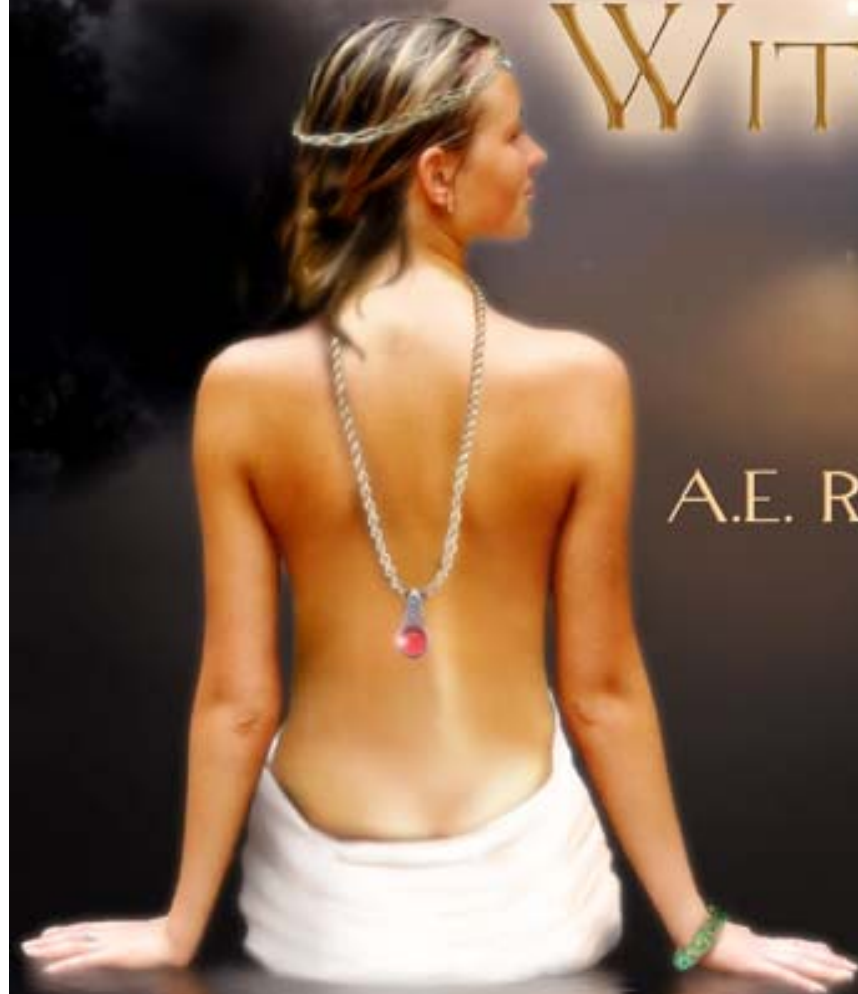


NUERMAR'S LAST WITCH

A.E. Rought



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Nuermar's Last Witch

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Love alone can save them

Nuermar's history is whittled in ruins, its prophecy carved in stone. Maelis, child of the Prophecies, is the last of her kind—a green-eyed witch, and the only one whom the stones of Nuermar say can channel the Elements. She alone has the power to vanquish the evil that reigns over her land. But without the greatest element of all, she has no hope of winning such an impossible battle.

A turncoat-assassin holds the key to her ultimate triumph. Yet the destruction of her village and the brutal slaughter of Maelis' family lies on Joran's hands. Can she overcome her hatred in order to fulfill the Prophecies and channel the ultimate Element – Love?

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Dedication

This book is dedicated those who believe in Magick, and to the ones who first saw it in me—my kids, my husband and my friend, Lisa. Thanks go to all who have touched my life and encouraged me since I first put pen to paper, including Abby, my agent Gina, Roseanne and the ladies of Samhain Publishing.

Part One

Witch's Whispers

“The Witch’s whispers control the winds
Whether in tree or chest it does begin.”

— *Legend from the First Stone of Nuermar*

Chapter One

Maelis Keshnar's tears fell unchecked. Dust rose up with each breath to smart and sting her eyes. Crouched as she was, she felt her heart thunder in her chest, an unsteady rhythm as it pounded in impotent rage. She squinted at the pouch her grandmother had forced into her hand before slamming the door on her hiding place.

Maelis was not prepared for it; she hated it already—yet that was a paltry emotion compared to what was to come.

Fireballs were lobbed through the windows to crash in puddles of flame against the back wall. The doorjamb cracked and gave way as the door flew open, crashed against the wall and sent pots and jars flying from their shelves. From her hidden vantage, Maelis watched her grandmother, Niomi, spin to face the door as an intruder swept in with a swirl of black robes. With surreal speed, he closed the distance between them and his large, tattooed hands snatched at the old woman as she turned to flee. Niomi threw her thin arms up in defense. He cinched the fingers of one hand around her wrist and whipped her around to face him.

Niomi's face paled in panic. A guttural cry escaped her lips only to be smothered by his heavy palm. Still, she struggled. Her feet flailed, kicked at his legs and knocked over storage baskets all around them, to no avail; he overpowered her.

He forced her into a chair. With one hand pressed against her chest, he searched the floor with the other. His hand came upon a knitting basket which had spilled over in their brief confrontation. His fingers curled around a wound, woolen ball and the cloaked man bound Niomi's wrists with her own yarn.

"Tell me where the Talisman is," he said. "Tell me where to find the Witch."

From her place of hiding, Maelis could not see his face for the darkness within his hood. His voice was disembodied. There was no point on which to focus her rage.

"Tell me, woman!" he snapped, and he moved his ink-worked hands as if he meant to throttle Niomi. He hesitated, his fingers grasping for her and then drew back. His retreat seemed more a gesture of annoyance than sympathy, as if he summoned tenuous inner resolve not to choke Niomi to death in his rage.

Not enough sport in strangling an old woman, Maelis thought, her anger increasing.

"I cannot," Niomi whispered. She looked deep into the darkness of the hood, peered into the face Maelis couldn't see. "Don't you understand? She is my grandchild, all the family I have."

He recoiled again, though whether moved by Niomi's words, or simply still considering her a nuisance, Maelis couldn't tell. Niomi hung her head and acted as though the intruder was no longer present. She waited bravely to die in silence rather than to speak Maelis's name or disclose her whereabouts.

"Very well," the man said. He balled his hands into tight fists, his posture rigid, his voice strained as if he spoke through gritted teeth. "I pray that she is worth it. May the gods have mercy on your soul."

With that sacrilegious petition and a final whirl of his vestments, he walked out and left Niomi tied to a chair in her burning home.

She's safe! Maelis rejoiced. I need only to free her and we will escape all this!

But no sooner had Maelis entertained that thought than another man entered Niomi's home. Like the first man, he sported tattooed hands, blackened robes, but he was slighter of build, shorter than his fellow. He strode straight to the chair where Niomi was bound, reached out, wrapped his hand around the old woman's neck and squeezed.

"Tell me," he growled.

No other words were necessary.

Niomi knew the information he wanted, but she would not give it. Her will did not waver and her body did not struggle as he crushed her throat. Her faded green eyes glared at her murderer until death closed them. Her body went limp and her head slumped down on her chest.

No! Maelis's heart cried out. *Not my grandmother!* She remained silent where she hid, unable to move, struggling to suppress the primal scream which threatened to break loose.

She could no longer watch; nor could she look away. She seethed in rage of depths unknown as this second cloaked figure ransacked the hut. A black, horrid hate wound its way into her heart and mind as he turned over furniture, shredded cushions with his dagger, knocked shelves off the walls. After a fruitless search, he kicked over an oil lantern and stormed out, without even a glance at the woman he'd killed.

The door, coated in licking tongues of flame, slammed shut and Maelis rushed to her grandmother's side. She knelt in front of that cursed chair and untied Niomi's hands. They were still warm and soft, as they had always been in life. Yet now they were motionless and gave no comfort. Maelis's eyes brimmed with tears as she laid her head in Niomi's lap, like she had done so many times as a child. Maelis kissed her grandmother's hand and her tears soaked into the simple dress the old woman wore.

"No more hiding," Maelis sobbed. "No more pain."

The blaze behind her mocked in crackled laughter.

Just then, a cry rang out in the streets, "Burn them all! Destroy the Witch's village!"

Maelis could see the murderer through the shattered window frame. He flung a lit torch against the side of their house, and the brittle wood and thatch immediately erupted in voracious flames. Ringed in fire, the man appeared inhuman, cloaked in darkness that eddied around him as he leapt astride his horse.

He spurred the steed, and shouted again, "Burn them all! The Talisman is not here!" He raised a whip and his hood fell back, revealing a young man no older than Maelis herself, his face, which might have once been handsome, now chiseled and made ugly with anger and

hatred. The great horse turned, thundered away and took Niomi's murderer with it into the dusk.

Her own life was now in danger as the building burned down around her. The roof timbers groaned and gave way. The flames began to snap at Maelis as even her family's singular magick which had so long protected the hut dissolved in the heat. The only escape left to her now was Niomi's tunnel in the cellar leading out to the banks of the pond.

Maelis spun on her heel and ran toward the door to the cellar. The leg of an upturned chair caught her thigh, pitched her off balance and made her stumble. Burning beams crashed around her. Walls collapsed, and a shattered door jamb struck her arm and knocked her to the ground. Fire raged, devoured her home and every other. All around, the screams of the dying faded into the roars of growing fires. She rose on shaking limbs, forced herself to move again, so that her grandmother's sacrifice would not be in vain.

The blaze was nearly too much for Maelis, and her eyes felt raw from heat and smoke. She closed them out of instinct and fumbled blindly for the handle to the cellar door. The scorching metal of a latch singed her palm. Maelis turned it and tumbled against the hard dirt floor below. A rib cracked, her head struck the floor, and consciousness threatened to desert her.

Maelis coughed bloody spittle as she struggled to catch her breath there in the cool shadows. She struggled upright and scrambled her way up the slope and toward the far end, away from the stench of murder and toward the fresh air and wet smell of the healing mud beside Sunar's Pond.

Once through the tunnel and out the other side, Maelis stood alone; an open and easy target. But, her safety was not her concern. Her sudden loss, her impotent rage reigned.

Anger rose up like bitter bile in her throat. So much had changed, both within and without. Where once she knew joy, only sadness remained. Her jaw muscles clenched. She knotted her fist around the pouch in her hand. Her fingers curled so tightly that her knuckles whitened and her fingernails dug into the flesh of her palm. Blood welled

up, soaked into the blue velvet, but Maelis didn't care. She couldn't. She could scarcely hold herself upright; her spirit besieged, her battered body threatened collapse. Only her will kept her moving, a will that spun with savage speed into a fury every bit as heated as the flames she'd only just escaped.

Maelis cocked her arm back, fist raised high. No prophecy could soothe her pain. *Nothing that this pouch could contain is worth so many lives*, she thought.

She inhaled a deep breath and readied herself to heave the bag and its culprit contents. Then, her grandmother's face rose in her mind—her grandmother holding the very pouch she held, and telling Maelis to take it and hide. Maelis had followed Niomi's directions, and in doing so witnessed her grandmother's murder. *She died to protect me*, Maelis mourned. *My grandmother died so that I might live to harness the power this Talisman controls.*

That truth struck her brutally, with a nearly physical force.

Her grandmother, the only family that she had ever known, had died to protect Maelis from the armies of Lord Nemenon. The entire village had shared Niomi's fate. The fires, meant for Maelis, had taken them all while she herself remained unscathed. The fires, meant for her, had taken them all. Her furious resolve failed, trickling away like the rivulets and streams feeding the pond by which she stood. She fell to her knees in the mud. Memories, so fresh and painful, deluged her mind.

"They were peaceful!" Maelis cried into the night air. She collapsed to her knees, tears blinding her vision, heartache blinding all else.

In silence Maelis vowed that she would avenge Niomi's death. The cloaked men would feel her wrath. In the pouch hidden close to her breast was the magick talisman to destroy them all. Maelis would discover its contents and harness its powers.

I will bring retribution.



Someone watched Maelis.

A man with great inner torment looked down an arrow's shaft and deliberated. Joran Tohknaar had his orders, and they were only partially complete.

The village lay in ruin, yet he was still to kill the Witch.

Another assassin, Daysen Shuluad, had murdered the old woman. The younger man had trained under Joran for years; Joran still regarded him as a pupil as much as a friend, and yet, Daysen had summoned the will that Joran had found himself inexplicably lacking.

Why did I falter then? he wondered. It should have been so simple. The old woman hadn't answered his questions. He should have forced replies from her lips through any number of painful inducements. He should have clamped his hands about her throat and squeezed the life from her. He had reached out to do so, been poised for it, in fact, but something within him had forced him to stop.

Why do I falter now?

His knuckles whitened as he held the bow string taut and arrow at the ready. He tried to steady himself but was unable. His heart pounded within its bone cage, his mind awash in conflicting quandaries. If he let the shaft fly, its poisoned point would put an end to everything—his fears, his questions and the threat that the woman embodied.

This girl whom he watched was the last survivor in the line of green-eyed Witches, and Joran's Master, Nemenon, had sent him to kill her. The magick she possessed would be their undoing; the legends written on the Stones of Nuermar said as much. It should have been simple, just as killing the old woman should have been. And yet now, as then, he found himself uncertain and torn.

I will let her live...at least for now, he thought. It is a poor shot from this angle, anyway. I will wait for one that is better.

His personal predicament solved, the assassin lowered his long bow and sheathed the arrow. He slid the bow over his shoulder, resigned to inaction. He would wait, and he would watch. Joran was well trained; the Witch would never know that he stalked her. He retreated into the shadows, allowed the darkness to swallow him whole. *She will not know.*

Chapter Two

As Maelis reached the foothills of the Tar-Nahser Mountains, dense forest gave way to shale escarpments and scraggy pines and the path she had been following for many long days since the destruction of her village grew ever narrower. She threaded her lithe body between outcroppings and over embankments, and finally into a fissure in the cliff before her. Light filtered down the path, no more than a crack in the face of the mountain. Maelis was pressed between vaulting walls of stone, yet she could see an opening yards away. Just as she eased her way forward, a sudden rock shower pelted her. Boulders came loose less than fifty feet above her head, crashing down at her.

Maelis shrieked, throwing her arms up. In response to this terrified, primal scream, a granite chunk arced in the air and bounced from the cliff above her. Its ricochet deflected another larger boulder from its direct and deadly path. Instead of striking her down, it caused her only a glancing blow, enough to knock her senseless. She crumpled, still and unmoving on the dusty, gravel path.

She awoke with a start, dazed and hurting. She brought her hand to her head and winced. When she pulled her fingertips away, they were smeared in blood from the wound where the rock had grazed her.

She realized what had happened, why she was not dead, buried beneath rubble in the narrow crevice. At her greatest point of fear, when adrenaline had surged through her as thickly as blood, Maelis had cried out and the mountain spirit responded. Though she was unaware of what she had done or exactly how, she realized she had manipulated nature. The boulder had rebounded at the proper angle and time to spare her life.

I wish I had never refused Niomi's lessons, she mourned in silent lament. In her youth, Niomi had tried to teach her how to use the Talisman, to command her own powerful magick, and at first, Maelis had been willing and eager to learn. But then, other children in the village had teased and tormented her, unfamiliar with and fearful of her magick. As a result, Maelis had suppressed her abilities, denounced any further training and had refused to accept the course of her destiny.

I was a fool, she realized, looking up at the mountainside. She was a child no longer, now a young woman. Yet time and again, her own insecurities and fright had kept her from Niomi's teachings. *I always thought I had more time, that I could learn more later,* she thought, tearful. *If a landfall comes again, will I be able to stop it?*

Angry with herself, Maelis cried, "I'm sorry! I want to learn now! I need to know!"

In the passing of that proclamation a sudden a rush of warmth bloomed against her chest; hot near to discomfort but not to point of pain. *The pouch?* Maelis thought. *Is the Talisman answering my call?* In her mourning, she had all but forgotten the reason her village had been attacked, her grandmother killed, her own life ripped asunder.

Maelis reached into her tunic and withdrew the bag from against the tender swell of her bosom. She pulled open the silver cords that cinched closed the pouch's neck. She had never seen the Talisman before. Because she had refused her training, Niomi in turn had kept the Talisman hidden and secret from her. With in-drawn breath, eyes closed, Maelis steeled herself to behold what she expected to be a Talisman of doom, some terrible, sinister object trembling with untapped energy and dark, immense magick.

Maelis tipped the pouch and its contents into the palm of her hand and slowly, trepidatiously opened her eyes.

What is this?

Where is the magick in that?

In her palm lay a ring. It was a simple band of silver with a white stone cabochon.

It was not remarkable; the stone not even pure white. It was milky and discolored. Maelis held it at arm's length for examination, thoughts of its discard it dancing in her mind. *There must be some mistake*, she thought. *This old thing—little more than a trinket—is a Talisman of power? Grandmother must have been wrong.*

Then a stray shaft of sun fell upon the White Stone, pierced and set fire to its heart. In that moment, the First Talisman of Nuermar stole her breath. Her heart fell to a stilted rhythm, and an involuntary smile softened the hard line her lips had become. Rainbows danced within the White Stone, mirrored in her eyes. She stood still for a long time, entranced.

“Whisper to it, honey...”

Maelis remembered Niomi saying that at the beginning of every training session, back in her childhood, before she had refused them.

“You must love it to summon its magick.”

Niomi's spirit spoke to her, the truth Maelis knew in her soul. The ring was meant for her. She felt that in a most undeniable way. The stone was for her to wield, and whatever power it contained was hers to control. *But how?*

She knew only to make it as much a part of her as she could, so Maelis slid the cool metal band over her ring finger but it proved too tight to ease over her knuckle. Maelis removed the ring and tried it on digit after digit. Finally on the middle finger of her left hand, the White Stone found its home. She raised her hand before her face to admire the ring's beauty. She marveled at it, stunned by the rainbows which blazed within the stone.

Her voice an airy whisper, Maelis spoke to the ring, told the White Stone how beautiful it was, how she loved it. A swirling breeze lifted off the ground beneath her feet. It snaked and twisted about her body, wrapped around her curves in a loving embrace. Maelis's eyes rolled as her body went limp, supported now by the wind which she had summoned. Wispy tendrils of her hair lifted to dance in a halo of gold around her face. She closed her eyes, her lips moving in unconscious murmurs, her love summoning further power.

As her mantra grew, so grew the force of the whirling wind. Her feet drifted up from the path and she was held aloft by the Element to which she spoke. For a long moment, she dangled there, suspended between earth and sky, and then her powers—still unfamiliar to her—drained her. The winds dissipated, lowering her to the ground again, abandoning their embrace.



Joran watched, his bow was slung over his shoulder, his weapons sheathed. He lay on the ledge above Maelis, pressed to the stone so that he was almost part of it. His body was as tense as a coiled spring, prepared for any necessary response.

The Legends he had once been forced to memorize had described the Talisman as something of unbelievable power. Anticipation flooded him, pulsed hard against his temples. From his position of concealment, Joran strained forward to witness the Witch's first contact with the Talisman. If she was capable of using it, there might be great devastation both to the land and him. The words of the Legend from the First Stone of Nuermar ran over and over through his mind.

*"The Witch's whispers control the wind,
Whether in tree or chest it does begin."*

Fear and wonder gripped him. Uncertain of the rhyme's true meaning, he held his breath against the likelihood of a windstorm, or some other airborne threat. Neither came from the Witch.

Joran watched the young woman for signs of disaster, eyes unwavering. Then he realized his chest ached; he had never expelled that indrawn breath. He exhaled, slow and silent. She stood there unmoving, glorious in untainted beauty, fearsome in untapped potential.

What could she be doing? he wondered. *Does she prepare for her first wicked act? Does she commune with the Element of the White Stone?* His eyes widened in shock, and his breath caught in his throat. It was all he could do to not cry out as he saw the breeze start to rise about her body, but sound would betray his presence, so he kept his peace—a difficult restraint given what his eyes beheld.

A brilliant white aura burned about the Witch's body as she fell deeper into her own spell. He could smell the power crackling in the air around her; see the energy dance in the white nimbus that wrapped her body.

She truly is a Witch! Joran thought. No ordinary person could call forth such power. Never before had he witnessed nature at the command of another, except for Lord Nemenon himself. But Nemenon's power came from the demons he had enslaved, not from something as pure as this. The Witch controlled the wind, just as the Legend said.

Her face paled, her limbs grew lax. Joran watched, spellbound as the breeze swirled about her, lifted her into its airy embrace. Her head fell back and she rose from the ground. When her feet dropped back down to the path, both the white aura and the wind disappeared, all to his great relief.

He had expected discovery, a maelstrom in attack, but it seemed this would be all she offered. She remained as she had all along, oblivious to his presence, and though he knew he should unsling his bow, take his shot, fulfill his mission and see her dead, his hands did not move. *Not yet, he thought. Not when she could summon a wind to deflect the arrow. I should not ruin my advantage of surprise. I should wait.*

The Witch's green eyes slid open and he could see that she was dazed, could read it on every line of her face. His muscles flinched as she raised her hand, White Stone sparking, yet she only brushed hair back from her eyes. She shook her head, as if to clear her thoughts. And then she scrambled for the cover of a thicket of wispy pines.

Joran eased back from the edge of the precipice upon which he clung. He crept along the rim, eyes trained on her as she settled into a bed of pine needles and collapsed. She was at his mercy.

I could cut her throat, he thought, reaching for his dagger. Open her veins like a fresh spring lamb for slaughter. She will never even feel—

His silent slide down the rock face stopped when he heard the slight scuffle of someone approaching along the path. The bow came off his shoulder, and out before him, the shaft of an arrow slid silent through

the air. The string creaked as he pulled it taut, index finger at the corner of his mouth as he watched a man approach.

Chapter Three

Maelis was exposed and asleep, her Talisman of scant defense as an old man crept up and then knelt beside her. He pushed her hair back from her cheek with spindly fingers. Then he folded his limbs to sit in front of her. Settled, he waited for her to open her eyes. The eyes would tell.

Was she the one?

Had he touched the Virgin of Prophecy?

What he once should have known without doubt, he now questioned. All monks were trained to know and shelter the Virgin, but in his years since departing the monastery, Ke'sair had grown lax and forgetful. The lessons a monk learns never leave him, but years alone had clouded the ready pathways to the knowledge he needed. If those eyes were emerald when they opened, he would know. And so he waited.

The monk pulled a cloak from his pack and settled it over the sleeping girl. His blue eyes fixed on her, yet his mind wandered. The girl's grandmother had once been very close to him; a fond smile slipped over his lips and brightened his eyes, yet they darkened quickly. Niomi and he had an agreement that should Nemenon ever find her, Niomi would send Maelis in search of Ke'sair. With the girl here before him, he knew that the unspeakable had happened to Niomi.

His friend was dead.

Fat tears slid down his cheeks. His vision hazed. Loss caught at his heart, stole his breath. He drew his hand up to wipe moisture from his cheeks. A sob caught in his throat, yet he forced it down, the mourning away. He never let the young woman out of his sight, blurry as it was. She was too important to the world to even blink.

He had been there at her birth, to witness and make record of her coming. Over twenty years had passed since that day, and yet here she lay. From a distance along the winding mountain path, Ke'sair had witnessed Maelis's first contact with the White Stone's Elemental force; he had seen its draining effects. Unbridled power is devastating, especially to its wielder; he understood her need for rest. Yet he could not allow her to sleep there much longer for the sun god already retreated from the sky. The Tar-Nahser Mountain range would soon grow cold. He knew they needed to get back to his lodge, no matter the girl's physical fatigue.

Maelis stirred. He watched expectantly, leaned closer for a better view of her eyes. Maelis's lashes parted. Then her emerald eyes snapped open wide and she jumped back from him.

Maelis was on him in a flash, fingers curled around the hilt of her short-bladed knife which she had thrust through his tunic up to its hilt. The point of the blade now cut at his belly. Before he could respond, he was prone in the dirt with a wildcat of a woman perched on his stomach. Her one claw was well pointed and scratching the skin above his heart.

"M-M-Maelis," he stammered. "Maelis, stop! It's me, Ke'sair."



As quickly as she had leapt on him, she tumbled off. Her instinctive response of self-defense had melted into a confused, slack-jawed look of surprise.

"Ke'sair? Really?"

She had been searching for him for days. Niomi had always told her to seek out the monk if anything should happen to her; that Ke'sair would help to keep her—and the Talisman—safe.

Although it did not affect her reflexes, fatigue still clouded her mind. She sat on her haunches, and shook her head to clear it. *I must have fallen asleep after summoning the wind*, she thought, although she had no distinct recollection of this. *Thank goodness it was Ke'sair who found me on the side of the road!*

What else transpired?

She shuddered to think. She checked her left hand for her ring—for the White Stone. It was there, the fires inside it now muted with the setting of the sun. She breathed a sigh of relief, yet her eyes still held a bewildered expression.

Ke'sair chuckled, a great smile wrinkling his cheeks. "I didn't know I was that hard to find."

His grin radiated warmth, and there was a sense of comfort about him that reassured Maelis that he was, indeed, her grandmother's dear friend. He reached a hand out to her. Standing, he said, "Come, child. Let me take you somewhere warm and safe."



The paths leading to the monk's mountain lodge were twisted and misleading, but Joran kept his distance and his vantage in his pursuit, unwilling to draw too close and risk notice. He hid among the underbrush outlining a narrow clearing and watched as the monk carried the Witch inside, closing the heavy, hand-hewn door behind him.

Through a window in the lodge, he watched as the monk led the weak young woman to a bed of tanned animal skins. She sat numbly on the bed and allowed the monk to remove her boots. For a moment, Joran imagined himself in place of the monk, gently pushing her shoulders until she lay her head against a pillow. And, in Joran's mind, it was his own hands that covered her with the hide.

He shook his head, his brows narrowing. What is the matter with me? he thought. I have a job to do, orders to see through.

The monk rose and walked to the window, looking suspiciously out into the cool night air. *Can he sense my presence?* Joran wondered to himself. He decided to pull away, creeping back among the thickets again, keeping the lodge in view but far enough back as to avoid detection.

He would watch and wait for the right time to approach her. But for now, he would surrender to the night.



Maelis awoke in confusion sometime later. After weeks' worth of woodland canopy as she had fled her ruined village, a stone wall was a shock to behold. She looked around the confines of the monk's lodge; the floors were slate, a blaze crackled in a large fireplace, and two wide windows on the adjacent walls let in fresh air. A small spring even trickled down the back wall and collected in a pool on the floor next to the hearth.

These were unfamiliar surroundings—orderly and clean. Tanned skins were everywhere, even stretched across frames to make furniture. The lodge was tidy, organized, yet it was also rustic and very natural.

"Ke'sair?" She called from the bed of skins on which she lay, too comfortable to move. It had been weeks since she'd slept on anything that did not have bark. Maelis waited for a moment, then called again, "Ke'sair?"

"Yes," he replied from outside. "I am here in the front garden." The old monk eased open the rough-hewn door and gave her a smile.

"You're finally awake. Greetings, my child!" Ke'sair stepped through the open door. He carried a woven basket filled with fresh berries and vegetables; he looked from its contents back to Maelis. "I'll wager you're hungry. You had quite a day yesterday." He shuffled in, leaving the basket on the kitchen table.

Ke'sair stepped up to a counter that was affixed to the wall. It was an unusual countertop, with a bowl carved into its surface. He reached across, slid open a small door on the wall above the lip of the bowl, and water poured through the opening.

"Ke'sair!" she blurted in amazement. "How is it that you have water running through your wall?"

In answer to her question, the monk only chuckled and took a handful of soap salts from a basket beside the cupboard-bowl. He rubbed his hands under the water pouring forth from the strange opening, and then closed the little door. As quickly as it had come, the water was gone. Next, he pulled a chain that dangled from the wall down into the bowl. Maelis heard water splashing outside the wall.

"Ke'sair," she cried again, sitting up now in her excitement. "You must tell me! What power do you have that you can make the water come from the wall?"

"Oh, child," the monk sighed. "Patience, please. You have so much to learn. This 'sink' is only part of your lessons. And it is not any kind of power, Maelis, other than knowledge harnessed."

"*Sink?*" The new word felt strange on her tongue. "My lessons? What are you going to teach me, Ke'sair?"

The monk walked over to the bed on which she rested. "I see your strength has returned." He sat next to her, and took her hand in his own. "But now you want to know about my sink, and where the water comes from, so I will tell you. Look up there on the wall." He pointed to where the spring trickled from a crevice near the ceiling. She hadn't noticed it before, but as she looked closely, Maelis saw a brown tube running along the wall, sloping until it reached what Ke'sair had called the 'sink.'

"This lodge has been built against the hillside," Ke'sair said. "And that clay pipe runs from the spring that feeds my little inside pool. You see, water follows the path of least resistance, so it flows down the pipe and collects in a holding jug in the wall. When the jug and the pipe are full, the water flows into the pool instead." His eyes searched her young face for a spark of acknowledgement, of recognition, of anything, but her face remained perplexed instead of enlightened.

"How does that pipe have anything to do with my training?" she asked. "Niomi said that you would teach me to use the Stone, to summon its magick. I want to become all that Niomi hoped me to be. I want to use my White Stone to save Nuermar, to avenge Niomi's death." She grew quiet for a moment, a pained expression in her eyes. When she spoke again, annoyance dripped in her voice. "What does water from a spring, going through a pipe in the wall, then into a sink, have to do with the White Stone?"

What does magick have to do with sinks? she thought. Absolutely nothing!

"You don't see the connection." His voice was flat. Ke'sair was ever patient, but he saw a problem brewing. "Please tell me that you have not

forgotten your training with Niomi. Tell me that you don't really think that the White Stone is the source of the magick." He paused, looking into her bright green eyes, then asked, "Child, are you oblivious?"

He rose and went to his sink to rinse berries and some small eggs for breakfast. He stood with his back to her, shoulders rolling as his hands worked. "There is so much for you to learn, apparently more so than I expected. It seems Niomi was not able to teach you much about the Stone."

Not enough, though Maelis miserably. Once more she regretted her refusal of lessons. Now, her path of preparation seemed all the more difficult for her childhood choices. For the second time in as many days, she thought, *I was a fool*.

Chapter Four

That morning, Maelis learned of Ke'sair's sink, and how hard she would have to train to control the Elements. It was not something she looked forward to, yet it was something she knew to be necessary; for herself, for Nuermar. The destruction of her village was evidence enough that Nemen forces stalked the land. It was her place to embrace her training and purge Nuermar of its oppressor.

Ke'sair began her lessons outside in his garden. At first, the surroundings proved to be a great distraction for Maelis. Even the sun shone differently here. It was brighter, as though the crisp air somehow put things in a sharper focus. Her eyes might focus, but her mind could not.

"Come, Ke'sair," she sighed several hours into the instruction. "So this black rock is harder than that one with the white flecks in it. This is tedious!" Maelis grew exasperated with all the education and no action. *Water freezes like this, wood burns like that, and this kind of stone can crush that one.* It all seemed so irrelevant. Before her was the White Stone, and that was what she wanted to work with. That was what she needed to understand.

"Can we *please* work with the White Stone?" she complained. "I need a break from all this other learning!"

"You need to know the elemental laws, if you want to control the magick which only you can touch," he replied. "But if you insist on working with the White Stone, we will do that."

Ke'sair took her hand in his, and led her to a low hilltop. "This is where we will begin. Know this, child: your White Stone is the way in.

Your natural ability is the key that opens the door, and the Elemental Force is what you release.”

Maelis’s eyebrows pinched together. A momentary frown darkened her features, but then the light of comprehension flared in her eyes. He saw that she understood, so he added, “Keep your focus, and don’t let the Element run away with you.”

The monk stepped aside, allowing Maelis a full view of her surroundings. They stood on the crest of a bare stone hill. Below, she saw the cradle the foothills created as they butted up to the soaring Tarnahser Mountains. Her emerald eyes took in the snowcapped peaks rising high above the scraggy pine-covered mountainsides. The sunlight was intense, as though the sun god blessed them, kissed them with his warmth. She sighed with appreciation and then inhaled the fresh mountain air.

“Oh, Ke’sair! This is beautiful.” Maelis was no longer bored.

“You must love it to summon its power.” Ke’sair reached his hands up to Maelis’s shoulders. “Whisper to your Stone, my dear. Focus on what you want the Air to do, then whisper to it.”

Maelis closed her eyes, quieted her thoughts, breathed deeply. Her eyelashes parted and she focused on a stand of pines on the farthest ridge. Perhaps a brave goal for her second use of the White Stone, but if she could call on the winds to touch them, she would at last feel as though she stood a chance to prevail over the evil pitted against her. She would feel as if she had accomplished something.

Whispers slipped slowly from her lips at first, low and breathy. She felt her heart swell in her chest as she reached within for that true, raw emotion she had first felt. Maelis allowed the feeling to flood her as she spoke of her love for the Stone, for Nuermar, for the air itself.

She asked its Element to touch the pines, make them bend and sway for her. The chant continued as her hand came up so that the White Stone was in line with the trees she wished to affect. She felt a response in the air as her mantra grew in intensity and a breeze sprang up from the ground beneath her feet. The gentle wind crawled up her body,

ruffling her tunic in a tickling caress before it flowed away from her fingertips towards the pines.

Maelis succumbed to the power flowing through her, lost herself in the act of calling again, as she had the first time. Her head tilted back until it met the sinewy strength of Ke'sair's arms. He caught her, steadying her on her feet and his reminding touch brought her back from the brink of losing herself again, as she had the first time she used the Stone.

"Focus," he whispered.

And she did.

With conscious effort, Maelis concentrated on forcing the effects of her power on the pines. She felt it surging through her, out of her, scarcely contained within her skin.

The tree tips began to wave in a beckoning manner, but Maelis wanted more. She intensified her rhythmic chanting until the pines undulated like waves on the ocean.

She heaved a satisfied sigh, and then dropped her arm slowly, pushed down against the wind she had summoned. It sprayed in an airy rush through her fingertips to dance in her hair. Maelis drew her fingers tightly together and cupped her hand over the flowing fount of air, forcing it down. With reluctance, the breeze died where it began, at her feet. It tickled her, reaching into her boots to caress her toes before disappearing.

"Very good, Maelis." Ke'sair said, beaming with pride. "Come child, the sun is setting. We must go before it grows too cold. My old bones can't take the chill."

Together, they walked back through the woods to Ke'sair's lodge. And though she was fatigued, it was not as badly as she had been the first time she called on the White Stone. Maelis was proud of herself, and glad to be going home.



The morning fog lay above the ground, painted in the pink of early dawn when Joran heard suppressed speech behind him. Silent, he rolled

onto his stomach, hand on the hilt of his knife as he peered in the direction of the noise. Its origins were about fifteen yards down the trail and moving in the direction of the monk's lodge. He crept along the ground until he grew close enough to identify the source of the whispers.

It was two of Nemenon's soldiers.

By their clothes and their Nemen robes, Joran knew them to be assassins. With that recognition, his fingers slipped from his knife, to the longer, deadlier sword. He recognized, too, that they were young and would be eager to win favor with the wicked Lord Nemenon. The reward offered for the Witch's head was very high.

Joran emerged from hiding blade-first, only steps away from the two unsuspecting assassins. There were no voices, no cries in the dark.

The first man fell quickly, with little more than a bloody gurgle. His body crumpled as it slipped from the point of Joran's sword, which had pierced his throat and exited the back of his neck. In one fluid motion, Joran withdrew his blade, spun on his heel and faced the second assailant, his sword now held in hidden position, lowered behind him. A savage light flared in his eyes, a wicked smile on his lips; Joran was trained for combat, for killing. This was what he lived for. He almost savored the blood his blade had tasted.

The other man stepped back and threw off the cumbersome robes of the Nemen forces.

Daysen! Joran thought in dismay. He knew the younger man; he had trained him. Daysen Shuluad had been with him when they'd ordered the Witch's village burned. Daysen had been the one to summon the resolve Joran had lacked, to kill the old woman. Joran had not seen him since; to see him now left him startled and dismayed. His old apprentice and friend was now his adversary.

"Greetings, Joran," Daysen said. His tone was light, his face set with a smile, but he took his sword by the hilt. He spared a glance at his fallen comrade and turned back to Joran. "I see your taste for blood has returned. I thought it lost forever—along with your spine—when you spared the old Witch in the village."

"The girl is mine," Joran snarled.

"Only if your blade finds her first, my Brother," Daysen replied.

As he spoke, he lunged forward, pulled his sword from its scabbard and slashed at Joran in a single sweep. Joran brought his blade up to block the attack. The swords glimmered in speeding arcs; the song of steel on steel rang through the cold dawn air. Daysen spun, swinging backward to once more meet the shank of Joran's blade. Reckless abandon tainted Daysen's efforts, as each man lunged and parried. Joran would use that haste to vanquish its wielder.

"You will have to get past me to claim her," grunted Joran as he fended off a downward cut.

"Then you will die as she will!" Daysen snapped. "I curse you to her fate!"

He lunged at Joran in a desperate attempt to unsettle the veteran. With brutal grace, Joran took advantage of Daysen's over-extension, deftly sidestepped the advance, and with a single horizontal slash, his sword again tasted Nemen blood. Joran leaned into the attack, shoved the sword blade deep into body of his adversary, and then with a pull on the hilt and torque in his shoulders, he withdrew the dripping blade. Joran flicked blood from his weapon as he centered and faced Daysen.

Daysen said nothing; he moaned and collapsed on the forest floor clutching his own entrails.

The clash was vicious but brief. Regret rose within Joran as he watched the life ebb from his old friend. He felt no lament in killing Daysen; that was what he did, what he relished; what he regretted was giving Lord Nemenon another victim to feed his bloodlust. Nemenon fed on murder, and Joran hated giving him the satisfaction.

Joran sheathed his blade. With a sigh of resignation, he bent down, grabbed the feet of the fallen and dragged the bodies of the two Nemen soldiers off the path.

Part Two

See it Stone

“Her Emerald Eyes can see it stone,
Whether it be water, tree or bone.”

— *Legend from the Second Stone of Nuermar*

Chapter Five

Daysen awoke. He could hardly see. His guts were afire. When he pulled his hands away from his wounded abdomen, they were stained and crusted with blood and dirt.

He tried to kill me! his mind screamed.

He could hardly grasp that Joran had struck him down. The young were quicker, stronger—victorious. But not against Joran. The senior swordsman had come away unharmed. Joran had dealt Daysen a grievous, nearly mortal wound, then had left him for dead. How Daysen had not died was a miracle most demonic.

Joran had apparently offered him a hasty burial at the least. While Daysen lay interred in the earth, the minutes ticked by like hours, and his every sensory perception was acute. He felt the earth around him, cold and unforgiving through his blood-soaked tunic; his cheek came to know every grain of dirt, every pebble and piece of debris. He could smell the musty dung of animal scat mixed into the loam, even over the bitter scent of his own blood. He felt his heart beating, the interval between each heartbeat growing longer until his pulse all but stopped and Daysen knew he would live no more.

The assassin prepared himself for the gods' final justice. But instead of blackness and eternal punishment, Daysen felt the edges of his belly wound begin to burn. His heart picked up an erratic beat. He unearthed himself, and pulled up his shirt; an apparition of one of Lord Nemenon's demons rode the ragged edges of his raw cut. Needing contact with flesh to solidify, the creature dug its claws into Daysen's skin, pulling the edges of his wound together.

The instant it touched Daysen's flesh, the creature transformed from spirit to being. The demon's black eyes pierced Daysen with its gaze.

"Your job is not finished," it hissed, its forked tongue fluttering. "You will live only as long as I permit. If I leave your body, I will once again become a spirit and will take yours with me. Should you fail to do my bidding, you will face my punishment..."

The demon's sentence trailed off. It began to fade again, like a shadow dissipating in sunlight, filtering through the assassin's flesh until only its glittering black claws remained solid, cinching Daysen's wound closed like crude stitches.

Daysen lay still in shock, his chest heaving with new life even as the crimson welt left in the demon's wake wept dark blood and pus, as though infected. He was infected, he realized—with evil. He felt the demon inside his body. Even Daysen's heartbeat was quick and shallow, echoing that of the creature. The soldier even felt the demon in his mind, its talons digging into his brain and its snarling lips whispering over his lobes evil things beyond imagining.

The demon arrested his death, and now Daysen was in its clutches, forced forever to do its bidding. Such was the price of continued existence. He was a puppet suspended on strings of death. As the demon invaded the assassin's soul, Daysen's human form changed—he began to resemble his internal tormentor. Daysen was now little more than a vessel, filled with something malevolent. As a glass bottle displays its contents, so, too, did Daysen. His lips curled in a nasty sneer; his eyes sunken, piercing and black. Whatever remnant of humanity remained within Daysen lay buried deep in his heart, a place the demon considered useless to invade.

After Daysen dug himself free of his premature grave, he once again stood on the path that led to the Sel Barna Plains and beyond to the Nemen Region. The demon within drove Daysen to find the Witch, to witness her power. Daysen worked his way back to the lodge which he had seen before Joran's attack.

The Witch must be there; otherwise Joran would not have remained nearby. Daysen didn't understand why Joran had not yet killed the

Witch himself. Clearly, he was in a position and condition to do so easily. And yet, she apparently lived while Joran slinked about the grounds of her sanctuary like a...

Like a what? the demon in his mind whispered. Like a fox awaiting its moment at dusk to steal forth into the hen house?

"Or a dog lying in wait," Daysen whispered. "To keep the foxes well at bay."

Then, suddenly, he heard the wind. *She is near.*

He crept off the path and stole through the underbrush until he found them, the Witch and her mentor. With possessed stealth, he approached the rim overlooking the mountainous cradle through which the Witch's winds blew. His eyes beheld a sight he never expected.

The young Witch was a stunning paradox—vulnerable but powerful. Beautiful. She wore simple boots, leggings made of doeskin and a green tunic, yet she wore her power like a glorious cape. She radiated with the strength of the Element she channeled.

The sight of her took his breath away.

More fascinating yet was the cyclone the Witch controlled. It spun above the trees, uprooting shrubs and scattering debris with every whirl. Daysen watched as the Witch raised her arm, pointing her fingers at a snowcapped rise. The cyclone whipped across the expanse, easily scaled the peak and sucked the snow off of the mountaintop. Shards of ice and clumps of earth fell from the lower twisting tiers, while the displaced snow spewed from the cyclone's mouth. The frozen water danced like a blizzard of diamonds.

Never before had he seen such power, other than in the hands of Lord Nemenon.

He felt out of place in this pristine environment. It nearly sickened him. Daysen sucked in a breath of cool mountain air, wrapped his arms around his stomach and crawled back through the undergrowth. Nauseous and nursing his wounded body, he shambled through the forest. The demon within had other interests than watching the Witch, anyway. It was content to allow her to live for now. It hoped to plant seeds of fear and mistrust among the people of Nuermar; therefore it

commanded Daysen to take the story of the Witch and her windstorm to the entire country.

He stumbled down out of the foothills of the Tar-Nahser Mountain Range. He was to bring word of Joran's actions to the Nemen leaders; whatever his motives, he had killed one of his fellow assassins. He would share the Witch's fate.

Joran must pay, Daysen thought.

He would bring word to all the Nemen colonies between the Tar-Nahser Mountains and the Nuermar Sea that they were under orders to kill the rogue agent and the emerald-eyed Witch. The two would find no safety in Nuermar; Daysen would see to it.



The spirits of the Tar-Nahser Mountains, through which Daysen passed, were oblivious to the departure of the reviled creature that he had become. They had seen so many things in their existence that the passage of one such human meant nothing to them. Yet never had the mountains' spirits witnessed such an awesome demonstration of Elemental power like that which Maelis displayed.

The mountains had forever knelt on the ground, held up the sky and resisted the Elements, but the whispers of one young, green-eyed woman with a flaring ring threatened to blow them down.

Maelis stood again on the hilltop, like so many times before; only her feet were now bare. She had developed an affinity with the energy of the mountains; she felt it surge through the soles of her feet. Her cheeks tingled from the force she controlled. Maelis whispered, directed the windstorm to gather in on itself and to spin. With the hand wearing the blazing White Stone, she directed the whipping dervish down to drill into the rocky floor of the valley below.

Maelis was focused and in control. She pushed her whirlwind down, pressing it into the earth. Her strength began to wane, she felt a strain in her shoulders. Her prize began to bubble up from the hole the Air Element had formed—water. Pure, cool water sprayed in a dazzling geyser from the earth as the tears of joy fell from her eyes.

She had accomplished so much. Maelis let her hand fall to her side and the wind fell silent. Though her body was still, her mind raced; she had used the knowledge that Ke'sair had fed her, and with those facts and her White Stone, she felt invincible.

"Maelis!" Ke'sair exclaimed. "You did it! Now I know that you are ready for what I have to tell you..."

His sentence trailed off, he looked deep into her eyes, as if he searched for something.

"Tell me, Ke'sair," she said. "Whatever it is, I can handle it."

"Maelis," he said. "The White Stone is not the only Talisman of which the Stones of Nuermar speak. It is only one of four—one for each Element."

"Wind, Water, Earth and Fire," she said. "I always felt that this Stone was not the only one. I only waited for you to tell me so. All of the training did not directly pertain to the White Stone's Element, and I knew you were not just teaching me because I am such a wonderful student." She smiled wryly at her teacher.

"Good!" He exclaimed. "I was quite worried. But there is so much that you need to know. Come, let's go back to the lodge where we can speak comfortably."

Together, they walked back down the familiar path to Ke'sair's hillside home. He held her hand for a while, until the path grew too narrow, then she led the rest of the way. She charged ahead, eager for the answers she knew the old monk held for her. Time for change had come, and Maelis was ready to embrace it.



Joran was thankful that the monk had grown comfortable, or perhaps lax, in his work with the girl. The old one spoke louder, spoke more often, took more risks and now, he had let slip the name of the girl he trained. Joran overheard the monk use her name, now he knew who he watched. He shadowed them, crawled close to the lodge, right up underneath a window, so he would be able to hear what the monk told Maelis—information he would soon need.

From his vantage point beside the wall, Joran watched Maelis and the monk prepare themselves a dinner of rabbit and root vegetables. So much went unsaid between Maelis and Ke'sair. They appeared to Joran to be so accustomed to each other that for them, the routine of daily life no longer needed words.

Soon, the aroma of roasting meat wafted through the windows, carried by the evening breezes. The scent stirred up the hunger in his guts. They began to growl, and Joran feared detection. To stifle the rumbles within, he decided to fill the void in his stomach. He reached into his hip pouch and withdrew a wafer of hardtack. It was salty and unappealing, but it would quiet his appetite. He munched on his dry meal in the dark, while those he observed supped at a well-lit table.

He saw Maelis as she washed the dishes in an odd bowl of water. *What kind of witchery is that?* he wondered. Never before had Joran seen water come from the wall of a house. He was amazed, and he wondered if she didn't also have the Blue Stone, which gave command over Water.



"Now, child," Ke'sair said when they had finished their supper. "There is much yet I need to tell you."

"Yes, I know," she sighed. "Forgive me for my avoidance, Ke'sair, but I know that things will never be the same. I have felt so many things in my time here; your fear that I could not control the Element, and then your pride when I did. I have sensed things out in the woods of which I have not spoken. And," she paused. "I am aware of the separation that is to come."

His smile was gentle, a comforting expression. "Well, then we will start with something other than the Stones. Let's talk about your eyes."

"My eyes?"

"Yes, your *green* eyes. Only the offspring of your family, all of them girls, have ever had green eyes, or been Witches. *Natural Witches*," he stressed. "Using only the powers of the Elements, not those of evil. Because of those powers, Lord Nemenon despises your family and

condemned them to death. Due to this edict, your mother sought to hide you after you were born.

"She handed this precious newborn baby to me and turned away crying; it was the only hope she felt you had. I returned with you to the Elementals' Monastery, where Niomi then took you into seclusion. That is the reason you only remember your grandmother raising you. It's also the reason why you are the only person in all of Nuermar remaining with green eyes, and why you are called a Witch. Hence, you must always be careful who you trust and you must remain focused on your task."

He paused, letting the knowledge sink in while he brewed a pot of wildflower tea. Maelis sat silent for a long while, musing over her childhood and the story the old monk told her. It all fit. She didn't question any of it, but it raised new fears. *Will I ever be safe? Where could I go and not be recognized as a Witch—the last Witch?* She sipped at the hot tea and then gathered her courage.

"Ke'sair, will you tell me what happened to my mother?" Her eyes beseeched him as much as her words.

"The cloaked men killed her, just as they did your Niomi," he said simply.

"Was she burned, too?"

"She was. Lord Nemenon fears your family so much that he wanted any evidence of their lives obliterated." He reached across the table and held her hand. "I know it is hard, child. But you must take your anger and give it to the winds. You cannot carry it with you, or you will not be able to use the Stones. You must be pure in thought and deed."

"Tell me the rest, Ke'sair," she said. "I want to know my fate. I want to know what I can do to stop Lord Nemenon. I want to make him pay for all that he's done to my family."

She listened to him tell her of the Four Stones and their Elements. He recounted the Legends that had been written eons ago—Legends that foretold her birth, and held the secrets to the Stones. He told her of the Monks building the Monastery, of them hiding the Stones and studying the Elements. Then he told her the Legend written on the Stone Lord Nemenon had destroyed.

*“Four Elements in nature,
Fifth is the Soul,
With the Stones, all but the Fifth
She shall control.”*

“Only you can stop him, Maelis” Ke’sair said. “Only you can channel the Elements to defeat Nemenon. The Legends say so, as does my heart. I have foreseen it; the great battle, the armies in defeat, your village restored. You can do it, Maelis, *only* you.

“I will go to the Monastery,” Ke’sair continued. “And rally the monks. You must go to the Plains of Sel Barna to search for the Green Stone. It was hidden there many years ago.”

“Then on the morrow I will depart,” Maelis said. “I have much to accomplish to fulfill the prophecies. I will take the knowledge that you have given me, and quest for the Stones. I will find them and defeat Lord Nemenon.”

Maelis rose from the table and walked over to her bed beneath the window. With a steeled resolve, she packed for her long journey.

Chapter Six

"Let no one see your eyes!"

Those were the monk's last words to Maelis as she set off toward the Sel Barna Plains. The success of her mission, her survival, depended on wearing the brown veil he had given her. Yet, like a nagging mother telling a child over and over again to lace her boots, he was calling out needless reminders. A smile whetted Maelis's lips. She would miss that old monk.

Nag, nag... Maelis thought. I will not forget.

She stopped, yards out from the tree line, and turned her back to the open range, her eyes toward the forest. She lifted the veil to gaze one last time at her beloved trees. She felt dwarfed, insignificant, beneath the oaks and pines Grenwynn Forest which soared above her. How she hated to leave this place!

Tears blurred her vision, sobs wracked her chest.

For twenty-three years, that forest had been her home; its leafy canopy had always sheltered her and, in the twilight hours of her childhood, the tree limbs had offered solace. Yet now she stood outside of its comfort, looking back with remorse, knowing that she might never return. Maelis held up the brown veil and wiped her hot tears with the back of her sleeve. Sniffing, she squared her shoulders and bade farewell to her beloved woodland home.

Maelis plodded down the path Ke'sair had directed her to follow. His final instructions ran through her mind. That trail he said, would lead to a village where she may not be recognized, but there, at least at *The Crooked Ale Tavern*, she could get a hot meal and at its inn, she could get a good night's sleep. Ke'sair knew from his own travels that the

tavern owner, a man named Gustin Mashual, would be able to provision her for her long journey.

Maelis looked through her veil at her dusty boots, wondering how the Plains women could suffer such constant indignation. She was accustomed to being barefooted; she could scarcely comprehend the necessity of shoes, or why women would do that to themselves in the name of submission to their antiquated laws or men.

In the distance, a harsh and unnatural shadow loomed. Maelis took the darkness to be the village rising from the dust of the plains. The sharp corners and hard lines of the buildings stood out in stark contrast to the surrounding landscape. The plains rolled gently, almost lazily along, as if the ground had no desire to raise itself to the height or splendor of the Tar-Nahser Mountains. The village, in contrast, was a blight on the landscape.

Hopefully, thought Maelis, the villagers will be more pleasant than their town appears.

Hesitation grew in her step as Maelis approached the village. She would gladly avoid it if she could, but she knew that it was necessary to stop there.

Stench struck her with an almost physical force as it wafted from the streets to accost her nose. The foul odors which assaulted her were indicative of the village and its way of life. The redolence of dung from herding animals mingled with the greasy odors from kitchens; dirty water ran in the streets and, on the outskirts of the village, there was a large mound of trash.

How can they live like this? she wondered. Maelis fairly gagged on the smell. *They live with this all the time! How horrible.* The concept was difficult to comprehend.

She pinched her fingers to her nose and placed her feet carefully as she made her way through the streets. Here and there lay steaming piles of horse manure, through which oblivious people had clearly shuffled. It was an awful, fetid mess. Maelis detested it. She longed for the clean blanket of pine needles and fallen autumn leaves covering the forest floor.

Maelis beseeched the gods in silent prayer. She asked for their favor, asked them to allow her safe passage, and perhaps a friendly person to direct her to *The Crooked Ale Tavern*. The gods knew she didn't want to wander through these offal-covered streets any longer than necessary. *But who to ask?* Maelis wondered. The men considered women to be beneath them, and the women looked afraid. Finally, she decided to ask an old man who sat on a bench near the town's gate. He looked harmless enough. *I hope*, she thought.

"Excuse me, Sir," Maelis said. "Can you help me please?"

She waited for him to reply, but he didn't. With her eyes down, she inched closer to him, thinking perhaps that his age had robbed him of hearing. If he was deaf, she would have to lean in close and speak loudly.

"Sir? I am new here. Will you please tell me where to find *The Crooked Ale*?"

The man slowly turned his head to look at her. Maelis looked at his face and she watched as his eyes searched her for a sign of familiarity.

"Do I know you?" His voice was breathy and cracked with age. He reached out a gnarled, thin hand to touch hers, then took her right hand in his and stroked it gently. "You look like one of my grandchildren."

Poor old confused thing, Maelis thought.

At least he was friendly to her. If she had a grandfather, perhaps he would be like this old man. A swift and sudden thought flashed in her mind; after her quest was finished, she would come back and spirit the old man away. Her musing was cut short when a warm drop fell upon the dry flesh of her fingers. Startled, she looked at the man's face. His eyes brimmed with tears, but he no longer looked at her. His eyes stared past her into the village square.

"What did you want, dear child?" His eyes were blurred with tears, but his voice was clear. "I will answer you as well as my old mind permits." He flashed her a wide, almost toothless grin.

"Please, kind sir, I need to find *The Crooked Ale*. Can you help me?"

"The tavern?" he asked.

His following words fell from his lips in a rush, as though not to be caught saying more than he should, "Down this lane, three cross roads,

then down two to your left. Do not stop, and let no one see your face.” With that, he dropped her hand and went back to staring blankly down the road.

Maelis walked away, following the indicated lane, looking neither to the left nor to the right. As directed by the old man, she kept her head down, and thought to herself how strange it was that he would tell her something like that, something so like Ke’sair had said. Without knowing why, she sensed that there was more import to their short conversation—perhaps it was an outside influence, or maybe it was merely a moment of clarity. Whatever she had sensed, Maelis pushed her feelings away and made her way along the dirty streets.



Maelis followed the old man’s directions away from him, even as a shadowy figure made his way into the village.

Recognition softened the old man’s face and deepened the creases around his eyes as he smiled through renewed tears. “Joran! Come here, my boy!” he called, reaching out his arms.

Joran met the summons with measured restraint, holding his finger up to his lips in a shushing gesture. “Papa,” he whispered as he took the old man’s hands, and knelt in front of him. “Papa, you must be quiet. No one can know I am here. There are Nemen spies everywhere.”

Joran’s father reached an unsteady hand toward the young man who knelt before him. The assassin remained steadfast, unmoving, staid and untouched by the elderly’s show of affection.

“I don’t care why you are here,” Joran’s father said. “You are my son, and I feel the good still in you.” He paused and sucked in a shaky breath. “You wanted me to help her. I saw you motioning to me from the forest. I read your hand signals. Now you go help her, too.”

I do not know about that, Joran thought, rising to his feet. He pressed his lips against his father’s brow and turned to follow Maelis.

“What do you want, you filthy damn cur?”

He had not walked more than a dozen steps or so when the sharp voice uttering derisive comments from behind gave him pause. He turned

and saw a boy, not more than twenty years old, approaching his father by the gate.

"Begging for coins again?" the boy laughed. "Hoping to scrape together enough for a pint, you stinking wretch?"

The lad mocked the old man and hurled obscenities at him. To Joran's shock, he raised his hand and struck Joran's Papa.

From then on, restraint was impossible.

Joran raced back the way he had come, his hand darting out, his iron grip stayed the young man's hand just as he drew back to strike his father again. Joran stepped back, jerked the youth off balance and, as he pitched forward, Joran snaked his arm around the offender's throat and began to squeeze. The boy's face turned red and he flailed his arms in vain attempts to break free.

Joran relaxed his grip and the perpetrator collapsed to the ground. Instead of leaving him there, Joran jumped on him, pummeling him about the head with clenched fists.

"Joran! Stop it!" His father's call pierced through Joran's rage and stopped him from killing the young man. Joran stood, suddenly shamed as to what he had almost done.

"You...you bastard...!" The young man coughed, and bloody spittle trailed from the corners of his mouth. His right eye was swollen shut and, as he began muttering more obscenities, blood dribbled from a split lip. Sputtering defiantly, the youth tried to raise himself on shaky arms. "You rotten bastard...!"

The boy's rant raged through Joran's system and, with a guttural snarl, he raised his knee and released a vicious kick to the battered youth's midsection. There was a muffled *CRACK* as Joran's heavy boot made contact with an unprotected ribcage. Again and again, Joran lifted his knee and kicked.

His father's gentle touch stopped him.

Joran looked at his father through a haze of hatred and anger—emotions he had thought long gone. The flames of Joran's anger dissipated, giving way to guilt once more as he looked as the motionless

figure on the ground. Sick culpability coursed Joran's veins; he covered his mouth with his hand, aghast at the brutality he'd displayed.

"I will take care of all this," Papa said. "Go now, and find the girl."

Joran stood a moment longer, until a nudge from his father set him to motion. His gait was stilted, awkward for a step or two, but then his training took over and he fluidly disappeared into the shadows of a fieldstone wall.

His father, meanwhile, roused the boy and examined his injuries. Joran knew his father would soon return to dreaming and staring past the gates, looking for a life away from the oppressive village. Someday, Joran vowed he would give such a life to Papa. After he helped Maelis to defeat Nemenon, Joran would return and take his father away from this village.

His immediate mission was to protect Maelis. Even now, as he watched her pick her way toward *The Crooked Ale*, he felt a foreboding sense doom lingering in the streets. He noticed how the villagers turned to watch the strange woman as she walked past them. He must reach her, and protect her from these people.



Maelis stood in the dirt of the street, two paces from the steps of the tavern's porch. A painted sign hung above the tavern door that read, "*The Crooked Ale... Walk in straight and come out crooked.*"

She had no idea what that meant, nor did she care to learn. Yet she learned quickly when the doors swung open and a patron walked out. The man staggered away from the building, weaving like a courting bumblebee. Amused by his erratic behavior, Maelis moved aside and watched the man stagger his way down the side street. She had never seen anyone intoxicated before. Then, suddenly, the man lurched to one side, fell to his knees and vomited.

Her amusement faded fast. Maelis advanced on the door in retreat from the wretched stench rising from the steaming puddle.

She stood outside of the swinging doors and peered into the tavern. Circular tables were scattered over a floor laid with roughhewn oak slats,

and tin lanterns hung from the ceiling. Despite the lamps, the light from a fireplace on the far wall and candles on the tables, the room was dark and smoky. The patrons were a raucous bunch; they laughed loudly and occasionally threatened each other with harsh words or raised fists.

In all of Maelis's twenty-three years in Grenwynn Forest, she had never seen anything like this place. If it wasn't for the fact that she needed to speak to the proprietor, and the loud complaints of the hunger demon gnarling her guts, she would have sought help elsewhere.

Maelis remained rooted where she stood, opting to observe the villagers in their revelry. A line of men stood against the bar, while others sat at nearby tables, all of them in various stages of drunkenness. Most of the patrons were men; the women were serving-wenches, except for a lone woman who sat with her mate in a corner booth. That woman did not speak and nodded only when her husband addressed her. She was well covered from wrists to ankles, but the wenches wore tight clothes and short veils that barely covered their eyes.

Maelis saw that the exposed flesh of the wenches and the liquor the men consumed were a volatile mixture. The men patted the women on their rears, and a few even dared to touch their breasts. The wenches forced smiles and laughs in response. They served the men, but even their garish make-up couldn't disguise the reluctance and resentment that painted their faces.

Maelis hated this place.

She shrank away from the doors. Cringing in disgust, she stood on the tavern's porch and deliberated. *How can I go in there? But where else can I go? Who else will help me?*

Then, defiantly, she answered her own questions.

I have to go in, like it or not. I need Gustin's help. There's no other place in this putrid village for me to go. There is no one else who can help me.

Against her better instincts to run screaming down the streets and back into the mountains, she pushed apart the doors and made her way to a dimly lit corner booth.

Instantly, all voices hushed, and the men turned to stare at her—a woman so bold as to walk into a drinking establishment unescorted. The serving-wench stared at her curiously and soon a disgruntled murmur arose.

“Doesn’t know her place,” one man grumbled to his companion at the bar. His friend nodded in agreement. The two turned to glare at her before resuming their meal.

“Must be from another village,” muttered another.

“Her man is going to punish her when he hears about this,” said a third.

Comments floated around the bar, bombarded her. These men wanted her to know that she was unwelcome, without saying so directly. The complaints quieted to grumbles, as the men decided that she was either an outsider or a prostitute looking for a job. Maelis listened as the men began to pass along the local gossip and, in more hushed tones, they began to speak of Nemen soldiers and strange happenings in the mountains beyond the plains.

“Nemenon knows,” one man exclaimed in the booth behind her. “I would not want to cross that Witch! Word from that traveler was he saw her make water rise from the mountain’s heart.”

Witch? Maelis thought.

“And she controls windstorms, can even make them uproot trees,” his neighbor added. “That man from the Nemen Army said that she can draw the air from your very lungs!”

They’re talking about me! she realized. But how could the villagers know of her so soon? She heard fear in the man’s voice. She was already infamous among these people, and they didn’t even know that she was there.



Joran watched from the tavern door as Maelis spoke to a serving-wench. He knew he needed to warn her of the dangers in this village, knew she needed protection. *She needs me*, he thought. *I must protect her.*

He had known this all along, from the moment he'd first laid eyes on her after the burning of her village, even if he'd been unwilling to admit it. Somehow he had to make her accept his offer of assistance. He knew, too, that he would have to explain his part in her Niomi's death. Despite his training, Joran felt trepidation at approaching the Witch. His thoughts betrayed his fear.

Do I dare raise the subject with her? Will she scream at me? Will she strike me?

He knew, too, that the news would hit her hard. But it was necessary for her to hear it if he was to gain her trust. He approached her table as the wench walked away.

Joran raised a hand to tap her shoulder. She turned and looked at him through her veil, his hand eye level with her face. He knew, by every line in her body, that she had sensed his presence. Joran was shocked.

"Do you intend to use that hand you just raised or do you plan to use your mouth?" she quipped.

He heard a hint of fear underneath her sarcasm. *So, she is a little afraid.* She was on edge, and rightfully so. Joran knew that his father had told her to be wary of men, and especially of strangers. The assassin laughed lightly as he lowered his hand and stepped to the other side of the booth, across the table from her.

"I would never hit you," Joran said. "May I sit?" He pointed to the empty seat.

Maelis nodded her head. "If you wish," she said. Joran was certain that she mistook him for a villager, and he'd overheard Ke'sair instruct her not to argue with the local men unless it was a matter of life or death.

Her voice was very pleasant and, as he slid into the seat opposite her, his body thrilled at her nearness. He smelled the natural powers that hovered about her like a heady perfume. He leaned close to her, over the table and the candle in the center. She inclined her upper body toward him as well and as she did so, he saw the light from the candle's flame dancing on her face beneath the veil. The softened view he had through the gauze fabric made her features appear even more enchanting.

“Maelis,” he said. Use of her name might unsettle her, but he hoped it would instill a bit of trust in her, too. “I know who you are.”

Perhaps there was a better way to start the conversation, but for Joran, blunt was best. There was no time for pleasantries. He sat and waited for her to speak, rather than overwhelm her with his dark news.

“Then you know, too,” she replied, voice level, no intonation. “That I have sensed your presence in Grenwynn Forest, and many times in the mountains.” She spoke as if she had been expecting him. “I have even felt your presence here in the village. Who are you, and why are you following me? And don’t lie to me, because I will know, and things will not go well for you if you do.”

With that threat, Maelis put her left hand on the table between them. The White Stone glowed with an inner fire, and the rainbows danced in it hypnotically. Its fire caught Joran off guard.

“The White Stone is truly beautiful,” he said breathlessly. “I have seen you use it, Maelis. Absolutely amazing.”

“Well, isn’t that nice!” she snapped. “Are you going to answer my questions, or is there someone else who saw me who I can ask?”

“No, there aren’t any others. I took care of that.” His allusion to Daysen’s death was lost on her, so he continued to speak. “As for the rest of your questions, I will gladly answer them. But we must go someplace more private. There are Nemen spies everywhere.”



The tone of his voice made Maelis believe that he was telling the truth. His name was Joran, he told her, and he meant to help her. And when she looked into Joran’s eyes, studied his expression in them, they were intent but not veiled in falsehood. She nodded her head in acquiescence.

The serving-wench came with their meals. Plates mounded with rare roast beef and root vegetables covered the center of the table, while steaming tankards of warm honey-ale perched precariously on the table’s edge. Maelis stabbed a fork into her food. All at once, her mind was not on eating, yet the hunger in her was insistent.

As calm as she appeared on the outside, which she still considered to be a very necessary front, her guts, her mind twisted like one of her own cyclones. Thoughts and questions chased each other in her mind. *How did he know me? Why do I feel that somehow I know him, too? What are his intentions?* She needed answers.

Awkward quiet hung over their meal. When neither could stomach more silence or food, Joran gave a handful of coins to the serving-wench. They rose from the table and he took Maelis's elbow in his gloved hand, directing her out of the tavern. Maelis tried to turn back, but Joran squeezed her arm harder, pulling her along. She yowled in complaint, but he covered her mouth with his hand, led her deeper into the dark streets of the tavern's neighborhood.

She wrested his hand from her mouth. "I was supposed to speak to the proprietor!"

Confusion and anger stormed within her. She spun around, and with a wrench of her arm, freed herself from his grip. Ke'sair had said that she needed to talk to Gustin, and she meant to do so. She pushed her way past Joran and headed back toward the tavern, with Joran in hot pursuit.

He caught her up, grabbed her by the shoulder. There they stood—Joran with a fist full of tunic and Maelis with a heart full of resentment.

"Release me," she growled. "If you have seen me use my powers, then you know why I must speak with Gustin."

"You mustn't speak to him, Maelis. He is a Nemen spy. If you go back in there, he will kill you!"

His words hit like a fist. A sick and sudden realization slammed into Maelis as she realized how little she knew of this world into which she'd been thrust.

She trembled and then burst into tears. She felt his arm wrap about her shoulders, stiff and uncertain, and she all but collapsed against him, weeping against his chest.

"I can't do this anymore!" Maelis cried. "I don't know anything. I don't know who's good, who's bad. I am going to fail—fail all of Nuermar!"

She lay against his chest, surrendered at last to the fear and misery she had borne so long. The tensions of all that had transpired in the weeks since Niomi's death converged on Maelis in one miserable, vulnerable moment. She broke down, entrusted herself to the arms of a stranger who knew more about her than she did of him.

Chapter Seven

Joran once believed the righteousness of his mission to assassinate the green-eyed beauty; he once believed that killing her would keep Nuermar safe. But now, as he cradled her in his arms, he believed that she would save them all.

Joran had witnessed her power. He'd also felt her weakness, collapsed as she was, and clinging to him; he understood her capabilities and her encumbrances. Maelis could accomplish everything that the Stones of Nuermar foretold, yet, not without his assistance. She was not yet ready for battle.

I must prepare her, he thought. I must teach her of combat, stealth and surprise. I must protect her from Lord Nemenon's evil minions.

But he also understood that he could not do so without revealing his horrid truth—his involvement in her grandmother's death and her village's destruction, as well as his role as her would-be assassin.

His heart clenched. The truth was a burden too heavy to bear, yet one he did not wish to transfer to her. She would hate him.

Joran held Maelis, his tattooed hand strong against her supple, lax spine. She made no move to pull away. He was her support, and she lay sacked and crumpled against him, crushed beneath the weight of her own misery. Joran scooped her into his arms and cradled her against his chest as he moved through the dark streets and out of the village. He was not the only roving Nemen operative; there was a military presence in every village. Joran needed to put distance between them and town, so he carried Maelis to his father's house on the rural outskirts.

Joran kicked the door open, turning sideways to lift Maelis through. He carried her across the threshold and over to a cot where he laid her

down. She clung to him, mumbled and flinched occasionally as he walked, but fell asleep as soon as he settled her on the bed.

He took the veil from her face, covered her with a musty blanket and tucked it under her chin, as he had seen the old monk do. Joran's heart, long devoid of any kindly feelings, warmed from the tending to Maelis. Within, Joran slid down a slope from murder to ministrations, from bloodlust to love. *Gods, let me tend to her always*, he thought. *Let me help her. Let her help me.*

She was so beautiful, so innocent in her naiveté. Joran brushed strands of hair from her cheek, pausing for a moment to freely admire her before he turned and bolstered the door against any possible intruders. Then he stepped to the windows and peered outside before dropping the skins and securing them against the night air. Satisfied that there was no immediate threat, Joran returned to Maelis's side and, reaching into a cupboard hidden in the wall, gathered an old woolen blanket for himself.

He yawned. He stretched. Then Joran performed the same ritual he did every night—removing his gloves and stretching his fingers. He nestled his tired shoulders deeper into his blanket. He rested one hand on the hilt of his sword, and then draped an arm protectively over the girl. Finally, Joran surrendered to his own exhaustion.



While the two slept, evil personified crept through the village. Daysen, still a captive to the demon inside him, plied the streets and accosted all who would listen. He spread tales of the Witch and her windstorms, and urged all loyal followers of Lord Nemenon to capture or kill Joran and Maelis on sight.

Joran was helping the girl, of that Daysen and the demon were certain. He had not attacked Daysen because he'd wanted the kill for himself. Somehow, some way, Joran's loyalties had turned. *For that, he must die.*

The demon's mission was to set Nuermar afire with insidious whispers, inciting all the people between the mountains and the Nuermar Sea to uncover Maelis and the traitor.

The demon inside Daysen was single-minded in its task. Its mission was always foremost in his thoughts, overriding Daysen's own intentions.

The demon controlled his body and much of his mind, yet Daysen continued to harbor feelings buried deep in his human heart, beyond the demon's grasp. He hungered for revenge against Joran, he wanted the traitor dead, wanted his hands to slay him. And another, more unsettling emotion stirred beneath the surface—he was attracted to the Witch.

There was something about her that intrigued him. Not only was she physically attractive, she was pure, untainted by the evil that festered in the followers of Nemenon.

In his heart, where the demon inside him could not dwell and where an iota of decency remained, Daysen yearned for a touch like hers. Like Joran's, Daysen's life as an assassin had been a cold and lonely one, with no room for softness or fond emotion. Before the demon had taken him, Daysen would have given his life to feel such tenderness. But now, with every kind thought Daysen attempted, the demon would punish him, digging deep into his mind and replaying bitter, painful memories: his mother abandoning him, his father beating him. The demon's reminders overwhelmed him, washing away any pure thought that tried to emerge.



Daysen shambled though the streets, a derelict of humanity with a demonic mouth; Joran and Maelis, however, lay wrapped in deep slumber.

The sun god climbed the sky, its pale rays reaching into the cabin where Joran and Maelis slept. The thin fingers of light crept across the dirt floor until they alit on Joran's leg. Airborne dust motes danced through narrow shafts of illumination as though in a mystical ballet. The light grasped at the sleeping pair with the gentleness of a blind man's

fingertips, almost as though the sun god himself were trying to learn their features by touch.

Maelis slowly roused from dreams of black-cloaked men, raging fires, the screams of the dying, and her grandmother's murder. The last vision in her mind was of Niomi's head slumped upon her own chest.

Maelis's chest rose and fell rhythmically until the sun's caress touched her cheek. She opened her eyes and, as awareness of her surroundings returned, she beheld the interior of an unfamiliar dwelling and felt the warmth of Joran's tattooed hand where it rested on her stomach, his fingers wound in the hem of her tunic. Something about that inkworked hand stirred uncertainty in Maelis. *Those marks*, she thought. *I have seen them somewhere before.* She wrapped his hand in hers, hoping it would clarify her memory.

Her tickling caress, delicate attempts at discernment, woke Joran. He opened his eyes and saw her fingertips tracing the blue and black lines of his tattoos.

His expression was swift and scared, even out of the corner of her eye.

He looked at her face as she slung a sidelong glance at him, her expression thick with loathing, while his bespoke of a cur which awaited a beating. Her grip on his hand tightened, cinched with near savagery as she looked back to the black lines tracing his flesh. Tendrils of hair hung loosely around the sides of Maelis's face, and the corners of her mouth turned down. She had a sad and quizzical expression, and a single tear clung to her eyelashes.

"These hands," Maelis mumbled. "I know these hands. They bound my grandmother to a chair and then killed her."

His eyes widened. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Please, let me explain. It was not—"

"*Your* hands," Maelis hissed. With those words, she wrenched her fingers away from him and brought them to her face. The man responsible for killing Niomi was here, and he had slept beside her like a childhood friend. Her anguish engulfed her mind, loosed her lips to chant a whisper to the White Stone as she focused her eyes on Joran's face.

Now there was someone on whom she could vent her rage. An aura formed around her, blindingly bright and white with the heat of her passion. She raised her left hand and the First Talisman came to life.

The White Stone flared and sparked as Maelis whispered her love to it, her need for vengeance. A whirlwind spun around her body, and its power lifted her from the cot until she hovered above Joran and out of his reach.

The cyclone widened until everything in the small dwelling was caught in its fury, except Maelis who remained steady in the eye of the storm. Soon, even Joran was sucked into the maelstrom. Flying furniture battered and bruised his body as he whipped, pass after pass, around the whispering woman. He tried to call out to her, perhaps beg her to stop, but his voice was lost in the sound of the wind.

The violent whirlwind sucked air through the windows, feeding its power. The skins covering the windows flapped wildly, breaking the sun's rays and dappling the room in a frenzy of light and dark flashes. Joran's body hurtled past the now-open door, and just when it seemed that he would be battered into unconsciousness, a golden hue fell across his body.

The sunbeam illuminated Joran's hair and smooth cheeks in subtle clarity. The image brought about a shocked realization within Maelis, and she knew that Joran did not kill Niomi. Her aura faded and, as suddenly as the winds had begun, they ceased. Joran and all the furniture that had been caught in the maelstrom fell to the floor with a resounding crash, leaving him crumpled on the floor among the debris.

For a moment, silence reigned. Joran did not move. Maelis recoiled in horror from the devastation she had caused. She feared him to be dead. Retribution for the genocide of her village was the province of the gods, not something for imperfect human judgment. Her vengeance against Niomi's true murderer might be excused, but if she had killed an innocent man, she would be no better than Niomi's assassins.

Guilt rose in nauseating waves through her. Her hand fluttered to cover her mouth, and she sucked air between her teeth. Her knees felt weak. Her stomach clenched against a sudden need to vomit.

To Maelis's relief, Joran coughed. His eyes rolled open, he rose on arms which quivered as he struggled to face her. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Maelis knew they were not tears born of pain, but of his own grief over Niomi's death and the destruction of her village.

"It wasn't you," Maelis said. "Niomi's killer was young, like me—I saw him. It wasn't you..."

He nodded weakly. "His name...is Daysen Shuluad."

She took a few steps back from where Joran knelt on the floor, and then she said, "But I saw your hands. You were there. When you left the house another man came in and killed her."

She began weeping, too; silent, angry tears of frustration and pain. "But you were the man who asked her about the Talisman. You left her to die! How could you do that?"

"Maelis, please let me explain," pleaded Joran.

"You had better," she snapped. "You *know* what I can do."

It was a thin threat, one she hoped he wouldn't see through. Her powers were limitless, but to channel the Elements, she and her intentions had to be pure. She believed in Joran's innocence, and therefore she had rendered herself impotent. Any act she attempted against him with the White Stone would fail.

"I was there, Maelis, I admit that," Joran said. "Lord Nemenon sent me to find the last Witch and destroy her—you—to prevent you from bringing the apocalypse. But by the time we reached your village, I had misgivings. The Elementals taught me much at their Monastery, and their teachings made me question the truth of Lord Nemenon's diatribe against you. Then I saw your face." He paused, a deep blush flooding his cheeks. "Instead of killing you, I followed you, and finally I decided that the monks were right and that Nemenon was wrong. That's when I knew I must help you."

She pinned him with a gaze colored with contempt. "So, Joran," she snarled his name. "Why should I let you help me? How do I know that you're not going to kill me once you've discovered all my powers? How do I know that you won't turn me over to the Nemen leaders? Why should I trust you?"

"You must believe me, Maelis," Joran answered. "I've already killed two people to protect you."

"Does that atone for what you did to my grandmother? To my village?" She slung her words like a fist. "How can I believe anything you say? All I know of you is what I have seen with my own eyes, and so far, that's not very good."

"Then let me prove it to you," Joran replied. "Let me help you, and you'll see the truth. Whether you like it or not, you need me. I know where to look for the other Talismans. I know much about the Nemen armies and I can help you fight them."

"Well, I do not like it. But..." Her voice trailed off and Maelis stood silently, studying the lines of Joran's face. Her emerald eyes traveled down his neck, pausing at an ugly bruise on his collarbone. She winced in sympathy with the pain she saw there, then her gaze moved over his strangely colored tunic, dyed with different hues to resemble leaves and branches. She continued on past his simple brown pants, his sturdy boots and then back up to his hands. The image of his tattooed hands binding Niomi to a chair was forever seared into her mind.

Can I ever trust him? she asked herself. But how can I succeed without him? This task is beyond me. Ke'sair couldn't have prepared me for it, not in a lifetime. I need Joran's help.

"Fine," she said. "I accept your offer of help, but you must know this—I will never trust you. I may be young and naïve, but I am not a fool. Do not ever make the mistake of thinking I am."

"I will not," Joran said. His body posture, his facial expression told her that he considered the discussion finished. "I used to live in the village where we met last night. I know where to gather supplies. I'll go while you get the packs ready. We'll start for Lake Melnam at nightfall."

"Lake Melnam?" Maelis asked. "Why are we going there?"

"Because that's where the Second Talisman—the Green Stone—is hidden," he answered. "We will follow the Selben River that flows through the plains. It shouldn't take more than a few nights' travel."

Chapter Eight

Maelis might have enjoyed four days of travel in the spring sunshine, but that much in the chilly moonlight with Joran was near to torture.

She was in a better frame of mind when walking, despite the inherent difficulties of hiking in the dark. When they were on the move, she could keep some distance between them. The daylight hours, however, were nearly unbearable, as she found herself forced into close quarters, hidden in caves or under bushes with the man whose hands helped destroy her village. Maelis grew increasingly sullen, mulling over her losses and wrestling with her insecurities.

By the fourth night, she was captive to her fatigued petulance, and as the sun set, she scrambled from the bushes, spoiling for a fight.

She stalked over to the fireside, and dropped gracelessly to the dirt. She took the mug of tea that Joran offered her, but she met his evening salutations with little more than a grunt. Maelis's mind buzzed with angry, ugly thoughts, as though everything came to crash in on her at once and Joran's pleasantries and attempts at soothing only made her feel worse.

"Is something wrong, Maelis?"

"You tell me," she growled. "My village was destroyed, my grandmother was murdered, I had to leave Ke'sair's when it was beginning to feel like home, I'm on an impossible quest and I'm traveling with a man who wanted to kill me!" She glared at him, aiming her frustrations at the face across the flames. "Tell me how you would feel!"

Maelis flung her cup at Joran and then kicked at the fire, sending up a shower of sparks.

Joran rose, as much to defend himself as from anger. He pointed a warning finger at her and shouted, "Stop it!"

"What if I don't?" she snarled. "Are you going to kill me, like you did the people in my village?"

"That's not fair, Maelis."

"Calling you a 'killer' isn't fair?" Her words dripped venom. "Why not? It's the truth." She looked at him with searing green eyes. "Killer! Killer! Killer!"

Joran closed the distance between them, bristling, his fists balled up at his sides. He grabbed Maelis by her tunic collar and raised the other hand as if to slap her.

He inhaled. She exhaled.

"Killer," she growled one last time.

There was no hesitation.

Her taunts had found their mark in a man easily given to violence; his hand arced down in a vicious swing. A resounding *crack* stung them both as Joran's callused hand struck Maelis's cheek. As soon as he slapped her, he regretted it. He saw the wounded look in her eyes and reached out to console her.

"The old nature lies just beneath the surface," Maelis whispered. "And you expect me to trust you?"

She covered the growing welt on her cheek with her hand and stepped away from him.

Joran tried in vain to make amends for striking her. Maelis refused to soften. What had been an uncomfortable truce between them became, instead, a bitter war of nerves. She ignored him when he spoke, refused the food he offered, and glared back at him whenever he caught her eye.

Joran apologized repeatedly, to no avail. Maelis was skilled at holding a grudge; she refused to release the anger she harbored. He did everything he could to make recompense for his action, and make the trip easy for her. He shorted himself on sleep by taking the later, longer watch; he left his spare tunic folded for her to rest her head on while she slept and he prepared breakfast for her when she awoke.

No matter what the attempt, Maelis grumbled inwardly, I will neither forget nor forgive what he did.



Two days passed before they were capable of polite conversation. She was the most stubborn woman Joran had ever met; she held tight to her grudge. Yet it seemed finally her need for information eclipsed the wounds she nursed. Maelis broke her brooding silence.

“So, Joran,” she began, refusing to look directly at him. “How much further to the lake?”

He didn’t answer right away. He was pleased by the dispassionate tone in her voice and terribly taken with how the firelight danced on the profile of her face. She looked warm and inviting, despite her sullen, staid nature. She sat across from him, her arms folded across her chest and her face averted.

“Well, Joran, are you going to answer me?”

“Sorry,” he replied. “I was just thinking—trying to estimate the distance left and time to get there.” He smiled sheepishly.

Finally, she faced him. She caught him staring at her; embarrassment warmed his cheeks. Joran was certain the desire he felt must have shown in his eyes. He feigned interest in the fire, poked the coals.

“Well, how long will it be?” she asked again. “And how, exactly, are we going to find the Second Talisman?”

Her tone hardened again, but now Joran recognized a subtle hint of self-doubt. She did not know where to find the Green Stone, and it was a Talisman meant for only her. *How could she save Nuermar*, he thought, *when she couldn’t even find her own stone?*

Joran had been trained to think as his enemies; he knew that Maelis’s lack of knowledge made her feel frustrated and helpless. He knew, as well that she hated having to rely on Joran. Before this, her grandmother and the monk had been her teachers; their characters had been pure and she loved them. Being dependent upon Joran—a Nemen assassin—went against everything her mentors had taught her.

"Well," he said, trying to ease her angst. "I believe by the end of tomorrow's hike we should reach the shores of Lake Melnam. When we get there..."

"So how do I find the Green Stone?"

He heard the thinly veiled aggravation in her voice, and Joran longed to reassure her. Yet the only comfort he could give was information, so he answered as best he could. "The legends say, '*On Melnam's fields of green, Her whispering path will be seen.*' I would guess that when we reach Lake Melnam, you will need to call on the White Stone to help you. Beyond that, I can't be sure."

Maelis simply snorted in response. Then she looked at him, her features soft, her voice weak, "Your knowledge and my abilities—together we're perfect."

Surprised by her own concession, Maelis's expression toughened, solidified into the sullen mask it had been. She got up and hurriedly packed her things. Though she tried to be enthusiastic, she struggled to hide the tears that came with the realization that she did need him. Despite everything, it had become evident to her that they were good together.

Joran watched her. He knew by her posture, her quaking shoulders, that Maelis stifled tears. Out of respect for her silence, Joran left her alone to cope with her emotions. He believed that the time would come when they would speak of the things she kept buried in her heart, but for now his silence was the best gift he could give her. As she rose with her pack, he scooped up his own and led her along the riverbank toward the shores of Lake Melnam. They marched together, yet still apart.



The moon was full, but waning. Soon the Early Downs would slow their travel time. The people of Nuermar were accustomed to seasonal climatic changes, and they called the heavy rains and dark nights of early summer the Early Downs. It was a dismal, muddy time of year in which travelers dreaded being caught on the plains.

Maelis trudged quietly behind Joran and accepted his proffered hand when she scrambled up to the riverbank. Climbing above the water's edge was risky, but a necessary risk to ascertain their whereabouts in relationship to the lake. In the hazy predawn hours, their tired eyes strained to find the horizon. They spied the line of the Tar-Nahser Mountain Range plunging into the flat expanse of Lake Melnam. They were close—less than a day's hike—yet Joran retreated to the riverbank.

"We'll stay here today and head for the Lake tomorrow," he stated flatly. He dropped his left shoulder, allowing his heavy pack to slip from his back. His rump followed the pack to the ground, and he stretched out along the riverbank. Joran looked up to where Maelis should have been likewise unburdening herself, but instead he saw her lithe frame silhouetted against the rising sun. Maelis was over the rise of the riverbank and heading toward the delta between the tributary and the lake.

Joran jumped up from his resting place and caught up with Maelis. He grabbed her shoulder and spun her around to face him.

"I can't believe you were going to make camp." She was dumbfounded. "This is why we came all this way and I refuse to stop now!"

With a quick shrug, she shook off his hand and turned toward the lake again.

"Can't you at least wait for me?" He was tired, and knew she was, too, but he realized that he couldn't keep her from her destiny. "Just let me get my pack."

For the first time, she smiled at him. "Hurry up!" she shouted with enthusiasm. "I won't wait very long."

Joran paused only a moment to smile back at her and then dashed for the riverbank. Moments later, he scrambled back up and rushed to her side. Maelis looked at him, and for a brief moment Joran saw the energy glowing from her body. She was radiant.

Maelis bolted toward the lake. Joran unsheathed his bow and quiver in one fluid motion. He nocked an arrow at the ready as he ran. Any

Nemen scout would have had the perfect opportunity to slay her in that moment.

Maelis slowed to a loping gait as Joran caught up with her. She was short of breath, yet Joran saw the pale aura still surrounded her. He attributed it at first to his imagination but the evidence glowed before him, a visible phenomenon of which Maelis seemed unaware. He watched as the aura about her faded from a brilliant, breezy white to a muted green and then back again, the closer they drew to the lake and the hidden stone.

The colors faded in and out of each other, slipping like liquid light around her body. It was something he had never seen before. It made her more beautiful. Maelis's forward momentum halted suddenly as her toes reached the grasses surrounding Lake Melnam. As she stopped, the aura disappeared. Her face showed only doubt and quandries where a moment before, he had seen joy.

Perhaps the aura has some correlation to Maelis's feelings, he mused as he stood waiting for her to speak. He watched for some sign that she was ready to retrieve her Stone, to claim her birthright, yet she said nothing. Instead, tears came to her eyes; a droplet slid down her cheek, refracting the tiniest ray of sunlight into a rainbow on her face. Unconsciously, Joran reached his hand out to her and gently brushed the tear away, carrying the precious liquid to his lips where he could taste the salt of her frustration.

With fists balled up at her sides, Maelis cried, "Now what?"

Joran reached for her left hand where the White Stone glowed softly, and raised it up for her to see its radiance. "Ask your Stone, Maelis."

Joran took a few cautious steps back. His body had not forgotten the miseries inflicted on him the last time she had summoned the First Talisman to life.

She concentrated on her ring and the Element of the White Stone. Whispers slipped soft from her lips, hesitant at first. As she spoke, the grass beneath her feet began to swirl, then flattened in a circle. Maelis called the Air Element to her, and a whirlwind rose up around her body, ruffling her clothes and dancing through her hair.

What do I ask for? she wondered. Maelis's lack of concentration caused her to lose control of the powerful Element. Her head tipped back as her chanting faltered.

Joran raised his hand to stop her head, as he had seen Ke'sair do before. He whispered: "Focus."

She raised her head and reined in the Element. The poem Joran had recited ran through her mind. "*Her whispering path will be seen...*" She began to whisper to the White Stone what she desired. She asked for a path to the resting place of the Second Talisman, the cradle of the Green Stone. In answer, a narrow cleft settled between the blades of grass at her feet and raced for the lake. The path's course shot across the narrowest part of the lake's surface, visible as a succession of slender waterspouts. The wind's path stopped on the opposite side of the lake at a grassy hillock that huddled against the shore.

Together they ran toward the grassy mound, skirting the water's edge as they rounded the narrow bay. The earth fell away from the hill's rocky backside; a small cavern opened where the remnants of Maelis's wind had pushed back the long grasses. Maelis lunged for the hole even as Joran reached out to stop her.

"We need a torch, Maelis," he said. "There's no telling what we may find in there."



Maelis was exasperated by his caution, but she accepted the need for light in a dark cavern. She turned and foraged along the beach for a piece of driftwood to serve as a torch. She walked along the lake's edge, its waters lapping at her boot. By the time she found a serviceable piece, her left foot was sodden. Brittle prize in hand, Maelis turned and walked back to Joran.

He struck flint to stone, breathing on the sparks until the driftwood caught fire. Maelis took the lighted torch from Joran and scrambled down the loose shale face of the hillock to the cavern's opening. She thrust the torch into the maw of the cave. She allowed her eyes to adjust to the flickering light, and then the cave's interior became visible. Inside

the jagged jaws of the opening, lay a ledge about three steps in width, then the floor dropped away as if the lake had sucked it out from underneath.

"There's not much room," Maelis said over her shoulder before she slipped her lithe frame through the jagged opening. Grunting and muttering, Joran squeezed himself in after her. Before them, in the half-light, they saw an empty chamber and the edge of a chasm.

"Where's the Talisman?"

Maelis scanned the cave's interior; there were no ledges or crevices, barely even a ripple on the smooth stone walls. There was no sign, no symbol, no directions for them to follow.

"Look!" Joran pointed at the edge of the chasm. "There's a smooth spot, where the stones have been worn away."

With cautious, measured steps, Maelis moved closer to the edge. She shifted her weight as she stepped nearer to the chasm's blackness and placed her left foot down near the edge. Her damp boot betrayed her, its treacherous grip giving way to the mouth of abyss. She pitched over the edge.

"Joran!" she wailed.

Joran flung the torch to the side, dove for the chasm's edge and her hand. He caught her by the wrist, circling his fingers around it. The torch, however, tumbled over the edge, flickering as it fell. With a brittle *crunch*, the wood wedged in a pile of human bones, coming to rest between the white domes of two skulls.

"The monks!" Shock rang in Joran's whisper. "They really did take the secret of this place to their deaths."

On a ledge no wider than a few finger-widths lay a silver circlet with a strangely colored, oblong cabochon on it. It seemed neither special nor powerful, but Maelis knew appearances deceived.

"I see it!" she exclaimed, her voice reverberating in the chasm. "I can almost reach it."

Maelis trusted Joran to anchor her weight as she stretched across the pit. He held her life in his hands while Maelis's fingers grazed the cool metal of the circlet. At her barest brush the stone glowed with a faint

green hue. She stretched further, strained her shoulders until they ached. Joran grunted above her as he tried to counter her pull. She could hear his boots scraping the stone above as she caused them both to slide farther. He grunted again, and the motion stopped. Maelis reached once more. She wrapped her fingers around the metal band, and called out to Joran.

“I’ve got it!”

Joran expelled breath through gritted teeth as he struggled to pull her body from the edge. Her wrist twisted within his grasp, slipped down until he held her only by the palm and fingers. Maelis kicked her feet and cried out. Her heart plummeted in fear even as her body slipped farther down.

“Joran, please!”

“I will... not... let you go...” growled Joran.

Even through her terror, Maelis could feel him draw on inner reserves as he dug his toes into the gravel floor of the cave. Inch by inch, inhaled and exhaled breath, he slowly pulled her back from the fate that had befallen the monks. He heaved backward, pulling Maelis up and against him. He gathered his legs beneath him until he knelt with her wrapped in his arms.

“Are you alright?” he whispered, his voice strained and winded.

Maelis nodded, tucked against his chest, grateful for the man who had saved her life. She tilted her face, looked into Joran’s eyes, and though he said nothing, Maelis could see the love burning there. In that moment, she knew that she could trust him with her life, that he would never allow harm to come to her. Maelis lay her head against him again, wrapped her arms around him, and felt herself softening to the sound of his thundering heartbeat.

Chapter Nine

They sat in the cave and clung to each. Their environment, their world was each other's skin and breath, but then the flame from their torch expired and left them to darkness. The utter black drove them outside. The cave was the site of two great events—the sacrifice of the monks who had died to protect the Second Talisman, and the change of Maelis's heart.

Although she swore to never again feel animosity for Joran, she was not yet prepared to return the affection she saw in his eyes. It was neither the time nor the place for her to think of such things. Now Maelis clasped the Second Talisman in her hand, and it commanded her full attention.

"Maelis." Joran broke the silence. "You have the Second Talisman!"

She did not respond, lost in thought, a flood of emotion.

She held the fine-wrought silver band tight in a white-knuckled grip. Relief settled on her with the realization that she held part of her birthright and with it the key to unlock the Element of Earth.

Her fingers slowly unfurled. Over her palm lay a silver circlet. It was the size of her wrist with an oblong, deep-green stone fixed to it. She held the Green Stone up to the setting sun, looking for some resemblance to her White one, but there was none. This Stone was dark and though light penetrated through, it held no hidden fire. It appeared much more like an ordinary river rock than a Stone of power. The Green Stone reminded Maelis of damp moss, for its color was a rich, deep green, with paler veins running through it.

Given its size, the Second Talisman could only be a bracelet. Maelis slipped the bangle onto her right wrist; it fit as though it has always been

there, circling her arm and caressing her bare skin with its metallic coolness.

So beautiful, thought Maelis. *Such a rich color, such a lovely Stone*. Once again, she stood enraptured by the beauty of her new prize.

Maelis whispered of her newfound emotions, her hopes and dreams in using the Green Stone. She closed her eyes, and against the black background of her mind she envisioned a tribute to the Second Talisman, to the monks who had died to protect it, and to Joran, her savior. She pictured a stone obelisk rising from the shallows of the bay. She scanned the terrain for appropriate rocks and contemplated the forces it would require to create such a monument.

Her aura, by now familiar to Joran, enveloped her body, cloaked her in a shimmering cloud. It was pale at first, the white and green scarcely discernable from one another; yet as she concentrated more deeply, the colors became more vivid. Joran watched with great fascination.

Maelis's lashes parted. She stretched out her right arm, palm down, fingers splayed wide, as if she reached for something in the lake. In the shallows of the narrow bay, the surface erupted in a bubbled mass. The tumultuous spray gurgled higher, the bubbles surging as the water hissed and spat. Then, it spilled away as a large stone arose from the murky bottom. As it climbed into the air, Maelis's mantra intensified, and her hand turned sideways to direct the stone's movement with her thumb.

The stone vaulted high above the hillock behind them. Maelis changed her chant, and as she did, she wiggled her fingers. Quartz flakes flew from the stone and descended on the river in a glittering shower. The result was a brilliantly colored obelisk twice the width of a man's chest. It was a rich green, like the hues of the Second Talisman. But Maelis wasn't finished. With the first two fingers of her right hand extended, she stirred the air beneath her hand. The obelisk split into two narrow shafts that first seemed to liquefy and then twisted about each other like vines on a trellis.

Maelis dropped her hand and the stone solidified again. Arching above Lake Melnam's surface, her monument stood sparkling, green and

entwined like frozen lovers. Her work done, she exhaled a long sigh as the sun slipped behind the hill.

Turning to Joran, Maelis said "Two made one—the united." Then she collapsed to her knees, exhausted. She pressed her palms to her temples, pushed against her skull, as leaned over until her forehead rested on the ground. "My head hurts," she mumbled.

Joran rushed to her as Maelis turned on her side. She allowed him to touch her head, to stroke her hair as she whimpered. She was physically exhausted, as with her first contact with the Element of the White Stone. Yet this headache was different—a demon clawed and tore behind her eyes, screamed in between her ears. She was nearly incapacitated. Even in her agony, she fumbled for Joran's hand and then took his hand in hers, placed it on the side of her head.

Joran rubbed Maelis's temples and massaged her scalp, trying to work the pain out with his touch.

She fought the nausea twisting her stomach and raised an arm weakly, pointing to her creation. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes," said Joran. "Can you tell me about it?" He stopped massaging her scalp to listen, but Maelis whimpered for him to continue. With gentle strokes, Joran's fingers rubbed her forehead and then her temples, too. Her eyes squinted shut against the pain and tears seeped from their corners.

"Maelis," he said. "Maelis, are you all right?"

Maelis opened her eyes. They were puffy and ringed, her emerald irises surrounded by angry red lines.

"Please don't stop rubbing," she begged.

Her eyes slid closed again, and Joran believed that she had fallen asleep. He reached around to his backpack to retrieve his healing herbs, yet even this slight motion caused her discomfort.

"Don't move," she mumbled. "It hurts when you move."



Those were the last words that Maelis uttered for more than two days.

She slipped into a fitful sleep; she hung lax from Joran's arms as he carried her to a stand of trees near the river's mouth. He pressed his cheek to her forehead where it was cradled in the crook of his arm; she burned with fever. He laid Maelis down in a bed of pine needles and fallen leaves, then covered her with a soft blanket from his pack.

He kept watch on her as he busied himself erecting a lean-to of branches and moss and gathered stones for a fire pit. Even when he had finished his labors, Joran did not sleep.

For two sunrises, two middays and two nights, Joran hovered over Maelis as he watched her sleep. His concern for her was painted heavily on his face and lay in dark puddles beneath his eyes.

She scarcely stirred the first day, and moaned weakly as her head moved. The second day, she fared better, her sleep more restful, as if she was gradually recuperating from the malady that had seized her when she used the Second Talisman.

At sunrise on the third day, Maelis stretched and sat up slowly. Her arms felt full of sand as she raised them to wipe the sleep from her eyes. The rest of her body was no better; though she suffered no injury, she felt battered and bruised. Hunger gnawed her guts and a dull, residual ache throbbed in her head. It wasn't quite a headache; more like the ghost of one. Her vision cleared gradually and she saw a rather bedraggled Joran sitting near her feet, a wan smile on his face.

"H-how did I get here?" Maelis asked. "And why do you look like you haven't slept in days?"

"I carried you here after you collapsed." Joran replied. "And I have not slept in days. I stayed awake watching you." He stood, vainly trying to smooth out the wrinkles from his clothes, pulling at the creases in the seat of his pants.

"What do you mean *days*?" Maelis asked. "We found the Second Talisman and I made the memorial. But, then...things are fuzzy after that. I remember my head hurting..."

She wrapped her arms around her body for comfort. When the wrist of her right arm peeked from her tunic's sleeve, she saw the Green Stone

resting there on its silver band. With her fingertip, she traced its oval shape, a lost expression on her face.

"You collapsed, Maelis," Joran told her. "You lay with your head in my lap, complained of a headache, and then you fell asleep. I carried you here, set up camp and watched over you. I didn't dare sleep; I was afraid that you were sick."

He bowed his head, averted his eyes from hers. "I was so worried about you," he whispered. His feelings for her were out in the open, painted on his face as clearly as the pallor from his lack of sleep.

"Thank you for taking care of me," she said. Guilt rose up within her. On some level, she regretted that she was not yet capable of returning his love; she, too, lowered her head. She turned, grabbed her pack and rummaged through it. Her stomach growled, a demon alive and hungry within. She appreciated the distraction her ravenous hunger provided.

Joran heard the sound and laughed. "Hungry?"

Maelis's face reddened in embarrassment.

He stretched his long, lean frame, his arms reaching skyward with the music of cracking joints. "How does fish sound? I'll go catch us some river trout."

"You don't know how good that sounds," Maelis said. "I'm starving!"

Joran seemed relieved to have the yoke of worry lifted from his shoulders; he even stood straighter. And an honest, if somewhat lopsided grin came to his lips. He did his best to mock a courtier's bow, sweeping his hand close to the ground.

"I live to serve!" he said emphatically. "I shall return with the Lady's fresh fish." With a flourish, he spun about and headed for the river. He grabbed up a sapling on his way, wrenched it from the ground, and with his knife, whittled it into sharp spear as he walked.

Soon, Maelis had built a fire in the circle of stones, and Joran had a large collection of trout flopping on the beach. The catch was large enough to require both Maelis and Joran to carry the load back to their campsite. After cleaning the fish, Joran skewered on his spear, and braced it over the fire pit. In minutes, the smell of roasting trout

permeated the air. Both Joran's and Maelis's stomachs growled in appreciation.

Except for an occasional murmur of satisfaction, Joran and Maelis ate in silence. When she had eaten her fill, she looked with chagrin at the pile of delicate fish bones on the ground beside her; it was noticeably larger than Joran's. Maelis looked at Joran, a smile playing at her lips.

"Sorry," she said. "I was very hungry."

Joran emitted a large belch as he shrugged his shoulders. "Quite all right, my lady!" he said. "I had my fill." He walked over to the bed where Maelis had spent the last days sleeping, lay back on the ground and loosened the laces which cinched his waistband.

Maelis watched his body relax. He twitched a few times and then settled into a deep slumber. She smiled at him; such juxtaposition between the waking man with his sword, and the sleeping man with a snore. Her great protector looked like a sleeping bear. She covered him with the same blanket under which she had slept for two days. Out of sudden impulse, she reached out, stroked his hair and then his cheek.

She rocked back on her heels and watched him sleep. Such contradictory thoughts ran through her mind. She had hated him once. She could not love him now. But she was somewhere closer to the latter now, and it pleased her.

Sunlight filtered through the leaves and danced over Joran's dozing form. He did not stir. Satisfied that he would sleep for a long time, Maelis scooped up her pack and made her way to the river to wash both herself and her dirty clothes.

She left fresh clothes on the narrow beach and stood naked on the water's edge, testing its less-than-tepid temperature. Her tangled hair fell halfway down her back, as goose bumps crawled up her bare thighs. She drew in a heavy breath and jumped in with dirty clothes in-hand. The cool water nipped her bare flesh, tingled between her toes and fingers. Maelis dunked her head back into the current and her scalp tightened from the chill.

Maelis washed her clothes first. Niomi had taught her to use fine-grained sand and rub softly, instead of pounding them against the rock;

her clothes lasted much longer. She laid the tunic and pants over a large stone and then rubbed clean white sand over both. She then turned them over and repeated the process before she rinsed them in the river. Once her clothes were clean, Maelis rubbed the fine sand on herself as well. She lamented over leaving her flowers and herbs behind at Ke'sair's; they were much more forgiving on her skin than the sand, and they smelled better too.

Her task complete, Maelis left the river's cold embrace and stood, naked and dripping, on the bank. She worked the tangles from her hair with a comb carved from a shell she had found as a child at the shore of the Nuermar Sea.

She had nearly combed all of her hair when she sensed another presence in the woods. She froze, strained her ears to listen. Maelis heard a movement.

Quickly, she struggled to pull her spare leggings over damp skin. She tugged at the pants with one hand, as she reached for her burgundy tunic with the other, muttering curses under her breath all the while. The sound of familiar footfalls reached her, and though she scurried to clothe herself, the tension left her. It was Joran. Still, she pulled in vain at the waistband that seemed now permanently stuck to her thighs.



Joran approached the river's edge and saw much more than he had expected. Clothes lay strewn about the beach as if a wild beast had attacked a clothesline. A shirt hung from the branches of a thorn bush, breeches lay across the flat of a rock, and a tunic floated in the river, stuck to an underwater root. And in the middle of it all stood Maelis, red-faced and bare-bottomed, turned sideways to the hill to prevent Joran from seeing all of her femininity.

"Go away! I thought you were sleeping!" she shouted, tugging at her leggings. With one last effort, she wrenched the seat of her pants over her exposed buttocks.

Maelis pinked in mortification, her entire body blushing, her face flamed red with embarrassment.

She inhaled, prepared to give Joran a good tongue-lashing, suddenly saw the humor in it all and laughed. Soon they both doubled over, guffawing until tears rolled down their faces. Maelis crumpled to her knees as she howled with laughter. Joran held his sides, and smacked a thigh.

He straightened, wiped tears from his eyes. He stared openly at Maelis. She was stunning when she laughed, like one of the lesser goddesses. Such brazenness was out of character for the Maelis he had known until now. He regained his self-control, turned away in deference to her modesty and waited for her to dress and collect her things. When she had wrung out the wet clothes, he offered his hand to help her back up to the trail.

"Sorry," he said to her. His eyes were downcast at his boots in embarrassment.

"No harm done," she replied, and pulled her hair forward to hide the blush which still flared on her face. "My clothes are wet. May we stay at camp another night so they can dry?"

"I don't see why not," Joran replied. "I see no sense in rushing headlong at destiny. She will find us in the end."

"What do you mean, *she*?" Maelis asked; destiny as a female was a new concept to her. She walked beside him on the narrow trail and awaited his answer.

"Well," he started. "That saying is something we learned in training."

"Training?" Maelis asked, curious. "For what?"

"Never mind," he said, shaking his head. He reached out and took the damp pile of clothes from her, carrying them. *That's enough*, he thought, not wanting to volunteer any more. *No need to go to that painful place.*

Back at camp, Maelis hung her clothes from tree branches, and Joran considered the subject closed. She went in one direction to gather tubers and early summer berries, and Joran hefted his makeshift spear and headed for the river. Before nightfall, they both returned to camp, laden with food for their evening meal.

While they worked, Maelis purposely sat close to him. She reached a hand over and placed it on top of Joran's. "Does it hurt that much?" she asked.

He heaved a sigh. He did not wish to speak of his experiences, did not want to darken her vision of life. But she needed to know what she was up against and with whom she fought it. He scraped the last of his meal from his tin bowl, cleaned off the spoon, and then dropped them both in the dirt.

"Maelis, it was awful," he said. "It's not something you want to know about."

"I want to know you," Maelis said. She squeezed his hand for encouragement. "Your past is part of you, Joran. You can't just bury it. Please tell me—I promise I won't judge you for anything you might have done."

Silence hung between them.

Joran shifted his weight, uncomfortable in his own skin. He appreciated her interest, but his story was not one she would like. He turned his hand over beneath hers. He drew strength from her as he gripped her delicate hand. He inhaled a shaky breath, then exhaled and began to speak.

Part Three

Begins to Burn

“When to love the Virgin turns
All in her sight begins to burn.”

— Legend from the Third Stone of Nuermar

Chapter Ten

Joran sat stoic and silent in that exhaled breath. He was grateful for Maelis' presence at his side. He stared into the coals beneath the logs, allowing himself to get lost in the flame's undulating motions. The recollection of his training released a flood of memories, overpowering him in a deluge of pain. *Fire consumes*, he thought; *so too, does training in torture*. He picked up a few pebbles, shaking them in his closed fist before tossing them back on the ground.

"Have you ever played *Roll-the-bones*?" Joran asked.

She shook her head. "No."

"That was my favorite game," he said. "I used to play it all the time with my Papa. We would go to the meadow outside of the village, where a large flat sheet of slate had pushed its way to the surface. It was best to play *Roll-the-bones* there because you could get more action bouncing the playing pieces off of the stone rather than the packed dirt of the roads in town.

"Papa and I were playing *Roll-the-bones* the day the Nemen commanders came and took me away. I had no idea what was happening. One minute, I was happy, playing with my Papa, then the next, I was dragged away in shackles."



Young Joran's head was down, his bangs hiding tears. His feet shuffled as they shackled him to a towrope with a dozen other boys, none of whom he had ever met before. He raised his bound wrists to wipe snot from his nose along his sleeve.

He had never been treated so harshly. Roughed about by men he'd never seen, Joran was fearful to speak or even look up from the ground. The dark-robed men jerked the boys along by their wrists, sometimes pulling the rope viciously and laughing as the boys scrambled to keep their footing. Joran chanced a look back at his father, as the line of boys crested the last rise before the flat expanse of the plains swallowed them.

Papa still sat in the same place; only now he cried. Joran could see the tears, even at a distance. To see his father cry broke something within Joran; a loose rattling pain engulfed his chest. Just before he faded from Joran's view, Papa raised one hand high in the air and shouted, "I'm sorry!"

It was only three days after Joran's tenth birthday.

The boys marched day and night, north and east over the dry plains. When the first boy fell, he dragged the boys on either side of him down. A gnarled ox of a man lumbered toward them as they struggled to get up. The man was barely taller than the boys, but barrel-chested with massive thighs, thick with muscle. He did not speak. Instead, he pulled a whip from his belt and lashed them. Over and again, the whip rose and fell; over and again, the tip bit into their flesh.

Only when the whip dripped with their blood did he stop. He glared at the terrified boys and snarled, "First lesson. Don't fall. If you do, you and any who stumble because of you will be beaten."

The captain then strode to the head of the line, barked at the troop leader, gestured and shouted obscenities. The troop leader suggested that they rest, but the captain would hear none of it.

"Keep moving," the captain huffed. "These boys are soft. They need to toughen up!"

The terse exchange between the two officers was the only respite the boys had until nightfall. They marched in silence, none of them wavering until dusk, when the boy in front of Joran stumbled.

Joran caught the boy with his arms hooked his armpits and hissed, "I won't get beaten for you."

The captain witnessed the incident. He scrutinized Joran and the other boy through slitted eyelids. He raised the handle of his whip and struck the boy. Then he turned and patted Joran on the shoulder.

“Lesson two,” he said. “Do not let the team or the mission fail. Failure will result in beatings.”

Joran had done something right and, as a reward, the captain allowed the group to stop for the night. The boys collapsed to the ground, exhausted and beyond hunger. In minutes, they fell asleep where they lay, but, after days of unrelenting terror, their dreams were troubled—tainted with images of ropes, shackles and whips.

Dawn came too soon for the newest conscripts of the Nemen army. The troop leader yanked on the rope, and shouted for them to rise. Their bonds chafed their wrists, wrenched them from their fitful sleep and reminded them of their waking nightmare. They grumbled, and out of sullen sluggishness they resisted the troop leader's orders to fall into place until the captain strode up brandishing his whip. He lashed out twice, and the boys fell into line.



The boys were clueless as to the reason behind their conscription. Their captors never told them why they were chosen, but rumblings among the boys revealed a common thread. Their fathers were all veterans of the Nemen army. Each boy could relate similar tales of fathers' army days; stories of abduction, abuse and, ultimately, bloody battles.

Not one boy knew the circumstances of their fathers' release from military service.

They did not know, until that day. The captain passed up and down the ragged group. He used the handle of his whip as he passed to poke them into a straight line. He turned at the end and then strutted back again, beating their shoulders until they stood at attention. He swaggered alongside, stared each of them down until each boy lowered his eyes in submission.

“How do you expect me to tell you the truth,” he grunted. “When you can’t even look me in the eyes? Hum?”

Expectations of another beating held the boys’ breath within their chests.

“Do you want the truth? Do you want an answer to the one question you all share? You wonder, ‘Why did they take me away?’” The captain laughed, a wicked sneer screwing up his face.

Not one boy moved.

The captain arched his back and waved his whip handle up and down the line of boys like a fat finger. He bellowed, “Your daddies sold you to the Nemen Army!”

The boys shuddered. The news hit them with a physical force, knocked the air from their lungs. They each pondered the news, and registered varying expressions of horror. Some eyes teared.

Joran alone remained unaffected by the captain’s words. *Papa would not sell me*, he thought. He watched the others tremble and cry, but he refused to show emotion. He was a bright boy, and he knew that the captain wanted a reaction from him; Joran wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

He paused in front of Joran and glared, but still Joran refused even to blink. The captain gave him a near imperceptible nod and then moved up the line.

“That’s right,” the captain said. “Your daddies sold you down the river to the Nemen Army before you were even an itch in their pants!” he mocked. He enjoyed their pain. “Sold you, they did! All of them were given a choice—life service in the Army, or the life of their firstborn sons. And you are all first-born sons, aren’t you?”

He strode to his packhorse, pulled a flagon of water and a greasy sack from its saddlebag and threw both items on the ground in front of the boys.

They looked from the flagon to the sack and then back at the captain, wondering if this was a new lesson, a new excuse for whippings.

The troop leader took pity on the boys and said, “It’s safe. It’s just water and hardtack. Eat it quickly. We’re leaving soon.”

The boys descended like carrion, first on the water, sucking one after another from the flagon until it was empty. With their thirst quenched, they grabbed for the food. Either by ruthless joke or cruel intention, there was not enough. Only seven of the boys held biscuits in their hands; the others looked around, hoping for another sack to be produced.

"Isn't anymore," the captain barked. He laughed at their dilemma. "Either people share, or fight for it."

The boys were unprepared to fight, but it was what the captain wanted. He knew they were all starving, but it was his obvious intent to cull the weaklings. Those who were willing to defend what they already possessed or take food from someone else would eat; the others would starve. The captain would select the winners and train them for the elite Nemen assassins.

At first, the empty-handed boys begged, and a few of the ones with food offered to share. But some hoarded their biscuits, dared the others to take it from them. What little camaraderie existed melted away as soon as one of the boys pushed another one down and took his food. The fallen boy jumped up and lunged. Fists flew, boots and bare feet kicked. Soon it was a free-for-all.

Joran scooped up a stone. He bided his time, watched the others and waited for the scuffle to stop. When it did, he picked out the one boy who held the largest share of hardtack and bragged about it. Joran lobbed his stone and hit him square in the mouth. The braggart screamed in pain, dropping his food as he reached his hands up to soothe his shattered mouth. Joran picked up the hardtack and said to his victim, "Don't be so cocky next time."

He stood there, arms open, offering the boy a chance to retaliate. The boy just whimpered in pain. Joran walked away, stuffing a biscuit into his mouth.

The captain saw it all. "You," he said, pointing at Joran. "What's your name, boy?"

"Joran, sir," he replied, his mouth still full of hardtack.

After the boys ate, the captain allowed them to relieve themselves in the trees. There was still a hard day's hike ahead, and there would be no more breaks until they reached the Nemen region. After the last boy emerged from the trees, the troop leader ordered them to move out. He called for double-time march, and the two officers led the conscripts east out of the plains and into the mountains.

At the end of the day, the tired troop trekked out of a shallow depression on the plains and beheld the most frightening scene in the land of Nuermar.

The Nemen Region, polluted by Nemenon's evil, loomed like a cancer on the horizon. Jagged mountains, vaulted from the earth like broken teeth. There were no rolling foothills, only sharp peaks which pierced the sky, separated by steep valleys hidden in thick mists. Flat black bogs festered, circling the sheer mountainsides. No animals moved. No birds flew. No vegetation grew. Only a few dead trees remained rooted to the earth, their skeletal branches twisting skyward in silent agony.

Joran and his companions marched across the foul ground. Though the land was barren, they traversed a well-traveled trade route—the earth beneath their soles was beaten down and rock hard. Their feet throbbed in complaint as they hiked toward the gates of the Vale of Dismay.

Two massive stone beasts loomed into view. The beasts were carved in fine detail, revealing every scale-covered, muscled feature in bold relief, even the jagged edges of their beaks. They towered above the castle gates, which they flanked, their talons outstretched and their wings raised, yet crouched on their haunches as if turned to stone in mid-leap. Their heads turned, their sharp eyes trained toward Nemenon's abode as though preparing to assault the castle and finish their charge.

The Demon Gates, Joran thought. I thought that they were only legends.

Trepidation ran thick in their veins, as the boys marched beyond the Demon Gates and entered the Vale of Dismay. Past the gates, a stench of evil pervaded the valley. All the boys gagged; a few were overcome with nausea and vomited. Joran easily resisted the impulse to retch; he had smelled this peculiar odor before. It had clung to his father always, and

Joran remembered its constant presence until the day the Nemen press-gang abducted him. It was somehow like returning home.

The valley was two miles wide and three miles long. On the southern side was a tumbled-down village of stone and thatch shacks; on the northern side, farther down the valley, was the army camp, sandwiched between the sheer rock face of a cliff and Lord Nemenon's castle.

Though their surroundings were as bleak as their march, the boys were grateful to reach the camp; it meant their long hike was over. Inside, another officer met the boys. He was taller than both the captain and the troop leader, and his uniform was crisp and clean. The captain was little more than a coarse ogre; this new officer had the true military bearing of a Nemen Commander.

Without preamble, he demanded, "Who are the chosen ones?"

Joran knew who those boys were. He knew without question that he had been chosen. He and a few others stood at rigid attention, but the rest of the boys fidgeted and shuffled their feet.

The Commander peered down his nose and regarded them like a herd of animals at auction. "Well, Captain," he snapped. "Tell me their names."

The captain fumbled in his hip pouch for his list. At the sound of his name, Joran felt an involuntary shudder. Fright skittered up his back like the talons of a fright demon. Bravely, he held his head high, sucked in his gut and stepped forward. Though he was sick with fear, he would not show it.

The captain then called the names of the four other boys selected for assassin training. The troop leader released each of the selected boys from their tethers to the tow rope, and they stood before their new Commander. Joran sensed that the Commander wasn't the brute that the captain was—he was something much more sinister.



The five selected boys were billeted in a cage built against the sheer face of the mountain. There were no ropes or shackles in the cage;

neither were there beds nor other furniture, just the dirt floor and moldy blankets. In the far corner was a pit for bodily functions.

A new troop leader led them from the cage to the rear of the camp where they stripped and stood in line. One at a time, a barber shaved their heads, and then they were scrubbed with stiff brushes, and rinsed with buckets of frigid water. They stood naked and freezing, while an ugly little man paced before them, inspecting their hairless bodies. The man was hunched and crippled, with a hump on his back and scars marring his gnarled skin; deformed by toil or torture.

The hunchback grabbed the smallest boy by the forearm and led him behind the flap of a makeshift tent. Minutes later, a scream reverberated from the tent. The hunchback emerged and, one by one, led each boy inside. With every scream, the remaining boys shuddered. Terror swirled within Joran as he wondered what awaited him behind the tent flap.

Joran was the last to go.

The hunchback grabbed him and pulled him inside, where two soldiers pinned his arms against an upturned board. Joran saw the other boys lying or sitting on the ground in the back of the tent. Two of them were unconscious; the other two were crying. From the corner of his eye, he saw the hunchback advance toward him with a white-hot branding iron. Before he had time to cringe, one of the soldiers shoved a flat piece of wood between his teeth and the hunchback pressed the iron to the tender flesh of Joran's left buttock.

Pain raged down his leg and up his spine. He choked back bile which rose in his throat, bit through the wood between his teeth and let out a scream. He lay atop the table, his left leg trembling uncontrollably. The soldiers shoved him into the corner with the other boys where he collapsed on the ground, and fought off tears.

Later, back in their cage, they examined each other's wounds. An image of a demon wrapped around the blade of a sword had been seared into their backsides; branded forever as an elite Nemen assassin. The troop leader issued them uniforms—hard leather boots and stiffly woven jerseys, pants and tunics.

Shorn of their former identities, bathed in the bloody hues of the setting sun, the boys again queued before their new Commander.

The Commander looked down his nose at them, sniffed vainly as he straightened his own tunic. "You are Lord Nemenon's newest trainees," he said. "You will become assassins. First will be your physical conditioning, and the training will be hard. If you fail in your assignments, you will be punished. If you try to escape, you will be killed."

Their next six months were characterized by predawn awakenings, mess tent meals of stewed beef, and then rigorous exercise until late into the night.

For training in speed and stealth, they raced through tunnels, over sheer-surfaced walls, through bogs and bramble bushes. If one boy failed, he would be lashed; if more than one failed, the entire group would be beaten. Many nights they returned to their cage, thirsty, hungry, bruised and bloodied.

Sometimes, the training officer would permit them neither morning nor evening meals, that they might learn to function without food. Always a guard stood, whip at the ready, to flog those that might complain of hunger.

Weeks passed. Late summer rain soaked the ground, soaked the boys, and pelted the blood of the first deserter into the mud.

At sun set one evening, Harver, a boy whom Joran had grown to like for his joviality, decided that he could take no more. He dropped his weapons, darted from his position and ran for the camp gates. No guard set up an alarm; no trainee cried out against him. Instead, in silent indifference, the Commander nocked an arrow and let it fly. Harver fell. The last ray of the sun touched upon the shaft of the Commander's arrow jutting from between the boy's shoulder blades.

The others broke ranks and ran to Harver's body. They turned his face from the dirt and saw shards of bone sticking through the flesh of his nose where it had been smashed upon impact with the ground. Blood seeped from the corners of his mouth. Harver coughed once, spewed bloody spittle, and then his body went limp.

“Any who try to escape will be killed.” The Commander’s voice cut into their grief and horror.

If they had not before, the four boys who remained now understood the ultimate meaning of their captivity and service to Lord Nemenon.

The boys carried Harver’s body to a trash pile, which they used as a funeral pyre. Through the night, the stench of burning flesh polluted the air of their cage. Each gust of wind, each sickening smell, reminded them of the futility of resistance or escape. They grieved for their murdered friend and the loss of their hopes, however small. Yet they kept their thoughts to themselves; it was useless to voice what they all felt.

Joran vowed to himself that he would survive, no matter what happened to the rest.

The remaining boys found new motivation after Harver’s death. With grim determination, they attacked their assigned tasks. They scaled walls without regard to the danger of falling; they permitted the bramble bushes to snag nothing but the air behind them; they ran through the bogs without a thought to the dangers of quicksand or the vile creatures which lurked beneath the mud.

Their conditioning over, the Commander stepped up the pace of the training. New and nettled skills awaited the boys. Through autumn and winter, they learned the subtle art of hand-to-hand combat. Training officers demonstrated strikes, kicks and blocks, and then the boys paired off to spar using the techniques they learned. Either they blocked well and hurt their opponents, or their opponents hurt them.

One boy died when Kimmal, Joran’s archrival, intentionally took a chokehold too far and broke his sparring partner’s neck.

The original group was down to three: Joran, Kimmal and Nilak.

The winter months dragged on, snow blanketed everything; their training was moved indoors. The three assassin trainees learned archery, including how to construct their own bows and fletch their own arrows. The first shots flew wide of the targets, but when the boys had grown accustomed to the bows they had created with their own hands, they began target practice.

The competition between Kimmal and Joran intensified as they each developed prowess with the bows. At first, they shot only at painted targets and straw effigies, but their training took a gruesome turn when the Commander produced cadavers for the boys to use as targets.

Joran liked the new arrangement.

He enjoyed the *TWANG-WHOOSH-THUMP* of his arrows striking flesh. A dark smile shadowed his lips the first time he buried an arrowhead into an eye socket. Joran even made notches on his bow for every vital point he pierced.

One morning, Kimmal and Joran's simmering feud erupted from passive animosity to active hate. Their sparring practice was meant to teach them technique; it consisted of pulled strikes, which allowed the opponent to block and return the thrust. But Kimmal went too far. He lunged passed Joran's guard, planted an uppercut to the jaw which broke his lip and landed him on his backside in the dirt.

Joran's face darkened. He eyed Kimmal with fresh hatred as he wiped blood from his split lip. He ran his tongue through the sanguine bead, smiled at the bitter iron taste in his mouth. He bunched his limbs, and launched his body at Kimmal. He rammed his shoulder into the other boy's chest, driving the wind from him. Kimmal came down and Joran penetrated his guard, straddled his chest; his arms pumped like pistons, raining down blow after blow to Kimmal's head.

The Commander stood, impassive as always, arms crossed as he permitted the beating to continue a few moments before pushing Joran off. He knelt between them, holding their heads so that their eyes met, and said, "Assassins do not pummel. A deathblow must be administered quickly. There will be another time for you."

Joran's feet shuffled beneath him as the Commander led him away, toward Lord Nemenon's castle. Realization soured in his guts, his chest squeezed tight as if in the grip of a demon. He knew to where the Commander dragged him. *People don't come back from there*, Joran thought.

He struggled to keep the morning's meal where it was. The maw of the door gaped before them and then they plunged deep into the belly of the castle.

"Never allow personal matters to affect your mission," the Commander snorted.

They passed through a vaulted archway and into a windowless dungeon. Men were chained to racks, awaiting punishment. Bodies of other men, some near death and others already dead, remained shackled to blood-soaked tables, some with their limbs lobbed off. Others still lay unmoving, with shredded skin hanging from their bodies in long, bloody strips. Still other vaguely human forms hung from leather straps pinned to the walls.

The Commander shuffled Joran across the torture chamber to a steel door on the far wall. He opened the door and pushed Joran into the darkness beyond.

The cloying smell of rotting flesh filled the room, penetrated his sinuses. Joran gagged. He struggled to adjust his eyes to the darkness. Dim shapes swam into focus: corpses, in various stages of decay, lay against the far wall.

So this is how it ends, lamented Joran. If I get out of here alive, I'll kill Kimmal and the Commander.

There was no escape from Joran's prison. The sound of screams from beyond the steel door was the only lullaby to which he fell asleep that night, and for many nights that followed.

Days and nights bled one into the other, punctuated and set to rhythm by the rise and fall of tortured wails. Then, the cries stopped. Sick silence rolled like a black fog through the dungeon. Joran scurried to the door. Through a crack in the doorframe, he saw a tall man dressed in black. The man, whose back was to Joran, wore a high-collared cloak that cascaded to the floor, swirling around his feet in a black mist. The man's shoulders were wide and his head was crowned with a thick shock of wavy black hair.

It's him, Joran thought. Lord Nemenon.

The dark figure turned toward the steel door behind which Joran had been imprisoned. Joran did not look away. Yet, where a face should have been, there was naught but a smoky haze pierced by two glowing eyes. The boy crouched, frozen in fright, transfixed by the demon's eyes. Joran's jaw gaped, yet he was mute in shock as the haze congealed into the form of a face.

The forbidding figure drifted forward. The black haze at his feet seeped across the floor and through the crevice beneath the steel door that separated Joran from him. The mist filled the room. Joran felt evil permeate him, soak into his muscles and vital organs. He tried to turn away from his peephole, but he was caught in a hellish grip and his mouth fell open in horror.

Nemenon's face became his own father's!

Then, in rapid succession, Nemenon's face changed from that of Joran's father to that of Joran and back again. The face repeated its transformation several times until Joran's eyes blurred and his brain ached. But then, Joran's face morphed into one that the boy did not recognize. The sheer malevolence made Joran's legs weak. He collapsed to the floor in a faint.

Joran awoke in the cage with his fellow trainees. Nilak and Kimmal stared at him, aghast at his condition. He scrambled backward and into a sitting position. "How did I get here? I was in the dungeon. I-I saw Lord Nemenon."

Kimmal and Nilak laughed. Kimmal snorted. "Yeah, sure you did!"

The two boys sniggered at Joran's expense. Joran seethed. Their laughter tapped the reservoir of evil left behind by touch of Nemenon's mist. A primal growl rose in Joran's throat. His fists balled at his sides. He would have killed them both where they stood, had not the Commander appeared at the cage door.

My time will come, Joran thought. His fingers unfurled.

There was no respite for Joran. The Commander directed them to the training arena. They worked through their warm-up exercises, and though Joran had been in confinement for weeks, with little food or

water, he retained his strength. Lord Nemenon's gaze had restored him. He stepped ahead of the other boys, eager for the day's training.

"Today, we start working with long swords," said the Commander. As Joran's hand grasped the sword's hilt, a strange sensation surged through his body.

This sword belongs to me, he thought. I was born to use it.

Kimmal on the other hand, struggled with his blade; its length and weight unwieldy for him. The boy fumbled with his new weapon and watched darkly as Joran waved his about with ease.

Through the months that followed, the three boys trained with their swords. Each boy's skills with the blade grew, yet Joran easily eclipsed his rivals, and found himself the focus of their jealousy. Kimmal was intent on bringing his nemesis down, and he goaded Nilak to help. Nilak acquiesced, not because he liked Kimmal, but because he feared him.

One evening after training, the Commander permitted the boys to return to their cage unescorted. Kimmal and Nilak seized their opportunity and turned on Joran, their swords held at the ready.

Joran didn't say a word. Instead, he smiled.

Nonplussed by the disparagement of numbers, Joran brought up his sword, held it high and pointed at Kimmal's throat. He looked down its savage sharp length and glared at his longtime adversary. Joran inhaled bloodlust, exhaled killer confidence. A growl rolled from him and reverberated through the ground between them, its sound more fierce than the Commander's own bark. He was ready; he was eager.

Nilak, weakest of the three, dropped his sword and fled.

Kimmal attacked, stabbing at Joran with an awkward thrust. Joran sidestepped with languorous ease and parried the blow. He smiled as a new, heady rush surged through his veins. *Real combat!*

This was to the death, and both boys knew it.

Lunge and turn. Thrust and parry. Kimmal had never been a match for Joran's skill with a blade, and that inadequacy showed as the effort to fend off Joran's blows wore on Kimmal. Kimmal raised his sword in a risky overhead maneuver to slash at Joran's neck. The high-held sword

left his torso exposed. Joran's grin flashed, followed by the flash of his blade as in one swift movement, he disemboweled his opponent.

Kimmal dropped his sword and sank to his knees as his viscera spilled onto the ground. He grabbed at his wound, shook his head in disbelief. He looked up at Joran, hate still etched on his face. Joran laughed. Kimmal pitched forward and Joran swung his long-sword in a vicious arc, beheading him.

Nilak and the Commander returned to find Joran wiping Kimmal's blood from his blade. Joran averted his face to hide the grin which curled his lips. He took fierce enjoyment in that fight. If the duel was a dance of the assassins, the music of the blades ringing against each other was its symphony. Stabbing Kimmal had been the crescendo; beheading him, the coda.

His shoulders shuddered as he sighed in satisfaction.

The Commander stood with his arms akimbo, his unflappable demeanor momentarily broken. "Joran! What happened here?"

"He attacked me," Joran replied. He faced the Commander, unafraid. Someday, Joran would make him share Kimmal's fate.

It was just three days after his twelfth birthday.



The fire burned down to smoldering embers as Joran finished the recount of his tale to Maelis. When he spoke of his confinement in the dungeon, he wept. Silently, he cursed his weakness. *I am supposed to be the strong one*, Joran thought, and he regained his composure. But when he recounted his fight with Kimmal, he broke down again.

Maelis arose from the stone on which she sat and knelt before him. She reached her arms around his quaking shoulders, held him tightly to her chest. Joran inhaled the aroma of her river-washed hair, gathered strength from the embrace she gave him before he spoke.

"I was barely twelve years old, Maelis. I killed him—not on any orders, not out of mercy. I killed him because I wanted to.

"After that, I was sent to more intensive training with Nilak. Then, a few years later, we studied the legends and learned all they thought they

knew about you. When I was eighteen, they sent me to the Monastery on my first mission. There I was taught the goodness and light of a simpler life. The monks re-educated me. The Nemen trainers taught me to kill; the monks showed me that killing was wrong.

“But just when my heart began to soften once more, Nemen operatives came for me.”

Joran told her of his tattoos on his hands, of receiving word that she had been located, of his hunt for her and of when he first saw her. She knew the rest. He looked at her then, eyes wet from tears, bottom lip quivering, and the words, ‘I love you’ hanging on his tongue.

Maelis put a finger to his lips, unwittingly cutting off that confession. With the cuff of her tunic sleeve, she wiped his tears away, then rose and took his hands in hers. She led him to the lean-to under which she had slept for two nights. She guided his shoulders down until he lay beneath the shelter. She knelt by him, folding a spare tunic for a pillow; then she covered him with a blanket. When he opened his mouth again to protest, she shook her head at him, silencing him without a word. Joran settled into the moss bedding.

To his surprise, Maelis lay down beside him.

She pulled a blanket over herself then turned on her side to look at him. She smiled, and laid her head back, putting an arm over his chest. Bliss spread through Joran’s body, ebbed out in waves from the point of her contact with his chest. Happiness washed away the misery dredged up, and he enjoyed a comfort that he had never felt before. He prayed to the gods that it would always be like this, yet he knew that much lay before them, and between them, that he must soon return to the Vale of Dismay.

Maelis slid her hand up to his neck and wrapped her fingers in his collar. “No more training,” she said. “No more torture. I’m here now.”

Chapter Eleven

Sunlight filtered through the leaves above, pale green and dappled on the ground near the lean-to. Joran opened his eyes with reluctance, knowing that morning would chase away his dream of Maelis lying beside him.

But that did not happen.

Maelis was there, her face close to his, her breath warm against his cheek. The weight of her arm was a pleasant pressure on his chest. Maelis's fingers remained curled over his collar, her nails against the bare skin of his chest. She had moved closer to him while she slept, draped her knee over his left leg and rested her boot on his ankle.

For one blissful moment, all was peaceful and he was loath to disturb her.

Joran loosened Maelis's grip on his collar and he shifted his leg to slide out from under her knee. Despite the pains he took not to awaken her, his movements roused her nonetheless. Her eyes snapped open and she lay there looking at him. He saw embarrassment on her face, as if she had crossed an imaginary boundary and now regretted it. She smiled sheepishly, then stretched and yawned.

In the morning light, with her body open before him, Joran found it difficult to contain himself. To avoid embarrassment, he scrambled over her and threw another log on the dying embers.

Maelis rose, folded the blankets, and exchanged a few pleasantries with Joran. She smiled briefly, her emerald eyes sparkling, and then set off under the trees to forage for some berries and spring herbs while Joran prepared a thin gruel for breakfast. When she returned, she added

her berries into the simmering pot, and then got a kettle to brew some herbal tea.



The morning was awkward for both of them. So much had changed in just a few days. Joran walked on eggshells around Maelis, obviously not wanting to upset their new amicable relationship. Maelis was embarrassed by her show of emotion.

She only knew to hide her feelings, suppress them; which was difficult. A floodgate had opened inside her, flushing away the anger she had toward him, and pouring forth affections that intensified with every passing moment. Maelis struggled to contain the new emotions, unsure of how to behave around Joran. She feared the emotional freefall that loving Joran represented to her.

She had already lost or had been parted from everyone she loved; she did not want to lose him, too. Maelis believed that if she did not admit her emotions, then they would not be real and the gods would not take Joran away from her.

At last, Joran broke the silence.

"Maelis," he said. "We need to start moving again. I want to take you to the Monastery to meet the Elementals and on our journey, I hope to find a clue to the location of the Third Talisman. At the Monastery, one of the books spoke of a boulder on a river bend." Normally, the mention of another Talisman would pique Maelis's interests. Joran waited and watched for her reaction.

"B-but you saw what happened with the Green Stone," Maelis stammered. "I'm not ready to go after another Talisman, Joran. I'm afraid of what could happen..." She paused, inhaled deeply then exhaled in lament. "I wish Ke'sair was here!"

"Maelis," Joran soothed. "That was just your first time with the Talisman. You hadn't eaten all day. You were tired from not sleeping..."

His voice trailed off, as if he ran out of explanations for what had happened to her. Despite the confident tone of his voice, the pinched corners of his eyes told Maelis that he was worried about her using the

Green Stone again. The White Stone had not made her so ill; it had only weakened her. *If the Second Talisman made her that sick, what would the others do?*

"Maybe you're right," Maelis said. "We'll practice with both the Talismans as we travel to the Monastery." She paused, bending over to scoop up her pack and sling it over her shoulder. "Which way did you say we were headed again?"

"Back along the river's course," Joran replied. "North and east toward Sedgwin Swamp. The Monastery is nestled between the Sel Barna Plains and the marsh."

With that, he led the way back to the river in which she had bathed only the day before. At the embankment where he had seen more of her than she had intended, Joran turned to Maelis, a playful twinkle in his eyes. A crooked grin, as much mischief as mirth, curled his lips. He bowed low, with a sweeping arm gesture toward the gurgling river, and asked, "Do you need another bath before we get going?"

"No, sir," Maelis said. "I'm not interested in risking another episode of wet thighs and stubborn pants!"

They both laughed, the freedom of which was a pleasant respite.



For Joran and Maelis, the trip from Lake Melnam was more pleasant by far than the trip there. The risk of daylight travel was diminished now that Maelis held two of the Talismans. They followed the river as it snaked to the north and east. She had claimed her birthright; he had managed to prove himself trustworthy in her eyes—together, they had accomplished much. Yet, from Joran's perspective, the greatest achievement thus far was the warming of Maelis's heart.

After breakfast on their second morning out, Maelis decided to try again with the Green Stone. She stood on the riverbank, looking for a good rock to manipulate. Near a narrow bend in the river sat a very large boulder. Maelis examined it closely, gauging its weight and composition. Then she pictured in her mind what she wanted to do with the stone. She knew that Joran stood only steps away from her, and that

knowledge gave her great comfort. With a deep sigh, she squared her shoulders and then raised her right arm until the Green Stone was parallel to the ground. She pointed in the direction of the boulder.

Quiet at first, barely audible to her own ears, Maelis whispered to the Second Talisman. She whispered of her love for the stone, her pride in it and its power, and she whispered to it her desires for the boulder. Her murmurs grew in intensity; a tingling sensation rose through the soles of her boots. The very energy from the earth channeled through her.

This time, however, Maelis was aware of the power which surged through her. It was an entity within her, a tickling which danced on her nerves, flowed through her veins. Instead of allowing the energy to flow uncontrolled throughout her body, she directed it from her feet, through her torso and arm, and then out of her fingertips.

The boulder began to shudder, its surface resembled heat waves above the desert, as it undulated and stretched. Maelis's whispered voice came forth in a swift, rhythmic chant, built on itself as the stone elongated toward the opposite shore. Soon, Maelis succeeded to manipulate the bulky boulder into a bridge which spanned from one shore to the other. Maelis stood at the western-most end.

Her task complete, she dropped her arm and broke her mental connection with the Element of Earth.

Satisfied with her creation, she attempted to walk over the bridge, but found herself unable to move, her feet stuck fast to the ground. The Earth Element refused to release her. Maelis wiggled her boots, to no avail.

"Release me!" she shouted. As if invisible fingers unfurled from her boot, she was freed and staggered forward.

"Maelis!" Joran cried as he rushed and caught her in his arms as she started to fall. "What happened? Are you all right?" His eyes searched hers, his cheeks pale with concern.

"I'm fine," she said, extricating herself from his arms. She pointed in accusation at the ground. "It wouldn't let go. My boots were stuck. But when I yelled, the earth released me."

"Odd," he said. "Perhaps the monks will know why that happened. How's your head?"

"Fine," she replied. "Why don't you ask me about the bridge that I made?"

"All right," he said with a smile. "Tell me about your bridge."

Maelis told him how she thought her way through the boulder, made her mind see its tiny pieces, like grains of sand, and rearranged them to the shape of the bridge. She explained how the energy had flowed through her—how she had *felt* the Elemental powers course through her body. Once she had become aware of that power, she had been able to control it easier.

Maelis concluded from that experience that the migraine she'd suffered after her first contact with the Talisman had resulted from her fatigue. Her weakened body had been unable to sense the subtle tracings of the energy, unable to control the Elemental power which flowed within her. Therefore, it had surged and sapped unchecked through her entire body.

Joran remained silent, listened intently and learned from Maelis. But upon her conclusion, that slow, crooked smile took over his lips once more. "So," he said. "In a way, you really did have rocks in your head!"

"Not funny!" Maelis snapped. Although her voice was terse, mirth tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Well...maybe..."

She slapped his shoulder, nearly shoving him over before she dashed across her bridge.

Joran hesitated a moment, doubt in her magick keeping his foot in midair. His eyes followed the span to Maelis where she stood, her hands on her hips, eyes locked on him. He defied his doubt and placed sole to stone. She was his life and he would go to her, no matter the path. Head forward, eyes locked on hers, he crossed the span without another thought.



The two took up travel on the east side of the river, continuing along the riverbank, hiking during the day and camping by night. Though

Joran hoped against hope that Maelis would yield to her growing affections and lay beside him again, she maintained her distance at night. Joran accepted this reluctantly, though in his dreams he still lay beneath the lean-to with Maelis's arm over him. He desperately wanted that intimacy with her again.

"Maelis," he said as they reached a fork in the river. "This is it! Somewhere around here is the boulder of which the book spoke, the one that reveals the location of the Third Talisman."

Joran raced headlong down the beach. Then, in a shallow part of the river, he hoisted his pack up over his head and forded across. He dashed over the beach on the far side and searched the edges of the delta.

She shouted at him from midstream. "What are you looking for?"

"A flecked boulder," Joran called over his shoulder. "A brown one. There is an inscription on it that tells us how to find the Third Talisman."

Near the mouth of the river branch, Joran found the stone he had been seeking and, motioning wildly to Maelis, he dug it from the shore. Joran worked the stone loose as Maelis caught up to him, and the two rolled it up onto the beach. He ran his hands over the surface frantically as he searched for the old Nuermarian runes.

To his dismay, however, he discovered that the inscription had been chipped away.

Maelis fell to her knees, a hesitant hand reaching out to touch the boulder's freshly marred surface. Her fingertips traced its jagged gashes as though they were raw wounds on living flesh. When she looked up at Joran, tears filled her eyes, not for their setback, but for the pain that the stone had suffered.

The Second Talisman rested on the wrist of the hand that touched the boulder, and she felt the stone on a different level. To Maelis, the rock had a life force inherent in its essential particles. Although Maelis knew nothing of what these essential particles were, the bracelet she wore opened her senses to them; their energy field had been disrupted, and the result for the boulder felt like pain.

"What now?" Maelis cried. "How could this happen? Joran, who did this?"

The questions flew from her lips. Maelis feared that their location had been compromised. There would be no safety if other Nemen operatives were on their trail. Yet with the elemental powers of her bracelet coursing through her, her fear gave way to her need to heal the wounded boulder.

"We have to find the Nemens, Maelis," Joran said. "They know where to locate the Third Talisman!"

He, too, felt the panic. He could not fend off an entire division of Nemens. Death was a ready sacrifice to them, yet Jordan now had something—someone—to live for.

The stench of Lord Nemenon's evil demons pervaded this place. *Perhaps something worse than Nemens have been here*, he thought with a cold shiver of dread. He turned to tell Maelis his fears. Surprise rose up when he saw her kneeling, eyes closed, whispering to the Green Stone.

That familiar nimbus again began to glow around her as he watched. But this time it wasn't white. It was pale green. To Joran, it was clear from the aura's color which Talisman she was using.

I wonder if she's aware of that cloud, he thought. Maelis's chanting grew intent and rhythmic. The nimbus gathered in front of her, hovering over her outstretched hand. With tears in her eyes, but no break in her mantra, Maelis lay her hand upon the boulder. The misty cloud seeped through the stone's surface; the stone wavered and then became smooth once again. Maelis had healed it.

Her chanting took on a different lilt—more querulous and tentative. She used words he did not recognize. Yet, soon she grew more confident and, as her chanting became more forceful, the nimbus returned. Again, it collected before her, but then seemed to dissipate as it poured onto the ground before her bent knees. When she opened her eyes, the green cloud shot across the river toward the east, straight toward Nemenon's stronghold.

Maelis jumped to her feet, pointing in the same direction. "That's the way they went," she said. Hoisting her pack above her head, she charged back through the river.

"Wait!" Joran cried. "How do you know? What were you doing with the Stone?"

Even as he shouted his questions over the river's surface, Maelis's feet hit the pebbled beach on the other side. He slogged through the river and reached her at the opposite shore. Panting, face darkened with unanswered questions, he asked again, "How do you know?"

This time, Maelis answered him. "The Second Talisman controls the Element of Earth," she said. "The troops had to travel over the ground, so I asked the Green Stone to show me which way they traveled over the earth."

"Well, that's handy!" snapped Joran, a hint of sarcasm in his words. "Did it to tell you how many men there were, or when they left?"

"Actually, it doesn't *tell* me anything in words," said Maelis. "It communicates in feelings. I sensed that they were here last night—a group of about twelve men and a couple of horses. Only... only..." Her voice trailed off, taken away by the babbling river.

"Only what?"

"I sensed something evil," Maelis said. "It was worse than anything I have ever felt before."

A demon, Joran thought. He was correct. One of Lord Nemenon's own demons had foiled their attempt to find the third Talisman. His mind floundered, answers to too many questions evading him. *Where should he and Maelis go now? Straight to the Monastery? Follow the path the Element gave them?* And, finally, he asked himself: *Was it safe?*

"Joran!" Maelis called, her voice cutting through his quandaries. "Come on! Their evil doesn't frighten me. I'll not let them get the Talisman!"

She tugged on Joran's arm, and he saw a mix of fear and determination on her face. It took only one look in her emerald eyes for him to know that he could not deny her. If Joran and Maelis could overtake the Nemen troop, they may yet be able to rescue the Talisman from them. But Joran feared that they might be bested in combat, as Maelis had yet to test her powers in battle.

He could not, however, afford time to worry. Maelis was far ahead and his concern was in keeping up with her on the trail. She hiked as hard as a seasoned soldier, maintaining a pace that was almost too

much for even Joran, the battle-hardened assassin. Never breaking stride, Maelis swung her pack off her shoulder, pulled out a flask and handed it to him. Later, they ate hardtack as they marched.

Maelis kept up the pace until late into the evening. Joran finally called on her to halt after midnight. He dropped to the ground in a chest-heaving heap, and Maelis, too, collapsed, panting like a dog.

Joran was too tired to stand and walk off of the trail to find shelter. Tucking his arms and elbows in, he rolled off the path. Maelis crawled next to him. She pulled a blanket from her pack and covered them both. While they slept, evil was not far away.



In a village on the Sel Barna Plains, Daysen obtained two horses for carrying supplies and then assembled his troop—twelve young men from the military encampment on the east of the town. Four days after being recruited, without an explanation from their leader, the small band marched toward the river. They obeyed without hesitation because they knew that to question an assassin was to court death.

Behind the Nemen assassin's back, however, they gossiped about his looks and his stink.

"I tell you, he's a demon," one man whispered to the next in line.

"I heard talk in town that he has a wound that won't heal," another said.

"Did you see his stomach?" a third man hissed. "There is a wound on it! It's putrid and has black hooks keeping it closed."

And so the rumors spread through the small band of men. They followed without questioning, but whispered their suspicions among themselves.

Hour after hour, they marched without rest, pressing on and on toward the riverbed. The troop reached their destination before sunrise on the second day. There they halted, waiting while their leader sniffed at the breezes and along the shore like a bloodhound. Then the men watched as he straightened and turned to face them.

His visage alone was good enough to silence every loose tongue. There was no longer question of demonic possession.

“Our mission is to stop the Witch and the Traitor before they reach the Vale of Dismay,” Daysen told his men. “She has acquired the First Talisman and may have the Second. We must prevent her from getting the Third!”

Daysen led the troops north and east at a harried pace. He knew that soon the Early Downs would swell the river, and therefore submerge the boulder for which he searched. Their destination was at least a two-days’ hike, and he dared not waste a moment. He barked for double time. The sound of the men’s marching reverberated within Daysen like the beating of the demon’s heart.

Daysen roused his troops before the dawn on the sixth day of their march. The demon screamed between his ears to get them going without delay, but Daysen showed a moment’s humanity by permitting his men to eat a hasty meal. They ate quickly, but the demon loosed its claws on Daysen’s stomach, ripping his flesh with pain.

Never disobey me again, the demon hissed in Daysen’s mind. If you do, it will mean your death!

Sensing the evil in the man before them, the horses reared and whinnied in fear, their forelegs flailing in mad attempts to strike at Daysen even as he hunched over in pain. The men gained control over the two frightened beasts, leading them to the back of the line, as far from Daysen as possible.

During the men’s preoccupation with the horses, the demon’s claws cinched back together the edges of Daysen’s wound. Daysen had learned the lesson; he followed behind the men, barking orders as he tore a strip of cloth from his sack of provisions and dabbed at the blood and pus that leaked from his stomach. He drove the men mercilessly until shortly after midday, when the lead man shouted that they had found the boulder.

Daysen ran to the front of the line to view the men’s discovery. It was indeed the boulder for which they had been searching. He instructed his men to move it carefully, taking care not to disturb the stones around it. After they loosened the boulder from its place, they recorded the

inscription that would lead them to a settlement on the edge of Sedgwin Swamp, on the northeastern-most edge of the Nemen region. Daysen then ordered his men to deface the boulder's inscription, so they chipped away the centuries-old writing.

This will foil the Witch, the demon hissed in triumph.



Maelis awoke with a start, gasping and flailing her arms. Instinctively, Joran hugged her to his chest, thereby avoiding her wild swings and also calming her in the process. Once she had struggled up out of her nightmare and into reality, Maelis breathed a sigh of relief and her body went limp in Joran's arms. Still foggy from sleep, she focused on his face and smiled at him.

"Bad dream," she mumbled, her tongue still thick with sleep.

"Want to tell me about it?"

"Well," Maelis started. "I was fighting against the Nemens. Then I was knocked into a pond and began to drown. When I came to the surface, my arms were weak and my chest was burning. I was gasping for breath when I was struck on the back of my head." She paused, looking intently at Joran's face, reaching up to touch his whiskered cheek. "As I slid back into the pool I caught a glimpse of my face reflected in the water's surface. It wasn't my face, Joran! I died, but it wasn't me. It was you."

Joran held Maelis close, stroking her hair and rocking soothingly from side to side. He stroked her face, quieting her with his pursed lips. She lay against his chest, shaking.

"I'm here Maelis," he said. "I'm not hurt and I'm not going to leave you."

"I know," she replied. "But it seemed so real, it *felt* real. But it was just a dream." Comforted at last by Joran's presence, Maelis stood and stretched her aching muscles. "Let's get going," she said.

After breakfast, Maelis once again called on the Second Talisman. She knelt on the ground, facing the east. Holding her right arm up in front of her chest, she grasped the back of her right hand with her left. Then she stilled herself, and the mists gathered in front of her body.

Maelis chanted in her whispered cadence until the aura collected in front of her, then flew in a straight path north by northeast.

Joran watched where the mist traveled. “Sedgwin Swamp,” he muttered. “So that’s where the troop is headed.”

Chapter Twelve

Maelis folded their blanket and stuffed it in her pack, and then she and Joran set off at a fast pace. Soon the sun rose, and they jogged toward it, intent on catching up to the Nemen troop. As the morning rays illuminated the earth and the Plains became more visible, Maelis and Joran could see the sharp crags of the Nemen region not far off in the distance, the great jagged peaks stabbing up through the flesh of the land of Nuermar. To the mountains' left, Sedgwin Swamp's shaggy willows hid in the shadows; they squatted before the mountains, sucking up the Gray River as it tumbled into the bog. Nearer Sedgwin, they saw a swirling cloud of dust that could only have been made by troops on the march. Even without the telltale cloud of dust, Maelis knew that it was Daysen, so strongly could she sense the presence of evil from across the river.

Burying her fear, Maelis redoubled her speed, breaking into a run toward the men who would dare to steal her birthright and doom the land of Nuermar. Joran was at her side, checking his equipment as he ran. Each weapon he carried gave him confidence. He mumbled, "Dagger...check. Sword...check. Bow and quiver...check." He steeled himself against the overwhelming odds: two against twelve. Things did not bode well, but perhaps if they divided the enemy's forces, he and Maelis might defeat them.



Maelis and Joran observed the Nemen forces. Daysen must have sensed that danger approached from his rear, because the troop had stopped its advance and wheeled around. Instead of rushing headlong at

their opponents, however, Maelis and Joran halted. Joran knelt down and drew a map of his strategy in the dirt. He would attack with arrows from the left flank, providing a distraction and giving Maelis time to summon her untested powers. Maelis would use the Second Talisman against the Nemens, causing the earth on which they stood to swallow them whole.

As soon as they were within range, Joran loosed his arrows at the enemy. Aiming first at one side and then at the other, he drove the Nemens closer together, herding the flustered men into a defensive circle. He was attempting to make Maelis's job easier, and the plan would have worked beautifully had Joran not noticed the horses in the back of the group.

Horses would make our traveling so much easier, thought Joran. Racing into the fray, he shot his arrows through the Nemens' defensive circle, driving the horses and their handlers from the rest of the troop.

"Get them!" he called to Maelis, pointing toward the cluster of soldiers. "I'm going for the horses!"

Maelis fell to her knees, raising her right arm in front of her, clasping the palm of her left hand over the back of her right. She uttered a prayer before beginning her intended task; then, almost in a trance, Maelis fixed eyes on the ground beneath the circle of Nemen forces. She looked beneath the grass and into the soil, seeing its separate components. Then she whispered her incantations.

In a moment frozen in time, the hands of the gods seemed to slow the earth's rotation. The troops saw the Witch facing them, gazing in their direction. She was frighteningly beautiful, her lips moving as she wove her spell against them, and her emerald eyes radiated an almost visible heat. Yet it was the sparks emanating from a green stone she clutched to her chest that froze them all in fear. The sparks flew from it and sunk into the ground beneath them, melting the earth. Before the men had time to act, the hard soil on which they stood gave way and they sunk into a quagmire.

Inexorably, it sucked them down. Try as they might, the men could not free themselves. With backs twisting and arms flailing, they sank,

first feet, and then ankles and calves slipping beneath the surface. Soon, all the men were buried up to their chests. They felt the Witch's whispers resonating through the mire in which they were trapped, and they were helpless.

As the leaching mud sucked at their shoulders, Maelis approached them and the men cried out for mercy. They beseeched the gods to save them. Although no gods interceded, their pleas did not fall on deaf ears.

Maelis realized that she could easily kill the men, but she knew that it would be wrong to use the Green Stone for that purpose now. Instead of plunging the Nemens forever beneath the earth's surface, she directed the Green Stone's power to solidify the ground around their bodies. As Maelis came nearer, the tenuous ground hardened. The Nemen troops were trapped in the ground, but still alive. Their hands were still free, and, eventually, they would be able to dig themselves out. Maelis had stopped short of murder and had thus remained pure.

Maelis then turned her attentions to Joran and his battle with the remaining members of the troop. Joran had already felled three men with his bow. As Maelis approached, she watched one of the wounded Nemens try to take advantage of Joran when he dropped his bow to unsheathe his sword. The wounded man advanced on Joran with his blade held high. Joran spotted him in time, lunging at his exposed belly and spilling the Nemen's innards all over the ground.

What bothered Maelis more than the anatomy lesson was the look on Joran's face. He enjoyed the battle, deriving a thrill from killing. His eyes sparkled and an insidious grin twisted his lips. As he raised his sword to deal the fallen Nemen a final blow, Joran's eyes rolled back in his head and he roared with pleasure.

Maelis called out to stop him. "Joran, stop! He'll die anyway!" Then, pointing behind Joran, she screamed as another Nemen came from behind, his sword already on a downward swing toward Joran's head.



Joran spun and parried the blow, focusing on the blade rather than its wielder. As the attacker pressed down, taking advantage of Joran's

poor footing, Joran's eyes fell on the contorted, leering face. Something was familiar about the man. Although his eyes were sunken and his teeth were jagged and black, Joran recognized that face.

"Daysen?" Joran said. His mind reeled. It couldn't be! I left Daysen for dead, buried in the Tar-Nahsers!

Daysen sneered at Joran, mocking his shocked expression. He paused for only a moment, but in that instant, Joran knew that Daysen was not the same man he thought he had killed. This Daysen was something more—and something less.

Daysen slid his sword back into its scabbard, turned and leapt onto the back of one of the horses. The stallion reared, trying to dislodge him, but Daysen spurred its flanks. The animal's eyes went wild with fear; it chomped at its bit until bloody froth coated its lips and it whinnied in pain as Daysen whipped it and stabbed his spurs into its sides until they bled. Finally, the horse leapt forward, carrying Daysen away.

"Joran," Maelis said. She shook him by the shoulders. "Joran! Who was that?"

Joran's eyes followed the retreating rider; he stared after Daysen in utter disbelief. When at last he turned to look at Maelis's questioning face, he brought himself back from the edge of an emotional abyss and raised his blood-covered hands before her face. He looked at his tattoos, painted in the rich red tones of Nemen blood; then he turned them slowly and looked at the creases in his palms.

"These hands," he said. "With my sword, I killed that man. With my sword and these hands." He looked at Maelis, a pained expression in his eyes.

Maelis reached out to him and took his hands in hers, comforting him.

"That was Daysen," Joran said and Maelis recoiled in surprise, recognizing the name.

"The man who killed my grandmother?" she whispered.

Joran nodded grimly. "He was my apprentice in the Nemen army. I trained him before Lord Nemenon sent me to the Elementals' Monastery. I found him and another assassin on your trail in the woods near

Ke'sair's cabin, and I did what I had to do. I attacked them. The fight was brief. I killed the first assassin before he even knew I was there. Then I turned to face the second assassin, and it was Daysen. I couldn't let him kill you, Maelis," Joran said. "I killed him, too."

Maelis wrinkled her brows and looked in his eyes, puzzlement written on her face. "But I don't understand," she said. "How could he still be alive if you killed him?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. But that creature we saw just now was indeed Daysen; and it was more than Daysen—it was pure evil."

Joran regained his stolid composure. He wiped his hands against the coarse fabric of his tunic, trying to obliterate the stains of death from his skin. As he wiped the blood away, the truth revealed itself to him: murder, other than in self-defense, was immoral. The acts of carnage that his Nemen trainers had taught him to enjoy were vile. The Elemental Monks had been right. By abandoning Lord Nemenon's mission and adopting Maelis as one to be protected rather than killed, he had ended his career as a Nemen assassin. Now, by performing in her service, he had cleansed his spirit. He looked down at the Nemen warriors he had just killed and thought about the glee with which he had taken their lives. He still had much for which to atone.

Maelis smiled at him with understanding. She reached up and brushed the hair from his forehead. "That part of your life is behind you," she said.

Though he had not spoken his thoughts aloud, she had seen them written on his face. Maelis read his emotions like a book.

"There is much good in you. I can feel it," she said as she laid the palm of her hand against his chest. She felt his guilty heart slamming against his rib cage. With one hand on his chest and the other wrapped behind his neck, she hugged him tightly to her body and Joran surrendered to her embrace, needing her comfort. Maelis transferred her calmness through his body and erased his pain, focusing her selfless thoughts on him, whispering in her mind all her hopes for his soul.

With a startled look, Joran grabbed her hand and pulled it away from his chest. He held it a few inches from his face, examining it as though

he searched for some hidden magick. He touched her open palm. Confusion rippled across his face as he looked from her hand to her eyes. He lifted his tunic and put her hand back over his heart, bewildered.

"It's warm, Maelis," he said. "Somehow, you made me feel better when you touched me. The warmth is still here."

A shout from one of the trapped Nemens drew Maelis and Joran's attention. The Nemen soldiers lay buried up to their chests in the hard earth. Behind them, beyond the swamp and the mountains, gathering thunderclouds signaled the onset of the Early Downs. The men wailed, fearing that they would drown in the impending rains. They begged Maelis for mercy.

"Mercy?" she asked. "Would you have shown mercy to me? No. I think not. You would have taken my life and carried my head to Lord Nemenon to collect your prize. I shall show more mercy to you than you would have shown me. I'll not kill you; instead, I'll leave you to the compassion of the land of Nuermar. If you struggle free, then you shall owe Nuermar a great debt. If you do not, then Nuermar will have claimed that which it deserves."

Maelis knew that if she released the men, they would surely kill her, so she spun on her heels and leapt astride the chestnut mare, the last standing member of the ill-fated Nemen troop. She sat confidently atop the horse, reaching a hand out and beckoning Joran to join her. In a show of bravado, he ignored her offer of help and vaulted over the horse's rump, sliding against Maelis's back. He wrapped his arms around her waist for support, and for the sheer pleasure of feeling the warmth of her body.

Thunder rumbled in the distant clouds while the storm gods hurled down bolts of lightening. With sacks full of provisions and high hopes for their future, Joran and Maelis rode off, the storm-laden breezes blowing away the dust of their battle on the edge of Sedgwin.

Chapter Thirteen

Joran and Maelis rode hard for the cover of the giant willows that ringed Sedgwin Swamp like a wall. Above them, the sky was black and boiling, seething with nature's fury; the rumbles became louder, and the lightning flashes seared as the rain started. They reached shelter only moments after the rain reached its full force, but, even so, they were soaked. Maelis directed the mare under the canopy of a massive willow, where the rain slid in rivulets down the trunk, dripping beneath the branches.

On either side of the horse, they changed into their spare clothes. Joran then took inventory of the provisions left in the packs by the Nemen troops. In one saddlebag, there were flagons of water, hardtack, salted meat and dried fruit. In the other saddlebag, Joran found rolls of parchment, a spare dagger and, at the very bottom, a small flask of spirits. So, thought Joran, *This won't be such a bad night after all!* It had been a long time since he had drank anything but water, and he looked forward to feeling the potent liquid burn as it slid down his throat.

"Maelis," Joran called over the horse's hindquarters. "Look what I found!" As he raised the flask up for her to see, one of the dislodged parchments fell to the ground.

Maelis paid no attention to Joran's liquor. Instead, she scooped up the parchment, unrolled it and began reading. Dates, distances, meal rations... The scroll was a record of the Nemen troop's mission; the last entry was from four days ago. The troop, the record said, had followed the riverbed and searched for the same boulder she and Joran had sought.

Maelis tore through the rest of the parchments until she found the one with the next consecutive date, which would have been the day that the troop found the boulder. Maelis hoped that they had made a copy of the inscription. Her eyes scanned the page, searching for any mention of it.

“Joran,” Maelis said. “Look!” She held the parchment up for him to see. “They copied the inscription from the boulder onto this parchment! The Third Talisman’s not far from here!”

She danced with joy, but when she handed the parchment to Joran, he remained somber, reading the passage first and then scrutinizing the shadows beneath the trees as though he was looking for someone.

“Maelis,” Joran said. “Read beneath that entry. In Daysen’s own handwriting it says they were to meet up with another troop. Today, at the pool where the Talisman is hidden.”

He was still tired from the recent battle, and his emotional wounds were too fresh for him to relish another fight. Gone was his lust for combat, replaced with a timidity that unsettled him.

“We must be cautious, Maelis,” he told her. “The Nemens will not risk the open plains in this weather. We have to find them and learn if they already have the Red Stone.”

When she opened her mouth to protest, he placed a finger over her lips. He drew a map in the dirt. They made plans to separate and investigate different areas of swamp—Joran would go to the north and Maelis and the horse would go to the south. They would rendezvous at dusk on the far side of the pool where the Nemen parchment indicated that the Talisman was hidden. Before they split up, Joran made Maelis promise to attempt nothing on her own, but to find him first. Maelis didn’t like Joran’s plan, but agreed nonetheless.

For the first time in days, they parted company. With a curt nod, and a frown of disapproval on her face, Maelis took the mare’s reins and trotted away. Before leaving the shelter of the willow, she turned and gave Joran a parting scowl.

Joran shrugged his shoulders in reply. He called after her, "You accepted my help because of my knowledge of Nemen military tactics. If you argue with me now, you question your own decision."

Maelis seethed. *Why does he have to be so logical?* she fumed. *Why is he always right?* Though she hated to admit it, and would prefer to stay angry, she knew that his way was best.

When she reached the designated area, she dismounted and led the mare by the reins. She searched carefully, trying to choose paths on which the horse would make the least noise. Without Joran's protection, she was afraid to use the Green Stone to locate the Nemens—they could catch her off guard while she was under the spell of the Talisman, calling its Element. That wicked man Daysen could be lurking under the trees, too—the thought that he might be nearby made her stomach turn.

She proceeded stealthily, skirting the southern edge of the pool. Though her senses were heightened and her eyesight keen, Maelis saw only lichen-covered tree branches and slick paths that tricked her boots and sent her slipping more than once. The only thing to pique her interest in the half-light beneath the trees was the discovery of canid tracks near a brackish pool. She had never seen a wild dog before, and she looked for signs of its whereabouts with excitement. She had heard tales of dogs living with men, and even serving them, but she had never witnessed such a thing.

"Maybe I'll be able to see a dog," she said to the mare. Maelis then stopped and look at the horse. "If you are going to be my horse, you're going to need a name. I think I will call you Blaze." The mare whinnied and nudged Maelis in the chest, apparently showing approval. Maelis scratched her horse on the forehead, the white blaze of hair for which she was named.

Maelis and Blaze soon stumbled across the path of the Nemens. In their haste, they had trampled plants and hacked down branches, trampling a clear path where they had traveled. Their evil scent still clung to the foliage, and it made her wince.

"Come on Blaze," Maelis said. "Let's find their camp."

Blaze nodded her head, her eyes telling Maelis that she understood. The mare had been trained well by the Nemens. Maelis smiled—it was good having a companion that never questioned her, unlike Joran, who compelled loyalty with nothing more than his presence.

Maelis felt a powerful attraction for Joran—an all-consuming emotion that burned in her heart. But still she denied that it was love she felt. To love was to forgive and forget. She could neither forgive nor forget his part in Niomi's murder, yet she didn't want to lose him, either. It was a conundrum, and this time away from Joran gave her some relief from the strain of trying to solve it. As she stalked along the path, she was grateful for Blaze's companionship and the comfort it provided.

Suddenly, Blaze reared back, shaking her head and snorting. Maelis took her bridle in both hands and soothed the animal. She looked in the horse's eyes and saw fear, but worse yet, recognition.

Maelis led Blaze from the path and lashed the reins to a tree. Then she quietly slipped from tree to tree until she was within twenty yards of the Nemen troops. *One, two, three...* Maelis counted to herself. When a shadowy figure stepped out of a tent, the evil stench of Daysen's demon came with it and carried across the ground to where Maelis stood. It sickened her.

There were thirteen men counting Daysen, and it looked as though they were going to camp while they waited for Joran and Maelis to arrive. They had pitched their tents in a circle around a hastily built fire pit. Despite the presence of the Nemens, the fire looked inviting to Maelis; she wanted nothing more than to allow its heat to chase Sedgwin's chill from her bones. She was drawn to the flame, until Blaze nickered and nudged her back.

What am I doing? She had almost jeopardized the mission and herself. Maelis rubbed her eyes, trying to eradicate her fascination with the fire. She patted Blaze's neck and then turned the horse around and headed away from the Nemen encampment.

Though the sky was still heavy with rain clouds, Maelis could see that the sun was descending and soon it would rest in the cradle of the

Tar-Nahser Mountain range. She hurried to reach the far side of the pool and her rendezvous with Joran.

As dusk fell and Maelis waited beneath the shelter of the trees, she sensed someone approaching. She expected Joran, but realized it might also be a Nemen scout. She strained her ears to hear and peered around tree trunks, looking for clues to the person's identity. It wasn't Daysen; there was no evil stench.

Joran stepped through the mist. "Hello," he said. "My side was clear, how about yours?"

"I saw them," Maelis said. "They're camping on my side of the swamp, on a low rise near the pond. There were twelve men, plus Daysen. I think they're waiting for us."

"Well, then we'll give them what they want," Joran said with a twinkle in his eye.

"What do you mean?" Maelis asked. "Do you want to attack them?"

"No," Joran replied. "I'm almost out of arrows. But I have a better idea."

He suggested that Maelis use the White Talisman—the Element of Air—to suck the air from the camp and render the Nemens unconscious. Then Joran would be free to search them.

Maelis asked, "But how can I do that without suffocating us as well?"

"Well, first," said Joran. "You won't be coming. I know their tactics, and I know where they would hide something as important as the Talisman, if indeed they have it. You must stay behind and concentrate on your task. Once you have removed all the air and knocked them out, release just enough so that they will remain asleep. Hopefully, there will be enough air for me to search the camp without waking them."

She was horrified. "But if there isn't, Joran, you'll fall asleep, too. And I won't be able to help you! If I release enough air to awaken you, then the Nemen soldiers will, too, and they'll kill you!"

Maelis paced around, thinking of how she could focus the White Stone's energies. He wanted her to use the Element she knew best to perform many tasks at the same time. She had never done such a thing. Back and forth she paced, until it grew too dark for her to see her

footing; she feared that she would trip over an unseen root. Maelis leaned against a tree trunk and slid down until she sat. She rested her head in her hands and continued to ponder the problem.

Joran walked toward the tree. He stood over her and asked, "Any other ideas?"

Maelis looked up at him and shook her head. But from her lower vantage point, the answer to their dilemma came to her. As soon as she removed their air, the Nemen soldiers would fall to the ground, yet Joran would be upright and walking through the camp. If she could create two different air streams, a lower one that leached out the air, and then a higher one with normal airflow, the plan could work. *But, can I really do it?* Maelis thought.

"I think I may have an idea," she said. "But I'm not sure about it. I want to practice first." Maelis rose, then stepped a few paces away. "I need you to stand still and tell me what you feel."

Joran became fearful of his own idea, but he nodded. He watched her raise her left hand, holding the White Talisman level with her chest and horizontal to the ground. Then she whispered to the stone and the familiar white nimbus lit the air around her. Soon, he felt a breeze wafting past him and ruffling his hair. As he watched, Maelis moved her left hand down, palm open, as if she was ready to catch something, and suddenly he felt the air beneath his waist rush toward her. Then she curled her fingers as if she were holding the air itself in her hand. He made a sign with his thumb, signaling that her attempt had worked.

With all the stealth they could muster, the two passed through the dismal swamp. When they reached the path where Maelis had turned to follow the Nemens' trail, she raised her hand in the air and signaled in that direction. Silently, Joran and Maelis approached the Nemen encampment, and on the perimeter of the clearing they stopped for Maelis to call on the White Stone.

When Maelis knew the air streams were in place, she pointed to the camp, directing Joran to complete his part of the plan. He covered the distance between the trees, stopping only to check beneath the flaps of the first tent to make sure the occupants were truly asleep. With a nod to

Maelis to let her know her spell was working, Joran proceeded across the camp to a tent farthest from the woods, marked with a black insignia. He parted the flaps and went inside.

Maelis worried only briefly; he came back outside with a pouch dangling from his right hand. Yet instead of returning to her, he walked three tents over and leaned inside. This time when he emerged, Joran had another bundle in his arms. At last, he raced back to her, carrying a quiver of arrows and a dark velvet pouch. He swung the quiver over his shoulder, placed the pouch in her right hand and then impetuously kissed her cheek.

When Maelis started to untie the strings securing the bag, he put his hand over hers and shook his head. Quietly he said, "Not here. It's not safe."

"What do you mean?" she said. "It worked. They fell asleep. You recovered the Third Talisman and stole some arrows. What could be wrong?"

"Daysen wasn't in his tent," Joran replied. He pointed at the pouch in her hand and said, "That's where I found it. There's something not right about him, Maelis. I felt it so strongly in the tent that it made me sick." Then, as he had done in the village, Joran took her by the elbow and steered her away from the encampment.

As they walked through the darkness, aiming for the edge of the swamp, they heard something following them. A new kind of fear surged through Maelis—that of the unknown. It constricted her throat, almost suffocating her. She reached for Joran's hand in the darkness, thankful for his callused grip over her own delicate fingers.

Blaze grew more fidgety behind them until Joran halted and withdrew his sword. He stood ready to face whatever came his way, a nervous energy surging through his body. He held his blade out, waiting for the opportunity to act, when a wild dog staggered through the mist.

The pitiful canid limped slowly toward them, favoring its right foreleg. It whimpered before collapsing at Joran's feet. Maelis sprang into action, rushing to the dog's side. While still clutching the velvet pouch holding the Third Talisman, Maelis sat down in the dirt and cradled the dog's

head in her lap, comforting the injured animal, heedless to whatever danger may come. The dog looked mournfully at Maelis and weakly wagged his tail, trying to show appreciation for her comforting touch.

Maelis rested her hand on the dog's shoulder, and with the other hand she stroked his muzzle and rubbed his ears. The animal had been beaten severely; blood ran from more than one gaping wound on its hide. *Who would do such a heinous thing?* As she touched the dog, Maelis felt its misery through her fingers. She also felt the canid's life slipping from it, as blood seeped from its body in a growing pool. Her heart ached for this poor animal.

The dog jerked once and then lay still. With its tongue lolling out, the dog's head slid from Maelis's lap. She looked up at Joran and cried. She felt impotent, even though she held three of the most powerful Talismans in all of Nuermar. At that moment, in the mud and the drizzle, Maelis wanted nothing more than to heal the dog. She hadn't felt such grief since her grandmother's death.

Suddenly, the pouch containing the Third Talisman grew so warm that she nearly dropped it. Instead, she clutched it tighter, drawing its warmth inside her, imagining that it traveled through her chest and down the other arm to where her hand still lay against the dog's chest. *If nothing else*, Maelis thought, *I loved it for a moment*. With that thought, that declaration of her true feelings, she triggered a response from the Third Talisman and a glow enveloped the dog, sinking into its motionless form. The light disappeared as quickly as it had come, but with its absence, the dog's wounds disappeared; it shuddered and rose on wobbly legs.

Joran stood slack-jawed at the sight of restored life. The Third Talisman represented Fire, the most destructive of the Elements, yet it had healed the canid. Or rather, its warmth combined with Maelis's love for the dog, had healed it. That was something not written in any legend that he had ever learned.

With a slobbering lick to Maelis's cheek, the dog trotted off the path. Maelis stood and wiped away her tears with the sleeve of her tunic. *How could she have loved the dog that quickly? How could she have triggered*

the Talisman without touching it? How had the Talisman healed instead of destroyed? These were questions that would have to wait until they arrived at the Monastery.

They turned to continue their course out of Sedgwin, but a shadowy figure leaped from the darkness into their path.

The man snarled at them, "Liked my dog, did you?" The voice was barely human. Daysen stood in the shadows of the ghostly mist, brandishing his sword, wavering the point of the blade between Joran and Maelis. Paying little heed to Joran, whose own sword was still at the ready, Daysen focused his attention on Maelis, his pointed tongue licking his jagged teeth. He advanced toward her, his bony fingers reaching, groping the air between them in anticipation of touching her flesh.

"So innocent, so pure," Daysen said, almost purring as he reached for Maelis's tunic.

"She may be pure," snapped Joran. "But she won't be yours!"

Daysen's head snapped in Joran's direction. His demonic eyes saw the approach of the man responsible for his necrotic state. And he held the sword responsible for his festering wound, the parasite in his body, the pariah wreaking havoc on his soul. With a sudden twist, Daysen turned and raised his sword to block the downward slash of Joran's blade. With unnatural speed, Daysen swung at Joran's mid-section. *This time*, Daysen thought. *The demon will have his prize, and I will have my revenge!*

Strike after strike, block after block, Daysen never tired, and never backed down. He evaded every one of Joran's blows with ease. And when Daysen struck at Joran, his blows came from all angles, his sword searing the air with its speed.

As the two men battled, Maelis scrambled out of the way. Frantically, she looked around for a safe vantage point from which to try her Elemental powers against the creature attacking Joran. She grabbed Blaze's reins and pulled the horse from the path, then she positioned herself behind the gnarled trunk of a sycamore.

Instead of acting quickly, she fretted—frightened of hitting Joran with a strike intended for Daysen. The Green Stone's Element was too broad

to focus accurately; the White Stone's winds were dreadful indeed, but also difficult to direct. It was time to use the third Talisman.

As she watched Joran weakening against Daysen's frenzied attacks, Maelis fumbled with the strings binding the pouch. Anxiety seized her; with difficulty, she forced herself to slow down and work the knot more methodically. String by string, she worked to free her third Talisman from the pouch, even once ducking a glancing blow from Daysen's sword as he swung wide of Joran and aimed for her instead. Spinning away, Maelis came to rest with her back against the sycamore. At last, she untied the pouch and the third Talisman tumbled into her palm.

A pendant! The Third Talisman was a red stone pendant—a heart-shaped ornament that dangled from a long, icy-white silver chain. Bunching the chain up in her fist, she thought about her desires for the Red Stone's fiery potential. She anchored her feet to the ground and struggled to summon the Element that only moments before had worked miraculously on the stricken dog without being called. She tried again, but failed. Desperate to assist Joran, she stuffed the Red Talisman back into its pouch and tried to re-direct her thoughts on the White Talisman instead.

She raised her left hand chest high, holding the White Stone level with the ground, and then softly began to whisper to it, calling for it to reward her love with action. Yet before she could formulate a plan to use the source of the glowing nimbus about her, a dark figure flew from the gloom beneath the trees and landed on Daysen's back.

The canid he had so cruelly abused returned at the most opportune moment to exact its revenge. With teeth buried in the cowl of Daysen's cape, the animal dug its claws into the flesh of Daysen's back. Yowling with pain, Daysen pitched forward as the weight of the enraged animal knocked him off balance. As he hit the ground, the dog sank its teeth deep into Daysen's neck, shaking its head and growling as it bit into the exposed flesh. Daysen struggled, flailing his arms in a desperate attempt to free himself. The two rolled, snarling, swiping and clawing at each other.

Maelis took advantage of the distraction and mounted Blaze. Guiding the horse to Joran's side, she reached out her hand, and Joran struggled to pull himself astride the mare in front of her. Maelis wrapped her arms around his waist; Joran was grateful for her touch.

"I'm sorry," she said as Blaze began to run through the trees. "I couldn't make the Third Talisman work."

Joran felt her sadness. He tenderly patted Maelis arm. "We'll go to the Monastery," he said. "Perhaps the monks can tell us why you can't use the Red Stone."

Part Four

Mercy in Rage

“Her mercy in rage will be seen
When Witch’s Wrath the earth shall clean.”

— *Legend from the Fourth Stone of Nuermar*

Chapter Fourteen

The driving rains made the ride to the Elementals' Monastery, north and west along the edge of Sedgwin Swamp, torturous for Joran and Maelis. He walked ahead, guiding the horse through the squalls, while she rode behind. The last sound Maelis heard as they left Sedgwin was a sharp yelp, and then a mournful howl. Daysen had killed the dog; she was sure of it. *There will be time to mourn him later*, she told herself, *After we reach the safety of the Monastery*.

The Elementals' Monastery was less than a day's ride, though with the Early Downs blustering across the land of Nuermar, night and day were little different. At last, the stone walls of the Monastery loomed through the pelting rain, ethereal and gaunt, like an apparition. Conversation was useless in the howling winds, so Joran pointed instead, thrusting his arm through the rains. Maelis squinted through the downpour. Relief washed over her at the sight of their refuge.

Soon they stood before the Monastery's gates, shielding their eyes from the rain as they craned their necks to see the tops of the walls, the Monastery's first line of defense. Joran rapped the hilt of his sword against the gate three times, and then once again. To Maelis's surprise a response of two knocks came from the other side. Maelis saw a smile on Joran's face as he knocked again, the same three knocks, then a pause, and then the final knock.

Joran guided Blaze to the side as the gates swung outward and open for them. He then led Maelis and the horse inside the gates, where they were greeted with a loud hail from a little room in the Monastery's wall. Joran strode over to greet the portly monk inside, then reached out and shook the monk's extended hand before turning and pointing to Maelis.

He shouted things to the monk that Maelis couldn't hear, and then the two men stepped up to the mare and helped Maelis down.

The principal structure of the Monastery compound was a seminary that towered above the center of the grounds. It was surrounded by four long, low stone buildings abutting the outer walls, forming a main quadrangle in front and three smaller courtyards on each side of the seminary itself. A gravel road bisected the main quadrangle, allowing for traffic to and from the gates. Evergreen shrubs in raised planters decorated the front of the seminary; herb gardens had been cultivated at each of its corners. The courtyards on the left and right were reserved for agriculture and livestock, while the rear courtyard held a barn, stables, and work-sheds for the carpenters and blacksmiths. It was not a large compound, but it bustled with activity. Every available space appeared to be efficiently used.

The monk took hold of Blaze's bridle and led the horse away to the stables. Joran took Maelis's hand and then ran with her through the rain, across the gravel road in the quadrangle to the main entrance of the seminary. Joran pushed the heavy oak doors open and ushered her inside, where he would have his long-awaited chance to present Maelis to his old friends, the monks.

As they shook the rain from their sodden clothes, an old man dressed in a floor-length brown robe shuffled toward them, a grin beaming from his wrinkled face. He reached his arms out in a welcoming gesture. But he stopped suddenly and, for a moment, his grin faded; then his eyes twinkled and a new brightness shone on his face—something that Maelis hadn't seen in a long time—*hope*. The monk reached out and grasped Joran by his wrist, and then drew him into a hug and clapped him on the shoulder.

"You came back," the monk said. "Joran, my boy! You found your way back to where you belong."

Joran looked down at the stone floor and nervously shuffled his feet.

When the monk released his grip on Joran, he turned to Maelis, reaching out a bony hand to grasp hers. With reverence, the old monk

peered at her emerald eyes. His own eyes sparked with intensity, and to Maelis's surprise, he threw his arms around her, too.

"Maelis!" he cried. "I can't believe you're here!"

"B-b-but how do you know me?" Maelis stammered. "How do you know my name?" She stood very still as the old monk embraced her, befuddled, not knowing how to react.

She heard rain pelting against the oiled window skins, and her nose was filled with the aroma of old parchments, damp mortar, and smoke from the fireplace, heavy with the sweet scent of apple wood. As the monk pulled away, she returned his smile, relaxing at last, her insecurities fading. In that moment, she knew she would find sanctuary there.

"Come," their host said. "Both of you look as though you swam through Sedgwin Swamp!"

This was nearly true, as the puddles forming beneath their boots testified. Joran stepped back and shook his hair like a dog shaking off water. The resulting spray flew in all directions, spattering both Maelis and the monk.

"We are soaked through, Josper," Joran said to the monk. "Our spare clothes are wet, too. Do you have a change for us?"

Josper circled around the wet floor, examining Joran and Maelis. He stroked his chin, squinting with his right eye, making secret calculations.

"Come with me," Josper said, as he patted Joran on the shoulder. "We shall see."

Josper led his bedraggled guests to private chambers. At the end of a long hallway, he unbolted a set of double-doors that opened into a well-furnished room, complete with fireplace, fur rugs on the floor and tapestries on the walls.

"Here is your room, Joran," Josper said with a sweeping gesture of his right arm. "One of my associates has prepared everything for you. Go in, my son, and draw yourself a warm bath. You will find clothes in the wardrobe."

Joran leaned close to Maelis and whispered in her ear about preferring to bathe in the river with her. He watched her blush and then entered his chambers with a parting wave.

Josper then turned to Maelis, extending his left arm and cinching her right hand in the crease of his elbow. The old monk apparently enjoyed catering to guests, which were rare at the Monastery. With a bounce in his step that belied his age, Josper led Maelis to the opposite end of the hallway. He stepped beside a door, and swung it open with a flourish. Maelis's gaze fell upon the plush furnishings, and she gasped.

The room was decorated for a guest of great importance; it seemed too grand for her. She hesitated on the threshold where she beheld a grand fireplace, plush white fur rugs, and gaily-colored tapestries. In the far corner was a canopied bed with sheer curtains draped over the posts. Hanging crystals adorned the lanterns. With great respect for the fineries in the room, Maelis shed her boots in the hallway in order not to track mud on the rugs.

"There is a tub of hot water and herbs for bathing in the corner behind the screen," Josper told her. Then he added, "I think you'll find clothes in the wardrobe too, my dear."

Maelis mumbled a grateful "thank you," and then turned and stepped into the room, opening her arms wide and inhaling deeply. The feel of fur beneath her feet was glorious, and she stood for a moment reveling in its pleasant texture before placing her boots on the hearth to dry. From there, she padded over to the screen that hid the bathing tub.

She dropped her soggy clothes in a basket and then stepped into the tub; its steaming waters stung her cold skin. She eased her body down, gradually becoming accustomed to the warmth. Maelis felt decadent. Fixed to the side was a shelf containing brushes and cleaning cloths, bowls of coarse salts and herbs, and bottles of precious flower oils. For a long time, she simply soaked, letting the water soothe her weary bones.

When it began to cool, Maelis roused herself from a light and comfortable doze. With a mixture of coarse salts from the Nemen Coast and herbs packed into the soft bristles of a brush, she scrubbed her heels, knees and elbows, washing away the accumulated grime. Then she

soaked a cleaning cloth in the water before filling it with the herbs and drops of flower oil. She gathered the edges of the cloth together to make a pouch and used it to buff the delicate skin on her abdomen, thighs and underarms. When she finished, she took the sodden herbs from the cloth and mixed them with more oils to make a paste that she used to wash her hair.

Maelis at last stepped from the fragrant waters, wrapping her freshly scrubbed body in a sheet woven from fabric with which she was unfamiliar. It was even softer than the fur rugs, and very absorbent. By the time she reached the wardrobe, her skin was dry. Only her hair remained damp, so she rubbed it with a corner of the drying sheet.

Maelis had no expectation of finding comfortable clothes or even anything that would fit her. This was, after all, a Monastery, whose residents were ascetic monks who cared little for fine clothing. She opened the wardrobe doors.

Gowns of rich fabrics and colorful hues were arrayed before her and, on the bottom shelf, were several pairs of handmade slippers, each with leather soles and tops dyed to match the colors of the gowns. Trilling like a little girl, Maelis tried on every one.

As she paraded before the full-length mirror, admiring herself, she heard a knock. She glided across the floor, waving her billowing sleeves and basking in the feel of the fine satin fabric. She opened the door only a crack to see who was there.

It was Joran. "I just wondered if you were all right," he said through the narrow slit. His voice conveyed concern. "You've been in there quite a long time."

"Of course I'm all right," Maelis replied. "In fact, I feel wonderful!" She then opened the door wide.

Joran took one look at her and then stepped back. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. He was awe-struck. He drew a sharp breath and ran a trembling hand through his hair to compose himself. *She looks like a goddess*, he thought.

Joran licked his lips and, at last, found his voice. "Dinner will be ready in the main hall soon," he said. He regarded her tenderly,

betraying the feelings behind his eyes. "I've never seen you in a dress before, Maelis. I am amazed...I mean..." As he stumbled over compliments that his tongue refused to speak, another person entered the hallway.

"Cleans up good, doesn't she?"

Maelis brightened. Ke'sair? Is that Ke'sair?

Maelis didn't realize how badly she had missed her beloved friend until she heard his voice again. She looked out and saw him standing at the far end of the hall. She ran to him, her skirts gathered in one hand while the other flailed in a joyous wave. Her heart nearly leapt from her chest.

In a pile of rumpled satin and limbs, Maelis and Ke'sair tumbled to the stone floor, both of them laughing. After a crushing hug from his pupil, Ke'sair extricated himself from the folds of Maelis's gown. He stood, made an attempt at straightening his clothes, and then offered his hand to Maelis, which she took as she rose, still giggling.

"Now, child!" Ke'sair exclaimed. "You must take care not to break my old bones!"

Maelis chuckled. "I would never do that," she said.

"Probably not," agreed the monk. "But you and that dress make a dangerous combination!" With that, the three of them had a good laugh, but as it subsided, Ke'sair became pensive, taking Maelis's hands and examining them closely. He touched the band of the First Talisman, a knowing smile on his old cheeks. Then he turned to inspect her right wrist, where the Second Talisman rested. He looked at her, silently asking permission to touch the dark green stone. She nodded and smiled, with an endearing softness in her eyes.

"It's very powerful," she said as Ke'sair tested the smooth surface with his fingertip. "And there are more uses for the Green Stone than we thought."

"Really?" he asked. "You'll have to tell us about it over dinner. And what of the Third Talisman? Did you find it, too?"

"We found it," she replied with downcast eyes. "But I haven't been able to figure out how to use it."

Ke'sair stroked his chin. "Really? Well, it seems we have a lot to discuss this evening." He said this last with a pointed and curious glance toward Joran. "I am afraid I don't know you," he said to the younger man. "How is it that you have come to know our Maelis?"

Ke'sair studied him, examining his eyes. His scrutiny caused Joran to flinch, and an awkward silence descended between them.

Maelis spoke, breaking the old monk's concentration. "Did I hear someone say that dinner was almost ready?" She had intentionally diverted Ke'sair's attention, attempting to save Joran from undue anguish. Over their time together, she had grown fond of him, and she had no desire to see him dredge up his painful past. She wanted that to remain their personal secret.

"Why don't you two run along and let me finish getting ready?" she said. "I'll meet you both in the main hall."

Maelis and Joran returned to their respective rooms.

Ke'sair however, went to the main hall to speak with his brethren from whom he had so long been parted. He hoped that his fellow monks would know more about this man Joran—one who behaved like a suitor and called himself a companion, yet resembled a mighty warrior.

Meanwhile, Maelis leaned trembling against her closed door. Joy, expectation and a strange new feeling mingled within her. She placed a hand on her chest, feeling her heart pounding and wondering if it was a result of her delight at seeing Ke'sair again, or a response to the way Joran made her feel when he looked at her. Whenever Joran was near, she felt nervous; she also felt a longing she had never known.

What strange new spirit is playing such tricks? Shaking off these thoughts, Maelis stepped back to the wardrobe, choosing for her evening's attire a dark green gown with bare shoulders, plunging neckline, a tight bodice and flowing skirts. She tediously combed her tangled hair, plaiting it and then piling the braids on top of her head so that the free ends trailed down her bare neck in loose ringlets. She straightened her ring and bracelet, and then opened the strings of the pouch that held the third Talisman. She unhooked the latch on the

chain, fastened it around her neck, and admired herself in the mirror. The red pendant shone brightly against the alabaster skin of her bosom.

The woman looking back at her from the reflection resembled someone from Maelis's dreams. Long ago, Niomi had told her stories of her mother, and Maelis had created a fantasy version of her. When the other children had teased her about being a Witch, Maelis would run away and seek the solace of her mother's care, even though the woman existed only in her imagination. Yet now it seemed to Maelis that her mother stood before her, appraising her daughter from within the looking-glass.

When Maelis left her chambers, a tear rolled down her cheek. She walked the few steps to the main hallway's entrance with mixed emotions coursing through her, lending a sparkle to her eyes and a lover's blush to her cheeks. She paused with her hands on the doors before pushing them open, knowing that things would forever change once she stepped into that room.



Back in Sedgwin Swamp, an enraged dog shredded Daysen's skin, even through the thick fabric of his cloak. With the weight of the wild animal thrashing on his back, Daysen lost his balance and pitched forward, landing face-down on the path. The dog sunk its teeth into the back of Daysen's neck and shook wildly. Daysen flailed his arms, yet he couldn't fend off the frenzied beast.

Daysen was defenseless, face down in the dirt with his attacker ripping him apart. He tasted his own blood; it was putrid. As he struggled, his field of vision grew black around the edges, evidence of head trauma from being violently shaken.

The human part of Daysen was ready to yield to the judgment of the gods, but the demonic intruder that had kept him alive spurred his body to action. Even if Daysen was unwilling to fight, then the demon certainly would. Nemenon's minion assumed complete control of its human host, making Daysen's limbs and mind its own.

The demon made Daysen's body twist underneath the dog with lightning speed, and before the canid could retreat or change its attack, the demon forced Daysen's hands around the dog's throat. Frantically, as it began to suffer from lack of air, the dog jerked its body in an effort to loosen the possessed man's grip. The dog dug its claws into Daysen's chest and stomach for traction, yet the more it struggled, the tighter the demon's grip became.

The dog became weaker and weaker, until its efforts were no more than twitches. The canid would die soon, but rather than grant the animal mercy by slipping forever into sleep, the demon wanted it to suffer. Controlled by the demon, Daysen lurched to his feet and, with unnatural strength, threw the animal's body at a tree. The dog's spine snapped against the unyielding trunk. It yelped once and fell to the ground, still as death.

In the damp and the darkness, as Daysen's form shambled stiffly back to the encampment, the dying animal loosed a mournful howl to the uncaring sky.

Back at camp, Daysen regained control of his body. He was physically spent, but mentally invigorated by his battle with the dog. The conflicting powers within him drove him nearly mad—the small spark of humanity that remained inside him rebelled against the demon's satisfaction. Daysen maintained a tenuous balance between his demon and the person he once was. His body was polluted and defiled, yet still he resisted total subjugation. He wanted to be himself when he sought vengeance against the Witch and the Traitor at the Monastery.

Chapter Fifteen

Maelis stroked the grain of the wooden doors to the dining hall, their smooth surface polished by centuries of hands being placed there. The hinges groaned as she pushed, and the doors swung wide. A yellow glow from a hundred candles suddenly lit Maelis's face and cast her long shadow back into the hallway. The amiable chatter of the monks ceased at once, and the entire gathering turned and watched her enter the room.

Maelis felt herself blush. She grinned tentatively, embarrassed by their stares, and she searched the room for Joran's familiar face.

A startled murmur arose among the Elementals who had gathered around the table, and Maelis heard more than one of them whisper, "Lorraine." It was her mother's name. One after another, the monks pushed back their chairs and rose to greet her.

Maelis turned to look at Joran, and, as always, while he appeared as strong as an oak tree, she also saw tenderness on his face. She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

Ke'sair was the first to address Maelis. He walked toward her with his arms outstretched. "Maelis, my child," he said. "You are so beautiful! Why, you are lovelier even than your mother."

The monks murmured their agreement.

Ke'sair embraced her, crushing the folds of her gown. She gasped with delight and then laughed, patting her old mentor on the back. Ke'sair loosened his grip, but did not release her shoulders. He stepped back, looking at her intently before he took her hand and led her to a seat next to Joran.

More than twenty monks sat at the banquet table. It was long and wide, and laden with bowls of steaming vegetables and platters of roasted

rabbit and other game. Piled among the place-settings were leather-bound books.

Maelis wondered why books would be sharing the table with their feast. She reached forward and took one of them. Its cover was tan, hand-tooled leather, and its title was written in golden script in a language that Maelis didn't recognize. She cradled the ancient book in her arm and traced the strange letters, noticing how the gold leaf flaked from their edges. She flipped through the pages. They were worn thin, having been handled by many over countless centuries.

Maelis looked across the table at Ke'sair and the old monk anticipated her question from the expression on her face.

"It's written in ancient Nuermarian," he said, pointing to the title. "That is the record of your family. Every Witch of Nuermar is recorded in the pages of that book."

Joran gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. He took exception to Ke'sair having referred to Maelis as a Witch. He glared at Ke'sair, who met Joran's look with stolid silence.

Maelis saw the tension in Joran's jaw, and his clenched fists on the tabletop were evident to everyone else.

"We mean no offense, Joran," Ke'sair said. "The simple people of Nuermar see the women of Maelis's family as 'Witches.' We, of course," he paused looking at Maelis, "Know better. The word 'Witch' has a very negative connotation. It was a name branded on her family by Lord Nemenon himself. This book's title is actually the ancient Nuermarian word for 'Guardian,' because that is what we Elementals know Maelis and her relatives to be—our guardians."

"Will you tell me about them?" Maelis asked. "Can you tell me why only women in my family are able to use the Talismans to summon the Elements?"

Josper interjected, "We don't have enough time, dear, to tell you your whole family's history. The night is simply not long enough to recount their victories, or the perils to which they have been subjected. But we can tell you that the connection between your family and the Talismans is directly related to the emerald green color of your eyes. Your family

alone in all of Nuermar has such eyes, and then only the women. Whatever trait your family has that causes the green eyes also triggers the Talismans.”

Maelis looked at Josper, then at Ke’sair and then back at Josper.

“Beyond that,” Josper said, shrugging his shoulders. “We don’t know. We understand the Elements, because we have studied them for so long, but we cannot fully understand the mystery of nature’s connection to you and your family. The secret remains hidden inside of you, and that is someplace we cannot go.”

“I understand,” said Maelis, nodding her head. She couldn’t explain the connection, either, but she *felt* it.

“What we can tell you,” Josper continued. “Is that you are the first Guardian to hold so many Talismans. In fact, you are the first to ever wield the Red Stone.”

He went on to tell Maelis how the White Stone had always been in her family’s possession—passed down from mother to daughter. But many years ago, when Nuermar was young, one of her ancestors named J’aime had held the Blue Stone. At that time, her family lived on the shores of the Nuermar Sea, and J’aime was called the “Water Witch.” There was a legend among the people of Nuermar of a romance between J’aime and Nemenon—and when J’aime spurned him, Nemenon swore vengeance against all her descendants.

J’aime had escaped the destruction of her village and retreated to the Monastery. Then, one night, she’d slipped away, but not before writing in one of the Monastery’s journals where she intended to hide the Blue Stone. No one ever saw or heard from J’aime again.

Josper also told Maelis of her great-great-grandmother, Monice, who once lived on the Sel Barna Plains. Monice had faced persecution at the hands of Lord Nemenon. He imprisoned her in his dungeon in the Vale of Dismay, torturing her mercilessly until she had escaped.

Monice, using her hatred of Nemenon and her love for the Earth Element, summoned its power to give life to her fury at being imprisoned. From the mountain pass there arose two giant stone Demons that embodied her rage. Though love had summoned the Element’s power,

hate had created the Stone Demons, and thus the Demons remained frozen in place, poised at the gates of Nemenon's castle, eternally thirsting for his blood. Monice's loathing of Nemenon made the Stone Demons incapable of doing her bidding. If ever they were to be released from the enchantment that bound them, they would be unable to kill Nemenon's evil spirit; they would be capable of destroying only his physical body.

Monice knew that, without possessing all four stones, she could not destroy Lord Nemenon, so instead she had cursed Lord Nemenon to remain in the Vale of Dismay until the Stone Demons left their posts. Only then would Nemenon be able to leave his valley.

Joran heard Josper's tale of Monice's Stone Demons and gasped. *The Demon Gates*, he thought. *Monice's Stone Demons are the infamous Demon Gates that guard Lord Nemenon's castle.* He shuddered with fear at the thought of the stone beasts that had terrified him and his fellow conscripts on the day that they entered the Vale of Dismay.

"Thank you for telling me about my family, Josper," said Maelis. She then turned to the rest of the gathering. "Does anyone here know why the Green Stone behaves the way it does? Or why I cannot summon fire from the Red Stone?"

The monks scrambled to grab the books on the table. Each man knew which book held the answers they sought. While they began thumbing through the pages, Joran looked around the table in exasperation. He turned to look at Maelis, cleared his throat, and then gave his own interpretation of the Green Stone's unique ability.

"When you walk on the beach, you leave footprints," he said. "If you travel on the ground, you leave behind a trace of yourself. You can't leave any hints in the air, because even though scent lingers, it will fade, as the air always moves. And you can't track through water; not only does it move, but it also cleanses. So when you tap into the Element of the Green Stone, it shows you the path because of the evidence left behind on the ground."

In unison, the monks nodded their heads. The young man was correct, and they knew it. Before researching Maelis's question about the

Red Stone, they proceeded to dine. Over dinner, the monks told stories and related information that Maelis found useful. When Maelis told the monks about the destruction of her village and her search for Ke'sair, everyone at the table became sad. Joran remained quiet throughout the story; he stopped eating and slumped in his chair. His behavior aroused the interest of the monks, but they asked him no questions.

After dinner, the Elemental monks focused their attention on Maelis and the task of answering her questions. The Red Stone inspired them. Legends described the Red Stone as one of the most powerful Talismans in all of Nuermar. The books spoke of the abilities for the Element of Fire, though none had considered that heat, when used properly, could soothe or heal. After much searching, Jospser found a passage that he quoted aloud:

*"There must be more than just desire,
To use the Blazing Stone,
Her heart must feel love's true fire."*

Eventually, the well of the monks' knowledge ran dry. Daigen, one of the Monastery's novices, gathered candles for everyone and, after servants cleared the table and returned the books to the library, the dinner companions left the dining hall. The monks went to their communal dormitory, while Joran and Maelis walked together to their respective guest chambers. Joran remained awkwardly outside her door as she stood on the threshold. Tentatively, he reached out his hand, his fingers touching the flushed skin on her cheek.

"Good night," he whispered in a husky voice.

"Rest well," she replied, and she placed her hand over his. Her eyes were deep green in the half-light of the hallway, as though her irises had captured the richness of the Green Stone. She tilted her head slightly to the right, and bit her bottom lip, struggling to hold back her emotions. She sighed and then bid him goodnight, turning into the sanctuary of her bed chamber.

Maelis found it difficult to sleep. She tossed and turned, trying to understand all she had heard during dinner. When slumber finally came, it was fitful; and when the sirens sounded the next morning, she

struggled awake. It wasn't until she heard Joran's voice calling her through the door that she became fully alert and climbed out of bed.

She called to Joran through the door, "What's happening?" She pulled on her doeskin breeches and tunic, and slipped her feet into her boots. Again she shouted, "Joran, what's happening?"

"They're here," he said. "They're here!"

"Who, Joran? Who's here?"

"Nemen troops! There are at least forty or fifty men. Hurry, Maelis, hurry!"



Daysen had placed his men strategically within range of the Monastery gates, and in the pre-dawn chill, they rattled their spears and knocked their arrows. He had a contingency of forty-seven men, just one shy of three full troops—he had purposely left one man behind.

Daysen watched for movement atop the Monastery walls, impatiently waiting for a sign of response to the raised Nemen flag. The ancient demon that occupied his body and owned his soul had been present at other skirmishes with the Elemental monks. The creature knew that the monks were peaceful, but that they would fight to protect the Witch they harbored within the Monastery's walls. Lord Nemenon's demon had been present at the last battle there, twenty-three years ago, when the Witch's mother was killed and her body raised on a post, burned before the gates.

Daysen shouted, "Archers ready!" and he raised his arm in the air to signal those who couldn't hear the command. The Nemen troops raised their longbows and aimed their arrows at the tops of the walls. Daysen knew that the monks would use their own archers as a first line of defense. This was only the beginning.



In the last gray light of dawn, Daysen dropped his hand. As the sun god rose above the rim of Nuermar, its rays caught the volley of Nemen

arrows, illuminating them like bolts of fire. Behind the wall, there was a cry of pain—a satisfying sound to the demon inside Daysen.

In response to the Nemen volley, the monks fired back. Fire arrows rained down on the Nemen troops from the Monastery wall. One of the monk's arrows struck a Nemen soldier in the chest, cutting into the man's heart and cauterizing the wound at the same time. The soldier fell to the ground and remained there, ignored by his comrades as they released another volley.

The monks were relentless in their defense. Volley after volley flew over the wall, doing much damage to the Nemens, but Daysen's men advanced after each spray of arrows. By the time the Nemen marauders reached the Monastery gates, four of their number lay dead. The Nemens heard the monks reinforcing the gates from within; Daysen pictured in his mind the great wooden beam they were likely using as a buttress. He smiled to himself, licking his thin lips, knowing that no wood could withstand fire. Two of the Nemens drew their flint and tinder, while the others squeezed the perforated bladders of their oil-filled flagons, sprinkling fuel on the wooden gates. Soon, a spark caught the tinder and flames erupted across their surface.

To Daysen's dismay, a massive gust of wind arose, as if from nowhere, and extinguished the flames. *The Witch's power!*

When the Nemens raised their eyes, they saw the Witch standing atop the wall, her arms outstretched and her emerald eyes focused on them. In the moment of hushed shock that followed, they heard her whispers. As the men before the gates scrambled to hoist a battering ram, her mantra assumed a different cadence; suddenly, the ground beneath the battering ram softened and gave way, and it sank beneath the surface like a ship under the waves. As the men stood, dumbfounded, the ground beneath their feet trembled again, toppling them. Then, as suddenly as her gust of wind had blown out their fire, the earthquake stopped.

When Daysen had recovered his footing, he glanced at the top of the wall and saw the traitor Joran grab the Witch's outstretched arm and pull her from view. Daysen howled in rage and surged forward to accost

the gates of the Monastery with his bare hands. The demon screamed in his mind, *They are so close! I can smell them! I want to taste their blood!*

Daysen pounded and tore at the gates until his palms were bloody and his chest burned from panting. Yowling like a frenzied animal, he stepped back in frustration.

The demon within Daysen growled at him, Go back to the gates, coward, and I shall finish the job!

Daysen obeyed.

Closer, fool. Hug the doors!

Daysen pressed his body against the wooden gates, and the demon untethered its claws from his wound. The razor-sharp talons burst from his gut and attacked the gates, slicing through the doors, sending splinters and sawdust flying in all directions. Daysen reeled in pain, blood and pus seeping from his now-open wound, but the demon urged him closer. In minutes, the demon had torn through the wood, gouging a hole at the junction of the two doors and severing the buttress that had held them fast.

The demon's claws retreated within Daysen's body, and Daysen, still aching, raised his foot and kicked at the now useless gates, forcing them open. At the sight of their leader's boldness, the Nemen troops rallied and charged the breach.

As the gates swung open, a cadre of monks came through to stem the flow of onrushing Nemen troops. Brandishing short-swords or no weapons at all, young and old monks came forth to face them. Daysen recognized one of them—the one he had seen training the Witch in the Tar-Nahser Mountains. *Maybe his death will call her out*, he thought.

The monks handled their weapons clumsily, but they fought fiercely. They had been well trained in the art of hand-to-hand combat, using a fighting style that resembled a frenetic dance. They leaped through the air, avoiding the Nemen thrusts, yet they landed few blows with their short-swords. Their hand-strikes, however, were devastating, felling more than one Nemen with fatal strikes.

But the battle turned in the Nemens' favor, and soon only the monk named Ke'sair remained standing. He was weaponless, yet faced Daysen with his hands poised to fight.



After Maelis had used two of her three Elements against the Nemens, she felt weak. Joran pulled her from the parapet and hustled her to the protection of a secret room in the outer wall of the Monastery. As the battle raged in the courtyard below, Joran held her prisoner, refusing to let her intercede on behalf of the monks.

"It's for your own safety, Maelis."

"But, Joran," she said. "I can help!"

He looked at her sternly. For the first time, he had presumed to give her an order. "No. I won't permit it."

"But..."

He held up the flat of his palm to stem her protest. "Ke'sair won't permit it. We cannot risk your life."

By invoking the name of her mentor, Joran had silenced Maelis. She yearned to make a difference, especially now that she could so easily summon the Air and Earth Elements. Every time she used them, she became more attuned to their Elemental powers. But here she sat, allowed only to watch through a small window.

Joran and Maelis stood inside the little room. Blaze remained outside by the rear gate, laden with supplies, ready for their escape. Now, all the defenders except Ke'sair lay in the courtyard, either killed or wounded, and only a few Nemen soldiers remained standing. The survivors gathered in a ring around Ke'sair and Daysen, circling them like hungry wolves.

Maelis watched, terrified for her mentor. She felt a chill of foreboding, and, as Joran pulled her away from the window, she saw Daysen raise his sword over Ke'sair's head. She bolted from Joran's grip and raced through the door. Maelis vaulted onto Blaze's back, grabbing the reins and urging the horse toward the courtyard. Joran ran behind her, with his bow in hand, arrow nocked and ready to fly.

Maelis watched in horror as Daysen's sword sliced downward toward Ke'sair's unprotected neck. Daysen's lips curled in an evil grin, the sunlight reflecting off the flat of his blade; Ke'sair raised an arm to protect himself. It was a useless gesture. The sword sliced Ke'sair's neck, severing his head. The monk's body collapsed in the dirt, gushing blood, and his head rolled onto the gravel path, eyes staring blankly at the sky. Maelis reached out to the fallen monk; a cry of love and loss escaped from her throat.

To Maelis's amazement, and that of everyone in the courtyard, Daysen's sword burst into flames.

With a yowl of pain, Daysen dropped the flaming sword. It melted into a puddle of shimmering metal at his feet. He looked up at Maelis, piercing her with his hate-filled gaze.

Joran climbed aboard Blaze and eased into the saddle behind Maelis. Blaze reared back and leaped forward, sending Daysen crashing to the ground beside Ke'sair's headless body. The mare galloped through the open gates.

Daysen lay there on the gravel, a wicked grin splitting his lips. *Let them run*, he thought. He knew where they were going.

Chapter Sixteen

Joran knew that Maelis was in tears, even though he couldn't hear her crying. He rode behind her with his arms wrapped around her waist, hugging her tightly and feeling the heaving sobs that racked her body. When they fled, they left behind the only father figure Maelis had ever known, dead in the blood-soaked Monastery courtyard.

"Maelis," he said. "I'm sorry. Before the battle, Ke'sair made me vow to keep you safe. You know that we couldn't stay there."

"But I could have done something," she said. "I have the Talismans."

"Yes," he replied. "But not all of them. The legends tell us that you'll be vulnerable until you have them all. The best thing you can do is to honor Ke'sair's memory, because he died for you."

"I know, Joran," she said. "That's what hurts. I really loved him."

"I could tell by the way you melted Daysen's sword," Joran said. He knew it was the first time she had been able to summon the Element of Fire from the Red Stone and she had summoned it unconsciously, without even trying. The fire in her heart was the only cue that the Element had needed. To Joran, it was astonishing to see such destructive power surge forth. In one instant, she had been swathed in a fiery nimbus, and then the flames had shot out and struck Daysen's sword.

Joran took note of the sun's position and realized that they were heading in the wrong direction. Instead of going north, through Sedgwin at its narrowest point, Maelis was guiding Blaze to the southern end of the swamp, from where they had escaped once before.

"Maelis," Joran said. "You're going the wrong way. We should be heading north."

"I know, Joran. But my heart tells me to go south and find the dog that rescued us from Daysen."

"What?" Joran asked, certain he'd misheard her.

"I want to honor what it did for us and give it a proper burial," Maelis said.

Has she gone mad? he wondered. "But we don't have time for that, Maelis. We need to go north to the Gray River and retrieve the last Talisman."

"This is *my* quest, Joran, and I am going to do what I feel is right."

"*Your* quest?" Her comment stung him worse than any slap could have. "I, too, am involved."

"I'm sorry," Maelis said. "I know you are, but ultimately, success depends on me and my abilities to use the Stones. I cannot use them if I have a cloud of regret hanging over my head. I can't go back to the Monastery and bury Ke'sair and the others, but I can honor that dog. I...I can..."

Her voice choked off in tears again. Joran saw some truth in what she said. She had a kind, affectionate heart, which was one of the things he loved about her. If it made her feel better to honor the dog, then that is what they would do. He understood now that by doing so, she honored her fallen friends, as well, all of those she had loved who had died for her.

The edge of Sedgwin Swamp looked different by the light of day. At last, they came across the trees where they had left the dog behind, still tearing at Daysen's back. Joran wondered what had transpired there—what heinous acts Daysen had perpetrated against the animal to make it so angry. He remembered how Maelis had railed against its mournful howl, and he was sure that she remembered too.

And so she did. Her guilt over leaving it behind only made her feel worse. The least they could do was bury it properly, yet Maelis harbored a secret hope that the creature was still alive. It was no more than a glimmer, but it was there just the same.

She guided Blaze toward the clearing where they had left Daysen embattled with the dog. Silence hung beneath the trees, ghostly and

thick as they breached the edge of the clearing. There was no movement. Across the opening, Maelis saw the canid lying on its side, unmoving against a tree. She slid off of the horse's back, ran through the brackish puddles to the dog's side and dropped to her knees.

Maelis saw a slight movement. She wasn't sure if the dog breathed, or if it was only her imagination that had stirred the creature's chest. She reached her hand out to touch its head, and with that tender contact, the dog's eyes opened. They were glazed with pain and clouded with the nearness of death, yet still the dog recognized her—Maelis *felt* it.

"Joran," she called. "Joran, come quickly!"

Joran dismounted and hurried to her side, where he, too, dropped to his knees in the mud. He placed a comforting arm around Maelis and, with his free hand, stroked the dog's ear. Their concern motivated the dog to manage a whimper, then it lifted its head. As Maelis ran her hand lightly down its side, she sensed where the dog was injured. From its position on the ground, she realized that the dog's back had been broken, but with her empathic connection to the creature through the amazing power of the Red Stone, she *felt* where it also had internal injuries. Maelis knew that without help, the dog would soon die.

She wiped away her tears and thought about how to summon the power of the Red Stone to help the wounded animal. She had never consciously tried to summon the healing capabilities of the third Talisman before—such healing had happened before only because of her love for the injured. So, not knowing what else to do, Maelis lay her hands on the dog, over the areas where she sensed the injuries, feeling with her heart and whispering its wishes to the Red Stone.

Mists the color of rose petals encircled her, spreading from her heart, and emanating around her body. Maelis closed her eyes and chanted quietly, her lips moving only slightly. She spoke of her love for the Red Stone, of her emotional bond with the dog, and her wishes for it to be healed. Soon, her wishes took effect as the nimbus deepened its red color and flowed toward her hands. Maelis felt the warmth, generated from the Talisman on her chest, spreading through her arms. Its soothing heat

puddled momentarily in her hands before seeping through her palms and into the creature's body.

The dog trembled and then weakly wagged its tail. To Maelis's delight, it sat up and licked her face. With her wishes granted, the mists dispersed, and tears of joy replaced the tears of mourning that had already wet her cheeks. She looked at Joran and smiled. His face reflected both astonishment and love, adding to Maelis's elation at saving her canine friend.

"He's going to be all right," she said. "Red's going to live!"

"Red?" asked Joran.

"I'm naming him Red because he was healed twice by the Red Stone, my Heart Stone." When he raised his eyebrows inquisitively, she said. "I am calling the Talisman that because it needs the fire of love, which comes from the heart."

Maelis laid one hand against the dog's chest and other on its head. "You must rest," she told it. "We have to go now, and you aren't strong enough to follow. I want you to stay here until I return for you. Do you understand?"

The dog thumped its tail on the ground and licked her face again. This was enough for Maelis to know that Red understood. Joran mounted the horse and reached out to help Maelis up. "Happy now?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Maelis. "As happy as I can be without Ke'sair."

"Only time can heal your grief, Maelis," Joran told her. "Think about Ke'sair and how much he loved you. Your memories of him will make you strong."

Blaze headed north.

Joran guided Blaze between gnarled tree trunks—the silent sentinels of the swamp. The horse's gentle motion soon lulled Maelis into a dreamlike state between wakefulness and sleep. She was emotionally and physically drained. Leaning against Joran, she surrendered to her fatigue, dozing peacefully until they reached the spot Daigen had indicated on the map.

The amber hues of dawn had already painted the sky when Maelis opened her eyes. She looked around and saw that Sedgwin Swamp lay forty or fifty yards behind. When she looked forward, over Joran's shoulder, she saw the Gray River Falls spilling out of the Nemen Region. Maelis remembered the legends that said the falls sprang forth from the peaks of the Nemen Region in order to escape the pollution of Lord Nemenon, only to be ensnared in the roots of what once was Sedgwin Forest. The forest became a swamp, and only the issue of the Gray River Falls and the Swamp, the Selben River of the Sel Barna Plains, was permitted to trickle away.

The sight of the waterfall humbled Maelis. She felt and heard the roaring power of the water as it cascaded from the cliff and tumbled down the face of the mountain. It spoke in a language that she almost understood—somewhere in her spirit, there echoed a remnant of that voice. The sheer power of the water as it rushed toward the pool beneath it, drummed in Maelis's chest and tingled on her cheeks. She didn't need a forgotten legend or an old map to tell her where the last Talisman was; she could *feel* its presence.

"It's here," Maelis said in a whisper.

She slipped from Blaze's back and walked in a trance-like state toward the pool beneath the waterfall. Her boots had nearly touched the limpid edge of the waters when she heard a shrill war cry behind her.

Have we been followed?

Maelis wheeled around to face the unknown challenge, only to find Joran fighting two-handed and already pulling his blade from the stomach of one man and fending off the blows of another. Other Nemen soldiers surged from the tree line of Sedgwin Swamp.

"Joran!" Maelis called. "Go for the Talisman! I'll stay here and stop them!"

Heedless of the arrows flying at her, Maelis turned to face the advancing foes. As she whispered, Joran felt the breeze fly past him and push the arrows intended for her away. Joran chanced a look at Maelis; again, he saw her familiar aura. A glow of white and green enveloped her.

Her image emblazoned itself in his mind, and then he sprang into action, swinging his long-sword at his attacker's leg.

Joran's blade bit into his opponent's thigh with a satisfactory *thump* that dropped the man to the ground. The wound was grievous, but not life-threatening; effective enough to halt the soldier's advance. Joran then dropped his long-sword. He unbuckled the sheath that held his short-sword and dropped it, too, as he ran for the pool behind the falls. He plunged through the waterfall. Maelis saw him through the shimmering curtain as he dove.

She turned her attention back to the stalled Nemen troops. Her wind had buffeted them to a standstill. While maintaining her control of the Wind Element, she also summoned the Earth Element, causing the ground to quake beneath the soldiers' feet. They pitched and tossed about until most had broken bones; some fell unconscious. Then Maelis's whispered a different wish—a task she had not yet tried with the Green Stone. As the earth beneath the Nemens stilled, its surface grew soft, and then gave way altogether, tumbling them into a deep sinkhole. She continued to whisper until the walls of the hole became smooth as polished stone. For the Nemens, there would be no escape.

Maelis severed her connections with the Elements, and the aura around her disappeared. She walked over to the sinkhole she had created. Deep below her, the soldiers tried in vain to scale the walls, using each other for footing in attempts to climb out.

Maelis cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted down to them. "How did you find us?"

They stared at her in dull silence.

"Answer me, or by the gods, I will fill this hole!"

She brandished the glowing Green Stone, which still emitted sparks, and pointed it at them. It was not until she pursed her lips and whispered to the Green Stone that one of the men finally replied.

"Tarmis knows, but he's not down here!"

Maelis growled back at the man, "Where is he?"

"He followed the Traitor!"

Joran! Maelis knew that Joran was unaware of another soldier following him. The Nemen would wait at the surface of the pool, and then take the Talisman along with Joran's life. Maelis dashed toward the waterfall, scooping up Joran's discarded short-sword as she ran. *May the gods help me to use this*, she silently prayed as she darted through the frigid curtain of water.

A Nemen solidier, cudgel in hand, stood watching the dark shadow of Joran's form as it rose through the water. Maelis shouted at the man, trying to distract him, but to no avail—the roaring of the waterfall drowned out her voice. Determined to stop the Nemen from harming Joran, Maelis drew the short-sword from its sheath and charged, intending to cut the man's arm. But before she reached her mark, Joran crested the surface and the cudgel came down with force, striking Joran on the head and driving him back under the water. Too late, Maelis lunged forward, but her short-sword missed the man's arm, and instead drove into his rib cage right up to the hilt. Joran's attacker collapsed onto the ledge beside the pool.

Maelis withdrew the sword and clambered on top of the Nemen, pressing her knee into his cut. A ribbon of blood ran into the pool as she put pressure on the wound. To the injured Nemen, she truly looked like a Witch, with her flaring green eyes, bloodied hands and her face ablaze with fury.

Maelis barked at the dying man. "How did you know we were here?"

"D-D-Daysen," he stammered.

The soldier went limp and said no more. Maelis leapt up, and searched the pool for a sign of Joran. *Nothing*. She couldn't see him. Frantically, she paced the circumference of the pool, her eyes peering through the depths for any sign of Joran's body. Then, she saw him near the bottom, his tunic snagged on an outcropping of stone that held him against the wall.

Maelis took a deep breath and dove into the pool. The water was so cold that it stung her skin and numbed her fingernails. She kicked, propelling herself down through the water toward Joran's still form.

Maelis tugged on the fabric of his tunic, freeing him, then she wrapped her arms around his chest and kicked her way back to the surface.

Her head breached the water's surface, and she greedily sucked in air. Joran was dead weight in her arms, and he started to sink them both the moment she stopped kicking. She almost lost her grip on him. Calling on untapped strength, Maelis kicked her way up again and reached the edge of the pool. There was no beach, no incline onto which she could ease his body, so she leaned his shoulders against the ledge. Then she ducked back under the surface, braced her shoulder against his backside and kicked as hard as she could, sliding his still form out of the water.

Maelis pulled herself from the pool. She shivered, still feeling the effects of the frigid water. She knelt by Joran, laying her head against his chest to listen for sounds of a heartbeat. She heard nothing, and he was so cold that his skin had turned blue. She rocked back and forth, listening to the roar of the waterfall mingling with the anguished beating of her heart. She had never seen Joran so still before; even when he slept, he would twitch and snore. It frightened her. And in her moment of fear, she realized just how much she had grown to love him. She denied it no longer.

Maelis fell forward, her pounding chest on top of his still one, with the Heart Stone pressed between them. There were no whispers this time, and there were no wishes. She clung to his cold, still body and wailed, crying out against the injustice of losing him. Then she shouted outloud to him.

“Joran, you cannot leave me! I will not let you go! I love you!”

With that declaration, the Red Stone flared, smothering her in a fiery nimbus, suffusing her body with its radiant heat. The Talisman banished the chill from her body. Maelis welcomed its heat, embracing it mentally even as she held Joran physically. She loosened her grip on him only for a moment as she tore open her tunic and then his, pressing their bare flesh together, better to transfer the heat of love and life from her body to his.

The love Maelis felt for Joran intensified as she touched his skin, and she lost herself in the spell she wove. The waves of warmth and emotion enveloped her as she clung to him. She felt the heat flow through her veins, pumped by her heart, beating as if for them both. She felt his body temperature gradually rise; his chest and cheek were no longer cold. And as his body temperature rose, so did his heartbeat and respiration.

Maelis roused herself enough to realize that she should re-tie her tunic before he regained consciousness. He had not heard her confession of love, and she did not want him to reach an inappropriate conclusion due to her un-laced shirt.

Joran's eyes opened, and a shudder ran through his body. "Maelis," he mumbled, reaching for her. "Maelis, it was just like your dream..." He took a breath before continuing. "Remember your bad dream? When you were drowning and then you got hit, but it wasn't your face that you saw? It was mine." After speaking, Joran curled up like a baby, shivering and clutching Maelis. "You must have the gift of prophecy."

She smiled at him and petted his forehead.

"I'm cold," he said, and then he yawned and closed his eyes again.

"Come, Joran," she said, and he opened his eyes again. "Let's get out of here. We'll go back to the swamp and build a fire."

"But we can't leave," said Joran. "I couldn't get the Talisman."

Chapter Seventeen

Joran shivered in her arms. He couldn't control his body's reaction to the cold, and it would be a very long time before the icy grip of the pool left him. He watched Maelis pull the tunic from the man she had slain. He felt sorry for her, knowing how badly having killed the Nemen would affect her later. But like a true soldier, she pilfered the enemy's remains for anything useful. When Maelis returned to Joran's side, she held the Nemen's bloody tunic in one hand, and in the other, she held his dagger and sheath.

"Here," she said, holding the shirt out to him. "Put this on. At least it's dry."

Joran did as he was told. He then held out his hand to take the blade from her, too.

"This is mine," she said, an odd glint in her emerald eyes. "I need it for close-range protection."

She was right, and Joran knew it. He nodded his head in agreement, but when she started to tie the sheath to her thigh, he stopped her. Raising his hand, he took the dagger from her, knowing that it would encumber her when she went after the last Talisman. Maelis, however, was unaware of what she would have to do to reach the Blue Stone, and she argued with him.

"Hey!" she shouted, jerking at the sheath's straps. "I want to put it on."

"Maelis," Joran said. "You can't just yet. It will be in the way when you try to go through the cave's opening."

"Cave? What cave?"

Joran explained. "Whoever hid the last Talisman must have known you, or someone built like you, would be coming, because the underwater cave's opening is too small for a man."

"So that's why you couldn't retrieve the Talisman."

"When I got to the bottom of the pool," said Joran. "I realized that the opening was too small for me. I was surfacing to tell you that when the Nemen soldier struck me."

"I suppose I shall have to go back in," Maelis said with steeled resolve. "You stay there and rest, Joran. Take care of yourself while I'm gone."

Maelis walked to the edge of the pool, watching the rippling surface. The water was crystal clear with just a hint of pale blue color, allowing her to see fine white sand at the bottom. Taking a deep breath, she dove into the bitter cold depths.

She immediately felt her scalp tighten and her chest contract as the chill stole her breath away. This time, though, the pool felt different. The temperature hadn't changed. It was still bitingly cold, yet the water now had an invigorating effect. It charged her spirit rather than sapped her strength. If she hadn't been concerned with the essential need for air, Maelis may have lingered in the depths to enjoy the feeling.

Nearing the bottom, Maelis searched for the cave entrance. Almost immediately, she spotted the narrow black maw.

Of course Joran couldn't fit through that, she thought. I may not be able to!

Yet there was no turning back. She wouldn't give up without trying, so she reached her hands in along the walls, wiggling her fingers into fissures in the stone for leverage. Then with a kick, she worked her way into the tunnel. It was tight, and Maelis had to exhale the air in her lungs just to squeeze through.

Panicking in the blackness, with her lungs burning for breath and no idea how far she must struggle, Maelis wriggled through the narrow passageway. Then suddenly, she was free of the tunnel's grip, and she found herself kicking upward into another pool on the opposite side. As she broke the surface, she breathed deeply. She was in a cavern filled

with blue light, and its brightness reflected off the depths of the icy pool. Somehow, air and light had made its way into this cavern beneath the falls. Maelis looked around as she treaded water until she located the source of the light and airflow. Near the jagged ceiling was a fissure in the rock.

The cavern was made by nature, and Maelis was awestruck by its beauty. Yet she felt something else that she didn't recognize; an energy she sensed that had once been powerful but had now faded. With a few strokes, she swam to a wide ledge on the far side of the pool and scrambled out of the water. Once her feet touched the dry stone floor, the feeling grew stronger. Then Maelis's eyes fell upon the source of the sensation.

Seated against the wall, with its legs and arms folded, was a mummified body. In the frigid environment, with the constant airflow, the natural decay of the body had been retarded. The eye sockets were sunken, as was the skin on the cheeks, but the clothing was in good condition, as was the long, pale, honey-colored hair that tumbled down onto the shoulders of the silent sentinel.

Maelis's chest ached, and her mind hummed with a knowledge that surprised her. *My ancestor*, thought Maelis. *J'aime*. No one else would have died to protect the Blue Stone except the renowned Water Witch. She was certain of the identity, for the sensation that Maelis felt was similar to that which she had always felt around Niomi. She dropped to her knees before the withered, preserved corpse, letting her tears flow onto the stone floor of the cavern.

She indulged herself only a moment in grief; she knew that there was much to do and little time to spend weeping. She examined J'aime, admiring the weave of her tunic and the soles of her boots that still bore evidence of her life above ground. Maelis then noticed a pouch tucked between the woman's arms.

"The last Talisman," Maelis said aloud. "You have been saving it for me." With reverence in her voice she added, "Thank you, J'aime."

Careful not to disturb the body, Maelis removed the pouch. It was larger than the others had been, and Maelis was curious to see its

contents, but she sensed a need for urgency in returning to Joran. With one last look at J'aime, she readied herself to dive back into the icy water.

"Farewell," she said. "Perhaps after we defeat Nemenon, I shall return your Talisman to you." Maelis then tucked the pouch into her tunic, sucked in a deep breath and dove into the pool.

With the Talisman of the Water Element held closely, the pool was no longer frigid. To Maelis, it felt the same as her own body temperature. And swimming was effortless; her kicks propelled her more rapidly than before. It was almost as if the water parted for her, assisting her passage. At the mouth of the tunnel, she wished for a swift course through the confining channel, dreading the panic she had experienced before.

Her trepidation was unnecessary. A current, born of the Talisman's answer to her wish, whisked her along the tunnel. Immersed in water with the Talisman near her chest, Maelis had summoned the Element's power. When she came through the mouth of the tunnel and into the first pool, the current propelled her to the surface, where it supported her. Then, amazingly, she walked across water's surface to Joran.

Joran lay where she had left him, curled on his side with his face toward the pool. Yet now he was silent and unmoving, and Maelis feared that he had slipped into unconsciousness while she was in the cavern. Worried, she knelt by him, gently shaking his shoulders.

"Joran," she called to him. "Joran, wake up!"

"Maelis," he mumbled. "I was just dreaming about you, and you were walking on the surface of the pool."

"I did," she said. "Watch me do it again!"

Maelis went back to the pool, pausing to balance herself before opening the pouch containing the fourth Talisman. She loosened the strings and reached into the damp velvet pouch. The sensitive pads of her fingertips stroked a metal band as she curled her fingers around the last Talisman and freed it from its centuries of slumber. Her emerald eyes beheld a unique sight. In her hand she held a smooth silver band open on one side, with a teardrop-shaped blue stone fixed to the center.

What is this? She held the Talisman up to the light and examined it. Then, with the blue stone and silver band before her face it became clear. It was a circlet—a diadem—to be worn on her head.

Maelis turned the diadem so that the stone faced out, and she nestled the band into her damp hair. The pale blue stone settled in the middle of her forehead, resting above her eyebrows. It felt cool on her skin, and the chill seeped into her body, yet the cold felt clean, not oppressive. Maelis stroked her arm, expecting to feel goose bumps, but her skin was remained smooth. She smiled at the sensation before she readied herself to summon the power of the Element.

Maelis gathered her thoughts and whispered, summoning the power of the Water Element. A new aura—pale blue and pristine—encircled her body in waves of light. She whispered to the water in the pool and begged it to support her body. Maelis stepped out onto the surface of the water. As if she were nothing more than ice on the winter surface of Sunar's Pond, the pool held her upright. She turned to face Joran.

From his position on the ledge, he watched her smile and saw a new sparkle of delight in her emerald eyes.

With the aura rippling around her body, Maelis strode confidently back to Joran. As she reached the ledge, the aura flowed away and settled into the pool of water.

Maelis helped Joran get up, stopping only to scoop up his tunic and her dagger before leaving.



Through the wavering curtain of the Gray River Falls, Daysen saw the Witch cast her spell. The demon inside him sensed the power she had tapped. Daysen's human heart, too, knew that she had summoned the last Element by observing her trick with the water. Her lithe frame had appeared to freeze. Then she had walked out onto the surface of the pool, and it had supported her as though she had merely walked across a dirt path. Like one caught peeking where he shouldn't, he'd cast his eyes down and turned away.

Daysen knew that he could not stay. Watching her was painful, for the sight of her power-charged body made him yearn for something more pure and innocent than he had ever touched before. Whenever Daysen dared to entertain such thoughts, Lord Nemenon's demon would punish him, tearing into his brain and digging up painful memories, or it would loosen his stitches and cause Daysen's un-healing wound to bleed and burn with pain. More painful to Daysen, though, was the thought of returning to the Vale of Dismay and reporting his failure to the vilest being in Nuermar. But the demon permitted him no choice.

He traveled on horseback through the treacherous passes of the Nemen Region. Though Daysen trembled in fear, the demon in him was relentless, and so it drove the horse onward, forcing Daysen to crack his whip against the horse's sweat-lathered hide until the beast whinnied in pain. The Nemen Region was home for the demon, and any misery it could mete out on its return added to its satisfaction.

The sun god set on the third day before the demon relented and permitted Daysen to dismount and rest the stallion. Daysen's journey was near its end; he stood before the Demon Gates. He was beyond exhaustion, but fear overtook him nonetheless, running up his spine and prickling his scalp. The great stone beasts reeked of power, and the sensation they evoked from the demon within him was familiar and formidable. Even the creature inhabiting Daysen's body feared the power of the Stone Demons. The horse, too, was terrified, and Daysen had to cover its eyes with a neckerchief to make it move forward. Daysen crouched and slunk beneath the stone beasts, daring to walk upright only after he had passed beyond their reach. The Demon Gates kept much out, but they held more in.

Though his horse was exhausted and near death, Daysen mounted its quaking back yet again, and spurred the animal to complete the journey. At the massive doors of Lord Nemenon's castle, Daysen dismounted. Relieved at last of its burden, the stallion collapsed and died on the slate portico in front of the doors. Daysen shrugged, indifferent to the animal's sacrifice. He marched up and banged his fist against the vaulting frame. With a creak and a moan, the huge doors swung open.

Like a black cloud, Lord Nemenon himself appeared. Fear rose up from Daysen's bowels and gripped his heart.

"Failed!"

The word seemed to echo throughout the Vale of Dismay. It reverberated in what remained of Daysen's soul.

"Failed repeatedly!"

The words seared Daysen's ears. His heart pounded erratically. Daysen fell to his knees, bringing with him the wicked, once-powerful demon that inhabited his body. Together as one, they knelt before the billowing cape of Lord Nemenon, gasping for air. Daysen's brain shrieked and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Wait... Daysen thought. Not yet!

"I...know...where...she..." Daysen struggled to speak between gasps. With a desperate flash of insight, Daysen knew something that could save him. "The...Witch...has...a...weakness," he stammered.

Nemenon released Daysen from the grip of his dark magick, and the miserable supplicant pitched forward, striking his chin against the stone floor. Struggling against the bile in his throat, Daysen rose up and gulped for air.

"Tell me," Nemenon snarled.

"If I speak, my Lord, I wish to be released. The traitor Joran must pay for what he's done to me." Having said that, Daysen lifted his tunic to show his rancid wound still closed by the demon's glittering talons.

"You dare to bargain with me," Lord Nemenon hissed. "Foolish." Raising his hand, Lord Nemenon clawed at the air before him, causing Daysen's heart to stop beating.

The assassin collapsed back onto the floor, his mouth gaping. His eyes failed him and he succumbed to the darkness.

Yet Lord Nemenon did not reward Daysen with the release of death. Instead, he dragged the failed assassin back from the brink, releasing the grip on Daysen's heart and allowing his blood to flow again.

"Do not attempt to bargain with me," Nemenon said. "Tell me or die."

"I shall die either way," Daysen said. "Release me and I will tell you, and take Joran's soul for you, too."

Nemenon regarded Daysen with contempt. He touched the fingers of his right hand to his chin and then pointed at Daysen. “Agreed,” he hissed.

“The Witch has a weakness,” Daysen said. “There is a dog in the swamp. She has vowed to return to it. I saw it.”

He watched Nemenon’s face as the evil Lord contemplated this information. Daysen knew that Lord Nemenon had reached a favorable conclusion when he released his mental contact with Daysen and turned his back.

As he marched into the blackness of his castle, Nemenon growled again in Daysen’s mind: “Go, Daysen. I will kill the Witch. But if I kill the Traitor before you do, your life will follow his.”

Daysen backed away and watched through a haze of pain as the immense doors swung shut, drawn closed by the power of Nemenon’s passage into the castle. Daysen limped toward the army encampment to get a fresh horse and supplies before he set out in search of the Witch and the Traitor. Daysen had once trained in this very camp with Joran—he knew the paths on which to hunt them. He set out, knowing that his fate was sealed. If Joran didn’t die by his hands, Daysen’s own life would be forfeit.

Part Five

Control

“Four Elements in nature,
Fifth is the Soul,
With the Stones, all but the Fifth
She shall control.”

— *Legend from the Hidden Stone of Nuermar*

Chapter Eighteen

Maelis held all four Talismans. She felt ready to confront Lord Nemenon, yet Joran was still weak from almost drowning. She supported him as they breached the curtain of the Gray River Falls, and then helped him mount their horse. Blaze nickered in concern, looking over her shoulders at Joran.

“Hush, girl,” Maelis said. “He’s going to be all right. Joran is just cold.”

The mare acted as though she understood, so Maelis climbed up in front of Joran and took hold of the reins. Joran leaned against Maelis’s back, allowing her to support his weight. Once, she had thought Joran to be impervious to injury—yet now he clung to her, shivering and semi-lucid.

Maelis intended to camp that night and build a fire for Joran, so she led the horse to safety under Sedgwin’s canopy—no matter how damp, the swamp had more firewood than the naked side of the mountain. She found a suitable site and reined in Blaze, then patted Joran’s arm. He muttered sleepily, but Maelis was insistent that he sit up, saying that if he didn’t, he would fall off the horse when she dismounted. Joran groaned and righted himself so that she could get down. While she scouted for firewood, Joran sat numbly on the horse, waiting for her to return.

She came back, carrying a load of branches and twigs. Maelis was both concerned and surprised to find Joran where she had left him, so she dropped the bundle of wood.

“Lean against Blaze,” she said, once she’d helped him from the horse. “I’ll get a blanket from the pack, and you can rest on it.”

Joran leaned against the horse's hindquarters, turning his face and chest toward her warm hide. In a show of affection, the horse reached its head around and snuggled Joran.

Maelis, meanwhile, prepared a place on which Joran could rest. She then returned to the horse, stroking her muzzle, and kissed its nose. "All right, Blaze," she said. "I'll take him now."

She led Joran to the blanket she had prepared and helped ease him down against it. He promptly curled into a ball, hugging his knees to his chest. To help warm him while she built a fire, Maelis pulled a second blanket from the pack and draped it over his shoulders. She tucked the corners in around his neck and kissed him on cheek. Then she walked over to her pile of wood, pulling out her flint and tinder as she went.

"Why don't you use the Red Stone to do that?" Joran asked.

"It doesn't work that way," Maelis said. She squatted near the logs and used the flint and tinder to coax a flame from the wood.

"What do you mean?" said Joran. "The legends say that you can rain fire down on your foes. Why can't you use the Talisman to start the fire?"

"Do you remember the poem that Daigen read?" she asked. "There must be more than just desire to use the Blazing Stone. Her heart must feel love's true fire.

"It's similar to when Ke'sair was killed," she said with a pained expression. "I loved him so much; when I cried out with love and grief, it triggered the Red Stone's fire. It's not enough for me to want to burn something. There has to be more."

Maelis couldn't explain it any better. She fed her small flame with tinder and twigs. Soon, there was a fire dancing between them, speaking in crackles and snaps. Joran leaned over, straining to hear what it had to say, and then reached out his hands to warm them in the fire's breath.

Maelis smiled at him. "See," she said. "I didn't need the Stone—I did it by myself."

"Yes, you did," agreed Joran.

Joran stretched, and then nestled deeper into the blanket. From across the fire, Maelis heard his stomach growling.

He grinned sheepishly. "I'm a little hungry," he said. He unfolded his legs, preparing to rise.

"Don't get up," she said. "I'll get the hardtack." Maelis walked over to Blaze and rummaged through the packs for their trail rations.

Maelis returned to Joran's side, hardtack in hand, and sat next to him on the blanket, lifting the covers from his shoulders for so that she could get close to him. She handed Joran a biscuit and nibbled on her own. They sat in silence, savoring their closeness more than the meal. Joran slipped his arm around her waist. She didn't move away; she leaned closer.

When Joran finished eating, he rested his head on her shoulder. "Maelis?"

"Yes, Joran?"

"May I tell you something?"

"Of course," she said. "You can tell me anything."

He was quiet for a long moment, and she looked at him, puzzled. "What is it?" she asked. He looked pained, and she wondered if the wound on his head from the Nemen's blow ached him or if he suffered some injury he hadn't yet mentioned to her. "Joran," she said, shifting to face him because he still wouldn't speak, and now he had averted his eyes to the fire, as if he felt ashamed or anxious. "What's wrong? Tell me."

He looked at her and smiled slightly as if her concern amused and touched him. "Nothing's wrong," he said. He reached for her, touching her face for a moment. "I love you."

The truth was out. Although Maelis knew that he loved her, Joran's declaration came as a surprise. *I can't say it back to him*, she thought.

With tears brimming in her eyes, she looked at him for a long moment before she replied. "I know," she said. Then she lied. "But I...I must focus my attention on the Talismans just now. My mind, and my heart, must remain clear for the coming battle. Maybe when this is all over..."

She looked down at her empty hands, feeling guilty for lying to him and for loving him. Then she looked into his eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, shaking her head.

Joran was hurt. The pain of her rejection was written on his face. He stiffened, pulling away from her, but he didn't retreat completely.

"Then I shall wait," he said.

Maelis got up and banked the fire. When she returned, Joran lifted the blanket for her, and they lay together. As Joran placed his arm against her chest, Maelis felt certain that the beating of her guilty heart would reveal her true feelings. But Joran said nothing. He fell asleep quickly, and Maelis drifted off to the rhythm of his slow breathing.



The conspicuousness of Joran's love remained a wall between them for almost two days. At last, he could take it no longer, and when they made camp in a stand of trees on the side on the mountain, he confronted her.

"Maelis," he said. "We need to talk."

Sensing what was on his mind, she retorted, "No, we don't."

"Yes, we do."

"Joran," she said, "I am *not* going to talk about it. I've told you once that I cannot think about my feelings for you just now."

"So you admit that you *do* have feelings for me," he said.

"I didn't say that!" He had, in fact, elicited a glimmer of the truth, and she was exasperated with him for doing so—and at herself for permitting it to happen.

Now we're getting somewhere, he thought. "You said you couldn't think about your feelings for me. Those were your words, Maelis—not mine."

"That's not what I meant," she said.

"Do you have any idea how obstinate you are?" Joran changed the gist of the conversation, easily manipulating her. He thought that if he could deflect her from this sensitive topic, he might be able to wrest another confession from her.

She faced him, still flustered. "I am not stubborn!"

"You most certainly are!" Joran had gotten a rise out of her, and he enjoyed it.

She stepped closer to him and slapped his chest. It was all in play; they both were aware of it, and to release the tensions between them, they engaged in a mock scuffle. He swung at her, and she ducked. She struck at him and he spun away. Joran was surprised at her agility, and proud of her strength when she made contact with his chest and shoved him.

With impish glee on his face, Joran shoved Maelis onto the ground—gently, so as not to hurt her. She scrambled up to face him.

"Ha! I got you down, Mael!"

"*Mael?*" She pretended to growl at him as she pulled herself up with his proffered hand.

"My name is *Maelis*. Say it. Say my name—*Maelis*."

Joran refused to say her name correctly, so she pushed him back, knocking him squarely on his rump. Jumping to his feet, he dusted himself off, jogged off behind a tree, then peeked out at her and made an absurd face.

"*Mael-eable!*" he exclaimed, ducking around a feigned blow she launched at his head. "*Mael-ificent!*"

She swung at him and missed again.

He stuck his tongue out at her. "*Mael-ancholy!*" He dashed for another tree, chanting as he ran, "*Mael-odorous!*" With that last slanderous name, he jumped out from behind a birch tree, hands on his hips, and full of bravado.

Maelis yowled, "That's enough! I do *not* stink!"

With those words she lunged at him, aiming for his gut. Her shoulder met his unprotected belly with force, making him stumble. With a thud and a muffled grunt, Joran landed on his back with Maelis on top of him. She scrambled to straddle his hips as she pushed his chest down with her palms, momentarily pinning Joran to the ground.

"Now," she said. "You're all mine."

He moved his hands from a defensive position over his face, placing them on Maelis's thighs. The look on his face softened, and the tensions in his body dissolved. "I always have been," he said in a husky voice.

Muscles lax, he was at her whim; he hungered for her touch. With the tips of his fingers, he rubbed her gently, stroking toward her inner thighs in a circular motion. He looked deeply into her emerald eyes. He gave himself to her without saying a word.

"Mine," Maelis murmured, reaching with her right hand to smooth his hair. She liked that idea—with all of her being, she wanted to taste what was hers. With a fingertip she traced the lines of his eyebrows, his jawbone, then his cheekbones. Inside her, Maelis felt a yearning growing for him, warming parts of her body that had never before felt the heat of desire.

Joran took her hand in his, kissing the skin of her palms before placing his lips on the sensitive skin on the underside of her wrist. With one arm behind Maelis's head, and the other holding her around the small of her back, he eased her off his lap and onto the ground. He leaned over her, urgently pressing his lips onto hers, stroking the side of her body. Maelis reached for him, pulling his firm body down on top of her.

Joran's mouth was on hers. His fingers pulled at the strings of her tunic until the shirt fell away, leaving her bare abdomen and breasts exposed to the cool night air. He moved his lips from hers, down to her neck, pausing to kiss her white flesh. With warm kisses, he made his way across her collarbone and then to parts of her that had never before been touched by a man.

Sensations flooded her body, making her quiver beneath his touch; a moan escaped her parted lips. And yet Joran moved on, his tongue rubbing her tender skin. Then his fingers fumbled with the ties of her doeskin breeches.

The laces gave way, and Joran began to tug at her pants, trying to remove the barrier that stood between them and the pleasure for which their bodies both yearned. His callused hands touched the inside of Maelis's calves, and then began to slide up toward her bare thighs.

Something in her mind resisted. The legends flooded her mind. *Virgin Witch...Virgin Witch!* Maelis knew suddenly that she must stop this before she allowed her desires to destroy all hope for Nuermar. Clenching her knees together, Maelis caught Joran's hand before it had gone too far, and before their carnal lust destroyed her abilities to use the Talismans.

"We must stop," she said.

He looked at her in dismay. "But Maelis..."

"Virgin Witch," she reminded him. "We can't do this."

Joran understood. Groaning, he slid off of her body. He closed Maelis's tunic, and then pulled her breeches back up. Still aching for her, he lay against her body, daydreaming of the intimacy they had come so close to sharing.

She took his face in her hands, looked into his eyes and said, simply, "I love you."



Daysen witnessed their tryst. He watched Joran and Maelis from a cliff above their campsite and waited for them to fall asleep. In the night, while they slept, he would kill them both.

He fumed as he watched them nestle close to each other. He wondered what her flesh tasted like, how soft her skin was. Jealousy added fuel to the fire of Daysen's frustration. Joran was able to touch her, caress her—she for whom Daysen also longed. He would slay the Witch's lover, then take her for his own. He licked his lips in anticipation.

The near side of the mountain fell into darkness as the sun slid behind the peak. The demon within Daysen hated the cold, so when the temperature dropped abruptly, it forced Daysen to action. The demon would wait no longer, nor would it give Daysen more time for his human whims to grow. The demon wanted to be done with this mission, to return to the Vale of Dismay and the heat that perpetually surrounded Nemenon's castle. It also desired to be free of its human host. Daysen had shown promise of great evil when the demon had arrested his death, yet even with the potential of long life, Daysen continued to resist, lamenting the loss of his humanity at every turn.

Daysen crept through the underbrush, his dagger clenched between his teeth. He crawled undetected to the edge of the fire pit and lay still, observing Joran and Maelis. From this proximity, Daysen could smell the herbs in which Maelis had bathed, and the demon inhabiting him could smell the power of her Talismans. Human desire filled Daysen, causing the demon to screech into his mind, *Kill them, you festering pustule!*

Daysen grabbed his temples with both hands, and whimpered as his will and the demon's battled. His limbs flailed wildly, chest heaving as his throat erupted in wails of anguish. Then, all movement ceased and the pain within was his only perception.

The demon, Nemenon's evil currier, took final control. Daysen rose to his feet, face contorted, mouth curled in a snarl as he took up his knife in one hand and drew his sword with the other. He advanced on the sleeping couple, demon-bent on their utter annihilation.



A twig snapped and Joran awoke with a start. He rolled to his gut and popped up to his feet in one movement. The source of his disturbance was only feet away. Daysen advanced on their position, with his weapons drawn and the light of bloodlust in his eyes.

Joran drew his sword from its sheath, instantly incensed and ready to kill. Maelis awoke then, and he rolled her from harm's way with a shove of his boot. She opened her mouth to protest, but he silenced her by snarling beneath his breath, "He's an assassin, Maelis! Either he dies, or we will!"

She nodded her head, resigned to allowing Joran to settle this fight. Yet, she raised her hands, Talismans flaring should Joran need her.

Daysen lunged at Joran, slashing in a wild arc with his sword and following with a thrust of his knife. Joran dodged, spinning to the side and cutting Daysen's extended arm in the same motion. The knife dropped to the ground, useless, that hand rendered limp and bloodied. Nemenon's assassin howled in pain and rage as he shifted his weakened hand to a doubled grip on his sword hilt.

He swung and the blade came down with savage speed, the point slicing the leather over Joran's shoulder. Joran returned the attack, favoring a second low cutting arc which found purchase in Daysen's gut. The possessed man grunted, but then slashed wildly at Joran, cutting once more into his leather armor and drawing blood. It was Joran's turn to groan in pain, yet it only spurred him to a more vicious swing which sank deeply into Daysen's midsection.

The strike knocked Daysen off his feet, and he landed beside his sword on the path. Joran readied his blade for the killing strike when he stopped suddenly. His eyes widened in shock as the new wounds in Daysen's abdomen peeled further open and the demon clambered from its confines within Daysen's body.

The demon's body glistened with Daysen's blood, a surreal shimmer matched only by the evil gleam in its eyes. Half in, half out of Daysen's writhing body, it turned to Joran. "Traitor!" it hissed, its claws extended toward Joran as it bunched its haunches and launched at him.

Joran lashed out with his blade as the demon neared him. The creature fell to the ground, cleaved in two with its severed halves wracked by spasms. Black ichor pooled around the creature when Joran pinned it beneath his foot. He ground his heel to a chorus of cracking bones, even as the upper half of the demon spat curses. Joran, in turn, pinned this portion beneath his boot, driving the point of his sword through its throat and chopping off the demon's head.

Daysen let out a guttural moan. Joran raised his sword, and stepped over his prone form. Blood ran from multiple cuts in Daysen's gut, and gushed from the corners of his mouth. "Kill me, Joran!" He gagged on the sanguine spill in his throat. "Do it, you traitor! It is in your blood—it is your very nature! Do it!"

The point of Joran's sword sank. "I think not," he stated flatly.

He grabbed Daysen by the collar and dragged his body to a tree, where he securely lashed him. Joran then stalked over to Maelis and helped her to her feet.

"We cannot just leave him here," Maelis said. She looked at Daysen, then turned her green eyes to Joran. "Without Nemenon's demon, he will die."

Joran turned back to Daysen. "It is what he deserves." He inhaled, and sensed relief at those words. "But, it will not be by my hands. I will not give you the relief of death, Daysen, nor will I carry the guilt of giving Nemenon another soul. My nature is my own now—never his again."



The pass through which Joran and Maelis traveled was high, and the air was frigid, biting her exposed cheeks. Joran, ever wary as they approached the Vale of Dismay, frequently stopped to inspect the area for signs of traps or Nemen soldiers. But their passage through the Nemen Region was unhindered, causing Maelis to fear that something was amiss on the dark side of the mountain.

There should be some kind of life, she thought. But the area was devoid of it—not even vegetation grew on the side of the mountain facing Nemenon's castle.

Joran and Maelis stopped only once, shortly after sunrise, in a jagged depression in the mountain that provided protection from both discovery and the winds. While they rested, Joran prepared tea and a thin gruel with the remains of their grain, and Maelis practiced with her Stones. Although she now held all four Talismans, the White Stone remained her favorite. She felt most competent with its Element, having used it the longest. Yet, as she practiced, she noticed a weakness in using the Talismans—the Elements were too broad to focus them onto a specific task. Even a slender cyclone still affected surrounding objects.

"Joran," she said, frustration ringing in her voice. "I'm afraid that my worst fear will come true. I am going to fail. I am going to fail all of Nuermar." Maelis sunk to her knees, grabbing handfuls of dry earth. She raised her hand, watching as the grains of soil that slipped through her fingers blew away.

He tried to comfort her. "The legends say that you will defeat Nemenon." He walked over to her and pulled her up by her hands. He

looked intently into her eyes and said, "You are going to save Nuermar. You shall not fail."

"I pray you are right," she said. She drew away from him and mounted Blaze. She embraced the horse's neck, drawing comfort from its quiet strength. Joran climbed up behind Maelis, and they rode far down the rift. Soon, they encountered an overhanging ledge. It was too low for them to sit astride the horse and pass underneath. Joran and Maelis dismounted and led the mare by foot. As they approached the end of the trail, they heard the sounds of battle.

The war for Nuermar had begun without them!

Maelis dropped Blaze's reins and ran for the opening of the mountain pass; she came to an abrupt halt when she reached an outcropping of stone that overlooked the Vale of Dismay.

The valley bristled with weapons and men—phalanxes of Nemen soldiers fought Nuermar villagers and Elemental monks. From Maelis's vantage point, she saw the effect of the Nemen attacks—Nuermarians and monks had formed a defensive square and the Nemens had surrounded them, driving them closer together, preparing for a mass slaughter. As the defenders clustered in the center of the Vale of Dismay, they left their wounded behind. Nemen stragglers hacked the wounded to death and looted their bodies.

Everywhere were the sounds of death—piercing screams, the clatter of metal and the sickening crunch of weapons punching through flesh. So, too, did the stench of battle rise and fill the valley; never before had Maelis smelled the putrid mix of soil, sweat and blood. She was physically sickened, and gripped with despair. She reached for Joran's hand, and as one, they climbed down toward the valley floor. Joran stopped on a narrow cliff and turned to face Maelis.

"You must stay here," he told her. "This is a good vantage point from which to use your powers. I know of a cave below this cliff where I can bring survivors. We'll be safe there."

Maelis nodded numbly. The atrocities in the valley made her mind reel. She felt ill, and her heart ached with the knowledge that her worst fears were coming true. She loved the people of Nuermar, and they were

dying. From their vantage point, they saw Daigen, Tassig and many other friends who had fled the Monastery just prior to the Nemen attack and rallied the makeshift army before them. She watched in horror as a Nemen skewered a monk with his sword, the heavy blade crushing the man's unprotected skull. As the monk collapsed to the ground, Maelis saw the wound on his scalp in high relief. She burned with a potent mix of emotions—love for her people and rage at the Nemens.

Joran slid down the remaining slope, and Maelis made contact with the Elements. Looking back, Joran saw her surrounded in a blaze of white and green, and then a faint pink aura.

Maelis considered how to use the Elements to aid her people. When the Nemen troops parted to allow a wave of reinforcements to advance, she took her chance.

She whispered a rhythmic chant and used her right hand to direct the power of the Elements. Concentrating on the narrow rift between the surviving Nuermarians and the Nemen troops, she summoned forces from deep within the ground. A low rumble gathered in the valley, growing in intensity until a stone barrier erupted from the earth, corralling most of the Nemens against the valley wall. The few soldiers who remained outside the barrier tried to flee in fear, but their officers whipped them from behind, forcing them to continue the attack on the Nuermarians and the monks.

Joran joined the fray, taking a fearsome toll. Nemens fell before him; none could withstand his fury. As he worked his way toward the middle of the battlefield, he directed the few Nuermarian survivors to run for the cave below the cliff on which Maelis stood.

Maelis's love for Joran fed the flames growing within her. She watched in anguish as a Nemen raised his sword against him; she altered her whispered chant. In response, the earth rocked beneath the two combatants, tossing them both to the ground. The Nemen attacker dropped his sword as he struggled to regain his footing. Joran rose, and with a deadly thrust, sank his blade into the Nemen's belly. The man doubled over in a heap, joining the other bodies littering the Vale of Dismay.

Joran spotted the monk, Daigen running toward him. He grabbed the younger man by the hood of his robe and pulled him away from the oncoming thrust of another Nemen sword. Joran blocked the attacker's blow with his shoulder, taking a glancing hit that ripped through his tunic sleeve and cut his arm. Joran swung his sword in a mighty arc, cutting the Nemen's body in half. Daigen watched in horror as the Nemen's torso flew to one side, spraying a fountain of blood into the air; his legs stood for a moment, then buckled at the knees and collapsed in a heap.

Joran shoved Daigen toward the cave and turned to rejoin the battle, leaving a red ribbon of blood in his wake.

Soon only Joran and a few others remained facing the Nemen onslaught. The soldiers Maelis had trapped behind the stone wall began to scale it, and defeat for the Nuermarians was imminent. The red glow around Maelis's body grew, flared by her love for Joran and the Nuermarians, and it began to permeate the white and green colors swirling around her body. As she raised her arms to call the valley walls to crumble on the Nemens remaining in her corral, an archer nocked an arrow and let it fly. The bolt found its mark and its tip sunk into Maelis's gut, the force of its contact knocking her to the ground.

Joran looked up and saw her fall. Bellowing in rage, he wheeled about to return fire. With sickening clarity, he saw the aging man's face—behind the arm of the bow leered his old Commander. Finally, Joran's vow to kill him would have its moment of fruition.

Joran drew his own bow and returned fire. The first arrow struck the Commander in the shoulder. It was a means to get his attention. The man followed the path of the arrow, and saw Joran's face. When his eyes widened with recognition, Joran loosed a second shot. The arrow pierced the Commander's throat, tearing through until the fletchings sank into the flesh. Blood spurted out around the shaft, and dyed the feathers a rich Nemen red. The Commander fell.

Chapter Nineteen

The fear of losing Maelis forever overtook Joran's senses. Heedless of the danger, he ran blindly toward the cliff where she had fallen.

An unyielding grip on Joran's arm stopped him. Daigen had rushed from the protection of the cave and grabbed him, holding him fast. The monk hadn't seen the arrow strike Maelis, and therefore failed to understand Joran's resistance or fury.

Joran pulled against the young monk's hold on him. "Maelis!" he cried, pointing to the cliff. "She's hurt!" Panic gripped him as tightly as did the young monk. He shouted again, "Maelis!"

Then he heard a faint reply.

"I'm here..." It was her voice, coming faintly from above. She sounded weak, hurting.

"Don't move!" Joran called to her. "I'm coming!"

"No," she called back, somehow summoning a louder, firmer voice. "Get to the cave. I...I can feel the Red Stone stirring in me...feel the flames rising. It's not safe, Joran!"

"She is right, my friend," Daigen said, pulling Joran toward the narrow mouth of the cave.

Joran looked at the monk with a mixture of fear and incredulity. *Doesn't he realize that all is lost?*

Daigen continued to pull him into the cave and Joran resisted, attempting with a bloodied hand to peel the monk's fingers from around his arm. "I must stop her," Joran said, tugging against Daigen's defiant grip. "Release me, damn it! She's going to die!"

“No! You cannot go up there. Her flames will kill you, too,” Daigen pleaded. “You both must live. In the last book, the Legends of the Guardians, there was a passage that referred to you:

*Only he of hazel eye,
and wheaten hair
Can woo the Guardian,
And produce an heir.*

“You are the one, Joran,” Daigen said. “You must stay here in the cave where it’s safe.”



Maelis grasped the arrow with both hands and pulled it from her stomach; the pain of its removal was negligible compared to the flames that raged within her. Her love for the land and its people had triggered the ultimate response from the Red Stone, and she was ablaze with its power.

Her skin sizzled from the heat. A damp sheen covered her body as the flames spread outward from her chest and engulfed her body. The conflagration transformed her honey-colored hair into golden ribbons of flame that snaked and hissed around her face. Her emerald eyes blazed and her skin blackened in response to the fire.

She looked at the devastation in the Vale of Dismay. So many had died. The floor of the valley was littered with twisted, pierced bodies—monks, simple villagers, and Nemen soldiers lying together in death. The love she felt for the innocents flared inside Maelis; its heat engulfed her and the rest of the valley. Her skin became nothing more than layers of ash, and yet her eyes continued to flare. Maelis’s whispers fed the flames, and the heat waves rose, radiating from her body. She felt the bones inside her burn; her muscles glowed red through the remnants of her flesh.

Maelis continued to chant, and the winds carried her mantra into the Vale of Dismay. Her whispers reverberated in the valley as though the land of Nuermar itself railed against the evil that had long polluted the

Nemen Region. The echo was so powerful that the remaining armies held their ears for protection against the din. Fire shot from her fingertips, scorching the ground in front of the Nemen troops and stopping their advance on the cave. The soldiers fell to their knees, gasping for air.

She looked out past the dying armies, past the Demon Gates to the Plains, the land she loved and must protect. A tear of white light trickled from her eye.

I love Nuermar, Maelis thought. I cannot allow this evil to spread.

She knew, through her connection with the Element of Earth, that Joran and their few surviving friends remained sheltered in the safety of the cave below. With her heart radiating as hot as Nuermar's sun, she raised her arms and released her wrath.

The fire, fueled by her love, exploded. A wave of heat spread out for miles, incinerating everything in its path. After it passed, only piles of ash remained on the valley floor. Her heat wave washed up over the mountains, searing all who remained in the Vale of Dismay and burning out the evil that had polluted the Nemen Region. Then, in a backdraft of flame, the heat Maelis had visited on the land streamed back into her smoldering body.

The cliff caught Maelis in its stony embrace. She fell back, stiff as a brittle log, and moved no more. No breath stirred her lungs; no movement stirred her limbs. Her body coalesced into a pile of sculpted ash and embers.



In the eerie silence following the aftermath of Maelis's purging flames, Joran looked outside of the cave where he and fewer than thirty villagers and monks remained unscathed. Clouds of smoke hung in the air over ash piles that littered the valley floor—piles that Joran knew to be the remains of the combatants. Here and there, between the mounds lay the melted remnants of their weaponry. It was surreal. But something else diverted Joran's attention from now the barren valley.

Maelis no longer whispered.

Joran told the others to remain in the cave until he signaled to them. Then he stepped out into the heat of the valley and scrambled up the slope toward the ledge on which Maelis had last stood. Hope failed him when he peered over the edge but found nothing. Only a charred log remained where Maelis had been. He leaned against the face of the mountain; it still held the warmth from Maelis's heat wave. He scanned the slope looking for her familiar form.

"Maelis!" he called. "Maelis! Where are you?"

He heard a crackle of fire from the charred log. He looked at it again and, all at once, he came to a terrifying realization. The love of his life lay before him, on the rocky ledge. What Joran had taken to be the remains of a burnt log was all that was left of Maelis. Horrified, he ran to her side, screaming her name. He collapsed to his knees beside her and saw Maelis's features through the charred ruins—her delicate nose, the ties of her tunic, the faint outline of the Second Talisman.

"Oh, Maelis..." he gasped, tears in his eyes, choking his throat. "Oh, gods, no!"

He touched the black char of what was once her cheek. It crumbled at even this light caress, and a small puff of ash rose from her face.

Joran threw his head back, crying out hoarsely, a wrenching, anguished sob. His need to touch her overwhelmed him, and like a marionette helpless to prevent the whims of its master, he reached out and stroked the remains of her once-golden hair.

Again, it crumbled at his touch, yielding gray ash. Yet beneath, he saw shimmering strands of hair.

How can this be?

Joran removed his tunic and used it to brush the ash from her body. He felt her residual heat through the fabric, but despite this, he continued wiping until all the ashes had fallen away. *Gods, she remains!* he realized in shock. Beneath the blackened crust of ashes, Maelis's body lay intact, unscathed by the flames.

He nudged her gently, and waited for her eyes to open, but they didn't. Joran then gripped her shoulders and shook her, but to no avail. He even slapped Maelis, hoping the pain would rouse her. Maelis didn't

breathe, nor did she respond in any other way. As he tried again to shake her into consciousness, the Heart Stone jiggled free of her tunic and flopped onto her chest.

“Wake up,” Joran pleaded. “Wake up! You are too stubborn to die now, Maelis. You’ve won!”

He clutched her still body to his bare chest, with the Heart Stone pressed between them. He rocked her gently, crying into her hair. “You can’t be dead,” he sobbed. “You can’t because I love you.”

He continued to rock, with her still form pressed against his chest. He stroked her hair, dampened by his tears, and repeatedly whispered to Maelis how much he loved her. He failed to notice over the pain in his heart, that the Red Stone warmed against his chest. But gradually, its heat became undeniable.

Have I triggered the Talisman? Joran wondered. Has our love produced a connection to the Element?

Encouraged by the possibility, Joran began to whisper to her that he wouldn’t allow her to die, that he loved her, and that Daigen had told him a great secret that he wanted to share with her. As he had heard Maelis do so many times, he made the whispers repetitive and rhythmic. His whispers intensified, and Joran felt the temperature of the Red Stone rising.

The pendant between them seared his exposed flesh, yet he continued to whisper. Then, with a violent shudder, Maelis coughed. Joran felt her chest heave as she tried to clear the soot from her lungs. He stopped whispering and held her, as renewed sobs—this time of joy—racked his body.

With a trembling hand, Maelis reached up and brushed the hair from her face and, as Joran watched, her lashes parted to reveal her brilliant green eyes. She gazed at his eyes for a long time before speaking.

“Hey,” she said in a hoarse whisper. “Your eyes have a little green in them.”

In response, he covered her with kisses. For a moment, she let him, relaxing in his arms, laughing against his mouth, and then she stiffened,

pulling back from him. “Maelis,” he said, bewildered, as she struggled to rise. “What are you doing?”

“The Stone Demons must destroy the castle,” she said, leaning against him for support as she limped to her feet.

“What?” he said. “No, Maelis, you can’t. They must remain at the gates to keep Nemenon prisoner in the Vale of Dismay.”

“It no longer matters, Joran,” Maelis said. “Look down there. Do you think anything could have survived that firestorm?”

He had to admit that she was right; nothing outside of the cave could have survived her fiery blast. Even the castle’s northern wall had fallen.

“I’ll call the Stone Demons—the Demon Gates—to life,” she said. “My ancestor Monice used them to trap Nemenon in this valley; I will use them to destroy what’s left of his castle.”

Maelis raised her right arm, clutching the back of her hand in her left palm. As she tried to concentrate, her weakened body betrayed her and she nearly fell.

Joran stepped behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist and supported her body with his own. He tucked his cheek close to hers. He held Maelis as she summoned the Earth Element again, and, unwittingly, he became part of the experience.

Whispers came, hesitantly at first, from Maelis’s lips. Then they grew more intent, and her chanting mounted in authority as she called the great stone beasts to rise and do her bidding. The green aura surrounded both Joran and Maelis and, as he supported her, he *felt* her power. It was as though he and Maelis were one; he felt her heartbeat and respirations in his own chest and, at the same time, he felt the energy inherent in the mountain on which they stood. With a sense of wonder, he experienced Maelis’s control over the impulses that flowed through and around them.

Joran watched as the Stone Demons began to shudder. Their ears twitched, and their hides rippled like waves traveling across a pond. Then the creatures’ movements became more pronounced, as though the Demons were flexing their granite muscles.

“Maelis,” Joran said. “It’s working!”

He watched as the massive beasts pulled themselves from their centuries-old perch and shook clouds of ashes from their massive wings. The Stone Demons roared into the air, flying across the Vale of Dismay. The creatures came to rest on the valley floor below the cliff where Joran and Maelis stood. Even on their haunches, the Stone Demons' heads reached up to them, and though they were solid granite, Joran saw life-like expressions on their faces as they awaited her command.

"Destroy the castle," she said, pointing at Lord Nemenon's fortress. "Then dig through the mountain's heart to the sea!"

Responding to her like obedient pets, the giant beasts raced across the Vale of Dismay. The beating of their wings created a wind that buffeted Joran and Maelis behind them.

The Stone Demons attacked the castle. With ravenous strokes of their talons, the creatures shredded the walls as if they were nothing more than paper. First the tower collapsed and then the castle keep, until nothing stood but a single column at what had once been the entrance. One of the Stone Demons paused to sniff the column before seizing it in its beak and smashing it to the ground.

Lord Nemenon's castle was destroyed. With their first task complete, the creatures next dug into the mountainside. Gravel flew from between their legs, and clouds of dust rolled into the valley behind them. Even after the beasts had disappeared from view, the sound of their digging rolled like thunder across the valley. Then, suddenly, as they broke through the far side of the mountain, a beam of light shot through the tunnel and bathed the valley in the amber hues of the setting sun.

When they had completed their labors, the Stone Demons returned to sit before Maelis.

"You have been at your posts too long," she told them. "The evil you held at bay is now gone, and you are free."

Rather than scampering away, the Stone Demons returned to their posts. Their bodies gradually lost definition, and they melted into the sides of the mountain pass. Maelis's ancestor Monice had summoned the Stone Demons from earth ages ago, and to the earth they returned. The Demon Gates were gone.

Maelis severed her connection with the Green Stone's Element. As the green aura sank into the earth beneath their feet, Joran felt a clinging sensation on the soles of his boots. Now he understood why Maelis had shouted after her first practice with the stone—why he had trouble moving, as she had. They had been immersed in its energy, and the Earth Element was reluctant to relinquish its hold on him.

Although she was weak, Maelis rested only a moment before she turned her attention from the Green Talisman to the Blue. With her transition, Joran became aware of the cool sensation Maelis felt when she summoned the Water Element. His eyes beheld the blue aura as it rippled around them, tickling him with its caress. He enjoyed it so much that he nearly missed the spell she wove. Maelis whispered again, speaking to the Black Lake that lay south of the mountain pass. She spoke in hushed tones of her love for the Water Element, and asked the lake to rise and cleanse the valley of the wickedness that had so long polluted it.

Through the mountain pass, Joran saw the waters of Black Lake churn. Maelis's chanting intensified as she demanded action from the Element, and Joran saw the water's response. Black Lake rose to its flood stage and spilled across its beaches. The waters gathered on the northern edge, swirling as they charged forth. The torrent gushed toward the pass, boiling white with foam. The roar of the water was deafening, and if Joran hadn't been supporting Maelis's weight entirely, he would have put his hands over his ears.

Joran watched the water tumble into the valley and flush the ash and rubble toward the tunnel dug by the Stone Demons. The rubble collected at the tunnel's mouth, creating a dam that blocked the water and caused it to rise and fill the valley. The water surged along the valley walls, reaching into fissures and rinsing out the remaining filth.

The water had risen almost to the mouth of the cave that still sheltered Daigen, Tassig and the other surviving monks and Nuermarians. Joran saw the danger, but there was nothing he could do. He was still held captive by the aura that surrounded both him and Maelis.

Suddenly, the pressure of the water burst through the dam. The raging waters of Black Lake roared through the Stone Demons' tunnel, and joined with the Nuermar Sea. As the water in the valley receded, the last purple hues of evening shone through the tunnel and lit the Vale of Dismay, now cleansed of evil and its residue.

With a sigh, Maelis released all connections to the Elements and collapsed into Joran's arms.

He held her tightly to his chest, stroking her hair. She took his hands in hers, pulling his face close, and kissed him on the lips. Then plaintive cries came from the cave below them.

"Is it safe to come out?"

"Is it over?"

Joran led Maelis to the edge, saying, "I believe it's your place to answer those questions."

"Yes," Maelis said. "It's safe! It's over!"

Joran and Maelis watched the mouth of the cave as people took their first hesitant steps into the newly cleansed valley. The people in the cave had only heard what had happened during the firestorm, but they had been terrified by the rising floodwaters that came so close to drowning them in their sanctuary. Fewer than thirty survivors remained, and they gathered at the foot of the mountain beneath the cliff. They looked up at Joran and Maelis.

Daigen raised his right fist in the air and cried, "Hail! Hail to our Guardian!"

Soon the other men took up the chant, hailing their Guardian, the woman who had saved them and the entire land of Nuermar.

"Hail!" they cried. "Hail to the Guardian!"

Chapter Twenty

The group continued to cheer Maelis until evening's shadows nestled in the valley. Then silence settled upon them as the alabaster rays of the moon enveloped the dale. The valley was now a cradle of white, filled with hope born of Maelis's victory over Lord Nemenon's evil.

Joran and Maelis approached the survivors arm in arm. They were quickly surrounded by friends and allies wanting to embrace them, shake their hands or pat them on the back. Their eager acclamation was more than Maelis had ever dared to hope or expect.

Daigen, Tassig and a handful of survivors set off for the Monastery, while the remaining people departed, vowing to share the tale of Maelis and her victory with their villages. No longer would her family's name be a scourge in the land of Nuermar. The Emerald-eyed Witch had become a heroine.

"Come, Maelis," Joran said, slipping his arm around her waist. "We should go to the Monastery too, so that you can rest. Afterward, we will go to my village and get my Papa."

"Fine," she replied. "As soon as we go back to the swamp to get my dog."

"Maelis, my love," Joran said. "You're not as strong as you think you are. You need time to recuperate. We should go to the Monastery first." He was a determined man, skilled in battle, but when it came to arguing with Maelis, both attributes were moot.

She rebuffed him. "Joran," she said. "I may be tired, but I promised Red that we would return to Sedgwin, and I intend to do just that." She placed her fists on her hips, facing him, with her green eyes sparking in the moonlight.

"You have a weakness for that dog," Joran told her. "You are hard-headed. You control the Elements, causing wind and firestorms like this land has never seen, and yet that dog makes you soft."

"No, Joran," Maelis argued. "If I have one weakness, it is my heart. Red just tapped into the softness that is there." She smiled at him and purred. "And so have you."

Joran leaned closer and kissed her head beneath the sparkling Blue Stone of her diadem. He knew the dog was important to her, a living, physical reminder that although she had lost her beloved Ke'sair, she would continue to honor his memory and legacy. He took Maelis by the hand and led her up the slope to the narrow pass where they had left Blaze. With a whinny, the mare nudged Maelis, and then tucked her head over Maelis's shoulder, pulling her close.

"I'm all right, girl," Maelis said, patting the horse on its neck. "Now let's get you out of here and go back toward Sedgwin."

Joran mounted Blaze first, reaching down to help Maelis up behind him. She turned her head to the side to rest her cheek between his shoulder blades, sighed and was rocked to sleep by the gentle motion of the horse as it picked its way through the rift, wending ever nearer to the mountain's peak.



Maelis slept through the night on horseback, hugging the man she loved. The rising sun warmed her head. Maelis, drowsy and contented, realized for the first time that she was happy. Their victory gave her boundless joy, and the love she shared with Joran gave her comfort.

She yawned, stretching her arms wide. "Good morning," she said.

"And to you," Joran replied.

"Would you like me to take the reins for awhile?" She rubbed her face against Joran's tunic, clearing her head.

"No need now," he told her, glancing over his shoulder. He nodded once to indicate ahead of him. "We've nearly arrived."

Maelis smiled as they approached the shadows beneath the trees of Sedgwin Swamp. Joran navigated between the tree trunks, past the

clearing where they had recovered the Red Stone, and continued on past the point where Daysen had accosted them on the trail. Soon, they drew close to where Maelis had left her dog.

Her smile faded the deeper they drew into the swamp. She should have been excited to see Red again, but something did not feel right. When Joran drew the horse to a halt, she did not wait for him. She slid from Blaze's back and walked toward Red's small clearing.

What is happening? She looked around for the source of her apprehension. Maelis had destroyed everything in the Vale of Dismay, and yet an evil seemed to permeate the clearing somehow, like a shadow draped around them. *Had something escaped?*

"Red," she called. "Here boy!"

Maelis heard a whimper. She looked for her dog, fear rising in her. "Red?" Her call was again answered by a whine, and then an insidious whisper hissed through her mind.

"Weakness..."

Something in the shadows moved toward her. A black cloud poured through the trees surrounding the clearing. It gathered in on itself until it solidified into the form of a man. He wore a high-collared black cape that covered him completely as it draped from his shoulders and spilled onto the ground, where it rolled like fog.

Where its face should have been there was nothing. Like a ghost, there were no features above its shoulders except colorless eyes and a shock of black hair on its head.

Lord Nemenon! Fear coursed through her veins and polluted her body as she faced evil personified.

Weakness... Nemenon hissed in her mind again. He stepped into the clearing, and Maelis saw shadows on either side of him; they moved when he did, yet they were translucent rather than opaque. The two shadows were barely visible, like smoke, yet as Maelis looked at them, she discerned that each had limbs and heads, and dim eyes that smoldered like coals. She followed the arm of one shadow as it reached across the clearing to touch her chest, above her heart.

That is his demon, she thought. I'm captive in its grip of fear.

As soon as Maelis understood that Nemenon's demon was the source of her fear, that knowledge gave her power. With her newly discovered intimacy with the Elements, Maelis no longer needed whispers or wishes—a thought was enough, so she called on the Blue Stone's capabilities to wash the fear from her body. A cool deluge of elemental power flushed through her, chasing the tension away and leaving her with a sense of calm.

Even as the Water Element's power cleansed her of the demon's touch, Maelis watched Nemenon's face, noticing the shock that registered there. *Nemenon was afraid!* The evil lord's own fear showed on his face. It colored the smoky haze above his shoulders an angry red.

At that moment, Joran decided to act. He drew his sword and leapt forward, swinging wildly for Nemenon's midsection. Instead of making contact with its intended target, Joran's blade was deflected, brushed away by a motion of Nemenon's arm.

"Foolish man," Nemenon hissed. "You cannot harm me!"

Maelis saw doubt creep across Joran's face even as he raised his sword again. With that motion, Joran left himself exposed to the touch of Lord Nemenon's other demon. With lightning speed, the spirit's hand shot out and its claws pierced Joran's chest. Maelis watched in horror as Joran faltered and staggered back.

But the claws left no mark. And then she understood the effect that Nemenon's demon had. Joran now doubted his own abilities. *Fear and doubt*, she thought. *Those are the demons' powers. Without them, he cannot affect us!*

Armed with that knowledge, Maelis became angry. Her anger flared against Nemenon, for all the harm he had perpetrated against the land of Nuermar, against its people, Joran and her dog.

"Leave him alone" she growled.

In response, Nemenon glared at Maelis, his eyes piercing hers with the fear on which he depended to dominate a foe. Maelis felt the power of its grip, like a thorn trying to work its way into her heart, but she repelled it with her own growing power.

"I will not fear you," Maelis told Nemenon.

Nemenon turned his eyes on Joran. "I remember you," he said.

"Leave him alone!" Maelis shouted, rushing to Joran's side. "Don't listen to him!" she cried, grabbing his sleeve. "Joran, fight him! Fight his demons! They have no power over you unless you let them!"

"You were a prisoner in my dungeon," Nemenon murmured, and Joran was helpless against him. His dark voice hissed in his ears, slithered through his mind. "Your name is Joran. Yes, I remember. I touched you." He cackled. "Even if you were to defeat me, part of me will always remain within you. You shall never be free."

Joran wailed, "But we won! She destroyed your castle!"

"Ha!" Nemenon snorted. "She used the Demon Gates to do that, and in doing so, she released me from the Vale of Dismay. Now I am free!"

Nemenon raised his arms into the air, directing his demons to finish Joran. Joran pitched backward, convulsing and clutching his chest.

"No!" Maelis cried. Her love for Joran triggered the Red Stone. Flames shot out from the Talisman and enveloped Nemenon. His robes and hair caught fire; yet he raised his arms again, gathered the flames together and launched them back at Maelis.

She quickly summoned the power of the Blue Talisman. A stream of water shot up from the earth beside the path, dousing the fireball before it reached her.

Nemenon shouted in rage. "Cursed Witch!" he roared, waving his hands about him, gathering the remaining flames that licked and tore at his form. "I will see you burn!"

With a hoarse, furious cry, Joran charged at Nemenon just as he raised his arm to hurl the fireball at Maelis. Joran rushed through the shadow demons, dissipating them like clouds of smoke from his path as he wrenched his dagger from his belt. He drove the blade as deeply as he could as he shoved it into the meat of Nemenon's belly.

Nemenon screamed in pain as Joran jerked the knife free and then plunged it in again; again and again, Joran stabbed Nemenon's stomach and chest.

"For my father!" Joran cried as he drove the blade home, his voice choked with rage. "For Maelis and Nuermar!" He stabbed again. "For

Ke'sair and the Elemental Monks you saw butchered!" And again. "And for me!"

This time, Joran used all his might, not only driving the dagger and its hilt but also his fist, into the chest of Nemenon. He gripped the creature's withered heart and pulled.

"Finish him, Maelis!" he screamed, crushing the blazing, still-beating organ in his hand.

"I cannot!" she cried back. "Not without harming you!"

Nemenon writhed, flailing and thrashing against Joran, pummeling him with his fists. "Do it!" Joran yelled. "For the love of the gods, Maelis, I cannot hold him much longer! You have to finish him!"

Maelis whispered again, and a new aura formed around her. Green light surged forth, crackling with energy. She stepped forward and stared into Nemenon's colorless eyes. Fingers of stone erupted from the earth and reached for his tall, cloaked form. Joran threw himself sideways, releasing his grip on his dagger, just before the earthen hand clamped tightly about the dark lord, locking him in stone, only his head showing.

Joran hit the ground hard, grunting breathlessly, and then scrambled to his feet, snatching his sword in hand again. He watched as Maelis continued to speak to the Earth Element. She approached Nemenon, her emerald eyes intent as she focused on him.

"Foolish Witch," Nemenon seethed, struggling against his stone prison. "Do you think your pathetic magick can hold me for long?"

"Long enough," Maelis replied. Reaching out, she placed her hand on top of his black hair. Strand by strand, it began to turn to stone.

"Nemenon," she said. "Just as my ancestor Monice created the Demon Gates, I condemn you to live as a stone. Rock shall you become and rock shall you remain until the line of Emerald-eyed Witches ends."

Maelis watched as his face contorted with rage, then froze in stone, eternally carved with his scowl.

She stepped back from the twisted statue, and then raised her hand in front of her chest, watching as the Green Stone flared and spit sparks that sunk into the ground at her feet. The sparks traveled across the ground to Nemenon. There, they released more rock particles from the

earth and coated the twisted figure like an oyster with an irritant to create a pearl. At last, Nemenon stood encased in a granite cocoon. Maelis raised her arms, pushing with the Earth Element until the entire mass was buried deep beneath the gnarled roots of Sedgwin Swamp.

Nemenon was gone.

Epilogue

One snowy day ten months later, Joran paced the floors of their home along the shores of Sunar's Pond. Agitated and frazzled, he strode from one end to the other, feeling useless and consumed with worry. The dog, Red, lay on a comfortable rug before the hearth, its head on its paws, its ears perked. The dog knew something out of the ordinary was happening, though not precisely what.

Joran grew more and more impatient as Maelis's moans came louder and more frequently from beyond their closed bedroom door. Finally he could bear no more and burst through the door.

Maelis lay on the bed, exhausted but happy, clutching a tiny bundle in her arms. "Oh, Joran," she said, but was too spent to offer more. The midwife who had helped deliver their baby scooped up the wriggling blankets and carried Joran's child to him.

He held out his arms and accepted the bundle, cradling the infant's delicate head in the crook of his left arm. He saw only the crown of the baby's head, covered in blond curls, recently washed and smelling of roses.

The baby tested its lungs with a high-pitched cry. Joran smiled and tears of joy came to his eyes. With a little tug, he moved the folds of cloth away from the baby's face. He placed his fingertip gently between the two fine eyebrows and stroked his child's nose. When Joran's finger slipped over the edge and brushed against the baby's lips, it suckled on his fingertip, and then wailed loudly at the lack of sustenance from what it had mistaken for a nipple.

As Joran looked at the tiny, perfect face, the baby's eyelashes parted and, to Joran's surprise, the eyes were already brilliant and green. *A girl!* he thought joyfully. *An heir for Maelis!*

He might have longed for a son on some deep, unspoken level, having both lost too much time with his own father, and dearly valuing that which they had enjoyed together in his youth. But a daughter was right and natural; the Witch of Nuermar needed someone to maintain her legacy.

Still, he thought as he shifted his grip and lifted the naked baby out of the blankets. *It might have been nice to—*

His sharp, sudden gasp roused Maelis; she looked at Joran with concern.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "What's the matter with our baby?"

He turned to her and laughed. "Nothing," he said. "There's nothing wrong, Maelis." He shook his head, laughing again. "In fact, I think the gods must be rewarding us both for ridding Nuermar of Lord Nemenon."

She sat up from her pillows, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"I mean they've given us each an heir," he said. "Both of us all at once." He smiled at the naked infant in his arms. "We've a green-eyed baby, Maelis, my love," he said. "A son."

About the Author

To learn more about A. E. Rought, please visit www.forever-dark.com. Send an email to A. E. at aerought@gmail.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as A. E. at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/DarkInk>

Immortality has a way of changing fate.

King of the Unblessed

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Merrick, dark elfin King of Valdis, had once been heir to all that was good—happiness and pleasure his domain. Now, trapped as the ruler of mischief, king of necessary evil, he stands on a precipice of choice. On one side, his estranged brother, now ruler of what should have been Merrick's and, on the other, King Lucien of the Damned. Both would sway him. Damnation is winning.

Lady Juliana of Bellemare is from a human family, protected by the blessed, coveted by the damned. Betrothed to an old friend of her father's, Juliana is resigned to living out her days close to her childhood home, longing for an adventure, never dreaming she'd get what she wished for. When her fiancé is murdered and the children of Bellemare are stolen, Juliana is sent on a quest in a strange realm where appearances are deceiving.

Merrick brings more adventure and passion than any woman could want. Can she withstand the temptations of the unblessed king? The spell she weaves over him is more than he can resist and, desperate to be the one to rule her, Merrick offers her a choice; either come with him until he tires of her...or die.

Realm Immortal Book One

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Realm Immortal: King of the Unblessed*

A loud boom echoed over the forest followed by the sound of birds taking to flight. Juliana jolted awake, blinking rapidly as she scrambled to her feet. It took a moment to get her bearings, as sleep still clouded her mind. She'd been dreaming of Merrick. Sad music was all around them like a cloud and he was offering her his hand. She wouldn't take it because there was blood on it, but part of her desperately wanted to.

Behind him a black stone angel stretched out her arms. Death and blood? Is that what Merrick had to offer her?

When Merrick was near, she felt as if she couldn't breathe. Every nerve in her body reached for him, making her anxious and excited at the same time. But there was a darkness in his eyes which frightened her and she knew it was best to stay away. Surely anything she felt was just a trick. She'd always wanted to believe in magic and now here it was, in front of her. She hated the pleasure she felt in the adventure and tried to bury it deep inside herself. It was wrong to take joy when Merrick kept the children prisoner. She might want an adventure, but not at their expense.

Another boom sounded, crackling over the forest. Juliana cried out. Her heart leapt in surprise as she looked around. The snow was gone and it was spring, the air warm. It shouldn't have been possible. When she went to sleep it was the dead of winter, but now water dripped off the trees where icicles had been. The ground was damp, making the floor of the forest soggy. Her boots squished in the mud as she walked over it.

Juliana slipped the wool cloak off her shoulders, folding it over her arms. This time when a boom sounded, she didn't jump. Drawn to see what made the horribly loud noise, she walked down the forest path, stopping to pull the dagger from her boot.

"That's not right!" a voice screamed in irritation. "Here, give it to me!"

"The muse told me how to do it, not you!" another voice answered.

"If you're so smart, then how come the wizards made the winter only last one night?" the first voice yelled. "They've never done that before, have they?"

"That's easy. We must have slept longer than one night!"

Juliana slowed, as the sounds of a struggle ensued.

"Let me!"

"It's mine! I made it."

"You did not!"

"Did so!"

"Did not!"

Juliana pulled back a tree branch, looking out into a small clearing in the trees. Sunlight glowed over the pretty clearing covered with tiny

blue flowers. The ground was blanketed with them and the air was sweet with their perfume, combined with the robust scent of earth.

Juliana frowned in confusion. She didn't see anyone in the clearing. The voices kept arguing back and forth.

"Did not!"

"Did so!"

"Is someone there?" Juliana asked, her voice soft.

"Is someone there?" the first voice repeated. "Of course someone's there. Who would you be talking to if no one was there to answer?"

"Maybe she's talking to herself," the second voice argued.

"Why would she ask herself if she was there?" the first demanded.

Juliana heard the words, but didn't see anyone to speak them. "I can't see you."

"Of course you can't see us, you're not looking at us, are you?" the first voice continued, huffing. "Halton, give that back to me!"

"You stop it, Gorman, lest I turn you into a piskie!" Halton yelled.

"A piskie? Me?" Gorman sputtered in outrage. "I look nothing like a piskie!"

"Not yet, but that's because I haven't changed you!"

Juliana frowned. Slowly, she leaned forward. She lowered her dagger, hiding it behind her leg. Two tiny creatures were on the ground, their voices nearly ten times as big as they were. Aside from their stature and a slight point to their ears, they looked like two small human males in bright green tunics. There was something oddly familiar about them, but she shrugged the notion off.

Halton pointed a small stick at Gorman. "I'm warning you. Stay back!"

"Excuse me," Juliana said. They both looked up at her, their wide blue eyes rounding. A slight breeze tousled their already messy brown hair.

"There," Gorman said, motioning up. "You can see us now."

"Now, quit staring, if you don't mind. It's not polite." Halton pointed the stick up at her. A small stream of light came from the tip, whizzing past her face. Juliana gasped, jumping back. The light hit the tree limbs above them with a loud boom. A limb snapped off, crashing to the forest

floor. Juliana scrambled to get out of the way, falling against the trunk of a tree.

"Watch it!" Gorman screamed, hopping on top of the fallen limb. He looked at the charred end, still smoking and then up at the tree it came from. He nodded thoughtfully.

"Watch it do what?" Halton asked, joining him up on the branch. Juliana stood, brushing off her skirts.

"Give me that. You almost hit the little giant." Gorman pulled the stick from him. Then, to Juliana, he said, "He didn't mean to frighten you. Don't look so scared. We mean you no harm, little giant."

"I'm not a little giant," Juliana said. She eyed the stick, curious. She'd never seen anything like it. "What is that thing?"

Halton laughed. As if she couldn't hear him, he mumbled to his friend, "Well she's not a big giant now is she? Poor little thing, she's sensitive about her height."

Juliana grimaced. She was being called little by creatures no taller than her knees—and that was if she stacked them one on top of the other.

"It's a wand," Gorman said. "Haven't you ever seen a wand?"

"Nay." Juliana shook her head.

"You're not a very bright giant, are you?" Halton snorted. Speaking very slowly, he said, "Little stick make big boom. Magic. That's a wand."

Gorman hit his friend over the back of his head. "That's not all a wand does!"

"Well, she doesn't need to know that. Ah, just look at the poor, simple creature. She's already confused. Well, giants never were the brightest creatures. You know what they say. The bigger the body, the more dull-witted they be."

"Who says that?" Gorman asked.

"You know, they." Halton shrugged.

"Right, they." Gorman gestured in understanding. "But wouldn't that make her smart for a giant, being as she's so little?"

"Well..." Halton tilted his head, seemingly perplexed as he contemplated the question. "Ah, but she's still a giant and so can't be too smart."

"Ah, right," Gorman agreed.

"Right," Halton said, nodding emphatically as if they'd just come to a major decision.

"I know," Gorman said, smiling at Juliana. "Let's keep her. I always wanted a pet giant."

"You have?" Halton asked.

"I'm not simple," Juliana said in irritation, interrupting their discussion.

"Oh, nay, of course you're not!" Gorman said, a little too eagerly in his agreement. Then to Halton, he said, "Just think of the berries we could reach with her helping us out!"

"What are you exactly?" Juliana asked. At the thought of food, her stomach growled. She shouldn't have skipped supper the eve before. She leaned over to get a better look at them. "Faeries?"

"Faeries?" Halton frowned. "Do you see us flying around with wings on?"

"She might not know what wings are," Gorman whispered, though Juliana could hear him just fine. It was obvious they didn't know how loud they were.

"Ah, smart thinking." Halton flapped his arms like a bird, bending his legs as he moved in a circle. He wiggled his backside and yelled up at her, "Do you see wings on us?"

"Never mind." Juliana slipped her dagger back into her boot and stood up. Glancing around, all she saw was trees. It was doubtful she was going to get any help from these two. However, who else was she going to ask? "Tell me, do you happen to know in which direction and how far it is to King Lucien's palace?"

Both creatures paled. They stared at her, jaws dropped.

"She says she's not simple," Halton tried to whisper through the side of his mouth, "but she seeks out King Lucien of the Damned."

"I know what he's king of," Gorman grumbled.

"I'm just saying," Halton defended.

"Quiet, Halton, I'll handle this." Gorman held up his hand for silence. He puffed out his chest with importance, before calling to her, "What's a simple creature like you want with King Lucien?"

"I have to speak with him." Juliana again glanced around the forest. The noise of their wand must have scared even the birds away. All was quiet. "I have to ask him something."

"I knew it, she's going to sell her soul," Halton said, turning to Gorman. Motioning vigorously toward Juliana, he said, "I told you she was sensitive about being little."

"Nay, I told you she was sensitive about being...ah, now quiet! Shh, I'll handle this." Gorman gestured to his friend for silence. "Do you know what happens when you sell your soul, giant?"

"I'm not a giant," Juliana answered.

"First she's not little, now she's not a giant." Halton laughed. "Can't seem to make up her mind, can she?"

"And I'm not going to sell my soul," Juliana said before they could start another tangent. "I just need to find the king. I can't tell you why."

As if he didn't hear her, Gorman continued, "He sucks it right out of you, he does. He doesn't wait for you to die a natural death like some think. He sucks it right out of you as soon as you make the bargain. Have you ever seen a creature with no soul? Their eyes are dead. Their faces pale. Their bodies carry the demons and they don't—"

"Hey! When did you ever see a creature without a soul?" Halton demanded.

"Uh, you weren't with me." Gorman scratched his head, looking away.

"I'm always with you," Halton argued, giving him a small push.

"Well, you weren't this time." Gorman pointed the wand to emphasize his words. "It was a Wednesday."

The wand shot a spark of white into the forest. It hit a nearby tree, ricocheted off the trunk, bounced in the other direction, hit another tree and bounced again. The two little men covered their heads, ducking as it whizzed by. Another loud boom sounded moments before a tree was set on fire.

"Give me that! I told you, it's mine. The muse told me to make it. She said I'd need it for a great task." Halton reached for the wand. He stuck it under his tunic, lacing it to his belt.

"You don't know any muses," Gorman said.

“Do so! She came to me in a dream.”

“Did not!”

“Did so!”

“Did not!”

Juliana sighed as they again argued. Shaking her head, she walked back toward the forest path. She’d just have to ask someone else. That was if they hadn’t scared everyone off with their loud noises.

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