

Twilight Times Books

Twilight Times Books

POB 3340

Kingsport TN 37664

Copyright © 2001 Steve Lazarowitz

All rights reserved. Except for very brief quotes in reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form without the written consent of the author.

Electronically published in the United States of America.

A special note to TT readers. All contents of this ebook are copyright by the author and artists. If you discover any artwork or writing published here elsewhere on the Internet, or in print magazines, please let us know immediately. The staff of Twilight Times Books feels very strongly about protecting the copyrighted work of contributors.

Credits:

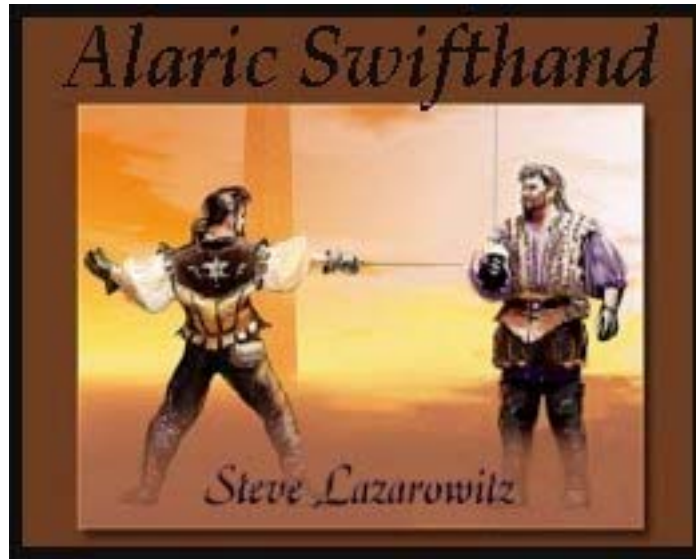
Cover artwork ~ **Judith Huey**

Publisher ~ **Lida E. Quillen**

Twilight Times Books



<http://twilighttimesbooks.com/>



Alaric Swifthand

By Steve Lazarowitz

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Book One

Chapter One

If you have never been there, it is hard to conceive of the city that is Modron. Like many great cities, it is an unlikely mixture of elements. Here the lowliest beggar may be seen standing only yards away from the mightiest warrior. A young waif in a torn tunic might stop to converse with a finely garbed craftsman. At any time, an unlikely personage (such as a great mage or powerful noble) might traverse a street that has not seen the like for many decades.

In addition to the people, the architecture of such a city is just as varied, due to the number of cultures that add to its structure and the number of years such work takes. Toward the center of Modron is a section built of old stone that should have long since turned to ruin. The architects of the area had vanished ages ago and their origin, or indeed any hint of information about them, has been long lost to history.

Many legends and tales begin on the streets of Modron. My story is just another. I was born Alaric Mason, but over the course of time, acquired the name Swifthand. I am still amazed at the implication of the label, for I can never see it when I look at myself in the mirror.

I was born in Modron. My father was a tailor, my mother a seamstress. My parents were wonderful people, but their existence was not one with which I could identify. The very concept of spending the rest of my life pulling a needle through cloth was abhorrent to me. Hence I did everything I could think of to avoid following in my father's footsteps.

I stayed out late. I drank. I pursued women. I started keeping company with a rougher crowd. Many of my older friends were already being considered for guard duty on the walls, while the younger, including myself, spent most of our time practicing with wooden swords, the only kind we could afford.

My tongue was somewhat sharper than my weapon, which was a pity for I was far from the greatest of warriors. Consequently, I was constantly forced to defend my brash attitude. I received more than one trouncing at the hands of far larger opponents. Once I realized I was unlikely to grow much larger, I started working on my speed. I practiced constantly, building upon my already impressive agility. This soon became my most obvious asset, though I was not a weak man by anyone's standard.

By the time I was seventeen, I had weaseled my way into the town guard. Unlike the larger, less intelligent members of our group, I was not offered a position on the wall. Instead, amidst much jealousy, I was selected to train for the palace guard.

By then my ferocious reputation kept the jackals at bay. Though there was much griping, I suffered no assaults over the matter. Or perhaps I was saved by the fact I finally had a metal sword.

I worked hard and learned rapidly. I found I preferred shorter blades with which I could duck inside an opponent's guard more easily. I learned to fight as if I were dancing, though I don't know where I picked up the style. It was effective nonetheless.

Within a short time I was one of them, working too many hours each day for not quite enough to live on, but it didn't matter. I was happy for the work. For a time, everything went smoothly. Then Theona entered my life.

I will never forget the day I first became aware of her. She was talking with another young lady, blue eyes sparkling at some intimate jest. She threw back her head, long blonde hair painting a slow arc in the air above her, giggling as girls do. Her dress was pastel blue, long and finer than anything found in my father's shop. It was her lust for life that first drew me to her, but there was more to Theona. Much more.

I'm not certain at what point she noticed me watching, but from then on, she kept turning her gaze in my direction as if to verify I was still interested. She tried to be casual, but I could see she was intrigued by the opportunity to spend time with a guard. It didn't matter that I was wasn't much older than her. I was something new and exciting.

Many times after, I tried to imagine what I might have looked like to her that day. Still seventeen, if only barely, hair blonde like hers, but of a darker shade and not quite as long. I cursed the fact I hadn't trimmed my beard in a couple of weeks. As I've already mentioned, I'm not a large man, but Theona was comfortably smaller, the way I like my women. Of course I was wearing my guard's outfit, a suit of brown leather armor that was probably older than I. Fortunately my gruff appearance didn't put her off.

Whenever she was at the palace, which seemed to occur with increasing frequency, she always made certain I knew she was there. After a while, our surreptitious glances became deep scrutiny. Finally, we conspired to meet.

To be honest, I don't remember much of that encounter. I was awestruck by her wit and charm. She was entertained by my rough manner, a thing to which she was not often subjected.

She was young and pretty. Perhaps when she was older, she would be beautiful. She was everything I thought I could want in a woman. There was only one problem. She was the daughter of a noble and thus our rendezvous had to be in secret.

It was only a matter of time before we were discovered. Let me at this time say, though we saw each other when we could arrange it, I had always treated her honorably. Our romantic relationship was never consummated. The fact made little difference to her father.

I will never forget the day I was called before Count Herlic, the man in charge of palace discipline. A small man, with thinning brown hair, small brown eyes, a small nose, thin lips and a voice like a bassoon. He looked me up and down, trying to keep the smile from his face. Whether he was amused at the thought of my punishment or my relationship with a competitor's daughter is still not clear to me.

I had often passed this room while going about my duties and it was well appointed indeed. Tapestries on the walls, a hand-woven rug on the floor, golden candlesticks on the desk and me and my nicely aged armor in the midst of it all. Standing there, waiting to hear the Count's decision, I found the rich trappings more than a little intimidating.

The Count had a way with words or at least got them at a good discount. The lecture I received that day rivaled a full sermon for sternness and length. I pretended to pay rapt attention, but my mind could only consider what was to come after.

At length, he wound down and delivered his sentence. I will never forget his words as long as I live. "Tomorrow at dawn, you are to accompany the King's tax collector to the City of Broken Swords, protect him from harm and deliver him safely back to the palace. Until those taxes are paid in full, you are not to return to Modron."

And there it was. I was to be sent to the roughest frontier town they could find, a place that hadn't offered tribute to the King in time out of mind, and collect taxes. It was common knowledge the Broken Swords was part of The Southern Realm in name only. I wondered who the tax collector had angered to receive such a sentence. If I failed, I would be forever barred

from my home. Worse yet, I would never see Theona again.

Theona. What was I to do? That I loved her with all my heart might be an understatement. I would have to find some way to see her before I left. And Count Herlic was certainly not going to make that easy.

I betrayed no inkling of my plans. Instead, I bowed my head and looked intimidated, a task that didn't require much deception. When finally I was dismissed, I was escorted to the barracks under guard. Apparently I was to be watched until after my journey began. And so went my chances of seeing Theona.

The rest of the day, I did little but sit and reflect on my future. Suddenly, being a tailor didn't seem half bad. As the day wore on, I found I could stand it no longer. I simply had to find a way to see Theona, one last time.

I studied the two men who had been sent to watch me. Not really men. Boys. One dark haired, one fair. Probably a couple of years younger than me as well. They hadn't even been given armor. I could take them, if need be. But should I? And then I thought again of the noble's daughter and realized I had no choice.

Being a guard myself, I knew as soon as they convinced themselves I wasn't going away, pretty much after the first hour, they'd relax a bit. Start talking to each other. It was only natural. I waited until they were thus involved, before I leapt into action.

I had been disarmed, of course, but still had my speed. I tripped one, while pulling the other's short blade from its scabbard. I didn't want to kill them, nor was it necessary. I knocked the prone one out with the sword's pommel, then pointed the blade at the second, who now conveniently had no weapon to oppose me. I made him bind his friend. Just as he finished, I knocked him out as well. I kept the blade and ran. Escaping the palace unseen was somewhat easier that it looked. After all, a guard's job is to keep intruders out, not in.

As I ran through the streets, drawing more than an occasional stare, I started to wonder what I would say when I reached her. Would I bid her farewell? Would I ask her to come with me? If I did, would she be willing to trade her life of luxury for the uncertain future of a fugitive? What would I do now, in any case?

I knew I had to decide soon. I was rapidly approaching her father's residence.

Chapter Two

Baron Kelrak's domicile was more akin to a mansion than a house and the grounds upon which it stood were vast indeed. I had passed the high walls surrounding it many times, but never before had I ventured within. I was risking everything, but Theona was worth it.

It was not difficult for me to scale the wall, though a less agile person could not have made it. I thanked the gods I'd kept in shape. From atop my perch, I scanned the area before lowering myself to the ground. I moved as quickly as I could without making noise. As I approached the house proper, I wondered how I was going to find Theona's rooms. A wrong guess would cost me.

I circled the mansion, looking for external clues. That it was made from stone clearly illustrated the Baron's wealth, for the nearest quarry was not close. Hedges and flower beds surrounded the three story structure, creating several lovely pathways and more than enough cover to make it easy to remain hidden.

Two of the upstairs rooms had curtains that would befit a noble's daughter; brightly colored wisps of silk. One of them was next to a drainage pipe that ran down from the roof. At least it would be an easy climb.

As I began my ascent, I noticed several sharp clicking noises--no doubt some industrious gardener busy trimming a nearby hedge. I froze. Only when I had determined the sound was coming from around the side of the house, did I continue. I pulled myself up the pipe, knees scraping against stone, but there was nothing to be done about it. I ignored the discomfort and continued.

A short time later, I gained the ledge, though the term might be somewhat generous for so slight a protrusion. Though I trusted my balance, discovery at this point would be more than a little dangerous. I slid my feet slowly along, using what handholds I could find, until I came to the window which, fortunately, was wide open. I stuck my head in and looked around. Theona sat on the bed, writing. I envied her the talent. Perhaps one day, I would learn it.

I climbed through quickly, making so little noise she didn't look up until I stood before her. She almost gasped, but caught herself. I didn't doubt a lady in waiting sat just beyond the door.

"Alaric, what are you doing here?" she whispered.

"I have come to ask you to leave with me."

For a few moments she looked puzzled, as if she did not understand the question. At last she spoke. "Leave with you? To where?"

I shrugged. "What difference, as long as we're together? There's a whole world out there, waiting to be explored."

She studied me for a time and I began to grow fearful. I had allowed myself to believe she would assent immediately. None of my thoughts on the matter prepared me for what was to come next.

"Have you lost your mind? Do you think I would give up all this," she gestured expansively here, "for life with a criminal? For a commoner with no title? I admit our meetings were fun, but certainly you realize they were just fantasy."

I tried unsuccessfully to keep the emotion from my face, but if anything, her tirade became even more intense.

"You must have the largest ego in the Kingdom, Sir, if you ever really thought you were that important to me." She laughed. "In fact, you're lucky I don't cry out and have you arrested."

I stood there, stunned, unable to believe what I was hearing. Worse yet, the words did nothing to change my feelings for her. Perhaps I believed that somehow, if I could find the right argument, I could change her mind. Then I looked at her face and knew she was telling me the truth. I had been misled or mistaken. Determined not to give her the last word, I spoke as I backed toward the window.

"Forgive me. I had not realized how low the nobly born could sink."

With those words, I climbed out, feeling for the protrusion with my toe. Once I found it, I continued, sliding along the lip toward the pipe. I did not descend immediately. Instead I paused there, trying to understand how I could have allowed myself to be so misled.

It was a precarious place to reassess my life, but appropriate perhaps because of it. A single slip and it would be over. At any moment, a guard might pass below and spot me. Still, I did not move.

As I hung there, three stories up, I began to grow angry. How could I have come to this, over a girl that didn't even care for me? I wanted to hurt her, though I knew it would be a

mistake to do so. For long minutes, I battled with the issue of revenge. I imagine all young men must face that challenge sooner or later. I will never know how the debate ended, for it was interrupted by the sound of voices.

My first reaction almost propelled me backwards off the ledge, but I held tightly and took a moment to regain my composure. This high up, I could afford no slips. As I waited, I realized I was in no immediate danger. The voices were coming from Theona's room. I strained my ears, but could not make out the actual words. Slowly, I made my way back to her window, ignoring my body's protests. I could not stay up here for much longer.

The first voice I was able to make out was that of Alicia, Theona's handmaid, who was more of a friend to Theona than a servant. As I listened, I was finally able to make out what she was saying.

"It must have been very hard for you. Are you certain you did the right thing?"

Theona's voice was ragged, as if she'd been crying. "How can one ever know? Damn it, Alicia, what would you have done? I had no choice."

I inched closer, raising my head slightly so I could see inside. Theona sat on the bed, head in her hands. Alicia stood before her almost facing me, a look of abject sympathy on her plump young face. "How did he take it?"

Theona raised her head. Her voice was clearer, though slightly angry. "How do you think he took it? He was crushed. I don't know where I found the strength to pull it off."

"Your love gave you the strength. That's what love is. When you're willing to sacrifice everything for another." Even as she finished, Alicia shifted her gaze and saw me. At least I thought she did. "You could have gone with him."

Theona shook her head. "And have him hunted for the rest of his life? Do you think my father would ever give up the chase before he saw Alaric's head on a pike? You know as well as I what kind of temper he has. I could never make anyone face that, especially Alaric."

She broke down then. "Oh Alicia, what am I to do without him?"

I had heard enough. No matter the danger, I knew I would risk it all to be with her. I climbed through the window. Alicia smiled at me, but Theona was stunned. She turned on her servant and began to yell. "You knew he was there all along. Traitorous bitch! Get out!"

Alicia, not used to that type of treatment from her mistress, turned and fled. I knew tears would follow, but I was thankful for her complicity. Theona looked at me and sighed. Neither of us spoke for some time. At last, I broke the silence.

"I do not wish to live without you, whatever the price."

She did not look at me. "Nor I without you."

She fell silent again, wrestling with her hopes and fears. Finally, she looked up. "Tonight at midnight. Meet me at the tool shed behind Aron's Forge. I'll be waiting inside."

I kissed her hand and climbed through the window, not trusting myself to speak. How quickly I had been ready to throw it all away. Now, I had reason to live again.

Staying out of sight until then was tricky, but I was up to the task. I had grown up on these streets and knew them intimately. The only place I knew I couldn't go was back to my parent's house. It was almost certainly being watched.

The hours dragged on, until the time of our rendezvous neared. At last, unable to wait any longer, I made my way to Aron's Forge. I had never been in back, but the tool shed was so large it was impossible to miss. Had I not known it was there, I would have thought it a guest house.

I crossed the yard and pulled at the door. It swung outward on rusty hinges. It was dark inside. I brought my lantern forward, forcing the gloom into the corners. I entered, distracted at

first by the amazing array of tools. Behind me the door closed slowly. Only then did I see Theona lying on the floor.

I set my lamp down and approached, a seed of despair growing in my stomach. I knelt down and cradled her head on my lap. Her lifeless eyes stared back at me. The thin line of blood across her throat and the pool of it in which she lay told part of the story. To her left, on the ground was an ornate, black stiletto, stained with her blood. I picked it up and studied it, unable to recognize the markings. I was so stunned, I didn't hear the sound of men approaching until the door creaked open. I regained my feet and turned. Standing in the doorway was Baron Kelrak. Behind him, still outside, I could make out at least two guards.

"What have we here?" he boomed, stepping into the shed.

I realized I still held the blade, dripping with his daughter's blood. I thought about dropping it, but didn't want to call attention to it either.

I was about to experience the rage for which Baron Kelrak was so famous.

Chapter Three

The Baron slowly drew his sword, a malicious smile forming on his heavy jowls. He wore a full suit of chain mail and his beard was more gray than black. If he hadn't been wearing his hood, his hair would have been mostly black, though the gray invasion was in progress there as well. I had no doubt he'd yet to notice the body of his daughter, lying behind me in a pool of blood. And he was angry now.

In addition to the stiletto, I still had the sword I'd taken from the two guards earlier, but as he advanced, my confidence wavered. Even if I were a match for him, the guards outside would certainly tip the scales against me. I admit I panicked. It seemed like a good time for it.

I took a step backwards, careful not to trip over Theona's corpse. Baron Kelrak pointed his sword at me and continued forward. To my left, against the rear wall of the shed, tools hung neatly on wooden pegs. I reached out, grabbed a long pole and held it lengthwise, thinking only to slow him.

He stopped and looked at me, then the object in my hands. As the far end of it came into focus, I realized I was holding a halberd. The end of the weapon, in the shape of a spear, was almost in the Baron's stomach. Then it occurred to me. I was in the shed of a blacksmith. He must have used it to store some of his surplus stock. I was surrounded by weapons. I thrust forward, but he was ready for it, and sidestepped neatly, advancing around it.

There wasn't enough room for me to swing it, so I released the weapon and let it fall to the ground. It was at that moment Baron Kelrak looked down. I had never before seen a face transform so swiftly. What had been a bit of exercise for a master swordsman was now a nightmare of unknown proportion. Even as I reached for my blade, I knew I wouldn't be in time.

The Baron, face contorted into a mask of hatred, charged me. He didn't use his blade. If he had, I'd have certainly died then. Instead, he slammed his head into my abdomen. I had never felt such a blow. I felt my body raise off the ground and fly backward. I wasn't certain if anything was broken, but certainly enough was bruised. I slammed into the wall behind me. Then the wall deterred me no longer.

I managed to make it to one knee, uncertain why I was still alive. I looked into the shed through the hole I had made. Baron Kelrak was on his knees over the body of his daughter. The

guards had entered, not realizing I was already outside. I forced myself to my feet and took off before they noticed I was conscious. Behind me, a scream of rage filled the night. Baron Kelrak would hunt me to the end of his days.

I ran for a long time, until I found an alley between two shops that contained enough garbage to hide me from prying eyes. I ignored the smell, sank against the wall and considered my options.

I had much to think about. The pain in my body was nothing compared to the agony in my heart. Theona was dead and I had no idea why. Did someone hate me enough to set me up? Probably not. More likely someone wanted her dead and I was conveniently positioned to frame. But who?

I knew then I had two options. I could spend the rest of my life fleeing from the Baron, or I could find out who killed Theona and why. I looked down, only now realizing I still held the dagger. For now, it was my only clue, but I needed to know more. Unfortunately I could only think of one place to find the answers.

Within a day or so, Theona would be interred in the Kelrak mausoleum. It was amazing the kind of things you learned as a palace guard. Dangerous as it would be, I needed to be there. First, to say good-bye to Theona and second, to try to figure out who had killed her. The image of her corpse turned over in my mind. I began to cry.

Tears flowed freely throughout the night. Often I had to bite my hand to keep from making noise. By the time the sun began its climb the next morning, I was ready to begin my life as a fugitive. I didn't realize it at the time, but the events of the previous evening had changed me. I was harder, more reckless and certainly less sympathetic than I had been only a day earlier. I briefly considered going after the Baron myself, but that was lunacy. Even if I could beat him, which was far from a sure thing, I'd never get away with it. Anyway, he wasn't the enemy, though he didn't know it himself. I found myself wondering who was.

I made my way to the small church on the far side of town. I slipped through the back door and walked downstairs. If I timed it correctly, and I was fairly certain I had, Father Delran would be holding noon services. I hoped so for his sake.

The door to his spartan room was unlocked. I entered as quietly as I could and went through his wardrobe. I counted them. Twelve brown cloaks. I was certain he wouldn't miss one. I threw it over my clothes, raised the hood and made my way back to the street. This was one disguise they wouldn't see through.

I congratulated myself on being particularly clever. Holy men could go almost anywhere without being questioned, perhaps because so many of them had taken vows of silence. As I walked about town, I listened to the whispered conversations of the townsfolk. Many were talking about the murder. Several mentioned the service, which was to be held that night at dusk.

I passed the day listening to gossip. Several merchants offered me food, which I accepted gladly. I'd hardly eaten in two days. I even had a few coins contributed to the cause.

As twilight approached, I made my way to the Kelrak mansion. Perhaps entering the confines of those great walls was foolishness. I simply couldn't allow them to put her away without saying farewell.

There were many people milling about, not one of which spared me a second glance. I followed the crowd to the back of the house and across the gardens to the mausoleum. In the fading light, it looked almost surreal. When I realized it would be Theona's final resting place, I had to fight back tears. I was certain of one thing. Someone would pay for what had been done to her. I hoped it wouldn't be me.

While most of the people crowded close to hear the priest speak, I stayed back and surveyed the crowd. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I thought I might when I found it. The eulogy was like every other I'd ever heard. It didn't come close to capturing her spirit. Perhaps I was the only one who could have done her justice, but no one was going to ask me to speak. As the service wound down, I began to fear I would find no clue as to what had happened. Then I looked to my left and there was Alicia.

If anyone might have an inkling as to the reason behind Theona's murder, it was her handmaiden. She was watching the ceremony with unrepressed grief. It took me several long seconds to get her attention. When she looked at me questioningly, I lowered my hood, just enough so she could see who I was.

For a moment, she stood there. Then she began to scream. "Help! It's him. It's Alaric Mason."

"Alicia, listen to me, I didn't do it."

Perhaps she believed me, but it didn't matter. The damage had been done. I turned and ran as fast as I could. A glance behind told me half the town, outraged at my intrusion, followed in pursuit.

As I rounded the house, I saw the gates had been closed. In spite of the piety of my garb, it didn't look as if I had a prayer.

Chapter Four

There are certain times when life seems totally bleak and just when things can't get any worse, they do. So it was for me. I met her, fell in love, was exiled because of it and finally had been blamed for the death of that very loved one. It was almost enough to make one believe in conspiracies. Of course, things had been bad enough before half the adult population of the city Modron, or at least what seemed like that number, raced after me with the intent to do me bodily harm. It would have been funny, had it not been so tragic.

I turned from the gate and began to run along the west wall, thankful that even in robes, I was fast. While a handful kept up, most fell behind. I ran through the extensive gardens, wondering what to do next, when I noticed a tree I thought I could climb.

I risked a glance behind. The pursuit had slowed. Perhaps I was difficult to spot in the failing light. I pulled myself into the lowest branches and worked my way higher as quickly as possible. Only after I was well situated did I realize I was not all that far from the wall. As I sat there, I heard several of my pursuers moving below me. Obviously, I had not been spotted. I looked again. I could make it, but my aim would have to be flawless.

I moved quietly, making my way along a sturdy branch. The way it was laid out, I would have to stand up, literally out on a limb, and balance myself before jumping. I would have to try for the top of the narrow wall. Too far and I would clear it and probably break something. Too short and I would land before it and be discovered.

I held my breath and straightened up, balancing precariously above those who sought me. I bent my knees and tried to judge the distance. Below, a voice called out,

"There he is!"

It was now or never. I leapt.

Even as I sailed through the air, I knew I had misjudged. Below me, people scurried to

intercept. I struck the wall hard, but managed to grab hold of the top. For a moment, I dangled, listening to my pursuers draw near. Their approach gave me strength to pull myself up, though I felt like a single giant bruise. I was certain I had done severe damage.

I was only atop the wall for a second before dropping to the outside. I looked down the avenue, trying to get my bearings. It would be at least a few minutes before the gate was opened and I had to be gone by then. I found my feet and set off, limping down a nearby alley. I went as far as I could before fear of collapse made me stop at the next place to hide. It was a nearly empty wagon beside a shop in the market square. I half-buried myself under a pile of rotting cabbages that hadn't sold. I was too tired to worry about the smell or even how well I'd concealed myself. No sooner did I lie down, than I fell into a fitful sleep from which I didn't awaken for many hours.

I awoke bruised and battered, but otherwise whole. The sun had not yet risen. I envied it. I slowly worked my way to my feet, stretching my strained muscles. Green debris fell from my body. Even if they called in hunting dogs, they'd never pick up my scent. I wondered if I'd ever get the smell out of my hair. At least nothing seemed broken. After testing my limbs to make sure they all still worked, I climbed from the wagon and turned my attention to the current dilemma.

I knew no more today than I did yesterday. Theona was still dead, I was still wanted. I had no choice but to leave Modron. Though I might live indefinitely on these streets and avoid detection, I could have no life here. I thought again about her body lying in the shed. I took the black dagger from my belt and studied it. Someone had wanted Theona dead. Who? Why?

Finally I made my way toward the gates, stopping only to shed the priest's robe in favor of my well worn cloak. As I made my way through the nearly empty pre-dawn streets, I knew my destination would be Athour. The great southern city attracted me for three reasons.

First, Theona always spoke of it with respect, bordering on longing. It was the city she most wanted to see. Also, I would be able to easily lose myself in a city of that size. Finally, Athour was probably the only city I could find without a guide. Geography had never been one of my strong points.

The guards at the gate ignored my passage with complete indifference. The implication was clear. They would neither hinder nor help me. I was truly alone. I made my way south, keeping slightly off the road the whole time. I didn't need to make Kelrak's job any easier.

I will not bore you with the details of my journey. Suffice to say, it rained frequently between the stretches of heat, and small flying insects can be the damndest of nuisances. Only one strange event befell me during the trip.

I was four days out of Modron and tired, but kept pushing myself to go a little further, as if by distancing myself from the city, I could somehow outrun the pain of Theona's passing. The rain had let up, which meant I had to slog my way through ankle-deep mud for the rest of the day. At one point, I turned from the road and wandered further into the woods. At the time, I thought doing so was a rebellion of sorts against the hopelessness of my situation. Later I came to think otherwise.

For how long I wandered I cannot say, but at some point I found myself staring at a skeleton lying face down in the center of a clearing. I was almost upon it before I noticed. I looked down at the unfortunate soul who had once breathed the very same air as I. He must have been there for some time, for even the remnants of his clothes were well on their way to dust. I was about to walk away when the sun emerged from behind clouds. Something reflected its light. I moved closer to investigate.

Lying beneath the hapless adventurer lay a sword of great quality. I knelt down and carefully slid it out, so as to upset the bones as little as possible. From the moment I lifted it, I knew it was magical. It was a beautifully crafted short scimitar with small symbols carved onto its gleaming curved blade. I held it outstretched and took a few practice swipes. The sword felt as if it were made for me. Though I was loathe to disturb the dead, I found and removed the scabbard, which was in fine condition in spite of the length of time it had apparently been there.

I thought then about the events that had led me to this point. I had somehow learned to fight, lucked into the palace guard and met Theona. Our relationship was terminated rather abruptly by her untimely demise, for which I was blamed. This situation led me to flee the city and in turn, find this blade. It was almost unthinkable this chain of events could have been completely accidental. Of course, only the most egotistical man would think he was important enough to warrant such conspiracies.

And yet, I was hard pressed to think of another cause. Perhaps the loneliness of the past days was beginning to prey upon my mind. I kept the sword and managed to find the road again. The remainder of the journey was uneventful.

Athour was in many ways similar to Modron, but there were also differences. Modron had few tall buildings, while Athour was fraught with them, as if all the cities architects got together and decided to have a contest. I had never seen such structures before and I found them impressive.

It wasn't long before I noticed a small man following me through the streets. I caught a glimpse of him at least three times. Twice he ducked out of sight as soon as I turned. As a guard, I recognized the type. He was a thief. At first, I wondered what he wanted to steal, until I remembered the sword. Damned if that thing wasn't going to be trouble.

I made my way around a corner into a narrow alley. There was no one about. I stopped and waited.

He rounded the bend, almost walking right into me. My speed and pent up aggression were too much for him. Within a minute, he was lying on the ground, sporting a bloody nose.

"Don't you have anything better to do than follow me?"

He was a small man, considerably smaller than me, or maybe he just looked that way lying there. His hair was so short it looked more like fuzz and his nearly black eyes showed fear. In spite of that, his voice remained steady when he answered.

"Listen, I have nothing against you, but it was a lot of money."

I didn't react immediately, partly because I wasn't sure what he was talking about. He must have thought I wanted more, for he continued. "Listen, if they ask me, I never saw you. Just don't hurt me."

I thought the direct approach might be the best way. "What in hell are you talking about?"

He scrutinized me, as if unable to believe my ignorance. Then he reached slowly into his pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of parchment. I could see the words on it, though interpreting them was beyond me.

"Read it."

He opened the scroll and complied. "I hereby offer 50 gold ralens to the first person that can bring me the head of Alaric Mason. Payment in full is on receipt. I well know what he looks like and will not be fooled by impostors. The Duchess Kallondra."

I was stunned by the implications of the missive. "Okay. How did you know who I was?" He turned the parchment around, revealing a detailed portrait of me in the center of the page.

"Where did you get this?"

"The assassin's guild. There was a whole stack of 'em."

I shook my head in disbelief. Someone had not only anticipated my arrival, but had gone to great trouble to see me dead. This sort of thing was even beyond Baron Kelrak's means.

"Let's go," I said.

He looked startled. "To where?"

"Your place. I need to think."

Before he could get any ideas, I pulled the black dagger I'd found beside Theona's body. Immediately, the assassin's eyes widened in terror and his voice was no longer steady. His gaze never strayed from that blade.

"Please Master, I beg of thee. If I had known your allegiance, I'd have never dared stalk you. In the name of the gods, don't kill me!"

I would have smiled, had he not been so serious. I looked from the dagger to the assassin and back again. It was suddenly very important I find out its significance.

"Take me to your home."

He nodded enthusiastically. "As you wish, Master."

He rose quickly and moved through the alley. I followed behind, trying to understand this new piece of the puzzle.

Chapter Five

To look at it, you'd never know the house belonged to an assassin. The furniture was both comfortable and colorful, and each room contained either a painting or tapestry, none of which evoked thoughts of violence. Perhaps due to the nature of his occupation, Dalyn liked to surround himself with relaxing images.

You would also never have guessed just a day earlier that same assassin had been following me, ready to kill me as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Only the strangest stroke of luck yet had saved me. Had I not drawn my dagger, even if Dalyn didn't get me, one of the numerous members of the Assassin's Guild would have eventually done the job.

I spent the night thinking and resting, though the former had a detrimental effect on the latter. The next day, perhaps because I didn't get enough sleep, I awoke in a foul mood. It was not really the moment to make irreversible decisions, yet at the time I didn't care. Someone I didn't know wanted me dead and I was going to find out why.

From what little I could gather from his offhand remarks, it was easy to guess the black dagger was a badge of sorts, used by a very powerful sect of assassins. Since seeing it, Dalyn had certainly become eager to please.

"Dalyn, I want you to take me to the Guild."

He licked his lips. "Are you sure that's wise?"

I stared at him and he dropped his gaze. It didn't matter I wasn't certain what I'd do when I got there. I desperately needed to find out who was stalking me and why. The Assassin's Guild seemed the most likely place to start.

Just after dawn, we set out. The building was located halfway across town in an empty warehouse. The deserted street gave the area an ominous feel. I looked at the large stone structure, hesitating only momentarily before following him up to the door. I sincerely hoped the

others would have the same reaction to me as Dalyn. I made certain the blade was in plain sight.

He walked up to the door and rapped in a sequence I found difficult to follow. Presently, we were allowed access. The inside was well furnished and had a homey feel to it, and the assassin who had opened the door looked more like a butler. Once more, I was bemused by the setting. Had I known of such establishments previously, I'd have pictured them bleaker.

Dalyn led me through a maze of corridors to an empty sitting room. He told me to remain there. After he left, I heard the door close. When I tried it, it was locked. I stood and paced, suddenly not certain coming here was a good idea. Not that there was a lot I could do about it now.

While I waited, I examined the room, which was essentially a small private library. As I couldn't read, I ignored the shelves of books. Instead, I sat on a large comfortable chair and thought of Theona. God, how I missed her!

After a time, the door opened and Dalyn entered, followed by a handsome middle-aged man who could easily have been the neighborhood candle maker. Only the confident way he regarded me told me he was not only an assassin, but one of those in charge. I forced a smile and rose. He looked at me and then at the dagger on my belt. I tried to breathe normally.

"My apologies, Sir. You understand, we had no way of knowing."

I nodded. "I need a bit of information, if it's not too much trouble. What's your name?"

"Greln, Master."

"Tell me about this Duchess, who so wants me dead. Who is she?"

He glanced at Dalyn, then back at me. "No one knows. After all, many of our clients use assumed names. She sent a servant to deliver the notice and that is our only contact."

"So you know where to find this servant."

Greln nodded. "Absolutely. At a room in the Circling Hawk Inn. If you want, Dalyn could show you the way."

I smiled. "That would be fine. Someone is going to answer for this." Both assassins shivered. Though I was playing a role, I meant every word.

A short time later, Dalyn and I walked down the street, while I tried to figure out what I was actually going to do once I got there. It was one thing to bluff the guild, but I had an odd feeling that whoever awaited me at the Circling Hawk wouldn't be impressed by my credentials.

As soon as I saw the inn, I told Dalyn I wouldn't be needing him anymore and he could go about his business. It wasn't that I didn't need his help, but I couldn't take the chance he'd somehow find out I was not who I claimed to be. I suspected this servant of the Duchess Kallondra knew more about me than I wanted Dalyn to know.

He gave me a room number, fortunately one of the few I could actually read, and quickly returned the way we'd come. I got the distinct impression he was happy to be rid of me. I waited until he was out of sight before continuing.

The inn was one of the nicest I'd ever seen. It wasn't in any way ostentatious, but instead radiated an air of quality that told me the people who stayed here were so well off they didn't feel they needed to impress anyone. I certainly had some powerful enemies. I only wish I had done something to deserve such persecution. Not that it mattered. The way I felt now, I would have no trouble giving my foes a good reason to hate me.

I had no difficulty finding the room. I was going to knock, but on an impulse I tried the door first. It was open. I turned the knob and pushed. It swung silently inward. Against the opposite wall, staring out a window, stood a rather large, brown-haired individual wearing a black cloak. I stepped into the room and closed the door.

I stared, thinking perhaps there was something familiar about the figure. Some sixth sense must have alerted her, for she turned. I gasped. The woman in the room was Alicia.

The sardonic smile that found her face was totally out of character. For a second or so she stood motionless before crossing the room. She moved with an agility that belied her bulk, only stopping when she stood directly before me. I stared at her, disbelieving.

Alicia held out her right hand and her smile broadened to a grin. "May I have my dagger back, please?"

Chapter Six

I don't know who I'd expected to find in that room at the Circling Hawk, but Alicia wouldn't have been far from my last guess. Somehow she was responsible, at least in part, for what had happened. I stared at her, trying to reconcile the confident assassin standing before me, with the overweight, insecure servant I'd once thought I'd known.

"You killed Theona." That one thought drove out all others. I felt rage flick across my mind. Yet, if she were an assassin, that meant someone had paid for that result.

"Who hired you?"

Her smile was not at all pleasant. I took a step backward, but she remained where she stood. "Would you like to meet my client?"

I could only nod.

"My dagger, please."

I looked down, surprised to find it already in my hand. I hesitated briefly before handing it over.

"Thank you."

I continued to stand there, held captive by doubts and unanswered questions. Finally, I found my voice. "Why?"

She didn't answer. She moved forward and I stepped to the side. She continued out the door and I followed.

As we entered the street and moved away from the inn, I tried desperately to understand what had happened. Alicia had been Theona's servant for years. She could have killed her at any time. Why then? Did it have something to do with me? Who was behind the entire conspiracy?

As I followed, the neighborhood began to deteriorate, though I didn't notice until the change was drastic. All of a sudden, I found myself surrounded by houses in various states of disrepair. Few people roamed these streets and none were the type of person you'd want to find moving in next door to you. It was already late in the afternoon. I didn't relish being in this section of town after dark.

"How much further is it?"

Even before her answer, I was in motion. I now know it was the magic sword that warned me, but suddenly, I was whirling to face her. She moved closer, surprised I'd somehow anticipated her attack. Her black dagger arced toward me, almost too fast to follow. I jumped backward and swung my blade, but she ducked under it and continued her advance.

I attacked frantically. She brought down the dagger to block my thrust. As the sound of metal clashing filled my ears, I saw into her mind. Only a glimpse, but enough to see where she was going after she finished me off. So startled was I, I almost died then, as she returned an

attack of her own. I only managed to sidestep just in time, but I was unable to entirely avoid her swipe. It wasn't until she'd backed up a step that I felt the burning sensation in my chest and realized I'd been cut.

As I moved in again, I felt a slow trickle of blood descend past my stomach. I wondered how bad it was. She moved in and our blades met. Once again, her mind was laid open to me. Somehow the sword was responsible, though I didn't understand its power at the time. The speed of her attacks increased and I was forced to fall back from the furious onslaught. I began to feel dizzy and almost tripped. Then I felt a wall against my back. Alicia smiled triumphantly.

I didn't think I could defend myself. Then, summoning the last of my strength, I pushed off the wall. My fury surprised her and she fell over backward, rolling to get away. I stayed with her. If I allowed her to regain her feet, it would be over.

I fell upon her, striking down with the hilt of my sword. She tried to defend herself, but the urgency with which I assaulted her was more than she could take. I continued my attack, until she moved no longer. I rolled to the side and made it to my feet, albeit somewhat shakily.

I wasn't certain she was dead and wasn't about to find out. Instead, I hobbled down the street. Nearby, in one of the deserted houses, lived my real enemy. Fatigued as I was, I continued onward. One way or another, it would end today.

It wasn't difficult to find the place. The image from Alicia's mind still burned clearly in my consciousness. Perhaps at another time, I might have questioned the source of that information, but rage propelled me. I only wanted to put an end to the running. The sun was already low in the sky, but the proximity of nightfall no longer concerned me. The burning in my chest was beginning to subside, but I still felt dizzy. I suppose I was in shock.

I opened the door with less stealth than a wiser man might have employed, but fortunately, there was no one waiting. Inside, a flight of stairs disappeared into the gloom above. I waited for my eyes to adjust before continuing. Fresh footprints in the dust led up the stairs and to the first door on the left. I flung the door wide and entered.

A single figure sat alone on the bed, reading. I stood there for a long moment, unable to come to terms with the sight that awaited me. It could not be.

"Theona."

She looked up from her book and smiled. "At your service."

I shook my head. "It's impossible. You're dead. I was at your funeral."

"You saw my body lying in a pool of lamb's blood, the very same blood that made it look as if my neck was cut. I don't believe you ever ascertained I was actually dead. I swallowed a potion provided by Alicia that made it seem to everyone else I was dead as well. If they'd buried me, I would have had a problem. Escaping from the mausoleum was considerably easier. I had to trust Alicia to release me, of course. Your intrusion aided me there."

I sank to one knee, barely able to believe what I was hearing. "But why?"

I met her eyes and she said nothing. Then she doubled over in pain, clutching the sides of her head. At first I thought it was some sort of ruse, but as the minutes passed, I wasn't as sure. Finally, a wisp of whiteness flowed from her ear. As I watched in muted horror, it began to take shape. When it was done, I was staring at a milky, viscous, semi-translucent child.

"Congratulations. You've won again. Finding the Sword of Truth was a particularly nice move. I'd forgotten it was there." Rather than hearing the words, they were somehow placed directly into my mind, as if I were remembering them only now.

I was only confused for a moment, before a terrible pain ripped through me. I'd never felt anything like it. When I again had the presence of mind to raise my head, a second ghost-child,

nearly identical to the first, stood nearby, no doubt having emerged from inside me.

"What are you?" I asked through clenched teeth.

"We are passengers, the spirits of children that have died before our time. We ride the minds of others, maneuvering our hosts at will. Competition is fierce and the game is everything."

"Game? What game?" My voice was hoarse with the memory of pain.

"Our game. Who you called Theona was the hunter. You were the quarry. Since you managed to discover her before she could bring about your death, you won."

"Why didn't she just kill me? She had plenty of opportunities."

"The rules do not permit it."

Slowly I rose to my feet, too exhausted to feel the anger I knew should be there. "What gives you the right?"

"The right of those that are stronger to use those that are weaker, any way they choose."

Before I could answer, the two children faded from sight. For them, it was all just a game, like they'd played when they were alive. Perhaps they really were like children and didn't understand the repercussions of their actions. Driven by the need to win, the passengers would do anything to anyone. They did not value life. How many other tales of adventure might never have come to pass without the passengers and their games? I wondered what would happen now.

I looked at Theona. She stared at me, the mixture of emotions on her face beyond my ability to read.

"You never would have approached me, if it wasn't for them," I said.

She shrugged. "We'll never really know that, will we?"

And that was the truth. Neither of us could possibly know what had been our will and what had been caused by the influence of the passengers. I looked at her as if she were a complete stranger. Come to think of it, it wasn't far from the truth.

"I'm sorry, Alaric. I never would have hurt you."

I wanted to believe her, but too much had happened. I remained silent.

"You know I can't go home again." She looked almost as if she might cry. As bad as it had been for me, it was worse for her. I'd lost relatively little in this transaction and gained a magic sword in the bargain. The Sword of Truth, the passenger had called it. She'd lost her family, her wealth and her social status.

I wanted to say something kind, some of my old feelings perhaps lingering, but could think of nothing.

"What will you do now?"

She stood and moved toward me. "You know, it all may have happened for a reason. I may have never looked twice at you, but now, well, it's different for me."

I wasn't certain whether she spoke out of desire or desperation. It didn't really matter. If she didn't love me yet, we would have the time to work into it. I opened my arms and she came to me. She cried for a long time, and I held her until she finally grew calm. Perhaps it wouldn't last, but I chose not to think about the possibility. At that moment, only one thing mattered to me.

Theona and I were together at last.

Book Two

Chapter Seven

It is a source of constant amazement to me that Theona and I managed to avoid trouble for a year after the passenger incident. After all, we had several things working against us.

First there was Theona. While she was always pleasant enough to me, she had spent most of her life as the daughter of a noble and had not yet grown accustomed to what was expected of a commoner. She was constantly frustrated by the fact I was the only one who cared what she thought or felt. For Theona, this was not a natural state of affairs.

Then there was the fact I was qualified for precious little besides guard duty, which meant I was constantly in the company of a rough and tumble crowd. Our idea of a good time was getting drunk, going out into the woods and looking for bandits to abuse. More often than not, the only action was a brawl amongst ourselves, which was fine. In our various states of inebriation, we wouldn't have been able to handle anyone who'd actually meant us harm.

The final ingredient that worked against us was that, due to financial concerns, we were forced to live in a rather nasty neighborhood. Though many still thought I was a high ranking assassin, others were not aware of the fact. More than once, I had to teach one of the thug-like denizens of the sector a lesson they would not soon forget. After everything Theona and I had been through, it was all rather anticlimactic.

Strangely enough, it was none of those elements that propelled me into a new set of adventures. It began again on a cold evening in a tavern called the Wicked Warlock. I had started to think of the Warlock as a second home, though there was nothing homey about it. It was dimly lit, smoky, and filled with polished wood fixtures (when anyone bothered to polish them). Booths lined the sides of the place and a few tables were scattered about the floor. The chairs were of wood and horribly uncomfortable, but since most of the patrons were well beyond physical sensation anyway, it seldom represented a problem. I tended to spend most of my time at the bar itself, sitting on the tall, mismatched stools that lined its length. The stools were probably just as uncomfortable, but at least from a bar stool you expected that.

Theona and I were unhappily sober, as the rent was soon due and we didn't want to spend the last of our money on ale. Around us, the Warlock was filled with the usual crowd of malcontents. Warriors with no wars, merchants with no merchandise and various other scrapings from the bottom of the humanity's barrel. Theona and I fit right in.

I was in the middle of one of those stupid arguments that seem important at the time, but a day later are beyond recall. I think Theona had accused me of looking at one of the ladies for hire and I was busily trying to deny it. It was business as usual. I was too busy trying to exonerate myself to notice the stranger arrive.

The bartender grabbed my arm. Areet was a tall fellow, slender with thinning gray hair and a tuft of a beard that looked like nothing so much as a white caterpillar. I looked at him and he gestured with his head. It was only then I realized the rest of the Warlock had fallen silent.

The newcomer was a large man with bulging muscles, a bald head, a thick, black mustache that looked like the haft of a broom, and a swagger that spoke volumes about his confidence. I had never seen anyone I disliked more on first sight.

He moved across the tavern as if he owned it and every eye followed his progress. As if by mutual agreement, no word was uttered. Perhaps everyone felt as I did. This man was an invader into our domain and should have been more cautious. It was a caution to me that he wasn't.

Areet released my arm and moved toward him. I felt a throbbing at my hip. Surprised, I looked down. The Sword of Truth, which had not bothered me for more than a year, was suddenly awake in a way I had never experienced. I placed my hand on the hilt and made my way in the newcomer's direction, ignoring Theona's questioning stare.

He barely glanced up, even when I stood directly beside him. Areet took his order and returned with a bottle and a glass. He set the pair before the man, looked at me oddly and backed away. The man poured half a glass of some amber liquid, tossed it down, studied the glass for a few moments, then turned to regard me.

I returned his gaze with more confidence than I felt. I instinctively knew this man was out of my league.

When he spoke, his voice was softer than I thought it would be, but for all that, it was the harshest sound I'd ever heard. "Something I can do for you?"

I smiled, though my legs felt weak. "Perhaps."

He grunted and turned back to his bottle. "And what might that be, little man?"

The Sword of Truth was burning hot against my leg and I wondered what I was doing. Then, without any conscious decision on my part, the weapon was in my hand. The stranger was off his stool in the same moment, holding a heavy looking broadsword in a fist that was larger than it had any right to be.

"If you're trying to impress the lady, I think you should reconsider."

I wanted desperately to answer, but I found myself unable. First I thought of the passengers, but this was somehow different. It was as if some external force had taken control of my body. Without warning, I leapt forward and swung my sword in a vicious arc.

The stranger parried it, easily. The moment our swords met, his mind was laid opened to me. I saw a large iron box, locked with a padlock, in a room that looked familiar. He returned my attack with one of his own and I jumped backwards and shook myself. Behind me, I could hear Theona trying to get my attention.

The sneer that settled on his face did little to assist his appearance. He came at me, but I was ready, knocking aside his thrust with more than a little effort. Once again our blades met. Again, I saw the box, but this time recognized the setting. It was a room in a rundown inn not far from here. Theona and I had spent some time there before we found our current lodgings.

I had no time to think before he attacked again. As I turned his thrust, his memories became mine. In a recent battle he'd hurt his left leg. It was all I needed to know.

I moved in closer, brought my blade up as if to attack and kicked him as hard as I could in his knee. My opponent screamed in pain and, for just long enough, dropped his guard. My own swipe was right on target. I felt my blade bite deeply into his arm. His sword clattered to the ground.

I wanted desperately to stop then, but my body was not my own. I moved in closer, swinging my blade with more speed and skill than I thought I'd possessed. He tried to back off, but with an injured knee, could not avoid my attack. Only when he lay on the ground in a pool of blood, did I stop.

Theona was at my side, studying me as if I was a stranger. I could hardly blame her. At least I'd regained control of my limbs. I turned toward her and tried to find the words to explain what had happened.

She managed to find her voice first. "What have you done?"

"I wish I knew."

Numerous whispered conversations created a background buzz, while I wrestled with the

task of explaining. After a short while, I gave up. How could I explain a thing I didn't understand myself?

I turned toward the door. "Come on. We have to go."

She looked at me uncertainly, but didn't resist when I grabbed her arm. As I passed through the crowd of regulars, for the first time in my life, I heard the name Swifthand. Though it would be several more years before it caught on, I am certain it was that night that earned me the name.

Theona and I entered the cold night. She didn't ask where we were going, nor did I tell her. Darkness closed in around us as we made our way toward the White Boar Inn. I don't know how, but I was certain at least some of the answers I sought could be found in a locked iron box.

Chapter Eight

As we hurried through mostly deserted streets, I thought about the woman who had been my lover for the last year. Theona wasn't quite beautiful, but there was about her a strength I found appealing. In spite of that, there were times she seemed so fragile I was afraid to speak with her.

I often wondered why she didn't return to her father's mansion back in Modron. Only recently did I actually raise the question. I can still picture the pain on her face as she answered.

"How could you, of all people, expect me to go home and just resume my life? You've lived with one of *Them* inside you. I faked my own death to bring about yours. I brought an assassin into my father's home. Do you know how I paid for that? By taking certain valuable items that wouldn't be missed and selling them on the black market. Can you understand how that makes me feel? You're the only person that can begin to understand what I've been through."

And I knew what she meant. Neither of us could go home again.

Why it came to mind at that moment, as we moved through the winter chill, I can't say, but it did distract me sufficiently, until we reached the inn.

To describe the White Boar Inn as run down would have been an understatement of tremendous proportion, yet I can barely think of words to describe it more adequately. The wooden walls were rotting, the roof shingles loose, and the entire place was permeated by a sort of gray atmosphere caused by more than just an unimaginative paint job. It was hard to believe Theona and I had stayed here, no matter how briefly.

As soon as it came into view, we moved even faster, anxious to get out of the cold. We needn't have bothered. It wasn't much warmer on the inside.

The proprietor, a rather rotund fellow I'd never liked, met us with complete disinterest. We didn't look as if we had enough for a room and that was all he was interested in.

"I am looking for a friend of mine who's staying here. He's a large gentleman, impeccably garbed and carries a large broadsword on his belt. Can you tell me what room he's in?"

The man barely looked at me. "Don't know him."

"I see. Well, it is rather important that I find him. I'm certain he would be unhappy if he found out I was here and was turned away.

"Is that right?"

I looked at Theona. She stepped forward and for once, I made no attempt to silence her.

"Now see here my good man. How are we to know if we are taking a room at the right establishment, if we cannot determine that our friend is in fact here?"

Suddenly, there was a flicker of interest in the fat man's eyes. "I think I may actually recall the fellow."

"What room is he in?"

At first, I thought he might not tell us. He looked from Theona to me and back again.

"You are taking a room then?"

"If our friend is staying here."

"Very well, he's in room three."

I nodded. "Do you have a vacancy in that same area?"

"As a matter of fact, Sir, I have one right down the hall. If you'll follow me."

Removing himself from behind the narrow counter was a major ordeal, but he got through it. I turned to Theona before following him upstairs, but she was already heading toward the door.

"I think I need a spot of fresh air," she said. "I'll be right back."

I shrugged and walked behind the proprietor, who moved relatively quickly for a man of his bulk. I had no idea what Theona was up to, and at that moment, really didn't care. The narrow hallway led to half a dozen rooms that were probably all about equally decrepit. The proprietor stopped, unlocked a door on the left and opened it. I moved forward to look.

"It's a bit squalid, isn't it?"

The tinge of red that touched his cheeks was a welcome distraction from the otherwise drab color of the place.

I tried to look thoughtful. "I don't know. I suppose I will have to wait for my lady to come. I'll bring the key down in a moment."

He looked me up and down as if deciding how serious I was. "It runs a copper a night."

I smiled. "Believe me when I tell you, I have paid ten times that for a night's stay. I just need to make certain the lady approves. I'll return the key presently, if she doesn't."

The man looked at me one more time. For a second I thought he might recognize me, then he nodded and moved toward the stairs. He glanced at me one last time over his shoulder, shook his head and made his way down. A few minutes later, Theona stepped onto the landing.

"Where have you been?" I asked, not bothering to disguise my annoyance.

She grinned at me. "Stealing the key to room 3, if you must know."

I looked at her, a bit surprised. This was a side of my lady of which I had been completely unaware. She apparently enjoyed a bit of larceny.

"Well then, we should hurry."

She nodded and we moved down the corridor until we stood before the appropriate door. She unlocked it and we entered. It looked exactly as it had in my vision. I moved immediately to the chest, but it was, of course, locked. I tried to move it, but it didn't budge. I circled it, trying to see what held it down.

"It must be magic," said Theona. "My father had something similar. It could only be moved by a person who knows the key word."

"Great," I said, shaking my head. "Just great. And what do we do now?"

I didn't expect an answer. The chest was made of solid iron. Even if I did have the proper tools, opening it would make enough noise to call attention to my endeavors. And yet, I knew I had to get into it.

Theona pushed past me and knelt before it. I pursed my lips as she pulled a pair of thin

leather gloves and a small set of tools from her pouch. I said nothing as she worked on the lock for a minute or so. I bit back an exclamation of surprise when the lock clicked open.

"Where did you learn that?"

"You know. Here and there."

"I see." Later, Theona and I would have to chat.

At first I thought she was going to open the chest herself, but she rose gracefully and moved to the side. Knowing Theona, she probably suspected a trap. I moved forward and opened the lid. Theona watched intently.

There were only two items in the chest. The first was a large gold key. The second, an old, leather-bound book. I took the key and placed it in my pouch. I was about to look at the book, when the door swung inward.

"Dendrac, are you awake?"

I rose and turned. Standing in the doorway, and filling it, was the largest man I'd ever seen. He must have been over eight feet tall. His hands were as large as my head and he wore a sword that made Dendrac's look like a toothpick. His brown hair and eyes were of a color, as was his neatly trimmed beard. Had he been three feet shorter, he'd be almost nondescript, but his voice, deep and resonant as it was, would have still intimidated me.

"Who are you? Where's Dendrac?"

I looked at Theona, but she would be of no help here. She stared at the intruder, mouth agape.

The giant took a step toward me and I thought furiously. Even with a magic sword, this was one battle I wasn't going to win.

Chapter Nine

I am no stranger to tight spots. Those of you familiar with my previous adventures, will no doubt be aware I spend much of my time in over my head. Not to say I enjoy it, but I certainly have learned to cope. This was different. There's something truly horrible about being cornered by a very large man, whose friend you've just killed for no apparent reason. I made certain to keep my hand *very* far from my sword.

The giant looked at me, then at Theona. Even if I could have made it past him, which would have been quite a trick considering how much of the room he took up, I couldn't very well leave Theona to face him alone. I thought quickly, took a step forward and frowned.

"It's about time. You're very late."

The giant stared at me.

"Don't just stand there, Dendrac is waiting." I gestured toward the door, hoping he would turn before he noticed how badly Theona was trembling.

He regarded me uncertainly. I took his arm and led him from the room. "Now pay attention."

Fortunately, Theona followed us into the corridor, then down the stairs.

"Dendrac has been waiting for an hour already and we both know how he feels about that." Considering Dendrac's attitude, I could only assume he was in charge of this relationship. He didn't strike me as the type to take orders.

"Listen carefully. I don't want to have to repeat myself and time is short. Go outside, turn

left, go three streets until you come to the Street of the Rotted Calf. Turn left until you hit Broadsword Court and then continue on to the Slaughtered Guard pub. There will be a man there. Tell him Dendrac sent you. He'll give you instructions. Good luck."

Before he could ask any questions, I took Theona's arm and pulled her down the street in the opposite direction. I risked a single glance over my shoulder. The man was staring down at his oversized hands, obviously trying to decide which was the left one. I pulled Theona into a nearby alley. Only then did I allow myself to relax.

I waited until my breathing slowed to a normal rate before once again taking Theona's arm. She was just beginning to come to herself. "Let's move. I don't know how long it'll take him to realize he's been had. I intend to be in another part of the world by then."

She looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"If you think I'm gonna hang around here with that walking oak tree after me, you're insane. And since we're on the subject of insanity, what the hell was that back there?"

She blinked innocently. "What in particular would you like to know?"

"You picked that lock like a pro. Would you care to let me know just where and when you acquired that skill? I mean, it doesn't seem to be the type of thing the daughter of a noble would need to know."

She considered me, as if she were deciding whether or not I would accept a less than complete explanation. I made certain to keep my expression grim. After a few moments, she dropped her head and spoke.

"I'm a member of the thieves guild."

I stared at her. "The thieves guild? And when did this come about?"

She shrugged. "Pretty much since we've been here."

"Theona, look at me. Are you trying to tell me that the entire year I've been a guard, you've been a cutpurse?"

She looked uncomfortable. "What did you expect? You were off working all day and I was bored."

"Bored? So you decided to become the scum of the earth?"

"Oh thank you. You didn't seem to mind a few minutes ago when I opened that box for you."

"But that was different."

"You mean, I suppose, that it's morally okay to take the possessions of a man you just killed for no reason."

Now it was my turn to look sheepish. "That wasn't my fault."

"I see."

And suddenly I was on the defensive. I have often wondered how that happened each and every time we argued. "Listen. The sword killed him by itself."

"Oh, by itself." She was laughing at me. "You are a terrible liar."

"What! I happen to be a very good liar. If it weren't for that ability, we would've been mauled to death by that monster."

"Well, good for you. Now, are we going to move, or will you continue to stand here and judge me for the rest of the night?"

I sighed. Once again, I was enmeshed in an argument I wasn't going to win. I swore then that one day, just once, I would get the last word. Not today, though. I turned and reentered the street. It was very late. I was tired and more than a bit bemused. I turned toward home, making certain Theona was by my side.

I watched her as we walked. Was it just boredom that had driven her to the far side of the law, or something much deeper? Had past events left her so out of control, she was willing to risk her freedom in the pursuit of a few cheap thrills? Was there another reason for it I could not fathom? What would happen to my job, if the captain of the guard found out?

I pushed the thoughts from my mind as our building came into view. I had much to consider, but it would have to wait. My first priority was to get a look at the book I had taken from Dendrac's room. Not taken. Stolen. Perhaps there was no difference between the two of us.

I unlocked the door and stepped inside. After Theona entered, I shot the bolt. She didn't say anything. Instead she disappeared immediately into the bedroom. I placed the book on the table and opened it. For about a minute I flipped through it, looking for a picture, but there was nothing but words. I spent a few minutes staring at the jumbled symbols. Finally, I closed the book.

"Theona, honey."

She emerged from the bedroom.

"Could you perhaps help me out with this?" I gestured to the book.

"I'm not even talking to you."

"Theona!"

"Well I'm not. And I won't be, until you apologize." With those words, she turned, stalked into the bedroom and slammed the door.

I dropped my head into my hands. There were times when my Theona could be most unreasonable. I sat for a very long time before standing and walking to the bedroom. I was about to enter, when there was a knock at the front door. I turned to stare. I didn't get many visitors during daylight hours. At this time of night, it could only be bad news.

"Who's there?"

"Alaric Mason? This is the town guard. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

The bedroom door opened and Theona poked her head out. She looked at me and I shrugged. She crossed the room and opened the door.

"Yes?" she said.

I recognized the guard immediately. They didn't come much uglier, but he wasn't a bad guy, even if we didn't let him hang out with us.

"What's this about, Harlyn?"

He looked at me apologetically. "I'm sorry, Alaric. I'm here to arrest you for the murder of Prince Dendrac. I would like you to come peacefully, but I'm prepared to use force if necessary."

I fought the panic that suddenly closed in on me. I had no way of knowing the man I'd killed had been royalty. I'd never heard of Prince Dendrac, but there were so many minor nobles roaming around, even the King couldn't keep track of all of them. Still, if I allowed myself to be taken, I'd most certainly be executed.

I glanced at Theona, then back at Harlyn. I took a step closer, as if I were going to accompany him. I was about to reach for my blade, when I noticed a second, somewhat larger guard, standing just outside the door. Suddenly, the odds had shifted. I dropped my hand and took a step forward. The guard outside nodded curtly. Then in one swift movement, I drew the Sword of Truth and attacked.

Chapter Ten

I don't know when it actually happened, but at some point in my rather interesting life, I had become something akin to a master swordsman. Perhaps it was the early years of having had too many altercations with men who were often much larger than me. Or it might have had something to do with my training as a palace guard. Nor can I discount my sudden rise to infamy, when an entire city was after me, as a possible cause.

Or it might have just been the fact that I had a powerful magical sword at my disposal.

Any or all of those things might have made me the weapon I was that day. I was a blur as I attacked my former comrade-at-arms. He tried to pull his blade, but that would have complicated matters. I kned him in the stomach and brought the hilt of my sword down hard across the back of his neck. His head hit the floor with a sickening smack and I knew he wouldn't be getting up anytime soon.

Though he was too late to help his friend, the other guard moved toward me. He was larger than Harlyn and somewhat better with his blade, for all the good it did him. After a few parries and swipes, I knew I could take him.

I held myself back, just barely beating away his clumsy attacks. After a minute or so, he grew more confident. I waited until he tried a hard side-slash. I ducked under it easily.

The larger man's momentum brought him around. I struck him hard on the side of his head with the flat of my blade. He still managed to take a few more swings at me before he lost consciousness. I deflected them easily. Behind me, Theona stood and watched with expressionless eyes.

It was over before it started. I studied the two as they lay in a heap at my feet, certain the next soldiers who came for me would be of a higher caliber.

"What now?" asked Theona.

"I know this sounds hypocritical, but... how hard would it be for you to appropriate a couple of horses?"

She looked as if she were about to say something, then thought better of it. "Shouldn't be a problem."

"Good. I'll pack, then I'll head over to the Warlock. Get there as soon as you can."

She looked at me strangely, but didn't protest. Instead she pulled a cloak over her shoulders, stepped gingerly over the unconscious guards and left without a word.

As soon as she was gone, I secured the guards with their own manacles and stuffed a gag into each of their mouths. Then I found a couple of cloth sacks and tossed in what possessions I could fit. For once, not having accumulated much material wealth was a blessing. The only items of any value we possessed were my sword, which never left my side, and the key and book I'd taken... no, stolen from Prince Dendrac's room. Naturally, I made certain both were well packed.

I took both sacks, threw one over each shoulder and made my way onto the street. It was somewhat before dawn, but the Wicked Warlock would still be open. Indeed, in the year or so I'd patronized the establishment, I had never seen it closed.

I walked briskly, barely noticing the cold. Nothing like a healthy dose of panic to put your other problems in perspective. As I walked those deserted streets, it seemed possible for a moment I was the only one alive--until I stepped inside the Warlock.

The usual crew of malcontents sat about, most in various states of inebriation. Areet, as always, was behind the bar. I walked up and sat heavily on a stool.

"Well, well, if it isn't Alaric Swifthand."

"That's not my name."

He shrugged. "It might as well be. Half the place now calls you that." He poured my usual. "On the house. You know, that was a pretty impressive display of swordsmanship earlier."

"I suppose it was."

"Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

Where indeed? "Here and there."

"I see." I could tell Areet was expecting more from me, but I had other problems on my mind. Not to be deterred, Areet continued.

"Seriously, you're wasting your time as a guard. You could be a mercenary with that kind of skill."

"A mercenary?"

He nodded and poured a drink for himself. "Absolutely."

"Prince Dendrac could be part of my resume, is that it? Hire me, I killed a noble. I don't think it's wise to continually bring that up."

"So you move on. Change your name. Grow a mustache. Shave your beard. Let your hair grow longer or cut it all off. No one would ever know."

I thought about it. "You make sense. Listen, I'm on my way out of town. If anyone wants to know, I went north to Modron, okay?"

"Got it."

At that moment, several other men approached the bar.

"Hey, Alaric, that was somethin' earlier. You musta been born holdin' that sword."

"Hey Swifthand, let me buy you one."

"You shoulda seen the look on his face, that conceited son of a..."

And so on. Instant minor celebrity. I wondered how many of them would even remember the incident by tomorrow. Still, it couldn't hurt to have a drink or two, at least until Theona arrived.

By the time she showed, I was feeling better. She entered, looked at me and shook her head.

"I'm out saving your ass and you're sitting here, getting drunk."

"I'm not drunk. I was saying good-bye."

She took the drink from in front of me and downed it. "And you've said it. Now let's get moving. It's just about dawn."

"Is it?"

"Yes. And if we're not out of here in the next hour or so, you're as good as dead."

"Right." I stood up. "Good-bye, Areet. Thanks for everything."

"Farewell, my friend. And you, Theona. Be safe."

She hitched her thumb at me. "With him? Try to be serious." But she was smiling when she said it.

As we made our way through the crowd, many of them wished us well. We were halfway to the door, when the giant we'd met at the White Boar Inn entered and looked around.

"Which one of you is Alaric Swifthand?" he boomed.

The crowd stopped to stare for a moment and then all of them, including my dear Theona, backed away until I stood alone in the center of the room. I smiled weakly.

"Uh, that would be me."

"You!"

I swallowed. The giant took a step toward me. "I think you and I need to talk."

"Talking is good."

He walked right up to me and placed a massive hand around my left shoulder. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised that none of my 'friends' came to my aid. I'm not certain I would have in their place.

He guided me to the bar and threw his leg over a stool. He was so tall he could barely sit on the thing. I felt his hand close around the back of my neck. It was a good thing. If he hadn't been holding me up, I'd probably have fainted.

"Now," he said, leaning forward so he was talking directly into my ear, "It's time for us to have a little chat."

Chapter Eleven

The Wicked Warlock was usually a noisy place. There was always some argument going on, or a game of cards or even a brawl. There was a fair chance that even if only two people were present, they would be involved in some sort of altercation.

That morning, however, the Warlock was silent. Every eye was on me and the man who was about to take my life, unless I could think of something devastatingly effective in short order. In other words, I was about to be mauled.

The giant sat next to me. He had ordered an ale and was waiting for Areet to bring it. During that time, he sat quietly. At least he'd released the death hold he'd had on the back of my neck. I winced as I massaged it. I was not looking forward to the actual fight.

Many thoughts went through my mind as I sat there waiting to die. The first was that it didn't seem fair. I didn't kill Prince Dendrac, my sword did. I had no control over the thing and didn't feel I should be held responsible. The only problem was, I was the only one aware of the fact.

I looked around at my so-called friends, hoping at least one of them would have the nerve to come to my aid, but as I considered each of them in turn, I realized, even if one had wanted to, there was little to be done. Even I, Alaric Swifthand, would have been unable to take the giant. I smiled as I realized I had used their name for me. There is little that is more dangerous than beginning to believe your own press.

Areet was approaching with the giant's drink. He said nothing as he placed a large brass tankard on the counter. I couldn't help noticing when the giant raised it that the mug was somewhat smaller than his hand. I looked again at the way he sat, held my breath for just a moment, and went for him.

It wasn't the stupidest thing I've ever done, but it was close. The concept was simple. If I didn't try something, I was dead anyway, so I might as well die by my own actions. I threw my shoulder hard as I could into his chest. It was not unlike ramming into a stone wall.

Then, a miracle occurred. Perhaps because he was so off balance, the entire thing toppled over backwards; the stool, the giant and the tankard of ale. As I watched, it seemed as if time had slowed to present the calamity in some way that made sense. I prayed then there was some truth behind the old "the bigger they are" adage.

I ran for the door. Theona, carrying one of the sacks, was a step ahead of me. Outside, our two horses were waiting. She leapt upon the white one, leaving the darker steed to me. Both

were large, noble beasts, far better-looking than any horse I'd have gone after, though I was too rushed to wonder to whom they had once belonged. I was in the saddle only a moment after her. I pulled on the reins and headed east.

Behind us, the giant emerged from the Wicked Warlock. I was happy it was still too dark to see the expression on his face. Even without that detail, I was going to have some impressive nightmares.

I guided my steed to the south gate. Theona was right behind me. We reached the area just as the gates were being opened for the day. We rode through without pausing. If any of the guards planned on stopping us, they didn't get the chance. Theona and I rode south into an uncertain future.

I suppose I should have been sad about leaving Athour. The city had been my home for a year, during which time I had made many friends. Perhaps that was an overstatement. I had made many drinking buddies. Well, most of them weren't buddies come to think of it.

And suddenly it occurred to me. I was leaving behind absolutely nothing. I glanced to my left. Theona, who had much more riding experience than me, seemed happy enough to be galloping down the road, blonde hair streaming in the breeze, face a mask of ecstasy. As long as she was with me, there was nothing in Athour I needed.

We rode for what seemed like hours, but couldn't have been that long, because when we stopped to rest, morning had barely begun. I had no idea how I was going to cope with being mounted for the long haul, but if how I felt then was any indication, I was going to sell the creatures to the first buyer. Except, of course, for the fact Theona seemed so happy. I sighed. It wasn't the first time I had sacrificed for her, nor I was certain, would it be the last.

I was surprised and more than grateful to learn Theona had managed to take some food as well as the horses, so at least we wouldn't go hungry. Now, as we broke our fast on a small portion of bread and cheese, I wondered where we were heading. No potential destination called to me, which didn't come as a surprise. You could take everything I knew of the world and put it in a thimble--and still have room left for everything else I knew.

I looked at Theona. She sat with her knees to her chest, arms wrapped around them, head cocked to the side. She was looking at me with those too blue eyes.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"About you."

"About me?"

She smiled. "I just wanted to let you know that in spite of the hardship, I've never regretted any of it."

I returned her smile. "Nor have I. I'm sorry about last night. The whole thieves guild thing just came as such a shock."

"I know. I should have told you sooner."

And there was silence. If there was time, we might have made love then, but pursuit couldn't be too far behind and we had to start moving. If only I had some idea of where to go.

That was one of the good things about our relationship. Theona's education more than compensated for my own ignorance. "So, where do you think we should go?"

She shrugged. "I have no idea."

"What do you mean you have no idea?"

"Which of those words are you having trouble with?"

"All of them."

"What about that book?" she said. "Maybe that will give us an idea."

I nodded. Not for the first time in my life, I regretted my illiteracy, but once again Theona more than made up for my deficit. I wondered what I would have done without her.

She rose, removed the sack from her saddlebags and brought it back. She placed it on the ground and rummaged through it. After a few minutes, she removed the book. She flipped it open and paged through it. After a while, she closed it and looked at me.

"I can't read this."

"What do you mean, you can't read it?"

"It's in another language."

"So?"

"So, I can only read Talonite. I've never seen symbols like this before in my life."

"Then what do we do?"

"We find someone who can read it."

I looked at her. "And where might we find such a person?"

"In Modron."

I thought back to my last days in Modron and knew this was not a place I wanted to be. "I'm an outlaw there. Everyone thinks you're dead."

"Then we'll have to keep our arrival a secret."

That seemed reasonable, until memory beat some sense into me. "It was also the place I told Areet to tell the authorities I was going."

"Why'd you go and do a stupid thing like that?"

"Because you said you could never go home again and I agreed with you."

She looked at me. "Well then, we'd best make haste. With a little luck, we can be there and gone before anyone is the wiser."

I was about to protest, when I noticed the gleam in her eyes. I knew Modron would indeed be our destination, because once Theona got that look, there would be no changing her mind.

We finished breakfast and mounted, turning back the way we'd come. We'd have to circle Athour completely, which would waste even more time. I could only hope those who pursued wouldn't get to Modron before us.

Chapter Twelve

I have, in my lifetime, been beaten and battered by any number of unlikely personages and events. Oftimes, I've found myself hurting so badly I couldn't conceive of ever feeling able again. Yet next to my current agony, my previous brushes with injury seemed to pale in comparison.

I had just spent a day in the saddle for the first time in my life. My spine was compacted, my leg muscles were forced into the most unnatural of arches and the skin of my inner thighs was chafed, as if someone had whittled it down with a dagger.

The first time I'd crossed the distance between Modron and Athour, I had been on foot. While this wasn't necessarily a fast way to travel, at least my legs hadn't felt as if someone had set them aflame. So what if it took five days? At least, when I'd reached my destination, I'd been able to stand.

Unfortunately, there was no choice. We had to get to Modron and be gone before anyone

knew we were there, despite any number of factions that might have an interest in our arrival.

First, I was a wanted man in Modron. I was wanted for the murder of a noble's daughter. That she was riding beside me might not be enough to save my carcass, considering I had been exiled for seeing her in the first place.

Then there was Theona, whom everyone thought was dead. She had made it abundantly clear she did not relish a chance run-in with one of her family.

Behind us, the authorities pursued me for the murder of Prince Dendrac. Though not entirely guilty, for all intents and purposes, I was the one who would hang for it. And if all that wasn't enough, the Prince's companion, who also sought me, wasn't much smaller than an oak. I was certain after our last meeting, he would swing first and ask questions later.

Theona tried valiantly to suppress her amusement as I dismounted and tried to arrange myself into a comfortable position. I looked at her reproachfully.

"Look, not everyone was born wealthy. I'm certain the first time you rode all day, you felt the same way I do."

She smiled. "I can't remember the first time I rode all day. I was pretty young. I still doubt I looked as sorry then as you do now."

I harrumphed, but otherwise didn't reply. I couldn't beat her at word play when I was feeling well. I wasn't about to take her on now. Sensing my mood, she started to make camp, such as it was. In our case that meant tying up the horses and removing some bread from a saddlebag. I lay back on the ground and closed my eyes. I didn't stir again until the next morning.

The rest of the trip was more of the same--a day of riding, followed by a night of suffering. After the second night, Theona decided she was feeling amorous. I fell asleep while we were kissing. The next morning, her mood was as foul as mine. Served her right.

We reached Modron without further incident. Since riding through the city streets would have called attention to us, we decided to walk them, which was fine by me. I wanted to sell the creatures, but Theona noted the people pursuing us might well be looking for horse thieves and the brands might give us away. I hated to admit it, but she was right. I found myself wondering what horse meat tasted like.

It was strange coming home. Everything was almost, but not quite, exactly how I remembered it. It was the minute changes I couldn't pinpoint, but must have been there, that threw me. It was almost as if I had never been away and had woken up in a slightly altered version of my world.

After entering the gates, we headed for a nearby inn. The plan was relatively simple. I would stay in the room while she tried to pick a few pockets or steal some disguises, whichever turned out to be easier. Once that was accomplished, we would make our way to a man she knew. I hoped he was still there. I wasn't quite clear on who he was, but from what I could gather, he was sort of a scholar. How he made a living reading books was beyond me. And so, apparently, were a lot of things.

As I sat in our run-down room, I thought about my life. Aside from being pretty handy with a sword and rather agile in general, there were few skills I could lay claim to. I was intelligent, but not learned. I was fast, but not particularly strong. I could hold my liquor, but couldn't often afford enough of it to make a difference. I couldn't help but think, as I waited for Theona to return, there was something horribly wrong with me.

Perhaps if I'd had a better upbringing, I would have more options. Alas, I knew nothing but the sword. Of course, if you're going to know only one thing, the sword isn't all that bad, especially if it happens to be a magical one.

I thought then about the Sword of Truth. I'd been led to it by the passenger that had once possessed me. The weapon seemed to have a mind of its own, helping me at some points and dragging me into trouble at others, as if it was working toward its own ends. I wondered what kind of ends a sword could have, besides a point and hilt, that is.

I drew the blade and set it on the table before me. I examined it in minute detail, taking in every inch of it.

"What a fine piece of work you are," I said aloud.

"Thank you."

I stared at the thing. I stood up, took a step backwards and looked around. The voice wasn't coming from the sword, but rather inside me. I was growing sort of tired of things invading my mind. I mean, if you were going to enter someone's head, you could do a lot better than mine. I looked at it again and spoke.

"You can talk!"

"Gee, do ya think?"

"Listen, don't give me an attitude. I'd just as soon leave you here." I really wouldn't have, but I would be damned if I was going to let a weapon talk down to me, magical or otherwise.

"I don't think so."

"Oh you don't. And why might that be?"

"Because you need me. Suppose you meet that giant again. Do you think you could take him yourself?"

"No. But if you hadn't killed Prince Dendrac, then I wouldn't have to worry about it, would I?"

"Precisely the reason I did it. Now you're forced to keep me, which fits my plans perfectly."

"Which are?"

"My own."

"I see."

Actually, I didn't see. How did this kind of thing always end up happening to me? First the passengers, now this. "So what now?"

"That depends. Just remember. You need me."

I cursed. Then cursed again. The sword chuckled.

"What's so damned funny?"

"You. You're pathetic."

"Pathetic? I'll give you pathetic. I'll snap you so fast, you won't even..."

The door opened and Theona entered. "Alaric, who are you talking to?"

I looked at her, then at the sword and knew immediately I should tell her the truth. Before I could do so, however, the sword spoke in my head.

"Go ahead. Tell her. She'll never believe you."

I looked at the sword, then back to Theona. I knew I shouldn't lie, and had a feeling this particular incident would later come back to haunt me, but the sword was right. She wouldn't believe me. I was the one hearing the voice and only barely believed it myself.

"Well?" she asked, impatient for an answer.

I sighed. "I was talking to myself."

I heard the sword chuckle in my head, "Coward!"

I turned toward it, but the reply on my lips remained unspoken. I couldn't answer it in front of Theona.

She placed a bag down on the table, which presumably contained some kind of disguise. The Sword of Truth continued to laugh as she reached inside.

Chapter Thirteen

Life with Theona was not always an easy thing. Not only was she devastatingly intelligent, but she was also more than somewhat mischievous. The two traits together did not bode well for me. It was with no small amount of resignation that I agreed to her choice of disguise. Even now, so many years later, the conversation is burned into my memory.

"I'm going to what?"

She smiled. "Shave your head. All of the priests of Selantha do it."

"But I'm not a priest."

"But you're trying to escape detection. Remember, I'm not the one with a price on my head."

She had me there. More than one loyal citizen wouldn't mind seeing my head on a pike.

"This is ridiculous."

"No it isn't. It's perfect. The priests of Selantha not only paint their faces, as I'm sure you're aware, but also take vows of silence. They're never found without their apprentice, with whom they communicate telepathically. Which means if you need to say something, you shut up, we touch heads and I answer for you. This will keep us out of trouble."

I wasn't aware of any such thing and was fairly certain she knew that. This was one argument she was not going to win. "I am not shaving my head, painting my face or allowing you to speak for me!"

She looked at me, impishly. "Okay, forget it. It was just an idea. Give me the book and I'll take it to my friend without you. You can wait here until I get back."

"But I don't want to wait here."

Theona shrugged. "Gee, that's too bad. Because I am NOT going to go out to steal you another disguise."

I was about to argue further, when my sword interjected. I had, of course, only recently found out it could do so.

"If I were you, I would go with her. Believe me when I say, this is one place you don't want her to go alone."

"Now what do you know about it?" I asked.

"What?" she asked.

I sighed. "Nothing."

Between Theona and my trusty sword, I was well on my way to a nervous breakdown. Still, I couldn't ignore the sword's advice. It didn't matter it had an agenda of its own, of which I knew nothing. It was still far more aware of things than I.

"Fine, I'll do it."

I didn't speak again, not even after my hair lay in a pile at my feet and my face was covered in large, multicolored triangles. One thing was certain. Even my closest friend wouldn't recognize me. I was more than a little self conscious as I left the room and entered the street.

The looks of respect bordering on awe made some of it worth it, Theona's amusement notwithstanding. Somehow, I would make her pay for this.

We moved through the streets slowly, a priest and his apprentice. Theona, of course, held the book. It wouldn't do for an important person like me to carry it. Everywhere we went, people deferred to us, bowing their heads as we passed. We acted as if we didn't notice or care. Come to think of it, I might have made a good priest.

She led me to a section of town I had seldom visited. Street rabble like me would have been out of place here, and no situation had ever presented itself that required me to explore the area. Whomever we were about to visit had apparently done well for himself.

The streets were emptier here than in the neighborhoods I was used to, and the houses larger and more imposing. Between them, gardens were bright, beautiful and well tended.

Theona walked with her head high, probably feeling at home for the first time in years. This, more than anything else, spoke volumes about how different we really were. Not for the first time, I wondered how our relationship had lasted as long as it had.

We stopped at a house that wasn't large, but was certainly impressive. It was made of stone and looked like a miniature castle, complete with a parapet and a single tower. The large, double wooden doors each supported an iron ring, which I proceeded to use. I stepped back and waited for a response.

After a few long moments, the door swung silently open and a man stood before us. He wasn't quite what I expected. He must have been in his late twenties. He wore his long black hair in a ponytail and it perfectly matched his neatly trimmed beard and mustache. His eyes were so dark they almost matched too. The effect was rather disconcerting, making it look as if each eye contained a giant pupil. He had the type of body women die for... or at least kill for. He wore an expensive black silk robe, which perfectly set off his fair skin, and matching leather sandals on his feet. I couldn't help but feel there was something wrong with this picture.

Scholars were supposed to be short and rotund, or skeletally thin men with ten years of facial hair scraping the tops of their toes. This couldn't be the scholar.

Theona stepped past me and smiled. "Jeren. It's good to see you."

As he looked at her, a number of emotions fled across his face in rapid succession. First was joy, then puzzlement, then astonishment, then curiosity. I may have missed a few, before it finally returned to a sort of perplexed happiness.

"Theona," he said at last.

She bowed. "At your service." We would see about that.

"I thought you were dead."

"Well, for once, you were wrong. By the way, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine."

She turned toward me and gestured.

"Hi," I said.

For the second time that minute, Jeren looked stunned. "But your vows!"

I smiled. "You think we take them seriously? HA!"

Theona shot me a reproachful look. "Stop it. Jeren, my friend is in disguise. Could we come in before we're seen?"

"Certainly." He stepped aside and we entered. He closed and bolted the door behind us.

"Now, what is it I can do for you? I assume this is not a social visit."

"You always were so smart."

I bristled at her compliment. She never spoke that way about me. Then again, I never gave her reason to.

"Come, join me in my study." He looked at me. "I still don't know your name."

This state of affairs was fine by me.

"Oh," said Theona, "This is Alaric Swifthand. I know he may not look like much, but he is a warrior of no small skill."

I stood up tall and smiled my most imperious smile. I've since learned the expression makes me look rather foolish, but back then, it filled me with confidence.

Jeren looked doubtful. "You're sure about that?"

My expression of pride became one of anger. I had never before considered the possibility anyone could be as annoying as Theona. Before I could reply, she leapt to my defense.

"Well, now that you mention it..."

I turned toward her. "What!"

She grinned. Jeren grinned. I sputtered.

"Listen to me, woman whom I have not yet forgiven for making me shave my head. I am here, because you dragged me here. I didn't want to come to this city. I didn't want to see Jeren..."

"We wouldn't be here, if you hadn't slain Dendrac."

Jeren whistled. "Dendrac? As in Prince?"

I glared. This was a fact I wasn't particularly anxious to advertise. To my surprise, Jeren looked at me with new found respect. "Well, perhaps there is more to you than meets the eye."

I stood up taller.

"There would have to be, I suppose." Without another word, he turned and strode away.

Theona followed without so much as glancing in my direction. I followed, but more slowly.

As I strolled leisurely through several lavishly furnished rooms, the Sword of Truth spoke to me. "Aren't you glad I told you to come?"

I glared down at it and whispered. "Sure. This is terrific fun."

The sword chuckled. "You're right. You could have stayed back at the inn and let Theona come here alone."

I thought about it. I could almost picture the lovely Theona and handsome and intelligent Jeren, pouring over the mystical tome and together discovering its secrets. Indeed, what reason would she have had to return for me? I imagined myself sitting in that lonely room, day after day, waiting for her. I shook my head at the vision, then hurried to catch up to them.

As long as Jeren was around, I wasn't about to let Theona out of my sight.

Chapter Fourteen

Jeren's office was, like the man himself, immaculate. Standing there, I felt I somehow interfered with the order of the place or perhaps that was just an effect of being surrounded by so many books. I stood for a while looking at the strange symbols that meant nothing to me. For all I knew, they meant nothing at all and everyone was just pretending to understand them. I felt as if the symbols were mocking me. Nor, did it help that Jeren and Theona both shared the ability to read, while I lacked it.

Off to the side was a writing desk and beside it a table of beakers. Each contained a different color liquid. I had first supposed them to be potions, but later found out they were wine. The walls were mostly bare with only an occasional candle bracket breaking the monotony. I

couldn't imagine why they were necessary, since the room was lit quite effectively by two oil bowls burning atop twin pillars.

Theona leaned over the tome and conferred with her friend in a low voice. I gave up trying to figure out what they were talking about long before the first hour had passed. Jeren asked me if I wanted to be shown to the kitchens for a bite to eat. Normally I would have jumped at the offer, but the very idea of that rich, handsome sage alone in a room with Theona filled me with jealousy.

After a time, I lowered myself into a chair that was probably worth more than the house I was raised in. I tried to keep my eyes open, but eventually drifted off. I awoke some time later, stiff, alone and in the dark. I tried to stand, but found my legs were both still sleeping. I stumbled, almost taking the table of beakers down with me. I managed to catch my balance and support my weight, until I felt feeling return to my feet. It hurt like hell, but I didn't wait for the transition to be complete. I half ran, half hobbled from the room, cursing silently at the pins and needles assaulting my calves.

I moved down empty corridors, peeking in doors on either side until I located them. By then, feeling had returned to my unhappy feet, but at least I was able to stand again.

They were in the dining room, sitting across the table from each other. My arrival went completely unnoticed. From my vantage, I could see the back of Jeren's head. Theona might have seen me, had she been able to pry her eyes off him, an event that didn't seem probable. I stood and watched, wondering if I wanted to hear what they were talking about. Still, it would be better to know than to live in doubt.

"I can be ready to leave by tomorrow," Jeren was saying. I felt my heart grow heavy.

"Right. I just have a few last minute things to take care of. I'd sort of like to prepare Alaric first."

"Ah, Alaric." His tone was heavy with sarcasm. "I can't imagine how the two of you even met."

Theona sighed. "It's a long story."

"How do you think he'll handle it?"

At this point, I stepped into the room. "Handle what?"

Both looked startled. Jeren fidgeted with his food. Theona stood and moved toward me. "Awake are you?"

"I'm not certain I want to be. What's going on?"

The two shared a significant glance and I found myself wondering if he were as good with a blade as I suspected he might be.

"We managed to decipher the book," she said.

"Is that so?" I let a hint of anger into my voice. Theona either ignored it, or didn't notice.

"Uh-huh. You can't imagine how surprised I was at the content."

"Were you planning on sharing it with me?" If she had missed my displeasure before, she couldn't have missed it this time.

She looked at me for a long moment. "Well, of course. What did you think?"

"I'm not sure."

She turned toward Jeren. "Might we have a moment alone?"

"I was just leaving." He rose and departed. I could see him shaking his head on the way out.

"You mind telling me what this is all about?" Her voice was hard as granite.

"I was about to ask you the same thing."

"What is it with you, Alaric? Why must you be so difficult? Jeren and I have stumbled upon the most amazing find of the century and you're acting like a complete idiot. I hope you have a good reason, other than the fact that you *are* a complete idiot."

"An idiot? Well, for your information, I was standing just over there and heard a portion of your conversation."

"And?"

I sputtered. "You're planning on running off with Jeren."

"What! That's preposterous. What gave you a crazy idea like that?"

"As I recall, he said something about leaving tomorrow and you said something about preparing me."

She paused for a second, threw back her head and laughed. "Well of course I have to prepare you. You've never been on this kind of expedition. I haven't either really, but my father went on quite a few. I heard all the stories. Anyway, we're leaving tomorrow."

"All of us? Jeren too?"

"Yes," she said slowly, as if talking to a child, "Jeren too. Because without his help, we'll never make it."

"Sure we will... make what?"

She looked exasperated. "Okay. In a minute, I'm going to tell you the most amazing thing you've ever heard. Before that, however, I have something to say to you." She looked directly into my eyes. "I'm yours. I'm not going anywhere. Jeren may be tall and attractive and intelligent, but he is no threat to you or our relationship."

"And why, pray tell, is that?"

"Because with you, I can always get the last word. Now shut up and listen."

I sighed, well aware I had, once again, made a fool of myself.

"Have you ever heard of the Labyrinth of Kerrenar?" she asked.

"Hasn't everyone?"

She smirked. "One can never be sure with you. Do you know where it is?"

"No one does. It's lost, or so they say."

"Right. That's the story. The lost Labyrinth of Kerrenar. Lost until now, that is."

Suddenly, I was wide awake. "You mean to tell me you've found it?"

"That's precisely what I mean to tell you, but that's not the amazing part."

I blinked. "What is the amazing part?"

"It's been right here under our noses all along. Here in Modron. Hidden by magic. Somehow that key can gain us entrance. The entrance was what Prince Dendrac was searching for. He'd never have found it."

"Why?"

She grinned. "The book mentions an inn by name and claims the entrance to the Labyrinth can be found within it. The Dangling Dagger."

"Never heard of it."

"That's right. Nor have most people. Do you know why?"

I shook my head.

"The name was changed many decades ago. It's now called the Battering Ram."

"I know the place. So what you're saying is that somewhere inside is the entrance to the Labyrinth?"

"That's precisely what I'm saying."

"And we're going to go there?"

"Yes."

"Is it a dangerous place?"

"Quite."

"I assume there's a reason worth facing that kind of peril."

She nodded.

"And that would be?"

"More wealth than you can ever imagine in one place at one time." Her eyes blazed as she spoke of it. "Think of it, Alaric. With that kind of fortune we could go anywhere, do anything."

"Tell me again why Jeren has to go with us."

"Because he knows his way around ruins. He has experience treasure hunting. It's not as if there won't be enough to go around."

"I see. You're sure this is a good idea?"

She looked at me, sighed and turned toward the door. "You can come back now," she called.

Though she never answered the question, the Sword of Truth did.

"No, Alaric, it's not a good idea, but you have no choice. Quite probably, the Labyrinth will make short work of the three of you, but that's of no consequence. It is where I need to be."

I couldn't answer him with Theona there, but I did look down. It was why the sword killed Prince Dendrac. So I would steal the book and Theona would take us to Modron to learn its secrets. I found myself wondering how much influence the Sword of Truth had over the events in my life. Could it have somehow influenced Theona to join the thieves guild in the first place? I fought down a growing sense of paranoia.

It didn't really matter. What did matter was tomorrow, I was going to enter the most infamous lost labyrinth in the world and there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

Chapter Fifteen

I somehow managed to get through the remainder of the evening without embarrassing myself further, though I'm not certain how. I tried to pay attention to the plans Theona and Jeren were hatching, but as the evening wore on, I found myself wondering at their sanity.

Tomorrow morning, if all went as planned, we were off to search for the lost Labyrinth of Kerrenar. It was inevitable the issue of required equipment would come up. Some of the mentioned items, like lanterns and oil, made a lot of sense to me. Others threw me completely. The small, silver pole-mirror was one. The ten foot collapsible staff was another. Yet it wasn't until they mentioned the iron spikes that I suspected they were putting me on. Not to say that spikes didn't make some sort of sense, but the reverence with which they were mentioned was a thing I couldn't comprehend. After a while I came to understand they were serious after all, though perhaps no less demented.

At length, fatigue set in and the conversation ground to a halt. Theona and I rose and bid our host farewell, though hers was somewhat warmer than my own. I managed to keep my glowering to a minimum. I was most relieved when Jeren closed the door behind us.

The walk back to our room gave me time to think. Theona continued to ramble on about the next day. I remained oblivious to most of it. Only when words like danger or horrible creatures popped up in her dialogue was I momentarily distracted from my musings.

Finally, I could stand it no longer. I interrupted her. "Can you tell me something?"

The comment was so abrupt she stopped to look at me. "Sure."

"What the hell is the big deal about iron spikes?"

"Iron spikes are perhaps the single most useful adventuring tool ever invented," she said.

"I see. Why would that be and how do you know about it?"

"My father always made sure he had plenty of spikes on hand before he left on his expeditions. The shop in the thieves guild building always stocked a full supply of them and they are one of the fastest moving commodities in that line of work as well."

"Are we talking about the same iron spikes? Cylindrical or pyramidal foot long black iron things that come to a point?"

"Is there another kind?" she asked.

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

She sighed. "Okay, this is how it is. Most items have a single purpose or maybe two. A lantern is used to make light or to set something on fire. A sword is a weapon or a thing to cut with. An iron spike is the single most versatile object known to man."

"Versatile?"

"Yes." I could see the mischief in her eyes, but I was damned if I was going to ask. She said nothing as we continued on our way.

I waited a few long seconds, before giving in. "How so?"

"First of all, it can be used as a grapple on the end of a rope. If you pound them into a wall with a mallet, you can create a sort of spiked stairway. They can also be used to spike doors closed, so that you can lock yourself into a room even if you don't have the key. They're inexpensive enough to waste one or two down pits or corridors that you suspect are trapped. They can be driven into the hearts of certain undead creatures that are only affected by iron. They can be used to string a tripwire across a place where there is nowhere else to tie it. In a worst case scenario, they can even be used as weapons."

It was my turn to stop and look at her. "You're serious?"

"Completely."

"And Jeren believes this too?"

"Absolutely."

"Can you explain to me again why we're taking him?"

I never heard her reply, for at the moment the Sword of Truth interrupted. "Got a second?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't with Theona right beside me.

"Perhaps you should try to be more conscious of what's going on around you," said the sword.

I almost sighed. I don't know what was worse. That my best weapon was the most obnoxious being I knew or that I couldn't answer it back for fear of being overheard. Still, not one to ignore advice, I scanned the area.

At first I didn't see anything that might have prompted my sword's warning. Then I grabbed Theona's arm and pointed. Even as she turned, the giant noticed us. He wasted no time heading in my direction. I froze for a second before I managed to make my legs understand that if they didn't start moving, the ability to do so might soon be beyond them.

Theona ran too, except in the opposite direction. I'd like to think she was trying to confuse the giant by providing a second target. Unfortunately, I knew her better than that.

I ran as fast as I could, which was fast indeed. I could outrun just about anyone. Anyone,

that is, that doesn't have a stride twice the length of my own. Each time I looked back, I found the giant a little closer. If I didn't think of something fast, I was done for.

Fortunately, knowledge of the streets returned to me as if I'd left Modron yesterday. If I just had a little more time, I was certain I could lose him. Unfortunately, time seemed to be running out.

I ran into an alley. As soon as I exited the other end, I made a sharp left and ducked into another. I was certain I had made it in before he emerged from the first one. Which meant he wouldn't know which way I went and would lose ground. Possibly, I could make it out to the street before he figured out where I'd gone.

I moved like the wind, certain I would be able to lose him and thanking the gods the area hadn't changed much in the year I was gone. Or so I thought, until the wall loomed up before me. I tried foolishly to scale it, but it was beyond even my great agility. I found myself wishing I had an iron spike and a mallet. If I did, I could have pounded it into the wall and used it as a foothold to grab the top and pull myself up.

I turned and began to retrace my steps, looking as I went for either a place to hide or an irregularity that would allow me to climb. Alas, neither seemed to be present. I was halfway back to the street when an unmistakable figure entered the alley. I was tempted to mumble a prayer, then thought better of it. I was, after all, impersonating a priest. I didn't figure I was exactly on the best terms with the gods at the moment.

The giant moved closer, slowly, methodically. I couldn't see the expression on his face. Not that I wanted to. I began to back away, straining to figure out some way out of the predicament. Unfortunately, combat seemed to be my only option.

The decision made, I almost relaxed a bit. Then I placed a hand on the hilt of the Sword of Truth. "Stay back. Come no closer." As if that would stop him.

He advanced another step.

My fingers tightened around the haft of my weapon. I moved to draw it, but it remained in its scabbard. I tried again, straining to free it, but it wouldn't budge. The giant continued his slow advance.

I gave it one last mighty heave that left me dangerously off balance, but nothing. I spoke to my weapon, not caring whether or not my stalker heard.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"What's the point?" replied the sword. "It's not as if you can take him, even with my help."

I almost screamed in frustration. "Damn you, just let me try!"

Still the sword remained stuck. I cursed it, pulled at it, cursed it again, but for all that, it seemed as if the Sword of Truth and its scabbard had fused into a single piece.

The giant stopped and smiled. "I finally have you precisely where I want you."

Strung together in that order, they were the scariest words I'd ever heard.

Chapter Sixteen

In all my life, I had never been more certain my death was imminent. There was no way out of the alley that didn't involve somehow getting by the giant. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide and I was fairly certain he would no longer be fooled by subterfuge, no matter

how clever. My trusty ally, the Sword of Truth, adamantly refused to be drawn, leaving me without a way to defend myself. If ever I needed divine intervention, this was the moment.

The giant took a step toward me and then another. I stood my ground, though it was hopelessness, not bravery, that motivated me. I briefly considered trying to duck between his legs, but even that would do no good. He was fast enough to catch me before I reached the street.

"Alaric Swifthand," he boomed in a voice that made my legs weak.

"Er, that would be me."

"So I gathered."

"Listen, about Prince Dendrac. I can explain. You see, I was in the Wicked Warlock, having a drink with my lady..."

He cut me off. "Not interested. Actually, you did me a favor by killing Dendrac."

"I did?"

"It was something I'd been contemplating for a long time. Never did get around to it though."

"I see. Then why have you been following me?"

The giant smiled. "Aside from the compelling need to extend my thanks, there is the matter of a certain book that belongs to my family. I would like it back."

"Book? I don't know what you're talking about."

"The book your lady was carrying when she scurried off into the night."

"Oh, that book. Why didn't you say so?"

"I did. You solved it, didn't you?"

"Solved what?" I asked.

"The mystery. The lost labyrinth. The puzzle of the hidden guardians."

Hidden guardians? Theona had mentioned nothing of hidden guardians. I began to wonder what else she might be keeping from me. "Sort of."

"Good. Dendrac spent a good amount of time trying to figure it out. We were going to tackle the labyrinth together. Of course, that's no longer possible."

"Does this mean you're not going to kill me?"

"Who said anything about killing you? At first, all I wanted was my book back."

"And now?"

He smiled. "I'm going to be right along side of you when you descend into the darkness."

"You are?"

"Yes. Only a fool would enter the Labyrinth of Kerrenar alone. Now let's get out of here."

He moved to the side and I passed, still not certain he hadn't lulled me into a false sense of security. I didn't begin to relax, until we were out on the street again.

"You have a name?" I asked.

"Graham."

Graham the giant, my new comrade-in-arms. Not the worst turn of events. Had I been looking for a new addition to our party, he would have been a good choice.

"How do I know you won't double-cross me?" I asked.

"You don't. Live with it."

And that was that. We made our way back to the inn. I knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" I could hear the tension in Theona's voice.

"It's me."

"You're still alive?"

"No, I'm dead and I've come to collect my belongings. Now open the damn door."

I suppose I could have warned her about the giant's presence, but I still owed her for making me shave my head. This was going to be fun.

The door opened and her eye appeared in the crack. Graham stood beside me, impossible to see from her vantage. She opened the door wider and I stepped inside. The giant came into view a moment later.

Theona paled. She took several steps backwards. I ignored her and walked to the table upon which rested the book. "See? Here it is, safe and sound."

Graham glanced at it, then back at Theona. "What's your name?"

She swallowed a few times, before responding. "Theona."

"Theona," he repeated, as if trying to get the feel for it. "Odd name for a thief."

"What makes you think she's a thief?" I asked, genuinely interested.

"I can smell a thief a mile away. Can't abide them."

"Well you'll have to abide her. If she doesn't go, I don't go."

Theona, realizing death wasn't imminent, found her voice. "Go where?"

"To the Labyrinth," I replied. "I recruited some help."

She looked at me.

"Turns out he wasn't out to kill me after all. He just wanted his book back."

Graham nodded. "It's been in my family for generations. We weren't able to make sense of it. We never knew what we had. That was until Dendrac showed up searching for it. How I hated him."

Theona looked at the giant and back to me. "Alaric, can I have a word with you in private?"

I looked at Graham and he nodded. "I'll be right outside." He turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

"What were you thinking?" she asked.

"Thinking? I wasn't thinking, I was trying to survive. And according to you, the Labyrinth is fraught with perils. It couldn't hurt to have someone like Graham along."

"So now you're on a first name basis? Let me ask you this. Once we lead him to the entrance, what makes you think he's not going to kill us?"

"For the same reason we won't kill him. We need each other. Even he doesn't relish taking on the Labyrinth alone."

"No, I suppose he wouldn't at that."

"By the way, what are the hidden guardians?"

She turned away and shrugged. "No one knows. I imagine we're going to find out."

I stared at her. "And when were you planning on telling me about them?"

"No point, since I have no idea what they are. Listen, if we're really doing this, we need to get some sleep."

I nodded, too weary to argue. I opened the door. Graham stood outside staring at the stars.

"We're going to turn in. You have a place to stay?"

He nodded. "I'll be back at dawn. Be ready." He pushed by me and walked to the table. He picked up the book and turned. "I'll hold on to this. Call it insurance."

Theona glared at me. It was my turn to shrug. I certainly couldn't control him. "Right. See you tomorrow."

The giant nodded and left the room. I closed the door behind him.

"Well, that's just terrific, Alaric. What do we do if he doesn't come back?"

I smiled, for once having thought of something before her. "I don't consider that very likely."

"And why would that be?"

"I don't know how much good that book will do him, without this." I removed the gold key from my pouch and held it up.

She paused for a second, then smiled. "Why Alaric, that was brilliant!"

I beamed. She'd never before used the word to describe me.

"We'd better get some rest," I said, removing my tunic. "Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

She walked over and embraced me. "I'm glad you're still alive."

"You had doubts?" I asked, feigning astonishment.

"None whatsoever," she replied, pushing me back onto the bed.

I smiled. It seemed neither of us were going to get the rest we needed. Not that we cared. After all, this might well be our last night alive.

Chapter Seventeen

Located near Modron's center, there is a section called the Old City. After its construction, the rest of the city was built around it. No one knows anything about the original architects, except for the fact that no one knows anything about them. Indeed this is so odd a phenomenon, people feel they need to repeat it, even though everyone knows it.

"This section of Modron is so old, no one knows who built it," I said.

Theona looked at me. "Everyone knows that."

Jeren nodded in support of her statement. I looked at Graham.

"Er, yeah, I suppose I had read about it somewhere," said the giant.

"Fine. I was just trying to make conversation."

"Try making intelligent conversation," suggested Theona. "Then maybe someone will talk to you."

I really didn't want her to get the last word just then. Not in front of Jeren and Graham.

Unfortunately I couldn't immediately think of a rebuttal and by the time I did, we had reached our destination.

We walked up to the entrance of the Battering Ram. I couldn't remember a time when the pub hadn't been here, yet I had never ventured inside. It had once been called the Dangling Dagger, but that must have been before my time.

According to Jeren, the book was hundreds of years old. Did that mean the Dangling Dagger was that old? It would seem to follow, unless I had stolen a book of prophecies.

I turned to the others. "Have any of you ever been here before?"

There was much shaking of heads.

"Can you recall someone telling you they have?" I asked. There was no intuitive brilliance behind the question. I simply couldn't imagine a bar in Modron I hadn't checked out at least once.

"I thought not."

I turned, walked up to the door and pushed. It didn't budge. I reached into my pouch and removed the gold key. Theona walked up beside me.

"It would help if there was a keyhole." At first I thought she was putting me on, until I saw the look in her eyes.

"You can't see it?"

"No."

I pointed with my finger. She shook her head. I thought for a second and handed her the key. Even as I watched, the keyhole faded from sight. Theona gasped when it appeared before her. Jeren and Graham moved closer.

"This must be the entrance," breathed Jeren.

We all looked at each other. What a sight we must have been. A warrior, a sage, a noble's daughter and a giant, standing at the entrance to a pub that hadn't had a customer in centuries. On the other hand, if that were the case, who had changed the name, and why? I had a feeling we would find out.

"Ready?" asked Theona. She didn't wait for a reply.

Graham leaned forward performing an unconscious impression of a tree bending in the wind. I placed my hand on the Sword of Truth and inched closer. Jeren stared at the door as if he could bore a hole in it with intensity alone.

Theona placed the key against the wall and pushed. To the rest of us, it looked as if the key actually sank into the stone. When she turned it, the doors to the Battering Ram swung noisily inward.

I turned to look behind us. There weren't many people on the street, but there were a few. None seemed to notice what we were about, even those closest. Perhaps the same power that kept the tavern in obscurity had been extended to us. I was uncomfortable at the thought.

Theona entered first and I followed. Jeren and Graham both stopped to light lanterns before entering. Apparently the people in the rear of the party would light the way, leaving the hands of those in front of them free. It seemed to make sense to me.

There was no doubt we were in a tavern. There was a bar running across most of the back wall. There were tables and chairs scattered randomly about and paintings hanging on the walls. There were also a few hundred years of cobwebs, covering every available surface.

The fixtures were recognizable, but unquestionably antique. Even if we just removed and sold the furnishings we could do well. We waded through several inches of dust as we made our way toward the bar. My eyes were everywhere, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

To our left, a stairway led to the second level. There was also a corridor opposite the stairs, leading away from the main room. From our vantage, we could just make out a couple of doors within.

Jeren looked at me. "Why don't you and Graham check out that corridor? Theona and I will see what's upstairs."

"Why don't I go with Theona and you stay with Graham?" I asked, certain he couldn't give me an adequate answer.

He smiled. "Because then Graham and I would have lanterns and you and Theona would be stumbling around in the dark. Of course, Graham could go with Theona and we could go together, I suppose." He didn't seem thrilled at the prospect.

Nor was I. I didn't trust Jeren, but at least I was certain he wouldn't hurt Theona. Graham, on the other hand, had already made it clear exactly how he felt about thieves.

I shook my head. "Go on. We'll meet back here in fifteen minutes."

I didn't wait for them to set off. Instead I walked past Graham toward the corridor. I drew the Sword of Truth as I entered the passage. A quick glance over my shoulder reassured me

Graham was behind me. I walked slowly, frequently stopping to brush cobwebs off my face.

There were two side doors, both of which opened into storerooms. Inside was exactly what you'd expect--a few barrels of ale and dusty shelves, once filled with food. What little was left, even the rats had given up on.

Ahead of us, a final door blocked the passage. It was heavier and more impressive looking than the two we'd just investigated. I felt if we were to find something, this was the place. Cautiously, I pulled it open, ready for anything. Behind, a flight of stairs descended into darkness. I looked at Graham.

"Feeling adventurous?"

He smiled nervously. It was so odd an expression for him I almost laughed.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe we should wait for the others."

"You've never done anything like this, have you?"

He shook his head. "Nope, first time. You?"

"Can't say as I have." *Terrific. Two novices alone together in the most infamous lost labyrinth in history.*

"Come on," I said, no longer amused. I slowly made my way down the stairs. I could hear him breathing heavily behind me. It never occurred to me the giant would be scared.

I was not surprised to find we had located the wine cellar. There were racks containing rows of bottles, each of which must have been very old indeed. I wondered if wine kept for that long. If it did, we would have some classic vintages at our disposal. I pulled one out of its holder and was brushing the dust off the label, when Graham tapped my shoulder. I jumped.

"Don't do that!"

"Sorry. I think it's almost time to meet them."

I was about to reply, when the sound of someone playing an instrument reached us. It was coming from upstairs. We looked at each other. Neither of us spoke for more than a minute. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore.

"What do you think?"

"It has a nice melody," replied the giant.

I sighed, pushed past him and climbed the steps two at a time, not really caring whether he followed. When I reached the corridor, I stopped. A moment later Graham was by my side.

A glance at his face told me he was as stunned as I.

The passage before us was devoid of dust and cobwebs. I walked slowly toward the main room. The music continued to play. Even before we got there, we could see it was now inhabited. There were dozens of people present, going about their business. Though I had been privy to many formal occasions as a palace guard, I did not recognize the style of dress. The men were clad in tunics, and matching, baggy trousers, most of which were black. Ladies' dresses, tight at the waist, ballooned out beneath. They looked like nothing so much as a group of colorful bells out walking on a misty night. It was like something out of a dream, but I knew it was real.

Spellbound, I walked among them. They were people who had been dead for many centuries, only no one had bothered to inform them of the fact. Off to the side, a man played a bizarre, stringed instrument, the likes of which I'd never seen. One of the barmaids, wearing a somewhat tighter and more revealing outfit, approached.

"Can I get you something?" The language was the same, but her accent was odd. I wasn't surprised I couldn't place it.

I nodded. "Anything... strong."

She looked at Graham. "And you?"

"I don't drink."

She shrugged and moved off to fill my order. I looked around, first just amazed, then fascinated. I almost smiled, until I remembered Theona and Jeren were not here and there was no guarantee they would be able to join us.

Graham must have been thinking along the same lines, because we both practically ran toward the stairs. As we approached, two large men moved to block our path. Unlike the patrons, these men wore studded, leather jerkins and matching breeches. Each wore a thin, rapier-like sword at his side.

"Can I help you?" asked the first, not sounding all that helpful.

"Uh, I need to get upstairs."

"I'm afraid not."

"Is that so?" I turned toward Graham. "Well, my friend, it looks as if we might have a fight on our hands."

"Alaric, can I have a word with you in private?"

"Now?"

"Now."

I looked at the men. "We'll be right back." I turned and took several steps away. "What do you want?"

"I think there's something you should know about me," said the giant.

"And what might that be?"

"I'm a pacifist."

"What?"

"I don't like violence."

"I know what it means." I thought for a second. "Do you mean to tell me the entire time you were pursuing me, you had no intention of harming me?"

He nodded.

"And when, exactly, were you planning on telling me this?"

"After we were inside. If I told you first, you wouldn't have taken me along."

I clenched my teeth and took a step toward him. "Are you out of your mind? Do you know how dangerous this place is?"

He didn't answer. Indeed, what could he say? I turned back to the men guarding the stairs and wondered if I could take them both.

"Stay here," I said. "When I come back, we're going to have a little talk."

Graham nodded, clearly uncomfortable. I approached the men one more time.

"Listen," I said, in my most reasonable tone of voice. "My lady is up there and she may need my help. Now you're either going to stand aside, or I'm going to have to teach you two a lesson."

The first smiled, while the second lashed out with his fist. Had I been expecting the move, I'd have been able to duck it, but I'd been concentrating on the larger of the two. As I flew backwards past Graham, I was certain of only one thing.

The denizens of the Dangling Dagger were definitely not ghosts.

Chapter Eighteen

I found myself fighting my way toward consciousness. This wasn't altogether unusual. In fact, considering what I'd been through in the last few years, it was almost a comforting feeling. Until I remembered where I was. I sat up quickly and looked around.

Unfortunately, I was precisely where I thought I'd be. I was in the Dangling Dagger, a tavern that hadn't served a customer in a couple of centuries. Which meant, I had either gone back in time or I was hallucinating. I sincerely hoped it was the latter. I rose painfully. Graham was heading in my direction. Apparently I'd only been out for a few seconds.

While he helped me to my feet, I glared at him. I allowed disdain to show plainly on my face. I wanted him to be aware of exactly how I felt. The throbbing in my head did nothing to lighten my mood. He carried me to a table and lowered me into a seat.

"You're angry with me, aren't you?"

"Whatever gave you a crazy idea like that?"

"Listen, Alaric. I'm sorry. I didn't do it out of malice."

"We brought you along to help us. How the hell are you going to do that, if you can't swing a sword?"

The giant shrugged. "I'm sorry you feel that way. I do have a number of skills that might come in useful. I'm strong. I can read and write three languages. I have a good knowledge of rocks and minerals."

"Great. You can tell us what type of stones are being hurled at us, while we charge into battle. We brought you along as an extra sword."

"Because you assumed I was skillful with one. I never claimed to be a fighter."

I shook my head and turned away, because he was right. I had allowed his massive frame and the greatsword on his belt to convince me he was a warrior, while I had seen no actual evidence of it.

"Okay. Then answer me this. What were you doing with Prince Dendrac?"

The giant sighed. "Dendrac was blackmailing me."

"Blackmailing you? With what?"

"Mine is a race of warriors. Could you imagine the shame I would bring upon my family if anyone ever found out I abhor violence? My family would be outcast and I would be made to pay for it."

"So you took up a sword and did his bidding."

Graham nodded.

"You fought for him, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You killed for him."

"Yes."

"But you won't raise a weapon to help me out of a life and death situation, is that what you're saying?"

"I'm saying I don't like violence and, given the choice, I won't fight. I believe there are other ways to settle differences."

"How very noble of you. Just hope that we live long enough to negotiate. In the meantime, how do we get upstairs?"

Graham looked over my shoulder. "We may not have to."

I turned. Theona and Jeren had descended already and were walking across the tavern toward us. While I waited, I gingerly touched my face, wincing at the pain. I resisted the urge to

punch the giant, just to show him how it felt.

Theona spoke first. "Hello, Alaric. You're looking well. Did Graham finally have enough of you?"

"No. Not that it matters. You see, Graham doesn't fight."

"What do you mean, he doesn't fight?" She turned toward the giant, who nodded. "Then what the hell good is he?"

It was Jeren who answered. "Not every member of a party need be a warrior. I'm certain he must have some skills of value."

Graham inclined his head. "Thank you."

Theona glared at Jeren, then at Graham, until finally her gaze settled on me. "I believe it was your idea to bring him."

"Oh no, don't put this on me. At the time, we both thought he could hold his own."

"I can," said the giant. "I just choose not to. Violence is not the answer."

"It depends, I suppose, upon the question," retorted Theona. "Still, we have other problems without having to deal with a cowardly giant."

"I'm not a coward. I'm a pacifist."

Theona shrugged. "Whatever." She turned toward me again. "What do you make of all this?"

"I don't know. I don't think they're ghosts."

"Why not?"

"Because one of them knocked me clear across the room. These are living breathing people."

"Well what do we do now? We didn't find anything upstairs."

"We found the wine cellar. Not much else though."

We all sat and looked at each other, until Jeren broke the silence.

"I'll be right back." He rose and walked toward the bar.

"Where is he going?" I asked.

No one answered. Having nothing else to do, we sat and watched. I didn't realize just how out of place we must have looked, until that moment. Jeren stood out like a priest in a brothel. He caught the bartender's attention and they conversed briefly. The bartender reached under the bar, pulled out a rather ornate bottle, placed it on a tray with four glasses and followed Jeren back to our table.

I looked at Jeren. "Can't you go one day without a drink?"

Theona kicked me and I shut up. The bartender smiled. "Here to try the Labyrinth, are you?"

"You told him!" I said.

"I had to. He's the only one who knows how to get there."

"Ah. And how do we do that?"

"By drinking this elixir." The bartender placed the bottle on the table.

"Let me get this straight," said Theona. "If we drink from this bottle, we'll end up in the Labyrinth, is that it?"

The bartender nodded.

"Wow, that must be some powerful stuff."

I was tempted to kick her back, but restrained myself, turning instead to the bartender. "How do we know this isn't poisoned?"

"You don't," replied the bartender.

I smiled. "Okay, Giant, it's time for you to start earning your keep."

I uncorked the bottle and poured a bit of it into a glass. I had never seen a liquid quite that color. It was red with gold swirls and a small head of steam. I pushed the glass across the table. Graham picked it up and examined it. Then he looked at the rest of us.

"If I don't make it, good luck."

There was something about the solemn way he said it that made me regret some of my earlier anger. He really wasn't a bad guy. Before I could say as much, he raised the glass to his mouth. He downed the contents and immediately pitched forward onto the table. His head struck with a resounding crack.

I stood quickly, knocking my chair over backwards. Theona looked at the bartender and Jeren took a step forward. Nobody breathed. Then Graham sat up.

"Just joking. Actually, it wasn't that bad."

Relief battled with anger. I was about to let him know how I felt, when there was suddenly a hole in the room where the giant had been sitting. At least, that's the only way I can describe it. One moment he was there, the next he had vanished. Jeren poured three more servings.

"Shall we?"

I picked up the glass and stared at the elixir with the same sort of suspicion employed by a child examining medicine his mother is about to force down his throat. I placed my nose above it. It didn't have much of an odor. Then I tossed back my head and downed it.

"Good luck on your journey," said the bartender. "You're going to need it."

It was actually pretty tasty. I was about to say so, when the universe went away and I found myself falling through an endless black void.

Chapter Nineteen

It was the oddest sensation I'd ever felt. One minute I was standing in the Dangling Dagger, the next I was suspended between worlds. It was as if all of my senses had been taken from me. It wasn't that it was dark, but rather there was nothing to see. Nor could I hear anything. I was almost beginning to think I had died, when suddenly, I was somewhere again.

Of course, I still couldn't see anything because I had stupidly left without a lantern. I listened for a time, but could hear nothing, save the sound of my own breathing. If you have ever been alone in a dark, strange place, then you know how I felt. Except this particular place would have been dangerous enough with a source of light. When I realized nothing was going to happen if I didn't do something, I spoke. My voice sounded harsh and desperate in the darkness.

"Graham? Theona?" There was no answer. I would have even welcomed Jeren at that point.

"Nervous?" The question made me jump. I looked around before I realized the sound had come from inside my head. I looked down, but it was so dark, I couldn't even see the Sword of Truth.

"Why would I be nervous? Just because I'm in a dangerous labyrinth, alone and deprived of light? Don't be ridiculous."

"Remove me from my scabbard."

I reached down and placed my hand on the hilt of my sword. I slowly drew the weapon forth. At first, nothing happened. Then in the darkness, a dim light began to form. As I watched, the Sword of Truth began to glow. The light had a bluish cast to it, but was bright enough to see by. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"What other tricks can you do?"

My weapon didn't answer. Perhaps it was expending so much energy, it couldn't light the way and carry on a conversation at the same time. At least, I could hope that was the case. On the other hand, it was probably just being mysterious.

I was in a rough-hewn stone corridor. On three sides, walls blocked the way. I started walking in the only direction open to me. I followed the corridor for a long time, until I noticed something at the very edge of the light, further down the passage. I moved closer to investigate.

"Is that you?" asked a deep voice.

"Graham?" I increased my pace. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

The giant replied. "I have been waiting for you."

As I approached, I noticed he was facing away from me. I was almost beside him, when he turned. Whatever it was, wasn't Graham.

The creature lunged. If I hadn't already been holding the Sword of Truth, I would have died. I took a swipe at it and it backed away. It stood still then, giving me ample opportunity to examine it.

It would have been ugly enough without the bluish sheen from the light of my sword. It was as tall as Graham or perhaps even a little taller. Its face looked as if it could have once been human, but only after a few months of decomposing. The flesh was rotted and pulled back from the cheeks, making its eyes seem like they were bulging. Strands of long, scraggly gray hair dangled from the top of its head, some reaching halfway down its chest. Its nose was missing altogether and its lips drawn back, displaying a mouthful of rotten teeth. The nails on its huge parody of hands were long and horribly misshapen.

"What are you?"

"What do you mean, what am I? Shouldn't you be fleeing in terror about now?" It no longer sounded like the giant.

"I can't flee."

"Why not? Do you so relish your own death?"

"Because there's nowhere to flee. The corridor behind me is a dead end."

The creature looked surprised, then a bit miffed. "Listen, I've been here for a long time. People always flee in terror. You're making me look bad!"

"Gee, I'm sorry. What will you do to me if I stay here?"

"I'll walk over to you and rip your heart out!" He enacted the movement to show me, I suppose, that he knew how to do it.

"Will you really?"

For a few long seconds he didn't answer. "No. No, I won't. Oh what's the use?" The creature squatted and placed its grotesque head into its misshapen hands.

"What's wrong?" I asked, though I didn't move any closer.

"When I was young, I was the nastiest, most vile creature in the Labyrinth. Now look at me. My teeth are all but gone. I have almost no strength in my arms. Once, I spoke with such power, people fled at the very sound of my voice. Now I can't even drive them away with threats. Do you know how hard it is to find a job terrorizing at my age?"

I did move closer then. "Well, you still look horrible. I was scared." I knelt next to him.

"I thank you for that."

"Exactly how long have you been here?"

"A couple of centuries, at least. It's been terribly dull. We don't get nearly the number of adventurers we once did."

"They did a good job of hiding the place, that's why. You wouldn't believe what I had to do to get here."

"You don't say? I really have to have a talk with the monsters in charge. When I took the position, they guaranteed me a certain number of adventurers per year and for a while it was great. Just like they said it would be. I do so miss the old days" The creature was silent for a second. Then it dropped its head even further and began to cry.

I turned away, so I wouldn't have to witness that. The creature was hideous enough without a face contorted in grief. I was about to rise, when a voice called to me.

"Alaric, look out!"

I turned quickly, raising the sword as I did. Graham was standing further down the corridor. Beside me, the creature had drawn itself up to its full height. It continued to make sobbing noises. Its mouth was now full of pointed teeth and the nails on its hands were straight and sharp.

"Good-bye, do-gooder."

I jumped backwards and brought my sword down as a giant claw reached for me. I noticed Graham moving closer, though he didn't draw his weapon.

"Stop that this instant," he yelled. "There's no need for this kind of behavior."

He said it so powerfully, the creature paused before backhanding me hard down the corridor. I flew about twenty feet before I fell. I ignored the pain and found my feet slowly, only then realizing I had dropped the Sword of Truth en route. The creature moved toward me so quickly, I didn't have a chance.

Then the sword spoke in my head. "Call me."

"What?"

"Call me."

"Sword of Truth," I yelled, not knowing what good it would do.

The sword raised itself off the ground and flew toward me. The beast had already passed it and was almost on me, when the blade buried itself deeply into the creature's back.

"What!" it screamed and turned to face what it must have thought was Graham.

The Sword of Truth was now in front of me. I grabbed the hilt and pulled. The creature turned back. I lifted the weapon and saluted it.

"Let's see how well you do against an armed opponent," I said.

It struck at my chest.

I brought the sword down as hard as I could, severing its arm with a single, powerful stroke. The creature threw back its head and roared. I didn't wait for it to stop. I lunged, burying the blade deep into its chest. It continued to roar for a few long seconds before toppling over backwards. As soon as it fell, Graham was there.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, thanks to you. I can't believe I turned my back on that thing."

Graham smiled. "I can. You're a compassionate man, Alaric. You may not see it, but I do."

"Yet you still wouldn't have drawn your sword to help me."

"Nonviolence is my choice. I have a right to that, just as it is your right to choose the

sword. Is there some law of which I'm unaware that says large people have to fight?"

"No, of course there isn't."

"It doesn't mean I won't help you. It means I've made a personal decision I'm asking you to respect."

I nodded, remembering my reaction to his words in the bar. "I suppose that's fair."

I looked around. "Okay, where the hell are we?"

"I would suspect we're in the Labyrinth of Kerrenar. Once again, we seem to have been separated from Jeren and Theona."

"So it seems. Graham, can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"If that thing got the upper hand on me and I was about to die, would you have reached for your sword?" I wasn't certain I wanted to hear the answer.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not sure."

At least he was honest. I knelt to clean my blade on the dead creature's cloak, when I was startled by a voice from behind.

"Did you check it?" I looked up and there stood Theona.

"What?"

She sighed, pushed past me and started to examine the body of the creature. While she was thus engaged, Jeren joined us. "Hey, I'm missing all the excitement."

Theona didn't look up. "Don't worry. There'll be plenty."

He nodded, sagely. I guess that's the way sages nod.

"What's this?" Theona removed a crumpled piece of parchment from a pocket in the creature's cloak. She opened it and flattened it on the ground. "It's a map."

"That'll help," I said.

"If we can figure out where we are on it," she countered.

She was probably right. I didn't know much about maps.

"Which will only happen if we locate a useful landmark," said Jeren. "Which way should we go?"

I pointed the way I'd been heading. "Behind us is a dead end."

He nodded and started walking. Theona followed behind. Graham went next, while I watched the rear. Not that I needed to. The dead end guaranteed there was nothing behind us.

We walked for a long time until the walls, which had been stone to this point, became metal lattices, like the bars of a cell. Each square was about eight inches across. Further down the corridor, where the walls became stone again, a lever jutted from the left wall. We looked at each other.

"Okay, Giant," said Theona. "You're on."

I looked at her. "Why does Graham have to go?"

"Because he isn't going to fight, so his risk is less than ours. I think we should all have the same amount of risk. Don't you think so, Jeren?"

The sage smiled and stepped forward. He was holding an iron spike in his right hand. "A moment, please."

He tossed the spike down the corridor. It landed between the bars with a clatter. At once, hundreds of thin, clawed hands reached out and grabbed for the thing. Even after one of them got it and dragged it back through the bars, the claws continued to grasp and swipe at the air and floor. There might have been about a foot forming an alley that the claws could not reach. If we stayed exactly in the middle, we might be able to sidestep through the area.

"It was the sound," said Jeren. "They didn't come out until the thing hit the ground. If you can make it to the other side quietly enough, you should be safe."

I looked. It was perhaps forty feet across. Already some of the arms were beginning to withdraw. Soon they were all gone. Finally, Theona spoke.

"Ready, Graham?"

I stepped forward. "I think you should do it, Thea."

"Who gave you permission to think?" She didn't look happy.

"As a member of the thieves guild, you have the best chance of making it across silently." She glared at me.

"He's right," said Jeren. She shot him an exasperated look. He met her gaze, without flinching.

"Fine. I'll do it." Without relinquishing her glare, she removed everything that could possibly make a sound. She took a deep breath. She still didn't look happy.

Theona set off down the aisle, trying to position herself in the precise center. She moved slowly, carefully, barely breathing. We all held our breath watching. Soon after she reached the halfway point, she started moving faster. I wanted to shout a warning, but I was afraid the sound might call forth the creatures again.

At first I thought she might make it. Then, when she was most of the way across, she kicked a stone. It only rolled a few inches, but it was enough.

Theona stopped moving completely. A second later, a hundred clawed hands went for her.

Chapter Twenty

The events of the last few years had left me increasingly immune to the feelings that usually accompany a crisis. At least my own crisis. Seeing Theona in a potentially fatal situation was another thing entirely. I had never been so scared in all my life.

Through the iron lattices emerged those terrible clawed hands on the ends of arms that were both too thin and too hairy to belong to any human. I had never seen anything like them and hoped I never would again.

Theona stood sideways. Arms before her reached for her stomach and others behind nearly missed her back. Fortunately, she had positioned herself perfectly. As long as she didn't move, she'd be all right. However, the slightest shift would take her into one claw or another and if that happened, she'd lose her balance and be dragged toward the bars and her inevitable demise.

I felt a pang of guilt. After all, I was the one who suggested she go first. If she died, it would be on my head. I wanted to turn away, but couldn't take my eyes from the spectacle. Though it was many years since I had last prayed, I spoke to the gods, even begged them to help her, for without their aid she was doomed.

She stood stiff as a board, the claws missing her taut body by as little as a fraction of an inch. In fact, it looked almost as if some of the ones in the front were touching the very tip of her tunic. She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the scrambling fingers. She had to relax or she'd never make it.

Apparently she knew it too, for as soon as I thought it, she opened her eyes and began to

inch her way toward the other side. There was nothing we could do to aid her. Theona was on her own. Several times a sharp claw almost snagged her, but on each occasion, she managed to steady herself, regain her balance and continue onward.

By the time she reached the other side, some of the arms had already withdrawn to their lair and others were following fast. Finally safe, Theona collapsed on the ground. Even from this distance, I could see the sweat glistening on her face. I released my breath and noted the others in our party were equally relieved.

She lay there and we let her be. It wasn't as if we were in a particular hurry and she certainly deserved a break. Finally, after a number of minutes, she climbed to her feet, walked to the lever and pulled it.

I readied the Sword of Truth as the sound of sliding metal reached me. At first I thought the bars on either side of the corridor were ascending. Fortunately, it was just a momentary illusion born of fear. Instead, a heavy metal plate dropped behind each set of bars, protecting us from further harm. They struck the stone floor with such resounding force it seemed as if the entire Labyrinth shook. The clamor was so unexpected my hands instantly moved to cover my ears. Even the echoes were devastating.

After I recovered from the shock, I looked at my two companions and started walking. Graham and Jeren followed behind. With the plates down, the corridor's guardians could not reach us.

We soon caught up with Theona. I didn't have to meet her gaze to know I was in trouble. Theona looked at me, then turned away and continued down the corridor. I suppose she was angry I had suggested she risk her life. I certainly couldn't blame her. I would have to make it up to her, somehow.

I turned back to regard the corridor that had almost cost me Theona. A strange feeling settled over me. So rarely had I had to deal with such emotions that at first, I didn't recognize them. And then I knew. I wanted to take out my frustrations on the creatures.

A strange idea began to form in my mind. I approached Jeren. "Would you happen to have an extra one of those spikes?"

"I have plenty, why?"

"May I have one please?"

He nodded and reached into his pack. Theona stopped to see what I was up to. Even Graham seemed curious.

I took the proffered spike and walked to the lever on the wall. When I pulled it up the metal gates rose, albeit somewhat more slowly than they had descended. I waited until they were all the way up, then tossed the spike. As soon as it struck the stone floor, hundreds of skeletal arms emerged from their lair to tear apart whatever hapless intruder happened to be there.

I waited only a second longer, then pulled the lever down. The extended limbs did little to slow the metal plates. Within seconds, countless severed arms lay on the corridor floor. Theona turned away in disgust. Graham looked uncomfortable. Jeren walked over to me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"That was relatively brilliant. I didn't think you had it in you."

"Thanks... I think."

"Don't mention it."

He turned and strode off to join Theona, who was still somewhat ahead of us. Graham walked over to me.

"I want to thank you, " said the giant.

"For what?"

"What you did back there. I wouldn't have made it across alive."

"Then we're even." I smiled at him. "Come on, or they're going to leave us behind."

As we hurried after them, I began to wonder why this place was called the Labyrinth of Kerrenar. Certainly the single passage we currently traversed couldn't be called a labyrinth. As soon as the thought crossed my mind, the corridor seemed to come to an abrupt end. One second there were walls on either side and then nothing. Theona cursed. From my angle I couldn't see what she was looking at, so I walked forward until I stood beside her.

The floor ended just ahead of us. Beyond was a huge cavern, so large, I could see no boundaries. Far below, a maze of corridors and passageways, stairways and inclines, rooms and even buildings, formed what amounted to a huge underground city. Under normal circumstances we wouldn't have been able to see it, but enough of it was glowing to illuminate the rest. I turned to Jeren.

"What's that green stuff?"

"Several subterranean races raise a type of phosphorescent lichen, which they use for light. Apparently there is no shortage of it below."

I nodded, because I didn't want him to know I had no idea what he was talking about. Theona, however, had no such compunctions.

"Fosforeswhat?"

"Phosphorescent lichen. Sort of a glowing mushroom."

"Oh."

I shrugged. At least one of us knew what was going on.

I looked straight down. Directly before us was a steep slope with what looked like giant purple tree fungi jutting out from it. Dozens and dozens of them. The first shelf was close, perhaps ten feet away. A short slide down the slope would place us right on top of it. Then we could step off left or right and slide another ten feet or so to the next one. I was already thinking ahead, trying to calculate a path to the bottom.

Apparently Theona was thinking along the same lines.

"Watch this," she said.

Before I could stop her, Theona stepped off the edge and slid toward the closest shelf. Jeren let out a shout of surprise. Graham looked concerned, but said nothing.

She hit the ledge and came to a perfect landing. I breathed a sigh of relief. For a split second, nothing happened. Then the shelf bent downward and she lost her balance. Theona toppled off and continued her descent. The shelf returned to its original position, blocking our view.

Theona's screams continued for at least another minute.

Chapter Twenty-one

No one said anything for a long time, not even after the echoes of Theona's screams had faded. Graham, who had no reason to like her, took it as hard as Jeren and I. Suddenly, it wasn't just a fun adventure anymore. The Labyrinth of Kerrenar had claimed the woman I loved.

Jeren looked at me. He wanted to offer his sympathies, but didn't know how to go about it. I looked down and considered following her. At least I wouldn't have to be alone. Graham

must have sensed my intentions for he pulled me gently from the edge. I didn't resist. I wasn't sure I could bring myself to do it anyway.

We sat for a time and tried not to look at each other. None of us wanted to see our pain so keenly reflected on the faces of the others. We had come to get rich. We never really believed one of us would pay for that privilege with their life. Now, faced with the harsh reality, there hung between us the question of continuing. And yet, what choice did we have? The corridor behind us was a dead end.

Strangely enough, it was my sword that spoke first.

"Tough break, huh? So you suffered a loss. What are you going to do, sit down and die?"

I answered aloud, not caring that the others heard me. "You got me into this. I should throw you from the ledge and be done with you."

"Go ahead. It will place me that much closer to my goal. You won't make it anyway."

Jeren and Graham were both staring at me. It was Jeren that spoke. "Alaric, with whom are you speaking?"

I held up my hand, signaling for him to wait. "I spit on your goal. If it weren't for you, Theona would still be alive."

"Theona is not my primary concern. Nor are you for that matter. Leave me here, or throw me over the edge. It doesn't matter. I'm in the Labyrinth of Kerrenar. I will succeed. What you do now is your own business."

Jeren spoke again, louder this time. "Dammit Alaric, what's going on?"

"My sword is sentient. He's been speaking to me for a week."

"And you didn't think it was worth mentioning?"

"I didn't think anyone would believe me."

"Certain magical items are suffused with the life force of their creators and, over time, do become beings in their own right. Hardly an uncommon occurrence."

"Depending, of course on who made the item," said a voice from behind us.

There was an audible snapping of necks as we turned to look. An elderly creature stood in the corridor. At least he seemed elderly to me. It was hard to tell, with the grayish white fur covering most of his rat-like body. In fact, he looked very much like a rat, except he was just about my size, had no tail and walked erect.

"Who are you?" asked Jeren. He beat me to the question by only a second.

"It is I who should be interrogating you. Which one of you, if you'll pardon the pun, disarmed my trap back there?"

I thought about hundreds of severed arms lying on the ground writhing. "It was me."

"Do you know how long it took me to grow them? Do you know what you've done?"

I almost felt guilty, until the anger kicked in. Perhaps losing Theona had pushed me over the edge, but I didn't care what happened to me. I stood up and walked toward the creature.

"What I've done? What gives you the right to jeopardize the lives of others? What kind of maniac are you?"

The thing smiled, displaying rows of sharp teeth. "I'm not certain. What kinds of maniacs are there?" Its chuckle came off as more of a short bark.

I took another step toward it. "You're about to find out."

I raised the Sword of Truth over my head, ready to bring it down with all my strength on the rat-man's head. Graham, however, had other ideas. Before I knew what was happening, he stood behind me, both of my wrists held tightly in one massive fist.

"Not now, Alaric. This is not the time."

I tried to turn, but didn't have the strength.

Jeren spoke before I could unleash my wrath on the giant. "He's right, Alaric. The corridor behind us is a dead end. Where did that come from?" He gestured to the creature.

I continued to struggle to free myself from Graham's grip, until I caught the meaning of Jeren's words. I stopped squirming and he released me.

"Okay, where did you come from?" I asked.

"From down there. And I'm going back now. Would you like to come? I can take you if you like."

Every bit of intuition I possessed screamed at me, but what choice did we have? I looked at Jeren and he nodded. I can't imagine how it happened, but suddenly, I was the leader of this expedition. I turned to the rat-man.

"You have a name?"

"Max,"

"Max!" I repeated, incredulously.

"Short for Maxikendalous Ulanthrotus."

"Okay, Max," I said, never taking my eyes off him. "Lead on... but be warned. If this is a trap, our next meal will be your liver."

I heard Jeren choke at my words, but didn't turn.

The giant spoke. "Actually, Alaric, I'm a vegetarian. I have plenty of dried fruit with me."

"Can it, Graham! Now Rat-man, Max or whatever the hell you are. Are you going to start moving, or are we to stand here all day?"

Max chuckled, but turned and set off down the corridor. We followed quickly behind. When we reached the area with the severed arms, Max turned toward the lever. He pushed it halfway up, then pulled it out. The handle grew about a foot longer. Then he pushed it all the way back in. To my right, a section of the wall slid inward, forming a new passage running almost exactly parallel to ours.

I looked at Max suspiciously. "Where does this lead?"

"To a different part of the slope. Come, it resets quickly."

He ducked inside and we followed. Several seconds later, we heard it slide shut behind us. This corridor was lit with the glowing lichens Jeren had mentioned. It was one thing to hear about them, but another entirely to see them up close. Had I not been so angry, I'd have been amazed.

We followed our guide down a long, straight corridor. As he'd claimed, it soon opened onto the same slope which had taken Theona's life, a mere fifteen feet further along. Fifteen feet spanned the difference between life and death. From where I stood, I could clearly see the place where she'd stepped from the edge. Below us, an identical purple shelf jutted from the rock wall.

I looked at Max. "Now what?"

He smiled, or maybe it just looked like he had. It was hard to tell with all those teeth. Then he stepped off the edge and slid down, until he landed on the shelf. I watched, half expecting the ground to give way beneath him. It never happened. This was the only way down. The only way we could have made it was knowing about that secret door, or happening upon it ourselves.

"It's not difficult," said the rat-man, "but I think you should slide one at a time. I will go to the next pad and wait until one of you follows. Then I will vacate that one and one by one, we will descend."

With those words, the rat-man stepped to the left and disappeared from sight. I sighed, looked at Jeren and Graham, and smiled weakly. Then, like Theona, I stepped off the edge.

For a panicked moment, I thought I might pass the shelf, but I landed squarely on it. I held my breath, until I was certain it would support my weight. Then, I looked to the left and down. Below me, about fifteen feet, stood Max, looking up expectantly.

"You see, it's easy. All you need do is follow me."

He stepped to the right and vanished. I sidestepped left and followed him. Above me, I heard Jeren screaming as he descended. I was glad Graham was going last. We still didn't know whether or not the protrusions would support his weight.

I looked over the edge to the right. The rat-man had already moved on. I sighed, held my breath and slid downward. Jeren and Graham would follow after.

Once I landed, I immediately looked down on both sides. The rat-man was nowhere to be seen. We were still pretty high up. If I chose the wrong pad, I would die, just as Theona had. Suddenly the idea of joining her didn't hold much attraction.

Above me, Jeren called down. "What's the hold up?"

"Our Rat double-crossed us. He went on ahead and I don't know which way to go."

Jeren cursed. The ledge above him and to his right shuddered as Graham landed upon it. Suddenly I realized the Giant was directly above me. If the shelf couldn't support his weight, I was a goner.

"I think you should keep going," boomed Graham, "I don't want to stay in one place for too long."

I looked at Jeren and he shrugged. "Well, we can't go back up. You're going to have to make a decision and take the risk."

"And if I'm wrong?"

"Then you'll die and I'll go the other way."

"That's comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be."

I shook my head and turned away, but Jeren was quite correct. I simply had to choose a direction, take a step and pray for the best. In a worst case scenario, I'd be joining Theona sooner than I'd anticipated. I looked back up and nodded.

"Okay, here I go."

"Good luck," he called down.

I drew a deep breath and stepped off the pad to the right. As I slid down to my uncertain fate, the Sword of Truth spoke.

"You should have asked. I knew how to get down all along."

I'd have replied, if I hadn't been busy screaming.

Chapter Twenty-two

As I slid down the stone slope heading toward the hopefully sturdy protrusion, I felt certain it wouldn't support my weight. Even after I landed solidly, I still braced myself, waiting for the inevitable fall. It never came. Jeren alighted on the ledge above me and to the left.

"So far so good," he called down.

"Easy for you to say." I looked over both sides of the ledge, then spoke softly to my sword.

"Okay, my faithful ally who is about to be stranded on this very spot. Which way should I go?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Come again?"

"It doesn't matter. All of the ledges from this entry point are solid."

"You might have said as much and saved me the worry."

"After the way you've been speaking to me, you're lucky I talk to you at all."

"Is that a fact? Why is it then that I don't feel lucky?"

The Sword of Truth chuckled. "Perhaps a more intuitive man would understand just how precarious his situation is."

"Why are there so many of them, if all the ledges are solid?"

"So many people can descend at one time, without waiting for the ledge before them to be clear. Sometimes a party of fifty will have to make their way to the bottom and the proliferation of shelves lets them attain their destination more swiftly."

I tried to picture how a descending army might look from the ground, as they flowed like water from the top of the incline. I shook my head at the thought of it.

"It's okay, Jeren. They're all solid on this part of the slope."

"And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"Call it a hunch."

"Good, then shouldn't we be getting on with it?"

I nodded and without hesitation, stepped off to my left. Jeren followed immediately. Further up the slope, I noticed Graham's giant shadow. Jeren didn't wait. He stepped off the protrusion to his right and landed about ten feet away from me, but at the same altitude. We still hadn't reached the halfway point.

"This is really insane," he called to me.

"You don't say. Did you study long to reach that educated conclusion?"

I had quite had it with Jeren, in spite of the fact he'd been basically civil to me. Perhaps it was Theona's death that prompted the jibe.

"No. I just figured it was something you might not have realized on your own, considering your own dazzling cerebral acuity."

I was going to reply, but thought better of it. Perhaps I would have, had I been able to unravel the full nature of his taunt. Instead I shrugged and stepped off the ledge to my left. I looked up as I did so, in time to see the giant land one level above.

We proceeded in this fashion, Jeren and I leading the way and Graham following a step behind. About halfway down we stopped to rest. My legs hurt from catching my weight each time I landed and I was breathing so heavily I didn't even have it in me to shout insults at Jeren, who had ended up just a short distance away. The only bit of satisfaction I attained thus far was the times I did catch sight of him, the sage seemed just as fatigued as I.

Graham on the other hand, seemed to be having the time of his life. He actually started singing as we continued downward and I was too tired to make him shut up. We traversed the last part of the slope accompanied by Graham's solo. Finally, I became so exhausted, I stopped looking and just kept landing and rolling, not even taking a moment to rest. I hoped to make it all the way while I still had some feeling left in my legs.

I was almost relieved when I finally touched ground. That was before I noticed the

gathering of rat-men who stood in a semicircle, waiting. Each of them held a loaded crossbow, all of which were pointed in my direction. It was a long, tense moment before one of them stepped forward. I tried to determine if it was Max, but found I couldn't tell one from the other.

"You have trespassed into the domain of the Drintu," it said in an oddly accented voice. "You have destroyed the claw corridor, which we can only replace at great expense and have threatened one of our people with bodily harm. Are these charges false?"

I stood silent, still trying to catch my breath. When I finally spoke, it was with as much confidence as I could muster.

"It is true I am responsible for the incidents you have named, but I am not guilty."

"How so?" asked the rat-man, seemingly surprised by my answer.

"I am in a strange place. I didn't ask to be here. I did only what I needed to do to defend myself."

"You lie."

One of the Drintu stepped forward. Only after he started speaking did I realize it was Max. "You had already passed through the claw corridor, when you wantonly destroyed it. You threatened me with no provocation at all. I suppose you are responsible for the death of the old giant as well. I was quite surprised when I stumbled upon his body during my morning stroll."

"The old giant tried to kill me. In that case, at least, I was defending myself."

"Against what?" shouted the rat-man. "He didn't even have teeth or claws. He was so weak he could barely stand. How could you attack such a helpless creature? What kind of monster are you?"

"I don't know," I replied, my anger once again getting the better of me. "What kinds of monsters are there?"

Max turned to the creature who had first addressed me. "I demand this man stand trial under the laws and customs of the Drintu."

"So it shall be."

I began to wonder as to Jeren's whereabouts and Graham's for that matter. They had been only just behind me. Perhaps they had seen the welcoming committee and decided to wait, rather than crash the party. The old adage, "look before you leap", suddenly took on new meaning. I returned my attention to the rat-men. With any luck, Graham and Jeren would remain free so they could later come to my aid.

Several of the creatures moved closer now, gesturing with their crossbows. I had no doubt they wanted me to follow. Having no choice, I did just that. I resisted the temptation to look behind me to see if Graham and Jeren were following. I didn't want to risk giving them away.

The Drintu led me toward the lights in the distance, which I later learned was a city they called Ezwindru. I also found out this was only one of their many underground cities, all of which were heavily protected from the other, more dangerous denizens of the deep.

I was quite surprised to find myself walking through what might have been a smaller version of Modron. The main difference was Ezwindru was underground and illuminated by millions of tiny, glowing mushrooms.

I walked slowly, not at all anxious to stand trial for crimes of which I knew I was guilty. I spent much of the trip wondering just how severe the sentence would be, for I certainly couldn't think of anything to say in my defense. A short time later, we reached a three story building, the entire front of which was covered with, and illuminated by, vibrant green fungus. I stopped to stare before one of the Drintu pushed me inside.

The interior was dimly lit. Here the mushrooms grew only in the corners, giving the chamber a dreamlike quality. There was a barred area at the far end of the room that contained a single locked door.

"Okay, strip," said one of them.

I took my time. I didn't relish the idea of being naked in front of a bunch of giant rats. The fact many of them were just as naked did nothing to comfort me.

As soon as I was done, one of the creatures unlocked the cell door and pulled it open. Several others unceremoniously shoved me inside. I stumbled and fell, skinning my bare knees on the hard, stone floor. Before I could regain my feet, I heard the door clang shut. I rose and walked to it, but the bars were solid iron. I wouldn't be escaping any time soon. Only then did I turn to examine the cell.

The furniture, two chairs and a bed, was made from giant carved mushrooms. On a table was a plate of gruel, which I later found out was made of the very same mushrooms, except they had been ground and spiced. The Drintu grew just about everything they needed.

In huge caverns surrounding the city, fungus farms supplied most of the rat-men's food and raw materials. At the time, I didn't know any of these interesting tidbits, nor did I care. I had a rather limited curiosity about my captors. All I really wanted to know was what their legal system was like and if I would survive it.

I didn't have to wait long to find out. An hour or so later, several Drintu entered the outer chamber. In the dimness it was hard to tell how many. One unlocked my cell door and pulled it open. I was taken from the cell and escorted by a dozen armed giant rats to a huge empty arena only a short distance away. Once inside, I was comfortably seated in a sectioned off area just above ground level. A moment later, a large, impressive Drintu entered and sat beside me.

I turned toward him and opened my mouth to speak. A hand slapped me hard in the back of the head. I turned. The guard behind me motioned me to silence. Apparently, I was not to address the boss. Rubbing my head gently, I turned my attention to the center of the arena.

There was some activity now. A Drintu warrior had walked to the center. At least, I assumed he was a warrior. He wore armor and sported a large metal shield in his left hand and a sword that might have been as long as Graham's in his right. I thought about the giant then and where he and Jeren might be.

And why hadn't Max revealed the existence of my friends to his superiors? Was it because I was the one who had destroyed the claw corridor and threatened him? Hadn't he accused us all of trespassing?

I was lost in such thoughts when the place came alive with growls and snarls. It took me a moment to realize the audience was cheering. Even the important Drintu beside me added his voice to the cacophony. It grew so loud I had to hold my ears. It was many long minutes before it finally died down.

From nowhere, five large clawed beasts were released into the arena. They looked almost like lizards, except they ran on their hind legs and stood eight feet tall. Even from where I sat, I could clearly see the rows of sharp teeth that protruded from their muscular jaws. Their golden scales reflected the green of the lighting, their black eyes did not. Each of the beasts sported a very impressive set of claws and ran with a speed I wouldn't have believed, had I not been witness to it myself.

In spite of their speed and ferocity, the warrior stood proudly, holding the huge sword ready in a hand as small as mine. The reptiles circled and drew in, then faded back, as if taunting him. The warrior did not strike out, but instead stood his ground, eyes everywhere.

Then one of the creatures passed too close. The movement was so fast, I almost missed it. Within a second, one of its great clawed legs had been severed from its body. The creature bellowed in pain and sagged to the ground. It continued to twitch for a short time before finally succumbing.

The sight of blood must have enraged the attackers, for they all looked to the cavernous sky and screamed, a sound so horrible I felt myself reach for the Sword of Truth. It wasn't there, of course. Driven by either the need for vengeance or some other inexplicable bloodlust, the creatures grew less cautious. They all swarmed the Drintu warrior at once.

I thought he would die. Then he moved. His sword danced and struck, withdrew and struck again. In each case, his gleaming blade found its target. His shield blocked everything the four remaining creatures could dish out, except for the few attacks he dodged. I began to feel great sympathy for his attackers.

One by one, the great beasts fell until their battered carcasses surrounded the Drintu warrior. He bowed low and was met with a resounding ovation that made the first seem like a whisper. When it finally died down, the important Drintu beside me spoke.

"I am Idigar, the Chancellor of Ezwindru. I have decided you don't have to stand trial."

"Really? How come?"

"Your guilt is so obvious I didn't feel it was necessary to waste everyone's time. We all have more important things to do, don't you think?"

I didn't say anything. Indeed, what was there to say?

Idigar continued. "What did you think of the show?"

A slow, horrible suspicion began to tickle the back of my thoughts. "Very entertaining."

"Good, because you're on next."

"What!"

"If you beat the reigning Drintu champion," he continued calmly, "you will be freed and treated as our honored guest. If you don't... well, you saw what happened to the loreths."

I pointed to the warrior standing alone in the center of the arena. "Are you insane? I can't defeat him."

The Chancellor nodded. "If you insist."

Then the guards behind me leaned forward. I tried to escape, but there were too many of them. I was grabbed and hurled into the arena. A moment later the Sword of Truth clattered to the ground beside me. I stood up and looked at Idigar.

"Forget it. I'm not going to fight. I may die, but I won't be your evening's entertainment."

"I suspected you might feel that way. Very well, let me give you additional motivation." He motioned toward the edge of the arena.

Several guards wheeled out a large wagon covered with a black tarp. I watched as they pushed it toward me. When it was a few feet away, they left it and retreated. I walked to it and pulled the cover to the ground. I gasped. Inside a large iron cage, knelt Theona. She was naked and somewhat bruised, but other than that seemed no worse for the wear.

"Alaric!" she gasped.

I looked at the Chancellor. "What the hell is going on?"

"The woman will be given into the custody of the winner of the next fight."

I turned to study the waiting warrior, wondering to what uses he might put a human woman. Then I turned my attention back to Theona. I had thought I'd lost her. Now, if I didn't succeed, she would certainly die. I saluted Idigar with my sword.

"After I finish off your champion, I'm coming for you."

If he had a reply, I never heard it. I turned and strode off in the direction of my greatest challenge yet.

Chapter Twenty-three

Though I was surrounded by hundreds of screaming Drintu, I felt an odd calm suffuse me. To this day, I don't know what possessed me. I looked at the Drintu champion, hoping to see some sign of weakness, but he hadn't even broken a sweat. Of course, I had no idea if rat-men sweat. Even if they did, it wouldn't likely show through their fur.

I spared one quick glance in Theona's direction. Her fingers were wrapped around the bars of the cage and her face was pressed against them. I thought she might be crying, but couldn't tell from this distance. Then I pushed her from my mind and turned my attention to my opponent.

I tried not to think about the pieces of dead loreth that I continually had to sidestep as I advanced. I had just watched the Drintu champion hack five of them to pieces, as casually as I might cut a cake.

"This is suicide," I muttered.

"That's one word for it," replied the Sword of Truth.

I paused in my stride and looked at it. The warrior waited patiently. "Do you have another?"

"Things are not always as they seem," it replied. I raised my head to regard my opponent.

He wasn't large or muscular, but he was even faster than I. The Drintu champion moved with a fluidity I could never hope to match. He held a large sword in one paw. In his other, he held a large round shield that looked rather heavy. Apparently he had the strength advantage as well. I was about to get mauled by well-armed giant rat.

I charged forward, brandishing the Sword of Truth above my head. Behind me, Theona screamed encouragement. Or perhaps she was just screaming. I leapt at him, bringing my sword down with my not inconsiderable strength.

He moved his shield to the right and smashed me from him. I was knocked about twenty feet away and my side hurt, as if he'd cracked a rib. My blade hadn't gone anywhere near him. I turned again and walked forward, determined to score at least once before meeting my inevitable demise.

"I'm sorry, Theona," I whispered. "I tried."

"Obviously not hard enough," said my sword.

I held it in an en guard position and slowly closed the distance between us. The Drintu champion stood casually, as if bored. His lack of fear angered me. I moved forward and sliced at him, performing a dazzling display of swordsmanship that few men could ever hope to match.

He beat aside my attacks as if I were using a practice sword. Then he struck. I jumped backwards, but I must have underestimated the length of his weapon, for it ripped a line across my chest. I didn't feel it until a few seconds later, when it began to burn. I backed off and tried to catch my breath. My vision blurred, then grew sharp again. Then an idea began to form.

I threw the Sword of Truth directly at him. He sidestepped it easily. The blade landed several feet beyond. Now that I was disarmed, he took a step toward me.

"Sword of Truth," I shouted. The blade raised itself off the ground and tried to return to my grasp. Its path would take it directly through my opponent's back. I barely dared breathe as I watched the weapon fly at him. At the very last moment, he spun and blocked, sending it skidding across the arena.

I moved toward it and he moved to intercept me. There was no way I could beat him to it.

"Sword of Truth," I yelled again. Once more, the sword took to the air and flew directly toward me. I held out my hand and caught it perfectly. Surprised, the warrior stopped to study me. If nothing else, I at least managed to catch his attention. Not that it would help me.

This time, I didn't move. If he wanted me, let him come. The longer it took him, the more time I had to rest. He must have had the same thought, for he held his blade before him and charged. I stood and watched and did nothing else. He held his shield before him and I knew there was nothing I could do to dodge the reaper this time around. Still, I readied my weapon and waited.

He came into range and I prepared to swing my sword for the last time. I lunged forward, hoping to somehow get through his guard. He didn't even slow. Then, at the last moment, his shield moved to the side. He turned to look at it, as stunned as I. The point of the Sword of Truth entered his chest and I slammed it home with everything I had.

For a long moment he stood there, staring at me as if he were unable to comprehend what had happened. Then he fell to the side and slid from my blade.

I threw back my head and yelled, "That will teach you to mess with a man from Modron!"

I fell to my knees before the echoes returned to me. When I looked behind me, one of the Drintu guards had opened the cage and Theona ran toward me.

"Alaric, you're hurt."

"I'm not hurt," I said indignantly. Then I fell the rest of the way to the ground and lost consciousness.

I awoke many hours later. My mouth was dry, and the only thing that could possibly hurt worse than my head, was my side. I had definitely come close to dying. I opened my eyes slowly and, after the room came into focus, tried to look around. Beside the bed stood Graham. It was a great effort to speak.

"What happened?" I managed to croak.

"You defeated the Drintu champion. You're a hero, Alaric."

"A hero," I repeated, dumbly. I still didn't know how I'd managed it. "Where's Theona?"

I could tell he didn't want to answer. He took the time to phrase his next sentence carefully.

"She's with Jeren."

In spite of my pounding head and throbbing side, I managed to prop myself up. "What do you mean?"

The pain was clear in Graham's gentle eyes. "I'm sorry, Alaric."

"Not as sorry as you're going to be, if you don't tell me what's going on."

My answer came from the direction of the door. "Why not ask me?"

I turned and saw Theona approaching the bed. "Okay. Would you mind telling me what has transpired while I lay here, unconscious?"

She gave the giant a reproachful glance, then turned her attention back to me. "I wasn't going to say anything just yet, but it seems I have no choice. It's over, Alaric."

I didn't say anything.

"Why didn't you tell me about the sword? You knew it was sentient, but you never said a word. How am I supposed to trust you after that?"

"I didn't think you'd believe me." I tried to keep the pain from my voice with little success.

"I can't take it anymore. First it was spirits of dead children, then it was your sword... I'm tired, Alaric. I just want a normal life."

"Do you think you can handle a normal life?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure going to try."

"I risked my life for you."

She dropped her head, but her voice was still clear. "Do you think I don't know that? Do you think this is easy for me?"

I nodded. "Yes, Theona. I think it's all too easy, but that's okay. I really didn't expect any kind of commitment or integrity from a thief."

Her eyes flashed, but she never replied. Instead, she turned on her heel and walked out of my life forever. It was ironic. After all this time, I had finally gotten the last word, yet I still felt like the loser. I blinked to fight back the tears. Graham placed a gentle hand on my arm.

"I'm so sorry."

"So am I."

Though he stood by my bedside for a long time, neither of us spoke another word.

The next day, I received a visit from the Chancellor. He was wearing an outfit similar to the one he'd worn when he sat beside me in the arena. In his right hand he held the Sword of Truth, in his left the Drintu champion's shield. He laid them both against the wall. Then he turned and faced me.

"You are to be congratulated. That was as amazing a display of courage as I have ever seen."

"I would say thank you, but I'm still not talking to you."

"I understand completely, but at least hear me out." He waited for my nod before continuing. "The Labyrinth of Kerrenar is a very dangerous place. If we didn't conduct ourselves in this manner, we would soon be wiped out by the other races that dwell here. Whether you accept it or not, it is necessary for us to defend our borders."

"And that gives you the right to threaten my life?"

"Perhaps not. But it is our way. While you slept last night, I had quite a conversation with Graham. I wish I would have had that conversation before I sentenced you. It is not often I come across well-meaning creatures down here."

"Go on."

"We are not a mean spirited people, Alaric. We are like you. We do what we must to defend ourselves. Surely you can not fault us for that."

I wanted to lash out at him. I wanted to hurt him for all I had been through. I drew a deep breath and let it out. I was angry with Theona, not the Chancellor. "No, I don't suppose I can at that."

"Good. Let this magical shield be a token of our respect for you. You may stay as long as you like."

"That's very kind of you. What of my friends?"

"Graham is welcome to stay as well."

"What of Jeren and Theona?"

"They've continued their descent into the Labyrinth, though I can't imagine why anyone would want to enter such dangerous territory."

"Greed. They're looking for treasure."

"Treasure?" The rat-man seemed surprised. "There is no more treasure in the Labyrinth of Kerrenar. It's been gone for ages. Your friends are going to get themselves killed."

The thought of Theona lying dead tugged at my heart, but no more so than the thought of her and Jeren together. She had once assured me she had no interest in Jeren. Was it possible their relationship would remain platonic? No, I decided. There was too much common ground between them. In many ways, Jeren was a much better match for my Theona than I would ever be. It hurt to not have her, but if she could be happier with him, so be it.

"Theona's safety is no longer my problem. All I really want to do is get back to the surface."

The Drintu smiled. "There, I think we can be of some service, but not quite yet. You still have healing to do and once you're back on your feet, there will be a celebration held in your honor. You will stay for it, won't you?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

We continued to talk for a long time, until I grew tired and the Chancellor of Ezwindru left me. I was asleep only moments after he walked from the room.

"Alaric?"

I opened my eyes and looked around. The room was empty.

"Can you hear me?" It took me a moment to recognize that the Sword of Truth was speaking to me.

"Yes, I can hear you. Do I want to?"

The sword chuckled. "I just wanted to thank you."

I was quite taken aback. My weapon had never before addressed me so pleasantly. "For what?"

"For reuniting me with my sister. I'd like to introduce you to the Shield of Reckoning." I sat up in bed. The room spun. I had spent too long on my back.

"What!"

"Hello, Alaric," said a woman's voice in my head. "It's so nice to make your acquaintance."

"Look, I don't think I can deal with any more surprises. Don't tell me, you are somehow related to the Drintu warrior's shield."

"She's my sister."

Realization lit my eyes. "That's how I won. She took control and left him open for my thrust."

"Of course," replied the Sword of Truth. "My essence was imprisoned in this sword centuries ago by an enemy of our family. My sister's essence was imprisoned in the shield. The wizard then sent the shield into the Labyrinth of Kerrenar. He also changed the name of the Dangling Dagger, so no one would be able to find it. He hadn't counted on Jeren, apparently."

"Let me get this straight. The reason you wanted to go to the Labyrinth of Kerrenar was to find your sister?"

"That's about it."

"You might have said something."

"Sorry. After all I'd been through, I couldn't bring myself to trust you."

"So you mean now, instead of having one talking armament, I'll have two?"

"That's about the size of it."

"I hardly know what to say."

"Then say you'll have us and call it a day."

I smiled. "Graham isn't going to believe this."

"You don't have to tell him."

"Don't start with me. No more secrets, okay?"

"Okay."

I slowly sat up and let my aching legs dangle over the side of the bed. I stretched painfully and slowly shifted the weight to my feet. I was tired and weak, but at least I could stand. I limped a few steps from the bed, then returned. By the time I sat again, I was exhausted.

I lay back down, but didn't find sleep immediately. I was too busy thinking about the soul of a man imprisoned for centuries, deprived of the company of the only being that could really understand him. I finally fell into an uneasy sleep, filled with barely remembered dreams.

Graham and I stayed with the Drintu for several days. We learned a lot about their culture and even some of their language. We were treated well and I found I quite liked the rat-men.

I spent quite a bit of time thinking about Theona. While I worried about her at first, as the days passed, I managed to set aside the emotion. I couldn't protect her any longer. She had made her choice and there was nothing I could do about it. I did say a prayer for her safety though. I felt it was the least I could do.

After several weeks, I finally began to tire of my newfound fame. I was going to say something, but Graham beat me to it. It was late one night when he broached the subject.

"Alaric, I think we should think about leaving here."

"I couldn't agree more. I like the Drintu, but I wouldn't mind seeing the sky again."

"And I want to see my family."

I thought about the race of warrior giants that lived somewhere in the south. I'd grown up on stories of their adventures.

"Would you like some company?"

Graham placed a single massive hand on my shoulder. "I would be honored."

We still stayed on for several days longer. It wasn't as if we were in a rush. After all the running, it was finally nice to feel secure, if only for a short while.

Book III

Chapter Twenty-four

I was completely unprepared for the scream, for any number of reasons. For one thing, it cut through the darkness like a knife, carried on a chill wind that was as out of place as the sound. For another, my life had been uncharacteristically uneventful for several weeks now and I was just getting used to the slower pace. And finally, it carried within it a chord of sheer terror,

the likes of which I had never before encountered.

Graham was on his feet before me. I have often wondered how a man so large could move that fast. Even without his boots, he was over eight feet tall. I looked at him as I buckled on the Sword of Truth and grabbed the Shield of Reckoning, but didn't stop to pull on my own boots. From the sound of things, we didn't have much time.

Tindal was only a step behind the giant. He was the third and final member of our party. Though we'd only recently met, I liked the dapper swordsman, if for no other reason than he listened to me speak of my adventures with some semblance of rapt attention. Whether or not he believed any of it, I couldn't say.

The woods were dark, but the glow from my blade illuminated the landscape enough for me to see. A less agile man might have smashed into a tree, but not I. I settled for tripping over a root. Several steps ahead of me, I heard Graham's voice, though the insistent scream overshadowed his words. I climbed to my feet and kept running.

When I burst into the clearing, I stopped to take stock of the situation. The scene was like something out of a nightmare. Several large, red-cloaked individuals danced around the source of the offending noise, a woman tied to a stake. An unnatural ring of fire surrounded the woman, distant still, but slowly making its way toward her. Her stare was fixed on the flames, which she regarded with the type of horrified awe I usually reserve for the King's tax collectors. Graham looked in my direction, no doubt ready to take action on my cue.

Tindal had no such compunctions. He moved toward the woman, only at the last minute realizing the flames were high enough to keep him from her.

I pulled my blade and charged into the center of the dancers. They ignored my intrusion and continued to chant and circle. Only when I noticed I could hear the chanting, did I realize the screaming had stopped. I risked a glance in the direction of the stake. The woman was watching, eyes expressionless. I only had a moment to observe her, before the largest of the dancers turned toward me.

"Why have you come? Are you so impatient to experience your demise?"

"I've faced greater odds than this." I wasn't sure it was a true statement, but it sounded good.

For the second time in my life, it was a shout from Graham that saved me. "Alaric, behind you!"

I should have been more aware, but weeks of relative inactivity had made me careless. I whirled, only at the last moment, slicing a hand from one of the red-cloaks, rendering the golden dagger it held useless. Graham jumped in to stand behind me. They regarded us for only a moment before they broke rank. I took a halfhearted swipe at one as he ran past, but didn't pursue when it missed. I continued to watch until all seven vanished into the darkness. Only then, did I return my attention to the woman.

The flames were closer now and I knew time was running out. I dropped my sword and shield, removed the dagger from the severed hand and jumped through the flames, falling and rolling as soon as my feet touched the ground. The heat, as I passed through the wall of fire, was beyond intense, but I landed safely inside the ring. I kicked several logs away from the stake. This bought me enough time to cut her down. She was shaking, but seemed physically unharmed.

Now that I was closer, I could better make out her features. She was attractive, in a casual way, though she was more than somewhat disheveled at the moment. Hair as red as the flame, or perhaps it only looked that way by its light. Her green eyes were wide with equal parts hope and

desperation. I suspected her skin was fair beneath the soot.

She looked at me, then at the surrounding inferno. I could see the question in her eyes and it was a good one. Now that she was down, how would I get her out? I looked at her, then at the stake. I squatted with my back against the wood.

"Up you go."

She hesitated only briefly, before placing a foot on each shoulder. She used the post for balance, as I straightened my legs. Sweat poured down my face and into my eyes. I blinked several times, but it didn't help. Fortunately, the ring of fire was still a few feet away. I wasn't looking forward to its arrival.

Graham moved toward the flames, until I could see the pain clearly on his face. Still, he didn't flinch. Though he was outside the ring, he stood closer to it than I. For a pacifist, the giant was one of the bravest men I'd ever known.

"You're going to have to jump," I said. "I'm going to take a step in Graham's direction and he's going to catch you. Do you understand?"

She nodded, though she didn't look happy. Not that she had a choice. Fortunately, she was small and thin enough for me to easily support. I took a step away from the post. She shifted her weight from the pole to my shoulders. I felt her hands on top of my head and winced as she clutched my hair to keep her balance. I moved slowly forward, until there was only a thin wall of flame separating us from the giant. The heat tore at me, but I forced myself another step closer, closing my eyes tightly against the pain.

Graham's voice blared over the crackle of flames. "Jump. I'll catch you."

I opened my eyes just in time to see him pluck her from over the fire. I nodded approval, only now realizing rescuing myself would require some attention. I looked around for the thinnest and lowest portion of the inferno. Behind me, the flames had almost reached the post, which gave me an idea.

As I started to climb, the Sword of Truth spoke in my mind. He was still out there somewhere, beyond the flame. "This is suicide, Alaric."

"You have a better idea?"

I spoke aloud, certain the roar of the flames would prevent my new companion from hearing. If Graham heard, it didn't matter. He knew of my blade's rather wry intelligence.

"I suppose not. It was nice knowing you."

"As ever, your confidence in my abilities is staggering."

The sword performed the mental equivalent of a shrug, which I only barely noticed. I had reached the top of the pole, which was fortuitously high. I was also fortunate the top was flat, giving me something to stand on, if only barely. It would simply be a matter of pushing myself away from it, hopefully over the fire. I could feel the top of the flames licking my legs and knew I was out of time. I drew a breath and jumped.

I felt the flames around me and then I was through. I hit the ground and rolled, hoping to quickly extinguish myself, in case I'd caught fire. Tindal was on his way to my aid, though I was already climbing to my feet, when he reached me. He looked at me with newfound respect.

"That was amazing."

Graham was just behind him. "That was insane! Are you all right?"

I had to think about it for a few seconds. I realized I was hunched over and straightened to my full height. "I think I am. What about the girl?"

We turned to look at her. She sat off to the side, legs extended, rubbing her chafed wrists. I was not surprised she remained silent, as her throat was no doubt sore from recent activity. She

rubbed her ankles as well, before making her way shakily to her feet.

She regarded us with some apprehension. It didn't matter that we'd saved her. A woman alone in such a situation would be at our mercy, and until she could be certain of our intentions, she would be wary. I smiled to reassure her, though I think it only made her more nervous.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She nodded. "I will be. Thank you." Not surprisingly, her voice was a low rasp.

"You're fortunate we were close enough to come to your aid. I don't suppose many people travel this road."

"I will have to take your word for it, since I don't know where I am."

"You have a name?"

"I am called Aynslae."

"Alaric Swifthand, at your service."

She nodded, but remained silent.

"And how, Aynslae, is it that you happened to find yourself in your current situation?" asked Tindal. A note of suspicion tinged his voice.

"They attacked the caravan this afternoon, killed the family and took me."

"This group took a caravan? I find that hard to believe. What about the guards?" he persisted.

"The guards were on their payroll. They stood by and drank beer during the attack."

I gave Tindal a sharp look, hoping to silence him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I was just a servant and a mistreated one at that."

Tindal turned and walked a few steps away. I could see he wanted to continue the interrogation, but he deferred to me, perhaps impressed by my performance. I don't know what he was worried about. I couldn't see this small woman as a physical threat, and we didn't have anything worth stealing.

"You won't be mistreated here. I've been on the wrong end of a whipping post once too often myself."

It was her turn to be skeptical. I'm sure my appearance bespoke of no such mistreatment. I was determined to prove her wrong. "If you should decide to stay with us, I will protect you."

She smiled sadly. "Why? I am nothing more than a servant. I have no recourse. I have no skills, no papers, I can't read or write. I can not think but that you must have some hidden motive to treat a servant so."

I thought about it. What she said was true. Without money, she couldn't go off on her own and without our protection, she would fall prey to the first interested party. Indeed, why would I offer her protection without taking something in return. "Well, perhaps there is something you can do for me."

She nodded, smiled sadly and moved toward me. I held up a hand. "You can help set up and break down camp, just like the rest of us. You can talk to me and keep me company on the road. In exchange for that, I'll share my food and protect you."

Her smile faded. She studied me, as if she didn't believe her luck. "Why not just make use of me?"

I shrugged. "It's just not my style. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to return to camp and get some rest. There aren't enough hours until sunrise."

I turned and walked off into the night, flanked by Tindal and Graham. A quick glance assured me Aynslae followed immediately behind.

I didn't sleep well that night. I dreamt of Theona, deep in the Labyrinth of Kerrenar. Jeren was there too, but I wasn't. They were in horrible trouble and I couldn't help them. I kept trying to enter the dream myself, but failed time after time. Only after they had been claimed by darkness did I awaken, shivering and sweating at the same time.

Chapter Twenty-five

The days that followed were as routine as any I can remember. We walked all day, every day. Graham would sing, until we asked him to stop. Tindal listened raptly to my tales of adventure, until Graham could no longer stand it. And Aynslae remained aloof, doing anything asked of her, but never volunteering to perform even the simplest chore.

I thought that odd behavior for a servant, though it was possible she was testing her new situation, seeing just how far she could go. I was also impressed with her conversational abilities. While she never volunteered information, I could tell from her choice of words, she was more educated than she let on. I couldn't imagine why she would choose to keep that information from us, but it didn't really matter at the time.

We headed south toward Rikkordia, what we humans called Gigantia. The city was the legendary home of Graham's people and was known for its great warriors and skillful craftsmen. Graham, as large as he seemed to me, was not particularly large for one of his kind. While I happily supported my friend's urge to visit his family, I wasn't exactly thrilled with meeting a race of warriors, twice my size... especially with *my* penchant for trouble.

Tindal didn't seem to mind though. Nothing seemed to bother him, not even the oppressive heat that seemed to increase daily as we continued south. I thought about him then.

We had met him on the road, after the Drintu showed Graham and I the way out of the Labyrinth of Kerrenar. We were quite relieved to find ourselves back in the present instead of the past, as I feared might be the case. Apparently the present day Labyrinth could only be entered from the Dangling Dagger, two hundred years ago. It was a truly brilliant way to hide the place.

Tindal was another traveler, like ourselves, wandering the world with no real plan. He was only a hair taller than me and somewhat thinner, though I wasn't heavy myself. His hair was black and short and he wore a goatee which he kept neatly trimmed. His garb was too fine to be peasant garb, but not rich enough to be worn by nobility. Still, it was impeccable. The dust and grime that seemed to find my clothes and boots, avoided his for some reason.

Tindal was as good-natured a fellow as I'd ever encountered, yet there was something about him that was a little off. It wouldn't have surprised me if I later found out he had been raised by wolves, or a field of wheat for that matter. Tindal, in fact, did have a secret, but it would be a long time before he chose to reveal it.

Nights were the hardest for me. They hadn't been before we'd met Aynslae, but I suppose her presence, in some way, reminded me of how lonely I had been since Theona left me. Not that she had always been nice to me, but traveling with Graham, as good a man as he was, couldn't fulfill me the way my relationship with Theona had. The fact was, though I was hurt by her decision to go off with Jeren, I accepted much of the responsibility for the separation. I had lied to her about the nature of the Sword of Truth and she had lost her ability to trust me. I can't say I blamed her.

In Theona's absence, I had tried, fruitlessly I might add, to get to know Aynslae better. I

had, several times, tried to question her about her past. As with all things, she would answer anything I asked, but with minimal detail. I wasn't certain if she was shy or taciturn and it didn't matter. After a while even Tindal got tired of attempting to interrogate her and we had to content ourselves with speculation as to her past.

So now it was just the six of us. Myself, Graham, Tindal, Aynslae, the Sword of Truth and the Shield of Reckoning, the last of which, against all odds, also speaks. I won't go into further detail about my rather eccentric armaments at this time, but I will say this. Since their reunion, the Sword of Truth and the Shield of Reckoning have spent more time talking to each other than to me. Over the weeks, I had learned to tune them out, though at times I found their gentle banter a source of amusement.

We reached the outskirts of Rikkordia about a week after I cut Aynslae down from her pole. By that time, she was finally beginning to suspect I was as good as my word.

Certainly, she began spending more time closer to me. Or it might just be that the traffic we met coming north consisted largely of well-armed giants that didn't, at first sight, look all that friendly. Whatever the reason, I didn't mind a spot of female company, even if there was something decidedly odd about her.

As the days passed, I began to suspect Aynslae had been lying about her past, but it didn't really matter to me. The source of my suspicion seemed barely out of reach; like the way you sometimes see a flash of movement from the corner of your eye that's gone by the time you turn. There was definitely more to our reluctant servant than met the eye, but I didn't care. I found I had grown to like her in spite of her reticence.

Rikkordia was an interesting city. Unlike the human cities of the north, Rikkordia was more of a sprawling village. Most of the houses were made of sun-baked clay and were, to my surprise, hard as stone. Because they were all a single level, the city was huge. Nor did it seem to have a beginning or end. It simply spread out into the surrounding areas, with no seeming rhyme or reason. There were no streets, no walls, nothing to divide one section from another, or indeed the city from the surrounding wilderness. This last was particularly odd to me, since almost all major cities in the north have huge walls around them to protect them from attack. Perhaps the giants didn't fear attack or perhaps no one had ever been stupid enough to make the attempt.

Another quality that made the city surreal to me, was the lack of color. Everything was constructed of the same material, so every structure had the same gray-green hue. Nor did the giants dress colorfully. I thought that if I had to stay here for any length of time, I might go mad, just from the monotony of the surroundings.

None of this seemed to bother Graham, who was happy to be home. He navigated between the dwellings, as if he knew exactly where he was going. How that was possible, I couldn't imagine, since everything looked exactly like everything else. After only a few minutes, I was completely lost.

Tindal was taking it all in with a sort of bemused detachment, while Aynslae stayed even closer to my side, a circumstance I didn't at all mind. We wandered for a long time before we came to a house that looked, for the life of me, like every other. Graham walked up to the doorway and entered. Like all the dwellings we'd seen so far, there were no doors or windows, but rather holes where they should have been. I found this an odd arrangement and made a mental note to ask Graham about it later.

Tindal and I looked at each other, but didn't enter. Not at first. Graham had not invited us in and so we stood out in the hot sun and baked like the clay. Flies were plentiful here. After a

time, I gave up swatting them. They had no such compunctions about biting me however and after a while, I thought I could learn to hate it here.

It was roughly at this point that a particularly large giant approached us. I could tell by his weapons and his carriage he was a warrior of no small skill. Almost instinctively, I placed my hand on the hilt of my sword and jerked it away when I realized what I was doing. There was no way I was about to threaten a giant in his own territory.

He looked us over without slowing and entered the house without saying a word. Only a moment later, there was a loud shout from inside and then another. Tindal and I exchanged glances and charged in. Aynslae, rather intelligently, remained outside with the flies.

Inside, the newcomer had grabbed Graham and thrown him to the ground. Before we could intervene, he dove and landed directly on top of my now prone friend. Graham struggled to get out from under him, but found it impossible. I drew my sword and approached. What happened next, happened very fast.

Graham struggled out from under his assailant just enough to get a glimpse of me. Tindal moved forward to support my effort, though he didn't draw his weapon. It was roughly at this point that the larger of the two giants became aware of me.

He growled and lashed out with his foot, kicking me roughly across the dirt floor. Graham found his feet. Tindal was clearly uncertain about approaching the melee. There was no telling whether his reaction was born of cowardice or wisdom, though in this instance his hesitation turned out to be the best possible circumstance.

Only now that Graham stood beside his attacker could I see how much smaller he was. I took a step forward, but Graham raised his hand. I took a final halting step and waited for him to say something.

"Alaric, I'd like you to meet my brother, Rolland."

I paused and studied them. There seemed to be little resemblance between my pacifist friend and the huge warrior beside him. Before I could speak, Graham continued. "He was just happy to see me, Alaric."

"So he grabbed you and threw you to the ground?"

Graham nodded. "Admittedly, he was somewhat over-enthusiastic, but then, it has been a long time since we've seen each other."

His brother walked forward until he stood directly in front of me. I looked up to meet his gaze, determined not to flinch.

"You are very brave for a little man. Your presence honors our home."

Only at those words did I sheath my sword. "Ummmm, thanks."

I still couldn't believe I'd gotten out of it with a whole skin.

"I'm sure the High Elder would like to hear all about your adventures, Graham. You were planning on reporting to him, were you not?"

Even I couldn't miss the tone of accusation in the statement.

"Of course. I just wanted to see the family first."

"You know the rules..."

Graham shrugged.

"Go now. Fulfill your obligation and we will celebrate your return afterwards."

Graham nodded, turned and walked out. Tindal and I joined him. Aynslae was waiting outside. If she was surprised to see us alive, she didn't show it.

"What the hell was all that?" I asked.

"Whenever a giant goes on an outing, he is required to recount it to the High Elder. The

Elder will then decide if the adventure did justice to the traveler's family name. Honor is very important among our people." He lowered his voice so only I could hear it. "Alaric... if the High Elder finds out the truth about me, I will never be able to face my family again."

I remembered finding out how Prince Dendrac had blackmailed the giant into doing his bidding. Graham's family were all warriors and his own refusal to fight would indeed darken their reputation.

"You have nothing to worry about. Your secret is safe with me."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Alaric."

The High Elder's house was like every other. No palaces for the highest ranking official of the giants. In fact, with the exception of ruling the race, there was nothing to set him, or his home, apart from every other. I later learned the giants saw leadership as grave responsibility, rather than a privilege. There was no status associated with the position, but rather a great pressure to live by the rules perfectly, thus setting an example for the rest of the population.

By the time we reached the Elder's house it was just getting dark and I was beginning to feel tired. Apparently the long trek, followed by the false alarm, left me drained. The heat, I'm certain, played a part in it. The walk to the Elder's hut seemed to take forever. By the time we reached the place, I was ready to turn in for the night.

I didn't look forward to standing outside, but I certainly wasn't about to enter without an invitation. Graham turned and motioned for me to follow, and though Tindal wasn't invited, he joined us inside as well. Aynslae, perhaps because she had been a servant, did not.

At first glance, I was almost disappointed. The High Elder was smaller than Graham and looked to be about the same age. I had taken the word 'Elder' literally, though that was not, apparently, the case. The Elder examined us before addressing Graham.

"Well met, traveler. You have a report for me?"

Tindal and I turned toward Graham and waited expectantly. He paused for a long while, perhaps to gather his thoughts. When he spoke, his voice was strong and steady. As his words unfolded, I found myself plunged into the past, remembering, but also experiencing it for the first time through Graham's eyes. Only then did I realize how little Graham spoke about our adventures. I suppose with me around, it was a good thing.

"I left here with Prince Dendrac, as you know, looking for the Lost Labyrinth of Kerrenar. Prince Dendrac was later slain by a thief who took the magical tome that had belonged to my family for generations, along with a magical key that had been provided by the Prince."

I held my breath as the story progressed, until I realized he wasn't going to name me as the murderer. I almost sighed relief, but caught myself.

"I tracked his murderer across the Kingdom until at last, in Modron, I caught up with him. Amazingly, the thief had somehow managed to solve the puzzle and discover the whereabouts of the Labyrinth. When I learned of this, I knew I couldn't kill him and bury the secret forever. Instead we joined forces and penetrated the place, looking for the treasure reputed to be there."

"Alas, there was no treasure, though danger and wonders abounded. It was during my time in the Labyrinth that I found new respect for my traveling companion. Thoughts of revenge faded from my heart, for I knew to kill him would be wrong. Especially because there were circumstances surrounding the Prince's murder that still bothered me."

My new found relief began to fade as his tale unfolded. Graham turned to look at me and the High Elder followed his gaze. Suddenly, I felt very uncomfortable. I had agreed to keep his secret, why couldn't he keep mine?

"What bothered you, Graham?" The High Elder's attention was completely focused on me. I shifted uncomfortably under that steady gaze.

I was about to speak, when darkness descended suddenly. Not the kind that accompanies night, but something more sinister like a thick fog. I drew my blade, hoping its glow would be visible, but even directly before my eyes, I couldn't see it. Reluctantly I sheathed it. I didn't want to accidentally injure one of my friends, or the High Elder either, for that matter.

I could hear Graham's voice calling my name as if from a great distance. There was the brief sound of a scuffle, then a groan of pain. I took a few hesitant steps forward, but stopped when I felt something move past me. I reached for it and felt something pressed into my hand. More sounds, distant and hard to place. I shook my head to clear it and tried to make sense of the item I now held.

Even without benefit of sight, I felt I knew what it was, though how it came to be here was beyond me.

Suddenly the darkness faded and everything became clear. It had happened again. The High Elder lay on the ground in a puddle of blood and I stood nearby, holding a dripping dagger. The very same dagger that had once been used to frame me for the death of another.

Chapter Twenty-six

For a time that must have been shorter than it seemed, we all stood and stared at each other. It was Graham who finally broke the silence.

"Alaric? Would you mind telling me what's going on?"

I looked at him, then at the dagger in my hands. "I honestly don't know. All I can tell you is I didn't do this."

"You were awfully fast to draw your sword on Graham's brother," said Tindal.

I turned to face him, momentarily annoyed by his lack of loyalty. Then I thought about it and realized that in his place, I'd probably feel much the way he did.

"That's true, but I didn't know it was his brother at the time. Graham and I have been through a lot. I wasn't about to sit by and watch him get mauled. I noticed you weren't exactly placing yourself in any danger."

"Are you calling me a coward?"

"Why shouldn't I state the plain truth?"

"Enough!" Graham's voice quickly slammed a lid on the accusations.

He walked forward and knelt beside the High Elder. I held my breath while he performed a quick, but thorough examination. When he looked up, there were tears rolling down his cheeks, but his voice was clear, when he spoke.

"He's dead, Alaric. If you didn't kill him, who did?"

"There are only three of us in the room. I didn't do it and I strongly suspect you didn't. What about it, Tindal? Have you ever seen a dagger like this?"

He studied it, then met my gaze, unflinching. "No, Alaric. I have never seen a dagger like it. I don't suppose you have."

"Actually, I have seen this dagger before, or one just like it. It's used by a powerful sect of assassins. I once had a run in with one of their members."

"Naturally, you survived. Tell me, how is it you managed to pull that off? After all you've

been through, I might think it would take a great wizard, or perhaps even a skilled assassin to last as long as you have."

I glared at him, but before I could respond, Graham rose and spoke.

"This is getting us nowhere. At the moment, we are in terrible danger. Alaric perhaps more than the rest of us, but few will believe he did this on his own. We were all present and will likely share the same fate."

"Okay, what are our options?" asked Tindal.

"We can stay and try to explain it, I suppose." My attention was focused on Tindal. I wanted to give Graham some time alone with his grief.

"Oh, good call."

I ignored him. "Or we can run and have the entire population after us for the rest of our lives. Why does this kind of thing always have to happen to me?"

"You've been successful so far," Graham reminded me.

"Which only means his luck is due to run out!"

I glared at Tindal, then turned my attention to the giant. "We have only one option. We need to solve the mystery."

Graham stroked the Elder's cheek with the back of his hand. In spite of the urgency of the situation, I was reluctant to rush him, though I kept staring at the hut's entrance, half expecting another giant to put in an appearance. When Graham looked up again, his face had taken on a look of determination that seemed almost out of character for my easygoing friend.

"I'm sorry, Alaric, but I can't go with you."

"What do you mean?"

"If I run now, I will be admitting my guilt in this matter. I have a responsibility to my people. I have to make known what happened here."

"But I didn't kill him!"

"I believe you. And I will tell them that, but it doesn't matter. I must stay and suffer the consequences. If I don't, my family's reputation will suffer. I cannot be the cause of that."

"Is that reputation more important than your life?"

"Yes, Alaric, it is."

I sighed and walked forward to stand beside him. Even kneeling, he was almost as tall as me. "I can't stay."

"I know that." He rose and looked down at me.

There were tears in my eyes. "I'm going to miss you."

"And I will miss you, but you cannot afford to wait any longer."

Graham was right and I knew it. There would be time to mourn our separation later, but at the moment, I had to get moving. But Graham wasn't finished yet.

"Tindal... in spite of the words spoken between the two of you today, I can assure you Alaric is one of the bravest, most compassionate men I know. I realize this looks bad, but it won't have been the first time circumstances have conspired to make him look guilty."

I thought then about my experience with the passengers. Could they have somehow returned and taken over my body again? If so, who was the other player in the game? I rejected the possibility almost immediately. It was unlikely for such an event to occur even once. It didn't seem possible it could happen again.

On the other hand, I couldn't think of any other explanation for what had transpired. Once again, life was busy making decisions for me, while I blindly blundered along. I was tempted to curse my fate, but decided against it. It would have to wait for later, when I had the time.

I nodded to Tindal and motioned for him to follow. I tried to avoid looking at Graham as I left the hut, but didn't quite succeed. Once outside, I forced the him from my mind, though that last glimpse would haunt me for weeks to come.

Aynslae was waiting, a question in her eyes. I only now realized she had not followed us in.

"Did you see anyone out here?"

She couldn't miss the urgency in my voice. "No. Why, what's wrong?"

"I'll explain later. We have to get moving."

I walked quickly between the houses, hoping I was heading toward the edge of town. Aynslae looked briefly at Tindal before joining me. Considering our exchange, I was sure Tindal would not stay with us, but he surprised me and turned to follow.

I don't think I can ever forget our panicked flight from Rikkordia. Everywhere we looked, giant warriors moved between dwellings. At each encounter, we were more and more certain we were the subject of their interest. Yet each time, they passed with nothing more than a curious glance. It was well over an hour before I managed to navigate our trio out of the city and into the surrounding countryside. I wondered how long we had before the giants mounted a pursuit.

As I half walked, half stumbled along, I found myself thinking about Graham and his honor, then tried not to think about what that honor would cost him. It hurt me to abandon him that way. It was there, just leaving the city behind, that I made a decision. Somehow, I would find out what happened and return to Gigantia to prove it. Somehow, I would find a way to clear Graham's name.

We left the city traveling east, into an area as barren and foreboding as any I'd encountered. Rocky crags and outcroppings appeared with increasing frequency, limiting the direction of our travel. Even had we wanted to turn north, we were channeled like water, flowing, always flowing south.

We wandered through a series of shallow, natural valleys that led to more of the same. Sometimes the walls were low enough to see over, revealing dozens of pathways cut into the stone. In other places, the walls rose ten feet above our heads, tickling feelings of claustrophobia I never knew I possessed. In spite of my fatigue, I stepped up the pace, hoping to get through the natural maze as quickly as possible. It only now began to occur to me that if we didn't soon find water and provisions, we would be in trouble.

We walked throughout the night, not daring to stop. By morning we were beyond tired, but I still felt it would not be wise to rest without finding a well concealed area. Of course, considering the surroundings, there were precious few places that weren't concealed. Yet I derived no security from the observation.

If we were pursued and some of the giants we had passed somehow recalled our direction of travel, any party pursuing us would be funneled to the same approximate place we now found ourselves. So, exhausted as we were, we continued to move until sometime in the mid-afternoon.

Finally we could go no further. We stopped in a particularly narrow crevice that wound its way into a dead end. I didn't like the idea of not having an escape route, but then, a single entrance is far easier to defend than two.

I think we all slept for a bit, but not long. I felt myself drift in and out of dreams, until an hour or two later, when I forced myself to my feet and, after much cajoling, convinced my two companions to continue our flight. We hadn't been long on our way, when Tindal started talking.

"I have to tell you, Alaric. I've listened and listened to your tales of adventure, but I didn't really believe any of them. They were all just a bit too improbable. But now, I think I'm

beginning to see. You're cursed, Alaric. The Gods have it in for you. Had I known that before, I'd have never joined up with you."

Aynslae looked at me. I shrugged. I considered it entirely possible Tindal was correct. Certainly, I couldn't argue the point. There was too much evidence supporting his accusation. When it became obvious I wasn't going to reply, the Sword of Truth leapt to my defense. Of course, I was the only one who could hear him.

"You're not cursed, Alaric. You're blessed."

"How do you figure?" I said it aloud. At this point, I didn't care what my companions thought of me.

Apparently Tindal thought I was answering him, but I never heard his reply. I was too busy concentrating on the sword's.

"Think about it. If you had stayed in Modron, you'd be a palace guard still, making just enough to survive. You wouldn't have a magic sword and shield. You wouldn't have the skills you currently possess. You wouldn't have met Graham, for that matter. And even though things didn't work out with Theona, you did have a good time with her while you were together. And you're free, Alaric. You can go anywhere, do anything. How many people in the world can make that claim?

"With your skill, you could become a guard on a Caravan, a paid mercenary, even an assassin, if that is what you wished. Your abilities are indeed remarkable. Not to mention if the Gods were against you, you'd never have survived as long as you have. If anything, the powers that be are protecting you, for reasons of their own."

I thought long and hard about my sword's words. Tindal had thankfully stopped speaking. Aynslae had moved away from me to a safe distance. Perhaps she had been affected by my companion's tirade. I didn't care. Was it good fortune or bad that had brought me to this place? I guess I'll never really know.

It was almost dusk when we chanced upon a party of giants. Actually, party is probably an overstatement, as there were only three of them. However, when dealing with beings that large, it felt as if we were watching a small army. Tindal was the first to comment.

"That's just terrific. Now what do we do?"

"We approach them."

"Are you insane?"

"Sometimes, but not now I think. It's not very likely they're from Rikkordia. There's no way they could have found us so quickly. Therefore, there is no reason to believe this party of giants would have anything against us. We can make up a story, tell it to them and enlist their aid. At the very least, they might give us some food and water."

"And if you're wrong?"

I thought about what the Sword of Truth had said. "Let's just say I'm feeling lucky today."

Tindal looked at me strangely and didn't press the issue. Aynslae, who still had no idea why we had suddenly fled, looked puzzled, but said nothing.

Trusting my new found optimism, I approached, hoping I wasn't making a big mistake.

Chapter Twenty-seven

By the time we were within hailing range, one of the giants had taken notice of us. He alerted his two companions. They stood and watched, apparently surprised anyone as small as we, would approach anyone as large as them. I was a bit surprised myself, all things considered. Even more so, when I realized one of the group was a woman. I had never seen a woman giant before. Had she been a couple of feet shorter, she'd have been downright attractive. Considering our circumstances, I wasn't about to hit on her anyway.

"Well, well... what have we here." The first of the giants was almost smirking.

"Sorry to intrude. We've somehow managed to lose our way. We're almost out of food and water and we were hoping you might direct us to a nearby city." Standing among them, I felt almost the same way I did surrounded by the walls of rock. "Preferably a human city."

The giant chuckled. "Glad to be of service. I'm Drake. Be welcome. We were about to eat. Why don't you join us?"

Tindal looked nervous, but shrugged. I smiled and accepted. Strangely enough, Aynslae didn't seem at all perturbed. Perhaps she didn't realize precisely how dire our situation was, or maybe she was in shock. At least she was hovering closer to me than she had been on the road.

Only at that realization, did I understand how lonely I'd been for female companionship. And it was even worse now that Graham was gone. Not that he was a replacement for Theona, but I liked him immensely and he had been good company.

Of course, Aynslae hadn't shown any interest in me at all, which was beginning to bother me. If I wasn't distracted by the fact I was fleeing for my life, I'd have been downright hurt.

A half hour later found us sitting around a fire intermingled with giants, sharing a meal of rations that tasted better than they had any right to. So good, in fact, it was almost worth the days of hunger. Sitting there eating, I could almost forget I was the subject of a hunt. Dinner conversation consisted of introductions and light banter. It turned out, the three were siblings.

Drake was the largest of the trio and apparently the leader. I had already surmised his position, as he was the one who had invited us to dine with them. Long black hair, almost black eyes and a short dark beard, made him look rather sinister, but his smile was infectious and soon even Tindal seemed to have stopped worrying.

The woman was named Kharrah. I had always wondered what a giantess would be like and that night, at dinner, I found out. She was, of course, much larger than the women I'd known, but she was proportioned perfectly so that it was only noticeable when she was beside me. Her hair was light brown, her eyes even a lighter brown, an eye color I had never seen before. Each time she smiled her eyes sparkled. The effect was so striking I found myself looking for it more and more as the meal progressed. By the end of that meal, she wasn't a giant to me, but a woman. I held no illusions though. I could never see myself dating anyone I had to climb a ladder to kiss.

Leif, the younger brother, looked very much like Drake, but with shorter hair. He was somewhat quieter, but no less good-natured. I was just beginning to let my guard down, when Tindal started a conversation that would change the course of our future.

"So, where are you folk heading?"

The giants looked at each other, uncomfortably. Apparently, their goal was not something they were willing to discuss.

"We're hunting," said Drake, finally.

"How long have you been at it?"

"A couple of weeks now."

"I see." Tindal looked at me and I knew the issue wasn't going to end there. Drake

seemed relieved by my companion's easy acceptance of his answer. I almost changed the subject, but decided against it. Like Tindal, I too was curious.

After a few minutes of silence, Tindal looked up from his meal and smiled. "You might consider trying something a bit different."

Even Aynslae shot me a puzzled glance. I shrugged. I had no idea where he was going with this.

"Why do you say that?" asked Drake.

"If you've been hunting for a couple of weeks and you've killed nothing more than dried fruit and cheese, you're probably in the wrong business."

Aynslae's look of curiosity turned to one of panic. I held up a hand to silence her and perhaps calm her, though my own heart was racing. Given the situation, I don't think I'd have risked our host's ire.

I saw a fire kindled in Drake's eyes. Then he seemed to relax. "Who said we were hunting for meat?"

Tindal hung his head in mock shame. "I apologize. It was silly of me to assume. You know, if you're looking for something specific, Alaric here might be able to help you. He is widely traveled and sees much that is hidden."

He dropped his head to hide a mischievous smile. He needn't have bothered. Three large pair of brown eyes all turned in my direction.

I looked at Tindal and tried to allow a note of anger into my voice, a task currently not at all difficult. "My friend is mistaken. I am but a simple traveler."

Kharrah looked at me and smiled. I felt distinctly uncomfortable. "I don't believe you."

"Why not?"

"Because no simple traveler carries a magical shield."

"What makes you think its magical?"

She pointed. The Shield of Reckoning, true to form, was glowing slightly. I sighed, then chuckled. "A minor enchantment. Barely more than a parlor trick."

Leif leaned forward and whispered into his brother's ear. Drake nodded and spoke.

"Tell me, what do you know of the Boots of Darkening?"

The Sword of Truth spoke before I did. It was times like this I was thankful only I could hear him.

"A powerful magical relic, believed lost in the Bloodless Wars. Supposedly makes you invisible, though that's a simplification. It makes you virtually impossible to detect. In addition to hiding your presence from others, it also allows you to move about in complete silence. If I recall correctly, the wearer doesn't even cast a shadow."

I wondered if the Boots of Darkening were somehow related to him, perhaps a distant cousin. I repeated the information. Tindal's eyes widened at Drake's nod of agreement. I smiled, mysteriously. I have to admit, I was enjoying myself.

"And do you know where to find it?" asked Drake.

I waited for the sword to speak. When it didn't, I improvised. "If I did, it wouldn't be lost, now would it?"

"Good point. They say it still may be found in the Caverns of Longing. It is for those fabled Caverns we are searching."

"And you think they're around here?" I had never heard of the Caverns of Longing, but wasn't going to let that stop me.

"As a matter of fact, we have good reason to believe they are very close to where we are

now, as little as a day away. Perhaps you'd like to join us on our venture."

I smiled slightly. Revenge was going to be sweet. "I never make that kind of decision without consulting the oracle." I turned toward Tindal. "What about it Oracle? Is it a good idea?"

Tindal's eyes widened, but he wasn't done yet. "Yes, great one. Let us accompany these men."

Somehow, I managed to hide my anger. What was he doing? The last place we wanted to stay was in the area.

If the giants noticed anything amiss they gave no hint of it.

"Excellent," said Drake. "The more the merrier, I always say. Especially in a place as dangerous as the Caverns of Longing."

"Did you say dangerous?" asked Tindal.

"Certainly. You are aware of the legends, are you not?"

"Of course I am. I was simply pointing out that dangerous was severely understating the matter, is all."

The giants might have accepted his statement at face value, but I could see how pale he was when he said it. I would think it served him right, but since I was going to be with him when and if we found it, it was hardly something I could gloat over.

Soon after, the conversation wound down. I suppose our hosts sensed Tindal and I were done talking. Aynslae, of course, hadn't spoken at all. Finally I pleaded fatigue and moved off to the side, to find a place to rest. Tindal and Aynslae lay down nearby.

I didn't sleep right away. Instead I lay awake wondering just what I'd gotten myself into and how to get out of it. Tindal snored nearby, reminding me with each irritating rasp that for once, I hadn't gotten *myself* into anything. I rose, walked over and kicked him in the side. In the distance, three mounds lay sleeping and thankfully silent.

Tindal opened his eyes. "This had better be important."

"Is that so? Exactly why did you volunteer us to join this venture?"

"Because I wanted to see the great Alaric Swifthand in action. Isn't that reason enough?"

"You know as well as I, we're trying to get as far away from here as possible. What the hell were you thinking?"

He sighed. "I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry we all can't be like the great Alaric Swifthand, who always knows what to do in every given situation. I've never had to run for my life before. I don't really know what I'm doing. To tell you the truth, I might be safer marching into hell with the giants, than into Athour with you. You may not see it, Alaric, but you're not exactly good luck."

"Maybe I should let you go with Drake and company. Aynslae and I don't need you." I wasn't certain that the statement was true, but I was angry.

"I'm sure *you* don't. As for Aynslae, don't be surprised if she ends up accompanying me instead of you. Now, if you don't mind."

Without another word, he lay back down and closed his eyes.

I walked back to my own patch of ground, couldn't quite find it, and gave up. I swept away a few larger rocks with my feet, then thought about laying down. The area was hardly conducive to sleeping. I thought then I should just go. Disappear and leave them to their adventure.

Not far away, Aynslae sighed. I turned to look at her. She was asleep and apparently dreaming. I thought about what Tindal had said. Would she go with him into danger, instead of with me?

The wiser part of my mind decided it was time for a lecture. Dammit, Alaric, when will you stop fooling yourself? The girl has no interest in you. Turn around and go. Now. Don't wait. No! Don't look at her again either.

I looked at her. She was vulnerable. Moreover, I had promised to protect her. And I couldn't do that by walking away. I cursed my honor, then shifted my gaze a bit further to where Kharrah lay. I shook my head. The giantess certainly didn't need my protection.

When I finally lay down, I didn't sleep well, for I knew it wasn't honor that kept me here, but some sort of thinly veiled, completely moronic lust. I cursed myself several times, before I finally succumbed to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The next morning was hot, humid and altogether too bright. I was sweating before we even started walking. Flies were common here and apparently hungry. They were also big, black and bold. I had sustained a number of painful bites during the night and a couple before breakfast. I soon learned to swat them fast, before they had a chance to settle down and dine on me.

As if the flies and heat weren't enough, Tindal talked incessantly. After the first few minutes, I ignored him, which didn't seem to bother him at all. It's not as if he left me an opening to respond anyway.

I had thought about last night's conversation and considered going off on my own. I might have too, but Tindal's comment about Aynslae weighed on my mind. I wasn't sure she wouldn't rather stay with him and, as little interest as she'd shown in me, I still wasn't willing to give up on her. I suppose I have always been a fool for women; I just didn't realize how much of a fool until that moment.

Only after we'd been on the road for an hour, did I begin to suspect why Tindal was talking. He was nervous. While he was no stranger to the sword, he had never actually had any real adventure. He was talking to hear himself. I thought back to my own expedition into the Labyrinth of Kerrenar and suddenly found myself feeling sorry for him.

I dropped back until I was beside him and touched his arm. He stopped talking and looked at me.

"Are you nervous?"

He turned from me, so he didn't have to look me in the eye. "Why would I be?"

"Have you ever been on this sort of expedition?"

"No, I haven't. And if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be on one now."

"Actually, I'm not sure I can completely take the blame for this outing, but that's not important. Let me give you a bit of advice. Adventures happen. You have to deal with them. There's no other option... at least, there wasn't for me. Now if we do find these caverns, we're going to likely be in considerable danger. We're going to need to help each other. The last thing we need is me blaming you or you blaming me. So whatever you feel you have to say, get it out now."

He dropped his eyes to his feet and lowered his voice, so only I could hear him. "I'm scared, Alaric."

I almost laughed, but caught myself. "Of course you're scared. Do you want to know

why?"

"Yes."

"Because you're not an idiot. Only an idiot marches off into the unknown, without feeling fear."

"So you must be fine then."

"Dammit, man, what the hell is wrong with you? I'm in the same situation you're in. I'm in just as much danger."

"No, Alaric, you're not. There are things you don't know about me."

"Such as?"

"If I told you...."

"Yes?"

"You'd know them. And I didn't keep them a secret this long, to reveal them now."

"I see."

He didn't say anything else and I didn't want to push. I slowed my pace and allowed him to pull ahead of me. For a long time, I thought about the conversation, my imagination filling in the missing information. What was there Tindal felt he couldn't tell me and how would it affect the rest of our journey? I had a feeling it wouldn't be long before I found out.

We traveled all that day and part of the next, before Drake announced we had arrived. I followed his line of sight to a tiny fissure in the side of a rock wall. Had I passed it on my own, I'd barely have given it a second glance. I couldn't imagine how the giants were going to get through. I wasn't even sure I could make it myself.

"So this is it?"

"Yes."

"Not very impressive, is it?" I tried to keep the amusement out of my voice.

Drake shrugged, then smiled. "Since you're so brave, perhaps you should be the first one in."

I reconsidered the entrance, paused and took a step forward. Aynslae moved as if to intercept me. Her eyes glistened, though I wasn't sure if it was from fear or excitement. It was during that moment of hesitation that Tindal strode forward.

"Oh, what the hell."

He moved quickly toward the crevice and, without another word, turned sideways and edged his way in. Within only a minute, he was lost to sight. Apparently, after only a few feet, the crevice turned.

I knelt, opened my pack and lit a lantern. A few moments later, Tindal emerged and blinked. I walked forward and held it out. Without a word, he winced, took it and reentered. Several of the giant's snickered, but Tindal was out of sight before I could see his reaction.

I waited until the light had faded before I entered myself. Then I moved quickly to catch up with him, or at least, as quickly as the narrow passage allowed.

The corridor was uneven and not easy to navigate. At length, the area opened into a cavern. Tindal stood in the center, eyes everywhere. I moved to stand beside him. To my surprise, Aynslae was the next one through. She looked around cautiously before joining us.

It was a long time before the giants made it in. They had to remove most of their possessions and place them in sacks, which they held before them. While I waited, my eyes adjusted to the light and I could make out more clearly some of the details of the place.

It was a large open area, filled with stalactites and flowstone. Several areas in the

distance glowed pale green. It seemed like just a short time ago I had seen something like them for the first time. Tindal pointed.

"What's that?"

"Phosphorescent lichen."

"Excuse me?"

"Glowing mushrooms. Remember I told you of the underground civilization of the Drintu? That's how they illuminated their city."

"You didn't make that up?"

"No, Tindal, I didn't. Whatever I've told you about my adventures was true."

He turned and looked at the lichen and then back to me. "I thought you were an imaginative braggart. I never dreamed such places exist."

"Most people don't. They remain in their city of birth and never take the time to visit the next. They live repetitive, empty lives, but never know any better, because no one has ever shown them anything else. To you, this may be insanity, but I've been through it before and can say with some certainty this: the world is a more beautiful and magical place than you have ever dreamed. I wouldn't trade my life of adventures for a safe and secure old age. When this is over, if you somehow manage to survive, you will thank me."

His eyes widened. "And if I don't?"

"Then you'll be dead and won't care."

Tindal looked as if he were about to retort and thought better of it. Maybe he was learning, but more likely, he couldn't think of anything witty to say.

Drake had just forced his way into the cavern and I moved to meet him, leaving Tindal to ponder my words. The giant had stripped off even his leather jerkin to make it and both his chest and back were scraped and bleeding. While we waited patiently for the others, I decided to find out a bit more about this place.

"Drake, how do you know that these are the Caverns of Longing?"

"I saw and memorized a map when I was younger. The reference points were obscure, but a few of the notes scrawled in the margin hinted at the area. I've been searching for the landmarks for years and only recently have discovered enough of them to pinpoint the entrance. It's really quite remote."

"So I gathered. And these boots for which you search. Tell me of them."

The Sword of Truth has already told me what it knew, but I was hoping for more.

"There's not much to tell. They are ancient and magical. They are said to fit anyone, no matter the size of their foot and to bestow invisibility upon the person who dons them."

"There are five of us. If one person gets the boots, how are the rest of us to be compensated?"

"There will no doubt be more treasure than just the boots. Whatever we find, we split, except for me. I have no interest in the treasure. Should we find the boots however, they are mine."

"I see."

I thought about the Labyrinth of Kerrenar and how the lure of treasure had taken Theona from me. The irony of that situation had been lost on me, until the Drintu Chancellor had informed me all the treasure was long gone. I wondered if the same could be said of this place.

"Drake, why do they call this The Caverns of Longing?"

He paused for a second as we watched Kharrah stagger from the crevice. Like Drake,

she'd had to remove her outer garments and was pretty scraped up. I turned from the sight of her, momentarily embarrassed by the unimpeded view of her breasts. Drake didn't notice as he answered my question. Aynslae did and smirked.

"No one really knows, but it's one of the things I'd hoped to find out."

I was uncomfortable with his answer, though there was nothing I could do about it at this point. Not that it really mattered. If nothing else, I was fairly certain anyone pursuing us wouldn't likely find us here.

"What will you do with the boots, if you find them?"

"I will return to Rikkordia and present them to the High Elder. They will bring great honor to my family."

I turned, so the emotion in my eyes wouldn't give me away. Though I was not directly responsible for his death, there was certainly a good chance the High Elder would still be alive if I hadn't accompanied Graham to Rikkordia. I thought about the black dagger again and cursed under my breath. Someone would pay and this time, it wasn't going to be me.

Finally, Leif emerged and we moved together through the cavern, toward the patches of lichen in the distance. As we approached, I began to realize they were used almost like road markers, illuminating the entrances to passages that descended into the bowels of the world. I tried to be aware of everything around me, for I knew underground civilizations, at least the ones of which I'd been told, were all either warlike, or very, very wary of intruders. I hoped we would find a way to avoid hostile confrontation, though the wiser part of me doubted it was possible.

Such were my thoughts when the moaning began. The sound was so low at first, I thought it my imagination, but as we approached the entrance of the closest passage, it grew louder. Finally, I could stand it no longer.

"What the hell is that?"

Drake didn't turn as he answered. "The wind as it passes through tunnels can sound very much like a man in pain."

"Despair is more like it," said Tindal.

I listened to the mournful sound and thought it quite possible the caverns were named for it. The moan accompanied us for a longer time than I would have liked. Though neither spoke of it, I could tell from their expressions that both Tindal and Aynslae were likewise disturbed. The giants, true to form, didn't allow it to affect them.

The walls were tinged with glowing green fungus, but the small patches here and there were not enough to light the way. We continued onward through that first tunnel and several like it, until finally, we left the moaning behind. We were all on edge, but even then, we weren't prepared for what happened next.

The smell of rotting meat announced their presence before we actually laid eyes on them. The odor was so thick it made me dizzy. We continued more quickly, hoping to pass through the offensive area. We rounded a bend in the corridor and they were there.

Even without the smell, it would have been obvious they were dead. Why this didn't stop them from moving about, I couldn't venture to guess. Some walked and some crawled and some writhed, but they all moved continuously. We watched in fascination, in spite of the fact it would have been smarter to turn and flee. We had only been standing for a few moments before one of them noticed us. It threw back its head and shrieked, a sound that made the recent moaning seem almost cozy.

Then, almost as one, they rose and moved toward us at a pace I wouldn't have guessed they could muster.

Chapter Twenty-nine

The Sword of Truth was in my right hand and the Shield of Reckoning in my left, just barely in time. The others also drew their weapons, all except Aynslae, who didn't have any. We attacked.

Considering these ghoulish creatures were completely unarmed, it should have been an easy battle, but it was not.

The closest creature swung a putrescent arm in my direction. I held up my shield to block it and was knocked back several steps. Whatever else you could say about them, they were strong. I approached again, this time leading with my sword arm. The thing swiped at my sword and grabbed it by the blade. A moment later, its fingers were lying on the ground between us. It was indeed fortunate their lack of intellect more than made up for their superior strength.

I attacked now, swinging my blade in a fury of movement. I did a good job of carving the thing up, but a bad job of stopping it. I stepped back to reassess the situation. How do you kill something that doesn't bleed?

I found I literally had to hack the creature apart to keep it down. Because of this, the battle continued much longer than I had originally thought it would. By the time it was winding down, I was almost spent. I looked to my left and watched Leif smash one of them to pieces. I was about to shout encouragement, when I saw a second creature, just visible from my point of view. Leif didn't see him and I didn't have time to warn him.

The creature struck a glancing blow with a horrible clawed hand. It didn't look as if there was enough power behind the attack to do any damage. When the giant grabbed his arm and roared in pain, I was surprised.

Leif backed off and I charged forward, engaging the creature, before it could do further damage. Driven by fear, I was able to make short work of it. Only then did I realize the remainder of the enemy had been put down. I walked over to where Leif knelt, still holding his arm.

"Are you okay?"

"I will be, thanks to you."

"What happened? It didn't look as if it hit you that hard."

"It didn't. And yet my arm burns as if it has been set aflame. They are evil these creatures. We must not let them regroup."

"Regroup? They're dead."

It was Drake who answered me. "No, Alaric, they are undead. We can stop them only for a time, but until their master releases their souls, they will grow again, though I dare say from the looks of things, it will take some time for that to happen."

As I looked around at the scattered pieces of rotten carcasses that littered the floor, I felt a chill pass through me.

"How can anything survive what we've done to them?"

"They can't. It sort of helps that they're already dead," said Kharrah.

I nodded then swallowed. I glanced at Tindal, who stood off to the side, looking almost as gray as the ghouls. Aynslae, on the other hand, was kneeling over one to get a closer look. I shook my head. I didn't understand how she could be so calm when my only thought was to get

out of there. Once again, I thought there might be more to Aynslae than was immediately apparent.

Only a few minutes later we were on our way. Leif favored his right arm for quite a while. As we progressed, he started using his left more and more, until I could barely tell it had been injured. By then it was almost time to get some rest, but no one, not even Drake, was willing to stop in these parts. So we continued, weary and fearful. It wasn't much later that Tindal noticed a group of warriors approach.

We stopped and waited for them. Only as they drew closer, did I notice a feature that had not been obvious in the distance. The approaching party was curiously devoid of skin.

"Great Gods!" shouted Tindal, "They're skeletons."

I nodded in agreement. A column of walking bones approached, led by a man who looked just as dead, but not quite as decomposed. They all wore bits of armor and carried weapons in various states of disrepair. Even Drake was speechless as they drew closer.

Finally, they stopped and we regarded each other, though since only one of the approaching party had eyes, I don't know if the word is appropriate. It was the leader who addressed us.

"Why have you come?"

Now if I were Drake, I would have lied, but like Graham, he was far too honorable for that.

"We are searching for the Boots of Darkening."

"You are wasting your time, mortal. If the Boots were in fact here, it would be beyond your skill to remove them from this place."

"That remains to be seen," replied Drake.

I stepped forward. "I assume you are not here as a welcoming committee. If we intend to proceed, what will you do?"

The leader turned to look at me and I fought not to turn away. In a matter of months, he would look like the white warriors he led.

"We will take you to our master, who will answer your questions, though you may not enjoy the eventual results of such a meeting. This is your final chance. Turn back. Return to the light of day, or plan never to see it again."

"Well," said Tindal. "That's enough for me." He turned to leave, but I grabbed his arm. He glared at me, then turned and faced the skeletons.

It was Drake who answered for all of us. "We would be delighted to accept your master's hospitality, but I warn you, we will not be swayed from our task."

"So be it."

The leader motioned for us to follow. The skeletal guard split in two, six preceding us and six following. Aynslae walked practically on top of me, eyes on the ground, as if she couldn't bear to look at our undead host. Tindal shivered occasionally, but, to his credit, held his head high. Strangely enough, I was proud of him.

We walked for a long time through seemingly endless passages. Even with a map, I doubted Drake would be able to easily find the way out again, if in fact, he found the way out at all. That was assuming we would be given the opportunity to leave, a fact I wouldn't care to wager on.

Finally, after my legs had been aching for some time, we saw in the distance a large iron door, intricately carved with some sort of markings I assumed to be writing. Aynslae's next words supported my theories about her.

"The old speech."

We all turned to look at her. Even the leader of the guards looked surprised. "You know the language of magic?"

"Only a few words."

I suddenly found myself wondering how a mere servant could have learned a few words of the old tongue, while I couldn't read at all. I watched as she scanned the writing and began to think she might know more of it than she was letting on. Perhaps Tindal had been right to suspect her.

I was pulled from my thoughts by the loud rumbling sound that filled the passage as the door began to ascend. I could see no mechanism controlling it, though considering the group who led us here, it wasn't difficult to assume our host was more than a little conversant in the ways of sorcery or at the very least, necromancy.

When the door had completely disappeared into the ceiling, we continued forward. We weren't far past the threshold when it slammed down behind us, effectively negating our chance of escape.

Once inside, we passed creatures even more hideous than the ones that led us here--twisted beings in various states of decay. Not all were human, either. Even some Drintu seemed represented among their numbers, along with many types of creatures I didn't recognize.

Tindal's eyes were wide and even I was beginning to grow afraid. For though I had been in many a dangerous situation, I'd never faced a being powerful enough to raise the dead. Somehow, I didn't think the Sword of Truth would be a lot of help against the man who ruled this place.

Past the door, it was still a considerable distance to the necromancer's lair. I had expected a huge chamber with a hideous fiend sitting on a golden throne, carrying in his hand a staff of bone.

Instead, we found ourselves ushered into a rather comfortably furnished office. The walls were paneled, the floor covered by an ornately woven rug. The wizard's desk was large and expensive looking and covered with all sorts of scrolls. Behind the desk sat the least intimidating man I'd ever laid eyes on.

He was small, not much larger than a dwarf and rather slighter. He was bald except for a ring of fine, gray hair around the sides and back of his head. He looked more like a candlestick maker than a necromancer. The sight was so incongruous, I almost laughed.

He looked up from the parchment he was reading and studied us. When he spoke, his voice was almost boyish.

"Now, what have we here?"

We all looked at each other, but it was Drake who answered. "I'm here for the Boots of Darkening."

The mage smiled gently. "You giants are an interesting lot. You invade my home and ask me to relinquish one of my most prized possessions, as if you were asking for an old cloak. Why should I give them to you?"

"Because they belong to my family. They were originally created for one of my ancestors and stolen during a battle."

The wizard looked thoughtful. "Do you have any proof of this claim?"

"The story has been passed down for many generations in my family."

"I see. So I'm just supposed to give them to you, is that it?"

Drake looked uncomfortable. "It would save me the trouble of taking them, I suppose."

The wizard laughed. "Forgive my manners and allow me to introduce myself. My name is Eregor. I am, as you've no doubt guessed, a mage. A very old and powerful mage."

Tindal stepped forward. "May I speak?"

Eregor inclined his head.

"I have no desire for the Boots of Darkening. Frankly, I'm sorry I was even dragged into this. All I want is to go home."

The mage smiled sympathetically. "I'm afraid that's out of the question. For one thing, you've come to my domain to take what is mine like common thieves. I have a special fate for thieves, as you'll soon find out. For another thing, I don't like you. I have so much work to do and now, I have the inconvenience of dealing with intruders. Don't you realize I'm a busy man?"

"No doubt," said Drake. "And you could go back to work with barely a delay, if you'd give me the boots and let us go."

"Let you go! Very entertaining. Actually, I think you would all do marvelously as undead. And I have so few giants under my command. No, I think making undead of you would be far more rewarding."

"Guards! Take them to the pit and let them stay there, until I've decided their fate." He stopped, looked at us and smiled again. "Don't worry. You won't have long to wait."

Without another word, he returned to reading his scroll.

I was surprised Drake simply allowed himself to be led from the room, but considering the odds against us, it was our only option. Even if we were able to defeat our skeletal guards, we'd still have a powerful necromancer to deal with. And if we could handle him, we'd still have no way of getting back through the iron door.

The size of the Eregor's domain became apparent on the trip to the pit. As far as I could tell, the same group that had brought us here, guided us through even more labyrinthine tunnels, some man-made, some natural.

As we continued, the air grew gradually warmer until it was just this side of uncomfortable. I hoped the temperature wouldn't continue to increase, or our captivity would be even more unpleasant than I thought it likely to be.

Soon we found ourselves standing beside a circular pit, perhaps forty feet deep. The walls were smooth and thus, completely unclimbable. The only problem I saw was there wasn't an easy way down.

Almost the moment the thought entered my head, I felt a rough skeletal hand grab my arm and push me forward with inhuman strength. I was so stunned, I didn't even have time to scream before I landed.

Chapter Thirty

I made my way to my feet, more than mildly surprised to still be conscious. Only then did I realize the ground, which appeared to be stone, was yielding and spongy. I looked up to find the head guard grinning at us.

"Very funny," I called up. "What is this stuff?"

"Another of Eregor's inventions. You see, my master doesn't want his future servants damaged before the change, so he takes good care of them. Of course, he has no reason to feed them. Starving our new arrivals has a lot of advantages. It requires no effort on our part and it's

rather entertaining. Really, it's for the best. I mean you have to get use to not eating anyway, right? As thieves, it's no less than you deserve. Now, if you'll excuse us, we're late for our rounds."

"You can't just leave us here to starve!" shouted Tindal, but they were already gone.

Tired, I lowered myself onto the comfortable ground, though the thought of repose never crossed my mind. Even if my future wasn't in question, the oppressive heat would have made sleeping difficult. Tindal and Aynslae joined me, but the giants kept themselves busy trying to find a way out. After conducting a thorough search, Drake pulled an iron spike from his pack and attempted numerous times to drive it into the wall.

When he finally realized it wasn't going to happen, he pulled a rope from his pack and tied the spike around it. He spent about twenty minutes tossing the spike out of the pit and dragging it back in. Several times, he had to dodge the spike as it fell back down. I suppose he was hoping to catch it on something, but doing so would have been a stroke of luck, even by my standards. Finally, he gave up and joined us on the floor.

As I looked at him, an idea began to form. It was a good idea. I didn't say anything immediately but allowed it to roll around in my brain. Finally, I rose and cleared my throat. When I had everyone's attention, I spoke. "Okay guys, time to go."

Several asked what I meant and for the briefest of moments, I actually felt intelligent. Fortunately, the incident passed rapidly into history, unnoticed by all but me. Still, they were waiting for me to speak, so I did.

"If we were all human, we might not make it, but considering your size and strength, we may be able to get out of here. Drake, you stand against the wall. Leif, can climb onto your shoulders. Kharrah goes next. Then I go. Sooner or later, we will be tall enough to reach the top. Then we throw up the rope and whoever's up there holds it for the lightest of us. Then two can hold for the next and so on."

Aynslae was on her feet, for the first time hope lighting her eyes. I was proud to have thought of it. The way she looked at me, once again made me feel intelligent, but I repressed the impulse before it could take hold. I would never be as smart as Jeren, or even Tindal. I knew who and what I was--an ordinary guy with a big mouth and a magic sword.

Drake leaned against the wall. Leif had no trouble making it onto his shoulders. Drake stood solidly, apparently able to hold his brother's weight with ease. Kharrah, however, had problems. Not used to climbing, she fell more than once, but of course, the yielding ground protected her from injury. Finally, after many tense minutes, she was in position. Now it was up to me.

It would never have worked had they not been leaning against the wall. Even as I scrambled up, I could feel just how precarious our living tower was. I could see the strain in Drake's eyes as I climbed past and hoped he'd be up to the task of supporting all of us. Leif wasn't straining yet, but we still had two more to go after me. I climbed rapidly past him, glad I had managed to stay in shape. I rather enjoyed climbing over Kharrah, though I apologized more than once, as the situation forced me to intimacy. She laughed good-naturedly, the only one who had yet to show signs of strain. That would soon change. Finally, I was standing on her shoulders and Tindal started up.

He climbed somewhat more slowly. He didn't look down as he made his way painstakingly toward the top. For a few moments I thought the entire column might fall, but it didn't and I relaxed. Then Drake, voice tense, spoke.

"I can't hold this much longer. Aynslae should start now, before Tindal reaches the top."

Aynslae needed no further invitation. It seemed forever before Tindal stood on my shoulders and Aynslae was just behind him. I didn't have long to wait before she had passed the giants and was pressed against me. Under other circumstances, having a woman climb over me that way would have been arousing, but as things stood, I was too busy trying to keep my balance to pay much attention.

Finally, she was climbing Tindal. A few minutes later, she'd made it all the way to the top. Unfortunately, it wasn't good enough.

"I'm just short," she shouted.

I heard several frustrated mumbles from both below and above.

"Jump for it," I said, through clenched teeth. "It's not like you're going to get hurt if you fall."

"Okay."

I heard her take a few deep breaths before launching herself off Tindal's shoulders, just hard enough to topple our tower.

For the second time that day, I fell into the pit. This time, however, I wasn't as lucky. The floor was still just as soft, but Drake's head was not. I struck my sword arm hard on the way down.

Only when I ascertained it wasn't broken, did I turn and look up. I expected to find Aynslae looking down at us, but she was nowhere to be seen. I looked around the perimeter of the pit.

"Aynslae?" I waited a few seconds, before raising my voice. "Aynslae!"

Still no answer. I cursed. We all called out before giving up. Finally, I dropped my head.

Drake walked over to me. "What do you think happened to her?"

"I don't know. I suppose it's possible this pit is guarded. I wish I'd thought of that before."

"Don't blame yourself, Alaric. It was a fine idea."

"Not fine enough... we're still here."

Drake placed a hand on my shoulder. "We did what we could. If we die, the gods will applaud our efforts."

"I just wish their rewards were more tangible," I complained. I sank to the ground, exhausted.

I had almost drifted off in spite of the heat, when a flash of movement caught my eye. When I turned, I saw nothing. It happened several times before I realized what I was seeing. Tiny lizards ran back and forth across the ground.

A closer examination of my surroundings informed me there were more of them than immediately apparent, but as they were the same color as the stone, they were virtually impossible to see until they moved.

I watched for a long time before I wondered how they got down here. There was no source of food in the pit, so if they had been here long, they'd have starved to death. I thought about flies then and looked at the lizards and I knew. They were scavengers. When we died, or perhaps even before, they would start to dine on us. The thought brought with it a terror I'd never before felt.

I was about to mention the possibility, when I noticed one nearby run straight up the wall. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have thought it possible. I was distracted from my observations by the sound of Tindal weeping.

Most of the group studiously ignored the sound, but I walked over and squatted beside him. He raised his head to regard me.

"Are you okay?"

"No, Alaric, I'm not okay. I'm scared."

"Don't be. We all have to die sometime."

"I'm not scared of dying."

"Okay, then what's troubling you?"

Tindal didn't speak for a long time. When he finally did, there was a note of resignation in his voice I'd never heard there before.

"A long time ago, I took an oath on my grandfather's grave. I swore I would die before I ever use my gift again."

"Ummm, what gift would that be?"

He rose slowly and took a deep breath. Then he wiped the tears from his eyes. "I'm a mage, though the magic I practice is rare and forbidden among my people. If word got out, I'd be an outcast."

I waited for him to continue.

"And I vowed I'd die before using it again. But now, if I don't use it, I will be condemning innocent people to death. I can't sit by and allow that."

To my surprise, Drake walked over to us. "Do not feel you have to break your oath on our account. I understand what that would mean and I would never ask it of another. It is better to die with honor than to live without it."

I wanted to hit the giant then. For one thing, I was really curious about Tindal's power. For another, I didn't relish slowly starving to death in this pit. Also, I wanted to find out what had happened to Aynslae. So many mysteries, so little time.

"Tindal," I said, "you need to think this through. You have made an oath to your grandfather and I respect that. But I've given my word to protect Aynslae. And I can't do that from down here. If there is some way for you to get us out of here, I have to ask you to consider it. If it will help, I'll never tell a soul. Your secret will be safe with me."

Drake scowled, but didn't say anything. Tindal looked from me to the giant and back again. Finally, he came to a decision.

"Okay. I can get us out of here, but I need one of these lizards."

"Why?"

He dropped his head. "Life is sacred among my people. Many of us eat only vegetables and when we do eat meat, it's only animals that have been sacrificed to our gods. My talent is rare and is considered evil. If I kill an animal, for a time I absorb its abilities."

"What exactly are you saying?"

"If I kill and eat one of those lizards, I will be able to walk up the wall."

"You're serious?"

"Totally."

I turned again to regard the lizards. Catching one would be no easy trick. I was about to say so, when Tindal knelt and placed his hand palm up on the ground. His eyes grew distant and his face slack, as if he were in a trance. We all gathered around, paying rapt attention. Not long after, one of the lizards walked onto his hand and stood there. Even when he closed his fingers around it, the creature didn't struggle.

"Neat trick," I said, but Tindal was too far into whatever he was about to hear me.

He raised the lizard to his mouth and without hesitation, bit off the front of its body. He

swallowed without chewing. I repressed a shudder. He dropped the uneaten half on the floor. Then the transformation occurred.

Within seconds, he started to look more like a lizard. It wasn't that his facial features changed, but rather his whole demeanor began to seem more reptilian. Then, before I knew what was going to happen, he dropped to the ground and ran across it on all fours, faster than I'd have believed possible. When he reached the wall, he just kept going straight. A few seconds later, he reached the top.

Almost immediately, he seemed himself again. He looked around, then back at us. "Sorry Alaric. There's no sign of Aynslae."

I dropped my head. The suggestion that had put her in danger had been mine. If anything happened to her, it was my fault. She certainly hadn't gone off on her own by choice. I felt a pang of sorrow and perhaps self-pity as well. I was so engulfed in feelings of guilt, I didn't realize they were waiting for me until Drake touched my arm.

Against the wall dangled a rope, one end of which I could only assume was being held by Tindal. Fear flicked momentarily through my mind. Tindal and I weren't exactly on great terms. I chastised myself. Tindal would never do anything to deliberately hurt me. I forced down the feeling and started to climb, though perhaps more quickly than I normally would have.

When I reached the top, I looked around, hoping to find some clue as to what might have happened to Aynslae. Even while I helped Tindal with the rope, my full attention wasn't on the task. I stumbled a bit when Kharrah began her climb, but managed to catch myself and hold the rope until she was high enough to grab the edge and pull herself over.

With her help, it wasn't long before all of us stood together, looking for signs of Aynslae's whereabouts. Unfortunately, there were none. It was as if the Caverns of Longing had swallowed her without a trace.

"Okay," said Tindal, finally. "Now what do we do?"

"We find the Boots of Darkening and we leave this place," said Drake.

"Without Aynslae?" I asked. "I don't think so."

"Alaric, you made a pledge to Aynslae's safety and I respect that. But I am here for one thing only; the Boots of Darkening. Once I have them, we are gone. To do anything else would be foolishness."

I turned to face Tindal. "And what about you?"

"Me? I didn't want to come here in the first place. I'm gone with the giants. Honestly Alaric, if Aynslae is still alive, how are you going to find her?"

I thought about it. How indeed? We were trapped in a necromancer's lair, and though we had escaped his "hospitality", it wasn't likely we'd be allowed to leave this place without a fight. Nor was it as if I owed her anything. I had saved her life, but wasn't responsible for it. At least, if I kept saying it, I might at some point believe it.

I had a realization then that fairly stunned me. I wasn't doing it for Aynslae, or even myself. I was doing it for a woman, who was possibly in as much danger as Aynslae, that I'd allowed to walk out of my life. I was doing it for Theona. If I couldn't save her, at least, maybe I could rescue another in her stead.

"I don't know how I'm going to find her, but I have to try or die in the attempt."

"Brave words," said Drake. "You're a great man, Alaric. It is an honor to share this adventure with you."

"How touching," said a voice from behind us.

I whirled, pulling the Sword of Truth. Tindal had already drawn his blade and moved to

stand beside me. Before us stood the somewhat decayed man who had brought us to the pit and behind him, the entourage that seemed to accompany him everywhere.

The skeletal warriors moved forward brandishing weapons. I thought quickly.

"I thought your master didn't want his new servants damaged."

At those words the skeletons paused in their advance and their leader looked uncertain. Then he smiled broadly. "That's a chance I'll just have to take."

Without another word, they attacked.

It wasn't a pretty battle, even for me. The skeletons spread out to surround us. We formed a circle of our own, though a small one to be sure. I had my sword and shield, Tindal his sword and the giants were all armed with large maces. They had swords on their belts as well, but for some reason, chose not to draw them.

At first I fended the undead off, but couldn't seem to do any damage. Tindal, the only one of our party I could see from my vantage, seemed to be having similar problems. I couldn't figure out why, until the Sword of Truth spoke.

"Use your shield Alaric! You're trying to cut bone. These creatures are not going to bleed to death."

It was suddenly obvious why the giants were using maces instead of swords.

"Use the flat of your blade," I yelled to Tindal. Then I changed my own strategy.

I sheathed my blade and used the Shield of Reckoning to both block and attack. Almost immediately, I crushed one of my foes. I threw my head back and screamed with battle lust. I knew then they could be killed. The knowledge nearly cost me my life.

I allowed the feeling of triumph to rule my actions and broke from the circle we had formed. Almost immediately, I was surrounded by skeletons; so many I was completely unable to guard my back. I whirled and struck with my shield, but in the end, I was not up to the task.

Fortunately, they struck with the flats of their weapons. I felt a blow to my right arm and then the back of my left leg. I crumpled to the ground. They closed in around me, until I couldn't even see my allies.

They continued to lash out at me, even after I'd dropped the shield and curled into a ball. I didn't lose consciousness, though I kept wishing I would. The attack seemed to last forever, until there was no part of my body that wasn't bruised or bleeding. It was only after the attack stopped that I managed to pry an eye open to see what was happening.

The battle continued. A lot of skeletons had been relegated to piles of bone. One of the giants was missing, but the blood in my eyes obscured the scene just enough to make it hard to tell which. Tindal was still fighting, though he'd picked up a stout wooden club that must have been dropped by one of the enemy. Suddenly there were more of us than them, though their leader still stood. In fact, he was standing only a few feet away, watching the battle. His back was toward me. If only I had the strength to rise, I could take him out before he knew what was happening. I tried to move and pain shot through me. I waited until it subsided and knew the task was beyond me. I tried to distract myself by watching the battle.

It was then I saw Aynslae, sneaking from the shadows toward him. She held a large rock above her head. I would have smiled, but wasn't sure if I had any teeth left. Her approach would bring her right by me. Hopefully the battle would distract their leader long enough for her to strike. I was scared for her, yet proud at the same time.

She paused momentarily when she reached me and looked down. I wanted to say something to reassure her that I was all right. I wanted to tell her how worried I'd been, but I didn't dare draw attention to her. She looked at me, eyes blazing. The feelings that suffused me at

that moment, couldn't have been far from love. I wondered if she felt the same way, even as she raised the rock higher, and brought it down hard on my head.

Chapter Thirty-one

I don't know how long it was before I awoke, but it was suddenly quiet. I didn't know where I was or why, but I did know I hurt something fierce--worse than I'd ever hurt before. I tried to think back to what had brought me to this moment.

Fleeting impressions toyed with my mind before I remembered a great din. There were grunts and shouts and sounds that accompany battle, though it wasn't as loud as it had been. The conflict was coming to a close.

It all came back to me then. I fought my way into a sitting position, thrusting the pain aside. It was almost completely dark. I struggled to my feet and toppled to the floor. I landed painfully and stayed down for a long time before I had the strength to rise again. When I did, I was covered in sweat after only a few seconds, which worked its way into my wounds and burned me to the core of my being. Oddly enough, it was the pain that sobered me enough to stumble forward to the only patch of light I could detect.

I leaned against the wall and stuck my head into it, craning my neck. It took me a long moment to realize I was staring through bars set in an iron door. I was in some sort of cell.

That was about all I had strength for before I sank to my knees and once again lost consciousness.

My next foray into the waking world was somewhat more successful, though the pain was no less intense. Now that my mind was somewhat clearer, I moved slowly, making a circuit of the cell with my hands. The walls were solid stone, the floor, tight packed soil of some sort. The door was of cold metal, probably iron. There was no way out; not that I'd expected there to be.

Only in children's bedtime stories did a secret passage conveniently appear to allow the brave knight to escape. I wasn't as handsome as the heroes in those stories, nor was I as strong or intelligent. I was little more than a street urchin who, once again, was faced with overwhelming odds.

I thought then about Aynslae and what I would say to her, if I ever saw her again. Anger fueled my resolve. I had been willing to risk my life for her and she had betrayed me. It would not go well for her if our paths were to again cross.

Unfortunately, it seemed unlikely I would be seeing anyone again. I thought back to the comfort of the pit and wondered if trying to escape had been a mistake. As the hours passed, fear began to grow in me. Was the necromancer planning on allowing me to starve to death before transforming me into one of his own? If so, what could I do about it?

I don't know how long I spent in that cell. At some point, I realized I was naked. The Sword of Truth would have been a comfort to me just then. At least I would have had a companion to talk to and a bit more light. I wondered if I would ever see him again.

I drifted in and out of consciousness. Each time I woke, I found myself in the same predicament. Several times I relieved myself in the corner of the cell. The smell didn't make captivity any more pleasant.

During one of my conscious spells, I heard a sound outside the door. I tried to rise to my feet, failed and thus found myself on my knees, hunched over when the door swung open and the necromancer himself entered. I looked up at him, then past him, trying to see if he had arrived with an entourage. That he hadn't was a caution to me.

Of course, naked and half dead as I was, I don't know how much of a threat I presented.

"Good morning." Eregor smiled a smile that, had I not known him, would have seemed benevolent. "How are you today? Healing well I trust?"

"Where are my friends?"

"They are safe. Would you like to see them?"

Fear took me then. It had not occurred to me before that I might be the last of our number who had not been turned into one of the necromancer's minions. "What have you done to them?"

"Thus far, nothing. They are simply enjoying my hospitality. You, on the other hand, were badly hurt and so I placed you in here, so you could heal a bit. The soil in this room is very special and rather rare. Spending time on it accelerates healing. No one understands the process, though many underground races make use of it. Since it is not magical in nature, it can be used by anyone."

"Pardon me for being skeptical, but I can't imagine you're all that concerned over my well-being."

"On the contrary. I am very concerned. I needed you to be stronger. Otherwise, your body will be destroyed by the process you are about to undergo."

It was the casual nature of his statement that sent a chill through me. "I suppose warning you I have powerful friends, would be pointless."

Eregor laughed politely. "Follow me, please."

He turned and exited the cell. I hesitated before I struggled to my feet and stumbled after him.

Fortunately, he moved slowly enough to allow me to keep up. In spite of the fact I had supposedly healed to some degree, every muscle and bone in my body burned. I knew I couldn't make it much further. I was thinking thus, when I became aware of a sound that had been growing for some time. When the corridor grew warmer, I knew the sound for what it was. We were approaching a great fire. Only a short time later, we reached it.

Off to my left was a long corridor with an opening on the opposite end. The floor of the passage was completely filled with fire. I hoped that opening wasn't my destination, for already the heat was all but unbearable. Eregor paused and pointed.

"That's where your friends are. Too bad you won't see them again."

I looked at him, then at the flames. "Tindal!" I called.

"Alaric?" I could barely tell who was talking above the roar of the inferno.

"Is everyone okay?" I studied the area about the place, though I didn't know what I was looking for.

I received no answer. Soon Eregor pushed me forward and I stumbled away. I strained my ears to hear a reply, but if there was one, it was consumed by the flames. We only walked another few feet before I was directed through an open doorway on the left.

The room was cluttered with all manner of apparatus. There were strange chairs and tables scattered about the place and several shelves full of wooden boxes, glass bottles and clay containers. I was still taking it all in, when the necromancer addressed me.

"This is where I perform much of my work. Some of the materials that are quite hard to find on the surface are plentiful down here."

A movement caught my eye and I whirled. I don't know what I was prepared for, but it certainly wasn't the woman. To describe her as breathtaking would have been an understatement of vast proportion. Dark eyes, long, straight dark hair, tinged with a red to match her full lips and the palest skin I'd ever seen. Her body curved in and out in all the right places and the plain white robe she wore didn't hide any of it. Her skin was in fact so pallid, it was hard to tell where garment ended and flesh began, giving her the illusion of nakedness.

I froze as she approached, apparently amused by my reaction. I hadn't thought much about my own nudity until then. I found myself wishing I was fully clothed, so I could hide my body's response to her presence. She looked down at me, and those too red lips curved into a smirk. She leaned forward as if to kiss me and my breath caught in my throat.

Eregor's couldn't have missed my reaction, but his voice was all business when he spoke. "This is my surgeon."

I nodded and tried to clear my head. She stood in front of me, staring into my eyes. Only when her cheek touched mine did I realize what she was. Her face was ice cold. I jerked away.

"You're dead!"

"Of course I am. Does that bother you? It doesn't seem to bother Eregor. He makes use of me all the time."

I took an involuntary step backward. The idea of making love to an undead had never occurred to me. My cheek still felt the chill of her touch and I shuddered. She laughed and walked toward one of the tables.

"Come. Lie down for me. The procedure is about to begin."

I stood transfixed, unwilling to move closer to my fate. I had been in tight spots before, but nothing that could compare with this.

The surgeon ignored me, going about the business of preparing for, what she had called, the procedure. I had no doubt whatever was involved wouldn't be at all pleasant. I wanted to run, but wouldn't have gotten far in my current condition. In spite of Eregor's assurances, I wasn't sure the procedure, whatever it was, wouldn't destroy me.

The creature opened containers and sniffed their contents, then reached into a hexagonal box made of polished wood. She scooped a handful of orange powder into a clawed hand and walked toward me. Even knowing what she was, the sight of her made my legs weak. I raised a hand to my cheek to remind myself of the chill.

She stopped before me and raised her hand, palm upward, until it was just beneath her mouth. Then she blew the powder into my face. I almost choked, but caught myself. I don't know what it was supposed to do, but I certainly didn't feel any different. She took a step back and studied me. "Now, why don't you come on over to the table, like a good boy?"

I almost smiled. Did she think I would just stroll into the lion's den without a fight? To my surprise, my legs moved. Suddenly, I knew the purpose of the powder. She followed me to the table.

"Turn around."

Helplessly, I complied.

"Kiss me."

I didn't want to do it. I fought the impulse, but it was no use. I felt my body lean forward and felt my lips pressed firmly against hers. The coldness made me want to shrink away, but I couldn't. I was even unable to close my eyes.

She enjoyed the game, I could tell. Her eyes sparkled as she watched me, but the expression on her face was as cold as her skin. I couldn't even attempt to struggle. I was in her

power and she knew it. Fortunately, she didn't get the chance to play with me further.

"Can we get on with this?" asked Eregor, a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

Immediately, the surgeon grew serious. "Lay down on the table."

It was odd. I could feel my body, but had no control over it. It wasn't long before I was horizontal, awaiting her next command.

"Now this is going to hurt," she said, with perhaps a hint of relish in her voice. "Do not move. Do not cry out. Close your eyes."

I wondered what she was going to do, but in my current state, I couldn't even ask. Then Eregor spoke. Judging from the sound of his voice, he must have moved closer.

"She is going to sew your eyes shut. As an undead, you will depend on other senses. This is always my favorite part of the transformation to watch. I understand it is the most exquisitely painful thing you will ever experience."

I wanted to run, to hide, to fight, but I did nothing, even when I felt the needle pierce my eyelid. Eregor's words were true. I would have screamed, had I been allowed.

Chapter Thirty-two

The next minutes were the longest of my life. I could feel the needle scratch across my eyeball. I could feel it push through the skin below my eye. She worked quickly, but it seemed to take forever, until I thought I would die from the pain. Of course, that release was denied me too.

It was altogether too long before both my eyes had been worked on. I could almost feel the powder wearing off. I tried to move and managed to wriggle my finger a bit. Perhaps in a few minutes, I would have more control over my body. What I would be able to do, blind and naked as I was, I couldn't imagine.

The surgeon had finished with my eyes and moved on to the rest of me. I felt various parts of my body being prodded and occasionally burned. I had no idea what was being done, but again, the pain was excruciating. I tried to fall away from consciousness, but could not. I had given up all hope, when I heard a voice I had despaired of ever hearing again.

"Fear not, my friend. The others are on the way to save you," the Sword of Truth's words rang clearly in my head. It was a shame they were already too late.

The sounds of footsteps reached me. Eregor cursed and moved away from the table. The surgeon stopped what she was doing as well.

I heard the door burst open.

"You are about to make a grave mistake." The voice belonged to Tindal. I'd never thought I'd be so happy to hear his voice.

"On the contrary, the mistake is yours," Eregor's voice no longer sounded benevolent.

"Alaric! Call me!"

I struggled into a sitting position, though I was still sluggish from the orange powder. Fortunately, my vocal cords had started functioning again.

"Sword of Truth," I yelled. And though I was blind, I somehow sensed it coming.

I reached out my hand and the weapon flew into it. I can't imagine how I must have looked, sitting there naked, eyes sewn shut, holding a magical sword. Then, not for the first time, the Sword of Truth saved me. I could see the room in my thoughts.

Somehow the blade was placing images into my mind. The perspective was a little off,

since I was seeing things from the sword's point of view, but it was close enough for me to act.

Several skeletons had rushed into the room and the battle was joined. Then I heard Drake curse. "Hell's hounds! Eregor's gone! He must be wearing the boots!"

The sounds of battle filled my ears, but something else demanded my attention. Eregor moved silently toward the exit, completely unseen. He was going to get away. Except for the fact the Sword of Truth could see him, and was somehow able to share that knowledge with me.

"Out of my way!"

I ran through the battle, occasionally parrying a stray blade. Fortunately, the skeletons weren't the most skillful warriors. I reached the door at the same time as the necromancer. He was still unaware I could see him. He paused to let me through first. He must have thought I was trying to flee.

I whirled and thrust my sword straight through his stomach. He had just enough time to look stunned before he twisted away and slid off my blade to the ground. Almost at once the fighting stopped. The skeletons fell where they stood. The surgeon, who was a more powerful creation, was not dispelled by the passing of her master.

Drake looked at me, then at the necromancer laying at my feet.

"That was incredible," he said. "How did you manage it?"

I shrugged. "The same way I manage everything. Luck and guts."

Tindal smiled and walked closer to me. "How is it you can see?" Even as he spoke the vision faded.

"Sorry," said the sword. "I don't have the energy to keep that up for long."

"I can't," I replied. "I guess the gods really do favor me. Now where the hell is Aynslae?" If nothing else, she owed me an explanation. To my surprise, it was Tindal who stepped forward to defend her.

"Now wait a second, Alaric. Aynslae was going to hit one of them with a rock, when something took control of her mind. She had no choice. After you were knocked out, reinforcements showed up and the tide of the battle turned. We were placed in a room past the flame corridor and you were taken elsewhere, though I don't know why."

"And how did you get out of the corridor?"

"Aynslae freed us. When she heard your voice, she braved the corridor and ran through the fire."

"And she survived?"

Aynslae's voice spoke next. "Yes, I did. When I was young, my parents placed a spell on me to protect me. I am immune to fire. Once I escaped, I found a switch on the wall. When I pulled it, the flames died."

"She saved your life," said Tindal.

I wrestled with the story as best I could. Finally I turned in the direction of where the surgeon had been the last time I saw her.

"Get these damn stitches out of my eyes or I'll do the same thing to you that I did to your master."

"And if I do?"

"Then you go free. But if you try anything..." I didn't need to point out we were now more powerful than she.

I didn't want to trust her, but had no choice. I could sense the others were uncomfortable too, but if I were ever to regain my sight, my eyes would have to be able to open.

The removal of the stitches was even more painful than the insertion. I must have passed

out during the procedure, for I woke up many hours later in pain. I couldn't feel my eyes at all, and I certainly couldn't see anything.

"Is it done?"

"It is," said Tindal.

"Then if you would, I would like a word alone with Aynslae."

I could sense his reluctance, but he didn't answer. It was Drake's voice that did. "Okay, let's go. Everyone out. We'll be just outside if you need us."

I nodded and waited until I heard the sound of the door close. Then she spoke. "I'm sorry, Alaric."

"No, you're not. You weren't even sorry when you killed the High Elder."

There was a moment of profound silence. I suppose she was wondering if she should admit it before she tried to kill me. I could still sense the Sword of Truth nearby. I suppose curiosity finally got the better of her.

"How did you know?"

"I suspected you were able to use magic, as soon as I realized you knew the old speech. Since I had heard Tindal and Graham moving in the darkness in the High Elder's hut, I knew neither of them could have reached the High Elder without my knowledge. That left a third party and you were just outside. That was where you were when you cast the darkness spell, I gather."

"That's quite a bit of guesswork, based only on my ability to read magic. What makes you so sure now?"

"The flame. The way you were screaming when I found you. If you were immune to fire, you wouldn't have been as scared as you pretended to be. You were waiting for us. You knew we'd be there."

"Yes, I did."

"You were waiting for me. Tell me, did Alicia give you the dagger herself? Did she hire you? Are you of her brotherhood?"

Aynslae laughed softly. "Actually, meeting her was just a stroke of luck. If it weren't for her, I might have never found out what had befallen my lover. You see, I was betrothed to Prince Dendrac. Then, a young upstart named Alaric Swifthand murdered him in cold blood. I vowed revenge.

"I paid a good amount of money to a number of fine seers before I finally located you. I made sure to place myself where you would find and rescue me. I needed to win your trust, so I could more easily arrange your demise. I wanted to not just see you perish, but to watch you suffer. I think it's only appropriate you spend your last moments blind and bleeding."

"Is that right? Well, I think it's only appropriate you pay for what you've done. I'm sure the giants would be very interested in hearing your side of the story."

"No, Alaric. You killed the High Elder or so everyone will believe, once I kill you and report your confession to Drake. These giants are all so noble and honest. You know they'll believe me."

"On the other hand," I replied, "if I kill you, then they'll take *my* word for what happened. It works both ways."

She snickered and approached. I sat up and slid from the table. Fortunately my legs were able to support my weight. I almost stumbled over the Sword of Truth, which was leaning against the side of the table. I picked it up and heard her pause. I had hoped my weapon had enough energy left to show me what was going on, but apparently it didn't.

"Good-bye, Alaric. When you get to hell, be sure to tell Dendrac I have avenged his death."

I backed away slowly. She continued to close the distance between us. Then I felt the edge of a shelf press against the small of my back. There was nowhere left to retreat.

I felt behind me, searching for something, anything to help me. Just before she reached me, my hand closed around a familiar object. I flung it at her. At that moment, the room appeared in my mind and I saw I had guessed right. Aynslae ducked, but as the box passed over her, some of the orange powder settled on her head and face. I hoped it would be enough.

"Stop."

She took another step forward, and came to a halt. I could see the confusion in her eyes before she lost the ability to control even that. "I'm going to call the others in and you're going to tell them the truth. Nod if you understand me."

She nodded.

"Good. You know, you and Dendrac deserved each other." My vision chose that moment to fade, but it didn't matter.

"Open the door and invite them in."

I heard the appropriate sounds. A few moments later, when the rustling stopped, I spoke. "Aynslae has something she wants to tell you all, don't you, my dear?"

"I killed the High Elder."

"What?" asked Tindal.

Drake interrupted him. "The High Elder is dead?"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "Aynslae stabbed him and tried to frame me."

"Why?" asked Tindal.

"I killed her lover. She wanted revenge. Drake, when we found you, we were fleeing Rikkordia."

"Aynslae, is this true?" asked Drake.

"Yes."

"You realize once we return to Rikkordia, your life is forfeit?"

"Yes."

I could hear the giants crying. For a long time, it was the only sound. Finally, Drake spoke again. "We owe a great debt to you, Alaric. A debt we can never hope to repay."

"Bring Aynslae to justice. That will be payment enough."

"You can count on that, if we can find our way out of here."

"I know the way," said the Sword of Truth.

"I can guide you," I said.

"Blind as you are? I don't see how."

I spoke with more levity than I felt. "You didn't think losing my sight would keep me down, did you?"

It was Aynslae who answered. Apparently the orange powder had already worn off enough to allow her to speak.

"Perhaps your injuries have affected your mind. You may have beaten me, but you will never see again. You will live the rest of your miserable life shrouded in darkness. When you realize the sun that warms you, can no longer brighten your world, you will wish you were dead a thousand times over. Each morning when you awaken and hear the birds you can no longer see, you will think of me and cry. That is the nature of my vengeance."

I could feel them all looking at me, waiting for me to respond. I dropped my head, but

found myself unable to cry. On at least that one point, Aynslae was wrong. Whatever the undead surgeon had done to me left me incapable of shedding a single tear to mourn the loss of my vision.

Chapter Thirty-three

The march back to Gigantia was strained. Aynslae, who had been bound by the giants, glared at me incessantly or so I was told. Blind as I was, I had to take Tindal's word for it.

Fortunately, the restraints made it impossible for her to use her magic.

Oddly enough, I found myself thinking fairly often of the undead surgeon who had so skillfully stolen my sight. In spite of what she was, and what she had done to me, I found her invading my most intimate dreams. In the beginning I fought the fantasies, but eventually grew to accept them. At least I no longer thought about Aynslae in that way.

The Sword of Truth was happy to be on my hip again and the Shield of Reckoning on my back. Once again, their banter filled my mind. I found myself paying more attention to them than I used to, as if their voices in my head reassured me I was not alone in the darkness.

Tindal seemed quite a bit different on the return trip. He spoke more softly, yet with greater confidence, or at least, it seemed that way to me. He displayed nothing but genuine affection for me and we spent many long hours talking.

The giants were most impressed with my performance, for all the good it did me. Even Leif began to warm to me. Drake remained respectful and friendly and Kharrah and I grew somewhat closer. She seemed to sense when I was down and always somehow managed to be by my side when I felt I had nothing left to live for. When I stumbled, she was usually close enough to catch me.

In spite of my handicap, I began to feel secure again. I had survived another adventure. It was even possible my eyesight would eventually improve. I was on my way to see Graham. After all I'd been through, I had still pulled off a victory. Once stories of my exploits started making the rounds, I'd be a legend.

My optimism was short-lived. To this day, I don't like to talk about my affliction, because even after all these years, the memory of those early days is painful to recall. In the beginning, I stubbornly refused help, though it was offered frequently. I grew somewhat bitter and despondent on the trip back, which took three times longer than it should have. I simply couldn't move that fast, even though I had cut a stout branch to use as a walking stick.

Here the Sword of Truth helped me, by speaking a steady stream of directions into my mind, but that didn't ease my soul. In a way, Aynslae really had won. The last words she had spoken to me continued to echo in my mind. The only thing that prevented me from losing hope completely was that I would soon be reunited with Graham and my return would certainly prove him innocent of any connection to the murder of the High Elder. I held onto that fact as if it had the power to restore my vision.

Seeing Graham again became the only thing that mattered to me. I set that as my goal. It was what drove me forward day after day, when so much of me wanted to give up.

I tried to picture how he might react to the sight of me, scarred as I was. He wouldn't judge me... not Graham. Somehow the gentle giant always knew what to say to make me feel better. It was he who had broken the news to me about Theona and Jeren. Without his calm

reassurance, I would have taken that news much harder. I thought a lot about Graham during the journey.

Part of me also knew he would be hurt by my sacrifice, but that couldn't be helped. In the end, Graham was the only friend I had left. Tindal would eventually leave me and Drake and company would move on to other things, but Graham would be there for me always. I smiled, as I often did when I thought of him. Graham, the pacifist giant.

The third night on the road was much like the first two. Aynslae was still restrained and we had settled down to rest for the night. While the giants didn't usually keep watch, they chose to now, possibly to make sure Aynslae didn't find some way to slip her bonds. Of course, being blind, I was spared guard duty.

I was woken from sleep by the sound of Drake's voice. I didn't know it was his at first. It sounded more like the battle cry of a deranged demon than the voice of the reasonable and honorable giant. I was on my feet instantly, sword in hand. The instinct did me little good, since I couldn't see what was happening.

I strained my ears, but could make out nothing over the string of curses Drake released into the cool night air. Finally, when his tirade started to fade, Tindal walked over to me.

"She's gone, Alaric."

"Aynslae?"

"Yes, she somehow escaped and killed Leif in the process. It was his watch."

I released a breath. "No wonder Drake is furious."

I thought about the quiet giant, and wished, not for the last time, that I could cry, but Tindal wasn't finished.

"That's not all, Alaric. She took the Boots of Darkening with her."

It was my turn to curse. "Do you know what you're saying? There's a woman out there, hell bent on killing me, who can move about without being detected. She might well be watching us right now."

"But you have the Sword of Truth."

"Which doesn't mean she can't take me out with a crossbow, or a throwing knife at a distance. Face it, Tindal. My life has never been in more jeopardy than it is at this moment."

"That may be, but part of me still feels you're protected. Anyone else would have died a dozen times by now, but not you, Alaric. The gods didn't save you from the Caverns of Longing to kill you now."

I hoped he was right, but kept my doubts to myself.

For the remainder of the trip, a sullen silence fell over our previously cheerful group. Several days later, by the time we reached the outskirts of Rikkordia, I was beginning to get used to two things. I was able to move around fairly competently by tapping my stick in front of me, and I was just beginning to believe Aynslae was satisfied with her revenge on me and had no intention of hurting me further.

Upon entering the city, we were immediately confronted by a patrol and taken to the dwelling of the new High Elder. The meeting was very formal and over very quickly. Drake told his story, beginning with his quest and ending with its failure. He did, however, clear my name, thus exonerating Graham in the process. Only when he was finished, was I allowed to speak.

"Alaric Swifthand. You have proved your honor and your skill. You are a credit to your people. Your presence honors us. Is there anything you require?"

"I would like to see Graham again, if that is possible."

"It is. He's been incarcerated since reporting the news of your departure. I will send

someone to fetch him. Is there anything else we can do for you?"

"Not at this time, though if possible, I would like to stay here for a while, if that's okay. I'm not sure what I can do for a living in my current condition and it will take me time to figure it out."

"Take as long as you like. Until then, you will stay as a guest of my family," said Drake.

The giants then turned to talk of other matters that did not concern me. I don't remember any of their conversation. All I could think of was what I would say to Graham when he arrived. I didn't know how he would take the news of my affliction, but I was certain he would be understanding..

After a time, a giant entered and exchanged words in a hushed voice with the High Elder. My sense of hearing had improved enough to make out that much, though I couldn't hear what was said. After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence, the High Elder addressed me.

"Alaric, I'm not sure how to tell you this..."

I had never heard a giant at a loss for words. "It's Graham, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so. He's been murdered."

"Murdered!" I felt my fury grow and only managed to check it with more will than I thought I possessed. "What about the guards?"

"What guards?"

"You said he was being confined."

"Graham was an honorable man and didn't need guards. His confinement was voluntary and self-imposed. He was only waiting until I reached a decision on what to do with him. There were no guards. My messenger found him lying in the center of the hut, his throat slashed. There was a note for you on top of his body."

I felt the blood drain from my face. Please, not Graham... not like this. I was rapidly losing my battle with anger. My voice was a cold hard thing. "Read it."

The High Elder obliged.

"Alaric. By the time you read this, I will be long gone, but not before I have taken your best friend from you. As far as I'm concerned, we are even. Your actions have caused me pain and I have returned the favor. The Boots of Darkening made the task of killing Graham quite simple. He never knew I was there. He did not suffer, as I had enough respect to make quick work of him. I suppose I don't need to remind you, if it weren't for you, Graham would still be alive."

I felt flame begin to burn in my heart.

"I would tell you not to bother pursuing me, but I suppose that's hardly necessary, since you're completely blind. As a point of interest, it was Alicia who came to my rescue and killed Leif. She also feels balance has been restored and sends you her best. Hopefully your wisdom is sufficiently advanced to prevent you from attempting to find us. If it's not... you shouldn't be that hard to handle at this point anyway. Those are the breaks, I guess. Just remember, you brought this all on yourself. Aynslae."

I threw back my head and howled in rage and frustration. It couldn't end like this. It couldn't. Drake spoke, but I could barely hear him through my pain. And still tears were denied me.

"I'm so sorry, Alaric. I swear your pain will not go unanswered. I will find Aynslae and make her pay for what she has done."

"I'm coming with you," I said.

There was a long silence, before he replied. "I'm afraid that's not possible. I have a great

respect for your abilities and nothing but appreciation for your offer, but I can not afford to saddle myself with your handicap. All I can do is avenge Graham's death for you. Nothing more."

"I see."

I stood there, fighting alternating feelings of rage and helplessness. I was useless now. Without my eyes, how much help could I possibly be? Aynslae's revenge was more devastating than she could ever imagine.

"If anyone else wishes to accompany me," continued the giant, "it would be a privilege to have them along."

Anyone else, but not me. I was the one who should be hunting down Graham's killer, not Drake.

"If Alaric stays, then so do I," said Tindal.

I drew a deep breath and forced myself to smile in his direction, though I felt like doing anything but smiling. Kharrah spoke next and I was stunned by her words.

"I too will stay here with Alaric. I feel it is the least I can do for him."

I was surprised and appreciative of her show of loyalty, though I didn't understand it.

"Very well," said Drake. "Then I will go alone. Hear me. I shall find Aynslae and make her pay for her assault on Graham. And I shall reclaim the Boots of Darkening for my family. On this day, I so swear."

No sooner were the words spoken, than I heard him walk across the hut. I listened until his footsteps were no longer audible. I almost followed him. I actually took a step in his direction. Kharrah gently, but firmly, grasped my arm. I only fought her for a second. Deep inside, I knew Drake was correct. I would only slow him down.

I spent a long time in Rikkordia, during which, I learned to live with my disability. Tindal and Kharrah both stayed with me, though it was a long time before my depression began to ease.

I relived my adventures over and over again in my mind. Once, I had been Alaric Swifthand. No more. These days, I was Alaric Mason again.

For more than a year, I did everything I could think of to try to regain my sight. I saw countless healers and mages, but the damage to my eyes was just too extensive. My days of adventuring were as dead as Graham... or so I had then believed.

Yet Tindal had been right about one thing. Impaired as I was, the gods were not yet finished with Alaric Swifthand.

Author Bio

Steve Lazarowitz is a writer with a singular goal. He tries to make people think. His short fiction has been compared to *The Twilight Zone*, which very much appeals to him. "We live in a world of wonders, some of which are shrouded in shadow. My job is to remind people of that."

His award winning short stories and innovative articles and essays have appeared in *Jackhammer*, *Exodus*, *Planet Relish*, *The Wandering Troll*, *The Hood*, *Conflicting Spectrums*, *Dream Forge*, *Aphelion*, *Titan*, [*Twilight Times*](#) and many other ezines.

Visit Steve's [web site](#).

<http://www.dream-sequence.net>