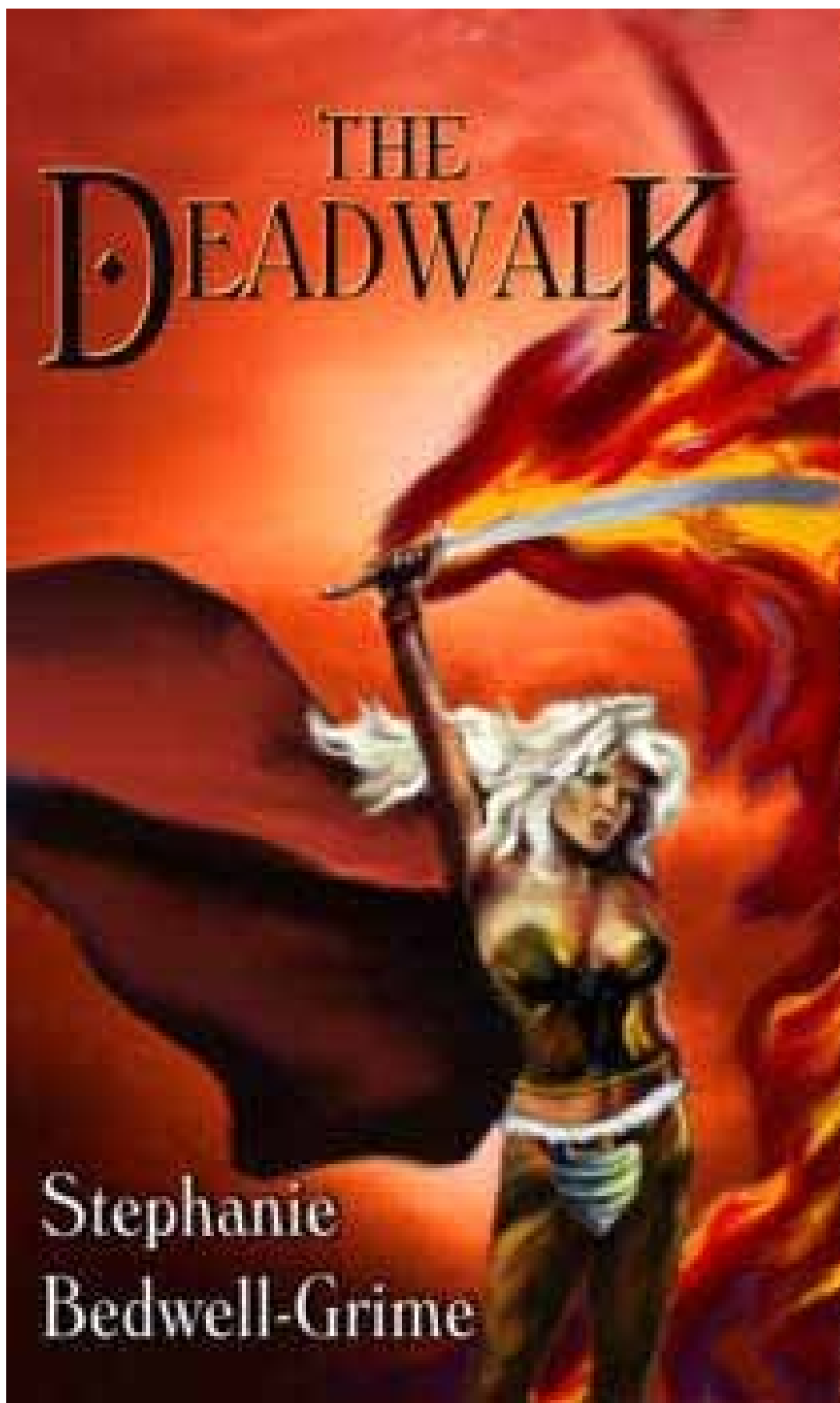


THE DEADWALK

Stephanie
Bedwell-Grime



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By

Stephanie Bedwell-Grime

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For my grandmother, Almonte Bedwell,
the original warrior queen.

CHAPTER ONE

The battle axe split the ground inches from his head.

Too close. Much too close. Bevan scrambled to his feet. It swung again, this time striking the stone wall behind him, showering him with gravel.

He caught a glimpse of a slack-jawed face, one glazed and clouded eye. The other eye...

Bevan didn't want to think about that, but he couldn't help it. The sight of the mutilated eye, a stake of amber protruding from the empty socket was forever engraved in his mind. Whatever happened, he couldn't let them catch him.

He ducked under the arm. A flap of foul-smelling cloth brushed across his face. He choked. Fighting nausea, he bolted back down the alleyway and into the open square.

The sight nearly stopped him cold. Blood carpeted the marble steps to the throne palace. A trail of bloody footprints led to the bonfire in the main square where all of value that couldn't be carried off was heaped and set aflame. Acrid smoke drifted in ghostly columns. Burning air caught in his throat. Having no other choice, he sucked it into his lungs anyway and forced his feet to keep moving.

Dying cries rose in an unearthly chorus. Pleas for mercy, abruptly silenced. The roar of flames consumed all. Bevan cast a furtive glance behind him. Clutching hands emerged from the fog. His assailant lurched mindlessly toward him. A low moan issued from its flaccid lips as flattened lungs labored to make a sound.

Bevan skirted the fountain, rushing past rows of thatched huts that now burned like flaming torches. His only hope of salvation lay in making it through the city gates. But he could barely make out the line of the circular wall through the drifting smog. And in his mad dash he'd lost all awareness of direction.

He darted down a narrow street, praying to every god in the pantheon of The Seven Heavens, that it led in the right direction. Looking back over his shoulder, he watched his assailant turn down the street after him, as if it knew before he'd decided which way he was heading.

The street spilled him back into the square. Bevan uttered a raw cry of defeat.

Blocking his passage was a virtual army of the things! He sagged against the wall. Behind him, his assailant lumbered mindlessly after him.

Bevan uttered a fervent prayer. To anyone's gods. It had ceased to matter whom he prayed to. As if catching his scent on the smoke-laden air, the horde turned toward him.

Ivory ribs striped the remaining threads of their clothing. Dried blood encrusted gaping wounds made by swords and maces. Jaws worked awkwardly. A flat cry rose from their ranks. Dead staring eyes leered at him from soot-covered faces. Gleaming monacle-like

from each right eye was a flash of amber.

The clatter of hooves drew Bevan's gaze past them. A troop of plumed and armored riders emerged from the smoke. The black and red standard of Hael furled past them.

At the center was a rider more decorated than the rest. His helmet boasted the thickest plume. The hilt of his sword was set with jewels. Blue eyes bored out from under his visor, calmly surveying the carnage.

Prince Doan-Rau. Bevan's hope evaporated. A cold stab of utter terror shot through him. Dead or alive, they wouldn't catch him, he vowed. He wouldn't let them do what they'd done to Zolan.

The Prince barked an order. On that signal, the ghouls surged forward.

Bevan looked up. Several feet above him, a clay drainpipe slopped its contents into the steaming gutter.

He leapt for the drainpipe. His fingers closed on thin air. With a jarring thud, he landed back in the alleyway. Robbed of the luxury of time to catch his breath he jumped again. Hot terracotta seared his hands.

He shrieked in pain, but forced his blistered hands to grasp the pipe anyway. The roof offered the only venue of escape. If he failed, if he fell, they'd make him one of those things. He swung a leg. Abused stomach muscles protested, throwing off his aim by several inches. He made another try for the rooftop. His boot grazed the edge.

Something seized his other ankle, hauling him downward.

He wrenched his leg from its grasp. His boot dropped to the cobblestone with a dull thud. Tightening his grip on the burning pipe, he summoned his strength for a last desperate lunge at the roof.

A loud crack broke through the muttering of the horde below. With a final swipe, his hand clutched the edge of the roof. But his fingers found no purchase in the smooth tile. In horrified fascination, he watched the tracks of his nails inch closer to the edge.

Screaming, he plummeted into a sea of smothering, clawing hands.

The first blow knocked the world askew. Blood, hot and sticky gushed down the side of his face, soaking his tunic and his breeches. He hadn't known there could be so much.

He couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Voices, those horrible dull moans echoed through his mind. Cold raced inward toward his heart, bringing with it a thick blanket of darkness. Beyond pain, he felt only the expanding pressure of the thin stake of amber being hammered through his right eye.

While his brain lay slowly dying, Bevan felt his body coming back to life.

CHAPTER TWO

"Damn!"

Riordan impaled a tuft of grass with her broadsword. "I almost had him." She plunged it deeper into the soft earth. "How could I let him get past my guard?"

With a groan of defeat, she thrust Nhaille's sword into the grass beside her own and glared at it in disgust. The chore of cleaning weapons fell to the loser.

"But I wasn't supposed to lose!"

She cast a quick backward glance at the source of her irritation, finding him in the jumble of bricks they laughingly called the bath house. Freezing water cascaded over his bare chest. Muscles clenched against the cold. At another time she would have been interested in this blatant display of maleness. Kayr-Alden-Nhaille was a handsome man, even at twice her age. During her exile she'd had few opportunities to observe men up close. Lately, she'd found her attention wandering to thoughts of romance. But on this evening, thoughts of revenge and victory crowded out primal urges.

Furiously, she replayed the match in her mind. Her footwork was beyond reproach, strategy her best ever. The match should have been hers. Would have been, but for that last overly-confident move. Nhaille had seen quickly through the false bravado and promptly dispatched her.

Her hand strayed to the ragged tear in her padded leather practice vest. It hurt surely enough, but not as much as her pride. The dire purpose behind the match had ceased to matter and become instead a matter of her own dignity. She lusted after that sweet rush of triumph. More than ever she wanted to beat him at his own craft.

"I just want to see the look on his face!" Riordan smiled with great relish. "I'll make him polish my sword until it gleams."

But the King's Captain was not about to lose for her encouragement. The fate of a nation was at stake, as he was so fond of reminding her. An age-old prophecy named her its savior. On that flimsy possibility, her youth vanished into an endless chain of summers spent training for its inevitability.

"Prophecy be damned!"

Riordan yanked off her helm and ran a hand across her face. The May evening was unseasonably warm. Casting a furtive glance to ensure she wasn't observed, she undid the cloth that covered her hair. Silver-blond tumbled over her shoulders. She unbuckled her vest and tossed the leather down on the pile of gear. Flopping down beside it, she rested her arms on her knees and stared west over the countryside toward Kanarek.

Tall spires taunted her from the distance with the promise of urban delight. Her only knowledge of her birthplace came from one faded map. She memorized the maze of

streets, clinging persistently to dreams of home.

Dusk cooled the evening breeze, drying the sweat that soaked the front of her shirt. Riordan sighed. She'd best apply herself to the task at hand before the light vanished altogether.

Black clouds drifted lazily across the swollen sun hanging precariously on the horizon. The sight brought her back to the present with a jolt. Squinting into the sunset, she made out the foggy edge of a bank of billowing smoke. Riordan traced the dark cloud back along its path to...

Kanarek!

Riordan snatched up her abandoned gear. Ignoring the painful protest of tired muscles, she raced down the hill.

"Nhaille!" The hills threw her voice back at her mockingly.

He emerged suddenly from the bath house, hauling on the shirt that bunched stubbornly against his wet body. Momentum pitched her forward, nearly running him down.

"By the Gods, Riordan! What is it?" With a fencer's grace, he sidestepped the near collision and bit back an oath. Balling his fists against his hips, he regarded his charge with supreme displeasure. "Must you announce your presence to the entire countryside?"

Riordan skidded to a halt. "Smoke," she got out between panting breaths. "On the horizon. Kanarek's on fire!"

"Impossible," Nhaille snapped. His eyes flickered angrily from her face to the two swords that had obviously not yet seen any attention and the practice vest that dangled from one hand.

Riordan dragged in another breath. "I saw smoke. Huge clouds of it. Really, Nhaille."

Nhaille sniffed the air. As though he could see through the hulk of the house before him, he looked toward the horizon. Perhaps he sensed something in the air, or maybe her horror-stricken expression got through to him because he paled visibly. With long strides, he gained the summit in seconds, Riordan close behind him.

"There," she said indignantly, pointing out the billowing cloud that was taking up more of the horizon with every passing second.

He sighted down the line of her arm. Clouds, dyed crimson by the sunset, bled into the smoke like a festering sore. For several moments neither of them spoke. With a sinking heart Riordan watched his mouth harden into a grim line.

"What is it?" she asked, knowing it was nothing good if it made Nhaille look like that. "You don't think..." She couldn't say it, couldn't bring herself to ask if, after all those years of doubt, the prophecy had suddenly fallen upon her.

The dying sun tinged his face scarlet as he turned to her. "I don't know." Nhaille reached

for the sword she still held forgotten in her hands. Buckling it low on his hips, he started back down the hill. "But I intend to find out."

Like a shadow, she fled after him.

"Saddle the horses," he ordered, suddenly taking notice of her. "Just in case," he added more gently. He gripped her by the shoulders. "Wait for me here." The look on his face invited no protest. "Do not show yourself no matter who comes to the gates."

Swallowing hard past the rising lump of dread in her throat, she nodded. Nhaille strode away from her, disappearing silently into the darkness. For several seconds she stared in the direction he'd taken, while that feeling of cold horror spread slowly down her spine.

"Do it now, Riordan," came his stern reminder.

She came to her senses, realizing she was standing still as if her feet had taken root. Without a backward glance, she bolted in the direction of the stables.

Smoke darkened the sky prematurely. Wind rose up, scattering it in their direction. Strayhorn caught the scent and whinnied nervously as she bolted through the stable doors.

"Easy." She patted his ebony flank and wished wholeheartedly there was someone to reassure her. But he sensed her fear and tossed his head restlessly. Stormback paced in the narrow confines of his stall, clearly wondering what lunacy had their mistress contemplating a ride after dark.

"Please don't let it be true." Her hands shook, she fumbled with the leather straps of the saddle. "Please let it be a cooking fire that got out of hand. Anything but the fall of Kanarek."

Strayhorn stamped angrily, baffled at being saddled and stuck in his stall.

"Great," Riordan muttered under her breath. "Now I've spooked the horses." She forced the tremors from her hands and petted his muzzle. "It's probably just a mistake," she told them in soothing tones, as much to console herself. "So you two just be patient. I'll be back in a few moments."

Strayhorn regarded her with one skeptical eye. Riordan raced back toward the house for supplies.

"Blankets, canteen, rations. Gods what do you pack to answer a prophecy?" She grabbed the saddle bags Nhaille kept by the back door in case of emergency. "How can we possibly fight an army that can draft the dead into its service?"

Her hand closed on the hilt of her sword. The cold metal seemed woefully inadequate against the dire forces legend foretold.

The Sword of Zal-Azaar is our only hope, she heard Nhaille say as clearly as if he'd been standing next to her.

"Come back soon, Nhaille," she prayed to Nuurah, Goddess of Mercy. "Tell me there's nothing to worry about."

"Gods, what if he doesn't come back?" The thought lingered in her mind. "Why didn't I listen to him?"

Stubborn, he called her. Just like your father. It had the undeniable ring of truth. She'd scoffed at his warnings and daydreamed through his lectures. She'd laughed in the face of prophecy, steadfastly refusing to believe something she could neither prove nor deny.

"Forgive me, Nhaille. I promise I'll never daydream again."

Now the prophecy might actually have found its way to her door, her mind was a whirlwind of disconnected thoughts. Panic clamored for her attention. She couldn't give in to it.

"Kanarek is depending upon me."

A deep shudder worked its way from head to toe and she thought of the gory paintings in the scripture Nhaille kept buried in the root cellar. Drawn in thick strokes of red, black and gold it showed an army of slack jawed corpses led by a tall Haelian rider. On the opposite page a silver-haired Kanarekii warrior thundered down the hillside toward them bearing the legendary Sword of Zal-Azaar.

A supreme accident of birth named her that warrior.

The trouble with prophecy, Riordan decided, was that no one asked you if you wanted to be one.

"I can't do this!" she protested to Nuurah, who had long ceased listening, and ran to fill the canteens.

Boots, armor, a second shirt, an extra knife all went into the pile in the hall and still there was no sign of Nhaille. That more than anything else made her nervous. Nhaille was exact to a fault. If he said he wouldn't be long, he would return without delay.

Something was horribly wrong. The air vibrated with impending disaster.

Giving up on absent gods, she cursed the ancestors who'd damned her to this fate by every demon in Al-Gomar, The Seven Hells.

Shraal. The pale willowy beings of temple paintings. Shraal who had ruled the world with their terrible weapons. The soul-stealing Sword of Zal-Azaar was countered only by the Amber Orb, slivers of which could reanimate the dead. Shraal fought with Shraal. Shraal destroyed all they built. Tall cities lay in ruin, the scorched earth barren and wasted. Shraal descendants crawled into the forest, intermarried until their proud achievements became no more than dim memory and legend. The Sword and the Amber they hid among the impenetrable magenta mountains, having lost the knowledge to destroy them.

In a time of great need, so the prophecy said, a princess, thirteenth in line to the throne of Kanarek would awake the Sword and rescue them.

"Moraah!" Riordan groaned, calling on the Goddess of Courage. "How did I come to be born under such an unlucky star?"

She'd known the moment she saw those black clouds that the prophecy she'd so fervently denied had fallen upon her at last.

And destiny, as Nhaille was fond of telling her, was not to be tampered with.

"I wish I'd listened to you, Nhaille." A more distressing thought occurred to her. "I wish I'd listened to my father."

She'd done everything but, she realized with a pang of regret. During the long years of exile, she raged against the unfairness of it all, refusing to mind the lessons Nhaille taught her, lying awake at night plotting her return to Kanarek. She made only one attempt.

Once, in the hours of early morning, certain Nhaille was safely asleep, she crept from the house intent on saddling a horse and riding for Kanarek. Nhaille headed her off at the gates. He said nothing as he hauled her back to the house. Alone again in her room, she wept in frustration and agonizing loneliness.

When he found her crying, she expected the worst. Normally, the King's captain was stern to a fault. But that night, he'd taken her into his arms and held her tenderly.

She could still feel his strong arms around her, the touch of his lips against her forehead, the press of his muscular body against hers. She'd clung to him like a child and sobbed until she'd soaked his shoulder.

Still, he said nothing, only held her and murmured her name soothingly. Eventually, he pulled away, embarrassed, and left as silently as he came.

Shortly afterward, her father came to visit.

He seemed to fill the main hall, towering over her. Her eyes traveled upward over the fine black boots caked with mud, to the dark green breeches. His quilted jacket was nicely made. Although the cloak that covered it all was a nondescript black, the wool was finely woven and lined with fur. His right hand bore an intricately-carved ring with a flaming ruby at its center. His ring of office, she realized, gaping openly at this imposing personage who was her closest blood relative.

Dark brown eyes bored through her, a penetrating gaze made all the more intimidating by his bushy brows and curly black hair. Her coloring must come from her mother's side of the family, she thought absently. For some reason she had always assumed she more closely resembled her living parent. Yet she could see her own expressions in the hard set of his mouth, and his straight nose was her own.

Until that moment, she had doubted. She imagined a dozen different scenarios: that

Nhaille had kidnapped her and was yet holding her for ransom, that she was actually Nhaille's own daughter, got upon some high-born lady, a source of disgrace.

This commanding presence before her was no doubt the King. And he was most displeased with his youngest child.

"Have you any idea the dangers I've risked to make this journey?"

Such was his greeting.

Flinching beneath his glare, Riordan dropped her eyes. "I'm sorry, Sir."

"Your disobedience places us all in jeopardy," he railed, repeating all that Nhaille had told her and more. "The entire kingdom of Kanarek depends upon you."

Her eyes brimmed with tears, but he continued undaunted. Launching the words at her like so many spears, he shattered her dream of the loving parent as surely as Nhaille had botched her plan of escape.

"All I wanted was to come home."

"That is not possible, Riordan."

She challenged his stubbornness with her own. "Why isn't it possible? And don't speak to me of prophecy. I'm tired of listening to it."

"What do you know of prophecy," he roared. He strode across the hall, dragging her to a seat by the hearth. For several moments he glowered fiercely at her, then sighed deeply.

"In the year before your birth, a seer dreamt of a war to rival the cataclysmic wars of Bayorek. She envisioned our tallest towers reduced to dust, the dead walking in the avenues of Kanarek."

He paused to let the images sink in. Then, reading the skepticism in her gray eyes, he continued.

"At first I did not believe. But the seer had also foretold of a light-haired female child who would claim vengeance for Kanarek and rebuild our kingdom from out of the ashes. Having sons already, I had no plans to beget any more heirs. Shortly afterward, however, we discovered the Queen was with child. The moment I laid eyes upon you, Riordan, I knew the vision to be true. Shraal blood runs strongly within you. Features such as yours have not been visible among us for many generations." He paused, taking a deep breath.

"I cannot afford to risk my kingdom for your desires. I will not see Kanarek reduced to ashes and forgotten."

His tales of war and carnage did little to ease her dreams in the following weeks. The lesson was clear. For Riordan there would be no comfort, and she'd best mind Nhaille and learn all he bid her.

Finally given her leave, she sat in the shadows of her draped bed, attempting to comfort herself when no one else would. That was when she heard them talking.

"...yet a child in many ways..." The words echoed up the wooden staircase. Nhaille's voice. "What if the prophecy turns out to be no more than the ramblings of a madwoman? What if none of it comes to pass? What of Riordan's future?"

"I have given much thought to the matter," her father replied, then more quietly, "There are times when I can think of nothing else. I have promised myself that if nothing has come to pass by her twenty-first summer, then I will call Riordan home to Kanarek."

"In all this time," Nhaille said, his voice low. "I have never doubted, never asked..."

"Asked me what?"

"Do you truly believe?"

"I do."

It was the stark fear in his voice that made an impression when the sharply-delivered lecture had failed.

Her father's words reached out of memory to rebuke her even now. Riordan felt the coil of dread wind tighter.

The spring snapped. Terror washed over her in heart-pounding waves. If the prophecy had truly come to pass it meant only one thing. Her father, her older brothers and their heirs were dead.

* * *

Where in the seven hells was the messenger? Nhaille peered down the twisting path that wound its way through the hills. Surely one was coming.

Not necessarily, he told himself. He'd seen the black smoke billowing up over the hills. There might not be anything left of the city.

The thought chilled his heart. For nineteen long years he dreamed of returning home, his duty completed, his oath fulfilled. And on that glorious day, his life would finally be his own.

Now if both the city and the dream were gone, like Riordan he would have no home to go to. But unlike Riordan, he'd had his youth, the summer evenings spent reveling and carousing.

Thoughts of pity served no one. He could do nothing about fate nor destiny. He ought to be contemplating strategy. He should be doing anything but waiting there in the darkness.

But before he could consider tactics, he had to know.

From the darkness came the jingle of a harness, followed by a low whistle. Nhaille repeated the signal.

The sound of hooves against the dirt road moved toward him. Out of the darkness, the

shape of man and horse emerged.

Barely older than Riordan, he thought in dismay. A boy in a lieutenant's uniform. Soot streaked the soldier's face. His ash-covered armor was missing half its buckles. The Lieutenant looked as if he'd already been to war.

No, Nhaille had to remind himself sharply. The war has not yet begun.

"Captain." The Lieutenant greeted him with the age old salute of the Kanarekii army.

The unexpected formality caught Nhaille off-guard. Hastily he repeated the motion.

"Your report?"

The Lieutenant's report was written all over his face. Though he took refuge in military formalities, the young man's eyes were wide with fear. If wasn't the dreaded prophecy, Nhaille thought, it had to be something just as bad.

"Sir, I come to inform you--"

"That Kanarek has fallen," Nhaille finished for him.

"Yes, Sir."

"And the King?"

The soldier swallowed heavily. A shadow of terror swept across his face. His mouth worked. No sound came out.

Gods help us!

"I understand," Nhaille said at last.

"Your orders, Sir?"

"Assemble any survivors. Ride for Kholer. Await us there."

Not a second to lose, Nhaille thought desperately. He had to get to Riordan. He should never have left her alone.

"Spread the alarm," he said, turning back. "Warn everyone you meet."

He fled into the shadows, racing after Kanarek's only hope.

She was only a child.

Nhaille cursed bitterly, loathing himself already for what he was about to do. Only nineteen, Riordan was not yet a woman, never mind a soldier.

He couldn't send her to war.

Yet, on the eve of her birth, that was exactly what he had promised his King he would do. A promise he never thought he'd have to keep. But he couldn't withdraw a promise made to the dead.

Arais-Khun-Caryn was dead. The knowledge sunk in slowly. The woman-child that

awaited him back at the house was now his Queen.

Though Riordan had the uncanny ability of conquering any task she put her mind to, her current interest in the sword lay only in beating him. He couldn't send her into battle. She wasn't ready.

Her grimace of pain and anger lingered in his mind. He hadn't meant to hurt her. Gods knew he hadn't. The lesson was necessary, he reassured his guilty conscience, no matter how cruel. She'd not readily forget the sting of his sword. Had it truly been a duel, she'd be dead.

As it was, he'd won the match by little more than a hair. If not for her lapse in concentration, that last impetuous lunge, she would have beaten him.

Her technique was much improved. When it came to tactic alone, she could duel with the best of them. So she had been listening after all. There were times when he was certain every word he said flew through her head like wind through the eaves. Still, she was far too impulsive, too easily goaded into rash moves. Her volatile temper would be her undoing, he swore grimly.

Riordan had inherited her mother's honesty and her father's skill with the sword. She also inherited a good share of the King's less desirable qualities, namely his temper and stubbornness. And though it pained him to admit his King and dear friend had such qualities, the duty of wresting them from the Princess fell to him.

Be it with words or swords, he thought with a wry smile. Already she could conquer him in an argument.

Once, in his youth, he'd lost his heart to such a feisty woman. In moments when his thoughts escaped his tight rein, Riordan reminded him of her. He pushed treasonous thoughts from his mind. The Princess was very beautiful, but it was not his place to notice.

The King's daughter, he reflected miserably, would be his undoing, one way or another.

* * *

Riordan leapt to her feet as Nhaille crossed the threshold. The look on his face told her more than she wanted to know. "What is it? What's happened?"

He knelt before her and bowed his head. "Your Majesty, I--"

"Nhaille, no!" Riordan sank down beside him. "In the Name of The Seven Heavens, don't call me that." She tugged his shirt, urging him back to his feet.

Nhaille looked at her, his green eyes filled with pity. She liked that even less.

"Riordan," he said roughly. He gripping her shoulders. "Kanarek has fallen."

The information rattled around in her mind, refusing to take root and make sense. Her heart was already pounding. She gasped a shaky breath. Not a warrior's reactions, she

told herself sternly.

Forcing calmness into her voice, she asked quietly, "My family?"

Nhaille shook his head.

It was all gone, she realized. The dreams of home. The older brothers she'd longed to confide in, the nieces and nephews to bounce upon her knee. All gone in one day that had begun just like any other.

Nhaille held her away from him, regarding her solemnly. "Your Majesty, I am your servant."

Your Majesty. The words sunk in slowly. Riordan-Khun-Caryn, Queen of Kanarek. She stared up at him, eyes wide in terror.

"It's going to be all right," he whispered pulling her against him.

But even as she buried her face against his shoulder, she knew he was lying. Her tears ran in hot rivers down the side of his neck.

"Hush, Riordan," he said quietly. "We have to go. We're already out of time."

CHAPTER THREE

In the kingdom of Hael a celebration was under way. Wine flowed in marble fountains and streamers of black and red fluttered from the palace windows. The city throbbed with the pulse of drums and the pounding of dancers' feet against the cobblestone. Soldiers, still in armor, lounged on the battlements, sobriety long forgotten, as everyone but the chefs and the servants were caught up in the merriment. Looking down from the upper balcony the entire square swirled in a kaleidoscope of color.

Within the castle the party was more subdued, as the wealthy and powerful made at least a show of decorum. Ladies in beaded and sequined dresses swept by on the arms of gentlemen nearly as brightly decorated. The obligatory speeches were long over. The Minister of Trade had passed out quietly in the antechamber, laid out beside the Minister of Taxes.

Nothing left to do but enjoy the victory, Prince Doan-Rau thought, making his way smiling through the press of noblemen. He was dressed in black on this celebratory eve, from his satin cloak, leather vest and high boots. Save for the amber clasp upon his cloak, the jeweled hilt of his sword was the only splash of color upon his person.

A glorious victory it was, he thought surveying the gathering. The one person who had yet to commend him on his brilliant campaign was the King. Damned if he'd let the night pass without congratulations from his father. Spying him in the center of an animated debate with Gamaliel, the High Priest, Rau moved toward him.

Against the Prince's sober black, King and Priest were a riot of color. The King's long hair was a thatch of silver beneath his gold coronet. His father had spared no expense in his attire for the evening. His purple cloak was of the thickest velvet Rau had ever seen.

Must be sweltering in it! Rau suppressed a grin. Protocol was protocol. This was the palace, after all.

Beside him, the wizened Gamaliel was nearly overwhelmed by his robes of crimson. The brilliant hue only served to wash the color from his pallid face. But his beady black eyes were ever watchful, absorbing every nuance in the vast gathering around him.

For several moments Rau lingered on the outside of their circle, waiting patiently for the King to take notice of him. He loathed palace protocol, rarely adhered to it in private. But a victory celebration was not the time to flaunt social conventions. He waited, knuckles white against the crystal chalice and tried to keep an equally tight grip on his composure.

"Ah," said the King, at last looking up. "Congratulations are most definitely in order for a successful campaign."

Rau bowed to his father.

"Well executed, Your Highness," Gamaliel agreed with a deep bow of his own.

Prince Rau raised his glass with much flourish. "To Kanarek."

He took a sip of his wine and grinned at his own sarcasm. When he looked up, however, his father's gaze held his own with disturbing seriousness.

"To the Shraal, ancestors of us all," the King countered, raising his own chalice, "who invented the magic that has seen us victorious."

Rau glowered briefly in his direction, then swiftly hid the expression behind the rim of his glass. Would he never earn the man's praise, he wondered, choking back rising anger. All his life he'd watched as the adoration he so desperately sought was bestowed upon his younger siblings. Surely his father could spare some encouragement for his ambitious heir. Fishing for the compliment he craved, Rau raised his glass again.

"Today Kanarek, tomorrow the coast."

"Gods willing," the High Priest amended swiftly, loathe to tempt fate.

With arrogance fueled by a good measure of wine, the Prince scoffed openly at Gamaliel's warning. "Kanarek's King makes a fine soldier, don't you think?"

His father's glance flickered in warning from the wineglass back to Rau's face. Rau read the warning in the look and promptly dismissed it. Draining his glass, he motioned for a servant to refill it. "Not only do we have that wily old fox under our command, we have the riches of an entire kingdom at our disposal." He shook his head in wonder at his own genius. "And our good friend, the King of Kanarek, is poised to be nemesis of his own kind..." He gulped down yet another glass of wine and beamed openly at his father. Surely this time the approval would be forthcoming. "You have to admit, it is a brilliant plot."

"Hush!" The High Priest glanced furtively over his shoulder at the crowd.

"The valley is not yet won," the King said. "Surprise was our ally in the conquest of Kanarek. By now the others will be warned."

"The valley will soon be ours," Rau insisted. Even to his own ears, he sounded like a petulant child. What was it about his father that reduced him to an awkward boy long after he'd proved his manhood in battle?

"Let us hope so."

"Even if they took to the hills with every kitchen knife and pitchfork they possess, we will defeat them easily. And then they'll find themselves drafted into our army of the dead!"

"No battle is ever easy," the King admonished. "Never forget Hael will have to reign over this vast kingdom once it is established."

"That worry is for another day," Rau dismissed his father's worries with false bravado.

Not what he wanted to hear on the eve of his victory. Apparently, the parental admiration he'd sought was not forthcoming. He searched the crowd for his peers. Alas, no one under fifty was to be found so close to the King.

He looked back to see a meaningful glance pass between King and Priest.

"Do not forget the legend of the warrior-princess."

Rau gaped at his father. The fear in the old man's voice made him shiver despite the heat.

"Surely you don't believe that nonsense of prophecy and another heir?" Rau threw up his hands in frustration, remembering too late the crystal chalice that went sailing off into the gathering. Wincing, he watched as it crashed in a rain of crystal shards amongst a band of revelers.

Taking the gesture for a celebration of his conquest, the crowd applauded.

Having no option but to continue the charade, he bowed to his admirers. A black-robed servant appeared at his elbow with another glass. Behind him, he could feel the watchful eyes of the King and his most trusted advisor boring into his back. He swallowed his embarrassment and turned to face them. "The House of Caryn now reside among the leagues of the dead," he whispered harshly into the silence. "I know, I counted them myself."

"It is a foolish man who tempts fate," Gamaliel warned. "Do you not think it strange that you razed the city of Kanarek and came away with neither the Sword nor the map to its hiding place?"

The comment brought a sobering scowl to Rau's face. "The Sword of Zal-Azaar is as much legend as the story of the warrior-princess."

"Is it?" the old man asked. "Have you never wondered what happens to the souls that once inhabited the bodies of your dead warriors? Have you never wondered why the legends spoke of two weapons?"

"Their souls mean nothing to me as long as their bodies do my bidding."

Giving the Crown Prince a long disapproving glance, Gamaliel shambled off, only to stop in the shadows several feet away. "The Sword of Zal-Azaar was made to counter the jewel that lies at the center of your strategy," he said quietly. "And if you were wise, you'd not mock its name."

Uttering a deep sigh, Rau watched the old priest depart. "Honestly father, I don't know why you retain him."

"He is an old and trusted friend."

"Well it's time you found another. Gamaliel grows feeble in his old age."

His feeling of euphoria was rapidly deteriorating into one of despondency. He wanted

nothing more than to be gone from the obligations of court and free to celebrate his victory in a fashion more deserving of the months of work that had led up to this day. But his father was still staring at him with that same disapproving, worried look on his face. And he'd not yet given him leave.

His deepening frown finally drew the King's pity. As if realizing he'd not given his son a word of praise, he asked suddenly, "Have you no friends of your own to share our victory with? No special lady?"

"For my consort," Rau scoffed, "Only the mythical princess of Kanarek will do."

His father shot him a cold look. "Watch what you wish for."

"You don't really think she exists?"

"Foolish is the man who underestimates his opponent," the King said. "Remember that, son."

Rau's eyes narrowed and he finished his wine in a single gulp. Spying a familiar figure in the crowd, he said quickly, "Ah, there is Captain Larz. By your leave, sir?"

Without waiting for his reply, Rau dove into the crowd.

He bypassed Captain Larz with no more than a nod, deciding suddenly that in his present mood, his own company was preferable. Smiling and nodding, enduring a multitude of congratulatory slaps on the back, he made his way to the balcony on the far side of the Great Hall.

Mercifully, it was unoccupied. He slumped against the cool marble. The night was unseasonably warm, the heavy satin cloak with its amber clasp was annoyingly hot. Long, brown hair clung to the back of his neck in sweaty curls. Belatedly, he regretted not tying it back in its customary braid.

Tossing the cloak over the marble railing, he debated shedding the leather vest laced tight across his broad chest. He couldn't run the risk of being caught on the balcony of the great hall clad in nothing but a linen shirt and breeches, he decided. That was for another sort of celebration all together.

It should have been the finest night of his life. He had planned to wander through the King's ball, collecting comments and drinking wine until the world retreated behind a haze of drunken euphoria. And then he had planned to take his pick of the banquet of women decorated in multi-colored silk. Perhaps two or three, he reflected grimly. But instead he'd gone searching for his father's approval, and therein lost the stomach for the rest of it.

Months of work had gone into this venture. Years in fact, if he counted the portion of his youth lost pouring over the dusty old scrolls in the chapel. It was there he'd first come across the old rhyme about the Sword and the Amber.

The desert is a shade of night
Of blue shadow and bone white light
Across the arid desert sea
The crystal mountains call to me

There within a tomb of stone
Lies a blade that owns my soul
Now I believe I've glimpsed Hell's fires
Let the desert be my funeral pyre

The haunting poem stayed with him as he passed from youth into manhood. And one day a disgruntled prince had looked out over the confines of his father's kingdom and decided to turn a boy's dreams into a man's reality.

All those months, baking under the merciless desert sun, searching by every map ever set to parchment for the Amber's tomb. Endless scorching days and freezing nights spent in the saddle, while the vicious winds drove sand into every layer of clothing and every crease of skin.

And yet, he had been victorious. He had conquered Kanarek. Rau glanced back into the room that still pulsed with color and laughter, finally sighting his father's purple cloak.

"I did this for you," he told the King's unsuspecting back.

Still, a line from the rhyme nagged at the edges of his mind, one he hadn't shared with his father.

Let their kingdoms fall before me

And I shall be her rightful Queen.

The Shraal had it wrong, Rau thought. He would be the rightful King. He would rein over the entire coast.

A shadow moved between Rau and the light. He tensed momentarily, going for the sword slung low across his hips. But the shadow smiled and moved into the beam of light shining through the doorway.

"Your Highness."

"Captain Larz."

"At your service."

Rau burst into raucous laughter. "That you are, Captain. Won't you join me?"

"A glorious night," Larz offered, eyeing his commander nervously.

"That it is." Turning away to hide the extent of his drunkenness, Rau leaned his forearms on the railing and stared down into the square. One of the soldiers had tumbled into the fountain. A group of giggling young ladies were trying unsuccessfully to pull him out. Larz, following the Prince's gaze, recognized his man in the fountain and shifted uncertainly.

"They fought hard for our victory," he said at last.

The women's laughter drifted upward to the balcony, followed by a loud splash as the drunken soldier slipped once again from the ladies' grasp.

"A hard campaign," Rau agreed, and almost chuckled at the concerned look on Larz's face. "They deserve their night of merriment."

Larz relaxed visibly. "And you, Your High--"

The Prince dismissed the title with a wave of his hand. Though they shared a camaraderie in battle, in the palace Larz was a model of decorum. "Rau," he insisted. "We are alone."

"Yes, Sir." Larz glanced at the soldier who, now sobered by the cold of the fountain, was clambering to his feet under his own power. "I'd have thought to find you out among them."

Rau sighed. "At court we must keep up appearances. Rest assured, I'll have my celebration later."

"When we take Kholer."

"The night we take Kholer, I shall run nude through that fountain," Rau said. "Regardless of what my father thinks."

Unsure whether to smile, Larz merely nodded.

"There will be weeks of hard battle between here and Kholer."

"Our army grows with each village," the captain said and shuddered visibly. In an attempt to cover the reflex, he tipped his goblet high.

Rau looked down into his own and found it empty. He glanced up at Larz. "The legend of Zal-Azaar, do you believe it, Captain?"

Larz snorted. "Stories to entertain old women and frighten small children. No more."

"What makes you so sure?"

The captain fidgeted with his gauntlets.

"If the tale of the Amber turned out to be true," Rau prompted using his father's argument to cover his doubts, "why not the Sword and the mythical princess?"

"That is a question for men greater than I," Larz said.

"Perhaps." Rau stared into the darkness.

"You don't believe in the warrior-princess," the captain asked anxiously. "Do you, Sir?"

"Of course not." His certainty sounded forced, even to his own ears.

For a moment neither made any further attempts at conversation.

"Well," Larz said at length, "I must see to the men." He laughed with forced cheerfulness. "We don't want them tearing up our city in their zeal."

"Good night to you, Captain."

This melancholy mood was not going to pass, Rau thought bitterly. Behind him the crowd of dignitaries was thinning. The ice-sculptures on the banquet table had melted into silver puddles, and the lavish spread looked as though it had been plundered as thoroughly as Kanarek. Empty goblets cluttered every flat surface. A few had even been thrust into the hands of marble statues and wedged between the branches of the potted topiary. Exhausted servants desperately tried to keep the carnage to a minimum and failed.

Rau turned back into the humid air. Despite the heavy perfume of honeysuckle, it was as if even the sky pressed down upon him in displeasure.

But I have made us great. Our praises will be sung for hundreds of years. He wondered absently why that thought did nothing to lift his mood.

The memory of Kanarek's King staring lifelessly at him in defiance had taken root in his mind and refused to leave.

The man was dead, he told himself sternly. All expression died with him. It was his imagination, nothing more. He stared into the night as the sound of merry-making faded.

For a moment his vision misted and he had a sudden image of a silver-haired woman staring down at him with piercing gray eyes. The vision was gone as swiftly as it came. There was nothing before him but a flash of gray against the black sky. Dawn.

Rau contemplated the empty goblet. He turned to go back into the now quiet hall.

Suddenly, he whirled and tossed the wineglass high into the sky.

Caught in the light of the lanterns, it flickered, then crashed to the cobblestone like a falling star.

CHAPTER FOUR

"How can an old piece of stone possibly make a dead body walk?" The image did nothing to ease Riordan's nerves. The outdoors were bigger than she could possibly have imagined. Deprived of the keep's protective walls, she felt exposed. Each snap of a twig made her jump. Each time the wind whispered, she caught herself scanning the trees for danger.

"I've never seen the Amber work," Nhaille said, "but if the rest of the prophecy has come true, we must prepare ourselves for that possibility as well."

"Why would someone make a weapon like that?" It had never occurred to her to wonder why. Wondering would have been an admission of belief.

She was believing now, as fast as she could, trying to make up for nineteen years of denial. Her mind raced ahead, conjuring every dismal scenario imaginable. Strayhorn's swaying gait only served to augment the turmoil in her gut. Terror became nausea. Each passing second made the possibility of vomiting an inevitability. Riordan grit her teeth. Vomiting was out of the question. She would not be sick in front of Nhaille and humiliate them both.

Nhaille scanned the horizon. "We can only guess what went on in Shraal minds. It is written they were not entirely sane. Shraal confined themselves to their opal cities, refusing to intermarry with the people of the plains. Inbreeding produced insanity, overcrowding."

"This whole thing is lunacy," Riordan ground out through clenched teeth.

"You'll get no argument from me there." Nhaille tightened the strap of his spiked helmet. Turning his head, he swept his gaze across the black silhouette of the hills, searching for signs of pursuit. So far there'd been none. Hael was certain of their victory.

Riordan glanced enviously at Nhaille and tried not to fidget. Armor seemed to suit him nearly as well as his own skin.

I should be so lucky.

Her helmet's leather strap dug into the tender skin behind her ears. Armor chafed everywhere it touched. She hated being encased in leather and mail, longed for the freedom of a simple tunic and breeches. Even Strayhorn whinnied irritably and tossed his head trying to throw off the spiked face plate.

"Once the Shraal realized their weapons could be used against them, why didn't they destroy them?"

"The machinery of war had already been set in motion. Perhaps they didn't know how."

"They made them."

"The knowledge may have been lost."

"A fine legacy to leave for me--" Riordan stopped suddenly. Her own words echoed through her head over and over again. "For me to clean up," she whispered finally.

Until now she'd been wandering around in a horrified daze, packing, organizing, trying to cram as much history as possible into her already overburdened brain. In one giant landslide the full impact of her task came crashing down upon her.

"Gods, Nhaille, I can't fix this mess. It's impossible!"

He rode in close and squeezed her armored shoulder. "Easy, Riordan. For now all we must do is make it across the desert alive."

"We have to stay alive long enough to find the Sword," she supplied.

"Right."

"What if we don't find it?" Gods, what if we do?

"According to the prophecy, we will."

Fear twisted within her, swiftly becoming anger. "And what if the prophecy is wrong? Has no one thought of that?"

"It has been right so far."

Riordan threw up her hands in frustration. Strayhorn, feeling the sudden slack on the reins, snorted nervously. Losing stride momentarily, he fell back into step with Nhaille's Stormback. "Fine, assuming that's right. Has nobody considered that maybe it can't be done?"

"It can be done," Nhaille insisted. "Hael had no difficulty turning the Amber upon us."

"Hael has an army! We have nothing, except a moldy old map!"

"For now," Nhaille said, maddeningly sure of himself.

Riordan reined Strayhorn in sharply. He protested vehemently, throwing up his head. "Suppose we find this mythical Sword of Zal-Azaar. Hells, suppose we do manage to assemble an army -- I'll even go as far as to believe that I'm capable of breaking through Haelian ranks, cleaving off the Prince's head and sending his soul to damnation in the Seventh Hell."

Nhaille waited quietly for her to continue.

"What then? What if I can't control it? What if I can't use it at all?"

The question hung between them.

"And even," Riordan added quietly, "if somehow by the will of the Gods I'm able to do all the prophecy says I will. That will not rebuild Kanarek. It won't bring my family back."

"No." He peered into the shadows. "Defeating Hael is but the beginning of the task."

"Great." Riordan urged Strayhorn forward. "Just as long as we both realize what we're trying to do is impossible."

Nhaille nodded noncommittally, thinking that was the end of the conversation.

"By the Gods, Nhaille, I can't do any of this!"

The night echoed her words back at her.

"Keep your voice down! You'll do none of it if you lead the Haelian army straight to us. You'll be dead and Kanarek will be lost forever. I do wish for a moment you'd remember what's at stake here."

"I am acutely aware of what's at stake here. And that is why I am utterly terrified."

"You don't have to do this alone, Riordan," Nhaille said quietly. "I will be with you."

It was meant to comfort her, however, despite his forced bravado, in the darkness Nhaille didn't sound any more sure of himself than she did.

They rode in silence for several moments while the urge to scream built inside her. But hollering, as Nhaille pointed out, would be suicide.

"Did it ever occur to anyone that perhaps I just don't have it in me?" Riordan whispered finally. "What if I'm not capable of coldbloodedly chopping off someone's head?"

"Chopping off mine didn't seem to bother you."

"I was trying to beat you, not kill you, Nhaille. I just wanted to see the look on your face when I won."

"I'd never have given you the satisfaction."

His pitiful attempt at humor did little to calm her. Riordan frowned and swallowed hard on the bile rising to her throat. "How am I going to beat Hael if I can't even beat you?"

"Hael won't have The Sword of Zal-Azaar at their disposal."

"Hael has the Amber."

"They are not the same, Riordan."

"No, but they're equal in their potential for destruction."

"Not exactly."

"The Sword is stronger?" She couldn't remember that fact written anywhere. At least, it hadn't been in the book Nhaille kept beneath the marker in the cellar.

"The Amber is an older, cruder weapon." Nhaille paused, gathering his thoughts. "Early Shraal possessed the magic to reignite the parts of the brain that control walking, fighting. The Shraal ancestors of Hael declared war on the kingdom of Bayorek. The Amber was cruel in its efficiency. For a time it seemed Hael would win as the conquered

territories found their own armies turned against them."

"So they created the Sword," Riordan supplied.

Nhaille nodded. "It turned out Bayorek had their own Shraal sorcerers in the House of Khun. Faced with a weapon that could make the dead walk, they created another that left no bodies when it killed. Your Shraal ancestors created the Sword of Zal-Azaar."

"My ancestors were responsible for that abomination!" There seemed to be no end to the night's cruel revelations.

"That abomination, as you call it, may well be Kanarek's only hope."

Chastened, Riordan considered his point.

"War became stalemate," Nhaille continued. "Each faction tried to rule the world. It never occurred to them that it would be their own world they destroyed."

"That's why the plains of Kor-Koraan are barren to this day," Riordan said. That part was written in the book Nhaille kept hidden in the cellar.

"The wars of Bayorek lasted for generations."

"Why did my family keep the map of the Sword's resting place?"

"Shraal blood still runs strong in the line of Khun. Your mother's legacy."

"This curse comes from my mother?"

"Only those of Shraal blood can use Shraal Sorcery. The Shraal abandoned the ruined city of Bayorek and built a new city, Kanarek. Though they swore themselves to peace, the house of Khun kept the map to the Sword's resting place. In case Hael should rise up against them again."

"I wish I'd never seen it."

Nhaille shot her an impatient look. "One has only to look at you, Riordan, to see the resemblance between you and your Shraal ancestors."

"I guess they had no more choice than we do," Riordan said. "They were being annihilated."

"They were desperate, Riordan."

She stared into the darkness. "How can you be so sure there is Shraal blood in my veins? What if the resemblance is only skin deep?"

"It could very well be. But there has not been a child with your coloring born for generations. After the fall of Bayorek, those who were left of the Shraal intermarried with the darker races of the plains."

"I didn't get my coloring from my mother, then?" She always assumed she had.

"No," Nhaille said simply, then nothing more.

"And prophecy spoke of a fair-haired child. Is that what made my father believe?"

"Even your father came about his belief reluctantly. The alternative was oblivion."

"Kanarek was too much to risk, so he sacrificed me," Riordan said bitterly.

"He chose to save you, Riordan. Had you been in Kanarek, you'd now be dead."

They rode in silence, hiding their thoughts under cover of darkness. Secrets hung heavily between them, all those personal matters Nhaille would never discuss with her. Curiosity tugged at her nonetheless. If she was to fight and likely die for Kanarek, then she wanted to know exactly what she fought for.

"Before we cross the desert," Riordan said suddenly. "There is something I must do." She didn't notice the imperiousness of her tone, but it brought Nhaille's head up sharply.

"And what is that, Your Majesty?"

His use of her title escaped her notice. "I want to see Kanarek."

Shock silenced him for a second, then he thundered, "Out of the question."

"Nhaille--"

"Riordan, that would be ludicrous. You might as well nail yourself to the city gates and wait for Doan-Rau to hammer a stake of amber through your right eye."

His brutal scenario drew a gasp from her. Taking that as acquiescence, Nhaille fell silent. But as in one of their duels, Riordan refused to give up so easily. "I still want to see Kanarek, Nhaille."

"I won't hear of it."

"I insist!"

In the darkness, she watched his eyes widen in surprise and anger.

"You may be my liege, Your Majesty." His voice hinted at the menace he was capable of. "But I have been entrusted with your safety, and I must refuse."

So much for my first order.

"You don't understand," Riordan said softly. Reasoning with Nhaille in such a mood was a delicate task. "I have never seen my home. I would like to see it now, what's left of it, in case..." She couldn't say it.

"In case of what?"

"So that if I don't come back, at least I will have laid eyes once upon my home."

Nhaille swore under his breath.

"Is that so much to ask? Especially since I have had so little of what I wanted in life."

"No," Nhaille said quietly. "It's not too much to ask. But for your own safety I must

refuse."

That much admitted, he'd give her no more. Riordan read her defeat in his expression and refused to acknowledge it. She looked him levelly in the eye. "Hear me Nhaille. I will go to Kanarek. With or without you."

* * *

Damn! There were times when he dearly wanted to throttle her. Would have, except that she had his heart wrapped around her little finger. He could never let her know that. Nhaille sighed deeply, most of the time she didn't even realize it. Going to Kanarek was folly. But he couldn't let her ride into the city alone, oblivious to the dangers she faced.

How could he deny her that first and perhaps last look at her home? Especially considering the task before her. He glanced over at her, her face set in that grim line that so reminded him of her father.

Only a brave man would cross her in such a mood, he thought with a brief smile. But he knew the ferocious expression merely hid the terror inside her. He watched the emotions flash across her face. Anger, terror, and finally cold acceptance.

She was holding up surprisingly well. Duty was a concept she understood--he'd made certain of that. For nineteen years, he'd worried that when the moment came, she'd crumble beneath the enormity of the task thrust upon her.

This stoic silence was not what he expected. Though he could see the horror lingering beneath her calm veneer, she choked it down, covering it in a layer of stiff formality eerily reminiscent of his friend and King. He would almost have preferred her tears, her rage against the weight of this crushing obligation.

And I thought I knew you, Riordan.

The Riordan who rode beside him was a stranger. A strangely alluring and beautiful stranger. He longed for the child he'd known, so he could hold her in his arms and promise he'd make it all right.

A blatant lie. Taking the woman beside him into his arms brought its own uncomfortable imaginings. And no way in the Seven Heavens would it be all right. Not unless he could stop the passage of time, reach back through the ages, unmake the Sword and Riordan unborn. The very best he could hope for was a speedy death for them both. Wielding the Sword had its own dark pitfalls--that he had yet to share with Riordan.

Forgive me, he thought desperately, for the ways I've misled you.

In a matter of hours, the child he'd raised had grown into a woman before his eyes. The walls were up around her. He may never be invited inside.

It was amazing how quickly the imperial tone had crept into her voice, her mannerisms, as if she'd grown up in the palace with its protocol and courtiers.

Surely this couldn't be the same Riordan who could barely make it through a meal without fidgeting--who sat statue-still upon her horse, staring into the darkness, her face closed upon her thoughts. Nhaille's frown deepened.

He didn't want to go to Kanarek. It would tear his heart in two to look upon the ruin of his city. He pictured Riordan staring out over the ruin of her kingdom with that calm expression quietly accepting it all.

And that would truly break his heart.

Folly in the extreme to venture anywhere near Kanarek. They ought to be half way across the plains of Kor-Koraan by now. But Riordan needed to look upon the demolition of her city with her own eyes, to know for certain all that was written in the prophecy was true. He couldn't deny her this one last mercy. Not when she'd been denied so much else.

She was her father's daughter after all. He'd never been able to refuse his King, either.

Damn, he thought. And damn again.

* * *

Muffled sounds seemed to come from far away. Shouted orders, the dull slap of boots against cobblestone. Bevan stirred.

Neurons fired intermittently. Sporadic thoughts flashed into his consciousness. Danger, terror, pain. In some lost chamber of his mind he remembered the concepts but feeling deteriorated into a dull haze.

Get up!

The voice echoed inside his mind. He tried to ignore it, content to linger in this cottony-filled world of nothingness. But it nagged at him, urging him to follow its insistent command.

He ran his swollen tongue over cracked lips, trying to rid himself of the sour taste of rot. Clotted blood filled his mouth. Flakes of drying blood covered the side of his face and encrusted the collar of his shirt. I'm dying, he thought in one brief, lucid flash. No, his mind calmly replied, I'm dead.

Get up! A boot collided with his side. The blow lifted his shoulder off the ground. He felt the impact but not the expected pain. A low moan issued from his flattened lungs. Bevan opened his eyes.

Half the world was dark, the rest blurry and out of focus as if the entire landscape was under water. He blinked, out of reflex, it did nothing to clear the clouds in his vision.

The order became desire. Deadened limbs sluggishly complied.

Walk.

Bevan lurched forward. Walking. His body remembered, obeyed. Brief snatches of

memory told him he wasn't always this shambling slave. For an instant he felt the overwhelming loss of that life, but the voice in his head drowned out the rest of his thoughts.

The odor of decay rose up around him, impossible to ignore, even through his numbed senses. Swiveling his head to see through that one, clouded eye, he made out the tattered shapes of his former countrymen, staggering in rough formation. Like a plague, they poured past the city gates and out into the unsuspecting countryside.

The sight triggered the spark of an image. Fire. Shouting. Danger. Something important he ought to remember.

But in the end the thought eluded him. He marched with the others through the city gates and into the searing afternoon sun.

* * *

The indigo sky gradually gave way to turquoise, darkness to amber light. Riordan ran a hand across gritty eyes and wished wholeheartedly for the familiar comfort of her bed. It would be a long time before she slept in a bed again, she thought regretfully. Longer still before she would rest without nightmares haunting her sleep.

Lack of sleep didn't seem to bother Nhaille any more than the chafing armor. She glanced over at him, seemingly impervious to any of the discomfort she was suffering and secretly hated him. She had no doubt he could sleep quite peacefully upright in the saddle.

Exhaustion dulled the terror, combining everything into one great discomfort. That made it all bearable, Riordan thought, steadfastly refusing to consider anything beyond getting through the next few hours.

Green hills gave way to flat grassy plains. Farming land. They rode past quiet cottages that sat among fields of grain. Lands that paid tribute to Kanarek. Her father's territory.

No, my territory. Riordan pushed the thought from her mind.

It will only be my land, if I win it back from Hael.

If I survive, she corrected.

"Not far now," Nhaille said. He studied her briefly and frowned.

"I'm okay," she said quickly.

The frown deepened.

"I have to see it, Nhaille. I have to know."

He nodded and turned away. Rounding the last bend, he gestured to the city that had once dominated the skyline.

"Look then, there it is."

Riordan straightened in the saddle and beheld what remained of her kingdom.

The sun festered on the horizon like an ugly sore, bleeding and running with the black clouds of the dismal morning. Soot hung heavily in the air, blanketing everything from the smoldering ruins to the charred remnants of farmers' fields. Riordan turned her horse in a slow circle, taking in everything that lay in the radius of her vision.

In the fields, the scorched remains of wheat and corn thrust their barren stalks toward an unforgiving sky. The charred corpses of sheep and oxen lay among the ransacked fields. Yet the leagues of bodies that should have lain in gutter and square were conspicuously absent.

Where once towering marble gates had marked the entrance to Kanarek, a heap of rubble now made passage impossible. Beyond the wreckage of the avenue a massive bonfire still burned. Within its smoldering embers, Riordan could make out the burning form of a massive carved throne.

My father's. She tried to picture the imposing figure of the King and failed. In a panic, she tried again, but her father's face flickered in her mind's eye then disappeared.

Did you truly ever think it would come to this? But he wasn't there to answer her question.

An eerie quiet settled over the once bustling metropolis, broken only by the crackle of the flames and the low whine of the sickly breeze.

No dying cries were carried on the wind. No rats scurried through the untended fields. Nothing broke the stillness save for the snap of a twig succumbing to the flames.

"Riordan," Nhaille said gently, breaking into her thoughts. "We can't stay here, it isn't safe."

She nodded, afraid to speak, afraid to twitch so much as a muscle lest the scream inside her work its way free.

A shadow swept over the hills toward them, followed by the sure thunder of hooves. Nhaille's head came up at the sound. Danger flashed in his eyes followed swiftly by what she took to be the accusation that it was her orders that had brought them here. The instinct for self-preservation took over. Turning Strayhorn sharply, she bolted for cover in a thicket of nearby trees.

Stormback followed closely on Strayhorn's heels. They reached cover just as the first of the riders crested the hill. Nhaille maneuvered his mount in closely beside her. Riordan chewed the corner of her lip and waited.

A battalion of plumed Haelian riders plunged over the hill, trampling all that lay in their path. Every muscle in her body clenched, fighting the urge to rush from cover and take as many heads as she could lay across the path of her sword.

That may win you a few Haelian scalps, but it won't bring back Kanarek. Nhaille's right.

Our only hope is the Sword.

The riders disappeared in a cloud of dust. Riordan gathered the reins. Nhaille's hand shot out, holding her in place.

And then she heard it.

Sound reached into her memory, dragging her back in time. To the summer day much like this one, when she'd come between a goat and the butcher's knife. She'd thrown off his aim and the animal had screamed in agony until Riordan had been dragged from the barn and the butcher allowed to finish the job. That dying scream was merely one note among the chorus she heard now.

Like an invisible fog, a choking stench nearly made Riordan cough out loud. A cloud of flies swarmed lazily over the hill.

The flat wailing crested the hill. Riordan opened her eyes, realizing suddenly they'd been screwed tightly closed.

You knew this moment was coming. Open your eyes and look.

Resolutely, she turned her head to face the nightmare that awaited her.

At first glance, she couldn't see anything amiss. But as the bedraggled soldier lurched down the slope of the hill, she noted the awkward movements, the flat staring eye.

Sunlight flashed upon the stake of amber impaled through his right eye into the brain. Riordan forced herself to look beyond this first horrid spectacle. Behind the first soldier crept the rest of Kanarek's dead.

The pressure of Nhaille's hand intensified, warning her against sudden noise or movement. She dragged in a shaky breath, refusing to look away from what remained of her subjects.

They came in pairs of two or three, staggering on in loose formation. Shop keepers still wearing their tattered aprons, stone masons, smiths, women, mutilated children bearing kitchen knives.

Clouded eyes stared out from blood-streaked faces. Tatters of clothing fluttered in the breeze like dirty laundry. Some rode on emaciated horses, others lumbered after them on foot.

Then in the center, Riordan saw a blaze of light.

Nhaille's hand covered her mouth as the gasp burst from her lips. She bit her lip, tasting blood. And still she could not tear her attention from the figure who rode past her, separated by only a space of grass and the insubstantial barrier of trees.

Even in death he sat straight upon his cadaverous mount. His shining black hair was caked with dust and the ruddy stains of drying blood. The wounds on his body were hidden by his cloak, but the skeletal hands that gripped the reins were streaked with dirt.

On his head, like some tasteless joke, sat his gold diadem.

As though he somehow sensed her presence, his head turned slowly in her direction. Riordan whimpered low in her throat. Nailed through her father's once jet black eye was a stake of amber.

Hot tears blurred her vision, threatening to spill onto her cheeks. Riordan fought the overwhelming impulse to surrender to grief. If she cried, all would be lost.

Scalding tears cooled. The rapid thump of her heart stilled. The urge to cry froze within her, turning her blood to ice.

With forced calmness, she watched until the last cadaver disappeared over the summit of the next hill. Nhaille dropped his hand from her mouth. Riordan licked blood from the corner of her lip.

"They will pay for this." Her words were the barest whisper. "I'll not rest until Hael lies in rubble and the head of its heir sits on a stake before the city gates."

"Riordan--"

A harsh shout cut off the last of Nhaille's sentence. As one they whirled, to find two Haelian riders galloping up the hill toward them.

"They've seen us!" Nhaille hissed.

She saw the flash of his sword, found her own in her hand. Having no other choice, they plummeted down the slope toward the soldiers.

Grinding her spurs into Strayhorn's flank, she raced past Nhaille. The eyes of the first Haelian widened in shock as he caught a glimpse of the crazed woman careening down the hill toward him.

For a fleeting moment he debated standing his ground. Thinking better of it, he turned tail and fled. Riordan urged Strayhorn relentlessly onward. The warhorse obeyed, bearing down on the hapless soldier like Jaador, God of Retribution himself.

Nhaille's shouts echoed in her ears. Her impulsiveness could get them both killed. She knew it well, but couldn't think past the blinding wave of fury inside. With the sum of her strength she swung. The effort nearly unseated her, but she felt her sword strike bone.

Impact reverberated up her arm, jarring her from wrist to shoulder. She swung again, ignoring her helmet as it slid from her head, freeing her mane of silver hair.

As if from a distance she watched in cold horror as her sword clove the Haelian's head from his shoulders. His plumed helmet sailed into the morning sun, coming to rest part way down the hill.

Still bearing the body of its headless rider, the Haelian's warhorse raced off on its previous course. His partner stared at the headless horseman and bolted for the cover of

a nearby patch of forest. Riordan chased after him.

Ground flew by beneath Strayhorn's hooves as he followed the narrow, twisting path. But the Haelian soldier had the lead and he vanished under the cover of the trees. A fence of green obscured her view. Within seconds she realized she'd lost him.

A gloved hand seized the reins. She gasped staring up at Nhaille suddenly beside her.

"It's too late, Riordan." Nhaille looked nervously around them. "They've seen us now. We have no choice but to ride for the desert and hope we make it to the crystal mountains in time."

Riordan dragged in a breath, waiting for the shudders of hysteria she was sure would follow. In dazed confusion she stared down at her bloody sword, seeing it, yet feeling nothing.

Nothing but the cold darkness inside.

CHAPTER FIVE

A night spent drinking did not a pleasant morning make. Rau silently rebuked himself for the previous evening's folly.

Rough terrain tortured his headache. Each bump felt like a knife to his skull. The brilliant sun overhead lanced through his sensitive eyes.

Though his linen shirt lay damp with sweat, he shivered in spite of his leather vest and heavy cloak. He almost considered calling an early camp. After last night's merriment, the men would be suffering as surely as he and would welcome a few extra hours rest.

But his father's words whispered like ghosts in his ears. Kholer would not lie in wait for him to conquer. Gamaliel's taunts of a warrior-princess had followed him even into his dreams. Doubt took root in his mind.

So he rallied his army days earlier than he'd first intended. Hael couldn't run the risk of stragglers from Kanarek forewarning Kholer. Surprise was their ally. Sweeping out of the west, he'd level their fair city and add the casualties to the ranks of his army of cadavers.

After Kholer there was the Golar. Following Golar, the rest of the coast.

Once he held the coast neither the fabled Sword of Zal-Azaar, nor the lost Kanarekii heir would be able to wrest it from him. He'd stamp his mark upon the entire landscape, blackening all that had been built there, obliterating all that stood against him.

His father would be forced to recognize Doan-Rau as his heir, instead of his younger brother, Tanin.

When the fires of his conquest had smoldered into ash, then he would rebuild, erect proud monuments to his name. By then the stragglers would be ready to bow to him. Those who didn't would soon find themselves among the legions of the dead. Manpower was the least of his worries. His standard would be flown in every hamlet along the coast. One day perhaps even across the plains of Kor-Koraan.

A mad and brilliant scheme, Rau thought. The Amber offered an ingenious savings in labor and time. Shraal be praised, there was no longer any need to burn the battlefields. Merely round up the dead, induce the magic of locomotion using the Amber, then ride them out. Shraal sorcery would spur them on until the process of decomposition rendered them immobile. What remained would be left to rot in the midday sun, an offering to the vultures.

Shraal mysteries had haunted Rau's imagination since his youth. Evidence of Shraal blood weighed strong within him, plain for anyone with discerning eyes to see. Still, his father would deny him his heritage.

Precious little now remained of the proud kingdom that had stretched over most of the

mapped territory. Shraal would have faded from memory completely had it not been for him. Rau fingered the amber clasp on his cloak. Despite his dark hair and rugged features, he had a Shraal's soul. He would raise the great kingdom of Bayorek from the ashes and rule as its king. Such was the dream he was shaping into reality.

Shouts broke into his reverie. Rau lurched to his senses. Soldiers, who should have been riding in tight formation behind him, now searched the rear for the source of the commotion. Sensing his sudden regard, they snapped to attention. Larz, he noted, had gone to investigate.

"Take the lead," he barked at the standard bearer, who nodded nervously and took Rau's spot. The last thing he needed on a morning such as this was trouble.

Further down the line of soldiers, he noticed a break in the ranks. Rau put the spurs to his horse. Dissension would not be tolerated. If the men needed extra incentive, that could certainly be arranged.

Soldiers scattered as he reined into their midst, anxious to fade back into anonymity within the ranks. In the center of the commotion, Larz held one of the men at the tip of his sword. But the look of repulsion on the Captain's face was directed at the ranks of the dead who milled behind them aimlessly, awaiting new orders. Rau swore.

Dismounting, he bore down on the hapless soldier like a bull intent on skewering his foe.

Larz whirled to face him, quickly smothering the look. "Your Highness?"

The Captain seemed genuinely embarrassed to see him. Though the young soldier looked up at him in utter terror, there was defiance in his eyes as well.

"What seems to be the problem, Captain?"

Larz shifted his weight uneasily. "The problem has been dealt with, Sir. No need to trouble yourself."

Rau's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Before he could speak, the soldier shook himself from Larz's grasp. Dismayed, the Captain lunged after him, but Rau held up his hand.

"I refuse to ride with the likes of them!" With a wide sweep of his arm, the soldier indicated the army of cadavers.

Horried by his man's insurrection, Larz reached out a hand to haul him back under his control. Rau stepped between them, his movement lithe as a panther. The Captain read the warning in Rau's stance and paled.

"Your Highness--"

"Silence, Captain. I believe the soldier has a complaint to register."

Falsely encouraged, the man continued. "The stench, Sir, it's too much to bear. The men have nightmares. No one should have to endure this!"

Rau smiled down at him. Larz shut his eyes and prayed.

"I take it you'd like a transfer," Rau said.

The soldier smiled back. "Yes, Sir!"

Amber flashed in the midday sun.

Much too late, the soldier saw the downward stroke of Rau's arm. He tried to bolt from the path of the amber missile headed for him. Rau reached out, seizing the soldier by the scruff of the neck. With one lightning strike, he drove the amber deep into his brain.

The soldier crumpled to the ground, the stake protruding from his eye like the horn of some twisted unicorn.

"A transfer you shall have," Rau snarled, wiping the blood from his hands.

He glowered up at the ring of soldiers standing in open-mouthed shock. "And so shall anyone else who wants one."

With covert glances of horror in Rau's direction, the army melded back into formation and went about its business.

Rau grasped Larz by the arm and pulled him after him. "Captain, if you please."

Larz swallowed hard. With a furtive glance in the direction of the fallen soldier, he swung up on his horse and followed Rau along the staggering line of the dead army.

* * *

Could they not see the beauty in it? Rau wondered as he inspected the ranks of his cadavers with Larz at his side. Could they not fathom the cruel yet wonderful irony of the fallen, rising up to conquer their own cities and then condemning their neighbors to the same fate?

They had no vision. Not his father, not the council, not even his loyal friend, Larz, though he'd never admit to it. Rau had seen the look of terror and repulsion on the Captain's face. He sensed the hateful looks his men shot at his back. No matter. His demonstrations had their purpose. Others must understand the true glory of the amber.

His fingers stroked the jewel at his neck. For a moment memory sucked him back down into those dark winding caverns that led to the Amber's tomb...

The stench of sweat and fear had hung heavily in the narrow corridor. They hammered incessantly against the crystal barrier, sleeping in shifts. Three nights and four days passed. Men eyed each other nervously and wondered when they'd go mad in the confines of the narrow space.

Crystal shattered. The wall collapsed beneath them. Shoving men aside, Rau tumbled through the maw of jagged rock. He had to be the first to lay eyes upon the Amber. No one must touch it but he.

The entire cave vibrated with its own pure tone. He reached out a tentative hand.

All sound ceased. Even the soldiers around him paused in their breathing. For the first time since he'd embarked upon his quest, he'd doubted.

In its nest of crystal, the Amber waited. Rau crept closer, afraid for a moment to touch it lest he be struck dead.

Men formed a fence behind him. Nothing to do but go on. The air around him crackled as his fingers met its cool surface. In that moment, Doan-Rau, Prince of Hael thought he had won for himself the ancient throne of Bayorek. It was destined to be.

Still his father had not believed. His entourage of aged advisors scoffed even as he rode up to the gates, bearing his great prize. They'd not believe him still, if old Wincott hadn't died.

Destiny again. Why else would the old counselor have perished on the eve of his return? A demonstration, they demanded. A spectacle he swore they'd have.

With the whole of his father's counsel room waiting in hushed anticipation, Rau chipped off a sliver of Amber and slid it into Wincott's right eye.

At Rau's command, as his father's most trusted advisors watched in open-mouthed astonishment, Wincott's body rose stiffly from its pallet. Only one more spectacle was needed to secure their devotion.

The thing that had been Wincott waited blank faced for its orders. Rau motioned for Larz to hand the cadaver his sword.

Larz stared back at him in uncomprehending silence. Then, sure he hadn't misunderstood, the Captain drew his sword. With a last pleading look in Rau's direction, he handed the sword to Wincott. The corpse took it. Rau scanned the soldiers that lined the walls of the audience chamber.

"That man over there," he said indicating one with the tip of a black-gloved finger. "Kill him."

The soldier shrank back in horror. He would have bolted from the chamber, had Larz not restrained him.

On Rau's order, the cadaver advanced upon the hapless soldier, sword raised for the killing blow. In horrified fascination the soldier watched the cadaver move toward him.

It would have killed him, Rau thought with a smile. Not his intention, of course. He'd waited until the sword was a hair's breath from the soldier's breast, then called the order to halt.

Wincott froze. The soldier fainted. In that glorious moment, Rau won the support of his father's advisors.

Ah yes, Rau thought grimly. These demonstrations were indeed necessary.

So why was there a chill running between his shoulder blades in spite of the warmth of his cloak and the blazing sun? Why did an old man's superstitions haunt his dreams, piercing even his most drunken stupor?

Rau and Larz circled back, taking their places at the head of the army. The brief dissension now effectively subdued, the long line of soldiers and horses flowed easily across the landscape. Featureless flatlands gave way to the gentle swell of hills and lush vegetation. Rau was grateful for the occasional shade of trees after miles of scrubby brush.

But though the terrain was easier going, the nagging sense of doubt would not allow him to relax. Fragments of his father's mocking words echoed in his mind. Could there really be some long-hidden Caryn heir even now plotting his demise?

"Fairy tales," Rau muttered with a cynical laugh.

If Kanarek had such a weapon, why had old Arais-Khun-Caryn not used it in the hour of his most desperate need? Last night's vision was nothing more than a drunken hallucination. The House of Caryn were noted for their dark hair and darker eyes. The blonde phantom was merely an embodiment of his drunken desire for female company, a symptom of the strain of a lengthy campaign.

The memory of those slate-gray eyes boring into his made him shudder. If destiny offered the warrior-princess as one last test, he would have to destroy her. Nothing would stand between Rau and his great legacy.

Rau jolted to his senses. Beside him, Larz waited patiently, as if for an answer.

"Captain?"

Larz cleared his throat. "I was asking, Sir, if we should not call a break once we've entered the forest."

Rau bit back the caustic reply on his lips, determined that if he must stoically suffer beneath the searing sun, so must the army. But the Captain's suggestion made sense. He was desperately in need of a moment's rest and some strong tea to revive him. "A half-hour's rest," he agreed. "Once we're within the shelter of the forest."

There was much to be said for having a camouflage of trees to conceal an army. No wonder the wars of Bayorek had been such a disaster. The exposed plains of Kor-Koraan left the Shraal armies without cover. Like trying to hide an army among so many grains of sand, Rau thought, congratulating himself on his superior strategy.

The Shraal, for all their greatness, had merely marched out upon the plains and slaughtered each other.

Shraal, he thought, blinking back another glimpse of the Kanarekii phantom who'd somehow taken root in his subconscious. She did so resemble temple drawings of the Shraal with her ghostly hair and light eyes. His intuition never led him astray. These

persistent visions meant something.

Or were they merely the effects of too much drink? Rau shook his head to clear the cobwebs from his mind.

"Certainly you could use the rest yourself, Your Highness?" Larz inquired quietly. Only Larz would suggest such a thing. No one but Larz would dare.

"Indeed." Rau cast an inquiring gaze at his captain. "You seem to fare well enough for one who was up even later than I."

"I have fared better," Larz admitted. With a second glance Rau noted the shadows beneath the captain's eyes. Tiny lines creased the corners, wrinkles that hadn't been there before.

The Prince nodded. "I see. So this break you kindly suggested on the men's behalf was for your own benefit?"

"If Your Highness is at all merciful," Larz said, "you'll grant me a break before I slide from the saddle and humiliate us both." Though the words were spoken lightly enough, exhaustion darkened his face. The day's events, it seemed, weighed heavily on Larz as well.

"Agreed then, a short rest and a pot of scalding tea. After that, Captain, I will have no mercy until sundown."

He watched as Larz made his way down the column to give the order. Ahead on the horizon the forest was a gray shadow.

Though he could appreciate the covering of trees as a tactical maneuver, Rau disliked the forest. The dark, damp interior made him claustrophobic. Manifestations of his growing paranoia waited to leap from under every branch. He much preferred the flat terrain on the outskirts of Hael, where anything within two days ride could be seen coming toward them.

You could lose an entire army among the twisted vegetation. From the corners of his eyes, he imagined he saw ghostly shapes prowling among the thick screen of trees. Or was it simply another vision of the silver-haired Shraal princess rumored to be hidden in the deepest reaches of the forest.

Rau wrenched himself from morbid thoughts. There was nothing in the forest save for trees, rabbit and fox. Indeed, he could hide an army in its shadowy depths. Concealed by the forest, Kholer would never know what lay in store for them. His present mood was the result of too much drink and too little sleep. And a father who promised his throne to his younger son, forever withholding it from the son who did so much to win his affection.

In the end, his father would be happy enough to take the credit for Rau's victory.

Will you now, my father, he thought viciously. We shall see.

* * *

They drew to a halt a mile within the shelter of the forest. Rau surrendered the reins to the soldier who appeared at his side. Grateful for the shade, he settled down against one of the wide tree trunks. Larz already had the map spread upon the ground. Together they plotted their passage for the rest of the afternoon.

Stores were broken open. On further contemplation Rau passed up the tea offered to him, deciding instead to medicate himself to sleep with the contents of his wineskin. He swallowed gingerly. It roiled about in his stomach but stayed down. He took a longer pull on the wineskin, then passed it to Larz who grimaced and vigorously shook his head.

A thick crust of bread sat better on his stomach. The heat, the wine and bread together conspired to make him sleepy. Beside him, Larz was already snoring softly.

Leaving his company to stand guard, Rau pulled his helmet down over his face, stretched out against the broad trunk, and surrendered to the sleep that had been threatening to drag him under all morning.

* * *

He raced through halls of magenta crystal, breath searing his lungs. His heart hammered like a drum within his chest. Something pursued him in the labyrinthian tunnels. And though he couldn't name the terror that chased him, he knew that to cease running would mean certain death.

He dove into another corridor, only to discover it ended abruptly in a wall of jagged quartz. He skidded to a jarring stop, then fled back over his footsteps toward the main hall.

Just a few more feet, he told himself as he rounded the corner. A few more steps.

Blinded by the corner ahead, the flash of steel caught him off guard. He flailed about, desperately trying to halt his progress. His boots slid against floors of smooth quartz. The momentum carried him steadily forward into the path of that deadly blade.

Rau screamed. Horrible gurgling sounds echoed loudly in his head, then deteriorated quickly into silence.

At last he saw her, a streak of silver hair and steel eyes. "Riordan-Khun-Caryn," came the whisper in his mind. Shraal features hovered above him, beautiful and deadly. The crystal floor rushed up to meet him.

His body toppled over him, cutting off both sight and sound.

* * *

Rau jerked awake, nails digging into the soft grass.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, I didn't mean to startle you." Larz shifted uneasily. "One of

our men, the last to leave Kanarek, has just caught up with us. He insists on speaking with you."

What could it possibly be this time! Rau wondered. These minor grievances, these niggly complaints only stole his attention from the grave task at hand.

Around them the army was packing up, stowing the supplies once again. Kholer would not wait for him to deal with the aggravations of administration.

"I have not the time." He waited for Larz to volunteer to handle the matter, but the Captain stood his ground. Rau bit back his annoyance. "Surely you can deal with him?"

Larz cast a nervous glance over his shoulder. "I think it best you speak with him yourself."

He followed the Captain's gaze, noting with growing irritation the wild-eyed soldier who anxiously awaited his attention. The nap he hoped would cure the pounding in his head had given him nothing more than bad dreams. Time would have been better spent on the march. The thought only added to his bad humor.

"Be ready to ride out at my command," he barked at Larz, who merely nodded, taking Rau's show of temper in maddeningly good grace.

He strode across the grass, cloak flying out behind him, and grinned as the sight of him made the youth take an involuntary step backward.

"Your Highness." The soldier snapped to attention. Youthful eyes stared back at him from beneath the plumed helm. Younger even than his brother, the one his father pledged his throne to. Rau fought back another wave of fury.

He waved away the title with an irritated flick of his hand. I don't have time for this.

"Your report."

The soldier swallowed. His mouth moved. No sound came out.

"Make haste, Soldier. An entire army awaits you."

"Begging your pardon, Highness."

Rau let go a caustic breath. Would the entire day amount to nothing more than a string of petty annoyances? He wanted to shake the report out of him. But the youth looked as if he'd come apart if Rau so much as raised his voice, so he settled for leveling his most impatient stare at the hapless soldier.

"We were leaving Kanarek--"

"We?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Major Gernz and me. It was our duty to make one last check of the ruins after the rest of the army had departed for Hael."

"I would speak also with Major Gernz."

"Begging your pardon, Sir, Major Gernz is dead."

Rau rubbed at his temples. If the pounding would cease for one moment, perhaps he could think.

The soldier's words tumbled into his silence. Rau glared at him to continue.

"We'd nearly finished our tour, when we spied two riders in foreign armor upon the hill."

"Foreign?"

"Yes, Sir." His throat worked, no sound came out. The youth swallowed again.

"Kanarekii armor. But old, like none I've ever seen. We rode up to question them, but the woman turned on the Major and--"

A streak of silver hair flashed across his mind's eye, followed by a pair of piercing, gray eyes. No, he thought desperately, it couldn't be. His father had cursed him with his superstitions. Rau reined in his imagination.

"This woman," he demanded, knowing already what the young soldier would say.

"Describe her to me."

"I would not have known it was a woman, Sir, but for her hair. She didn't look Kanarekii, she was far too fair."

"And the man with her?"

"I didn't get a good look at him, Sir." And when Rau glowered at him, he added, "But I got the impression he was...older."

Fear burst inside Rau. His father's warnings, Gamaliel's superstitions howled in his mind. Pieces of the rumored prophecy fell into place. The mythical princess and the supposedly long-dead warrior. Rau swallowed the terror rising inside him. This festering obstacle must be dealt with right away, before word of it reached his father. Before rumors destroyed the morale of his army. No Kanarekii princess would stand between him and his well-deserved glory.

"In what direction did they ride, this woman and her companion?"

"Away from the city, Sir. Toward the desert."

Toward the desert, Rau thought. Toward the mountains and the fabled tomb of Zal-Azaar. There could be no other explanation.

* * *

He found Larz at the head of the army. A long line of black-clad Haelian soldiers stretched in an orderly row through the trees. Behind them, leagues of cadavers waited with patience only the dead could have. Soldiers at the tail end of the column eyed the dead with growing nervousness. Rau caught more than one quick sign made against evil as he passed. He didn't need to turn to see the dark looks they gave his back. None were brave enough to show their superstitions to his face, he thought with satisfaction.

"Your Highness." Larz drew himself up, prepared to give the order to ride out.

"Captain."

Larz snapped to attention, but his eyes quickly scanned Rau's face. The Prince watched as he absorbed the bad news there and prepared to receive his orders.

"I will not be riding to Kholer."

Whatever Larz was expecting, Rau's words took him visibly by surprise. "Sir?"

"Another matter requires my personal attention. I leave the conquest of Kholer in your capable hands."

"But Your Highness--"

Rau squelched his protests with a wave of his hand.

The men were listening, an entire army of ears perked in their direction. Larz's eyes slid sideways, absorbing that thought. He opened his mouth to protest, then thinking better of it, backed his horse out of hearing range. Rau followed.

"You don't think there's truth to the rumor of the warrior-princess?" Larz leaned in close, lowering his voice despite the distance. "Do you, Sir?"

"Of course not," Rau said with a certainty that didn't reach his heart. "But I must discover the truth to this woman's identity before rumor of her existence reaches the King."

Larz nodded in agreement, though Rau read disapproval in the set of his mouth.

"And if there is substance to the legend of the Kanarekii heir, she must be stopped before she reaches the tomb of Zal-Azaar. I will not allow her to stand between me and the coast. I will not allow our great campaign to be damned to Al-Gomar's deepest hell and forgotten."

Larz cast a glance over his shoulder at the column of men and horses awaiting their orders. "Without the Amber, how are we to take Kholer?"

"Quite simple." Rau reached into the pouch at his waist and drew out a thick stake of Amber which he pressed into Larz's gloved hand. "You will have the Amber."

The Captain recoiled as if scalded. "Your Highness, I am not of Shraal blood!"

"The dead have weak minds," Rau said. "You need only lead them to Kholer and order them to fight. If the men believe you carry the Amber, they will obey your command." He fingered the Amber clasp on his cloak. "Besides, I control the Master Stone, you need only use this one sliver to maintain control."

"What if I cannot control the dead?" Larz whispered back. "Can we not set camp until you return?"

"With luck I will return before you reach Kholer."

"Forgive me for asking, Your Highness, but what if you do not?"

"Then you will do as I have ordered."

Larz read the threat in Rau's tone and fell silent. "Will you not take some men with you?" he asked, accepting at last his fate.

"I need not lead an army against one woman," Rau snapped. A multitude of eyes turned toward them. Rau sighted down the column and watched with satisfaction as each gaze turned abruptly away. Larz knew better than to argue. So did the men.

"I shall return victorious," he said with more conviction than he felt.

"May Moraah bless you, Sir," Larz said, his eyes fastening on Rau's.

"May Laalan, God of War, bless Hael," the Prince said and put the spurs to his horse.

The gaze of an entire army followed him as he rode down the long line of the column, back towards Kanarek, and the plains of Kor-Koraan.

CHAPTER SIX

Not a word from Riordan. Not even a glance in his direction during the long ride from Kanarek. In silence she ate the meal he prepared. Nhaille watched as she sat stonily staring into the flames, the firelight dyeing her hair crimson. Then like a shadow, she rose and crossed their camp. Slipping into her bedroll, she fell into an exhausted sleep.

Nhaille bent over Riordan's sleeping form and frowned. So much pain, and he could bear none of it for her. Feelings twisted like a knife inside him, emotions he could never express aloud, thoughts he shouldn't even be having.

In any case, he had no words with which to comfort her. Comfort would only weaken her resolve. Kanarek's new Queen could not be spared even a moment of weakness. No, he couldn't feel sorry for her. Couldn't allow her to feel sorry for herself. With a deep sigh, Nhaille pulled the blanket up around her shoulders and went to seek his own bed.

* * *

Riordan raced along the ranks of cadavers marching toward the sinking sun. He was among them. Somewhere. She knew it instinctively. The air was stifling, even in the twilight, and the dust kicked up by a myriad shuffling feet swirled about her in scarlet clouds.

She wiped dust from her eyes and swallowed hard on the urge to vomit. It was barely possible to breathe past the stench of rot and decay. She sucked the putrid air into her lungs and kept moving.

Filthy tatters were all that was left of their clothing. White bone showed through the ruin of their flesh and the rags of their clothing. Some wore shoes, others tottered along unevenly on one boot. Still others had lost limbs, hands, arms, sometimes even a leg, yet they still stumbled onward, crawling when that was the only method of locomotion left to them.

In the center of the vast column she caught sight of a black wool cloak. On some invisible signal, the waves of cadavers parted to let her through. Suddenly she was standing before him, staring up at the terrible and imposing figure atop the dead steed. The column came to an abrupt halt. Corpses crowded around them. Waiting.

Towering over her, he seemed to stretch toward the sky. Riordan dragged her eyes upward. Skin hung from the emaciated legs of the long-dead horse he rode. Its matted hide was stretched tight over the outline of its ribcage. One of the stirrups hung by a strand of leather, and the boot that dangled from it was caked with a reddish brown substance she didn't want to contemplate. Splotches of mud stained his cloak. The fine wool hung in tatters, barely covering the shriveled form beneath it.

From beneath the rags of his cloak, a pair of bony hands gripped the reins. As if seeing

her for the first time, the cadaver turned slowly toward her. Riordan swallowed the scream working its way up her throat and forced herself to face him.

Dried blood curled in flakes from the dark ruin of his eye. Flesh puckered about the stake of gleaming amber. His skin hung in gray flaccid jowls. His thatch of ebony hair grayed with dust. Only his imposing eyebrows were as she remembered.

Staring out at her through one clouded eye, the King faced his daughter.

"Father," Riordan croaked out. "I don't know what to do. You must tell me."

But he merely turned that horrible face upon her. Shriveled lips mouthed the words, but he could issue no sound. Caught in his terrible stare, she couldn't look away. Words formed in her mind.

This is all your fault, Riordan. You should have listened. You should have believed.

"No!" She stumbled backward. Cadavers closed around her, cutting off her all routes of escape.

Your fault, your fault... The accusation echoed over and over again in her mind.

"No!" The word was wrenched from her throat. Dragged down into the press of rotting bodies, smothered by the stench, she flailed against the powerful arms that gripped her, to find the grasp tightening, an immovable hand clamped over her mouth.

Suddenly it was Nhaille's eyes boring into hers, Nhaille's arm pinning her tightly to his chest, Nhaille's hand clamped over her mouth.

* * *

Gods! She'd get them both killed yet. Nhaille swore under his breath. "Wake up, Riordan. You're safe. It was just a dream."

At last there was comprehension in her gray eyes. He loosened his hand, letting her drag in a shuddering breath. "You were screaming loud enough to signal Hael itself."

She went suddenly limp against him. "I saw him," she said into his shoulder. "In my dream, I saw him, Nhaille."

"Who?"

"My father."

He stared at her, shadows rushing across her face in the flickering firelight. Was she crumbling beneath the enormity of duty? Nhaille wondered. Or did she have visions because the unleashed Amber called to her Shraal soul?

"Riordan, I'm sorry. I should never have allowed you to go to Kanarek."

She continued on in that strange flat voice, as if demons from her nightmare reached out to haunt her still. "The King spoke to me. He said it was my fault."

"What was your fault?"

"The fall of Kanarek."

Traitorous hands buried in her hair. He shouldn't touch her, should not allow himself to get that close. But she clung to him like a child. "Not yours, I assure you," Nhaille said, stroking her hair. "You mustn't think that. Prince Doan-Rau of Hael engineered Kanarek's downfall. And you will avenge it."

Riordan nodded, her arms tightening around him. "I will not rest until I do."

She spent the rest of the night tossing and muttering to herself. After watching her, Nhaille slept almost as poorly.

The first amber rays of light had yet to touch the sky when he awoke with a start. A shadow sat between him and the slash of gray that would become the dawn. Nhaille's hand closed upon his sword.

The shadow moved, turning into the half-light, becoming Riordan. Relief sent him collapsing against his pallet. Cold ground aggravated the stiffness caused by days in the saddle. Nhaille ground his teeth against the litany of aches and pains and cursed the youth that seemed to have fled without his notice.

"Riordan, it's not yet dawn."

"I know."

He leapt to his feet, ignoring the stiffness, the miscellaneous pains. "Something wrong?"

"Yes."

Her voice was distant as if she involved only half her mind in their conversation.

"What is it?"

He noticed the sword in his hand, not even conscious of having drawn it.

"You were right. Going to Kanarek was a grave mistake. We've lost most of a day's ride."

Her words chilled him more than the cold. In nineteen years, he couldn't ever remember her admitting to being wrong. So entirely un-Riordan like. He blinked, sheathed the sword and accepted a cup of steaming tea from her outstretched hand. Riordan took up residence beside the fire and regarded the map she'd obviously been studying for some time.

"Is there another way besides across the plains?" she asked after a time.

"Not unless we go by way of the ruins of Bayorek. But that would take us weeks out of our way. We don't have time."

"No, we don't. But we'll be easy marks on the desert basin."

Where had this mind for strategy come from? Nhaille took a sip of scalding tea. "Right you are."

"So speed is our best approach. Once we have the Sword in our keeping, we'll have more options."

In actuality, we'll have less. But he couldn't bring himself to tell her that just yet, so he merely nodded mutely.

"We'd best break camp then."

Nhaille moved toward her, unsure whether he should touch her. She practically bristled with her own anguish. He knelt before her and grasped her gently by the shoulders.

"We'll get there, Riordan."

But she merely stared down at the map before her, tracing their path across the plains of Kor-Koraan with the tip of her finger.

He released her. Forcing himself awake, he reached for his own kit. "Just give me a minute and we'll be on our way."

* * *

Grass gave way to scrubby brush, which in turn degenerated into sand dunes. The sun blazed on the glittering sand, reflecting itself back at them, doubling its efforts. Seemingly endless plains made Riordan feel exposed and vulnerable. She caught herself hunching down in the saddle, as if to make herself invisible.

Blowing grit worked its way into her mouth, the corners of eyes, and into each fold of skin. Staring into the constant glare gave her a headache. Yet, in their own way, these minor discomforts were a blessing. It kept her mind off a multitude of other horrors.

In spite of the glare, her father's mutilated face swam before her mind's eye. Each time she lay down to sleep, she saw him in the darkness, staring off into the distance, a pawn to do Hael's bidding.

What a cruel irony. Had he known? She wondered if he'd given any thought to his own fate beyond making provisions to save his city.

You left that to me. Did you actually think I was capable of it, my father? Or was I just a last desperate measure?

The pain of loss, the hopelessness of the deed she faced, tore at her. Nhaille flitted on the periphery of her consciousness, anxious to offer what solace he could. Though she longed for the feel of his strong arms around her, for the first time in her life she couldn't allow anyone to make it better. She couldn't allow anything to weaken the will to do what she must.

Exhausting heat and lack of sleep caught up with her. She dozed in the saddle, coming to herself seconds later, conscious of Nhaille's anxious eyes upon her. The blinding glare became her entire world. She stared at it, reassured by its constant agony.

The prism of light shifted, tinged toward magenta. Riordan blinked.

Columns of crystal towered over her, reaching into shadows high above her head. Smaller stubby crystals stuck out at all angles from the wall. The floor was polished as smooth as glass. Around her, the air vibrated in a single harmonic note.

Distantly, Riordan could still feel Strayhorn's steady gait beneath her, even as she gazed down that tunnel of magenta quartz. Not a tunnel, a cave, her mind suggested.

A soft tread echoed through the corridors like a whisper. Riordan fled down the halls of crystal. Above all, she couldn't let him overtake her. Something she sought desperately lay at the center of those labyrinthine passageways. She must reach it first.

With a furtive glance over her shoulder, she caught a glimpse of a black-clad form. A clasp of amber secured the neck of his cloak. A red plume decorated his helmet. His visor obscured his face, but somehow she found that she knew him. And while she raced through the corridors, he moved steadily toward her. As if he had all the time in world.

The hum increased, leading her onward. She ran toward it, gasping for breath. The hallway belched her into a massive chamber, polished to a blinding gleam. Raising a hand to shield her eyes, Riordan looked to the glowing beam in its center.

As if pulled on an invisible string, she was across the floor before she became conscious of moving. Thrusting her hand into the brilliance, her fingers closed on cool stone.

He burst across the threshold. Riordan whirled. In that instant she saw the blue eyes that bored out from beneath his visor like jewels. Too late to stop the arc of her swing. His aborted scream echoed through the crystal hallways. She screamed herself as the plumed helm rolled across the floor.

Empty eyes blinked reflexively at her, already glazing over. Riordan looked in horror at the sword she held in her hand. In disgust she tried to thrust it away from her, but her fingers refused to open. Seemingly of its own accord, the head slid along the floor, inching closer to the Sword.

A flash of light blinded her to all else. When her vision cleared, the head and the mutilated body were gone. In her mind she heard his soul's soundless scream.

And then his laughter in her mind.

Riordan lurched to her senses with a gasp. Carefully, she avoided Nhaille's probing gaze.

"You'd do us both a service if you'd sleep at night rather than sitting up studying maps," he said quietly.

She looked at him then, noting the cool arrogance in his green eyes. I don't have to take this, I'm the Queen. A pang of guilt swiftly followed the thought. Nhaille was the only friend she'd ever had.

"I wasn't asleep."

He raised his eyebrows.

"I saw something."

"The sun plays tricks on the sand."

"It wasn't a mirage. I saw it in my mind."

His eyes narrowed.

Riordan took a deep breath. He wouldn't believe her. Nhaille believed nothing beyond his own experience, nothing he couldn't see with his own eyes, touch with his own hands. He'd think she was cracking under the strain. To be quite honest, I'm not so sure that's not the case. He was still staring at her, his expression a combination of suspicion and worry. She'd only seen a look like that once, when she was seriously ill. Daring his scorn and anger, she plunged into the tale.

"I was running...through this crystal cave. Someone followed me, someone whose face I couldn't see. All I knew was that I just had to get to the chamber at the end of the tunnel. Then suddenly, I was standing in this shining room. Whatever I was searching for was embedded in a block of crystal, but I couldn't see it because it shone so brightly. I reached for it.

"Suddenly he was there, the one who chased me. I turned toward him, but it was a sword in my hand, and--"

Nhaille froze. "And what?"

He wasn't laughing the way she'd expected him to. He should be telling her it was just a moment of delusion brought on by the heat and lack of sleep. He should be admonishing her for wasting his time with a fanciful tale. He should be doing anything but staring at her with that look of concern on his face.

"And I--I killed him." Riordan scanned his face, taking in the lines of worry at the sides of his mouth. "That's when it got really strange. The body disappeared into the Sword. Then I heard him laughing...in my mind," she finished.

His frown deepened.

"What do you think it means?"

"What?"

"The vision," she said, impatiently.

"I place no stock in such things," he snapped, much too quickly.

"You believed the prophecy."

"Your father believed the prophecy."

"And you did not?"

"I did not say that. Your father was my King. It was enough that I do as he bid me."

"Would you do the same for me?"

His expression shifted to wariness. "I am your servant, Your Majesty." An odd sadness weighed his tone.

"Then hear me out, Nhaille."

Nhaille nodded but offered no comment, only continued to stare at her with that pained look of concern.

"He had a tall plume on his helmet. And a clasp of amber on his cloak."

He reined Stormback sharply to a halt.

She jumped at the sudden movement. "What?" she asked looking back at him. "Don't tell me you know such a person."

"I do know of such a person," Nhaille said slowly.

"Who is he?"

This time it was Nhaille's turn to look uncomfortable. "Doan-Rau...of Hael."

"Doan-Rau." Riordan tried to summon another glimpse of phantom from her vision. It was suddenly desperately important to have an image of the warrior-prince who had annihilated her family, leveled her city. Know your enemy, Nhaille was fond of saying.

"Somehow I never thought he'd be young."

She'd pictured him middle-aged. Older than Nhaille. It made it all the worse to think someone of her own generation could coldheartedly create such destruction, that someone her age could have such callous disregard for life.

"Nhaille?"

Within the shadows cast by his visor, his green eyes flickered upward to lock with hers.

"Is it written anywhere...that he who bears the Sword of Zal-Azaar feels the loss of the souls it kills? That those souls don't migrate to Al-Gomar, but live in the mind of the Sword's bearer?"

He didn't want to tell her. She could tell by the way his eyes searched the surrounding dunes, hunting for a way out of the conversation.

"Riordan," he said finally. "There are a good many things I have yet to tell you."

* * *

Doan-Rau stared into the glittering sea of diamonds.

As if my life wasn't complicated enough. Now this new development.

Somewhere in the basin was the phantom that haunted him. So the old man Gamaliel was not the lunatic he'd imagined, after all. Questions tormented him. What if his father got word of the Princess? What if word reached the already disillusioned army? What if Kholer got word before he could head off this disaster in the making?

No matter, he decided. The Kanarekii Princess was merely another of the annoyances to be tolerated and promptly dispatched. With the Princess gone, nothing would stand in the way of his quest. His divine calling.

The coast will be mine. My reward for the injustices I've endured.

But in order to achieve the prize he so desired, he must first rid himself of a legend.

I should be on my way to Kholer. Perhaps Larz was right. He ought to have brought a troop of Haelian soldiers with him. But that had its own dangers. He couldn't afford to let the secret out. This is but a short detour. The fires of Kanarek were merely a few days cold. How far could they possibly get? His mind nagged at him that if he'd had half the brain for strategy he bragged about, he'd have thought of hunting down the Kanarekii Princess first.

Who besides Gamaliel would have wasted the time fighting a myth? He couldn't have known, he assured himself. According to legend, not even her own siblings had laid eyes upon the Princess.

He sorely missed Larz's tracking skills. Not to mention the Captain's dry humor and quiet acceptance. Acceptance his own father refused to bestow on his oldest son.

No matter. When the coast is mine his acceptance will no longer matter. Not even my father will be able to deny my brilliance. Taking a brief sip from his canteen, Rau smiled to himself. They will sing my praises to Golar and beyond.

Maybe not my praises, he added with a sharp laugh out loud. But it will be my likeness upon their coins, and my standard flown above their cities.

Rau fingered the spike of amber in the pouch at his belt, cousin to the broach at the neck of his cloak. And I shall place the Kanarekii Princess beside her father at the head of my Army of the Dead.

After all, it's only right that families stay together.

Rau laughed maniacally at his own humor.

* * *

Nhaille hadn't uttered a word in hours. Not since she'd recklessly blurted out that foolishness about the vision. Instead he listened to the wind, his dark brows drawn, his mouth a grim line. She concentrated, but whatever caught Nhaille's attention eluded her.

Surely they couldn't be after us so soon.

He straightened in the saddle, and she watched as his expression darkened from somber to murderous.

"What is it?"

Nhaille signaled urgently for silence. Riordan scanned the low dunes around them. Nothing.

Desperately searching for a source of refuge, he motioned toward a low outcrop of rock. Dismounting, she led Strayhorn toward it. The ever-present wind drilled sand at the shallow opening, obliterating their footprints. They huddled in the indentation, urging the horses in behind them. The shadows were impenetrably dark after the sun's blinding light. Nhaille's eyes flickered in the darkness, warning her to silence. He clamped a hand over Stormback's nose. She mirrored his actions with Strayhorn. Crammed in beside the horses, they waited a veritable eternity.

Then, among the dunes, nearly tracing their own footsteps, there was movement. Riordan sunk deeper into the recess, pressing herself against Strayhorn's flank. Her heart hammered in her ears. She was certain even her shallow breath could be heard above the wind.

A rider passed in front of them a short distance away.

For one disorienting second, Riordan saw her premonition superimposed upon the scene before her. She blinked gritty eyes. No, this was reality. From her hiding place, she peered out at him into the glaring light of the sun.

Wind tore at his black cloak with angry fingers. It billowed out behind him like great wings. The crimson plume on his helmet waved back and forth like a flag. But it was the flash of amber at his throat that froze the gasp upon her lips.

Riordan's eyes slid sideways, locking with Nhaille's. He held her gaze, willing her to silence.

Several paces away, the rider paused, listening intently. Her heart froze in her chest. Indrawn breath burned to be released.

Indigo eyes flickered over the landscape, sweeping by the shadows that concealed them. Don't see us, Riordan flung the sum of her will at him.

A wall of sand blew momentarily between them. The rider wiped a hand across his face, then spurred his horse onward.

Riordan slowly released the breath she'd been holding. Shutting her eyes in a fervent prayer, she sagged weakly against Nhaille.

The rider plodded steadily away from them, his black form a dark smudge in the brilliance. Together they watched him go. The horses whinnied nervously, unhappy at being forced into such tight quarters.

"Doan-Rau," Riordan whispered. A statement, not a question. Without a doubt, she knew him from her vision.

Nhaille nodded. "He hopes to be heir to Hael and all its conquered territories."

"He is not heir to Kanarek," she said with venom. "And if I have my way, he'll not live to be heir to anyone's territory."

Nhaille offered no answer to that, merely stared at the rider's rapidly disappearing tracks. "Let him put some distance between us."

Riordan watched as he disappeared out of hearing range and flung the sum of her wrath after him. "Nhaille?"

He looked down at her in the shadows.

"Do you think I'm losing my mind?"

She watched the hard line of his mouth soften into tenderness. "Of course not. Why would you think such a thing?"

"It would be a likely conclusion for someone who admits to seeing things that aren't there."

Placing his hands on either side of her head, he gazed down into her eyes. "It stands to reason that if you carry Shraal blood in your veins, you might also have the capacity for Shraal magic."

"You think what I saw was real? That it may come to pass?"

"I am not an expert in Shraal sorceries, but we must prepare ourselves for the possibility."

"I don't care at all for that answer."

"Many difficult events lie in your future, Riordan. I wish I could will it otherwise."

"So do I." She stared after the black cloaked rider. "Speaking of unpleasant choices, what are we going to do about Doan-Rau?"

Nhaille followed her line of sight. "We have no choice but to kill him."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I don't see anything." Riordan squinted into the sun. Shuffling over on her belly atop the low ridge on which they were lying, she followed the line of Nhaille's arm.

Placing a hand on the back of her neck, Nhaille gently turned her head in the right direction. "There."

Riordan blinked sand from her eyes. On the horizon a black speck moved against the glittering sea of sand.

"Okay, I see him. Now what?"

Nhaille's eyes flickered up to meet hers. "Now we rid ourselves of this troublesome obstacle."

"What are we going to do, sneak up behind him and lop off his head?"

"That's one way to tackle the problem."

"Nhaille!"

He grinned wolfishly and held up his hand for silence. "I said it was one way, not the best course of action. What I had in mind was more along the lines of a night ambush."

Then he won't have to see my face, Riordan thought with a sudden pang of cowardice.

Since she'd stood among Kanarek's still-smoldering ashes, she'd dreamed of nothing but vengeance. Two days ago Nhaille would have had to use physical restraint to stop her from leaping from the ledge and dashing after him.

But the eerie vision in the magenta vault unnerved her. Not only the mindless killing, but the horrible feeling that followed, as if an abyss had opened in her soul.

Her father's dead and clouded eyes swam before her mind's eyes. You'll have no rest until I put a stop to these monstrosities. The task was hers, whether she wanted it or not, she thought, staring at the moving speck silhouetted against the featureless sky.

"It doesn't make sense." Nhaille rubbed the skin on the back of his neck that was chafed by sweat, sand, and the constant rubbing of his helmet. "Why, if he had an entire army on the march -- toward Kholer would be my guess, why would he break with his company and set out alone?"

"You're assuming Doan-Rau is sane," Riordan offered. "A dangerous presumption, don't you think?"

Nhaille shrugged. "He could very well be a raving lunatic, though his father was a rational man."

"Razing Kanarek and turning its dead into an army of ghouls was not a rational action."

"No--"

"And what does it matter anyway. We'll ambush him, as you say, and be done with the problem."

But Nhaille was still wandering the path of his own thoughts. "Is he so convinced of his victory to leave his company in the hands of his commander?"

A thought occurred to her. "Unless he's looking for the Sword as well."

Nhaille pursed his lips in contemplation. "Unless he's looking for you..."

"Me?"

"It does stand to reason that if word of a man and woman fleeing Kanarek reached Doan-Rau, he might draw the obvious conclusion."

"I am not an obvious conclusion! I'm supposed to be a myth."

"I do believe the myth is rapidly becoming reality." He offered her a pointed stare.

He didn't need to voice the accusation. Riordan felt a sharp stab of guilt. Doan-Rau might never have known of her existence if she hadn't insisted on going to Kanarek. Her selfish indulgence jeopardized Kanarek's salvation.

"I should never have made you take me there." It tore at her heart to admit her first order might have already caused their downfall.

Nhaille held her gaze a moment longer. "The deed is done, Riordan. Forget it."

* * *

The nighttime desert was a play of blue shadow against bone-white light. Arid wind tossed the sand like waves on the surface of a vast sea. Its frigid fingers combed through Riordan's hair and cast a dusting of sand into her eyes.

I hope I never see another grain of sand in my life!

Riordan blinked away the offending irritation. The moon shimmered through her tears, but she couldn't risk the movement to wipe at them.

Hells of a bad night for it. The moon's nearly bright as day.

But they couldn't wait until the moon was on the wane. The consequences of letting Rau escape were obvious.

Nhaille's right. He must be completely mad to venture out here on his own. Her hand tightened on her sword. Or does he think us so incompetent? Riordan's eyes fastened on her target. Well, Prince Doan-Rau, we shall see.

Like a shadow, Riordan glided through the darkness, inching toward her target. Know your enemy, Nhaille told her. She was close enough now to study him.

He -- she found she didn't want to name him now, not even in her mind, not when she

was about to kill him -- was sitting with his back to them. Reaching into the fire's light, he prodded the glowing coals. That small fire can't be taking away much of the chill, Riordan thought, creeping closer. Then again, maybe Doan-Rau's heart turned to ice long ago.

Pale skin gleamed in the moonlight as his hands worked at cleaning his armor. If it wasn't for the fire, she would have thought him part of the scenery, black upon white.

The odor of charred meat wafted back toward her on the breeze. Lizard? Mouse? Whatever he'd eaten for dinner smelled a lot worse than their journey rations. His resourcefulness impressed her. Mad or not, Rau would be a challenge. I'll know your measure soon enough, my Prince.

Behind her Nhaille's barely audible footsteps moved into position. She didn't need to turn to know where he was. She knew his technique almost as well as her own.

A horse whinnied nearby. Rau's, she realized with relief. Their own were tethered some distance away, safely beyond range.

Rau glanced up, disinterested, then went back to his work. Riordan released the breath that caught in her throat.

Nhaille's shadow bled into deeper darkness. Careful to keep his shadow from the circle of light around Rau's fire, he took refuge behind an outcrop of rock and motioned her forward.

Riordan eased her sword from its scabbard, certain Rau would hear the whisper-soft scrape of metal. But the object of her hatred was busy staring up at the diamond points of the stars.

Such a wistful gesture. In profile he looked youthful, thoughtful. Like any other young man contemplating his future. She hadn't expected him to be handsome. That was a disconcerting surprise.

Riordan yanked her thoughts back to the task at hand and slid into position.

The desert paused. Rodents ceased their scurrying between shadows. Moon, stars froze in position.

Nhaille sprang.

Riordan leapt after him. The desert rushed by her in a blur of silver and indigo.

A rush of wind must have alerted him. Rau whirled to meet Nhaille's onslaught. Too late. The impact knocked Rau into the glowing coals of the fire. Sand and ashes scattered in a whirlwind of searing dust.

Riordan flung herself into the tornado of flailing limbs, desperately trying to separate Rau from Nhaille. They rolled beyond the ring of scattered coals.

Rau snatched his sword from the pile of gear. It came free of its sheath with a screech of

metal.

Swords clashed together in a flash of moonlight. Nhaille parried Rau's thrust easily. His return caught Rau in the shoulder. The Prince swore.

Gripping Riordan by the arm, Nhaille thrust her away. "Stay out of it."

"Hells I will. He's mine." She took a step toward them.

"I mean it." Nhaille's look was brutal.

Wait a minute, I give the orders here. Riordan raised her sword.

But Rau noted even that small lapse in Nhaille's concentration. With a lightning twist of his wrist, he caught Nhaille's sword, knocking it from his hand. It landed with a whoosh, point down in the sand.

"Nhaille!" The warning was squeezed from her throat before she could call it back.

Nhaille leapt after his sword and stopped short. The tip of Rau's sword rested against his breast. The Prince grinned. Moonlight gleamed on his even white teeth.

Sensing her terror, he grinned wider, a twisted expression that warped his handsome face. Sapphire eyes blazed at her from under a shock of long, brown hair. Her eyes flickered to full lips she guessed could be as sensuous as they were now cruel. At that moment she wanted nothing more than to issue her most brutal kick to his strong jaw.

Riordan froze in position, afraid to startle Rau and send the point of his sword through Nhaille's heart.

"Ah, the good Captain Kayr-Alden-Nhaille it is," Rau said. "Great protector of the kingdom of Kanarek."

"Let him go," Riordan ordered.

Rau's eyes darted sideways. She watched them widen slightly as he caught a glimpse of the strands of silver hair that escaped from her helmet. Whatever he thought of her, he swiftly deduced she wasn't a threat.

"Not likely." The tip of his sword cut into the leather of Nhaille's vest. Apparently her orders were obeyed only by her own subjects. Had she really thought to intimidate him?

Nhaille's expression warned her to silence. His eyes shifted to the sword at his breast, imploring her to sacrifice him to get a clear shot at Rau.

Not what Rau was expecting. That would surely throw him off guard, long enough for her to slice off his head and be done with the whole affair. Who knew? Perhaps even the Haelian army would be lost without its commander.

If that were the case, Rau never would have set off on his own.

Nhaille glared at her, ordering her with a glance to action. She stared stubbornly back at him and watched his expression darken.

Nhaille's strategy made a cold-hearted kind of sense, but no way in the Seven Hells could Riordan stand by and watch Rau run his sword through Nhaille's heart. Images of his arms around her, the many ways he'd been both friend and mentor raced through her mind. With Nhaille gone she wouldn't have the strength to bear the Sword. She couldn't let Rau kill him, not even to save Kanarek.

The Prince was examining Nhaille much the way he might an exotic beetle. "The Great Captain Nhaille, after all. Well, I see the rumors of your death have been, shall we say, exaggerated."

Nhaille answered him with silence.

"And if I have the Great Captain at the point of my sword, then your companion must be..."

Riordan pulled off her helmet, letting her silver hair tumble about her shoulders in the moonlight. It was a chance, albeit a slim one, that confronting a myth might distract Rau long enough to give Nhaille a chance.

"Riordan-Khun-Caryn," she said, giving a passable version of a court bow. Fear flickered across Rau's face, quickly smothered. But Riordan heard his gasp of surprise beneath the wind's whisper. "And you are?"

He stared at her in amazement, his sword slipping for a moment from its target. "Doan-Rau."

Riordan took that opportunity to kick him under the chin.

Rau's sword flew wide, landing in a clatter amongst his discarded armor. He scrambled to reach it. Nhaille leapt after him, but Riordan was closer.

A risk he wouldn't have wanted her to take. She'd listen to his recriminations forever. But she had to stop Rau from reaching that sword.

Riordan flung herself at Rau.

She smashed into him, knocking him flat on his stomach. Putting the blade of her sword against the back of his neck, she leaned on him with the sum of her weight. "One move, Prince Rau," her words dripped venom on the last syllable of his name, "and you're dead. And believe me, I will enjoy killing you."

"Leave the Princeling to me," Nhaille said, getting to his feet. "It would be my pleasure, Your Majesty."

"Oh no," Riordan said, raising her sword for the killing blow. "The duty is mine."

In a sweeping arc, she brought the sword down toward the back of his neck.

Searing heat shot through her face. She scraped at the flaming ember Rau flung against her eye. The world blurred. Then she was on the ground.

And Rau held her sword against her throat.

Somewhere in the darkness, Nhaille swore vehemently.

Damn it, Nhaille. Why didn't you teach me the dirty tricks? Though he'd taught her every possible technique with the sword, he neglected burning coals and knives in the back.

Rau seized a handful of her hair and hauled her unceremoniously to her feet. "Stay where you are, Captain. Or the mythical heir to Kanarek will rapidly become no more than a brief memory."

Her eyelid was beginning to blister and swell. Even moonlight made it tear. It would be days before she knew whether she'd lost her sight as well. If she lived that long.

"Kill him, Nhaille. It's the only way."

She couldn't see out of her left eye. With the cold blade of her sword against her throat, she couldn't turn her head.

"Do it. I'm quite willing to die, as long as I take this Haelian swine with me."

"Riordan, be quiet." She heard the strain in his voice, though she couldn't see him. She knew how it felt, since she'd been in Nhaille's position only moments ago. Nhaille could no more let her die than she could him. If I live through this, Nhaille will kill me himself. The thought was comforting somehow.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Rau brought his face down close to hers. Moonlight glinted off the whites of his eyes, illuminating the madness within them. His breath was warm against the side of her face. "Shut up."

Nhaille took a step toward Rau. She felt the shifting of sand against her legs, even if she couldn't see him.

A warm trickle of blood leaked down the side of her neck, pooling against her collar.

"No further," Rau warned.

"Killing her will gain you nothing." Nhaille's voice, further away.

"Oh, have no fear, Captain. I don't intend to kill her. Not just yet, anyway."

Her father's mutilated face hovered in Riordan's memory and she pictured the multitude of horrors Rau could inflict upon her before her death. Please Nhaille, don't let him do any of those things to me.

"Not until our good Queen Riordan leads me to the Sword of Zal-Azaar." Rau considered his own strategy. "Perhaps not even then. I may decide I like her." Rau pressed against her suggestively. Her body recoiled, but he held her fast. And she realized there were more humiliating ways to torture a woman than slitting her throat.

The thought occurred to Nhaille as well, for his eyes narrowed. But he said evenly, "The Sword of Zal-Azaar is nothing more than an entertaining myth."

"Really? Then what were you and the Queen doing in the middle of the desert?"

"Fleeing Kanarek."

"Neither of you were in Kanarek when it fell. I know. I counted the bodies of the Khun-Caryn clan myself."

Riordan ground her teeth together. "When I get my hands on you, Prince, I'll dissect you slowly, oh so slowly. I'll make you suffer for a very long time."

Rau laughed. A flat echoless sound, lost in the desert wind. "I shall look forward to your hands upon me."

Only the sword at her neck stopped her from spitting in his face.

"Wave goodbye, Captain." Rau dragged her backward.

Nhaille took a step away, holding up his hands in a sign of defeat. Through her good eye, Riordan caught a glimpse of his anguished expression. She wanted to call out to him, to tell him to end it all now, but she knew he would never do anything to harm her.

And as long as I'm still alive, I've got a chance at Rau.

With the blade of his sword still pressed against her throat, he hauled her with him to his horse. He tossed the saddle at her feet. Holding her by the hair, his sword still at the ready, he ordered her to put it on.

"Don't even think of it," Rau said as Nhaille took a step toward them. "If you're smart, you'll say your farewells now."

"If you're not going to kill him, Nhaille," Riordan said, wanting only to get him out of harm's way. There'd be time to deal with Rau later. "Just do as he says."

"That's right, Captain. Turn around and start walking in the other direction. Keep walking until the sun comes up." He yanked Riordan toward him until their heads touched. "If I catch you following us, I will kill her immediately. Do you understand?"

Nhaille nodded grimly. With a last pleading look at Riordan, he turned and walked away into the darkness.

* * *

Trussed like a turkey, bound hand and foot, Riordan lay slung over Rau's horse and wished wholeheartedly for a moment when each step the animal took didn't knife into her ribs. Her left eye had long since swollen completely shut and the world swayed lopsidedly beneath her. Sweat stung the wound and the blowing sand only added to her misery. After two days under the blistering sun, she smelled only marginally better than Rau's horse.

Suddenly the world slid sideways. She hit the ground hard.

Thunk!

Riordan sprawled unceremoniously on the hard ground. Staring up through one eye at Rau's dark shape silhouetted against the sun, she realized she'd fallen asleep.

He kicked at her side. "Get up."

Making a scoop of her bound hands, she caught the edge of his boot and toppled him backward.

Rau hit the ground with a curse. Riordan scrambled awkwardly to her feet. In a zig-zagging hop, she raced for the abandoned horse.

He snagged her hair, yanking her backward.

"Just full of spunk, aren't you?"

She spat at him.

"Well, Your Majesty. Were I you, I'd save my strength."

Riordan answered him with a head-butt to the stomach.

With a vehement curse, Rau doubled up on the ground. Despite the pain, he refused to lessen his grip on her hair, and after a few more unsuccessful attempts to wrestle from his grasp, she sagged to the ground beside him.

"You Khun-Caryns have fire for blood," he said with grudging admiration.

"And you, Haelian scum, are lower than a snake."

Doubling over again, Rau laughed despite his wounded stomach. "Were the situation different, I might actually like you."

Riordan offered him her finest glare. "Were the situation different, I would kill you, Your Highness. Mark my words."

He sobered then. Casting a glance at her, disheveled and panting with anger, he snorted.

"I must say, you've looked better, Your Majesty."

"How in Hells would you know? No one's ever seen me."

"You were rumored to be very beautiful."

"Until I got a burning coal in the eye."

For a moment, Rau looked almost remorseful. "I doubt the damage is permanent."

Riordan shrugged. "No matter. I need only live long enough to kill you."

"Do you think of nothing else?"

"No."

Rau sighed. "Then I guess we have nothing to discuss."

"On the contrary." Riordan turned her good eye to face him. Under other circumstances she might have considered him handsome, but there was an intensity to his gaze that

betrayed the madness hovering just below the surface. "I should dearly like to know what it is that drives a man to level an entire kingdom. What twisted ugliness inside motivates someone to defile the bodies of our dead? What breeds such wickedness? An unhappy childhood? Or were you born that way?"

"Enough!" Madness bubbled to the surface. He yanked her to her feet. "I was willing to be merciful and offer you a moment's rest. But I've changed my mind. Wouldn't want your loyal subject, the late Captain Nhaille to come sneaking up on us." He shoved her toward his horse. "Be thankful you are riding. I could just as easily drag you along behind me."

Once again slung over the saddle, Riordan craned her head for a view of the horizon. Instead of the predictable featureless sky, a thin line of purple became visible.

The magenta mountains. At last.

Now would be a good time to begin formulating a plan. A vague memory of running through crystal corridors flashed through her mind. Was the vision destiny in waiting. Or merely one of the many cruel outcomes fate had yet to decide for her?

Riordan cast a glance behind them. Are you still there, Nhaille? What would you do in my place?

But there was only the endless wind and the shifting sand to answer her.

Nhaille would never have gone to Kanarek, her conscience whispered. Nhaille would have died for Kanarek's revenge. And she'd thrown the best of his intentions to the wind.

Don't you worry, she told the quiet desert. I'll find a way out of this. I'll find a way to fix it all. Somehow.

* * *

When he found her, he would throttle her within an inch of her life. And then he would bury his face in her hair and weep with gratitude.

Nhaille swore loud and long. No one could hear him over the ceaseless wind. Somehow it didn't make it any better. He had only to glance back at Riordan's riderless horse that trotted obediently behind him to feel a pang of unbearable remorse.

"Nineteen years!" he roared into the wind. "Nineteen years of watching and waiting. Not even five days on the road and all is lost."

Gods above, he'd spent all those years teaching her obligation, concern for others. And she'd thrown it all away, worrying about him.

"Why didn't I teach her selfishness?"

Images of what a madman like Rau could do to a young woman naive in the ways of men twisted in his gut. Her father's face flashed before his eyes, fierce and condemning.

Nhaille's eyes closed in a fervent prayer. "Forgive me, Arais. I should never have let her

care for me."

* * *

Rau's snores shattered the silent night. Riordan stared at him lying face up in the moonlight and swore. Oblivious to her venom, the Prince slept on.

Struggling with the leather thongs that bound her only irritated her chafed skin. Resigned, she wormed back under the blanket and tried to sleep.

Another snore shot her eyelids open. As good as shouting our presence to the world! Can you hear him, Nhaille? Are you still out there? There'd be hell to pay once he found them. Riordan wasn't sure whom she pitied more, Rau or herself.

She forced her eyes shut. Exhaustion won't help the situation. An awesome rattle issued from Rau's throat. Riordan groaned.

Throwing off the blanket, she contemplated heaving something big at him. An impossibility with her arms and legs bound.

Her sharp curse didn't register. Nor did the scoop of sand she flung after him with her heels. Finally, driven beyond the bounds of good sense, she squirmed until she rested on her knees and elbows and inched toward him.

A bolt of white fury shot through her as she gazed down at him. Arrogant swine! What gives him the right to sleep so peacefully after what he's done. Does he think me such a fool that I wouldn't consider smothering him in his sleep? Riordan shuffled closer. If I fell across him -- he could easily throw me off. He must outweigh me by at least three stone. She looked down at the sword in Rau's hand even as he slept. What if I kicked the sword away first? But what would I smother him with? A blanket?

Another thought occurred to her. In the darkness, Riordan smiled. Sleep soundly, Prince.

She leaned forward, positioning the tip of Rau's sword between the leather thongs that bound her wrists. Rau snorted. His hand tightened on the sword, but he didn't wake.

That's right, Doan-Rau, keep sleeping. How I'd love to see your face in the morning when you realize I'm gone.

Gently, she sawed at the leather. It was tougher than she anticipated, but eventually, she carved a narrow groove.

Just a bit more...

The snoring stopped. Rau's eyelids flickered.

Riordan swore silently to herself. Unhooking her wrists, searched for a way to camouflage her actions. Placing both feet against his side, she dealt him a swift kick.

Impact brought Rau fully awake. He leapt to his feet. Fury and fear battled for control of his expression. Then, recognizing his attacker was bound hand and foot, he flung the sword into the sand inches from her face. "Did you want something, Your Majesty?"

Riordan looked up at him, her gray eyes a mask of innocence. "You were snoring."

"Snoring!" Rau glared down at her and visibly debated taking a swipe at her with his sword.

She nodded and yawned as widely as she could. "You were keeping me awake."

"Wouldn't want to disturb your sleep, now would we?"

"I just wanted you to roll over."

"Fine, I'm up now. Go back to sleep."

Riordan eyed the discarded blanket and shivered. "Could you fetch my blanket?"

Rau swore. For a moment he studied her, lying bound at his feet. He snatched up the blanket and tossed it at her, leaving Riordan to find a way to wiggle back under it.

"Now be quiet, Your Majesty. Or I'll silence you with the blade of my sword."

Riordan lay back on the cool sand. Rau stood a few paces away, staring into the darkness. Looking no doubt for Nhaille.

A blade of moonlight cut across the sand beside her. She turned her wrists into the light.

Across the thick leather band that bound her wrists was a deep slash.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The desert's predawn cold penetrated blankets, clothes even muscles. The leather bonds did nothing to ease the cramps, merely forced her into unnatural positions.

Riordan's eyelids fluttered open. She'd been asleep, she realized with alarm. Warily she scanned the scene around her. Couldn't be more than a few minutes. Rau sat as he had for most of the night with his back against a rock, his sword mere inches from his hand. She'd spent the night watching the stars make their slow journey across the sky. All the while Rau sat sullenly in the darkness watching her.

Serves you right. I hope you're every bit as stiff and cold as I am.

But Rau had the freedom of his hands and feet. Rau had the liberty to attend to the necessities of nature. It wasn't Rau lying bound like an animal on the ground trying to ignore the dull ache in his bladder.

For that alone I would kill you. As if the Prince needed another sin to stack against the weight of his soul.

Riordan flailed into a sitting position and sat up. "Morning."

He grunted in reply. Watching her with scant interest, he pulled his blanket tighter around his shoulders.

"Sleep well?" She couldn't resist the barb.

Rau glared back at her, his eyes like dark jewels in the scant light. "Tomorrow night you can sleep upright, roped to the largest cactus I can find."

Riordan forced the smile spreading across her face into a bland stare. Not much chance of that. There wasn't a plant of any type for miles. In the scant light she could see the lines of strain beneath his eyes, proof of a night spent in surveillance of his prisoner rather than sleep. Bet you'll not dare to sleep soundly again, my Prince. Serves you right for snoring.

"Since you're up, would you mind--"

The Prince offered her a glower that said, not likely.

"Lot of help it'll be if I die of bladder failure before we reach the mountains."

That got his attention.

Wouldn't want my human failings to interfere with your glorious rule, now would we, Prince?

Rau rose stiffly from the rock he'd been sitting on. Riordan watched him move toward her, grimly satisfied that the cold affected him as much as it had her.

He reached down, scattering the blanket and hauled her to her feet. "Well?" he asked, tearing at the laces on her breeches.

How many times do we have to go through this? Go ahead, humiliate me, Rau. It will only make your demise all the sweeter.

Riordan turned awkwardly on bound legs. For all his manufactured grandeur, Rau was not overly tall. They were almost of a height.

"Rather difficult to do standing up."

He shoved her roughly. "So sit down."

Without hands or feet for balance she fell awkwardly, barely missing a head on collision with a nearby rock.

Rau shot her a look of utter disgust and walked away.

Riordan watched his black boots retreat. Thanks for nothing. It wasn't easy, but she managed to squirm out of her breeches. Bracing herself against a rock, she accomplished the task without soaking her clothes.

She studied the deep gash cutting across the leather thong that secured her wrists. Sometime today, my Prince, you're going to make a fatal mistake. Heaving herself away from the rock, she struggled back into her breeches. If not today, then tomorrow. It's just me and you. Sooner or later you'll slip.

And then I'll have you.

Wherever Rau's talents lay, it wasn't in the culinary arts. Riordan tried to choke down another of his putrid meals. Over the rim of his own bowl, he studied her. Riordan balanced hers between bound wrists.

"What I don't understand--"

He sighed heavily. "Do you never stop talking?"

"No."

"Must I bind your mouth as well, then?"

"That would stop me talking," Riordan admitted, then quickly added. "But not thinking."

"Planning my demise, I'd wager."

"Did you think me stupid?"

Blue eyes stared back at her in stony silence. Yet she caught a glimpse of the veiled respect within his gaze, as if he couldn't quite believe she was real. "Of course not, Your Majesty," Rau said patronizingly. "What is it you don't understand?"

Riordan ignored the sarcasm in his tone. "If it was Kanarek you wanted, why did you set it aflame?"

"It wasn't Kanarek I wanted."

"What then?"

"The coast, my good Queen. The entire coast from Kanarek to Golar."

The entire coast, by the Gods! Nowhere in the prophecy was it written that the destruction would stretch along the entire seaboard. Rau's revelation shattered the ice inside. In that moment the fire that the fall of Kanarek had extinguished flickered and came back to life.

Prophecy was merely speculation. Events that could come to be. Those prophesied events would not come to pass, she vowed silently. She would stand in Rau's path. Between Rau and the cities of Kholer and Golar and the coast.

Fire spread through her veins until she no longer felt the cold and the stiffness, felt nothing, but the raging inferno inside. In one brief, brilliant flash she recognized the enormity of what Nhaille had been trying to tell her all those years.

I do not have the luxury of failing.

More than Kanarekii lives stood in the balance. More than Nhaille's or her own. The knowledge only served to stoke the fire within.

And to think I once worried I'd be incapable of killing you, Rau.

Riordan forced her tone of voice back to amiable conversation. She had to keep Rau talking, find out more about his plans. "Once you have the coast, what will you do with it?"

"Rule it."

"And your father, what of him?"

"He has promised the realm to me."

"He has named you his heir?"

Her question was softly spoken, so she was unprepared for the fury with which Rau leapt to his feet. Sand swirled about her. She dropped her own bowl in an aborted effort to keep it from her eyes.

The Prince snatched the bowl from the dirt and thrust it into his saddle bag. "Enough of this nonsense. Get on the horse and stay quiet, or I swear, I will bind your mouth."

At least it would keep the sand from my teeth.

"That, or rip out your tongue," Rau added.

So, Riordan thought as he slung her over the saddle and climbed up behind her, after his brilliant campaign in Hael's name, Prince Rau could not be certain of his father's goodwill. She filed that notion in her memory for future reference.

What a scholar of human nature I'm becoming. Nhaille would be proud of her

observance--if he ever forgave her for not sacrificing his life to get at Rau.

Of all the killing that lies before me, you couldn't be the first, Nhaille.

Sand thinned, barely covering the glassy rock beneath. The mountains took up steadily more of the sky. Once there, Rau would expect her to lead him to the Sword's tomb.

So he can chop off my head with it.

Riordan watched the thinning sand beneath the horses hooves. The motion was mesmerizing. Eventually the swaying lulled her into blessed numbness.

* * *

Why in the Seven Heavens must the Kanarekii myth have the face of an angel and a tongue to charm vipers? She had a beauty as hard-edged as crystal, yet a disarming easy nature that came, he guessed, from growing up in exile and not in the stifling protocol of court.

Damn it all, why did she have to be real? Why, when the rest of the campaign had gone so well, did Riordan-Khun-Caryn have to come crashing into his life and threaten to destroy it all?

Just as he got past his father's doubt, the reluctance of the council, he'd remove this new obstacle as well. He need only seize the Sword to guarantee his victory. As far as the Kanarekii myth was concerned, his father would be none the wiser. Once he returned home victorious with the entire coast under Hael's rule no questions would be asked. The last surviving member of the Khun-Caryn clan would help him achieve it.

There could be no greater irony.

Rau looked down at her sleeping form slumped over the horse before him and smiled. For all her other faults, the new Queen had a pleasing form. He'd been so busy with his campaign, he hadn't had time for women. She was at his mercy. He could do with her what he willed.

A diversion he had not the time for, he thought with a disappointed sigh. Nothing must keep him from his chosen path. Kanarek's Queen could wait until the coast was won. He need not destroy her to win the Sword.

No, he thought with a decisive nod, the Kanarekii was a challenge worthy of him, a welcome distraction from the messy affairs of state. Taming her spirit was a task he would enjoy.

After all, the loss of her tongue would not destroy her other virtues.

* * *

Riordan raced through the crystal labyrinth. Magenta corridors stretched in all directions. The polished floors offered no purchase for the leather soles of her boots and she slipped more than once, crashing into the walls of jutting quartz. She gained her feet

and ran on. It was desperately important she reach the chamber at the center of the mountain.

The floor sloped upward, and she knew she'd taken the wrong corridor. She turned back, retracing her own footsteps.

To find the passageway blocked.

Doan-Rau towered over her. His laughter shook the mountain to the core.

Wrong, all wrong, she thought desperately. Doan-Rau was no taller than she. She should be the one blocking his passage to the Sword's chamber. Yet, caught in the vision's web, she was powerless to stop the events from tumbling into motion.

Rau swooped toward her. Riordan darted out of reach. His hands closed on thin air. He cursed vehemently. She felt his warm breath as he passed her in the cold chamber. Trapped, she had no choice but to plan her own defense.

Her foot shot out, catching Rau across the stomach. With a gasp, he doubled up. She raced past him.

His cruel laughter followed her through the corridors.

Riordan bolted back down the crystal hallways, searching for the junction where the floor began sloping downward. Footsteps echoed through the passageways. She forced her legs to carry her faster.

The junction loomed suddenly before her. Momentum carried her forward. She gripped the wall for balance and swung in this new direction. Her lungs burned for air as she dashed across the threshold of the Sword's resting place.

To find it occupied by a black-cloak figure.

A cry of defeat was torn from her throat. He whirled toward her.

The world spun. She felt the impact, saw the shower of red across the magenta quartz walls. Her headless body crumbled to the floor.

Riordan lurched to her senses. Sand swirled before her eyes, swept up the sure footfalls of Rau's horse. Sweat soaked her collar, leaking down into the silver strands of her hair.

Rau's voice dragged her back to reality. "Bad dreams?"

The sound of his voice caused another wave of sweat to break out across her forehead.

Was Rau blessed with the Shraal's gift of sight? Could he see inside her dreams? No, she decided with welcome relief. His tone was devoid of concern. He took pleasure in her discomfort, nothing more. Rau was predictable in his cruelty.

Terror ran its cold fingers down her spine. Why had the vision shown her this? Its meaning stabbed through her, cold and clear. She must change the course of events or the Sword would be Rau's.

Riordan ran her finger over the groove in the leather thong. Now was the time to make her move, especially while she had a chance of unseating him and making off with his horse. Nhaille could deal with Rau when he caught up with him.

That thought brought a smile to her lips. Pity the poor Prince.

The groove in the leather was deep. Riordan tested its strength. The gash had weakened it. One strong pull ought to do it.

Casting a furtive glance at Rau, she found his gaze fastened on the growing bulk of the mountains before them. Slowly, she worked at the leather, deepening the cut she'd made with his sword.

Delicate work. Too much movement would alert Rau to her deception. Too little would accomplish nothing. Riordan waited.

Just as she decided it could wait no longer, an opportunity presented itself. Twisting in the saddle, Rau cast a glance behind him, searching for the ever-present threat of Nhaille.

Throwing all her strength into one powerful tug, Riordan tore her hands apart. The leather snapped. She heaved herself upright, just as Rau turned back toward her.

Her fist caught him on the side of the head. Surprise was her ally. The blow knocked him off balance. He made a grab for his sword and missed. Deciding to use his hands to save his balance, he grasped the saddle.

Riordan swung herself into position. Her bound legs made movement awkward, but she managed to wedge herself against the horse's neck. She kicked out, using her legs as a battering ram, catching Rau beneath the jaw.

Still recovering from the earlier blow, Rau toppled. Riordan snatched after his sword, seizing it with both hands. She heaved, throwing the sum of her weight into the tug. The sword slid free of his scabbard in a flash of light.

Rau clutched at her legs, desperate to stop his fall. Grasping for purchase, her nails scraped across the leather saddle. But with Rau's sword in one hand and her other flailing helplessly in thin air, Riordan slid helplessly from the saddle.

Her shoulder collided with hard ground. Riordan gripped the sword for dear life and vainly tried to get her legs under her. The next impact came from above.

Rau had the advantage in height and weight. Unable to get the sword between them to slit his throat, she settled for ramming the hilt into his temple. The Prince cursed and dealt her a stinging blow across the face.

Riordan swung, cutting through his cloak into the leather on the back of his armor. Rau hissed in pain.

He rolled, using his superior weight to pin her sword arm to the crystal rock beneath

them. He seized her free arm, stopping the punch headed for his jaw. Anchoring her other arm with his knee, he leaned on her chest with the sum of his strength.

She bucked against him, would have unseated him, had he not reached up to the neck of his cloak and yanked open the clasp. She saw then it was not just a decorative pin at his throat, but a thin stake of amber. And it was poised inches above her right eye.

Rau glared down at her, panting with exertion. "Now what will it be, Your Majesty?"

CHAPTER NINE

Screams shattered the quiet morning air.

The people of Kholer looked up from their breakfast tables. Chores forgotten, they flowed into the streets.

The sight that awaited them froze the blood in their veins. They stared, mouths open in shock at the black-clad warriors swarming down the hill like a plague.

At the front of the army Hael's black and red standard fluttered in the morning breeze. Behind them billowed a vast cloud of smoke. As it drew near, they could make out the dark shapes of soldiers bearing torches.

"Close the gate," someone shouted. Too late.

With a thundering crash, the battering ram knocked the massive wooden door from its hinges. For a moment it tottered precariously on its side, then came smashing down in a rain of splinters. Barriers removed, the Haelian army streamed through the gates.

Citizens of Kholer scattered, rushing for their swords. Children snatched up pitchforks, women ran for butcher knives, elders wielded whatever weapons they could lay their hands on.

Smoke dimmed the sun within minutes. Orange flame danced across thatched roofs of huts and guttered down the supporting beams of barns and houses. Soon nothing but charred timber lay in its path.

Cries for help were trampled beneath the hooves of Haelian horses. Moans of the dead and dying blotted out all other sound. Shock and terror worked in Hael's favor. Kholer raised their weapons only to find the tide of battle had already turned against them.

Just when those in Kholer were sure the Seven Hells had overflowed and spewed the damned upon the earth, a more horrifying sight burst through the city gates. Enough to stop even the bravest heart, many simply turned tail and fled. Those who remained fought harder than ever. For the alternative waited at their very gates.

Dead bodies tumbled through the entrance, falling over each other to accomplish the task demanded of them. Like a multitude of graves suddenly overturned, they surged into Kholer.

Soldiers soon discovered the cruel futility of trying to kill the dead. The blows of swords and axes did nothing to discourage their forward advance. Devoid of fear, long past pain, they merely cast aside the arms and legs that had been hacked off. Crawling, hopping, slithering on their bellies when no other means was left to them, they trudged onward.

Like a disease, they covered more of the city. And as the bodies of Kholeran citizens piled up in the center square, those still living watched their dead rise to fight against them.

* * *

Muffled shouts filtered through Bevan's flaccid eardrums. Around him the stench of burning flesh reached his failing senses. Flames formed an orange fence against the sky. Someone thrust a sword into his hand. Bevan trudged forward, following in the loose ranks of the dead army.

He swung, cleaving through flesh before he hit the resistance of bone. Someone screamed. Nearby. Hard to see now, through that one decaying eye.

The blow knocked him back on his haunches. Putrid skin parted, tore. Though he felt no pain, the impact maddened him. Latent survival instincts kicked in. Bevan clambered to his feet.

A blurry face swam in his vision. The look of fear and loathing made him pause mid swing. No one ever looked at him like that before. A tendril of memory wound its way through his mind. For an instant he remembered his own gut-wrenching terror as Hael claimed Kanarek and turned him against his own people. The sword slipped from his swollen fingers.

Kill! The voice roared in his brain.

Bevan snatched up his sword and swung again, meeting the steel resistance of another's blade. Burning timber crashed beside him. He felt the heat, knew in some lost portion of his mind that fire meant danger. But the shouting voice urged him on. Stepping over the bodies of his fallen comrades and city natives, Bevan marched deeper into the fray.

* * *

"Touch her, you bastard and I'll skin you alive!"

Nhaille slammed a gloved fist against the outcrop that hid him behind a fan of crystal. He didn't dare come closer, didn't dare show himself, lest Rau make good on his threat to slit Riordan's throat.

"Harm one hair on her head..."

All those years while he'd taught her the nuances of combat, he'd never thought to warn her about the cruel things a madman could do to a woman. Somehow he always thought he'd be there to protect her. He'd failed even in that. If Rau harmed her...

He'd throw it all away -- Kanarek's revenge, his promise to his king -- for one clear shot at Rau. He'd toss the last nineteen years to the wind for the morbid satisfaction of closing his hands around that Haelian abomination's neck. He flexed his hands, imagining the last vestiges of life leeching from Rau's body.

Movement drew his attention. From his vantage point, he watched as Riordan heaved herself upright in the saddle and launched a two-footed kick at Rau. Nhaille had to restrain himself from shouting encouragements as the Prince toppled backward.

Perhaps his help was not so badly needed, he realized with a grim smile. Under the circumstances, Riordan seemed to have the situation under control. Since Doan-Rau had taken her captive, she'd done her best to make his life a living hell.

Nhaille squinted across the distance to bring Riordan into better focus. Her eye was healing. She seemed to be winning against Rau.

"Well done, Your Majesty!" he couldn't help whispering with pride. Riordan was his progeny, after all.

Pride deteriorated to alarm. Rau gained the upper hand. He watched impotently as they struggled on the horse, fighting the urge to rush to her aid. A futile gesture. It would merely blow his cover. He was too far away to be of any use. By the time he reached them, one would have control. It could mean the end of Riordan's life if it was Rau.

The amber stake flashed in the sun. Despite his vow, Nhaille bolted forward. He caught himself, afraid to startle Rau into sudden movement and accomplish the task for him.

Rau straddled Riordan. He raised the stake of amber poised to hammer it through her right eye into her brain. For several heart-pounding seconds they were frozen in that horrible tableau.

Nhaille swore through clenched teeth. "Don't do it, Rau."

"Do it, Rau," Riordan hissed.

Her challenge caught him off guard. His fingers tightened on the stake of amber.

"Go ahead," she goaded him. "Stab the amber through my eye into my brain. Add me to your legions of zombies."

Her strange request took Rau by surprise. Plainly he didn't know what to make of this new tactic. He sat back heavily on her chest and cautiously awaited her next move.

"Do you have that great a death wish?" he asked incredulously, and she knew he'd taken the bait.

Got you now, Prince.

"On the contrary, it is you who would suffer. My body might do your bidding," she forced a self-effacing laugh. "You know I'd make a capable soldier."

Rau nodded warily, weighing her words, looking for the trick within them. But he kept the amber poised mere inches from her right eye.

"Unfortunately," Riordan continued matter of factly, "all knowledge of the Sword would be lost with my mind. Forever."

The hand holding the amber trembled. She noted the tiny movement. A master stake, she noted, examining its pointed end at much closer range than was comfortable. One that could control the others. Who could guess the limits of its power?

"Is that really what you want?" she asked softly. "To wander endlessly through the crystal caves?"

Riordan played the last card of her bluff.

"Believe me that's what you'll do. Only I have the knowledge of where the Sword is hidden. And I can tell you this, good Prince, you'd never find it on your own."

Rau's hand dropped to his side. He hooked the amber back into the loop at the neck of his cloak.

Snatching a handful of her vest, he yanked her upright. Riordan dragged in a ragged breath of relief. He'd bought the lie. She'd escaped the proverbial fate worse than death. For the moment. Her heart sank.

Great. And what am I going to do when we reach the mountain and he finds out Nhaille still has the map and I don't have a clue to the Sword's whereabouts?

This time Rau allowed her to sit upright on the horse, her hands bound behind her. He even slashed the leather bonds about her feet so she could sit in the saddle. An awkward arrangement, it was hard not to lean against him. Rau wasn't the kind of person she wanted to get that close to.

Riordan felt the hard muscles of his chest rigid against her back. Rau had a wiry strength, a nervous energy, in contrast to Nhaille's calmness and heavier build. For a moment she desperately longed for the security of Nhaille's arms around her, then she pushed the thought away.

Amethyst mountains towered over them, a jagged fence against the sky. They rode into its shade, welcome relief after countless days under the merciless sun.

Riordan reveled in its coolness. Sleep beckoned to her. Days and nights in Rau's company took their toll. She was tired of the relentless surveillance. Her eyes drifted shut, and she realized for the first time in days there was movement in her wounded eyelid. A nap was perhaps possible.

Rau won't kill me until he knows for sure whether I can lead him to the Sword. Riordan surrendered to unconsciousness.

"My father often remarked," Rau said suddenly, the first words he'd uttered since their earlier skirmish.

Her eyelids flew open. "What?" She realized with horror that her head had fallen back against Rau's shoulder. Riordan jerked upright.

"My father used to say," he repeated. "That it was a shame Arais-Khun-Caryn had only sons."

Now what are you getting at, Rau?

She twisted to look at him, her face darkening.

"He said stock like yours would make for a good match." Rau's hand drifted from the reins up the length of her thigh to rest suggestively on her hip. Riordan caught a chilling glimpse of where the conversation was headed.

"Pity then, my parents had only sons," she said, schooling her voice to blatant disinterest.

"Ah, but I find now that isn't so."

Riordan offered a non-committal grunt.

"And to think. If your parents had not cloistered you away, you could have been that match my father so desired. Instead of war, I could have taken Kanarek by dowry."

"My father would never have given Kanarek to you. And you're forgetting the brothers before me."

"Oh right," Rau said. "Them."

And if he did, in some great lapse of sanity, give me to you, Rau, rest assured I'd have strangled you on our wedding night.

"Pity," Riordan said, "That Hael's King had only sons. One of my brothers could have taken Hael as dowry."

Rau lapsed into sullen silence.

Stupid, Riordan rebuked herself. Should have kept him talking. Know your enemy, Nhaille's words nagged at her memory.

"Your younger brothers," she said in her friendliest tone of voice, "tell me of them."

"Nothing much to speak of."

Riordan read the warning in his voice and ignored it. "Surely there must be. Are they captains in your army?"

"No," Rau said. His crisp tone encouraged no further inquiry. "My father keeps them close at hand. He's grooming the youngest to take his place."

The revelation slid with bitterness from his lips. Hael was lost to Rau. In order to rule, he had to claim kingdoms of his own. Riordan opened her mouth to say something further, but Rau continued.

"And you're wrong. My parents did have a daughter, but she died in childhood."

"I'm sorry." The traitorous words slipped past her lips, taking her entirely by surprise. Pity was something she never expected to feel for Doan-Rau.

He moved against her, letting go the sigh he held inside. "My father adored her." Rau paused, and she felt him suck in a long breath.

"And she was dear to me," he said at last.

Know your enemy. Riordan shook her head slowly. There was no end, she realized, to the complexities of the mind of a madman.

It required a strange type of delusion to feel sadness for the loss of one's family and then to coldbloodedly murder an entire kingdom. A keen blade of anger clove through her, so sudden, so pure, she gasped in surprise.

"I don't suppose it occurred to you, that maybe my family, my kingdom were dear to me?"

There was a long pause.

"Unfortunate, but their sacrifice was necessary."

"Necessary? For what? For your glory?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"I don't suppose I would."

"That was exactly the problem with you Kanarekii. You had no vision."

The fire racing through her veins ran cold. Riordan twisted again to look at him. She had to see the cool judgment in his face to believe a human being was capable of such a thing.

"Suffice to say our vision was different than yours." She shot him a look fit to kill.

But Rau was oblivious to the splash of venom launched his way. As if delivering a well-rehearsed lecture, he continued undaunted.

"If you knew all those years where the Sword lay, why didn't you break it out of the vault and take down Hael before it occurred to us to conquer you?"

"Destruction from the last time the Sword was unleashed marks the plains to this day. The Sword is not to be used lightly."

"My point exactly."

She stared at him in mute disbelief.

"Kanarek's downfall was prophesied. Your father knew the Sword's whereabouts. He had sons and brothers, all capable of leading an army. But did he break the Sword out of its vault and raze Hael? No? He cloistered his daughter in the forest and sat idly on his throne waiting for the prophesied events to come to pass."

With her hands bound, there was no way she could punch him in his insolent face. Riordan butted her shoulder into his chest.

Rau anticipated her move. Catching her, he absorbed the impact with his arms. Laughter rumbled through his chest as he held her away from him.

"You certainly have spirit, Your Majesty, but as a tactician you leave a great deal to be desired."

Riordan debated biting off his lips.

"Merely another point in my argument," Rau continued merrily. "In its last dying moment, Kanarek finally breaks out the Warrior Princess and its aging Captain."

"We had no way of knowing whether the prophecy would come to pass. And Nhaille is not old," she spat at him. "You'd best not mock him, Rau. You may yet meet your end at his hand."

But Rau merely laughed harder. "Oh ho! You have a fondness for the old man, don't you? Well, I guess that's to be expected after being locked up in the forest together all those years." He waved a finger at her. "Now what would your father say? Assuming he could still talk."

Riordan felt her mouth dropping open before she could prevent it. "Nhaille and I are not lovers!"

"Indeed?" Rau asked with mock interest.

The flame inside roared to life. Having no other method of striking out, she rammed herself against him. Chuckling, Rau wrapped his arms securely around her, preventing further movement.

"Now, now, Your Majesty. If you'd think about it for just a moment, you'd know the truth when you heard it."

"You wouldn't know truth if it bit you," she snarled. And how I'd like to bite you. I'd rip out your throat with my own teeth. Already I can taste your blood!

"As I was saying. Kanarek finally breaks loose its virginal Princess, who we find now, has fallen in love with her loyal servant the legendary, but aging Captain Nhaille. Belatedly, they set out to cross the desert and release the Sword." He recited the story as if telling it to a young child. "Whereupon they meet their enemy, the victorious Prince Rau."

Riordan craned her neck and spat in his face.

Still laughing at his own humor, Rau wiped the spittle from the side of his face and continued.

"Whereupon they meet their enemy. Seeing there are two of them and only one of the lonely Prince, do they kill him in cold blood?"

The question hung between them.

"No. Of course not. Being Kanarekii, they bungle the entire deed. And the Prince takes the Captain, who isn't your lover, hostage."

He turned her chin toward him.

"And the Princess, pardon me, The Queen, what does she do?"

Rau waited for her answer. When none came he said, "Does she sacrifice the man she doesn't love, so she can see the Haelian beast put to justice?"

Sapphire eyes stared down into hers.

"Did she, Riordan-Khun-Caryn?"

"Justice has yet to be served," Riordan growled.

"Is that so?"

Answering his own question, he said, "We shall see. But we have not ended our story. It would seem the prophesied avenger of Kanarek does not have much stomach for war."

Oh, just you wait, Prince.

"And what did our brave Queen do? She sacrificed her own life to save that of her lover."

"He's not my lover. And what would you know of loyalty?"

"Had you let him die, you could have turned the course of this entire war."

And I will, my Prince. I promise you that.

"But no, the good Queen thought with her heart instead of her brain. Just like her father, she threw away her chances."

"And what you did was honorable?" The words burst from her lips, in spite of her vow to prove him wrong and think with her head. "Leveling an entire kingdom and enslaving its dead into your army was preferable?"

"Preferable to losing."

"There wouldn't be a war if it wasn't for you, Rau."

"Wouldn't there?" he asked mildly. "It seems to me it was only a matter of time."

"A matter of time for what? Before an abomination like you was born?"

"Only a matter of time before someone found the map to the Sword and went to dig it up," he said calmly. "If it wasn't me or my kin, it would have been you or yours. The Shraal for all their great talk, left relics to their greatness all over. Did they think no one would ever decipher what was written?"

"You don't bear the markings of a Shraal."

But he did, she thought suddenly. Shraal madness shone within Rau like a flame.

"What does it matter?" Rau asked easily.

He knows. The knowledge seeped slowly into her brain. He knowss the Sword can only be used by one of Shraal blood.

Did Rau's madness mean Shraal blood coursed in his veins? Or was his insanity of his

own making?

"You're wrong," Riordan said, maneuvering the conversation away from the Sword. "I don't think your father would have ever gone after the Sword or the Amber for himself."

"The King is a man of limited vision."

"And you are not."

"Obviously."

"The King will be proud of your accomplishments then?"

Rau stiffened against her, and she knew the comment had hit its mark.

"He will," Rau said, without conviction.

"That's good." Riordan added a fair measure of sarcasm. "I'd hate to think the murder of my people was without cause."

Her sarcasm, however, was not lost on Rau.

"As I said, the Kanarekii have no vision."

"So you said."

"I merely speak the truth."

"It is equally true Hael is without compassion."

"Compassion is a useless emotion."

"A personal failing you were kind enough to point out to me. I shall try to rid myself of this weakness." She offered him a frigid glare. "Especially where you're concerned."

Her comment restored Rau's good humor. "Still plotting my untimely demise?"

"I've given little thought to anything else."

"I'm flattered I warrant so much of your attention, Your Majesty."

"Indeed, you fascinate me."

Rau raised his eyebrows, waiting for the insult he was sure was coming.

"Just as thunderstorms fascinate me."

Mistaking her words for a compliment, he beamed back at her.

"All noise and wind with little substance."

His smile faded to a dark frown. In that instant he did resemble the sky before a storm. Riordan waited for the first explosion.

But instead Rau said, "I assure you, Your Majesty. There is plenty of substance to me."

"Ah yes, the songs they'll sing, the monuments they'll build in your name. And what then Rau? Will that keep you warm on the cold nights when the ghosts of my family come to

haunt you?"

His fury she expected, anything but the thoughtful way he cocked his head and studied her. His hand cupped her chin and turned her face toward him. "The monuments could be built in your name as well, Riordan."

"Your Majesty," she corrected him, covering her shock. "We are not friends, Rau."

Gods! Is the snake really asking me to join forces with him? You really don't understand at all, do you, Rau?

"We could be." He said the words so softly, she wasn't sure she heard him properly. His hand brushed the swell of her breast.

Anger soared within her until she could feel nothing but its blinding flame.

"What is it that drives you!" Only the leather bonds stopped her from throwing up her hands in utter frustration. She had to distract him from the topic of an alliance. "Is the songs, the monuments, the people bowing down before you? Or the killing itself?"

Foregoing caution, she brought her head down close to his and whispered, "Are you so cold and empty inside that you have to fill yourself with the lives of others to feel whole?"

Riordan felt the slow shudder of his anger.

"You understand nothing! And I was a fool to think it might be possible for us to be friends."

Her eyes widened at the sheer incredulity of his statement. "Friends! You killed my family, you reduced my kingdom to rubble! Make no mistake, Rau. You and I will never, ever be friends."

"And you just threw away the opportunity to save your life."

"Did I?" she hissed back. "I rather think it was the other way around."

Rau was shaking his head. "You could have had it all, Riordan. You could have ruled beside me. From Hael to Golar and everything in between. I offered you a place at my side. And you threw it away. And for what? For stupid, Kanarekii pride."

"My ancestors built an entire kingdom with that stupid Kanarekii pride."

"Where is your proud kingdom now?"

"In my heart."

His laughter echoed off the crystal mountain face.

"That is the difference between us," she snapped. "There is nothing in yours."

He reigned his horse in abruptly, nearly unseating her.

"This conversation is futile. Arguing with one of your kind is worse than useless. Have it

your way, Your Majesty. Die like your father with your precious pride intact."

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," she shot back, quoting him.

"And you're right, I wouldn't."

Riordan twisted away from him. "Fine, then let's agree to continue hating each other. I much prefer that arrangement to ruling at your side."

"You may pay for that preference with your life."

She stared up at the jagged wall of crystal that towered far past her line of sight into the sky. "So be it."

Her words sounded inordinately loud to her own ears. She became aware for the first time, that there was no sound save for the steady tread of Rau's stallion and the soft whisper of their breath.

No wind, no hiss of sand on sand. In contrast the desert teemed with life compared to the mountains. The entire landscape was barren, lifeless. And yet, it vibrated, like a single note struck on a fine piece of glassware.

Above her the mountains loomed in all their crystalline glory. Pale purple seemed to bleed from the ground into their roots, fading to glassy pink where they touched the sky. The setting sun touched their peaks in a prism of crimson.

Even Rau seemed awed. Every footstep, every uttered breath reverberated with tinsel clarity off the myriad quartz outcrops. It was easy to believe magic ruled in this unearthly territory. The cold breath of Shraal ghosts ruffled the hairs on the back of Riordan's neck. She shivered, longing suddenly for the oppressive heat of the desert and the clear, open sky.

And now, she thought with a pang of cold fear, comes the moment for which I was born.

The only problem was that she'd memorized only the path across the desert, she hadn't had time to memorize the route through the labyrinthine tunnels of the mountain.

How long will it take Rau to figure that out?

She fought back a sudden wave of panic.

The timbre of the vibration changed. Riordan turned her head toward it, called by its strange song.

The Sword, she realized with a shock of recognition. Out of the corner of her eye, she cast a glance back at Rau. But he was still eying the imposing peaks of the mountains above. And in the same instant came the awareness that Rau couldn't hear it.

Shraal magic. It hadn't failed her after all.

With a hiss of metal, she felt Rau's blade suddenly at her throat.

"And now, Your Majesty. You will lead me to the Sword of Zal-Azaar."

CHAPTER TEN

Riordan drew in a shallow breath, afraid to move and press her throat any harder against the razor-sharp edge of Rau's sword. He shoved her toward the foot of the jagged quartz mountain range.

"Lead me to the entrance."

What now? If Rau discovers I don't know exactly where the chamber is, he'll kill me.

But in that second, she realized she did in fact know. The timbre of the sound changed, drawing her head to the left. Careful of the pressure of Rau's sword, she tilted her chin ever so slightly upward. Between nearly identical peaks of crystal she made out the shadowed indentation of an entrance. The gateway to the mountain. Following the route back down, she realized that what she'd taken for random sproutings of quartz was in fact a well-concealed pathway. And that knowledge posed another problem.

She couldn't enter the Sword's sanctuary, dragging Rau behind her. Especially after his stinging remarks about her lack of talent as a tactician.

See how fast I'm learning, Prince?

Most definitely the risks would be cut in half if she could rid herself of Rau before she entered. But how? Stalling for time, she tilted her head so she could see him out of the corner of her eye.

"And if I don't know exactly where it is?"

"You lie." The pressure of his sword increased. She didn't dare breathe, didn't dare swallow. Another fraction of an inch and he'd slit her throat.

"I said I didn't know exactly. Not that I didn't know."

"The whereabouts of the Sword is a Kanarekii secret."

She played a delicate game, trying to keep Rau from the Sword's chamber while attempting to escape with her throat intact.

"How do you know the secret didn't perish with Kanarek? You did after all, burn most of the city to the ground."

"The map was not among the wreckage."

"Perhaps you should have looked before you burned the city."

"And you should dispense with this juvenile game you're playing. If you don't know the Sword's whereabouts, I have no reason to keep you alive, now do I?"

"I thought you liked me," she snapped, in spite of herself. Rau's company brought out the worst of her nature.

"I've changed my mind."

"Fickle, aren't you." The words slipped past her lips before her brain could call them back.

"You, Your Majesty, are a colossal fool. Not only do you scoff at my offer of an alliance, you would have me slit your throat not steps from the Sword's tomb rather than take me there."

Well, you've got that part of it right, Doan-Rau.

The weight of his words swung in the balance.

"We're going to have to climb," Riordan said finally. "The entrance lies several feet from the ground. And no, as I told you, I do not know where exactly. But it's more than you will find out by yourself, so you're just going to have to trust me."

"Scant likelihood of that," Rau said, his lips only inches from her ear.

He glanced upward, scanning the mountain face for signs of the Sword's entrance. Finding nothing obvious, he scowled. Relaxing his grip on his sword, he shoved her toward the jagged thatches of crystal. "Climb then."

Those spiked clusters of rock could easily slice a man in half, she thought, putting her foot against the first of them, leading Rau deliberately away from the path to the entrance.

I'm not sure this is an improvement in my tactical ability, but it beats leading him to the Sword's door. As long as she didn't fall and render the whole exercise useless.

Riordan gripped a bolt of crystal, testing its strength. Surprisingly strong, it held her weight without difficulty. Hauling herself up after it, she began to climb.

"Not so fast." Taking out a length of leather thong, Rau tied one end securely around her foot and fastened the other about his middle. "Wouldn't want you getting too far ahead of me." He smiled, an unnerving expression that didn't warm the ice in his eyes, and gestured to the crystal mountain. "Please continue, Your Majesty."

She noted that while Rau didn't sheath his sword, he tucked it through the belt at his waist, keeping it close at hand.

Dropping it would be too much to hope for, now wouldn't it?

Stretching herself out to her full length, Riordan reached for another handhold. Deliberately, she led Rau away from the pathway she knew extended mere feet to her left. Crevices and handholds were fewer on that side, further apart. The path had been fashioned there for a reason, constructed out of the natural crevices in the rock. Scaling the mountain face made the game all the more dangerous.

Lot of good it'll do, if I kill myself. Unless, of course, I drag Rau with me into the afterlife.

Her foot precariously balanced on a narrow bolt of quartz, her knee wedged against another, she dug her fingers into the jagged rock and flung her free hand toward the narrow outcrop above her.

The world swayed beneath her. Jagged quartz sliced into her flesh, but she forced her hand to close around it. Beneath her fingers she felt the stickiness of blood. But for the moment she rested there securely. Her eyes closed in relief and she hung there panting, afraid to look up or down.

Amazing how even that distance above the ground could set her heart pounding. I can't believe we climbed so far so fast. She vowed to slow down as much as possible before Rau got impatient.

From a few feet below came his labored breath, as he hauled himself up the mountain.

That's good. You just hold on real tight now, Rau. Wouldn't do for you to fall off the mountain and take me with you.

Slowly, she dragged her leg across the rough rock, searching for a foothold. Already her hands stung with a multitude of tiny cuts. Her bare knees showed through tears in her breeches.

The toe of her boot connected with a narrow bolt of crystal. Riordan wedged her foot against it and tested it with her weight. Leaning on it, she stretched out her right arm, searching high above her head for the next handhold.

Below her, she heard Rau panting as he mirrored her actions.

She found the handhold, wrapped her fingers around it and prepared to move her other leg.

A tinkle, like the sound of glass falling, and the entire slope seemed to fall out from under her. She heard the crack before she felt the crystal give beneath her foot.

Riordan dug in her fingernails and held fast. Crystal shards rained down the mountain.

Several feet beneath her, Rau swore, realizing belatedly the flaw in his strategy of joining the two of them with rope.

And who's the better tactician now, My Prince?

Her foot scraped against sheer quartz, searching for any crevice deep enough to accommodate the toe of her boot. She found a shallow indentation, wedged her foot against it and swung for a more secure resting place with her other hand.

But crystal crumbled beneath her fingers, throwing off her balance. She hung even more precariously above the dizzily swirling ground.

Biting her lip, she extended her hand, grasping after a bolt of crystal strong enough to hold her weight while she searched for a more secure foothold.

Rau crept up the mountain behind her, carefully avoiding the unstable spots that had

nearly knocked Riordan from the mountain. He was gaining on her, out to her left, a few feet below her.

Not good. Riordan forced herself to quickened her pace. She couldn't have him racing ahead of her toward the Sword's tomb.

As if the Sword sought her out, the timbre of its vibration increased. Searching for her, confused as to why she insisted in moving in the other direction.

Perhaps I should have taken the path after all. Riordan dug her toe into another indentation and hoisted herself to the next rise. She cast a quick glance at the ground and instantly regretted it. Maybe I should have let Rau take his chances with the Sword.

Rau inched closer, practically neck and neck with her now. His eyes roved over the jagged quartz, searching for a shadowed indentation that could be the entrance. He looked back at her, eyes dark with suspicion, and Riordan knew she'd shortly have to dream up another tactic to keep him satisfied.

"How much further," he demanded between panting breaths.

"We're close, I'd imagine." Riordan hiked herself up another few inches.

"I'd have thought the entrance would be closer to the ground."

"It wasn't in the Shraal's interests to make it easy to find," she said with as much indignity as she could muster.

"And what game do you play now, Your Majesty?" His hand moved toward the hilt of his sword.

Oh no, this is it. Riordan searched her mind for a viable excuse.

A loud crack split the air. Instinctively, Riordan clutched the crystal wall, nails digging deep into crevices in the rock. The narrow outcrop Rau leaned on crumbled in a rain of crystal shards. Quartz fragments careened down the mountainside in a series of high-pitched notes. In a blur, she watched Rau tumble from his perch, felt the rope snap tight around her ankle. Rau's sword clattered forgotten to the rock below.

She hugged the sheer face of the mountain, anchoring her foot to the narrow ledge on which she stood, praying it wouldn't pick that moment to disintegrate. Rau's scream echoed off the many-planed crystal, fragmenting and reverberating back upon itself.

Yanked by the taut thong of leather, her foot was dragged closer to the edge. Mere inches stood between her and a downward plunge to the jagged teeth of crystal below. Recovering himself, Rau gripped the leather. Bracing his feet against the rock, he began to climb.

The timbre of the Sword's hum sharpened, grew louder. Despite her efforts, Rau's weight dragged her foot closer to the edge.

Now or never, the Sword seemed to sing to her.

Her toes slipped over the side. Riordan dug her nails in harder.

Pointing her foot, she let the downward drag of Rau's weight loosen her boot. The leather caught upon her heel.

Riordan strained her leg, curling her toes back toward her heel in an attempt to wiggle her foot from the boot. She glanced down. Oblivious to her strategy, Rau made steady progress toward her. She felt the heel of her boot give. Her foot slipped from the leather.

Rau glanced up just as the rope went slack.

For a moment he stared up at her incredulously. Swiftly his expression changed from anger to stark cold fear. Bare footed, Riordan scrambled for the next foothold, afraid to glance below and watch him fall.

He screamed, a sound full of rage and terror, abruptly silenced.

The sickly sound of flesh meeting hard rock reached her many feet above. Riordan fixed her gaze upon the natural pathway just above and far to the left of her.

There's nothing you can do, now. Don't look. Her mind repeated the mantra. You had no other choice. Above all, Rau must not get to the Sword.

Riordan forced herself not to look down and see his body impaled upon the spikes of crystal below. Her mind supplied the morbid details of Rau lying broken upon the rocks with a shard of stark white crystal protruding from his breast, his sapphire eyes closed forever, a thin line of blood trailing from his full lips.

Damn you, Rau. It would be just like you to haunt me from beyond the grave!

Intelligence insisted she clamber down and relieve Rau's corpse of the amber stake that held together the folds of his cloak. But the Sword's song pulled at her, urging her despite her reservations toward the opening in the mountain above her. Rau's dead body could keep, she decided. Vultures would not be interested in the amber.

The entire mountain seemed to hum with a single note. Vibration penetrated her fingertips, resonating down the length of her arms and down her spine. Low and urgently it called her.

Riordan moved slowly, painstakingly to her left. Safe handholds appeared at irregular intervals, throwing constant roadblocks into her course. Moving up and down, zig-zagging, she made her way to the opening.

The nearer she came to the entrance, the more it seemed to resemble a yawning mouth. Pink crystal ringed the opening like lips, the inside deepened to magenta and then again to darkness, like looking down a massive throat. Riordan had the impression that if she stepped inside she might be swallowed whole.

Panting with exertion, she stood finally on the pink tongue of the entrance and peered inside. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she began to notice the shadows of crystal

outcrops in the rough stone walls. Light seemed to radiate from the rock itself, luring her into its depths.

Beneath her bare foot, the floor was warm, smooth as glass. Standing on its surface, the vibration became one with her as if it radiated from her own core.

With one hand against the rough stone wall to guide her, Riordan moved slowly toward light and sound.

As in the dream, the tunnels led in a circuitous route toward the bowels of the mountain. Indeed, it seemed as though she moved through the intestines of some great beast, listening to the thrum of its digestion. Riordan thrust the image from her mind.

Crystal reflected her fragmented image back at her as if she moved through halls of pink-tinted mirrors. She kept moving, dragged forward by the Sword's summons and her own destiny.

I do wish you were here with me, Nhaille. As always, the Captain would know what to do.

But even if you were, when it came time to touch the Sword, I'd be on my own. Riordan quickened her pace. I'm on my own from now on. That knowledge shot a stark bolt of fear down her spine. Might as well get it over with.

The mountain sucked her deeper inside. She'd come too far down the twisting tunnels to even know which direction the entrance lay in. Light intensified, luring her further down the mountain's great gullet.

Running now, unable to slow the motion of her own feet, the Sword's hum was an unbearable pain that radiated from the center of her mind. In an eerie repetition of her dream, she bolted down the crystal corridor.

To find the end blocked by a wall of jagged crystal.

Turning, she raced back over her footsteps. Her bare foot stung from cuts sustained as she traversed the mountain face outside. Bloody footprints smeared as she ran over them, leaving others in her path.

Sound blinded her with its intensity. She raced on, realizing only when she bumped into a thatch of crystal how blinded her senses were to anything else. Shoving herself away, she whirled to find another shimmering tunnel to her right. It's length led downward. Riordan launched herself in that direction and ran.

The slope was steeper than the others. Her feet found no purchase on its smooth incline. Back-peddling furiously, Riordan managed to keep her feet beneath her.

The corridor vomited her into a large chamber. She crashed to her knees as the floor abruptly leveled out. Riordan picked herself up slowly and looked around.

A high-vaulted roof, hewn from the pale pink crystal of the mountain stretched far above

her. Its walls had been carved smooth. Shraal writing covered every surface, the floor, the walls of the egg-shaped chamber. Symbols shimmered before her eyes, taking shape in her mind, resonating with deep genetic memory.

Warnings, she realized suddenly. The history of the Sword and the Amber, of the great wars of Bayorek, all written in the regimented verse with which the Shraal transcribed their formal writings. But the Sword's call overruled the warnings engraved in the walls, drawing her gaze in a blinding flash to the center of the chamber.

Shielding her eyes, Riordan gazed at the object in the center of the blaze. She'd never seen a picture of the Sword. There were no drawings of it in Nhaille's history book.

The elegance of its simplicity surprised her. She expected something ostentatious, like Rau's heavily jeweled sword. But the Sword of Zal-Azaar was deceptively slender, built to accommodate the smaller stature of the Shraal race.

Her feet glided over the floor, drawing her closer. The blinding light brought tears to her eyes. Riordan reached her hand into the blaze. Despite the fire in its light, the Sword's hilt was cold to the touch. Riordan snatched her hand back.

Rather than being fashioned of cold steel, the Sword was crafted from the mountain's own stone. Refined, made harder, stronger.

So that's what binds it here. That's why the Shraal returned it to the mountains.

As her eyes adjusted to the brilliance, Riordan made out the silver outline of Shraal runes running down the length of the transparent blade. The silver at its center bled out to colorless edges. Ablaze with its own inner light, she found it difficult to tell where the Sword ended and the fire began.

Delicately carved scroll work formed its transparent hilt. Slender, like the rest of it, it had been fashioned for a smaller hand.

Mine.

Riordan sighted down the length of the blade to where its tip disappeared into a colorless block that seamlessly flowed into a pedestal carved from the mountain's core. And suddenly, she could imagine how their Shraal ancestors might have discovered the Amber on a mining expedition. After engineering their own demise, they returned the Sword and the Amber to the mountains that had given them birth, not knowing what else to do with them.

And here I am like a fool, preparing to loose the Sword upon the world once again. Simply because I don't know what else to do.

Because I have no other choice.

Even as Rau tumbled toward the jagged crystal at the mountains' base, the army of the dead was marching toward Kholer and Golar. With each step, others were added to the ranks.

I can't change the dire fate that befell my family, I can only stand in Hael's path. Stand I will. Kanarek will be avenged!

The rhythm of the Sword's call quickened, until she could hear nothing beyond its insistent summons. Sound pulsed through her mind, until she could see its pink urgency, taste its acrid desire. Commanded, she drew toward it, despite her fear.

I've come this far. Gods, Nhaille, I wish you were with me, now!

Closing her eyes, Riordan plunged her hand back into the blaze and reached for the Sword.

Her fingers met cool, smooth crystal. She forced herself to endure the unpleasant coldness. Her hand closed around the hilt.

Cold spread up her fingers through her arm, dissipating only where it met the muscle of her shoulder. She gasped, would have yanked back her hand again, but her fingers refused to open. The Sword melded to the shape of her hand as if it had been fashioned for her alone.

Icy tingles raced up her veins, as if she'd been jolted by a bolt of lightning. And then, in the core of her being, she felt its presence, pressing against her will, her thoughts.

Breath caught like a cold steam in her throat. Sensation billowed up inside, suffocating all other thought. Her body rebelled. From far away, she heard her own screams echo off the high-vaulted ceiling of the chamber.

Alien thoughts formed in her mind. Vivid images tumbled upon each other. As though looking down the long tunnel of history, she could see the proud crystal towers the Shraal had erected. Throngs of silver-haired people poured down the broad avenues. In their pastel robes, they shimmered in a moving rainbow. Monuments decorated every square. Runes like the ones running along the Sword's blade covered the sides of every tower.

The Shraal were truly great, Riordan thought.

Yes, we were, the Sword whispered in her brain. Softly, seductively it spoke to her, until she was unsure whether the thoughts were the Sword's or her own. Great we will be again.

Free me.

Riordan tightened her grip on the Sword's hilt.

* * *

The sun's light fractured, showering the peaks in a rainbow of color. Myriad prisms played out over the mountain range in pastel gradations.

Sunrise. He'd hoped to reach the foothills long before. Nhaille squinted into the sudden light as the sun rose above the mountains. Light spilled down the slopes, coming to rest

on something equally brilliant wedged among the shards at the foot of the hills. He tethered the horses to a nearby outcrop. Riderless Strayhorn had been ill-tempered since Riordan's kidnapping. Even now he stamped his feet in irritation. Stormback snorted nervously.

Wind whistled through the rocks above, a high and tinny whine. Unpleasant. The entire place rose the hairs on the back of his neck. He scanned the jagged boulders, any of which could be hiding an ambush.

Sunlight flashed upon a glittering thing among the rocks. Nhaille drew his sword.

Jewels, any of which would be fine enough for a king, were set into the gold and silver hilt. The captain seized the sword and jumped back, awaiting his unseen attacker.

But nothing broke the stillness, save for the high-pitched whine of the wind.

He hefted the blade in his hand. Rau's sword. No doubt of that. He recognized its ostentatious, over-jeweled hilt. Rau's weapon had all the subtlety of its owner. And then some, he thought gazing down at the abundant rubies and sapphires.

And if Rau's sword lay abandoned in the mountain's rubble, what then? He couldn't imagine the Prince parted from his weapon, not if he was still alive. He examined the rocks closely. No flecks of blood dotted their blinding crystal planes. No footsteps marked the dust between boulders.

His eyes rose to scan the magenta mountains.

Where are you, Riordan?

Dare he hope she'd somehow got the better of the Haelian snake. In gruesome detail, he pictured their fight on the peaks of the mountains. Unable to stem the flow of images, he saw Riordan clinging for her life to the side of the mountain. Above her Rau raised his sword. Nhaille reined in his imagination and grimaced. Surely The Queen had more sense...

Yet it was Rau's weapon lying among the rocks, not Riordan's body. Somehow, she'd emerged victorious. At least for a time. And if no bodies lay among the rubble at the mountains' feet, then that could only mean she'd found the gateway to the Sword's chamber.

If no bodies lay broken on the rocks, that could only mean Rau had gone after her. Or that Rau was with her. Cursing the age that stiffened muscle despite the meticulous shape he kept himself in, Nhaille began to climb.

* * *

Stone scraped against stone. With a hiss, the Sword sprang free of its prison. Its blinding fire slowly dimmed, until Riordan stood alone in the crystal chamber, the only illumination coming from the bowels of the mountain itself.

The fog in her mind dissipated. She became aware gradually that her thoughts were once again her own. Riordan sagged against the stone wall and beheld the weapon in her hand.

Cautiously, she tested its weight, its balance. Much lighter than she had anticipated, it didn't look like Hael's nemesis. Instinctively, she knew it was crafted from the strongest, most primeval material of the mountain's core.

The Sword responded like an extension of her own hand. Its graceful arcs much improved the technique Nhaille had taught her. She suspected it would cut through flesh and bone as easily as it clove the air.

Time enough to practice on the long journey back. Becoming suddenly aware of her surroundings, she was gripped by the pressing desire to be gone from the Sword's tomb. But she couldn't just carry it back across the desert in her bare hands.

Riordan looked down at her empty scabbard. With a sigh, she slid the Sword of Zal-Azaar into the carved metal. And still she couldn't loosen her fingers from its hilt.

Metal rippled. She watched in awed horror as it reformed to the Sword's own contours then released her fingers from its hilt.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and prepared to face the long walk back across the desert. Freeing the Sword exhausted her. Yet even hidden safely in her scabbard, she could feel its eagerness.

A shadow fell across her path. The scrape of metal against stone sent her whirling to face the figure that darkened the threshold.

"I think that's far enough, Your Majesty."

Riordan looked up to find Rau filling the doorway.

Alive. She stared down this new impossibility.

Blood streaked his face, running in drying ruddy patches down his neck and the right side of his body. In the chamber's subdued light, his eyes gleamed like coals.

In his hand he held her own sword.

"And now, Your Majesty, you will give me the Sword of Zal-Azaar."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Give it to you?" Riordan's hand closed protectively about the Sword's hilt. "Not likely."

She backed away from the entrance, baiting Rau to move toward her. As if of its own volition, the Sword slid an inch from her scabbard. Bloodlust flooded her veins. In a distant cavity of her mind, she could hear her own better judgment clamoring for attention. But it was as if the Sword wrapped the fist of its will around her mind and squeezed. She wanted Rau's blood. She wanted Rau's soul.

"You think you're a match for the Sword of Zal-Azaar?" Her voice sounded strange, even to her own ears. Confident, more mature. "Come then, Doan-Rau. Throw your life upon the Sword, like so many before you."

Rau's brow creased. He took a hesitant step toward her. "The Sword is meant for me. To complete the final step in my great plan."

"You expect me to make a gift of it?" Her voice fell to an incredulous whisper. The Sword slid another inch from her scabbard.

"Join me, Riordan. Can't you see that mine is a superior vision?" Words, sincerely spoken, devoid of malice. "Think of it. The entire coast united under one flag. Prosperous ports, proud cities, wealth beyond your wildest dreams."

Those softly spoken words terrified her more than anything else. Rau left nothing proud nor prosperous in his wake. Only death and destruction. "There is nothing in your...vision beyond pain and suffering!" Fear fed her anger, putting into words something she'd suspected for some time. "And for what? What did my family die for, Rau? For your shallow glory? So you can win your father's throne?"

Her comment hit its mark as surely as a stroke of her sword. He absorbed the blow with a wince. The grimace deepened, spread. His face folded in on itself, contorting in the anger that swiftly followed. Rage darkened his skin to crimson. Sapphire eyes were the only feature recognizable in that twisted expression. His fist snatched at thin air, tightening as if around her throat. With difficulty, the Prince brought his temper back under control.

"Have you not the slightest vestige of imagination? We would be greater than the Shraal themselves. All this," he waved his arm in a grand arc, "is but a temporary step, minor discomforts to be borne for the better good."

"The better good!" Riordan shrieked back at him. Her hand tighten on the Sword's hilt, freeing it further still. "No good can come from any of this. You razed my entire kingdom. In death, my family, my subjects prowl the countryside, deprived of even the dignity of their graves."

Kill him, the Sword's essence whispered in her brain. Kill him and be done with it.

Vividly, she pictured herself doing just that. She flexed her hand to draw the Sword.

Rau noted the tiny movement in her hand, read the denial in her stance. He inched toward her, and with each footstep his wrath grew. "What a fool I've been! I offered you a place at my side, a place of honor in my great kingdom. But you would rather throw my goodwill to the wind. You'll live to regret your decision, Your Majesty."

Craggy quartz pressed into her back. No route of escape, except past the madman before her. A roar of utter fury erupted from Rau's mouth. He lunged.

Footwork being her strength, Riordan neatly sidestepped the arc of his swing. Razor-sharp metal clove rough crystal instead of her throat.

"Your great kingdom. I liked my kingdom as it was! It's you who lack vision, Rau. Peace and prosperity are not concepts in your philosophy."

Again she regretted her losing her sword to him on the night of Nhaille's ill-gotten ambush. Rau's possession of her sword reduced her options to slitting his throat with the Sword of Zal-Azaar, or dying by her own blade in a madman's hands. She should have climbed down after him when he'd fallen. But never had she expected a dead man to scale a mountain. Or to raid his pack for her lost sword. She evaded another swing meant to decapitate her.

Rau tensed, preparing to swipe at her again. A crystal tone rang through the chamber. The Sword, pleading for its freedom. Its will battered her defenses, until the lust for his blood churned in her veins.

Don't make me do this, Rau. But her silent prayer went unanswered. In a silver streak his sword descended upon her.

With a single undulating note, the Sword of Zal-Azaar sailed free of its scabbard. In the subdued light the thin blade of crystal seemed to hover between them.

A challenge.

Smooth crystal vibrated beneath her hand, sending tiny tremors up her arm and down her spine. Coldness pressed against her flesh as the icy fingers of its will caressed mind and soul.

Rau's lifeforce glowed like a beacon in the center of the room. The Sword hungered for it, demanded its hunger be appeased. Beneath the Sword's iron will, her own was flattened.

With grace far beyond her own, Riordan swung the Sword into position. Rau's blade crashed against it, hard enough, it seemed, to shatter the delicate blade. But the Sword of Zal-Azaar effortlessly absorbed his offensive. Like other Shraal wonders, the Sword was deceptive in its strength.

Lost now to all but the Sword's insistent demand for Rau's blood, Riordan launched herself off the wall, lunging for Rau's heart.

He parried and returned with a killing blow of his own. The Sword deflected it easily, intent on skewering the Prince to the glass wall. Desire shot through her veins. Pure, hot rage. Disoriented, Riordan drowned in it.

She flung herself at Rau. One look at her face and his eyes widened. He took an involuntary step backward. Riordan sent the Sword crashing down upon him.

Metal collided with crystal. Rau brought his sword between them in a last-ditch parry. The blow reverberated up her arm.

She lunged, striking low, desperate to get past his guard and grant the Sword the blood it craved. Superior swordsmanship saved him. The Prince retaliated. The Sword deflected the tip inches from her heart. Forgoing all pretense at dueling etiquette, Riordan swiped at him again. Lust, terrifying in its intensity rippled through her, commanding her to tear past the insubstantial barrier of Rau's flesh and devour his soul.

And then what? Would it be like the dream? Would a tiny piece of Rau live forever lodged in her soul? Gods, Nhaille, where are you when I desperately need answers?

Riordan bore down on him. His back collided with the wall. Gripping the Sword with both hands, she swung. Crystal shattered as the Sword crashed into the space Rau's head had occupied. Strengthened and refined by lost Shraal technology, the Sword was far stronger than the stone that birthed it.

Rau whirled out of the Sword's reach, glory forgotten, intent only on saving his soul.

Rage, as thick and black as tar, poured into her mind, blanketing all other thoughts. Riordan fled after him. Rau bolted for the door. Riordan blocked his escape.

"Don't do it, Riordan."

The unexpected voice broke Rau's concentration. Riordan closed in for the kill.

To find her path blocked by Nhaille's Sword.

The Sword's fury seared through her mind.

"Stand aside, Captain." Her voice sounded flat, hollow. The Sword's words, not her own. Inside her, the Sword raged against the denial of Rau's soul. She turned toward Nhaille to remove this new obstacle against the Sword's will.

From the corner of her eye, a black shadow moved. Before she could cry out, Nhaille's sword lodged against Rau's throat. "Not so fast, Haelian swine."

Denied its chosen prey, the Sword's utter fury intensified, until she was conscious of nothing else. Not her joy at Nhaille's return. Not her fear, nothing but the lust for Rau's soul. "Get out of the way, Nhaille," she repeated in that same inflectionless voice. "He's mine."

"No."

"I'm flattered, but surely you could share the honor," Rau said dryly.

"The blood price is mine," Riordan snarled. "More is at stake here than honor."

"Exactly, which is why you mustn't kill him."

"I am the Queen. I'll decide who will die." Rage soared within her. Her sword hand quivered. Its tip wavered toward Nhaille, intent on taking any life it could if Rau's was denied.

What am I doing? Her mind cried out in horror. She wrenched her muscles against the Sword's will, succeeding only in moving the blade a fraction of an inch. Nhaille is my dearest friend. I'd give my life for him.

The corners of Nhaille's mouth tightened. She read the fear in his face, but he held his ground.

"You can't, Riordan. It's too soon." He cast a furtive glance at Rau. "You've not been prepared. If you allow the Sword to take his life, you could lose yourself. The Sword would possess you totally."

Is that what she'd experienced in the vision? Would that horrible feeling of possession and violation be her fate if she took Rau's life?

Rau snorted in disbelief. "You Kanarekii are truly a pathetic lot. It will be no loss if your strain dies out."

Fury undoing her, Riordan sprang.

"No!" Nhaille leapt between them. He parried the Sword, preventing Riordan impaling Rau on the crystal blade. His next swing deflected Rau's blade aimed for Riordan's throat.

Nhaille's interference only served to drive her anger to untapped heights. She swung, at Rau and met the resistance of Nhaille's sword. He swore, the only evidence the vicious blow hurt him.

No! This isn't right. But she found she wanted Nhaille's blood with a passion that shook her to her very core. And Rau wanted the Sword with a passion that matched hers. He cut low, trying to get around the Captain's defenses.

Nhaille returned the blow. Swords met, hilt to hilt. Panting with exertion, the two men glared at each other over their blades.

Riordan lunged between them, knocking their swords apart with one sure stroke of the crystal blade. They sprang away like startled cats, en garde against each other and the crazed demon with the Sword.

Facing them both, its tip wavered with indecision.

"Riordan, listen to me. You can't do this!"

She turned slowly toward Nhaille's voice. The Sword fastened its attention on his soul.

Yes! the Sword screamed within her mind. Having been denied, it was anxious for anyone's blood. With a cold pang of fear, she suspected even hers would suffice.

Against the smooth crystal floor, her bare foot shot forward. Gods, no. Anything but this. It can't end this way after all Nhaille and I have sacrificed. But her feet had developed a will of their own, as had her sword arm that even now was flexing to drive the Sword of Zal-Azaar's point through Nhaille's chest.

Rau laughed maniacally. "Oh yes! Kill him, Riordan! What an ending it'll make to the Ballad of Kanarek. The valiant Captain struck down by his own Queen." He chuckled again at his own cleverness. "I couldn't ask for better had I done the job myself."

Riordan froze, the slender blade poised just inches before Nhaille's chest. There has to be a way to master it, to impose my desire upon the Sword and use it's unholy desires for my own purposes.

"Don't hesitate, Your Majesty," Rau taunted. "Kill him. And join me. Together we will rule the coast!"

"No!" Her shout of defiance shook the chamber.

She whirled, throwing herself at Rau. Too late, he floundered for his sword. With one swipe of the crystal blade, she knocked it from his hand. It clattered to the floor inches beyond reach.

The Sword roared through her mind, deafening her to reason, to Nhaille's desperate shouts. She slammed her knee into Rau's stomach. He doubled up. She slid the Sword under his chin.

Rau froze. He glared at her over the crystal Sword, sucking in a painful breath. "Well, Your Majesty, it would seem you've found your courage."

"And what would you know about courage, Haelian coward?"

His jaw tightened. He moved to thrust her away from him. But with the Sword's heightened senses, she saw through that maneuver. Riordan flung herself against him, leaning on Rau with all her strength. A trickle of fresh blood ran down the side of his neck and into his collar.

"And how do you like the feel of a sword at your neck, Rau? Are you enjoying this as much as I am? You see that's the problem with your strategy. If you win only by subjugation and terror, there are too many people who'd be willing to drive a sword through your back."

"Fine for you to criticize," he shot back. "It wasn't me who sat idly by while others snatched my kingdom right out from under me."

Riordan drove the Sword's blade harder against his neck. Rau gasped.

"And you still don't have the courage to finish it, do you, Riordan?" He spoke her name

softly, like a plea.

In her mind, the Sword shrieked to be appeased. She glared into his eyes.

"How little you know me, Rau," Riordan said.

And leaned on the Sword for the killing stroke.

The blow came from nowhere. Knocked wide, she saw the silver streak of the Sword flying over her head to crash with a ringing note to the stone floor. Breath squeezed from her lungs. She felt the weight of Nhaille's body pressed along the length of hers.

Suddenly there was a roaring silence in her mind where the Sword's insistent shouts had been, and she was conscious only of Nhaille pinning her to the ground. For a moment they lay that way. Her hands gripped his arms, unsure whether she wanted to pull him closer or push him away. Embarrassed, he scrambled off her.

Rau recovered first and dove after the Sword of Zal-Azaar.

Nhaille's sword slammed against his chest. "Don't move, Your Highness. Rest assured, it will not bother my soul to kill you."

The Prince's eyes shifted from Riordan huddled against the wall then back to the Sword of Zal-Azaar.

"Don't even think of going for the Sword," Nhaille said quietly.

Their attention distracted, Riordan scrambled after the Sword.

"No, Riordan, don't touch it!" Nhaille's attention wavered, torn between restraining Rau and preventing her from snatching up the Sword.

Rau seized the opportunity. Shoving Nhaille away from him, he bolted for the entrance. Caught off balance, the Captain swung his sword, narrowly missing Rau as he fled across the threshold. Riordan's fingers closed upon the Sword.

Rau's footsteps echoed down the corridor into silence.

Riordan glanced up at Nhaille towering above her.

"Put it down, Riordan," he said, as she climbed dazedly to her feet.

Riordan felt the first tendrils of the Sword's will wrap around her mind. With a cry she shoved it into her scabbard and sagged against the wall.

Sheathed, the Sword's influence dissipated slowly. She dragged in a breath of air and tried to clear the fog from her mind.

Nhaille glanced regretfully in Rau's direction. Frustration, followed quickly by anger crossed his face. Picking up her lost sword he tossed it back to her. "Do not be so taken with the Sword that you forget the basics of combat."

The Sword's presence in her mind subsided, leaving behind the realization of what she'd nearly done.

A deep sob, wedged inside her since they'd left Kanarek, burst free. She attempted to choke it back and failed.

Cautiously, Nhaille crossed the distance between them. Satisfied she wasn't going to draw the Sword and run it through his heart, he drew her into his arms. She looked up at him, read the deep lines of concern on his face.

"Gods, Nhaille, it was in my mind."

He scrutinized her face, making sure she was in control of herself again. Finally, he sighed in relief. "I know."

"I couldn't think. It made me do..." she glanced at him, then quickly away, "things I didn't want to do."

Nhaille's arms tightened around her. "I know, Riordan. I know."

"I almost killed you."

Saying the words released the tremors locked inside. Shaking uncontrollably, she clung to the only sane reality in the whole situation.

"It's all right."

"Nothing's all right, Nhaille. I can still feel its touch upon my mind, and Rau--"

"He got away."

She scrambled to her feet. "We can't let him get away, he's too dangerous."

"We have the Sword, Riordan. We will deal with Doan-Rau, later."

"But he'll just be lying in wait for us. We'll never be safe from ambush."

"I don't think so. Rau has an army to command. Having lost this attempt at the Sword, he'll likely make haste for Kholer and try to strengthen his position on the coast before we catch up to him."

"And how are we going to stop him? Sure we have the Sword, but by the time we make it to the coast, Rau may already have conquered it."

Nhaille looked nervously around, as if Rau might have his ears to the very walls.

"Come, Your Majesty. We can't stay here. It's far too dangerous. We need to put some distance between us and the mountains. And then," he uttered a weary sigh. "There are many, many things I must teach you."

* * *

Wind played the crystal peaks like a series of pipes. High thin notes fell upon each other forming a disturbing melody. Nhaille would have liked to have traveled farther before the sun set, but Riordan looked as if she'd tumble from the saddle if they went but another foot. Sitting stone still on her horse, her pale hair unbound and tumbling over her shoulders, the Sword of Zal-Azaar slung across her hips, she looked like a Shraal

painting straight out of the history books.

And when she glanced at him, he noted an emptiness in her gray eyes that hadn't been there before. Worries crowded together in his mind. Would bearing the Sword be the thing that unhinged her completely, or would it change her irrevocably until he didn't recognize the haunted woman riding beside him. He longed to reach across the brink between them, touch her, to take her into his arms like he had when she was a child. But the eyes that stared unblinkingly back at him were most definitely not the eyes of a child. The eyes of a Shraal, he thought and shuddered. After she'd nearly driven the Sword straight through his heart, the thought of being in close quarters with her gave him pause.

She hadn't uttered a word of what had happened between her and Rau. Had he made good on his threat to defile her body as well as her soul? Traitorous thoughts of her body pressed against his in the Sword's chamber sprung unbidden to his mind. She is your Queen, his conscience warned him. Nhaille forced his attention to the safer topic of war.

* * *

The wind's incessant whine sliced through morbid thoughts. Ever since the Sword had touched her mind, Riordan felt the cold vacuum of the space it had occupied in her mind. Sheathing the Sword only quieted its voice, but never quite silenced it.

She hadn't expected to come this far. First she'd doubted the prophecy, then she'd doubted they would make it to Zal-Azaar alive. And now the fabled blade was strapped across her hips, she doubted her own ability to wield it.

Vividly, she envisioned a multitude of victim's voices, all shouting for prominence in her mind. Would it be like that? Would she spend the rest of her life haunted by their souls?

A sudden desperate need for human contact stirred inside her. She craved warmth, touch, anything that would fill the cold void the Sword had left inside. Riordan glanced over at Nhaille and debated how to ask.

But Nhaille had been decidedly quiet on the ride away from Zal-Azaar. She caught his sideways looks of concern, but he remained silent, immersed in his own dark thoughts. He feared her, she realized with a pang of regret.

Well, what was I expecting? I nearly skewered him to the wall. Sorry somehow didn't seem sufficient.

Still, he'd held her in the chamber, even after the episode with the Sword. As if he wanted to comfort her but was unsure how to proceed. Acknowledging those feelings shook loose an avalanche of risky thoughts.

Riordan stared into the mug of steamy tea.

"Now that I have the Sword, I'm going to have to do the rest of it, aren't I?" Carried aloft by the wind, her words drifted across their campsite to where Nhaille tended the horses.

His head came up sharply. "Regretfully, I believe you will."

"At first I was afraid of failing," she said. "But if I succeed, what then? I have no idea how to do what the prophecy says I will." Riordan struggled to find the right words to express this nameless fear. "I'd have to rebuild a kingdom take a husband, beget heirs..."

Nhaille stilled, regarding her shrewdly over Strayhorn's back. "You would have nothing to fear from a husband," he said at last.

"I may die before I have the chance to take one." The words hung between them, her meaning plain. Nhaille looked away.

"Riordan, I assure you--"

"Kayr, I don't want to die without knowing what it is to love."

Never in nineteen years had she called him by his given name. She knew it had been even longer since anyone had.

Nhaille swallowed uncomfortably. She watched longing battle with duty before he gained control of his expression. "Riordan, there isn't anything I can do to help you."

"There is."

"That would be treason," he said and went on to rub down Stormback.

"Treason! Who would prosecute you? I decide what is treason. And I wish you'd stop calling me Your Majesty."

He looked at her painfully. "It is your title, Ma'am."

"Fine," she snapped. Another thought occurred to her. "If I were to order you, would you obey me, Nhaille?"

He stared at her, mouth open in shock. "Do not play games with me," he snarled and stalked off.

Tears of embarrassment burned in her eyes. She had needed him so desperately, it never occurred to her he might refuse. Out of duty, or lack of desire, it didn't really matter.

So much for my heavy handed attempt at seduction.

Riordan stared off into the darkness, resigned to enduring more embarrassment to mend matters. With a sigh, she started off in the direction he'd taken.

She found him perched atop a low ledge, staring at the heavens.

"I'm sorry. What I said was unkind."

He nodded curtly.

"It's just that I'm afraid I'm going to die before I have a chance to experience some of the kinder things life has to offer."

"It was unfair," he said, quietly, "to send you away the way he did. I told him that."

"And you? Were there not other things that you wanted for yourself?"

"I am only human," he said simply. For the first time she wondered who Nhaille had been before the prophecy and what he had wanted for himself.

"Yet you obeyed my father's wishes."

"He was my king, and I his most trusted friend."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Nhaille--"

He pulled away gently. "I have thought of you as a daughter. It wouldn't be right."

"But I want it to be you."

"Your Majesty," he used her title to put distance between them. "You don't know anyone else."

"I may not live to know anyone else."

"You mustn't believe that. According to the prophecy, you will have a very long life."

"Prophecy be damned," she said.

He looked at her helplessly. "Riordan, I can't do this."

"Then you abandon me, just like my father," she said, and returned to the cold fire.

"I am old enough to be your father," he called after her. "Think about that, Your Majesty."

Love, she decided hugging her wounded pride close, was a great deal more complicated than war.

In her mind she could still feel the Sword's cold kiss. The wind that had been a mere annoyance now chilled to the bone. Nhaille returned to the horses, putting the physical distance between them that he had not attained with words.

Riordan hunkered down against a large boulder of quartz that did little to cut the wind. Just as she was certain her feet and hands had turned to blocks of ice and there was no other alternative but to raid their packs for a blanket, she heard the whisper of his boots against quartz. A blessed warmth covered her shoulders.

Nhaille pulled the coarse blanket around them and pulled her against him. But his closeness only twisted the cruel blade of embarrassment inside.

"Am I so undesirable?" The question escaped her lips before she could call it back.

Regret flashed across his face, tangling with unmasked desire. "No, Riordan, you must never think that."

"Then what is it?"

"It would be...improper. I took an oath."

"Nhaille--" She was afraid to call him by his first name again, to be the cause of that strange look of pain. "My father is dead. Of the Khun-Caryn line there is only me left. And I want it to be you."

He dragged in a breath. "Riordan, I--"

"In all this time," she asked gently, "have you never thought of it?"

"Of course I have. I lost my heart to you long ago. But what you're asking..."

"You misunderstood." Why was it so hard to find the words to express this new feeling?

"It isn't because you're the only man I know, it's because I care. And..."

He gazed down at her, his eyes glittering against the dark sky. "And?"

"I want to know what it's like to be a woman." She paused, then blurted, "Before I have to become something else in order to wield the Sword." There, she'd said it. Uttered aloud it still made no sense.

But Nhaille caught her meaning and nodded grimly.

"I can still feel the Sword in my mind. And Rau--"

His expression darkened to murderous. "Rau what?"

"He touched me." Her hand flew to her breast. "And it felt awful, but I kept thinking that with you it would feel nice."

Nhaille swore under his breath. "I will kill him for that."

Her arms tightened around him. "Help me forget it all, Nhaille. Rau, Kanarek, the Sword. Just for a little while."

Damned if she'd beg and risk rejection again.

He read the plea in her words and let go his breath in a rush. "It's not that simple, Riordan. What if we were to create a child?"

"It isn't my time." She tilted her head to face him, and in doing so, her lips brushed his.

"You told me about that, remember? You were embarrassed."

"I was."

"Are you embarrassed now?"

"No," he said quietly. His lips moved against hers. She felt his resolve weaken.

"Kayr, I wouldn't ask again--"

"No, Riordan, don't ask. In the name of the Seven Heavens stop talking."

As if to stem the tide of words, he kissed her. Not chastely the way his lips had always brushed her forehead, but a deep probing kiss that warmed the coldness inside.

"Forgive me Arais," he said, uttering a prayer to her dead father.

His fervent whisper trailed off into silence as he loosened the straps of her armor. She felt the warmth of his hand between shirt and leather as he traced the swell of her breast. He cast one last urgent glance around them.

"This is dangerous. We can't be caught in the open like this."

"My whole life has been dangerous. It has ceased to matter."

She fumbled with the laces of his vest. Spreading his shirt, she buried her face in the soft hair that covered his chest. Then, continuing her exploration, her fingers located the laces of his breeches.

His hands found the tender buds of her breasts, followed quickly by the hot pull of his mouth.

A torrent of unfamiliar sensation poured through her. Wholesome, natural, unlike the cold probing tendrils of the Sword. She arched against him, toward warmth and the refuge he offered her.

Calloused hands drifted lower, caressing her buttocks as he slid the leather over her hips. She gasped aloud as his questing fingers located the tender spot between her thighs.

Gently he maneuvered her until she felt him pressed against her moist opening. For a moment she was afraid and almost called out to him to stop.

No, she thought desperately. This one act of love I will claim for myself. Riordan pressed herself against him.

The brief pain was less than she anticipated. Letting her eyes drift shut, she followed his gentle movements.

Sensation rippled through her. She gripped his shoulders.

Yes, this one thing will be mine. Before I have to do the rest of it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Prisms of sunlight danced before his eyes. With a curse, Nhaille scrambled to his feet.

The sun had already climbed high into the sky. He looked about him urgently. All seemed in order. Oblivious to the lengthening day, Riordan still slept, breathing softly. Nestled against her, the Sword caught the sunlight and reflected it in rainbows on the rock around him. An efficient beacon for their many enemies.

The Sword had spent the night pressed between them like a lover. Its intimate proximity made him shudder in revulsion. For a moment he hated what it was, what it would do to Riordan. Rage seized him and he wanted to smash it against a rock.

Riordan stirred in her sleep, burrowing deeper into the blanket. Likely the first good sleep she'd had in days, he thought, envying her abandon. Then the full weight of his actions settled upon him.

Gods, Arais! What have I done? All the promises, the vows swept away in one thoughtless moment. Her chastity, her virginity, he'd claimed for himself when he'd solemnly sworn to protect her.

He was not some sixteen year-old soldier on leave, ripe to be persuaded by the first pretty face. He should never have allowed her to talk him into such a thing. He should never have weakened to his own selfishness. Whether or not they were victorious, nothing good could come of this new arrangement.

Her frank and honest desperation touched him, mingling with his concern for her. For days, he'd tracked Rau's footprints, afraid to the depths of his soul he'd lost her. Terrified that when he burst into the chamber it would be Doan-Rau who wielded the Sword and Riordan dead. Relief weakened his resolve.

And so he'd given her the only comfort he had to offer.

What a lie that is, his conscience countered mercilessly. Is that what you'd tell her father? Truth is you desired her. You took advantage of her fear, her willingness. And after you'd sworn to protect her. You're a disgrace to your dead King's faith in you.

Unaware of his torment, Riordan murmured in her sleep and turned over.

He reached out and gently shook her shoulder, careful not to touch the Sword. Its power worked in devious ways. It had corrupted him. Blame not the Sword. The deed was yours. His conscience would not even allow that small lie.

Nhaille shook her harder. "Come Riordan, you must get up. We've overslept."

She sprang awake, much as he had, searching instantly for the danger sure to be creeping up on them while they slept in broad daylight. Then her gaze softened and she looked up at him.

"Nhaille--"

There was a tenderness in her smile that hadn't been there before, betraying the intimacy they'd shared.

She had a knowledge of him he'd never meant to reveal. He swallowed another pang of shame. Never again he'd vowed. But Riordan conjured feelings long buried. Things he'd not thought of since...

Nhaille slammed the door on his thoughts.

"We must hurry." The words came out more sharply than he intended. "We've lost valuable time."

Bewilderment registered in her eyes, followed swiftly by hurt. He loathed himself for causing it. But what had taken place between them must not be allowed to happen again.

"What is it, Nhaille?" She reached for him, refusing to be so easily discouraged. "Are you troubled by what happened last--"

With a warrior's skill he evaded her. "Riordan, the day will not wait for us."

Walls came up around her thoughts. Hurt showed plainly on her face, but she absorbed the verbal blow with no more than a blink. Without another word, she rolled up her blanket, gathered up the Sword and strode toward Strayhorn.

With a temper like hers, he should have suspected she'd be as passionate as she was beautiful. A brief memory of her sweaty body pressed against his, her hands tangled in his hair, flitted agonizingly through his mind. With a cry, he choked it back.

And fled like a coward toward the horses after her.

He felt her eyes boring into his back as they rode out. As he feared, her silence was fleeting.

"You're angry with me."

"No," he said in a tone that discouraged further discussion. I'm furious with myself. But Riordan, once she seized upon an idea, would not be dissuaded.

She was silent a moment, and he could almost hear the gears of her mind turning. "If I'm not to your taste, you should just say, I would understand. It's not as though I'm expecting a proposal of marriage. I'll likely be dead within the month, anyway."

"Gods, Riordan! It's not that. Have done with it. Please!"

"Is there someone else?"

The question nearly stopped his heart. Was she hell bent on torturing him? He reined in between two cauliflower bunches of crystal. "There's no one else. Hasn't been for nineteen years."

"What is it then?" She looked him full in the face. Tears gathered in her eyes. "I

thought--I thought that you found it as pleasurable as I did."

Pleasurable? Indeed, it had been wonderful. But to tell her that would only lead him down the path to further oath breaking. Not to mention the eventual breaking of her heart. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, to appease her and set the conversation onto a more comfortable track. But the only words that crossed his lips were a hoarse plea. "Riordan, I beg you!"

The desperation in his voice got through to her when nothing else had. She shut her mouth and fell silent.

* * *

What in Al-Gomar, the deepest hell, could it be now?

Riordan shook off the seductive vestiges of sleep. The sudden of abundance of rest left her sluggish, dull-witted. Obviously things were not as they were last night. She had no idea what had changed.

Clearly Nhaille's conscience still troubled him. Why, she couldn't fathom. In a few short weeks they could both be dead and it would cease to matter. His promises to her father, her chastity, would be so many ashes. Just like Kanarek.

Was it regret? Did he wish their relationship, now consummated, undone, banished?

Riordan brought her brows together in a deep frown. By his utter abandonment to their passion, she'd assumed the pleasure they'd shared was mutual. But when it came to ways of men, she had to admit she was hopelessly ignorant. Nhaille was the only specimen she'd had the opportunity to examine up close. Even after nineteen years, the turnings of his mind mystified her.

Why, if he'd enjoyed what they'd done together, was he acting as if he was on the way to his own funeral?

Perhaps, she thought with a sudden pang of embarrassment, he'd merely participated out of kindness, obliging her desperate wish. Maybe he felt nothing for her beyond his oath to her father.

Shame brought another stinging wave of tears to her eyes. Had Nhaille bedded her only out of mercy? Could a man feign such passion?

I lost my heart to you long ago. His enigmatic words echoed in her mind. Damned if she could figure him out.

Even in the dirtiest duel, simple rules could be followed. Stab your enemy more times than he could wound you, and the victory was yours. In love, the rites were not so clear cut.

Should I be declaring victory or defeat? Her thoughts wandered after him as Nhaille put the spurs to Stormback and rode past her. Strayhorn followed automatically.

The brief respite from war was over. Her last wish had been granted.

With a deep sigh, Riordan gripped the Sword's crystal hilt. Well, that's one regret you won't be able to use against me, she told it silently and was relieved to discover it was true. This morning she felt wholly human. Memories of their passion crowded out the Sword's seductive call. Whatever fate had in store for them in the next few weeks, she vowed not to regret their one night together.

Beneath her hand the Sword thrummed softly. Her fingers stroked its cool smoothness. I'm here, it seemed to remind her.

Taking a deep breath, she emptied her mind. Its will nudged hers. Slowly, a little at a time, she let it in. This time the sensation was not as suffocating. She squeezed its influence into a small box in her mind. By exerting her own will she found she could maintain a margin of control, allowing for the fact that the Sword was not drawn and no ready victim awaited it.

Riordan looked around her. Seen through the Sword's consciousness, the landscape stood out in sharp relief. The sky above was so blue it stung her eyes. Tiny fissures and cracks spread across the rock around her like veins. If she concentrated, she could almost hear the earth breathing.

Shraal sorceries were very much tied to the land, she realized. A source of their great strength. Every outcrop, each rocky summit, even the individual grains of the crystalline sand vibrated with the same tone as the Sword. The entire landscape sang to it. Beneath them, the earth thrummed with a low bass tone. Smaller rock emitted higher pitched notes. Carried aloft above it all the wind through the mountains wove a soprano melody.

Riordan dropped her hand. The song faded until there was only the ever-present whine of the wind.

"It knows."

Startled from his own thoughts, Nhaille looked back at her.

"The world knows the Sword is drawn."

"Yes."

She rode abreast of him, and he looked over at her guardedly. Riordan noted the plea in his gaze and nearly laughed.

All right, Nhaille, you needn't worry. We will speak of something other than last night.

"Through the Sword I can feel the," she paused, searching for the right words, "pulse of the land."

"The Sword draws its power from the stone of which it is crafted."

"From the ancient earth."

"Right." Her intuitive understanding seemed to please him. Then again, perhaps it was

merely relief at a new topic of conversation.

"And if the land recognizes it as one of its own, then so would the Amber."

"Undoubtedly it does."

"Then Doan-Rau will know where I am." She considered the impact of that knowledge realizing for the first time how interconnected Shraal sorceries were. A weapon drawn leagues away affected another. No wonder the Shraal had nearly annihilated themselves.

"That is true. Our options are severely limited now."

My options have always been limited. Riordan smothered her self-righteous anger. It served only to strengthen the Sword's bloodlust.

"Since we spoke of other things last night..." She watched Nhaille's defenses slam shut on his thoughts and continued quickly. "Perhaps now would be a good time to tell me about the Sword."

Nhaille drew an obvious breath of relief.

"Before I have to draw it again," she finished. "It would be better than trying to instruct me while I have its tip pressed against your heart."

"That it would," he said and shuddered.

She met his gaze. "I'm sorry, Nhaille. When I think of what could have happened--"

"Put the matter to rest, Riordan. It was not your fault, and I am still in one piece."

His calm dismissal made her furious. "Don't make excuses for me! All my life I've been expected to sit still while fate walks over me."

He stared at her dumbly.

"Did it occur to none of you that I might have a brain of my own, that given resources, I might be able to change the course of fate?"

"Riordan--" he began, but she continued, raising her voice to drown out his words.

"If you really believed Hael was going to wipe us out, why didn't we launch the first strike?"

"That would have been a declaration of war. Think about it, Riordan."

"I have been thinking about it. If I'd been Queen, if it had been my kingdom, I'd have wiped out Hael as soon as I heard the prophecy."

"And what would have in return for your rash move? Two kingdoms locked in a vicious battle of your making. A land battered and barren, never to support life again. And all because of your own superstitions!"

His sudden anger shocked her to silence.

"It's fine to speculate long after the fact and the decision was not yours to make," Nhaille

continued. Would you really have destroyed Hael knowing that you'd never be certain whether your actions were justified? And what would you have done when Hael rebuilt itself and declared war on you?"

"War was coming sooner or later."

"Only a fool would hasten war."

"In the end, what does it matter?"

"It matters, Riordan. Never think it doesn't. Thoughts like that will only get you into danger with the Sword."

Bitterness rose up inside her, despite her vows. "My father didn't really believe, did he? Yet he was content to sacrifice my life and a great deal of time for the possibility."

"That is not fair to his memory. I know he agonized long over his dilemma. With your mother dead, he had no one to share the burden."

Riordan shot him a bleak look. It didn't matter how long he'd debated or how much pain the decision had cost him. She'd been deprived of his love, of the life she might have had.

"I'm not obliged to share his opinions simply because we're blood kindred," she snapped.

"No." Nhaille frowned severely. "But you must alter your thinking. Do not forget, the great wars of Bayorek were fought by like-minded people. And do not forget the result."

That if nothing else, got through to her. Images of the lifeless plains of Kor-Koraan, the gutted towers of Bayorek flitted through her mind. Images from the history books. A land blackened by war, lying utterly useless for centuries. Until its people rebuilt their kingdoms from its ashes.

In time to start another war.

Though she was loathe to admit it, Nhaille was right. Her way of thinking would lead her right down the Shraal's path to impulsive decisions, to ill-conceived declarations of war.

Riordan shook the clinging hands of hatred from her mind. "How am I going to wield the Sword without repeating the Shraal's mistake?"

"You could start," he said sharply, "by remembering what's at stake."

The romantic moment had passed. Nhaille the teacher, Nhaille the Captain had replaced the lover she'd so briefly caught a glimpse of. Riordan shook her head, wondering how he managed to keep such wildly differing emotions in separate little pockets in his mind.

"Concentrate?" she offered. "The way you taught me to do in combat."

"Like it or not." He shot her a pointed glance. "You cannot allow your thoughts to become scattered while you wield the Sword. No by hatred, nor revenge. You must have

a clear mind for this, Riordan."

She read the subtext in his words. Not by hate, nor by love. Have it your way, Nhaille. What will you do if the war ends with us both alive?

"Forgive me for wanting a few moments to myself."

Nhaille let loose a sigh of exasperation. "It isn't that, Riordan. Your tendency toward impulsiveness is more than just a personality trait. It could mean Kanarek's undoing."

His words stung. More so because she recognized the truth in them. She fiddled with the laces of her armor and regarded him from beneath her visor.

"This dark path on which you've set yourself can lead only to ruin."

Riordan accepted the blow with all the grace she could summon. If she allowed her hatred for Doan-Rau to overwhelm her once the Sword was unsheathed, she might forget she fought for Kanarek's salvation and kill them all. "I do hear you, Nhaille."

"Good. Then learn from your mistake."

"I'm listening."

Not for the first time she pitied the men who'd served under him early in his career. She knew from experience the King's Captain could be a ruthless teacher.

"You have already deduced that the Sword channels power from the earth. But it is guided by the energy of the person who wields it. If you waste thoughts on hate and revenge, the Sword will use them against you. And ultimately for its own purpose."

"I must focus my thoughts." A smile spread slowly across her face. "Like when I used that piece of glass to focus the sunlight and burn ants out by the barn."

"Cruel of you. The ants did you no harm."

"You don't spare the same sympathy for Haelians, I gather?"

"No."

"That was a joke, Nhaille. It was supposed to be funny."

"We have no time for humor," he shot back. Still in a bad mood from their argument, and she suspected, for his own actions the night before.

Riordan groaned. It seemed Nhaille was determined to spend the rest of the day in the dark mood he got up in.

"We haven't declared war on Hael yet," she pointed out.

Nhaille wiped at the sweat that was dripping from his eyebrows into his eyes. "Not yet. First, we need an army."

* * *

The crystal landscape wept by in a pastel blur. Rau noticed vaguely when the scenery

turned from quartz to fine sand, and then to desert. Mercilessly, he put the spurs to his warhorse, praying that along with the rest of his bad luck, he wouldn't lame the stallion before he reached civilization.

Viciously, Rau cursed the human failings that made him stop for sleep each night. He cursed his warhorse for needing to be fed and tended. Such things took time, the one commodity he didn't have. With each minute lost the Haelian throne slipped a little further from his grasp.

Failure roared in his ears, taunting his every waking moment, reaching even into his dreams. He'd ambitiously sought after the greatest prize of all.

For the first time in his life, he'd failed.

Defeat sat sourly in his stomach.

His glorious victory had been planned in minute detail. First, the Amber, then Kanarek, after that the coast. But like something from a minstrel's song, a myth had come riding out of the history books. And she'd tossed the most dangerous of all weapons into the equation.

In doing so, she'd thrown his best laid plans to the wind.

How had it happened? What vital clue had he missed?

Through the Amber, he could hear the whisper of a myriad souls. The volume increased with every step he took. Rau realized with a sharp stab of dismay that in his bid to win for himself both the Amber and the Sword, he hadn't focused enough of his attention on controlling the Amber.

Hindsight showed him his errors in painful clarity. He should have crushed Kanarek, Kholer and Golar to ruins, then waited for the Kanarekii myth to catch up with him. Even the Sword of Zal-Azaar would have been powerless in the wake of such destruction. And his father would have had no recourse but to grant him the throne.

Instead he dashed off across the desert, desperate to keep news of Kanarek's Queen and her fabled weapon from reaching his father's ears. Without his leadership, who knew how things had fared in Kholer. Desperate to get his hands on the Sword, he hadn't given much thought to whether Larz had a strong enough constitution to use the Amber.

What if Kholer was lost?

He'd spent far too much time out of touch. Errors multiplied in his absence.

Within the cries of a multitude of souls, he heard a single clear note.

The Sword was drawn. Nothing he could do about it now. The entire landscape thrummed with the its pulse. It tugged at the edges of his consciousness, pulled at the tides of his blood.

Even the amber shard at his neck vibrated in greeting. Like opposite ends of a magnet,

complementary wizardries rushed toward each other in the most dangerous of all attractions. War.

As he raced back over his steps, he felt the storm gathering behind him. Like lightning, its influence crackled across the landscape. The war would not see its end until one of the great powers lay in ashes. A fool, he'd been. He saw that clearly now.

Damn Riordan-Khun-Caryn and the Shraal blood that ran in her veins. Rau spat into the dust that lay in a thin layer over the crystal landscape. Before him in the distance lay the desert. Crossing it in defeat did not seem as inviting a prospect as it had when the promise of victory lay ahead. The Kanarekii Queen would pay dearly for his torment.

"I pray you've made me proud, Larz," he whispered to the sifting wind that swirled dust around the legs of his warhorse.

Never should he have left his life's work in the hands of another. He'd risked life, limb and his command for the Kanarekii heirloom, the Sword of Zal-Azaar. And she snatched it from right out of his hands.

"An inconvenience," he muttered aloud. Nothing more. Even if they met in battle, with the Amber behind him, he was certain to be victorious.

"Let's see if you're still so proud of yourself when you've had a taste of Haelian magic, Your Majesty."

Should have rammed that stake of amber into her brain while he had the chance.

Not to worry. He had only to be patient. Another opportunity would present itself.

* * *

Smoke. All around him. Enough to sting even tearless eyes. Enough to force long flattened lungs to heave in distress.

Deep in the caverns of his failing memory, he recalled smoke such as this. It meant something significant, even buried beneath the cotton batten in his brain.

Screams rose up around him in a dying chorus. Where had he last seen a city reduced to smoldering timber, its population cut down in their homes, their fields? His failing mind matched the images. For a second there was a break in the Amber's hold on him. For a moment it was all diamond clear.

Kanarek.

He'd watched the fiends from Hael come marching through the city gates with his own eyes. Nothing could stem the flow of their destruction as they bled into Kanarekii territory. And in that one, brilliant second, Bevan remembered suddenly what he was.

A pathetic dead thing, even now rotting in the glare of the sun. A puppet for the Haelian fiend who had stolen his life and his home.

Around him, he saw himself mirrored in a multitude of other mutilated faces. Tilting his

head to see through the blurry vision of his left eye, he regarded his filthy stained clothes, the creeping blackness of his deteriorating flesh, and knew he'd become the instrument of their own destruction.

The knowledge rekindled his forgotten conscience. Regret sliced through him. Pain followed swiftly.

Life had always seemed to him a precious gift. Dimly, he remembered the feel of life: the joy of running through an open meadow, freedom, love. He stared at the devastation around him, at the lumbering shadows he knew were his fellow slaves. This travesty wasn't life, but some cruel imitation to further Hael's interests. It must be stopped.

Throwing back his head, he uttered a soundless scream of defiance.

Around him, he noticed several of the other shadows milling aimlessly. The voice in his mind dropped to a low murmur. Consciousness came and went, like sticking gears now and then catching their grooves.

Something along the chain of command had gone terribly wrong. Bevan fought to stay with the foggy thoughts of his failing mind.

In the depths of his being a tiny spark was ignited. Human thoughts caught the flame. A great wrong had been committed.

Just as he remembered life, Bevan remembered hatred.

Suddenly Bevan wanted revenge.

With the last of his awareness he thought, Now's my chance.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"So where are we going to get an army?"

Riordan was dismayed to realized that until now, her thoughts had been focused on selfish matters: the cruelty of her fate, her fledgling romance with Nhaille. Even finding the Sword had come a distant second, until she had been kidnapped by Doan-Rau. Locating the Sword was where her plans ended. She hadn't expected to succeed, honestly hadn't expected to live that long.

Guess there's something to be said for long range planning. Rau's scathing remarks about her strategic ability stung even in memory. More so because deep down she knew he was right.

"It might please you to know your father was neither stupid, blind nor idle."

Nhaille's voice revealed his anger at her condemnation of his King. And the comment hurt. She hadn't meant to accuse her father of either crime. He'd paid dearly enough for his decision to wait to see if the prophecy unfolded.

"The Kanarekii underground has been active since you were born. A mechanism for a counter-strike is in place. With the Sword at our disposal, we finally have the resources to put your father's plans into action. Hopefully enough of our countrymen survived to assist us."

She regarded the space between Strayhorn's ears, refusing to meet Nhaille's eyes.

"He did the best he could for you under the circumstances."

Dead staring eyes accused her. Could it be that he'd cared after all? Enough to send her beyond harm's reach? Enough to sacrifice his most capable officer to protect her. Perhaps in the beginning he hadn't believed, but he'd put the skeleton of a rebellion in place anyway.

And prayed he was wrong.

"You inherited his greatest burden and his deepest sorrow, but he did love you, Riordan."

"He never knew me, Nhaille."

"Yes he did. He watched you from afar. He was certain that if any of his children could accomplish such a thing, it would be you."

"The one time he came to see me, all he did was shout at me. How do you think that felt? He could have spared me a moment of compassion. At least then I would have known I was loved."

"He was a desperate man. He feared his love would weaken you."

"I was just a child." Her pale eyes flashed at him. "It was unfair to treat me that way."

"You were never just a child, Riordan. You were our only hope."

"I wasn't allowed to be a child. That's the truth of it, isn't it, Nhaille?"

"Unfortunately that is so." He offered her a hopeful glance. "Perhaps when the worst of this is over, you will have a chance to do some of the things you wanted to do with your life."

"If I live long enough." She slammed her fist against her thigh. "You've all looked to me for your salvation. Whose shoulder am I going to lean on in my desperation?"

He set his jaw against the wound she dealt him. "I am here, Riordan," he said quietly.

She bit her tongue against the tears. Apparently it was not destined to go well between them today. An extra cruelty after the tenderness of the previous night. Damned if she'd cry again over her lot in life.

But she did want to mend things with Nhaille, to foster again more of those feelings of tenderness.

"Kayr, I'm sorry."

His jaw tightened at the sound of his name, but he nodded curtly in receipt of her apology. Why? she wondered. Why did his given name make him flinch as if she'd struck him?

"I ought to stop pitying myself."

"It merely wastes more time and accomplishes nothing."

"Surely even The Queen is allowed the odd bad day."

"Unfortunately, Riordan, exemplary behavior is expected of The Queen."

She made him a peace offering of her smile. "Then perhaps my loyal subject will forgive me for my bad humor."

Nhaille inclined his head. "I am your servant, Your Majesty."

"No, you're not Nhaille. You're my friend."

Her declaration took him off guard. She watched his expression soften as he accepted her offer of friendship. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled. "As you are mine."

She noticed the lines beneath his eyes and at the corners of his mouth were deeper than they had been even a few days ago.

Her friendship, it seemed, had its price.

* * *

Moonlight etched the sand with blue shadow. The percussive hiss of sand punctuated each gust of wind. But Riordan paid the desert's quiet beauty no heed. The beat of one tiny heart absorbed her senses.

Her hand closed around the crystal hilt. She slid the Sword from its scabbard. Nearly invisible, it caught the moon's glow in a flash of molten silver.

The Sword's consciousness poured into her mind. Like a cold puddle it lay there, flooding all other thought.

"Concentrate." Nhaille's voice was barely a whisper on the wind.

Riordan wrapped her will about the Sword's and forced it into a low mutter in her mind. Almost bearable, as long as she didn't listen too closely to its seductive murmur. She opened her eyes and looked around her.

The desert stood out in sharp relief against the darkness of the sky. Beneath each rock, each scrubby bush the essence of life glowed like a beacon. Rabbits, mice, lizards in their burrows. She heard the rush of their quick panting breaths, the whisper of blood through tiny veins, the thump of miniature hearts, overlapping.

She released her hold on the Sword, momentarily giving it free rein. In the deep shadow of a rock, the lifeforce of its intended victim beckoned. A large mouse. Through the Sword's consciousness, she could see the inky gleam of its tiny eyes, the soft down of its pelt. Its aura blazed against the darkness. Riordan crept closer.

Like a divining rod, the Sword swung into position. Covering her footsteps beneath the wind's low sigh, she inched toward her miniature prey. The Sword sliced the shadows. The little creature looked up suddenly, its eyes bright with fear. It froze against the darkness. Belatedly, it sought its escape. Riordan sprang.

The Sword pierced its tiny breast. A sharp cry, surprisingly loud, echoed off the rock above. It struggled, briefly. Its lifeforce raced up the Sword, entering her with an electric shock. A blinding flash lit up the ground around her. Slowly, it faded. When she looked down, the small corpse had vanished into the Sword.

Mouse thoughts echoed in her brain, urgent and alien. She felt its tiny body cling to the dissipating thread of life, felt it accept at last the seductive call of death. Riordan cried out at the strangeness of it, her own fear mingling with its last dying thoughts. Desert wildlife scattered for the safety of their burrows.

"Riordan!" Nhaille's voice seemed to come from very far away. She remembered vaguely she ought to be listening. But the Sword, once its appetite had been tempted, hungered for more.

"Put the Sword down!"

She heard the command, desperately wanted to obey. Riordan turned toward the sound of his voice. The brilliance of his lifeforce froze the breath in her throat.

The Sword wanted him. Desire warped her thoughts, turning them from Nhaille's orders to its own dire purposes. And if the Sword wanted his soul, so did she.

"Focus your thoughts."

Nhaille's voice was lost in the roar of the Sword's hunger.

"Exert your will."

Her foot slid forward. She dragged it back, only to find the other inching in his direction. Oblivious to her will, her arm extended, the Sword's point reaching toward the lifeforce that blazed like a torch in the darkness.

Riordan hauled her arm back, but the Sword would not be dissuaded. Slowly, she felt her elbow straightening. "Gods, Nhaille," she ground out through clenched teeth, "I can't!"

"Yes you can, Riordan. Concentrate!"

For a moment she envisioned it vividly: the Sword plunging into his chest, the shocked look on his face, the blood blackened by the darkness, and lastly, his lifeforce rushing through her. His thoughts pressed next to hers in her mind.

"No!"

She dashed past him, tearing mind and body from the Sword's grasp. It hurt. Agony seared her brain, every muscle screamed in protest.

Something scurried away in the darkness, low to the ground. She seized on this new direction, hauling the Sword with her.

A grunt. A dying shriek, quickly silenced.

Riordan speared the Sword into the ground. Flesh parted under its razor-sharp edge, tiny bones crunched. Then it plunged into the sand and stayed there.

Rodent thoughts assaulted her mind. The Sword grasped after its elusive lifeforce, catching it, suspending it in time and space. The bright stab of its fear sliced through her mind like a knife. This time she opened her mind to feel it, then let it go.

Strength fled her. She crumpled to her knees and knelt there panting.

"Well," said a voice behind her. "That was marginally better than last time."

She looked up at Nhaille silhouetted against the moon. "It always wants you. Why?"

"You have strong emotions where I am concerned."

A fact, calmly stated. Well, at least he's starting to accept it. "Emotions that could get you killed," she said.

Nhaille offered his hand. His skin was warm to the touch after the coolness of the Sword. She let him pull her to her feet and into his arms. Soothing hands stroked her back.

"It's all right, Riordan. You haven't killed me yet."

She looked up at him, the moonlight gilding his hair. "Nothing would be worth it if I did."

* * *

Bevan hefted the axe which he'd been about to lay into the side of a smoldering building and tested its weight. After weeks under the Amber's control, independent thought was foreign. He clung to the tendrils of his intermittent thoughts, clung to the concept of revenge. He flexed stiffening muscles and tested the axe's weight again. Spurred by will alone, his decaying arms obeyed.

Around him, a gathering of dead slaves stared back at him, awaiting his next move. Bevan turned his one rotting eye toward the line of Haelian soldiers sitting idly upon their horses while the army of the dead accomplished the ugly work of leveling the city of Kholer. The assembly of slaves followed his gaze.

Oblivious to the multitude of eyes upon them, the soldiers baked in their armor under the sun and talked of families back home and the leave to come. Through the Amber Bevan found he could hear the sluggish thoughts of the other dead. He sent out an order of his own. Shaken from their stupor, the dead raised their battle axes.

"Hael?" one darkly tanned soldier said to his fellow. "Why would you want to stay inland? When this," he encompassed the tumult around him in a wide sweep of his arm, "is all over, I intend to take up residence in Golar by the sea."

"Assuming we conquer Golar," said the other soldier. A tremor of unease betrayed his voice.

The tattered rebellion crept closer. Bevan seized his thoughts of revenge and held fast, closing his mind to all else.

"Of course we'll take Golar! Within the month, half the map will belong to Hael. Once we've been decorated for our," a wry smirk twisted his mouth, "bravery, we'll have our pick of the spoils. Me, I've got my eye on a plot of land overlooking the ocean."

The other soldier cast a glance over his shoulder to be sure they weren't overheard.

"What do you think of the rumors? About the Sword? About the warrior-princess?"

"Rumors!" He spat in the dirt. "Remnants of Kanarekii espionage I say. A pitiful defense at that. Did they really think tales to frighten children would scare off the Haelian army?"

His companion shifted uncomfortably in the saddle. Behind them, Bevan raised the battle axe and threw the sum of his last conscious thought encouraging the other dead to follow suit.

"More than rumors I'd say. Didn't you hear what happened to Major Gernz?"

"Gernz had not the stomach for the task, nor the courage to risk desertion. He faked his own death."

"Loraan was supposedly with him when he died. The man's spooked. Been looking over his shoulder all week like he saw a ghost."

The other soldier snorted in disbelief. "The ghost of Major Gernz, I'd wager."

He turned to survey the battle behind him. Bevan struck.

The blow toppled the warhorse. With a shriek of agony, the magnificent animal crumpled, unseating its rider. Man and beast floundered on the ground. The soldier reached for his sword, only to receive the edge of Bevan's battle axe instead.

His companion reined swiftly about, in time to see the hoard of corpses surging toward him like a rancid creek overflowed. Skeletal hands gripped his legs. A swipe of his sword did nothing to stem the endless tide of them. Screaming, he was yanked from his horse. His desperate shrieks disappeared beneath the press of dead bodies.

Victory--such an alien concept to Bevan, it took a moment for the knowledge they were winning to seep into his decaying brain. He summoned his thoughts, sending out the order for more of the dead to join them. One by one the former victims of Kanarek turned from the pillage of Kholer and advanced on the soldiers of Hael.

Larz reined in on the rise and stared in horror at the tide of bodies surging toward the Haelian lines. In terror Haelian soldiers backed away from the rising tide of dead bodies. Shouting above the chaos, the Captain ordered them back in formation. But they balked at venturing further into the fray. It took a frightening amount of cajoling to get his orders obeyed.

He was rapidly losing control of the Amber. With each lapse it became harder to regain command. Fear battled for control of his mind, causing another lapse in his concentration. Above all, he didn't want to end up one those shambling dead bodies.

Haelian soldiers thundered past him. He stared aghast at the turmoil breaking loose. Against the dead they were vastly outnumbered. This wasn't supposed to happen. Something had gone terribly wrong with the Amber.

* * *

"Steady now."

Riordan flowed through the shadows like liquid darkness, intent on the life force that waited only a few feet in front of her. Coyote. Crouched on the low hill, it tipped its snout toward the moon. Its undulating cry swept through her. She hugged the shadows, keeping the Sword close to her body so its translucent light wouldn't give her away. Easier to stay hidden now that they had the foliage of trees and shrubs to conceal them.

"Remember what happened last time."

Nhaille's voice was devoid of accusation. But the warning lodged in her mind. She had to master the Sword. The entire coast depended on her ability to do so.

"This time you must maintain control."

Riordan opened her mind, slowly, a little at a time. The Sword's cold consciousness

flowed into every space she left it. She forced her iron will against it, confining it to the tiny parcel in her mind. Still it taunted her, murmuring seductive thoughts. She ignored it and focused on the task before her.

In the moonlight the desert was a surreal pattern of light and shadows, flecked with bright spots of life. The coyote's essence glowed brightest of all. Riordan flattened herself against the ground and crept toward it.

"Careful," Nhaille cautioned. "Remember surprise is always your best ally."

Providing it isn't the Sword that surprises me.

Grass tickled her nose, she kept the Sword pressed to her side. She knew this maneuver well. Had practiced it many time under Nhaille's tutelage but never dragging the Sword of Zal-Azaar at her side. And her last few attempts had been embarrassingly unsuccessful.

The coyote sniffed the midnight air. But she was standing up wind, and it soon went back about the business of broadcasting its keening cry over the countryside. Riordan peeked cautiously over the edge of the summit.

With the victim in plain sight, the Sword's hunger soared. She slammed the force of her will against it and was horrified to find her effort succeeded only in marginally dampening the Sword's desire.

Summoning the totality of her will, she smothered the flame of the Sword's yearning. It rebelled, battering the walls of her control, demanding its desperate hunger be appeased. Riordan concentrated on moving slowly forward. She swung the Sword into place.

Air whistled by her. Ground rushed by beneath her feet. Another aborted howl, then the resistance of soft flesh and jarring bone.

Bracing her consciousness for the onslaught, she drove the blade home. Blood splashed in black droplets across her boots and leggings. The coyote uttered one last agonized cry and fell silent.

Animal thoughts ran rampant through her brain. For an instant she saw the black and white world through its panicked eyes, felt the pain lance through its side, the rush of warm blood leaking into the sand. As if she died with it, she felt its last thoughts fading into darkness.

Unfettered, the Sword's desire roared to life. Riordan knew that if she turned, she'd see Nhaille's life blazing against the darkness. Its appetite whetted, the Sword hungered for more.

Desire raced through every vein. She felt it from head to toe, reveled in it, became it.

Cold reason dampened her ardor. People depended upon her. She had to do better. At first the task overwhelmed her. But the tighter she wound her will about the Sword's hunger, the easier it became. Slowly, she forced its presence back into the tiny corner of

her mind. Clenching her fist on the Sword's crystal hilt, she lowered it to the ground. Still, it would have been so easy to whirl upon Nhaille. Her mind turned the thought over, considered it.

With a cry, Riordan thrust its point into the damp earth and let go.

"Much better." Nhaille walked up the hill toward her, smiling broadly. Her success pleased him.

"Marginally better," she said, using his words.

"Greatly improved from my vantage point."

He was trying to encourage her. Nhaille rarely offered compliments.

"Not so greatly improved from mine," she told him reluctantly. "I still could have killed you. The thought was in my mind. I couldn't help it."

"But you managed to control it."

The relief in his voice was obvious. He didn't think I could do it. The thought made her angry. Fear overruled annoyance. A near miss, Nhaille had every right to be concerned. Perhaps deep down he was as terribly afraid as she.

"I managed to control it," she admitted. "But just barely. It could easily have gone otherwise."

"It didn't. Now you know you'll be able to accomplish the grave task set before you."

Riordan thought of the few miles that still lay between them and Kholer and her rapidly approaching destiny. Too soon. She wasn't at all prepared.

"Nhaille, this is insanity. Wielding the Sword in battle against the Amber is not like cutting down coyotes and rabbits. I'm not ready."

Even in the shadows, she could make out the somber look on his face.

"It matters not. We've run out of time."

* * *

In a flurry of hooves, Rau crested the hill and gaped in dismay at the chaos below him. What should have been the clean lines of black and red, the Haelian army deteriorated into a riot of color nearly overwhelmed by the brown decay of the army of the dead.

He had to look several times at the scene to understand it. Soldiers who should have been supervising Kholer's downfall now stood hip deep in mewling bodies that clutched and tore at their uniforms.

The spoils of Kholer, his by right of conquest, lay ripe for plundering in the castle. Buildings, which by now should have been no more than smoldering ash stood remarkably intact.

Before his eyes one of his men tumbled from his horse to a chorus of flat lifeless screams. Zombies fell upon him like hungry sharks.

The stench of the dead, no longer confined to one quadrant but scattered across the city, rose in a sickening wave above the battlefield. The still air did nothing to dissipate the stench. Having been away from it for several weeks, the odor hit him as though he'd run straight into a brick wall.

Horried, he watched as yet another of his men fell to the dirt and was trampled. His eyes scanned the field for Larz' plume, noting with growing horror how few plumed Haelian helms he could pick out. From the chaos on the field his own worst mistake laughed back at him.

Panic gripped him, real and immediate. He'd lost it all. Everything he'd worked for, destroyed by his own hand. An electric jolt of undiluted rage coursed through his veins. It couldn't be so. He wouldn't let it.

Cool logic seized his thoughts, setting them at once to order. A setback. Like many others before it. He would deal with it. Set things to rights. The prize would still be his.

Never should he have left this conquest in Larz's hands. Though capable, Larz was merely human. Shraal blood did not run in his veins. Larz did not have Rau's natural affinity to control Shraal sorcery.

Rau snatched the Amber clasp from the neck of his cloak. The power stone caught the sun in a golden burst of light. He wrapped his fist around it. The shard of stone, impossibly sharp, tore into his palm. He looked down to see crimson droplets splash down the front of his cloak. He watched as tiny beads of blood ran along the Amber's spear and disappeared into the stone.

The Amber had been bloodied. And now, tasting his blood, it wanted more.

Spreading out, as if through the deep roots of a tree, his consciousness bled into each fleck of amber on the field. His mind recoiled, but he forced it onward, down into the depths of a multitude of dying minds.

Plunged into a world of half-thoughts and fleeting thoughts, he fought to regain his control.

Decaying minds tore at his consciousness, fraying the edge of his mind. Rau gathered the threads of his will and hauled them tight, resisting the force that threatened to shatter his mind and send him careening over the edge into insanity. Slowly, painfully, he layered his will upon the weaker minds of the dead.

A million barbed spikes assaulted his senses. Clutching his head, Rau stumbled backward. The Amber tumbled from his hands. It struck a rock, rebounded.

Poised on the edge of the hill, it teetered for a second, then plunged down the slope.

Below him, the army of the dead stopped in their plunder, looking up in amazement at

the black-clad figure towering above them. With a cry, Rau leapt from his horse and scrambled after the stone of power.

His fingers closed around empty grass. The amber rolled from his grasp, continuing its career downhill. Encouraged by the lapse in control, the former army of the dead continued their revolt with renewed fervor.

Grass crushed beneath his flailing feet. Rau skidded into slickness. Balance eluded him and he tumbled face down. Ahead of him the Amber bounced merrily downward.

With each revolution, he caught a glimpse of the tumult in the valley below. Haelian riders seemed to disappear into a swarming mass of dead bodies intent on their destruction. For each one his army hacked down, another rose in its place to continue. Missing limbs, sometimes even half a body, the dead fought on.

Rocks bruised ribs, despite the thick leather of his armor. He rolled, wedging one leg beneath him. Haelian soldiers rushed past him in aid of those downhill. Rau threw himself away from stampede of trampling hooves.

Gods, don't let them crush the Amber!

As if enjoying his mad dash after it, the amber ricocheted off another rock, coming to rest finally among a thatch of grass. He dove after it.

The impact squeezed every ounce of air from his lungs. His fingers closed around the shard of amber. Panting, Rau tightened his grip and flexed his will.

Strengthened by fury, his power flowed outward. Like a black wave it poured down the hill into the fray. Their thoughts of rebellion interrupted, the dead stared up in confusion.

Hooves smote the ground in front of him. He looked up into the sun to find Larz towering over him. An expression of extreme relief brightened the Captain's face.

"Very good to see you, Sir."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the brush ahead something moved. Small things scurried out of its path. Nhaille tensed, his hand going automatically for his sword. Irresistibly, Riordan found her fingers curling slowly around the Sword's hilt. Its curiosity aroused, it wanted whatever was there in the bushes. She eased the Sword from her scabbard, noting that Nhaille did the same. His eyes shifted to the side, carefully watching the shadows around them. She glanced behind them. But the path, now shaded by the deeper darkness of trees, was empty. Nhaille urged Stormback to a slower trot and she crowded in beside him. He looked sideways at her, warning her to silence. In the gloom she saw the dull gleam of his sword.

Impatient with desire, the Sword roared in her mind. It fixed on the flicker of life, demanding urgently she make claim in its name.

Her own instincts urged her to turn tail and run. But Nhaille rode steadfastly onward, his eyes fastened on the darkness ahead of them. The Sword goaded her toward the life that beckoned, toward the feast it hoped to have.

Nhaille raised his hand, bringing them to a halt. Riordan waited, the Sword half drawn, her mind holding its influence in tight rein. He whistled. The sound echoed off the nearby rocks, dying quickly into silence. The wind ruffled the treetops, snatching at the wisps of silver hair that escaped from her helm.

From the bushes came an identical signal. Dark shapes gathered around the trunks of trees.

Riordan tensed, going for the Sword. Nhaille's hand seized her wrist.

"Not to worry, they're ours."

Her eyes widened, looking at the bedraggled lot that crawled out of the brush. Kanarekii uniforms, more modern than their own, yet having seen hard wear. Elbows, knees showed through threadbare patches. Their spiked helmets were battered and dented. A line of rigid jaws and grim expressions greeted her.

It took all her resolve not to bolt as the group surrounded her. She turned to Nhaille for reassurance, and in doing so, shook loose more of her hair.

A collective gasp went through the gathering as tendrils of her silver-blond hair fell to her shoulders. As one they knelt before her.

My subjects. And now I will truly have to be Queen. Dismayed, Riordan realized she didn't have the faintest idea how to begin. Her stomach clenched. The Sword's desire flared. She dragged in a deep breath, slammed the Sword back into her scabbard, and faced her subjects with a calm she didn't feel.

* * *

About time, Nhaille thought as the dark-clad warriors stepped from the bush. He'd been watching the bushes for several nights now, praying the rebellion hadn't fallen prey to the city's fate.

Beside him, Riordan sat rigidly on Strayhorn, staring at the motley array of Kanarekii before her. It came to him suddenly, she didn't have a clue what to say, had no idea what the etiquette entailed. Should have taught her palace protocol, he realized about a decade too late. Until now it hadn't seemed as important as the details of survival.

"Riordan," he whispered. "They're still on their knees."

She came to her senses with a start.

"Rise." The command cut through the night air, unmistakably imperious. The gathering looked up at the severe woman on the horse and leapt to their feet. Eyes shifted to the crystal blade belted to her hip, then nervously back to Nhaille.

"As you've deduced," Nhaille said. "This is Riordan-Khun-Caryn. Your Queen."

Their gazes flickered briefly to her face then fastened once again on the Sword.

"And yes, that is the Sword of Zal-Azaar."

Jaws tightened, he suspected only their training prevented them from taking a step backward.

"Precious few of you."

"Yes Captain." One of the men stepped forward. A recent scar cut across his right cheek. Trouble, Nhaille deduced. And not long ago. "Haelian riders patrolled the area for some time. We lost quite a few men in skirmishes with them."

"And now?"

"According to our sources, yesterday Hael attacked Kholer."

Nhaille swore.

Riordan looked across at him, pale and regal in the darkness. "You were right, Nhaille. We're out of time."

Our people, he thought with a stab of rage. Kanarekii countrymen, struck down in their homes, then deprived of their rightful rest and sent scurrying across the countryside to turn others into the same abominations.

"My father?"

The question sprang from Riordan's lips before he could warn her otherwise. A dozen pair of eyes fastened upon her. Riordan swallowed, and Nhaille watched her squirm under the scrutiny of those politely inquiring eyes. The press of bodies clearly made her nervous. Getting used to the constant company of others would be a difficult adjustment for her after so many years in relative solitude. "Is my father still among them?"

The leader looked quickly from Nhaille back to Riordan, dragging his eyes away from the Sword. When it was plain that Nhaille would not intervene and he'd have to speak to the Queen himself, he said, "Yes, Your Majesty. It pains me to tell you he is."

She absorbed the information with a nod. The Kanarekii waited expectantly for her to say something else. "Are there more of you?"

"Several bands, Your Majesty. Stragglers here and there."

Not enough to do Hael any serious damage, but they had the Sword. Now was the time to put the prophecy to the test, the hour of Kanarek's revenge. No matter what happened, Hael would never forget the name of Riordan-Khun-Caryn, nor the Sword of Zal-Azaar.

"Then I suggest we gather what is left of our countrymen," Riordan said, "and make haste for Kholer."

* * *

Conspicuous, that's what they were. Nhaille glanced back at the line of Kanarekii warriors that rode behind them. Why not just unfurl the banner and announce our arrival to Hael?

But there wasn't any other way he could think of to move an army (dare he even think of such a small gathering that way) across the countryside. Each whisper sounded inordinately loud in the quiet air, every horse's footfall a stampede. At least there are more eyes watching our back. That one thought eased his mind. At least now we needn't do it all ourselves.

A low whistle brought swords to hand. He peered into the darkness and strained his ears for the familiar series of notes. Nhaille was sure his heart beat loud enough to be heard across the countryside as they waited. The whistle was repeated.

He whistled back.

Brush parted. A small band of men stepped into the road. A salute. "Captain." A voice long forgotten. Coren-Nhaille-Penden. There was gray in his cousin's hair. The sight forced him to consider his own age, which was only a few years younger than Penden. Gods, do I look that bad myself?

Nhaille returned the salute. "Greetings cousin."

"Very good to see you, Sir. We heard rumors. We feared the worst."

He cast a discreet glance at Riordan, taking in the Sword in that one glimpse. Military discipline took over. No gawking as the others had done. Penden bowed. "Your Majesty."

Riordan accepted the show of allegiance with a nod. "How many are there of you?"

"Ten with me. Another fifty or so, scattered across the hills."

"Weapons?"

Nhaille smothered a smile at her imperial tone, amazed at how quickly she had assumed control, though he could tell she was still terrified underneath.

"Stores hidden here and there," Penden said. "Not a lot, Your Majesty."

Another nod. She seemed to have come to the same realization he had. Any pair of hands was a help in the battle.

"Spread the word. Call in the men. Arm yourselves with anything you can lay hands on. We ride for Kholer."

A horse whinnied nearby. One of the men led Penden his mount. He took his place behind Nhaille while his men melted into the night to carry out the Queen's orders. Their numbers grew with each day. And while it felt good to have the kinship of their countrymen around him, family at his back, it also felt oddly stifling. He doubly pitied Riordan for having to adjust so quickly to being surrounded by people.

He noted Riordan's discretely nervous glances at the men around them. In her lifetime, she'd never seen a city teeming with life, never witnessed a crowd in motion. Homecoming would be difficult, he realized, thinking for the first time about the future. For both of them.

* * *

Chaos reined in the valley.

Riordan stared over the summit into the bowl carved by the hills. The valley seethed with writhing bodies.

Haelian soldiers hacked at leagues of the dead, on foot and from horseback. Bodies littered the hillside, the recently dead scattered amongst those in a state of advanced decay.

Soldiers of the dead. Riordan squinted into the dying sunset. But why are they just lying there? Another thought occurred to her. Has something gone wrong with the Amber?

Beside her Nhaille was apparently coming to the same conclusion. "Prince Doan-Rau is about to realize the folly in riding across the countryside after you."

"We should attack now," Riordan said. "Surprise, as you're fond of reminding me, is a good ally."

"No."

"No?" Not the answer she expected. She turned toward Nhaille, conscious of the curious eyes of the Kanarekii warriors upon them. Eyes followed her every movement, hung on her every word. "And why not, Captain?"

"Night approaches. Darkness will hide us. If we attack now, Rau will be prepared for us come morning. Let him waste his energy on this mutiny. We'll hurt him all the more if we attack at the stroke of dawn."

She didn't like this new strategy. But Nhaille's argument made sense. There were precious few of them. Even with the Sword they'd be vastly outnumbered. Once the surprise was sprung they'd have no other tricks to gain the advantage. The long trip exhausted them. Better to rally their strength. Better to give herself one last night of practice before she had to wield the Sword in battle.

"All right," she said finally. "Move the company out, back toward the forest, where we'll be hidden by the cover of trees. We'll break camp before dawn and ride into Kholer just as day breaks."

Nhaille turned to give the order.

* * *

In the forest the darkness was complete. No fires were lit, they couldn't risk the discovery of their one and only surprise. A cold dinner. An even colder bed awaited them. But the men, who'd spent the past few months with only the cold hard earth for a pillow, made no complaints.

Riordan sat with her back against the broad trunk of an ancient tree. Between the branches above her the diamond points of stars dotted the sky. The damp ground seeped through the leather of her armor, but her thoughts caused more discomfort than the coldness.

The moment has come. Finally, I'm going to have to do all that was prophesied of me. Only unlike the prophecy, I'm unlikely to survive.

She looked down at the Sword's crystal length lying across her lap. If I'm not cut down by Rau's sword, you'll be my undoing. A shadow blocked her view of the stars. Her hand closed upon the Sword.

"You shouldn't sneak up on me like that."

Nhaille uttered a short laugh. "Obviously you knew it was me, or I'd already be dead."

"We may both be dead on the morrow," she said and winced at the fatality of her words. Pity was something Nhaille would never tolerate. A lecture was certain to follow.

"No." He took a deep breath of cool night air. "I do believe tomorrow, we will at least take the bite out of Doan-Rau's wrath."

"You're just saying that." She glanced up at him, trying to read what lay behind the face he showed to her. Strangely, he looked confident.

"I believe it."

Riordan smiled. "Then I guess I'm obligated to believe it, too."

Nhaille's expression clouded. "You must be careful what you say now, Riordan. Even to me. Others are listening. You would not want your countrymen to hear you predicting their demise. Not when they've fought so hard already to give us this last chance."

The lecture, after all.

"Come," he reached for her hand. "One last rehearsal before the battle tomorrow."

Wet grass crushed beneath her boots. The night stilled. A breeze lazily ruffled the treetops. Moonlight speckled the ground between branches. Around her snores of the sleeping men rose in a quiet chorus. Riordan stepped into the clearing.

Slowly, she drew the Sword from its scabbard and looked around her. Seen through the Sword's consciousness, the forest teemed with life. Birds dozing in the upper branches, the glinting eyes of night life peeked out at her from beneath each bush. She slammed her defenses in place, walling off the Sword's keening cry. Forcing her will to the forefront, she held it before her like a talisman.

A fox scurried past her into the darkness. The Sword lusted for it. She squashed the urge to rush after it.

I'll decide which life is taken.

The Sword fought against the subjugation of its will, wailing inside her mind. With effort, Riordan silenced its call and cast about her for a suitable sacrifice.

Through the trees she sighted an unfamiliar aura.

"Nhaille!"

Her whisper brought him to the edge of the clearing. He peered into the darkness, squinting in the direction she pointed. He shook his head.

"What is it, Riordan?"

"I don't know. Something, coming toward us."

"I can't see it."

She forced the Sword's consciousness into the background and looked at it through her own eyes. Shadow seemed to swallow the faint pulse of life.

"An aura." She looked at it again through the Sword's awareness. "But not like yours. Very dim, except for a tiny flicker at the center."

"Be careful."

"You be careful," she ordered. "Stand back. I don't want you close to me while the Sword is drawn."

He obeyed without argument.

She could hear it now, lumbering toward her. Something large. Far too big to be a rabbit or a fox. Smaller than a bear. Man-sized. Branches parted. She caught a glimpse of a tattered, filthy shirt.

And then she smelled it. The unmistakable taint of rotting flesh. It stepped into the clearing.

One of Rau's army. One of her countrymen possibly, or even a citizen of the equally ill-fated city of Kholer. Trailing ribbons of torn cloth and rotting flesh, the dead thing lumbered onward.

Suddenly, she understood. Its life force was practically extinguished. Its aura was almost too pale to stand out against the darkness. It was the shard of amber that blazed with the illusion of life.

Lost, she realized suddenly. Unlike those on the battlefield, it seemed to wander aimlessly. Whatever had happened in the valley, contact had been broken. For a moment, she could only stare at the pathetic thing, the first she'd seen at close range. Sighting her, it staggered in her direction, reaching out toward the dim memory of human companionship.

Riordan swung the Sword into position.

Instantly, the ancient blade recognized its kin. The speck of amber flared brightly against the darkness. As if drawn by an invisible magnet, she leapt across the clearing in a single step. The zombie lurched toward her, impossible now to stop the rush of attraction.

She swung. The Sword sliced through the shadows, meeting the meager resistance of swollen rotting flesh. The dead warrior crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut. A flash of amber blinded her momentarily to all but its glare. Like a puddle the soldier's remnants rushed up the crystal blade and vanished.

Belatedly, she slammed down the barriers. Dying thoughts poured into her brain. Sluggish memories of its lost life, images of smoke, horrid cries of slaughter echoed through her mind. Riordan choked them back.

Like a whirlpool, they pulled at her, threatening to drag her down into deep waters. She fought her way through the vortex of muddled thoughts, emerging suddenly into clarity. And then in her mind, she felt one last thought of gratitude and peace.

Light blazed up around her. The Sword, having not received the meal it expected, hungered for more.

With a strangled cry, Riordan thrust the blade into the soft grass and stepped back. Shaking her head, she tried to clear her mind of the dead warrior's thoughts: overwhelming grief, the desperate longing for final peace.

"Gods Nhaille, they know!"

He approached cautiously, waiting a few paces behind her.

"They know," she repeated in utter horror. Dying thoughts still swirled in a tiny walled-off portion of her mind. "Even in death they know what's been done to them."

"It's all right," he said softly. "If we are victorious no one will ever suffer their fate again."

"I felt it in my mind." She left the Sword and rested her head against him, feeling the warmth of his arms come up around her. "I know what it's like. It's horrible beyond belief."

His arms tightened, pressing her close, but Nhaille said nothing.

"When I was small," she said, to no one in particular. "I was afraid of dying. Even when I knew what lay before me, death was still my greatest fear. Never did I think I would be afraid of not dying."

"You will be victorious, Riordan. You must believe that."

"Yes," she whispered. "I have to be." Riordan looked at the dark splashes that stained the grass. "That is the alternative."

She was silent a moment, content to lean against him, drawing back her strength.

"Nhaille?"

He looked down into her face.

"If something goes wrong. If I am not the victor. If it looks like I'm about to fall prey to Doan-Rau, there is a thing I would ask of you."

Nhaille stiffened, drawing in a ragged breath. He paused, suspecting a difficult request was coming, then said, "Ask, Your Majesty."

"Take the Sword and cut me down. Death no longer frightens me. Make certain I don't suffer that poor soul's fate."

She watched the color drain from his face. "Do not ask that of me, Your Majesty," he whispered.

Riordan refused his plea. "Nhaille, it has to be you. There is no one else I trust." She seized a handful of his shirt, pulling him close. "Do not leave me to suffer my father's fate, I beg of you!"

He pulled gently from her grasp. Silence lengthened as he stood staring down at her.

"You have my word," he said at last. His hand covered hers. "Come, you must get some rest before sunrise."

Riordan sheathed the Sword and began to walk with him back to camp. The flicker of a thought caught flame. She turned it over in her mind, examining it from each possible angle.

She realized suddenly she'd stopped walking and that Nhaille was looking back at her in concern.

"The Sword..." she muttered, as much to herself as to Nhaille.

He waited for her to continue.

"When the Sword destroyed the body, it also destroyed the Amber."

She watched realization creep across his face, dawning suddenly into hope. Riordan seized his arm.

"That's it," she said shaking him vigorously. "The piece of the puzzle the Shraal were never able to understand."

"If the Sword and the Amber were made to counter each other..." Nhaille began.

"It stands to reason that if the Sword can destroy the Amber." Her voice rose in excitement, she forced herself to whisper, "And if exposed to a large enough piece of it, the Amber might destroy the Sword."

"They're attracted to each other," Nhaille supplied, "because they cancel each other out."

"That's it. The one vital step the Shraal left out of the process."

"They did the opposite. They separated the two."

"But burying them in the mountain didn't stop us from digging them up."

"We need to bring them together."

Nhaille considered this turn of strategy solemnly. "I think you're right."

Riordan sucked in a long breath. "At last I know what I have to do." She gazed through the trees, seeing in her mind the valley beyond. "First I must defeat Hael. Then I must destroy both the Sword and the Amber so they can never be used against us."

* * *

They lay side by side, the Sword between them. A discreet distance away, a Kanarekii soldier stood guard. Riordan watched the slow climb of the stars across the sky. Dawn was scant hours away, exhaustion weighed heavily in every bone. And still she couldn't sleep. Plans formed, were discarded and reformed in her mind. Try as she may, she couldn't staunch the flow of them. She glanced at Nhaille to find him very much awake and lost in the labyrinth of his own thoughts.

"You should sleep, Riordan."

"I can't."

"Try harder."

"My mind won't stop working."

He sighed and turned toward her. "Neither will mine."

She moved the Sword within arm's reach past their heads and snuggled in close.

"Nhaille, I--"

He caught her meaning immediately and glanced nervously in the guard's direction.

"Riordan, the guard."

"To hells with the guard. Who is he going to tell? Our few remaining countrymen?"

"It's not right."

"So you keep saying."

He gazed back at her, his expression already softening as he weakened.

"Surely by now, it has all ceased to matter. Our false modesties, our ridiculous proprieties, our foolish gossip, what use are they now?"

In the shadows she saw the ghost of a smile drift across his face. "Your Majesty, you argue just like your father."

"Meaning you often lost."

"I don't believe I ever won."

"You're about to lose again."

He did smile then, and she caught a rare glimpse of the real Nhaille that lay beneath the iron facade of duty and obligation. He shook his head. "Between the two of you--"

She smothered his words with her mouth. Smothered her fears in his warmth, in the one thing between them that was simple, good and natural.

Afterward, in the last hour before the dawn, they nuzzled close together, heedless of the guard, the Sword ready at her fingertips.

And slept.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Wet grass crunched underfoot. Black shapes of men moved silently through the trees. The hot breath of horses came in puffs of steam. In minutes the pale light of dawn would stream above the hills. Men worked quickly, silently, stowing gear, breaking camp. The remnants of the Kanarekii army crept toward the forest's edge on the peak of the hill.

Dismounting, Riordan walked to the edge of the summit and stared down at what was left of Kholer. Even under the cover of darkness, the damage looked extensive. She made out the smoldering ruins of the high town, the charred and crumbling hulks of homes and markets, the dark slopes of Haelian tents. Haelian soldiers moved furtively among the ruins, about to wake the city to one last nightmare.

"By nightfall, Kholer will be liberated," Nhaille said from behind her.

She walked a few paces away from the edge of the summit and dragged in a breath of frigid air. "For our own sakes, and that of Kholer, let us hope so."

Right now it took all her concentration to calm the cold fear in the pit of her stomach, the terror of death, and Gods knew, things worse than death.

"Dawn is fast approaching," she said and swung up into Strayhorn's saddle. "Sound the battle horn."

The trumpet blast shattered the dawn.

The Sword of Zal-Azaar sailed from its sheath, catching the sun's first rays in a rainbow arc. Nhaille caught her eye, and Riordan nodded in receipt of the confidence he wished her way.

"This is it!" she shouted back.

"Laalan, God of War, be with us," he answered.

On her signal, the Kanarekii army streamed down the hillside.

Riordan put the spurs to Strayhorn. The trained warhorse responded. Plunging down the hill, he lowered his head, the metal horn of his armor poised to take down anything that stood in his path. Ground disappeared beneath Strayhorn's hooves as he dodged boulders, skirted the stumps of trees.

Hooves pounded the ground like thunder. She caught a glimpse of Nhaille on Stormback beside her. Nhaille's cousin, Penden, brought up the rear, even now organizing counter moves and emergency measures. Strayhorn's gait jarred every bone in her body. But fueled by the Sword's lust for blood, the downward plunge intoxicated her.

Beneath them in the valley, Haelian soldiers scrambled for their mounts. Like so many ants they scurried to form ranks, to herd the army of the dead into lines before them.

Prodded by Haelian warriors in black leather, the dead climbed sluggishly to their feet.

Riordan urged her army onward, hoping to scatter their ranks before they had a chance to form, hoping against all odds to get a clear shot at Rau before protective lines of the dead and his own army closed around him.

As the world flew by in a dizzying rush, she caught a glimpse of Rau's red plume, bobbing along the ranks of the dead. Like a storm gathering, the last survivors of Kanarek raced toward them.

Ranks of the dead formed, then scattered. The dead milled about in confusion. Rau seemed to be having difficulty bringing his army under his control. Shouts from the Haelian ranks carried above the din in an attempt to bring order.

Lines of dead soldiers disintegrated again. The Kanarekii army reached the foot of the hill and barreled across flat land.

Only to meet a rigid line of dead warriors.

Apparently, Rau once again had control of the dead. Riordan urged her army onward. For the first time she gave the Sword free rein. Her control dropped away, letting its desire for blood soar.

She dashed into the ranks of the dead army, swinging the Sword of Zal-Azaar in a wide arc. Caught in the expanse of her swing dead warriors tumbled. An avalanche of souls rushed into her mind.

Riordan gasped under the onslaught, losing for a moment her control of the Sword. Dozens of dying thoughts poured into her mind. Agony seared her as she felt the multitude of anguished thoughts. She screamed, swung again. Unable to stop the flow of souls, she opened her mind, pushing her own consciousness back into a tiny parcel in her brain.

Around her she heard the cries of the Kanarekii army attempting to hack its way through the fray. Riordan widened the arc of her swing, racing Strayhorn back and forth in an attempt to carve a wider breach in Hael's defense. Beyond the dead, she could see lines of Haelian soldiers forming. She cut a path toward them, toward Doan-Rau and the Amber.

Suddenly there were no more dead before her. She lunged through the last of their ranks.

To meet a wall of Haelian soldiers in black armor. Quickly she slammed the walls of restraint around the Sword's will. The Sword roared a challenge in her mind.

Riordan reined Strayhorn in abruptly. Behind her the Kanarekii army followed suit. She heard a similar order shouted behind Haelian lines. Soldiers parted to let through a plumed rider. Riordan faced her enemy.

"I give you one last chance, Prince Doan-Rau." Her voice cut cleanly through the still morning air. "Surrender the Amber, or be destroyed."

The Prince's laughter echoed through the hills. Around him, Haelian soldiers shifted

nervously. His Captain's eyes widened at the sight of the crystal blade. He opened his mouth to say something, but Rau broke away from the band of Haelians that closed to protect him.

"Sir?" Captain Larz reached out a hand to restrain him. Shaking off his arm, Rau moved toward Riordan.

Azure eyes as deep as the sky glared out at her, as impenetrable as the smooth crystal of the Sword. "Our little Kanarekii myth seems to have developed some flair, if nothing else."

"Surrender Rau." Riordan moved Strayhorn closer and rested the Sword's point inches from his breast. Soldiers rushed in to guard their prince. In her mind, the Sword shrieked for her to take his life, but she deafened herself to its cries. Time enough for that later. She didn't want Rau's foul thoughts pressing against her mind. Not unless there was no other way out. Sitting astride their mounts put their eyes on the same level. Riordan glared at him and decided she liked that meager advantage. "Now or later," she said, rational against his hysterical laughter. "The choice is yours."

"She has inherited her father's capacity for bluster," Rau said acidly.

Larz realized his mouth was hanging open and shut it quickly.

"Hasn't she, Larz?"

Faced with answering the question, Larz nodded noncommittally. "Your Highness, I really think--"

Rau waved his concerns from the air. With a swipe of his hand, he knocked the Sword from his chest. "Her father's capacity for noise and blunder and you see Larz, also his reticence for killing."

In challenge, the Prince raised the stake of Amber. A power stone, shaped like a dagger, potent enough to enslave an entire army.

But even the power stones drew their energy from the Amber Orb, itself. Where is the Master Stone? Riordan wondered. If not with them in Kholer, where? But Rau robbed her of time to ponder that thought.

"Surrender, Your Majesty?" Rau laughed again at his own wit. "It is your kingdom that lies in ruin. Soon Kanarek and Kholer will be merely a dim memory."

The Sword's voice became an insistent scream in her mind. Deprived of Rau's soul once, it recognized its withheld prize and demanded to be appeased. The Amber in Rau's hand tempted it, luring it closer, until it took the sum of her strength to stop the blade from impaling Rau on its tip. A last resort, she thought and tightened her grip.

"Have it your way, Doan-Rau." With confidence far beyond what she felt, Riordan

backed Strayhorn away. "But you're wrong, Your Highness."

Blue eyes glared back at her from the shadows beneath his visor. "About what?"

"About my inability to kill. I'm merely saving you as a last choice morsel. You will surrender my good Prince. It won't be Kanarek that fades from memory, it will be Hael. Along with the name Doan-Rau."

Rau's face crumpled, his expression turned from disbelief to ugly rage. His fist gripped the power stone. She watched as his face contorted in concentration.

Fury poured from the Amber into each dead mind. Through her connection to the Sword, Riordan felt it, recoiled from it. It tore through her as if glass ran in her veins. She slammed her mind shut against his onslaught and sent her own down through the Sword.

The remnants of the army of the dead snapped to attention. Haelian warriors raised their swords. Kanarekii soldiers poured in behind her.

Mental chains fell away. Riordan set the Sword's bloodlust free. Strayhorn reared up on his hind legs and bolted toward the tide of decaying bodies lurching their way.

The Sword desperately wanted the human bodies around it that throbbed with life. She dragged its interest away, bolting through their ranks, taking out an entire row of the dead with one sweeping arc of the Sword.

She hacked them down like so many trees, and tried not to think about how vastly outnumbered they were, even with the Sword.

Disjointed thoughts flooded into her mind. Horrifying visions from beyond the grave. She slammed the floodgates shut and raised the Sword for another blow.

Then she realized her mistake.

Each Kanarekii soldier the Haelians killed became another footman in the army of the dead. Her reach was limited to the Sword's length. And the Sword could only cut down and dispose of so many bodies. Haelian soldiers drove stakes of Amber through the eyes of the fallen Kanarekii and turned their converts against their countrymen.

It was the Haelian army she had to wipe out. Outnumbered as the Kanarekii were, they had to thin the ranks, get to the Amber and destroy it. After that the dead would be granted their rightful rest and cease to be a threat.

She wheeled about, sighting Nhaille's spiked helmet mere paces away. He followed, trusting in her strategy, in the Sword's desperate hunger.

Beyond the ragged line of hewing dead bodies, she saw the red plume of Rau's helmet bobbing with each stroke of his sword. Strayhorn dashed forward, butting Haelian warhorses with the spike on his faceplate.

Haelian soldiers saw her coming. Swords barred her path.

Riordan looked at the blades preventing her path like a fence of knives. Stormback's

hooves pounded the earth as Nhaille hacked his way toward her.

She raised the Sword. Eyes widened beneath Haelian helms. Innocent youths, drafted into Rau's services. Innocent lives about to be lost to his insanity. Where will it stop, she wondered, hesitating for a fraction of a second.

I have no choice. Unless I put an end to it, the killing will never stop.

Tearing her gaze from the youthful eyes that looked back at her, Riordan raised the Sword and swung.

Dying screams echoed in her mind. Terror, memories of loved ones fell into the tearing vortex in her mind. The Sword, never appeased, clamored for more.

Unlike the sluggish souls of the reanimated dead, this was her first taste of pure human blood. Souls ripped through the Sword's consciousness jagged as glass. Sickened, she toppled backward, catching herself inches before she slipped from the saddle.

A flash of steel beside her. Metal grated against metal. Nhaille deflected the blade aimed for her throat.

No time, Riordan thought with another desperate swing. No time to debate who was right or wrong. In war there were only sides. Nothing about killing was right.

Soldiers fell as Nhaille and the Kanarekii cleared a path around her. Haelian replacements surged in from all sides. Repulsed, she caught a glimpse of Haelian soldiers rushing to add their own fallen comrades to the numbers of the dead army.

Soldiers, mere seconds dead, rose to raise their own swords again. Dead eyes, devoid now of all thought but mindless killing, defied her.

"No!" Her scream cut across the battlefield. Riordan swung widely, taking out an entire line of the newly dead. Disjointed memories blew like a storm through her mind. This time she reveled in it, the utter horror driving her on. She swung again, losing herself to all but the motion in her arm, the sweeping arc of the Sword's devastation.

Bloated, decaying bodies disappeared into the Sword. Haelian soldiers followed their fate. Kanarekii soldiers formed a barrier with their bodies, protecting her as she surged forward, clearing a path toward the Haelian Prince at the center of the fray. Bodies tumbled into a heap to be vacuumed into oblivion by the Sword's magic.

Then there was only the Haelian Captain, Larz, between them. Rau looked up, suddenly appalled.

Swiftly, he covered his fear and faced her with his customary smirk. "Well done, Your Majesty. What a fine addition you'll make to my army."

His blade sang through the air. Riordan brought the Sword up in a desperate parry.

Steel met crystal. She riposted quickly. Stone and metal crashed again.

"The only army you'll command," she grunted with another swing, "will be one in Al-

Gomar."

"So kill me," Rau taunted. "And I'll live in your mind, forever."

Riordan deflected the sword aimed for her heart. The thought of carrying Rau's madness inside her chilled her.

Even now the voices of the dead clamored for attention in her mind, strengthening the Sword's ardor for more killing.

"You won't find my mind such a hospitable place," she growled.

He parried her upward stroke. Behind her, Nhaille and Larz stared coldly at each other over crossed swords. She heard the clash of metal, hoped vehemently Nhaille was winning.

Rau backed his warhorse away. For a second she was certain he'd flee. Then he rushed her.

Ground spiraled toward her. The earth reached up and dealt her a full-body slap. Nhaille's shout of warning came too late. Riordan managed to get the Sword out from under her and twisted, rolling away from the trampling hooves of Rau's stallion. Suddenly riderless, Strayhorn reared up, stamping the ground nervously.

Her breath came in short bursts, burning her lungs. Riordan forced her legs under her. Rau's warhorse stampeded toward her.

She snatched up the Sword. Throwing herself to the side at the last second, she drew the crystal blade across the its legs, cutting both tendons. The majestic animal pitched forward.

A heavy armored body pinned her to the earth. Riordan looked up into searing blue eyes. She got a leg between them, kicked viciously, trying to unseat him far enough to get the Sword between them.

"Riordan!" She heard Nhaille's call from somewhere off to the right.

"You are really starting to annoy me." Dark hair tumbled down around her. Rau had lost his helmet in the fall. He wrenched the amber dagger from his belt. "And I've worked so hard to spare your pretty face."

Freeing her right hand, Riordan swung the Sword toward him.

He parried, catching it at the hilt with the amber dagger. Energy sizzled down the blade, ancient sorceries long parted, greeted each other. Bending her arm backward, the Amber blade inched toward her face.

Lightning crackled. Golden beads of light formed within the Amber. The Amber blade became transparent. Then, before her eyes, it faded and disappeared. In her mind, Riordan felt the Sword's power weaken.

So, I was right. They cancel each other out. Hope soared.

Rau tumbled forward. For a fraction of a second, they lay face to face like lovers. Fear, the first real fear she'd seen, crossed his face.

The Prince stared at his empty hand, the horrifying realization dawning that without the protection of the Master Stone, he had no chance against the Sword of Zal-Azaar. Terror overtook disbelief. Like the Shraal before him, he'd thought his magic weapon was invincible. Rau scrambled to his feet.

"Pull back!" he shouted as Larz reined in beside him. "Retreat to Hael!" Like a coward, Rau fled, leaving his Captain to stare in dismay after him. Snatching up the Sword, Riordan dashed after him.

To find Larz' blade blocking her path.

Beyond the steel gray of his sword, she saw Rau's black cloak flapping in the breeze as he fled.

The Sword, weakened by its run-in with the Amber, demanded to have its strength restored.

Riordan swung.

"No Riordan!" Nhaille moved so swiftly, she barely saw him as he leapt in front of her, knocking her sword arm from its target.

As if in slow motion, she watched the length of Larz's sword descend, catching Nhaille in the shoulder. A thin line of blood trickled down the front of his leather armor. He crumpled, but still managed to stay in the saddle. "Get the Amber," he said hoarsely.

Riordan's eyes flashed to the amber stake lodged in Larz's belt. A second power stone. The one he'd led the army with.

She feinted left, putting herself bodily between Larz and Nhaille, drawing a swipe from Larz's sword. She cut high. Larz fended her off with a vicious swing.

And in doing so, he left himself open to the blinding arc of the Sword of Zal-Azaar.

Shocked eyes glared up at her. The Sword sliced cleanly through tendons, slowing only slightly as it hit bone. A fraction of a second later he tumbled to the ground, his horrified expression frozen upon his face.

Trailing blood, Nhaille lunged awkwardly toward Larz's body and snatched the Amber blade from his belt. The body liquefied, flowed into the Sword.

Disbelief reverberated through her mind. Larz's one last dying thought.

Haelian soldiers stared at her in mute terror. Amassed behind them, legions of the dead milled about in dazed confusion.

Nhaille held the Amber blade out to her. She looked down at the amber stake lying across his palm and took a step backward.

"No." Barely a whisper. Out of all her nightmares, this was one she'd never dreamed of.

"We have no choice."

"Nhaille, I can't do...that."

"Rau has fled back to Hael to the safety of the Master Stone. We must act before he reaches it. If that is where it's hidden."

Haelian soldiers recovered themselves. Finding no other way but to retreat through Kanarekii lines, they raised their Swords.

"Riordan, we're out of time and out of options." She heard the weakness in Nhaille's voice. "You must take the Amber."

Blood trickled Nhaille's arm, coating the Amber. Somehow she had to get him through what was left of Haelian lines and off the battlefield. Still, she balked at taking the Amber. "Give it to Penden," she suggested.

An odd expression crossed Nhaille's face. Revulsion mixed with longing. Nhaille shuddered. "Neither Penden nor I can wield the Amber."

"Why not?" She raised the Sword struck away a Haelian blade aimed her way.

"Neither of us are Shraal."

The words sunk in slowly. She parried a sword headed for her heart and sent its owner to hell. His dying screams twined with the twisting thoughts in her mind.

"That's why it didn't work. That's how Larz lost control of the army. He wasn't Shraal, but Rau was."

"Shraal, or simply mad enough to suffice," Nhaille said. "It worked for Larz for awhile, but he couldn't sustain it. That is at least my guess." Nhaille's attention was torn away by a Haelian soldier.

She leapt in front of him, dispatching the attacker with one sure stroke. Another mind echoed within hers. She felt sick. But there was no time to attend to her own revulsion and frailties.

Nhaille held the dagger out to her again. "Take the Amber. Without it we perish."

Riordan looked around her. Soldiers in Kanarekii armor were still desperately few, even with Hael on the retreat. Without the leagues of the dead to fatten their ranks, they wouldn't succeed in taking Hael. Hael would stand by superior numbers alone. Somewhere among the shifting lines of standing corpses were her brothers. Her Father. She balked at being their slavers, but she had no choice.

"Forgive me," she whispered. And reached for the Amber.

Unlike the coolness of the Sword, the Amber was hot to the touch. Riordan closed her fingers around it, felt Nhaille's hand drop away under hers. Slowly, she drew it back

toward her.

A multitude of minds assaulted her. Worse by far than wielding the Sword. Chaos swirled in her consciousness. Hate, fear, dampened by death. Thoughts from beyond the grave, unnatural. Riordan closed her eyes. Broadcasted by the Amber, she sent her own thoughts out toward them.

Dead minds were capable of little resistance. She reached into decaying brains, laying her thoughts over the fragmented images she found there. Like shaping clay, she reworked the orders Rau had placed there, changing their form, substituting allegiance to Kanarek instead of Hael.

The change confused them. She felt their thoughts slipping away from her like trying to catch an eel with her bare hands.

She concentrated harder, tempting them with the promise of eternal rest. Promising them vengeance for the terrible wrong Hael had dealt them.

Slowly, she felt the tide of their thoughts change. The dead raised their weapons.

And turned on the soldiers of Hael.

It took an inordinate amount of effort to maintain contact. No wonder Larz had weakened. Twin forces threatened to tear her mind apart. The Sword, confused by the proximity of the Amber, the banquet of so many bodies and so little killing clamored to be appeased. Each time she stole a little concentration to keep it under control, her command over the dead weakened. Dividing her attention, Riordan poured the full force of her will into diametrically opposing tasks.

Nhaille's good arm closed around her, holding her upright with the last of his strength. She hadn't even realized she was falling. The Amber burned in her mind, its flame consuming all conscious thought save for the dire instructions she broadcasted to the dead. In contrast, the Sword was cool evil, seducing her brain with thoughts of killing, of absorbing the souls of all around her.

Riordan tightened her thoughts around the Sword, squeezing its demands into silence, preventing it from killing, while she sent the Amber the opposite order. It tore at her soul. But one glimpse of the battlefield told her there was no other choice. They had to win over Hael before they could rid the world of the Amber.

Shouts leaked through the barriers. Riordan opened her eyes. Haelian soldiers who moments ago had stared at her in dumb-struck silence, now fought for their very lives. As if lifted by the strings of an invisible puppeteer, the dead sprang to life.

The dead outnumbered them all. Hael could not hold out for long. Especially without Larz or Rau.

"We're going to have to make more of them," Nhaille said. Seeing she was steady on her feet once again, he dropped his hands. It was then that she noticed his pallor, the tight

lines of pain around his mouth.

"Nhaille, we can't do that!" Her concentration slipped. Riordan caught herself and poured the last of her will into the equation. "Wielding the Amber is one thing. Making more of those ghouls is quite another." She motioned to the congealing blood on his armor. "You're injured, we have to get you out of here, so you can rest and--"

"Do not be short-sighted, Riordan. I am expendable in this matter. I have only to keep to my feet long enough to win back Kholer. After Kholer you must go on to defeat Hael."

"I'm not going anywhere without you!" Riordan parried another sword that slipped through the protective ranks of the dead around them. "What," she grunted, taking down another Haelian, "makes you so sure that's where Doan-Rau has hidden the Master Stone?"

"He would have taken it there," Nhaille said, "to win the King's praise."

"All right," Riordan said. "Hael it is. I'll find the Master Stone if I have to dismantle the palace brick by brick." She looked around in dismay. "And you're right, we don't have the numbers for such a conquest." It took only a glance at the field to notice that Kanarekii uniforms were in desperately short supply. Without the dead, and the extra Haelians added to their number, they had no hope at all.

"There must be a cache of amber stakes nearby. Pray Rau wasn't carrying them himself when he fled."

"The tent," she said between labored breaths. "Can you get to it?"

Nhaille squinted into the sun. Between them and Rau's tent, the ground was thick with writhing bodies. "I have no choice. We need that Amber."

"I'll come with you."

"Riordan, you can't."

"Damned if I'll leave you to fall here in Kholer," she said viciously. Plunging into the fray, she swung the Sword in a wide arc before her, leaving Nhaille no choice but to follow.

On the field, the dead hacked at the Haelians with anything they could lay hands to. Can't all be my influence. Could it be that on some subconscious level the dead recognized those that had enslaved them and now wanted revenge? Revenge and the promise of eternal rest thereafter.

The sword came from out of nowhere. Instincts instilled by years of Nhaille's relentless training took over. Riordan swung.

Blade pierced armor. She clenched her teeth, terrified to give into the pain and lose her hold on the dead army. Her pain raised the Sword's bloodlust to new heights. She swung, the effort tearing at the edges of the wound. The soldier's scream cut through the air and

clove her mind.

Detached, she watched as the Sword sucked up the puddle of life, then she fled toward the black tarp buffeted by the wind. Behind her she heard Nhaille swearing as he followed her.

The tent loomed before her. They ducked into the darkness inside.

"It's not deep," Riordan said to Nhaille's grim expression of concern. She felt beneath the leather of her armor to be sure. The wound would need a couple of stitches, but at least her sword arm was uninjured.

Kanarekii soldiers flowed in behind them, securing Rau's cache for Kanarek. She caught Penden's shadow against the brightness of the doorway and motioned him forward.

Riordan moved blindly forward in the darkness of the tent. Penden found a torch and lit it. Strange to be rifling through Rau's personal affects. There were surprisingly little of them for a person of his station.

His packs turned up nothing but clothing. There was nothing on the table by the cot. Nothing at all that might hold the fragments of the Mother Stone that could enslave the dead.

Riordan impaled a space of earth with the Sword of Zal-Azaar. Fiercely, she reined in her frustration. It took only a moment's lapse to leave the dead army open to rebellion.

"Nothing," Nhaille said. She could hear fatigue and pain in his voice.

"They have to be here. There's no way Rau could have had that much Amber with him. "

She moved toward the cot, intent on throwing off the covers just in case Rau was crazy enough to sleep with the Amber warming his bed. Her toe met something hard.

Her stifled curse brought Penden to her side. In one fluid movement he overturned the flimsy cot. Blankets fell into a heap at their feet.

Beneath the bed was a metal-bound chest.

With one sure stroke of his sword, Penden broke the lock. The contents gleamed golden in the torch-light.

Rau's cache.

Penden looked at her in askance.

"Do it," Nhaille said. "We have no other choice."

Penden motioned to the Kanarekii soldiers in the doorway, who came nervously toward the chest as if it held a deadly poison.

It made her physically sick to see her own countrymen handling the Amber shards, preparing to do to others the horrible deed that had been done to them.

No choice. Nhaille's words echoed over and over in her mind.

I may meet you in the halls of Al-Gomar after all, Rau.

"Get it over with," Riordan said.

Nhaille issued the order. Penden's men moved to obey.

The confines of Rau's sanctum were suddenly suffocating. She stepped into the sunlight, casting a worried glance at the battlefield around her. Kanarekii soldiers were already about the ugly business of creating slaves of fallen Haelians.

It's come to this. I'm sure this wasn't what you had in mind, was it, my father?

Nothing to do but the horrible deed itself. And after that there was Hael and more ugliness to come. Holding the Sword high above her head, she rallied the Kanarekii to her and plunged back into the battle.

A ghoul barred her path.

Nhaille stepped in front of her, ready to come to her aid with the last of his strength and left-handedly strike down what he took to be a stray renegade.

A sharp curse was torn from his lips. His sword fell.

It was then that she looked at the swollen, rotting face that even through the advanced stages of decay still held a trace of the regal.

"Father."

The word was a plea to be mistaken. But there was no mistaking the regal bearing, the tattered clothes that had once been cut from the finest of cloth. His one clouded eye beseeched her.

She couldn't waver. She had not the luxury. Not even now.

Riordan raised the Sword of Zal-Azaar.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Sword descended in a bright arc.

Riordan put the last of her effort into the swing to ensure her stroke was true, that she wouldn't cause him more pain than he'd already endured.

She wanted to shut her eyes and forget the sight of blood matted hair and tattered cloth. She desperately wanted to look away from that one eye that stared levelly back at her from beneath the battered diadem. But honor kept her eyes open. Someone had to witness the King's death.

Just as the Sword reached the summit of its killing stroke, the King uttered a flat moan. The flicker of a thought rushed through the Amber, then was extinguished.

With a vivid curse Riordan aborted her swing.

Muscles screeched in protest. She turned her wrist, forcing the Sword away from what remained of the King. It glanced off his shoulder in spite of her efforts. Her aim went wide, slicing through one of the ropes that secured Rau's tent. The rope snapped, one side of the tent sagged. The Sword connected with hard earth, coming at last to a stop. Its fury ricocheted through her mind.

Riordan brought her eyes up slowly, afraid to look into that terrible face that beseeched her to do...

What?

Even in the advanced stages of decomposition there was no mistaking the iron will behind that look, nor the temper he'd vented on his youngest child at their one and only meeting.

He can't possibly know me. It's been years since he's laid eyes on me. He's been too long...dead.

Yet there was recognition in that one decaying eye that looked so desperately back at her. Imploring her to do what? End his suffering? Allow him one last swipe at the nightmare that had ended his rein and reduced his kingdom to rubble? She could only guess.

"My Liege."

Riordan turned at the sound of Nhaille's hoarse whisper to find him kneeling stiffly in the dirt before his King. She caught the grimace of pain as he straightened, noted his pallor even in the hot sun.

A million thoughts clamored for dominance in her mind. She had to get Nhaille to safety, she had to focus her attention on keeping the dead in line. The Sword's cool flame licked at the back of her mind, demanding the blood she'd so nearly given it. Her

concentration leapt from one task to another, desperately attempting to juggle them all. Nhaille shot her a puzzled crosswise glance. Plainly he expected her to get on with the terrible deed.

"End his suffering, Riordan." The words were torn from Nhaille's throat, strain evident in each syllable. He swayed on his feet, caught himself and managed to hold himself rigid.

"No, he--"

"You must! In Nuurah's Name, ease his pain."

"He doesn't want me to."

The expression on his face told her he suspected she'd taken leave of her senses. "He can't possibly know--"

"But he does. Look at him."

Nhaille looked incredulously from father to daughter. Plainly whatever she saw in her father's face escaped him. "This is a travesty! Free him from this unspeakable existence."

But through the Amber came the quiet certainty that above all that wasn't what the King wanted.

"Kayr..." At the sound of his given name, Nhaille's eyes flickered toward the King, as if his liege might guess the secret of what transpired between the Captain and his ward. Riordan grasped his arm gently, wary of his injuries. "I can feel his thoughts through the Amber. Peace isn't what he wants. At least not yet."

"Riordan..." Compassion softened his face. Plainly, he thought her incapable of the task. "There isn't anything left of his mind to think, to desire anything with."

"But there is. In the depths of what's left of his mind he knows I command the Amber, that I've brought home the Sword of Zal-Azaar. He wants to keep fighting. He doesn't want me to have to conquer Hael alone."

For an instant, Nhaille looked as if he might actually lose his iron-clad composure. Then the armor around his thoughts was in place once again. "You aren't alone, Your Majesty." How could he misunderstand what was so plain for her to see?

"He wants revenge, Nhaille. One last swipe at Hael. And I can give it to him."

"You can't possibly know what his wishes would have been."

"But I do." Deep inside, she did. It was what she would want. Through their kinship she understood that much. And yet, something else nagged at the back of her mind.

Riordan sent her awareness down the flicker of the Amber's path, out toward that single soldier in the army of the dead. Felt the certainty of her father's thoughts. Dulled by

death, ravaged by the process of decay, nevertheless, something of his indomitable will remained. In his sluggish brain a spark of hope sprang to flame.

"End it, Riordan." His eyes implored her. "I can't bear to see him like this."

"He doesn't care. All he wants is his revenge. His last wish, Nhaille. Let him fight."

The Captain looked quickly from the dead King to his Queen.

"What more can a few days hurt?" Riordan asked.

Around her battle sounds rose to the forefront of her attention. They'd been too long at this. Father or not, she had battles to win. In his name.

"And we need every soldier we have. Dead or alive."

"Riordan!"

"Above all, he wants me to triumph over Hael."

Time to end this discussion. The war would not wait.

"That is the one of his wishes we are both certain of," she pressed.

"But leaving him like this--" Nhaille looked back at his King.

"If Hael wins his death will have been for nothing."

Kanarekii soldiers crowded in around them, protecting their Queen. The ranks of Haelian soldiers thinned with each passing minute, as one by one they disentangled themselves from the fighting and made off after their fleeing commander. But Rau being absent did not mean he had vanished nor that he was beaten. One lapse of concentration, one moment when her mind wandered elsewhere, and the entire course of battle could change.

"Gods know what awaits us in Hael," Nhaille said finally in eerie sync with her thoughts.

Riordan nodded soberly. Gods knew, indeed. Her hand tightened on the Sword's crystal hilt. She flung her mind back into the Amber's inferno.

It was like trying to control chess pieces scattered haphazardly across the board. Each move left a searing trail of fire in her mind. And all the while the Sword's cool fury burned like ice, aching to be appeased, urging her to throw common sense and strategy to the wind.

She sent the full force of her will sailing down the invisible wires of the Amber's web, urging the dead to put the sum of their strength into one last burst, one last consolidated strike against what was left of the forces of Hael.

They were winning. Haelian soldiers now staffed the dead army. Could the irony be blacker? Riordan wondered. I've come to the last of my options and past. When all is said and done, will the history books paint me any less sinister than Doan-Rau?

* * *

Filthy and tired beyond belief, Rau scrambled back to Hael like a rat. Only revenge kept him putting one foot in front of the other. Enduring the pointed glares of his countrymen, he contemplated his father's wrath to come.

He'd botched matters beyond redemption. His only hope lay in the Amber's Master Stone. Crawling back to Hael defeated would be intolerably hard to stomach. But in the end he would triumph. Failure was not an option he cared to contemplate.

And once he was victorious, then he would deal with Kanarek's Queen.

Vividly, he imagined the jagged stake of amber slicing through the jelly-like material of her eye. Embedded in her brain, its magic would quash her will once and for all. She'd be his.

For eternity.

His slave. To do with as he pleased.

The thought brought a tight smile to Rau's lips.

He'd make her pay. For his broken dreams. For making him look like a fool. For the ruin of a plan that should have gone smoothly, would have, if not for Riordan-Khun-Caryn.

Like a prized piece of art, he'd display her in his suite, perhaps even in the garden in the summertime.

In a tiny portion of her mind, she'd know what had been done to her. That was the sweetest part of it. She'd know, during the long months it took her mummified body to decay past the point of usefulness, she'd be aware of all he did to her. And forced her to do.

Driving a sword through Kayr-Alden-Nhaille would be her first order. She loved him. Even hidden beneath the cold exterior with which they conducted themselves, he could tell. The knowledge, if one cared to look for it, was in every glance.

After the murder of her lover, who knew. Uses for Kanarek's late Queen were endless.

Oh yes, he'd make her pay. The knowledge kept him going. That, and the thought of laying hands at last to the Amber's Master Stone, feeling its hungry fires once again in his brain.

Riordan-Khun-Caryn would lead her army to him. Rau sprawled beside a stream. Cold, black water splashed against his face, reviving him. All was not lost. Did Kanarek's Queen really think she could beat him with the Master Stone under his command?

She'd march them all right into Hael. Right into his hands: the cadavers, and the Kanarekii army. Knowing Riordan she'd march them straight into Hael and right up the steps of the palace. Into his control.

With the hungry roar of the Amber hot in his blood, he'd turn the tide of battle in his

favor. Seizing the dead once again for his own, he'd add the figures of Kayr-Alden-Nhaille and the legendary Riordan-Khun-Caryn to his army.

An example to anything else that lay in his path, anything else he fancied to claim for his own. A last demonstration to his father, who steadfastly refused him the throne.

Yes indeed he thought, taking another long drink of cold water, then rising. There were uses for Kanarek's Queen and her oh-so-loyal Captain.

* * *

A new voice sounded in his mind. Compared to the other which had lodged like a knife in his brain, this new voice offered a more gentle persuasion. No less insistent, however. Command after command poured into his mind.

VENGEANCE! This new order was sweetened with promise, turning his thoughts toward justice. It pledged that their suffering would not be forgotten. It offered an end to their torment. Bevan trusted this new authority.

The other mind that had touched his was chaotic, fragmented like broken glass. This one was vibrant, strong. Young, he thought. For a moment he remembered the feel of the young, limber body that had been his. Pain rushed in behind that memory, but the notion fled his mind, replaced by that compelling voice.

A Haelian soldier reared before him. A sword whistled past his ear, slicing into his shoulder. The impact knocked Bevan sideways. Memory insisted there should be pain. Instead there was only that cloudy nothingness. Dull surprise shook him from the nebula of his scattered thoughts.

FIGHT!

Bevan raised his axe and swung. The blow sliced through the Haelian's helmet, lodging deep into his brain. He fell, letting go of the sword still embedded in Bevan's shoulder. His hand clutched Bevan's arm. Bevan looked down, peering out of one eye, now nearly blind. The shadowy shape fell away from him. Slowly, the hand loosened, trailing down his legs before the Haelian crumpled to the ground. With a flat grunt, Bevan stooped and yanked his axe from the dead soldier's head.

More shapes crowded in beside him. Through dim eyes he recognized Kanarekii armor. The ghostly shapes stooped over the fallen Haelian. Bevan lowered his sword and waited, knowing from some deep recess in his mind, these were allies, not foes.

Kanarekii, his brain offered the flicker of a thought. Like me.

Kanarekii defending themselves against the evil that had turned him into this shambling, dead thing. Kanarekii trying to right a terrible wrong.

He watched numbly as the soldiers bent over the dead Haelian. One hefted a mallet. Turning his head, the soldier drove the point of an Amber stake into the Haelian's brain.

Each strike of the mallet reverberated in Bevan's brain. Over and over the mallet fell. He staggered, reeling away from the horror his body remembered, even if his mind refused.

And then it was over. Kanarekii soldiers moved on to see to the next Haelian victim. Bevan watched helplessly as his former Haelian foe rose to take his place in battle beside him.

More Haelian soldiers stood beside him as allies than in the battle against them. It meant something, something that ought to be significant.

Kanarek was winning. His desperate bid for vengeance hadn't been in vain. For the first time in this wretched existence, Bevan had hope.

The mind that touched his before had been self-absorbed, lost in its own shattered thoughts. But this entity was single-minded, persistent.

KEEP FIGHTING! it ordered. WE WILL WIN, it promised. AND THEN YOU CAN REST.

Bevan marched forward, the Haelian's lost sword still lodged in the rotting flesh between his neck and shoulder.

Beside him dead soldiers in Haelian and Kholer armor marched together into battle against the last of Rau's army.

#

The bite of antiseptic tore a hiss from Nhaille's lips. Everything ached to the depths of his bones. He felt as if the entire Haelian army had ridden over him.

Weak from the loss of blood, he longed to surrender to the potent liquor Penden offered as a painkiller and go to sleep. But he couldn't risk muddying his brain in case Riordan needed him.

"That's going to need stitching," Penden said with an appraising whistle. Cleaned of blood the wound didn't look any less gruesome. A jagged tear cut through the muscles of his shoulder, which was already stiffening beyond use.

I'm getting too old for this.

Damn, he thought. Damn the cold and the damp ground. Damn the war that came too long after his youth. Damn the wound that would likely cost him the use of his right sword arm. Damn it all, he couldn't die just yet.

Somehow he had to find a way to stay in the saddle a few more days.

Peering over his shoulder, Riordan winced at the sight of his mangled arm. Penden rummaged in his pack for a needle and sutures. Riordan pressed the wineskin closer.

Nhaille shook his head. "We have not the time. We should already be on the march to Hael."

"And kill us all from exhaustion? The men are weary, and so am I. We fought hard today. We're deserving of a couple of hours rest to patch our wounds."

She was bandaged herself, her armor hanging open so as not to chafe the wound. Though lines of strain creased the corners of her eyes and tightened her mouth to a grim line, injury hadn't slowed her down much. She'd sat through Penden's ministrations, jaw set, teeth clenched tight together. Not a sound from her, even as the needle pierced her flesh. Even after the effort of wielding both the Amber and the Sword, she was still milling among the ranks, offering words of praise and encouragement, worrying after Strayhorn who'd bolted when she was thrown from the saddle.

Riordan, he noted, hadn't drunk from Penden's wineskin, either.

He'd known this day would come. He'd trained her for duty, prepared her as best as he could to command an army. He'd tried to prepare himself for the day when she would be his commander. Now that day had arrived, he was reluctant to relinquish the post.

It didn't help that the Queen was fussing over him as if she was his nursemaid instead.

And he was but an aging soldier, a man twice her age who had no business doing what he'd done with his liege. Dark thoughts led him to the realization that it could never work. Assuming they survived the war, Riordan would ride home victorious, to rebuild Kanarek and reign as its Queen. He would be nothing but a crippled war hero.

Nhaille looked back at Riordan and was shocked to find her smiling.

"Look!"

He sighted down the line of her arm, wondering what could possibly amuse her. Hills dyed crimson in the setting sun were dotted with moving black specks.

"It would seem Hael doesn't care for our company."

Haelian soldiers, racing back toward Hael and the sanctuary of the Master Stone.

"We did it!"

They'd won at least this first battle. His duty was done, he realized. Riordan commanded the army. Riordan made the decisions. He was but a foot soldier. That thought mingled with pain blackened his mood further.

"Riordan, it was but one battle. Do not forget that Hael still awaits us." He moved to rise, to drag himself back upon his horse and ride toward Hael himself if she refused to listen to reason.

"I haven't forgotten." She pushed him gently back down. "But I'll see you patched back together first, Captain."

Penden had the needle ready. The sharp penetration of metal into his flesh made him grind his teeth. Another pain to be endured on top of the numbing agony that cut from shoulder to wrist. Nhaille shut his eyes, leaned back against her as the last of his strength

left him. He heard Penden's grunt of dismay as he attempted to close the ragged wound, felt the press of the wineskin against his lips.

And surrendered to the oblivion it offered.

* * *

The trumpet blasted through pain-clouded thoughts. Nhaille grasped left-handed for his sword, getting it half way out of his scabbard before consciousness dawned.

"You don't need the sword." A cold hand closed around his. He started, recognizing Riordan as the shadow that bent over him in the predawn light. "It's just the morning signal."

It didn't look like morning. The horizon had barely turned from indigo to gray. Rain seemed likely. Though she moved stiffly, still favoring the wounded side of her chest, the damp and the darkness didn't stop Riordan. Already she was dressed in full armor, the Sword slung about her hips, the Amber's power stone still lodged in her belt. It had taken nothing short of outright threats to get the Riordan he used to know out of bed. The Sword's hunger spurred her on. Or maybe it was just a headlong rush at destiny after all those years of waiting.

She walked now through uncharted territory. There was no longer any useful advice he could give. He didn't know what it felt like to have a million souls clamoring in his mind, tearing him up inside. He wanted to reach out to her, to take her in his arms one last time, regardless of the pain that radiated out from his shoulder in a shower of needles, regardless of what the soldiers around them thought. He wanted to shelter her, if only for a moment, from the consequences that awaited her. But Riordan moved like a woman possessed, with her father's single-mindedness

Fatigue weighed every muscle as he got to his feet. Sleeping on the cold ground only added to the agony in his shoulder. The weight of years of planning and weeks of worry descended on him in one massive stroke.

Gods Arais! Whatever made you think I could do this? But a young man never thought of the reality of approaching middle age. A young man never thought beyond the next moment, beyond the glory of being the recipient of the King's great faith.

Riordan walked among the men as if she'd been commanding an army all her life. And they regarded her with the awe due a legend come to life.

Movement caught his eye. Nhaille turned to find Riordan standing at the edge of the summit, the stake of Amber in her hand. Below them, the army of the dead marched out toward Hael.

He watched them go, fallen Haelians, Kanarekii in stages of decay too advanced to be recognizable, newly-dead Kholeran. If he looked long enough, the King would pass below them and he would have to look again on his dear friend's walking corpse.

Jewels caught the setting sun. Remarkably, the diadem still perched on the King's head, turning Nhaille's gaze in his direction.

"Let him go."

He became aware of Riordan standing beside him.

"Leave him be, Nhaille. He's made his choice. This is what he wants."

When had it happened, this strange reversal of roles? When had Riordan become the commander and he her loyal servant?

Relief flooded him. The decisions were no longer his to make alone. The course of the war no longer lay in his hands.

One of the soldiers led their horses toward them. It seemed Strayhorn had been found. The warhorse didn't look any worse for the ordeal he'd suffered.

"We must go," she said softly. "As you advised me at some length earlier, Hael will not wait for us."

Nhaille watched the King march past him until his lurching form was lost among the leagues of his fellows.

"No," he agreed, mounting stiffly onto Stormback's saddle. "Hael most certainly won't."

He was bone tired as never before. The biggest battle of Nhaille's career lay before him. Perhaps it was his wounds, or maybe seeing Arais in the ranks of the dead, weeks more decayed than last time. Or perhaps it was seeing the child he'd raised step into his footsteps without so much as ripple.

Kanarekii soldiers poured over the hilltops, down into the highway. The remnants of the Haelian and Kholeran army staggered after them. She had become everything he'd hoped she would, he thought with a shiver of revulsion and admiration. The army of the dead flowed before her, more smoothly than it ever had for Doan-Rau.

Shraal blood burned in her veins. The innocent child he'd known was forever lost, replaced by a wild-eyed woman he scarcely recognized. A woman who could wield the Sword that felled the kingdom of Bayorek--and then abandon herself with as much fervor to their love-making.

Nhaille shuddered again in the cold dawn air. From his hilltop perch, he watched as the army chewed up the ground before it, each footstep taking them closer to the destiny that awaited them in Hael.

He stood on the precipice of great events.

And he no longer had the stomach for any of it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hael. The city crouched on the horizon like an animal poised to spring.

Riordan reined in and looked up at the towering spires. In the tallest of those towers was Doan-Rau. And somewhere in the labyrinth of winding corridors was the Amber's hiding place. Before the day was done, she'd have destroyed them both. Or died.

Not the best mood in which to greet the morning. Beside her Nhaille looked up at the great towers with the same trepidation. Riordan suspected it was only his iron will that kept him on his horse during the long ride from Kholer. Deep down she feared the day's fighting would be the end of him. But he refused to leave her side, even after the most elaborate of her threats. And she didn't want the men to witness any more of their quarrels.

The army collected uneasily behind them. Riordan slammed down her visor, trapping her fears inside, away from prying eyes. She didn't want the men to sense the raw fear within her.

Above them, Hael waited.

Unlike Kanarek, whose wide avenues she had memorized through the map Nhaille kept hidden in the root cellar, Hael had a claustrophobic opulence. Dark streets doubled back upon each other in an order that defied comprehension. Buildings perched upon each other, monuments to different ages, different architects. Leering above the poverty of the lower streets, the towering palace took up the horizon. Its gilded roof was a sharp contrast to the bowels of the dark crowded streets below.

Massive wooden gates were slammed shut against them. Archers by the dozen manned the walls.

Just beyond range.

"We just can't go riding up to the gates," Riordan mused. "Once Rau knows we're in range, he'll bring out the Master Stone and the army will be his."

Nhaille studied her fiercely. "I know what you're thinking, Riordan. And I like it not one bit."

She studied Nhaille sitting rigid with pain atop Stormback. Though she was prepared to die in battle, now that the moment had come, she found she couldn't send Nhaille into battle to die. Love has weakened me, she thought. But I don't regret it, not one bit. However, if the Captain guessed her line of thinking he'd be furious.

"We have no other choice," she said aloud. "Only I can destroy the Amber. If we announce our presence to the entire countryside, Rau will have this battle won in a matter of minutes." Imitating Nhaille, she finished, "And I like that line of thinking not one bit."

Nhaille drew his mouth into a grim line but didn't refute her orders. When had things changed between them? she wondered. When had the Captain started taking orders instead of giving them?

"Nhaille, I have to go in there myself. There's no other way."

"I'm coming with you."

"No!" She couldn't humiliate him in front of the men. She couldn't order him beyond the lines of battle because of his injuries. "I need you here. In case I fail."

In case Rau captures me. In case I become a foot soldier in the army of the dead. His grim expression told her she didn't need to say the words aloud.

"No." The finality in his tone brooked no argument. Apparently, the Captain wasn't taking orders so well, after all.

"I need you out here to create a distraction. Give the archers something to do while I'm trying to find a way in."

He frowned, and she knew her logic was sound. He didn't need to like the idea to carry out her orders. But was he strong enough for the task she had in mind? Riordan weighed her options and decided she had no choice.

"Here!" She slid the Power Stone from her belt. Nhaille's eyes widened. He backed Stormback sharply away in reflex.

"Your Majesty, have you lost your mind!"

"Most probably weeks ago. But one lunatic knows another. Only a maniac can deal with Doan-Rau."

"Absolutely not!"

She crowded Strayhorn in beside him. "You must take it, Nhaille. If I'm carrying it, Doan-Rau will know my every move. With you at the gate, controlling the Amber, he'll be distracted from my movements with the Sword. Hopefully until it's too late."

"They'll tell him you're not with us."

"No they won't."

He looked at her then as if she were more insane than Rau. "And why is that?"

"Because they will think I am with you."

She glanced around for Nhaille's cousin. "Coren-Nhaille-Penden!"

Penden looked up in surprise. "Your Majesty?"

"Your helm and cloak, Soldier."

They were both staring at her now, as if she'd taken complete leave of her senses. With one last questioning look at her outstretched hand, Penden handed over his helmet and

undid the clasp of his cloak. Silver-blond hair gleamed white as the sun as she removed her helm and fastened Penden's beneath her chin. She handed her own to Nhaille's cousin, who took it and wordlessly donned it along with her cloak.

A tight fit, but he crammed it down over his ears and regarded her nervously.

"You will ride beside Nhaille on Strayhorn."

He dismounted. With a questioning glance he handed the reins to Nhaille.

"Do as Her Majesty orders," Nhaille said curtly as she swung down from Strayhorn's back.

The warhorse objected to a strange rider. He tossed his head, threatening to unseat the unfortunate Penden.

"Easy." Riordan snatched at the reins. The majestic beast snorted at her, plainly unhappy about this new arrangement. But he calmed at her gentle words and permitted Penden to sit astride him. Riordan swung up onto Penden's horse.

Amber flashed, a golden knife in the sunlight. "I wouldn't ask, Nhaille, not if there was any other way. If we march straight into Hael all will be lost." She held the golden knife out toward him. "You know the lore as well as I do. And there is no one I would rather trust with my kingdom or my life."

"I am not of Shraal lineage," Nhaille insisted, staring at the blade as if touching it would scald him. "I was never meant to command the Amber. Remember what happened with Larz."

"I haven't forgotten. But it is only for a couple of hours at most."

"Against the Master Stone, against a mind like Doan-Rau's I will be lost."

"Hopefully it won't come to that." Riordan gazed at the gates that barred their way. "And if it does we may be marching side by side in Rau's army on our way to conquer Golar."

The gravity of that comment got through to him. Nhaille reached for the Amber.

Only his quick intake of breath betrayed his surprise. Riordan remembered her own first contact, the terrifying sensation of dead minds pressed against her consciousness and pitied him.

"Focus your thoughts," Riordan said. "Do not let it steal too much of your strength. The dead require constant guidance, not brute force."

Nhaille's eyes narrowed as he concentrated. Riordan watched him closely. He seemed to be bearing the strain well enough. Hold on just a little longer, she thought desperately. If I'm successful, then we can all go home. But in order to do that, first she had to destroy the Master Stone.

"Start making a commotion. Get their attention on the gate and not on the soldier sneaking in the back door. Keep the men back. Let them underestimate the numbers in

our ranks, thin as they are. Put the dead on the front line."

He nodded, his eyes creased at the edges in concentration, his jaw set against the mental agony and the physical pain of his wounds.

"May Moraah, Goddess of Courage shine upon us. "

"And on you, Riordan."

Not her formal title this time, betraying the fact that Nhaille was desperately afraid. We may never see each other again. She thrust the thought from her mind. Please be all right, Nhaille. Riordan straightened Penden's loose helmet on her head. "See you soon."

"Wait!" Penden urged the reluctant Strayhorn up beside her. Reaching down into his boot, he drew his dagger. "For luck, Your Majesty."

"For luck," Riordan repeated and slid Penden's dagger into her own boot.

He offered her a tight smile, then turned away to carry out her orders. Riordan cast one last look back at Nhaille's back, stiff against the burden he carried and her spiked helmet bobbing on Penden's head. She put the spurs to his horse and headed back into the scrubby foliage for a scouting mission about the periphery of Hael.

* * *

"Enemy at the gate!" The cry rang through the palace. Rau ran for the balustrade. Beyond the city gates he could just make out the black forms of men assembling. A booming thud resounded off the towers. Riordan-Khun-Caryn knocking at his front door. He'd expected as much. The outright challenge was very much her style, as it had been her father's before her. Not much subtlety to the Khun-Caryn clan. Just as he'd thought, the Kanarekii had not one whit of sense when it came to strategy. Did you really think you could win against me, here on my own ground?

Another ominous boom sounded across the square. Apparently so. Desperation obviously clouded her thinking. An easy battle. One soon over. He could feel it in his bones.

He turned back from the wall, heading in the direction of the castle's inner-most chamber, with its hidden treasure. His father would be shouting for his presence in a matter of seconds, but before he dealt with the King and his entourage of dithering old fools, a moment's reflection was needed.

Shouting came from all directions. Men thundered down the stone stairs, racing for their bows, their swords, and their horses. He spied his father's steward in the halls below and ducked down another passageway. Soon enough he'd have to deal with the I told you so's, soon enough he'd have to listen to his father's endless list of recriminations. If he must face his father's disapproval, he might as well have all the facts. Facts even the keen-eyed watchmen on the wall couldn't give him.

Rau unhooked a large brass key from his belt. The heavy door swung inward. Though

the stone chamber had no windows, the center of the room glowed with gentle amber light. He stepped into its radiance.

Soothing waves of welcome washed over him. He opened his mind, admitting the Amber's touch. Since he'd fled Kholer, the emptiness had roared its silence in his mind. It was as if something vital had been cut away from him and he keenly felt its loss. He stretched out a hand, laying it flat against the Amber's warmth.

Heat seared into his palm, rushing upward through his veins into his heart, into his mind. Rau allowed his consciousness to flow outward with it, down the invisible strings that bound him to the soldiers in the army of the dead.

Clustered at the gate, he felt their failing minds and quickly laid his own will over them. But the mind that defied him was stronger than he'd ever imagined. With indomitable will it held to the pathetic minds of the dead, urging them forward into his territory, into his father's kingdom.

Rau cursed viciously. He felt further, testing the barriers of that mind that blocked his efforts like a stone wall. The power stone he could feel, a bright gleam among the dim minds of the dead. And yet, somehow it didn't feel like Riordan, though it certainly held the stamp of her stubbornness. Rau sent his consciousness further still, searching after the Sword's cool brilliance. Nearby, he was certain of that. As his father had proclaimed, the Kanarekii heir had brought the abomination to their very gates.

Was it the Sword that allowed her to hold on to those pitiful failing minds with such tenacity? Had she found some way to combine the two magics? The thought left him trembling.

No matter, he thought with renewed purpose. He had the Master Stone. He would win out over the pathetic numbers of the Kanarekii rebellion.

Rau placed both hands against the Amber and flung the full force of his will against the forces of Kanarek.

* * *

There had to be a way in. Riordan peered through the dense screen of branches at the stone wall that blocked her passage. A chip in the masonry, enough to get a foothold. Something. Anything!

And what of the guards on the wall?

Nothing was impenetrable. She'd scaled the magenta mountains.

She crawled deeper into the foliage, leading Penden's horse behind her. Just a couple of chinks in the stonework and a lucky arrow from one of the Kanarekii archers to take down the guard, that was all she needed. Behind her she heard the resounding boom of Kanarek's battering ram working on the city gates.

Retain control, Nhaille. Just a few moments longer, long enough for me to scale the

wall.

It was all a matter of timing. Hers, Nhaille's, Rau's. She poked her head out of the brush, sighting a patch of deeper shadow in the wall's pattern.

The tempo of the battering increased. Heads turned in the direction of the gates. Riordan crawled from her hiding place, keeping low in the deep grass. A few more feet, just a few more feet and another distraction. She was almost at the wall.

Standing in its shade she looked up at the soldiers on the battlements above her. A loud splintering echoed across the city. Heads turned. Bows cocked.

Just the distraction she'd wished for. Riordan sprang. Grass rushed by under her feet. She flattened herself against the wall. Shouts ricocheted above her. She wedged the toe of her boot into the stone and grasped the chipped masonry.

Each reach tore at the edges of her wound, making each move a silent agony. She felt blood seeping through the material of her shirt to rest in a sticky pool against her leather armor. Riordan ground her teeth against the pain and hauled herself upward. Boots pounded the stone above her. Riordan sucked in her breath, pressing herself flat against the wall. Just a few feet more.

Keep them occupied, Nhaille! Just a few moments more. I promise I'll never ask another thing of you again.

Almost there. She scrambled higher.

Shouts drew her eyes downward in spite of her vow to keep going no matter what. There ground swayed precariously below her. Framed by her booted feet, she caught a glimpse of black-uniformed Haelians arranged in a neat line. The army of the dead poured through the gates like putrid swamp water overflowing. A modest number of Kanarekii poured in after them. The dead came to an abrupt stop. For several seconds they seemed to hesitate. Then, as she watched helplessly from above, they turned on their Kanarekii masters.

No! The entreaty echoed in her mind.

Groping fingers located the ledge above. She dug in her nails and hung there.

"Hey!"

Hauling the rest of her body up behind her, Riordan lunged, getting an arm and one leg across the ledge before a handful of Haelians descended upon her. She flung herself across the ledge.

She rolled, hitting the stone floor, wedging her feet beneath her. In one fluid movement, she tore the Sword from its scabbard. It whistled through the air as she brought it down in one sweeping arc.

The first soldier tumbled headless to the stone.

No time for the Sword to savor its kill, she cut up and out, taking down the next. He fell to his knees, clutching his abdomen. Boots sounded on the stone behind her and she whirled, catching yet a third through the heart.

Bodies, souls poured into the Sword and vanished. Jumbled dying thoughts, ran together in her mind. From further down the balustrade black-clad warriors rushed toward her.

Riordan dove for the shadow of a doorway. Leather boots slid against the smooth stone stairs beyond. She caught the doorway, righting herself even as she skidded down the stairs.

So where is it, Rau? Somehow she'd expected him to be waiting at the gate to greet her personally. Oh Gods! Please don't let him have been there when Nhaille came through.

The stairway led into the bowels of the castle. Inward. She was certain the Amber's hiding place lay at the center of the fortress. Rau would never trust his treasure to an outer wall.

Shouts bounced off the stone walls, overlapping, until she couldn't tell if they came from above or below. Boots thundered on the stairs. She ducked into another corridor, relieved to find it empty. Flattening herself against the indentation of a doorway, she held her breath as a troop of Haelian warriors rushed past, weapons drawn.

She glanced out into the corridor. All the action seemed to come from the square beyond. Riordan continued down the hall, away from the stairs that belched a continuous stream of warriors into the stairwell.

"Invader in the castle!"

Shouts echoed in the passageways above her. Riordan crouched in another doorway.

I don't have time for this. Are you still there, Nhaille?

A sideways glance around the doorframe showed a lone Haelian soldier scouring the passageway. She hugged the wooden door, pressing herself flat against the rough wood. Footsteps came closer. Her hand tightened on the Sword's cool crystal handle.

He drew even with the doorway. Riordan raised the Sword. Another thought occurred to her and she drew the dagger from her boot instead. Soft footsteps whispered against the tile.

Riordan leapt into the hallway.

He brought his sword up in a last ditch parry. She blocked the blow with the Sword and cut in with the dagger. Blood bubbled up over the soldier's collar. In her mind, the Sword screamed in fury at having been denied.

She bent over the still body, tearing at the black jacket and helm. The soldier moaned once, then was still. Cursing, she wrestled his arms from the jacket. His helmet was an even worse fit than Penden's, but she took it anyway. Stuffing the soldier's arms into her

own jacket, she crammed Penden's helmet on his head and fled down the hallway.

At the far end, another flight of stairs led downward. She scurried toward it. A stampede of soldiers rushed by, heading for the lower floors. She hung back, waiting as they passed. Taking up the rear, she followed them. Surely Rau would put extra men around the Amber's vault.

I'm running out of time!

Linking minds with the Sword's cold consciousness, she sent her thoughts outward. Dangerous. Rau would know where she was. Out of options. Nhaille's favorite turn of phrase echoed in her memory.

Flames licked the inside of her mind.

Close. Far too close. The Amber recognized a Shraal mind, called to its sister sorcery.

An invisible chain of fire led to the Amber's vault. Just as the Sword led her to its hiding place in the crystal caves, the Amber sensed her Shraal mind and called out to her.

Riordan closed her eyes, following the flaming highway in her mind.

Down another flight. Turn. Straight. Down again. She opened her eyes to find herself in the shadows of a doorway that led to a hall more fortified than the rest.

Iron hinges secured the doors. Through the stone window frames, she could see the masonry was even thicker than the higher floors. She sighted down the hall. At the far end lay a door with iron hinges.

But barring her passage stood a fence of Haelian soldiers.

Riordan jumped back. Her heart pounded hard in her chest as she waited for a battle cry that she'd been seen. Can't just run in there. Or can I? That's what they'd be least expecting. And they certainly wouldn't be expecting a soldier in Haelian uniform to come barreling in swinging the Sword of Zal-Azaar.

Surprise is our ally, as Nhaille would say.

Nhaille, are you all right? Through the Sword, she felt for the pulse of his command over the Amber. But like one voice swallowed by the wind, she could sense nothing beyond the storm of the Master Stone's power.

In that moment she would have gambled her kingdom for the assurance of Nhaille's safety. And he'd kill her for it when he found out.

Damn, that was the worst part of caring for someone. They distracted your attention at the most dangerous of times. Riordan yanked her thoughts back.

None of us will be safe if I don't get moving.

Riordan tucked a strand of silver hair into the loose helmet. No sense in broadcasting her presence. Cautiously, she peered around the corner. It's now or never. Time had chiseled her options down to a single action. She drew in a deep breath and stepped into the hall.

Soldiers snapped to attention, then relaxed as they saw what they assumed to be one of their own moving toward them. Riordan straightened to her full height, putting as much authority into her stride as she could muster.

Precious feet of corridor disappeared beneath her feet. She quickened her pace. A few feet more. The leader saluted. Riordan returned the awkward Haelian salute. Her pulse pounded loudly in her ears. Beneath it, she felt the Sword's hunger stir.

"You have orders to report to the command post." A poor excuse, but the best she could do on the spur of the moment.

"On whose orders?" Skeptical eyes bored down at her from beneath his visor.

Riordan reached for the breast pocket of her stolen uniform jacket. "I have them right here."

Faster than the eye could track, her hand flew downward, fastening instead on the Sword's hilt. It sailed into the open air with a clear note of defiance. In the last instant, the soldier spied the deadly blade aimed for his heart. One heartbeat too late. Blood spattered the marble hallway. The Sword drank in his life force with insatiable thirst.

Shock and horror reverberated through her mind as she sent his soul to oblivion. The metallic hiss of swords being drawn snatched her attention away.

She hauled the Sword from the unlucky soldier's chest. His body liquefied. The Sword sucked up his life force like a straw. Steel whistled past her ear. Out of instinct alone, she parried. Blade met crystal. Riordan pulled back sharply and lunged into her next attacker.

He fell toward her, his scream of terror echoing in her ears even as it tumbled through her mind. Another soul sent to the corridors of Al-Gomar, the deepest hell. She whirled, took down another. She swung again. A pair of terrified eyes peered at her above the Sword. He hesitated, just a fraction of a second, but long enough for her to get under his guard. He swung. Riordan countered. The Sword knocked the blade from his hand. And while he moved to scramble after it, she plunged the tip into his chest.

Blood bubbled up over his lips as he opened his mouth to protest. She yanked the Sword away, not even stopping to watch as the body shimmered and vanished. Another soul sacrificed to the Sword.

Riordan hauled on the iron hinged door. It creaked open. She threw her weight behind it and nearly tumbled into the room.

Diffuse, golden light drew her eyes to the center of the room. Like a giant egg, the Amber sat on its golden perch.

"So," said a voice behind her. "It comes to this."

She whirled, coming face to face with that penetrating sapphire gaze. Holding the Sword before her like a talisman, she stared him down.

"Doan-Rau. I see you made it home safely."

The forced levity took him off guard. He stared back at her, his eyes crazed. His shirt hung in a multitude of creases. His pants fared only marginally better. He hadn't thought to don his armor. Not even his helm. Tendrils of brown hair hung down about his face, the few strands still in his braid spoke of days of neglect.

"A fool you are," he growled back. "To wander in here."

"Give it up, Rau. Kholer is lost. And Kanarek is at your door."

"Are you now?" His smile was not at all pleasant. "Well, what would you say, Your Majesty, if I told you the army you so kindly returned to me is now once again under my command."

"I'd say that was a temporary situation."

Harsh laughter echoed off the walls of the chamber.

"Did you really think you could wander in here and challenge the Master Stone itself?"

She had to admit it wasn't the best of strategies.

"Did you think I wouldn't know it was your henchman, Nhaille at the gate?"

Nhaille. Her heart skipped a beat.

"His feeble mind is no match for my power."

Touch him, Rau and I'll kill you. Kanarek and the war be damned.

Rau moved to stroke the Amber's alabaster smooth side. "Wouldn't it be a tragedy if that Power Stone he carried was to slip and pierce his withered old brain."

Riordan inched toward him, Sword ready. Rau's eyes snapped up at the movement.

"What is it that you see in him?"

"You really don't understand, do you?"

"Oh, explain it to me, Your Majesty."

She moved closer still. Secure in his power, he made no move to stop her. "How is it that you came of age without any insight to the concepts of loyalty and love?" Then answering her own question, she added, "Perhaps such things don't matter here in Hael."

His eyes hardened. He was dangerous in this mood. She knew it but continued anyway. Anything to keep his attention from Nhaille and what was happening at the gate.

"One cannot rule without compassion, and greed is plainly the only concept you do understand. Did it never occur to you that is why your father denies you his kingdom?"

Fingers curled against the Amber. His eyes flashed in anger. He leapt across the space between them, stopping just short of the Sword's range.

"You think you know it all, don't you, Your Majesty? You with your talk of compassion

and loyalty. It was useless concepts like those that led Kanarek to her doom. I had expected something just a little more original from a legend."

Riordan measured the distance between herself and the Amber. Too far to cross in one leap. And there was Rau still to be contended with.

He noted the quick sweep of her eyes and smiled.

"What are you going to do, Your Majesty? Sever my throat with that crystal blade? Or did you merely come to talk?"

She let out her breath in a rush. "You're right, Rau. I am a fool, I keep holding out hope for you."

"Did you really expect me to surrender?"

Keeping the Sword trained on his breast, she threw up her other hand in frustration. "No, of course not."

"Have you no inkling of my power?" He stood stone still, studying her as if he truly did wish to understand her.

"On the contrary, Doan-Rau, I take your power most seriously."

"Then surely, you must realize you've lost."

Words sincerely spoken. As if his retreat from Kholer had never happened, as though the Kanarekii army were not battering down his gate. That was what kept Rau going, Riordan realized. He simply refused to acknowledge defeat.

"I do not intend to lose," she snapped. "Too many people depend upon me. Obligation. Another of those useless concepts."

"One of the concepts that will be your undoing."

"I don't think so."

"I do."

He strode back to the Amber. Spreading his palms flat against it, he looked up at her in defiance. "I'd wager that if that Captain of yours were to find himself under the sudden compulsion to plunge that Power Stone into his right eye, you give up the fight in an instant."

A bluff. Could be. It would be just like Rau to use the exercise to see just how fast she'd crumble.

"Ah, " Rau whispered. "You don't believe me." He gazed into the Amber's milky depths. "Behold, Your Majesty."

Within the swirling golden depths of the Amber, Nhaille's image began to form. In horrified awe, Riordan gazed at the tiny scene that appeared in the Master Stone.

Shouting, Nhaille issued orders to the men around him. It wasn't going well, she could

tell that by the way his mouth drew sternly downward at the corners. Men thundered past him. Haelian warriors followed in close pursuit. The tide of battle was turning against Kanarek. The dead turned their attention from the Haelians to their Kanarekii masters. In horror, she watched command slip through Nhaille's fingers like so many grains of sand.

Rau took in her shocked expression with a grin. "He has a pathetically weak mind."

"He is not Shraal. The curse is ours alone. How can you blame him for not being able to bear it?"

"What is this fascination of yours with the weak and pitiful? Where does it come from?"

"Yet another useless concept."

Rau smiled, and for a moment she thought she might have won him over.

"Let him go." The words were barely a whisper, a wish.

The Prince's head came up sharply. "Oh no, Your Majesty, I don't think so."

"He's nothing to you. As you say, he's no match for your power."

"To do that would be to give you everything. And I intend to take, not give."

All of a sudden she had a terrible notion of what Rau meant. "No--"

Within the golden bubble Nhaille turned toward them, as if he looked directly into Rau's sapphire gaze. The fingers that gripped the Power Stone twitched. His eyes widened, then shut tightly. Slowly, his hand began to rise.

Veins stood out against his forehead. Nhaille's traitorous arm continued to rise, up past his belt, past his breast, until he was staring in horror at the pointed end poised before his unprotected face.

His mouth tightened. His eyes flickered open. The hand gripping the amber trembled. It inched even further toward his right eye.

"Stop it! It's me you want, not him."

A dark tide of dead soldiers surged around Nhaille, cutting off his route of escape. Under Rau's control, she realized, Nhaille's command severed. Even control of his own body was lost to him.

"You misunderstand," Rau said in a tone that was almost jovial. "I want it all."

"You have it all, Rau. Stop this!"

"It's not enough. I want everything. The territory, the glory, the suffering, the misery. All of it will be mine."

A mistake. All of it. Going after the Sword. Coming to Hael. There was no hope for Rau. Rationality, mercy were beyond him. There was only one option left. To kill him.

And if she did, the soul of a madman would rest in her mind forever.

Within the Amber, the Power Stone hovered fractions of an inch from Nhaille's right eye. His knuckles whitened as he struggled to stop its progress.

"No!"

She lunged forward, bringing the Sword down in a shining arc.

Rau brought his own up in challenge. No armor, so secure was he was in his power. He put his body between her and the Amber.

Riordan swung again, meeting the steel of Rau's sword. Could he control Nhaille while he was occupied? She cast a furtive glance at the depths of the Amber.

That glance nearly cost her life.

She whirled away from the downward stroke of his sword. Dying was not an option. She had no desire to join the rest of her family in the ranks of Rau's dead.

Steel glanced off her helm. Her ears popped. The impact knocked her off balance.

Falling, she did catch a glimpse of Nhaille staring into the point of the Power Stone poised before his right eye.

Rau's sword crashed into the stone beside her head, sending a shower of stone fragments into her eyes. She rolled away, momentarily blinded. Riordan flung her mind outward through the Sword, tracking Rau by the dark glimmer of his mind against the Amber's brilliance. She swung, into the darkness, felt the impact, heard Rau's sudden cry of pain followed by a string of curses.

Riordan blinked, swung again.

He lunged after her. She darted away, leaving a swipe of singing crystal in her wake. Her aim swung wide, missing him. In that instant, she realized her mistake.

Wrong target. Pursuing Rau was a waste of time. Without the Amber to bolster him, he'd be powerless.

Rau tensed, poised for another assault.

She feinted left, pretending to swing at him again. He darted forward to meet her. But in the last second, she swung wide. The Sword recognized the target, rushed to meet it, kindred sorceries drawn together like magnets.

"No!"

The Prince flung himself between the Sword and the Amber.

Riordan hauled backward on the Sword, desperately trying to abort the swing. But the Sword, called by its sister weapon, descended like a shooting star toward the Amber.

Cleaving instead into the body of the man plastered against it.

Not even the resistance of armor to stop it, the crystal blade clove neatly through the fine cloth of his shirt and the equally poor resistance of flesh. She felt the scrape of bone separating. His scream of pain and terror jarred her nerves. Blood splashed in a crimson wave up over the Amber, splattering her face.

No! Nuurah please! Not this!

In horror she watched Rau's head tumble from his shoulders to bounce once before it came to rest on the marble floor. Sapphire eyes stared up into hers, accusing her, damning her. The mouth moved to curse her, even now. Thrown off balance, his body teetered on its heels, then crashed to the floor.

The Sword, interested now only in this new treat, swiveled slowly toward the pieces of what had been Prince Doan-Rau of Hael.

His body shimmered. She tensed, knowing what was coming and powerless to prevent it. His torso slid along the floor, pulled by Shraal sorcery toward the Sword. She felt the burst of energy as it entered the Sword and steeled herself for the next blow.

Dragged by the tendrils of its long, brown hair, Rau's head inched toward the Sword. Jewel eyes accused her still.

Doan-Rau's soul tore into her body. Riordan flung her inner defenses against the onslaught and failed. Like a rain of needles, his mind pierced hers. She staggered back against the stone wall, panting, fighting desperately for control of her own thoughts.

Laughter shattered her mind.

Well, said Rau from inside her head. An interesting predicament, Your Majesty.

She tried to shut her mind against his intrusion and found she couldn't.

And then again, it still might work. She felt the devious gears of Rau's mind turning within her own. Now that we are one, perhaps war is not necessary. We could rule together.

Rule together with Doan-Rau lodged forever in her mind, and her face to the world, carrying out his destruction.

Think of it, Riordan, Rau hissed. Think of what we could accomplish together.

She didn't need to think about it, Rau's foul thoughts were embedded in her mind. Whatever happened, she had to end it now, even if it meant her own death. Even if it meant never seeing Nhaille again.

How touching, Rau scoffed. Did you really think killing me would solve the problem?

Rau's will penetrated hers. An intrusion so swift, she had no time to fight against it.

To her horror, Riordan felt her legs moving toward the Amber. She poured the sum of her consciousness into stopping their forward motion. To no avail.

Her fingers loosened. The Sword of Zal-Azaar clattered to the floor.
Slowly, Riordan reached out and placed her hands against the Amber.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sweat ran in hot rivulets down Riordan's neck. Palms flattened against the Amber's warm surface, her face pressed against it, she had no choice but to peer helplessly into its swirling depths.

Like chess pieces frozen in amber, the battle paused. The dead waited, axes poised as if the chain of command had suddenly snapped, leaving them without orders. She searched for Nhaille, losing his image in the Amber's muddy depths.

Rau's will snapped closed about her like a fist, squeezing her own desires from her mind. Images of the battle vanished, leaving her blind. Summoning her strength, she tried to lever herself away from the Master Stone to snatch up the Sword of Zal-Azaar which lay several feet away, abandoned. Her fingers twitched against the Amber's smooth warm surface, but she couldn't pry a single one of them from Rau's control.

Rau's thoughts spun like a vortex in her mind. Moving against the current was like trying to swim through a sea of knives. His will pierced hers in a of myriad places, slicing away at her thoughts.

Sounds of the battle below them retreated in the fog of Rau's will. She felt him reach out with her mind, her hands. Riordan watched in horror as she commanded the army of the dead to turn against Kanarek.

Nuurah, help me! she thought. It is my face they will put to Kanarek's downfall. My face to Rau's destruction!

Riordan pictured herself at the front of Rau's army of the dead, leaving a trail of ruin in her wake. It would be written in the history books that Kanarek's Queen had gone suddenly mad and turned upon her own countrymen.

Ah, the irony is almost too beautiful. Rau's mocking voice boomed inside her thoughts.

Rau's will rushed out into the Amber, drowning hers in the tide of his thoughts. The dead took up their axes and turned on the meager leagues of Kanarekii warriors.

Images changed as Rau searched for new sport. And suddenly Nhaille claimed the center of her vision. Oblivious to the fighting around him, he stared, mesmerized, at the tip of the Amber stake he held in his fist. Even through the Amber's swirling depths, she could see his muscles shake as he tried in vain to move the point from his face. Inches now from his eye, he brought the point closer.

Separated by the writhing bodies of the dead, she saw Penden shouting at him, desperately trying to gain Nhaille's attention as he fought his way through the press to Nhaille's side. But the dead, fortified by Rau's will, began fighting with renewed vigor. A blockade of axes and fighting dead bodies barred Penden's way.

Horried, Riordan watched as the tip of that Amber spike moved toward Nhaille's right

eye. The Captain was weakening quickly, the strain of resisting Rau's command leeching away the small reserve of his strength. At another time, Nhaille might have been able to resist Rau's onslaught, but battle wounds, compounded by a long march, took their toll. Even through the image in the Amber's depths, Riordan could tell he'd reached the last of his strength. In seconds Rau would win. And Nhaille would join the army of the dead.

"No!" Riordan ground out the word through clenched teeth. She'd kill herself before she let that happen. She'd run the blade of Zal-Azaar across her own throat before she gave Rau the victory. Except that the Sword lay where she'd dropped it, and she could not pry her hands from the Amber to break the chain of Rau's command.

Oh no, Your Majesty, came the echo of Rau's harsh laughter. I'd never let you do that. You are to be the vessel of my revenge.

Hatred throbbed within her, a low, bass note. Riordan flung the sum of her anger at Rau's consciousness.

Too late she realized her mistake.

Rau absorbed her hatred like a sponge, expanding until he filled her mind. She gasped as his control over her tightened. Through the Amber she felt Rau reach out to deal Nhaille the final blow.

Nhaille! Dragging her consciousness away from the battle with Rau, she touched Nhaille's mind. Stop fighting him! Join with me!

Understanding dawned even as she sent Nhaille her thoughts. Rau would draw strength from her hatred, just as the Sword could use her hatred and loneliness against her. She'd told Nhaille that she had to conquer her inner demons before she could wield the Sword. She asked his help to do it and they had become lovers.

Distantly, she felt Rau's malice still chanting on the periphery of her mind, urging her to join him. Riordan ignored the seductive call of his hatred.

Within the web of the Amber's control, she felt Nhaille's weakening constitution link with hers. Drawing out his love for her, his dedication to Kanarek, she wrapped herself in it and drove it like a missile into the wall of Rau's control.

Rau faltered under the sudden change in strategy, floundering for more of the hatred that had sustained him. Riordan struck quickly. With a massive leverage of will, she shoved his mind aside.

Beneath her hand, the Amber glowed bright gold. Her will flowed down the invisible current, out into the minds of the dead. Doing so, she lost contact with Nhaille. Fear for his safety clutched at her heart, but she couldn't falter now, couldn't spare a thought for anything other than marshaling the sea of dead minds against the threat of Hael. From far away she heard the clatter of boots in the hallway beyond.

With the tide of battle turning against them, it wouldn't be long before Hael turned to the

Amber for help.

She levered herself away from the Amber long enough to snatch up the Sword. The feel of cool crystal against her hand was reassuring. Riordan sent the sum of her will out into the Amber, searching for Nhaille's consciousness.

Minds howled at her within the maelstrom of the Amber. She sent a mental shout after him. As if from a great distance, she heard his weak reply. Relief flooded her, then vanished as a multitude of feet clattered down the hallway outside.

Nhaille, have Penden send some men to the tower! I need help up here, now!

Still, she couldn't be certain he'd heard her, or that there'd be enough Kanarekii left standing to assist the Queen. Having no other choice, Riordan sent her urgent cry out through the Amber.

And called the dead toward her.

* * *

With a harsh curse, Nhaille thrust the point of the Amber dagger away from his face. Memories of the chiseled point inching closer to his eye were burned into his mind.

He could still feel his own muscles tensing to run the stake into his brain. He remembered the Amber piercing the fringe of his eyelashes, stitches bursting in his wounded shoulder as he threw the last of his strength into turning the blade away.

Then, like a rope gone suddenly slack, Rau's will had vanished. And it was Riordan screaming in his mind that he should stop.

Hot blood trickled into his armpit. Abused muscles protested, torn flesh sang with pain. He sagged against Stormback.

"Captain!" Penden grasped his shoulder and shook him hard, sending another red-hot bolt of pain down his arm.

"I'm all right," he said, which was a lie. The world spun precariously about him, threatening to send him tumbling from Stormback's saddle. Beneath his armor, blood matted the front of his shirt. He tried to see past the red haze of pain, tried to organize the jumble of thoughts in his mind.

He glanced at the Power Stone still clutched in his hand. A shudder worked its way down his spine. Every ounce of sanity urged him to toss the thing away. But it was his only link with Riordan. And he had to know whether she'd succeeded, or....

Nhaille didn't want to contemplate the alternatives. Dragging in an unsteady breath, he felt with the tentative fringes of his consciousness into the Amber.

Confusion reigned over the ranks of the dead. The insistent call for order rippled through the lines. Around him, he watched the dead army take up their weapons and turn against Hael.

So it was Riordan in control. But her mastery of the dead was tenuous. He felt the sharp edge of her panic, read her mental call for help. But there was an uncharacteristic darkness to her thoughts that he recognized immediately.

Doan-Rau. Suddenly, he understood. She'd done what he'd warned her against, what he'd prevented her from doing in the Sword's chamber. She'd killed Doan-Rau. The Prince's consciousness was now lodged in her soul.

"Nuurah have mercy!" he groaned.

To which Penden stared back at him blankly.

"Dispatch every available man to the tower," he ordered, finding his voice. "Her Majesty is in danger!"

* * *

Two powerful minds tore at Bevan's consciousness. He staggered, losing his grip on the axe he was about to bury in a Kanarekii warrior's head. With a shriek of disgust, the Kanrekii threw him off. He landed awkwardly in a heap on the ground.

Another presence seized him, desperately trying to manhandle his dying mind into submission. Then just as swiftly, it was gone, replaced by that gentler mind, the one that promised him salvation. Endless sleep.

Bevan staggered awkwardly to his feet and raised his axe to take down the Haelian warrior next to him. Haelian soldiers gazed up at the palace, sensing that unseen events had changed the course of the war. Confusion turned to dismay, dismay to horror as they found themselves on the losing side.

Terror sent them running back through the palace doors, to the last bastion of Haelian power.

The mind's hold on the dead intensified with urgency. DANGER! it warned. HELP ME! THEN YOU CAN REST.

Insubstantial dead minds tumbled like falling leaves sucked into the vacuum. The ranks of the dead flowed up the palace steps, toward Riordan-Khun-Caryn and the promise of rest.

* * *

Regulation boots thundered on the stone floor outside. The heavy door bulged on its hinges, then splintered in a rain of wooden stakes. Haelian soldiers poured over the threshold, coming to an abrupt halt as they found the room vacant of all except the silver haired woman in the stolen Haelian uniform.

Riordan set her back against the Amber, maintaining the contact Rau so desperately wanted her to lose. She drew the Sword, a silver flash in the Amber's golden light.

"Stop where you are, or you'll join your Prince in Al-Gomar." Her words bounced off the

stone walls.

Soldiers glanced at the crystal blade, then about the conspicuously empty chamber. One of them detached himself from the rest. Their Captain, she guessed.

"You cannot hope to hold the Amber. There are many more of us than you."

"You are mistaken," Riordan said. "Now that I command both Shraal weapons and the army of the dead, there are many more of us than you."

The soldier took a step toward her. Crystal flashed between them. His scream ricocheted off the stone. His fellows gaped in horror as the body shimmered and disappeared into the Sword. Riordan braced herself for the shock of his consciousness lodging inside her mind.

Join me, she heard Rau's mental whisper to his fallen countryman. With dismay, she felt this new soul link with Rau's.

Suddenly her hands were not her own. The Sword twisted back upon its arc, aiming for her own neck. Eyes widening, Riordan watched the crystal blade descend. Muscles straining, she desperately tried to abort the swing, but it sailed toward her neck, carried by her own arms.

Nhaille! Strengthened by worry for him, her thoughts leapt to her Captain. From out of the Amber's golden storm she heard his weak answer, felt the ember of his strength merge with hers. Enough to throw off Rau's swing, enough to break the Prince's concentration if only for a second.

The crystal blade sliced into the stone floor. She brought it up swiftly and swung again at the line of Haelian soldiers facing her. Her own will surged within her mind, trapping Rau in a tiny compartment and nailing him there with the force of her anger.

Riordan felt for Nhaille's consciousness, found him busy commanding Kanarekii soldiers hacking their way through Haelian lines in the lower halls of the palace.

Haelian warriors recovered themselves and surged forward. She took down the front line with a mighty slice. Their terror churned in her mind. Riordan kept her concentration focused on sweeping a wide arc to keep them from seizing her and pulling her away from the Amber. She shot another desperate mental plea to the dead.

Then in the hallway she heard it, the flat moans of the dead army. Cadavers gushed through the doorway in a rancid wave.

Kanarekii the most tattered, uniforms barely recognizable, skin withering and shrinking from the bone already showing through exposed body parts. Kholeran, the recent dead in stained uniforms and civilian clothes, their stench unbearable. Haelians the freshly dead, stained with their own blood and the blood of fallen Kanarekii.

Dead soldiers lumbered to do her bidding. She lashed out with the Sword, sending the Haelians skittering backward. No more came to their rescue. With the dead army under

her command, it seemed all hands were busy holding off Kanarek in the lower halls.

Footsteps thudded up the staircase. Riordan reached out again with her consciousness, hauling more of the dead toward the Amber's sanctuary, cutting down the Haelians that stood in their way. Kanarekii soldiers marched in their wake to create more of the dead army from their fallen Haelian enemies.

Screams rebounded off the stone hallways. The Haelians in the chamber rushed to deal with this new challenge.

And found the doorway blocked by another wall of cadavers bearing swords.

Fearing now for their own lives, Haelian soldiers fell upon them, hacking viciously into their midst. Limbs tumbled to the ground with wet, bloodless thuds. But no matter how many dead they immobilized, there were more behind them to take their place. Injured dead left to writhe upon the floor continued their assault with nails and teeth. Riordan watched with grim satisfaction as another of Rau's men went down under a mass of clutching hands. In her mind Rau was strangely silent.

The chamber was once again under her command.

Riordan cast a glance into the Amber's depths. Kanarek made steady progress through the halls, cutting through the last of Haelian ranks. She caught a glimpse of Nhaille and Penden at the front of the assault. Waves of dead soldiers followed in their wake. Dead Haelian warriors took up swords on the side of Kanarek. Lines of Haelian soldiers dwindled.

Nhaille? She felt after his essence, received the spark of his life in answer. He was weakening rapidly, will alone keeping him on his feet.

Certain to die, Rau mocked from inside her mind. Riordan flexed the muscles of her mind, squelching his thoughts as though she squeezed them in her fist. One thing left to do. Then she could destroy the Amber and Nhaille could rest.

Send Penden to the throne room, she ordered Nhaille. Secure the King's surrender!

Riordan raised her eyes from the scene unfolding in the Amber to the pathetic wraiths that held the chamber. Still as the stone itself, the dead stood facing outward, awaiting her next orders. The stench sent bile rising in her throat. Her stomach lurched, she gagged and choked back the urge to vomit.

Why am I being squeamish now? she wondered. But there was a strange rolling quality to the sickness that would not abate.

Squeamish? Rau inquired acidly. Surely not Riordan-Khun-Caryn, Warrior Queen.

Riordan shoved Rau back into that tiny pocket in her mind. A shadow moved between her and the door. She looked up to find one of the dead stumbling toward her.

Kanarekii, had to be. One of the very first. His uniform, if he'd ever had one was frayed

long past recognition. Skin hung in loose tatters from his frame. Lips shriveled back from his gums in a permanent sneer.

But as he cocked his head to see through the pitiful ruin of his face, his one good eye held a semblance of awareness. Steeling herself, Riordan met his gaze.

* * *

Bevan stared up at the shadowy figure before him. This was the mind that drew him onward, the one that shone like the sun through the gloom of his failing senses. The one that promised him salvation. A quiet dark featureless rest.

He'd done all she asked. Walked forever it seemed. Fought, killed. The prospect of oblivion was strangely seductive. Freedom, void of thought, of the shame at what he had become.

He wanted desperately to tell her these things, but his mind was a barely discernible spark in the inferno of her consciousness. The message he sent with the sum of his failing thought flamed like a dying coal then turned to ash.

She turned toward him. Eyes nearly as pale as her hair seized him, much as her mind had. Something thrummed in the depths of his consciousness, an old rhyme that played on the edges of memory before evaporating. Something significant he should remember. His jaw worked. No sound came out.

No way to make her understand.

Light played along the thing in her hand, drawing his gaze downward. A sword. Tumblers clicked in the lock on his mind. Thoughts fell into place. The Sword of Zal-Azaar. Rescue, after all.

Bevan executed an awkward bow.

Staring at the floor, he didn't see the descending Sword. The blow came at first as a surprise, then as blessed relief. The floor rushed up to meet him.

He fell bonelessly into darkness. Into the tornado that sucked him downward. Then he was staring down as if from a great height at the blackened body that disintegrated into green ooze before vanishing into the crystal sword.

There were others like him there, lost souls trapped in purgatory before being sent on to their rightful rest. His thoughts unraveled one by one, weaving themselves into the fabric of that bright mind. Death certainly, but not the quiet oblivion he'd hoped for.

PATIENCE, she said. He could almost feel her smile. IT'S NOT OVER YET.

* * *

Riordan blinked away the last of the Kanarekii's thoughts.

We have secured the throne room, came Nhaille's message, weaker now, but still maintaining control of the Power Stone. The King wishes to speak of surrender.

Can you bring him to me? I can't leave the Amber, Riordan sent back and caught the current of his assent.

The room still spun dizzily around her. Fatigue? she wondered. The strain of battle, of bearing both the Sword and the Amber catching up with her. Nhaille also weakened with every moment, the task she had given him sapping the last of his failing strength. She desperately wanted it all to be finished. With Rau in her mind, it was dangerous to think such things. Riordan shoved her thoughts out of Rau's reach.

Commotion moved toward them from down the hallway. The dead soldiers protecting her parted, forming a corridor of rotting bodies, making way for Nhaille and his procession to pass.

Riordan glanced at him and bit back a gasp. His skin was deathly pale. From the rigid way he moved, she could tell he was in a great deal of pain. He kept his feet with great effort.

Behind him came Penden and another soldier leading a white-haired man. Hael's King, she realized, though he looked anything but regal. His robes were disheveled as if it had been days since he'd had time to attend to them. Shadows ringed his eyes. She couldn't see Rau's features in his face. But the scared youth dragged behind him by two Kanarekii soldiers could have been Rau's double. Tanin-Rau, his older brother sneered within her mind.

So this was the younger son on which the King lavished so much attention. In one glance she could tell the terrified boy would never have the spine to rule a kingdom. But given Rau's tendencies for death and destruction, she could see why the King had chosen in favor of his youngest son.

Hael's King stared across the Amber at her, his eyes defiant. But then his gaze fastened instead on the Sword.

"Yes, this is the Sword of Zal-Azaar. And I am Riordan-Khun-Caryn, Queen of Kanarek."

She watched the knowledge of his defeat settle in his expression. But he offered her no more than a brief nod. "Marik-Rau," he said.

Coward! Rau shrieked at him through her mind. He is about to throw away everything I fought for.

You fought for the wrong thing, she shot back with mental viciousness. And you had not the wit to realize it.

"Your Majesty," Riordan offered the old King the slightest hint of a bow. Fear whitened his face. His lips moved, but words failed him.

He expected her to run him through with the Sword, she realized with a shock. As if I don't have enough of the House of Rau in my head already.

I'd rather not have his company, Doan-Rau said. Such animosity lay between father and son it penetrated even the barrier of death. Her heartbeat raced with the pulse of Rau's rage.

"Kanarek holds the palace and the city. Your army of the dead are now under my command. Doan-Rau is dead. The Amber is mine." Riordan laid the facts before him. Still Hael's King said nothing. "Give me your surrender, Your Majesty!"

Marik-Rau ignored her demand, asking instead, "How did my son die?"

A father's concern. She couldn't afford to be touched by his pain.

The old man is weak, Rau snarled.

"I would have spared his life," Riordan said, realizing that after all it was the truth. "But he insisted on challenging the Sword of Zal-Azaar and in doing so met his end."

Hael's king blanched another shade paler.

"I have shown more mercy than Hael showed Kanarek," Riordan said. Subtle threat lurked in those softly spoken words.

Marik-Rau's eyes flickered from the Sword to the Amber and back to Riordan. Even faced with the grim reality, it seemed he still couldn't bring himself to end it in disgrace.

He doesn't even have the courage to surrender, Rau growled in her mind. He disgusts me.

"Haelian lives are being lost with every passing second," Riordan pointed out.

"Surrender, Your Majesty, and end the killing."

A sudden shift in Rau's thoughts brought her alert. She hadn't even felt the sudden lapse of Rau's attention. She hadn't even noticed as he turned his concentration from his hatred of his father to the battle raging below. With one blow of his powerful mind, the course of the battle changed.

Suddenly Rau ruled the dead. In the halls of the palace, the dead turned against Kanarekii forces. Riordan watched in horror as even within the chamber the dead turned on their Kanarekii guards.

"Nhaille!" Riordan barely ground out his name out before the crushing weight of Rau's will squeezed the breath from her lungs. She struggled for control of the dead, for control of her own body. To her further astonishment, she felt her sword arm rising, the clear profile of the Sword swinging into action.

* * *

Like diving into a blast furnace, Rau's hatred singed the edges of her mind. Anger tempted her to answer with her own fury. But desperation forced her to exert her own calm will. Within the maelstrom, she felt Nhaille's cool certainty as he offered her the last of his strength. She reveled in it, used it.

Rau held on with a will of tempered steel.

Control slipped away from her, further into Haelian hands. Riordan tightened her grip on the Sword's hilt in a desperate attempt to keep Rau from using both the Sword and the Amber to his advantage.

Understanding hit in a blaze of light. Instead of grasping after control of the Amber, Riordan felt out through the Sword, searching after the wisps of souls it had claimed. She felt them there within the depths of its consciousness, drew them to her. Feeble minds of those that had marched in the army of the dead joined Haelians warriors who had paid with their lives for Rau's ambition. Some would not be turned, but others rushed toward her plea.

Strength rushed into her. Riordan reached out with the sum of her soul and made one last desperate grasp for control. The onslaught took Rau by surprise. She felt the momentary lapse in his concentration and poured her mental army into the breach.

Rau's mind slammed against her control. He battered the wall of their collective will, but the wall held. Slowly, they pried the Amber from Rau's grasp.

Riordan sagged back against the Amber. Glancing into its depths she found the army of the dead back in Kanarekii hands. Guards in the chamber subdued the dead. Penden's men still had Hael's King and his Heir firmly in hand. But Nhaille leaned against the stone wall as if it held him up.

"You don't hold the Amber as well as you proclaim," Marik-Rau said into the uneasy silence.

Riordan leapt across the space between them. With one swipe of the Sword, she tore through the King's robe, leaving a trickle of red blood against the velvet. "Do not forget, Your Majesty," she snarled, "that I do have sole control of the Sword of Zal-Azaar. If you don't surrender, I will send you and every Haelian citizen to the halls of Al-Gomar. And I will not stop until Hael lies in ruin, just like Kanarek."

Getting no answer, Riordan pressed the Sword deeper into his chest. Cloth tore. Blood seeped along the crystal blade.

"Surrender Father," Tanin-Rau said suddenly. He cast a worried glance at the Sword.

"Don't damn me to die on the blade of that thing."

And this is the coward he would put on the throne instead of me, Rau growled within her mind.

Riordan leaned on the blade. The king gasped in sudden pain. "What will it be, Your Majesty?"

"Hael surrenders!" he said quickly.

"Give the order," Riordan said. "Stop the fighting."

Marik-Rau nodded.

Riordan withdrew the Sword. To Penden, she said, "Take him to the balcony. See that he does give the order. Round up the rest of his advisors and throw them in the dungeon. I'm sure there is one. I can't imagine a Haelian palace without such accommodations."

Penden and his guards hauled the old king across the hallway to the balcony overlooking the square. In the Amber she watched as the fighting slowly abated. Haelian soldiers lay down their swords. She gave the order to the dead to stand aside.

Through the ruin of the door, she saw Penden dragging Hael's King and his son back down the hallway. Their weight supported the old man who, his kingdom lost, now sagged lifelessly in their arms.

"Nhaille."

His head came up, turning his haunted gaze upon her.

"My father. Have the men find him. Bring him to me."

His jaw hardened at the mention of his friend. But he nodded and gave the order. Riordan turned back to the Amber. In the depths of her mind, she felt the flicker of Rau's interest.

"Don't even think of it Rau." She placed the flat blade of the Sword of Zal-Azaar inches from the Amber's surface. "Make one move and I'll drive the Sword right through it. Don't think for a moment I wouldn't. I'm sick to the death of all this fighting, of Shraal weapons and Shraal evil."

You wouldn't, he insisted. No one knows what would happen.

"I do," she said in utter weariness. "And trust me, you wouldn't like it."

Rau was silent, though his essence seethed with anger. She wasn't foolish enough to think him beaten though. Wouldn't put it past him to make another attempt for the Amber's control in a last ditch effort to save all he'd fought for.

Riordan pressed the Sword closer to the Amber.

Movement on the periphery of her vision brought her head up sharply. She heard Nhaille's startled gasp. In the doorway stood the barely recognizable remnants of a human being.

"Father."

Slowly, he turned his face to gaze at her through the last failing vision of his right eye. Shriveled lips moved stiffly without sound.

"I've done all you asked of me," Riordan said softly. And then, "I've done the best I could."

Now isn't that touching, Rau sniped.

Kanarek's king shuffled toward her. Awkwardly, he turned his head, looking at last upon the Sword of Zal-Azaar. Withered facial muscles moved in what could have been a grimace.

Riordan felt with her mind through the Amber, searching after the last vestiges of his thoughts. But if he still had thoughts, they were lost in the maelstrom of others' minds and she couldn't spare that much of her energy. Not while Rau hung in the balance, waiting desperately for any last lapse in her concentration.

"I wish you'd told me what you wanted me to do once it was all over," she said aloud.

"Riordan--" Nhaille started to say something, then fell silent.

"I wish you told me something, anything."

If he heard her, the King made no sign. His gaze fastened on the Sword.

"You didn't think I could do it, did you?"

None of us did, Rau admitted with a hint of grudging admiration.

"Don't do this to yourself, Riordan." Nhaille's voice cut through her thoughts. "This self-torture has no purpose. None of us can change the past."

And a pity that is, Rau remarked, refusing to be quiet even now.

"You never told me what you wanted me to do about you," she told her father. "This wasn't an outcome you planned on."

"No one wants to plan for their death," Nhaille said quietly.

But the King was still staring, one-eyed at the Sword.

The Sword! Understanding hit her full force. What other outcome could there be?

For an instant their minds linked. The King bowed his head.

The Sword clove the air between them. She heard Nhaille's startled intake of breath, the wet thud as her father's head rolled from his shoulders. She shut her eyes, not wanting to look upon the further ruin of his body.

Fragmented half-thoughts poured into her mind. At last peace, she thought he said. Then his mind was silent.

Sensing her distraction, Rau's will flexed to spring.

"No!"

Riordan gripped the Sword of Zal-Azaar with both hands and swung.

A blinding flash of light erupted as it hit the Amber's surface. Then, like two magnets rushing toward each other, the Sword sliced cleanly into the stone.

The world rippled, time and space running together. Beneath them, the ground rumbled. The palace shook as if rattled in a giant hand. In her mind she heard Rau's startled

scream, followed swiftly by the shrieks of a myriad voices. Human, male and female and high airy screams of long dead Shraal poured into her mind. Jagged thoughts pierced her consciousness, ancient memories, scenes of cities long lost.

The world folded in on itself, dragging Riordan with it. Darkness emerged the victor, claiming everything.

* * *

Riordan lay on a smooth tablet of rock. Above her the sky was streaked with magenta. Sunset. Stiffly, she rose and looked out over the desert around her.

Tall spires rose from the plain in the distance. A city, but not one she knew. The diffuse half-light around her cast no shadows. Beneath her bare feet, the sand was soft and warm.

She looked down suddenly, finding the Sword still within her hand.

It didn't work, she thought, desolation overtaking her.

But then she noticed the translucent robes that swished about her legs as she walked. Opal fires ran the length of the fabric, changing spectrum as she moved. She squinted into the distance, studying the city on the horizon. Something about it was familiar. Something she should know.

Bayorek. She couldn't say how the knowledge came to be in her mind, but she knew with certainty this was the Bayorek of the legends. Before the fall of the Shraal.

I'm dead.

The thought didn't frighten her. With a deep sigh, she turned in the direction of that far off city and began to walk, dragging the Sword behind her.

Spires, twisted like rope, rose above the horizon. The gates swung open as she approached.

Inside, the city teemed with life. Tall, thin, silver-haired Shraal swarmed about their business. No one spoke to her. No one touched her. They endured her curious stares as if she didn't exist. Yet when she approached, they moved courteously aside.

Above the city, tall spires formed the upper floors of the palace. A road of crystal marked the path. Riordan put a cautious bare foot onto the strangely warm pavement and started toward it.

Unfamiliar speech wove itself in silver threads around her, snatches of the forgotten language she recognized from the historical scrolls Nhaille insisted she read. Exotic cooking smells tantalized her senses. And all the time, the waif-like Shraal drifted around her, as if they merely sensed rather than felt her.

Palace doors admitted her into a cool temple-like entrance. Pillars of polished crystal flanked the sides of the vast hall. In the center, a sweeping staircase wound its way to the

upper floors. Riordan followed.

Her feet whispered up the stone staircase to the gilded halls on the level above. She wandered down the golden halls. Pictures were embossed in gold on the walls. Scenes of Al-Alaar, the highest of the Seven Heavens. Depictions of Al-Gomar, the lowest of the Seven Hells. A door more richly decorated beckoned at the end of the hall. She stopped before it. With a rush of air it swung smoothly inward.

Against the walls stood a solemn line of Shraal. Their opal eyes glittered as she passed, moving unerringly toward the golden throne at the end of the cavernous chamber. The Sword hummed as she dragged it across the smooth floor after her.

Riordan came to a halt before the heavily decorated throne, afraid to look up into the terrible face of the Shraal who sat there.

Look! Her subconscious urged. You'll never know unless you do.

And so she dragged reluctant eyes up toward the ferocious being on the throne.

The Shraal had a face that could have been cut from crystal itself. Hard planes shaped his face. His opal eyes glowed with the fire of the stars themselves. With a shock she recognized the shadow of her own features on that imposing face.

There wasn't an ounce of fat on the willowy body that bent earnestly toward her. Yet there was unmistakable strength in the pale hand that extended, palm facing outward.

"Well done, child." The words echoed in her skull.

Slowly, she drew up the Sword, handing it to him hilt first.

The Shraal hefted the blade in his hand and gazed at it wistfully. "Too long the Sword of Zal-Azaar has been the scourge of our kind. And our descendants," he said, fastening jeweled eyes upon her.

"Have I done the right thing, then?"

In answer, the Shraal raised the Sword high above his head. Those terrible eyes bored into her skull. He brought the Sword down in one glittering bolt. Light lanced through her mind.

Riordan pitched forward. Falling into blinding light, she was lost in its brilliance.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Riordan!" Nhaille's voice pierced the radiant fog. She swam upwards, groping toward the sound. "In Nuurah's name, speak to me!"

"Is she dead?" She recognized Penden's voice followed by Nhaille's muffled curse.

"She's not dead." Nhaille's voice was edged with indignation. His hand moved gently across her face. "See, she breathes."

Eyelids, heavy as lead, refused to obey her. Like hauling on a heavy door, Riordan dragged them open. Faces swam above her: Nhaille looking haggard and drawn as if he would collapse at any second, but refused to until he knew she was safe. Penden hovered uneasily nearby. Levering her arms beneath her, she tried to sit up only to come crashing back down into soft pillows.

Golden cloth decorated the canopy above her. She felt with her hand, finding a silk coverlet beneath her fingers.

"Where am I?" The words rasped from her throat. She swallowed past a mouth gone dry as sand.

"The King's bed chamber," Penden said from behind Nhaille's left shoulder. "Figured he wouldn't be needing it anymore."

Nhaille glowered at his cousin who fell sharply silent.

"Do we still hold the city?"

"Hael is in Kanarekii hands," Nhaille said but offered nothing more.

"And the dead?" Damned if she'd let him get away with these fragments of answers.

"Dead."

Riordan felt within her mind, finding only silence. Her eyes widened. "They're gone."

"No, Riordan," he said gently. "They're merely dead as they were meant to be."

"Not the dead." She stared up at him in wonder. "The voices in my mind."

Images pressed upon each other, tumbling back into her mind, overlapping until they became a whirlwind of thoughts. Rau's voice carried above the rest. She fought against the relentless press of his will. The blinding flash as the Sword hit the Amber, the horrible sensation of the world being torn asunder. Falling, forever it seemed. And then the eerie half-memory of wandering through the long-vanished city of Bayorek.

Riordan drew in a deep breath, reveling in the blessed silence. Exhaustion tugged at every muscle, every cell. And though she had not even a vague memory of her last meal, her stomach contracted violently and threatened to spill its contents.

Nausea or no, there was work to be done. She sat up slowly, heedless of the points of light that seared her vision. Nhaille reached out to steady her. For a moment they clung together, holding each other up.

"Riordan, you must rest. The battle is over. The prophecy is fulfilled. There are others to do your bidding now."

"And now I have a kingdom to rebuild." The knowledge settled like a hard lump in her stomach.

"You needn't start today. It can wait until tomorrow."

Riordan seized the wooden poster and pulled herself to her feet. But the floor spun precariously beneath her. Buzzing points of light threatened to send her down the dark spiral to unconsciousness.

She glanced at Nhaille, taking in the blood that soaked through his shirt, the gray tinge to his skin, the bone-deep weariness that threatened to topple him from his feet at any moment. Riordan sagged back onto the bed. "Tomorrow then," she said quickly. "That is if we can spare the soldiers from the occupation of Hael."

"Penden has agreed to stay behind and oversee it."

One task she didn't have to see to personally. Nodding her thanks to Penden, she drew in a deep breath of relief.

Seeing that his Queen was safe for the moment, Nhaille rose to leave. Riordan caught his sleeve. "You should be in bed, yourself." And when he opened his mouth to protest there were duties he had to see to, she shot him a stern look. "That is an order, Captain."

Penden smothered a smile.

"Find the Royal Physician," she told Nhaille's cousin.

"I don't need--" Nhaille started to protest, but she cut him off.

"I have a vested interest in keeping you in one piece, Captain." She glanced at Penden.

"See to it, Coren. And while you're pillaging Hael's resources, see if there is any food in Marik-Rau's kitchen."

"I can't imagine our Haelian hosts fancying starvation," Penden said with an appreciative glance at the gilt-edged furniture. He sent one of the soldiers on reconnaissance.

Oblivious to the multitude of eyes around them, Riordan pulled Nhaille gently down on the bed beside her. "Post guards on the door. The rest of you...out."

Penden saluted, more in deference to his cousin. "Yes, Your Majesty." The door closed on his laughter.

* * *

The soup didn't rest any easier on her stomach, in spite of the considerable talent of the

palace chef. She couldn't seem to get comfortable enough to sleep, even in the king's luxurious bed. The eggs and sausage she ate the following morning came back up immediately.

The balm the Royal Physician prepared for her wound made it itch unbearably. Stiffness set into her sword arm and her back ached. When she wasn't being sick into the gold bucket by Marik-Rau's bed, she slept like the dead.

A few day's rest improved Nhaille's color but did little to heal the terrible wound in his shoulder. Marik-Rau's physician had stitched the wound, and glancing at the Kanarekii swords around him, had nervously proclaimed that he doubted Nhaille would get much use from the arm. Nhaille accepted the prognosis in stony silence.

A week passed before he was strong enough to ride.

Battle had reduced the Haelian population to a size manageable by the meager Kanarekii army. And they had those left in Kholer as allies. Dead bodies lay like puppets without strings, scattered where they'd fallen when the Amber was destroyed. It lay to those who remained behind to collect and burn them.

Marik-Rau and his advisors were locked safely in the palace dungeon. Penden, as Nhaille pointed out, after years of organizing the Kanarekii rebellion, was quite capable of handling the occupation of Hael. Nothing more to do but leave for home and try to rebuild a kingdom from out of the ashes of Kanarek.

But Strayhorn's swaying gait sent her stomach into instant rebellion. It's the strain of the past few weeks catching up to me, Riordan thought. But the rationalization rang falsely. A twinge of uneasiness hovered in the back of her mind. During the battle she'd lost track of her cycle. The waist of her breeches cut into her stomach in spite of the weight she'd dropped. She glanced at Nhaille sitting stiffly on Stormback and banished the troublesome thoughts. Time enough to worry about it when they got home.

* * *

Kanarek.

Where once towers had challenged the heavens themselves, now lay only ruin and ashes. The main gate hung by a single hinge. Inside, the blackened streets led to nowhere, the market and the huts having succumbed to the flames.

No need to worry about the dead in Kanarek, Rau had drafted them all into his army down to the last smith, shopkeeper, and handmaiden. Even the corpses of sheep and oxen, anything large enough to support a body be it adult or child, had been put to his service.

There would be no parade, no ceremony, no medals of honor to welcome home the veterans of war, Riordan reflected grimly. Only devastation and the impossible task of rebuilding a kingdom stretched before her.

Silence greeted her return to Kanarek. Cinder crunched beneath Strayhorn's hooves, ominously loud.

The door to the palace gaped open like an empty mouth. Inside it was gutted by fire and singed with soot. The throne room, the banquet halls and audience chamber all lay in ruin, but though the upper floors that housed the bedrooms bore the lingering acrid odor of smoke, the fire had died on the lower floors. Rau, in his haste to conquer Kholer, had not waited to see it relit.

Dreams lay among those ashes. Hers, her father's, and generations of Kanarekii before him. From the cinder beneath her feet she was supposed to piece an entire kingdom back together. There seemed no end to the obligations expected of her.

Fine to prophesy such a thing... Riordan stepped through the main doors of her ancestral home into the quiet blackened cavern beyond. The seer who dreamt the prophesy didn't dream the instructions on how to accomplish it.

The stone staircase was still standing, leading in darkness to the floors above. She watched the flicker of torches disappear into the shadows as Nhaille's troop advanced to scout out and secure the upper levels.

"The structure is sound," he said coming up behind her. "It can be rebuilt."

"We have few resources for the rebuilding of anything," she said hollowly. Where in the wasteland surrounding the city would they find the timber? Where would they find the craftsmen? She stared at the destruction around her, unable to see the splendor beneath the soot. "Was it beautiful?" she asked Nhaille finally.

"The palace?"

Riordan nodded. Wandering to one of the far walls, she scraped off the soot and motioned for Nhaille to bring the torch closer.

"The mural of the Seven Heavens," Nhaille supplied. "Your mother had it commissioned shortly after she became Queen. She had impeccable taste."

"Did you have a suite here?"

He hesitated a moment as if trying to guess her meaning, then said, "I doubt any of it would be recognizable. I'm sure it was given to someone else long ago."

Standing in the empty hall, she realized he'd once had a life here. One she knew nothing about. "Did you miss court life, Nhaille?"

Nhaille grasped her gently by the shoulders and turned her to face him. He still moved stiffly as if each step caused him pain, but there was strength once again in his hands. "I had a duty of far greater importance than murals and parties. Do not misunderstand, Riordan. I would not have traded those years with you, nor the difficult task we faced, for anything."

Riordan looked up at the ceiling where the shadow of the mural disappeared into smudges of soot. "I would have. I would have traded it all for one day of life here in Kanarek without obligation or prophecy. But no one offered me that trade."

"It cannot be undone, Riordan. We can only go on. Build what we can over the ruin of what was. You are still young, and you have a long reign ahead of you."

"I haven't a clue where to begin."

He pulled her against him. "I am here, Riordan. And there are enough experienced Kanarekii left to act as your advisors."

Words, meant to reassure her, but they only served to fan the flames of the nagging doubt inside. What will you say when you've heard what I have to tell you, Nhaille? That I fear we may have made more than just love in those nights. She turned toward him, to tell him of her worrisome suspicion, but just then there were footsteps on the stairs above, and the moment was broken.

"The upper floors are secure, Your Majesty."

Leaning on each other, they made their way across the uneven floor. Damage lessened with each floor they climbed. Haelians in their haste had done most of their vandalism to the lower, most visible and heavily decorated floors.

The second floor was almost as bad as the first. On the third floor there was still evidence of the damage made by Haelian axes and most of the furniture had been carried off to feed the flames. But, by the time they reached the upper floor, the soot had thinned to the odd smudge here and there, but the smell of smoke permeated everything.

Nhaille led the way, knowing where he was going even amongst the carnage. He led her down a hall that still showed signs of having been decorated with gold leaf and stopped before an imposing looking door. "The King's bed chamber," he said.

She noted he said the King instead of 'your father' as if that made it any easier.

Riordan stepped into the darkness. In the shadows of the room she made out the dim shape of a huge four-poster bed. Too big to carry off and not time enough to set it aflame. Broken pottery crunched underfoot, vases, serving dishes, everything that had decorated the room was lost when Hael stormed through the gates. The rest of the room appeared to be empty.

Leather flaps hung crookedly on the windows, letting in the evening chill. Tapestries hung in shreds on the walls, carpets were streaked beyond recognition with dirt and soot.

"Perhaps you would be more comfortable in the camp," Nhaille suggested. She looked up into eyes darkly shadowed by the torchlight, but he said nothing of his feelings.

His homecoming, too, she realized.

Riordan dismissed the notion with a wave of her hand. "I've waited long enough. This is

my kingdom, my palace..." she glanced forlornly at what remained of the bedroom, "my bed chamber," she finished quietly.

"I'll call someone to clear out the room." He strode off to see to it.

"We'll need to secure the main door," she called after him.

Least of my worries. Riordan tore the hanging leather from its precarious hook and stared out the window. Outside, the sun was just setting. Crimson clouds scudded across the sky forming a curious red and black landscape out of the charred remnants of the fields.

Among the scorched remains of wheat and corn, something moved. She stared, straining her eyes to see in the half-light of dusk. Ghostly figures drifted through the fields outside, making their way toward the palace.

"Nhaille!" Her summons echoed hollowly through the empty corridors.

Thinking her in danger, he appeared, panting, in the doorway.

"Look!" She pointed to the window. His eyes narrowed as he caught sight of the figures, nearly invisible in the dim light, creeping purposely toward them.

"Stay here," he said sharply.

"No." She grasped his sleeve, worrying about his injuries, wishing Penden was there to see to it instead. "I'm coming with you."

Out of the darkness, shadowy shapes became filthy faces, tattered clothing. Haunted eyes stared up at the silver-haired woman on the palace stairs and the soldiers in Kanarekii armor who surrounded her.

They stopped, a distance from the broken stairs, looking silently up at her. A murmur spread through the ragged crowd. Then as one, they fell to their knees.

"Gods!" Riordan let her breath go in a rush. "They're Kanarekii!"

* * *

A fire burned in the hearth, taking the chill out of a room too long left open to the elements. Torches burned in wall sconces casting wavering shadows throughout the room. Most of the debris had been swept away. The filthy carpet still covered the floor. Rough soldier's blankets served as bedding.

Well past midnight and still voices drifted up from the lower floors. At least the hammering had stopped and a makeshift door secured the entrance. That didn't solve the problem of what to do with the multitude of Kanarekii she was forced to house amid the ruin of the palace. Every livable room was taken and still they overflowed back down into the lower floors.

Her father's bed looked desperately inviting, in spite of the ghosts that hovered like cobwebs in every corner of the room and the rough blankets. But a dozen worries

crowded her mind.

"Where are we going to put them all? The palace can't possibly hold them."

Nhaille's hand settled on her shoulder. "Come to bed, Riordan. There's time enough to worry about it tomorrow. We'll organize work detail, start on rebuilding the huts."

"How will we feed so many people? All the crops have been destroyed.

"They've survived this long," he said, circling her with his arms and pulling her away from the window. "And so have we."

We. That other worry that unlocked to the door a score of others. As if there weren't already enough. After all I've been through and still there is more. More problems to solve, more things to worry about. It was like peeling an onion, she thought. Each layer revealed another underneath. She should leave the topic alone until the others had been dealt with. But the longer she waited, the more complicated the situation became. The longer she waited, the more furious Nhaille would be for her deception.

"We haven't spoken yet of us." Riordan lunged into the conversation, not trusting herself to wait and lose her nerve.

"What of us?"

What indeed? She couldn't just blurt it out. Deftly, she sidestepped the issue, easing him into the conversation. "Have you thought of what you'll do once everything is settled?"

She watched him debate with himself, as if choosing his words carefully. Finally, he said, "I had hoped, when this was all over, to enjoy a quiet retirement in the forest."

He looked out the window, over the darkened fields, paying only half his attention to her. He had that wistful look that sometimes overcame him when he spoke of the old days in Kanarek. Entertaining his ghosts, she realized. This was her father's room. Likely he'd stood there conferring with her father many times before she was born. Perhaps this was the very room in which the King had asked him that one great favor.

It was unfair, she thought with a guilty conscience, to keep him from his life after he'd spent the last nineteen years in seclusion at her father's orders. Unfair to keep her secret from him. But still she felt betrayed that after those nineteen years, he would wish to be separated from her.

"I can certainly understand," the words ran into each other, betraying the hurt she tried to conceal, "that after nineteen years you might be looking forward to your freedom. I can imagine you counting down the last few years, thinking soon you would be relieved of the burden my father thrust upon you and free to finally do as you please..."

He sensed her agitation and stilled. She had his full attention now. She could tell, even though he still had his back to her. Did he suspect? Risking all, she blurted out,

"But it's not that simple, Nhaille. I believe I am carrying our child."

His back stiffened. She heard him draw in a quick breath. He turned toward her, very slowly, so slowly, his shadow preceded him.

"You told me it wasn't your time."

"It wasn't," she said. "The first time."

He looked quickly away.

"During the battle I lost count of the days. I had more than us on my mind, Kayr. Truly, I didn't think it of any consequence. I was certain we'd both be dead."

"But we're not."

"No, we're both very much alive."

"Gods, Arais," he said to the darkness, "what have I done?"

Not the reaction she'd expected. She had hoped to hear her name spoken, not her father's.

"You needn't be so shocked, Nhaille. I am not a child. Kanarek does need an heir. And I am entitled to choose whomever I please as its sire."

She paused and there was silence between them. This new development left the Captain speechless.

He raised his hands to touch her, then let them drop. "Riordan, I--"

"I would not stand between you and your liberty," she said quickly. "There is no one more deserving of it than you. I'm sure that never in a million years did you dream you might actually have to fight the prophesied war. I know helping me rule Kanarek is not what you planned to do with your retirement."

But he wasn't listening to her. He was staring out the window, muttering to his ghosts.

"Forgive me, Arais."

"Would he have thought it so wrong?"

"I'm certain he would have my head."

"Arais! Always Arais!" Indignant anger rose in her voice. "Will you never realize that I am more than an extension of my father? Can you not see beyond our kinship and see only me?"

"He was your father. He trusted me."

"Arais is not a part of what's between us," she snapped. "My father is not here to advise nor condemn. I must do what I think best."

"And what of me, Riordan?"

The question dampened her fury. "I've already done all that you thought best."

He crossed the meager space of floor between them and took her hand in his. Riordan looked up into tortured eyes.

"You misunderstand, Riordan. That's not it at all. It's just that...I would have liked to have done this properly."

"Properly? Kayr, we're in the middle of a war!"

"I," Nhaille cleared his throat and looked resolutely down at her, "I cannot be your consort, if that's what you're asking. I'm not royalty."

"I fail to see what difference--"

"I was the Captain of your father's guards. He thought enough of my abilities to trust me with his kingdom and his youngest child. But we were never of the same class."

"I doubt our child will object."

"It wouldn't be right. I indulged you in something I never should have. Don't you see, I've betrayed the oath I swore to your father. I've ruined your chances at marriage. I've ruined your future."

"If there's to be a future, we'll have to make it for ourselves." She reached up to grasp him by the shoulders, trying to force some sense into the situation. "None of this talk of royalty means anything to me. I am the only representative of royalty in Kanarek. If it means so much to you, I hereby make you royal."

"No!" He shook himself from her grasp. "I was not asking for a piece of the kingdom. Please, Riordan, do not think that I was. If we're to be parents, I merely wished us wed, which we cannot do...under the circumstances."

"Why not! I am Queen in Kanarek. I have the power to grant such permission. If that's what you want, Nhaille, as ruler of Kanarek and all its conquered territories, and as High Priestess of the Pantheon, I hereby pronounce us wed."

Riordan watched emotions race across his face. For a terrible second, it looked as if he might lose his iron composure and weep.

"If the prophecy had not come to pass, your father had intended you for Golen-Arik of Golar."

The knowledge that her father had further plans for her stunned her speechless. "Golen-Arik would not suit me at all," she snapped.

"How would you know? You've never laid eyes on him."

"That is it, exactly. I would not have a stranger in my bed. Nor in my body."

Nhaille's expression softened. "He would not be a stranger by the time you married him. You are not thinking of the future, Riordan."

"For once I am thinking about the future, about what I want. And what I want is you."

"It wouldn't be right."

"Right or wrong, who would complain? There are precious few Kanarekii left. Do you think those poor souls starving downstairs care if the Queen marries the Captain of her Guards?"

"I would know it was wrong."

Frustration welled up inside her, turning swiftly to tears. "What can possibly be wrong about you helping me rebuild our kingdom, or raising our children..."

"Children! Gods, Riordan!"

She glared up into his face. "If I'm not what you envisioned in a bride, you should just say so."

"In Nuurah's name, that's not it, Riordan. I swear to you."

So what then? He wouldn't tell her, and she wouldn't beg. After all that had happened, the many indignities she'd been forced to endure, she wouldn't beg.

"I believe you need some time apart from me to think this over."

"I know my mind well enough," she said, biting back tears.

His arms tightened around her. "I'm sure that is how it seems to you. But the truth is: you don't know anyone besides me. You need some time to get to know other people. And I should give you time to reflect on all that has happened before you start making decisions about the future of your kingdom."

"Perhaps it is you who needs some time to think this over." Riordan managed to get the words out without choking on the lump in her throat. "Have your retirement in the forest, then. There is time still for me to marry Golen-Arik. Assuming he'd be interested in a bride who is carrying another man's child."

She hoped to skewer him upon the barb of her words. But to her amazement, he said simply, "That would be best. Once the huts are rebuilt and the gates have been fortified, I might take that time."

After nineteen years, how could she refuse his request? Damn you, Nhaille, she thought bitterly. Damn you to the Al-Gomar and beyond.

* * *

Word spread like fire. Throughout the night Kanarekii arrived in an endless stream at the gates. By morning even the ruined main hall was brimming with stragglers from the hillside and refugees from halfway to Kholer. She scarcely saw Nhaille over the next few days. Fortifying the main gates and organizing the watch schedule absorbed most of his time. When they did speak it was of matters of state and security.

The abundance of people crammed within the palace walls kept her nerves constantly on edge. People shied away from her as she passed, not used to being in close quarters with

a Shraal legend come to life. Curious gazes lingered upon her.

Now that the battle was over and Kanarek secured, exhaustion tugged on her every move. Her eyes closed as soon as she lay down each night, only to sleep like the dead and awake more tired. Each day she greeted a multitude of problems. Suffering permeated the air. And there was nothing she could do to relieve it save press on with scant resources and hope for time to heal the city's wounds.

People flocked to the city, looking for work and shelter. The palace filled with would-be courtiers and servants. Already the lower floors of the castle had been scrubbed as cleanly as they would come and the debris cleared from the main hall. A small city of tents grew in the main square. Behind it the skeletons of huts were being constructed.

The ranks of Nhaille's defense team grew as men and women armed with everything from kitchen knives to pitch forks willingly submitted themselves to the Captain's relentless training. Palace staff multiplied as refugees who'd spent months sleeping among the hills traded their skills for a roof over their heads and a communal meal.

Riordan stood before the window in her father's chamber. It was the first night in a score of days that she'd made it back to the privacy of her chambers before the sun set. Newly planted fields stretched out below her in neat lines. Once again the city was starting to take shape. Signs of life were everywhere where once there had only been death and destruction. Kanarek progressed better than she had dared hope for.

Except for the one thing she'd hoped for herself. The only thing she'd ever asked of anyone.

"Why this evening?" she asked as Nhaille shifted uneasily behind her. Nhaille abhorred undue commotion. She could tell he was expecting her to carry on. Damned if she'd give him the satisfaction. "What is it about today that you suddenly must leave under cover of darkness?"

"I am not riding out in the darkness like a traitor." Indignation rose in his voice. He'd misunderstood even her attempt at trying to make it easy for him.

Will we ever understand each other?

"It's a simple question, Nhaille. I merely wondered why you were so eager to leave you could not wait for dawn." She wouldn't turn and look into that tortured expression on his face. "You're afraid if you wait until tomorrow you won't leave, isn't that so?" Riordan did turn and look at him then. His expression was as tortured as she'd guessed. "Did I not already grant you leave?" she pressed into the silence.

"Yes, Your Majesty, you did."

"Your Majesty now, is it? What happened to Riordan, to those endearments you called me the night before the battle of Kholer?" Riordan bit her tongue to stop the rest of the barbs from escaping.

Misery crossed Nhaille's face before he brought his emotions back under his iron control. "The situation in Kanarek is stable," he said, neatly side-stepping the verbal spear aimed at his heart. "Rebuilding is well underway, the training of the warriors is progressing well. I am not the only veteran capable of instructing. Kanarek can spare me for a few days after nineteen years without so much as a day off." His eyes pleaded silently with her, begging her to understand. "Forgive me, Riordan. I really do believe we need some time away from each other right now."

How could she refuse him the only favor he'd ever asked of her? Especially after all he'd sacrificed?

She wanted to touch him, to feel him real and solid before her. A memory to sustain her after he was gone. "I realize that I have been selfish," she said softly, "thinking only of what I wanted and not of the sacrifices you've made. It's not that I don't care, Kayr, just that I am overwhelmed by all that depends on me. And you are the only person I trust."

"Which is exactly why I must leave for a while. You've brought Kanarek back from the dead, Riordan. I've taught you everything I know. I'm certain you will manage well enough without me. I think it a good idea for you to try."

"Goodbye then," she said, refusing to beg, refusing even to cry.

He looked back at her with that tortured expression that tore at her heart. Then, with typical lack of fuss, he nodded and took his leave.

Riordan watched as Nhaille disappeared through the door. In the hallway, his footsteps echoed into silence.

Of all the things in her uncertain life, Nhaille was the one she'd counted on. Like the dreams of home, hearth and family, now he, too, was gone.

She'd misread the situation. Asked of him one thing more on top of all else.

A light knock brought her attention back to the present. "Come," she called, steeling herself for more problems, more obligations.

The door opened, revealing a haggard, middle-aged woman with steel-gray hair.

"Your Majesty." She bowed in deference.

Riordan smothered her impatience, accepting the title in good grace. That's how it all began: the bows, the Your Majestys, then reasonable requests that under their current circumstances were impossible.

"I've come to offer my services as lady in waiting."

Gods, what next? Another servant was the last thing she needed. Another mouth to feed, another body waiting for her instructions and guidance.

Riordan forced a smile. "That is kind of you, Madam," she swept her arm around the room that was still decorated with regulation-issue blankets and the accouterments of a

soldier. "But as you can see, at the moment I have little need for the services of a lady in waiting."

The bedraggled woman took a look at the barren surroundings and smiled. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, I believe my services are required more than ever." Before Riordan could protest she added. "Especially since before you were born, I was lady in waiting to your mother."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The quietly spoken words froze the argument on Riordan's lips.

"My mother?"

"You do resemble her, Your Majesty, if you don't mind me saying so."

"I do?"

"Not your coloring, of course. Her hair was much darker, as were her eyes. But you do have her graceful build and the same shape of face."

She took Riordan's hand in hers. Though she disliked being touched, Riordan found herself surrendering it unquestioningly.

"And her lovely, slender hands." She gazed up at Riordan as if greeting a long lost friend.

"I've always wondered what she looked like. It was odd growing up, never knowing..."

Suddenly she was like a curious child, desperate for information. Her father's face she could conjure with certainty, even after the horror he had become. The forbidding crease between his dark eyebrows, the formidable line of his mouth that warned her he was about to yell at his youngest child sprang readily to mind. Though her mother had died soon after she was born, Riordan had always felt that nameless loss. The craving for maternal attention had never lessened, never gone away.

And now I'm going to be a mother myself. Moraah give me courage, I don't even know how.

"What was she like?" The words slipped from her lips before she could call them back. It wouldn't do for the Queen to appear the frightened child she felt inside.

"If it pleases you, Your Majesty, I would tell you." She eyed the room inside.

Riordan stepped back from the door, motioning for her to enter. The woman took a more thorough glance around the empty room. "My services are definitely needed here," she pronounced.

Laughter burst from Riordan's lips. The unfamiliar sound startled her. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed spontaneously, outloud. Immediately she found herself liking this candid stranger. Oddly enough, her forthright manner reminded her of Nhaille. Riordan pushed the thought from her mind. The last thing she needed to think about right now was Nhaille. What lay ahead in their future together remained to be seen.

"Perhaps you're right," she admitted with a look at the forlornly decorated room. And it won't kill me to take an hour off. "Come in then..."

"Zelia-Gorman-Toor," she offered.

"...Zelia. Tell me of my mother."

Riordan motioned to the chair by the fire, the only piece of furniture other than the bed in the room.

"Oh no, Your Majesty, please sit. I couldn't, it wouldn't be right."

"I insist." Riordan settled herself against the window ledge. For a moment they stared at each other awkwardly. Without Nhaille's constant tutelage, she found she didn't even know how to begin the conversation. Small talk was not a commander's territory. There were no orders to be given, none to be carried out.

"Did my mother believe...in the prophecy?" she blurted out, then winced inwardly at how abrupt it sounded.

But Zelia seemed unperturbed, even eager to talk about her mother. "Oh yes. The Queen believed wholeheartedly, even when the King did not."

"Did she know...I mean was it prophesied that she would die bearing me?"

Zelia nodded solemnly. "Her Majesty knew the dangers. She was willing to sacrifice her life for her kingdom."

Silence hung between them.

"Your mother worried a great deal about your fate," Zelia said after a time. "But she would be very proud of you now."

At that moment there was another knock upon the door. Zelia jumped up to answer it.

One of the restoration crew working on the lower room stood in the doorway. Dust and soot coated his hair. He looked beyond Zelia to Riordan standing in the center of the room.

"Your Majesty." He bowed awkwardly and extended a dust-covered box toward her.

"They found this in a crevice in the wall in one of the second floor rooms."

Riordan took the box from his dust covered hands. It weighed more than she suspected. Handcrafted from silver and copper, it was a handsome thing to look upon even covered in soot. Someone had obviously put a great deal of love into its creation.

The delicate lock was crushed, but she managed to pry it open. Inside it was lined with red velvet and contained only two items, a golden ring and a tiny miniature of a woman.

Huge dark eyes stared out of a delicate face. A cloud of hair cascaded over her pale shoulders. Even in the tiny painting, an expression of mirth showed in the upward turn of her mouth and the gleam in her eyes. This was obviously a woman who enjoyed life.

"Do you know who this might have belonged to?"

Zelia glanced at the painting in Riordan's hands. "Yes, Your Majesty, that was Mira."

She paused, glancing nervously from Riordan back to the painting. "Captain Nhaille's wife."

"He never told me he was married!" Surprise sprung the words from her lips. She looked up to find both Zelia and the mason staring at her in the uncomfortable silence that followed and vowed to censure the next revelation that threatened to tumble from her lips.

"She died in childbirth," Zelia said. "Perhaps it pained him to remember. He lost his daughter as well."

Suddenly it all made sense: the way Nhaille flinched at the sound of his given name and shied away from her first furtive touches. He was remembering the touch of another, Riordan realized. And a daughter who died. In her naivete, she'd blundered through his feelings, made demands it was nearly impossible for him to honor.

"And did you know Captain Nhaille?" Riordan asked. "Before I was born?"

Zelia nodded. Riordan looked back to the mason waiting nervously in the doorway. "Show me the room in which you found this."

Riordan peered into the shadows of the high-vaulted ceiling. "You're certain this is the room?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." The stone mason held his torch high. Striding across the now cleanly-swept floor, he pointed to a crevice in the brick. "That's where we found it."

Riordan slid her hand into the shallow hole in the wall, finding just enough space to hold the jewelry box. Hastily, she replaced the brick. It seemed like she was prying into a part of Nhaille's life he'd never meant for her to see.

Until now she had never envisioned that there might be people left in Kanarek who knew Nhaille, people who had been part of the life he kept secret from her.

She looked around the spacious room. It was larger than she expected. Though all its furnishings had been destroyed, the size of the room alone spoke of prestige and accomplishment. Being granted a spacious chamber in the king's own palace was a fine achievement for the young man he'd been then. She tried to imagine what that part of his life must have been like.

For a time it must have seemed as if he had it all. Success, a place in the King's esteem, a beautiful young wife expecting their first child. And then it had all gone suddenly very wrong.

Having no power to fix the damage in his own life, he'd opted to accept the great deed his King asked of him. He raised the king's child as his own.

And found instead one day, that child was now a woman who had as many plans for him as his king.

Gods, Nhaille! Why didn't you tell me?

* * *

Running a kingdom was not so different from commanding an army, Riordan decided. Days passed. The unfamiliar role became increasingly more comfortable. She became accustomed to having people around her, no longer jumping at every voice, or staring at each footfall. Leadership and organization were concepts she was used to. The challenge she expected to her leadership never came. No one questioned her claim to the throne. Getting over their initial fear of her, Kanarekii seemed genuinely awed.

Riordan caught many sideways glances as she passed. People stared covertly at her silver-blond hair when they were certain she wasn't looking. She suspected that only her title kept her from openly touching this being who looked so much like a Shraal temple painting come to life.

Whispers died as she turned corners, only to start up again once she passed. The myth walked among them. They listened with great deference to her orders and her opinions, hanging upon each word as if spoken by the Gods themselves. That she had actually accomplished the deeds laid out in the prophecy, wielded the legendary and dangerous Sword of Zal-Azaar intrigued them, even as it made her lonely in ways she couldn't explain.

After all she'd done for Kanarek, she was still an outcast. At last she'd come home, only to find herself still in exile.

And though she appreciated the respect granted to her, she ached for Nhaille's company, for the companionship of someone who accepted her for the person she was and not the stuff of myth or legend.

Visions haunted her. She closed her eyes each night to dreams of towering Shraal cities teeming with tall pale inhabitants. Each night she wandered their winding streets, a traveler out of place and time. Vivid dreams hovered in her mind upon awakening. Even in memory she could smell the many-layered scent of the market place, the incense burning in the High Temple. It was as if in her dreams the fabric of time warped to encompass this strange Shraal descendant whose ravaged city now lay in ruins like the once vibrant city of Bayorek.

I have more in common with the Shraal than my own subjects.

She banished the black thought from her mind, admonishing herself as Nhaille would have done had he been there.

Penden's messenger arrived the next morning. Marik-Rau, it seemed, despaired the loss of his kingdom and his son. The morning guard had arrived to find him hanging by the sash of his robe.

The news saddened her. Another life lost, she thought darkly. Haven't enough been lost already? Was there no good that could be gleaned from the Shraal's great

accomplishments? She wandered her dreams in search of Shraal virtue.

* * *

The shining city stretched before her. In some lucid section of her mind Riordan realized she was dreaming, as she had every night since she'd returned from Hael. She placed a tentative foot on the crystal staircase that led to the palace. Gilded doors opened before her. In her dreams she was always welcome among the Shraal, though they said nothing to her, only watched her with luminous gray eyes as she moved among them.

Labyrinthine corridors swallowed her into the bowels of the palace. She glided forward, feet barely touching the ground. Pulled by an invisible string she floated onward, not knowing where she went, and strangely unafraid.

Ahead in the blinding white corridor, there was movement. A shadow moved in the threshold of a doorway. She came to an abrupt halt before the dark form, surprised to find a woman standing suddenly in front of her.

Green eyes locked with hers. An expression she recognized. Oddly familiar, yet different.

Nhaille's eyes, she realized with a jolt. Some relative of his, perhaps. She certainly inherited his height. They stared at each other, assessing.

Riordan looked closer, noticing suddenly the high cheekbones and stubborn set of the mouth was her own. Our child, she thought, understanding at last.

Riaan someone whispered in her mind. The dream shattered like glass.

* * *

Nhaille looked down at Riordan's slight form curled up in her father's huge bed. A fist closed around his heart. So like him she looked with her mouth set in a stern line even in sleep. And yet, he could see her mother's image in the slenderness she retained even in pregnancy. If he looked closer still, he could see Mira in the way her hand rested protectively over her stomach.

The three barbs twisted within him. So many memories here in Kanarek. Ghosts mocked him from all corners.

Time to put the ghosts to rest. Time to put aside the ruin of his life and start new.

But then Riordan had reached right out of fate itself and sent him spinning down a path he'd never envisioned.

He had hoped that some time apart might cure them of their forbidden attraction to each other. Or at least dull it long enough so they might do what was proper. Instead, it had sharpened his longing for her. And made Riordan feel even more that he had abandoned her. Less than halfway in his journey to the forest house he'd turned back, realizing that everything he wanted, everyone he loved, was in Kanarek.

Looking down at her, he ached to reach out and smooth a strand of silken hair from her cheek. He longed to protect her from the cruel reality of her life. For Riordan it would never be over. In Kanarek, she was Queen. The entire kingdom looked to her for guidance.

And who will protect her from me?

How could he have broken that sacred oath? How could he have let himself believe it was she who desired him.

However misguided, she wanted him still.

Dare he take what she offered? Dare he make one last grasp for the life that eluded him so long ago? Riordan had already made that choice for him. He had only to agree. Riordan, once she'd set her mind upon something would not be dissuaded.

Forgive me, Arais. I should never have let her love me.

* * *

Riordan came awake with the suspicion she was no longer alone. Her hand closed around the hilt of sword that rested against the bed. A heavy hand settled upon her shoulder.

"You have no need for the sword, Riordan."

Firelight gilded the edges of his hair. It burned higher than it had when she fell asleep. The dampness made his wounded arm ache, she remembered. But that he'd been there long enough to stoke the fire disturbed her. Being around so many people dulled her senses to the routine commotion of the palace.

"You came back." She sat up slowly. "Why so soon?"

Nhaille smiled wryly. "Solitude wasn't the luxury I remembered."

"I knew you'd be bored."

"Did you now, Your Majesty?" The bed shifted beneath his weight as he sat down beside her. "What made you so sure?"

Riordan smiled. "All the excitement is here in Kanarek."

She was right, he realized. The rebuilding of Kanarek brought a sense of anticipation he hadn't experienced before. He took her chin in his hand and looked down into her face.

"Are you well, Riordan?"

"Well enough. The sickness has passed."

Covers slipped from her shoulders exposing the thin shirt that covered her. The shirt was his, he noted. Perhaps it had comforted her when he was no longer there.

Riordan relaxed against him, resting her head on his shoulder like she had when she was a child. The weight of his arms around her was reassuring. He smelled of horse and the

cool night air.

For several moments she was content merely to listen to the steady beat of his heart. But one nagging worry refused to stay banished. If Nhaille had returned, then she wanted to settled what lay between them before another minute passed.

She rose out of the solace of his embrace and moved to retrieve the jewelry box she'd stowed with the rest of her gear. "I believe this belongs to you."

His eyes fastened on the box in her hand. She watched as he caught his breath and stilled completely.

But he took the box from her. Gingerly he opened the lid and peered inside. Wistfully, he regarded the miniature. He reached for the golden ring. It slipped over his index finger.

"Still fits," he murmured. That seemed to surprise him.

His ring of office. Given to him by her father on his promotion. Suddenly she understood its significance. And why he'd hidden it in the wall hoping to come back for it some day. He'd expected Kanarek still to be there. As had they all.

Green eyes dyed golden by the firelight watched her warily. "Riordan, I--"

"Why have you never told me you were married?"

He let his breath go. "I would not have burdened you with my sorrows."

"My sympathies," she said gently. "To hear of the loss of your wife and child."

"Thank you, Your--" He reached out, pulled her close. "Riordan."

"You blamed yourself," she guessed.

Drawing away, he nodded, as if he didn't trust himself to speak.

"You blame yourself for too much, Kayr. Even for things that I do."

Nhaille forced the shadow of a smile.

"Is that why you left? Were you afraid of history repeating itself?"

"I couldn't bear the thought of you suffering because of me."

"Don't worry. She'll be fine. So will I."

"She?"

He looked so shocked, she covered his hand with hers to reassure him. "She. I fancy the name Riaan, after my mother."

"What makes you so certain the child is female?"

"I--" She faltered, afraid to tell him about the images that haunted her dreams. "I have these...dreams. Vestiges of the Sword's power, ancestral memories, I don't know what they mean. But in one of them I saw this vision of a woman. Tall like you, dark like you."

And I just knew she was our child."

"You've seen this?" he asked, eyes narrowing. "Truly?"

"I don't know how to explain it, Nhaille. I just know."

He gave her a long look, then his expression softened, as if after wielding the Sword of Zal-Azaar and winning back Kanarek a vision of their unborn child was not so unusual. He was content to grant her this one indulgence.

It seemed so innocent, so normal, the two of them discussing the name of their child. As if none of the rest of it had happened, not Rau, the Amber nor the Sword of Zal-Azaar.

"We must choose a male name," Nhaille said after a moment. "Riaan is no name for a prince should your vision prove to be wrong."

"I'm not wrong. You must trust my judgment in this one."

Warm breath stirred her hair as he pulled her closer. "I am content to trust your judgment in everything from now on."

"Nhaille--" Did she have the strength to say what was on her mind, the courage to offer him his freedom? "If you truly do not want to be my consort, I would not ask it of you. I will always be grateful for the sacrifices you've made for me and for Kanarek. You deserve your freedom and your privacy. It is wrong for me to ask more of you."

"You ask nothing of me that I'd not willingly grant." His lips moved against her forehead.

"Does this mean you've come back to stay?" She schooled her voice to a neutral tone, carefully hiding the desperate hope inside.

Nhaille smiled. "I underestimated what a gaping hole there would be in my life without you."

"We need you here in Kanarek," she said quietly. "I need you, Kayr. Don't go live alone in the forest like a hermit. Stay here in Kanarek where you are loved. Where you have family."

"You seem to have managed well enough in my absence. The fields have been planted. The huts have been rebuilt."

"And what of the warriors to be trained? I have a score of grievances to hear in the morning. And we've shortages of just about everything. There isn't anything we have enough of. I can't do it all myself, and I'm desperate for the counsel of someone I can trust."

"I take it you don't care for your first taste of sovereignty, Your Majesty?" There was laughter in his voice.

"I could most definitely use an assistant."

Laughter died in his voice, replaced by seriousness. "Oh no, Riordan. The life of an administrator is not for me."

"Captain then, of her Majesty's Royal Guard."

His face darkened, and her hand moved to touch his wounded shoulder. "My career as a warrior is over, Riordan."

"Now that I doubt. Even left-handed, you could still likely best me. If I have my way, neither of us will ever see battle again. But I need you to help train the army," she said softly. "Just in case. I will never be unprepared, the way my father was."

"Captain then," Nhaille agreed.

Having his consent, she should stop there. But she couldn't. If he was back, she had to know the rest of it.

"And consort?" she asked quietly, and held her breath waiting for his answer.

"Consort," he echoed. He placed his hand over the swell of her stomach, and sighed deeply. "Your father would kill me if he knew."

"Perhaps this is what he had in mind all along," Riordan said, drawing a breath in relief. "I suspect that fate is not yet finished with you, Kayr-Alden-Nhaille."

He sighed deeply. "I don't think I have it in me to raise another like you."

"Maybe she will be like you."

That made him laugh. "Gods, I do hope not."

THE END

Be sure to check out Stephanie's first novel, *The Bleeding Sun*, available in print and electronic form. Continue reading for a preview Chapter of *The Bleeding Sun* Below.

The Bleeding Sun

Stephanie Bedwell-Grime

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CHAPTER ONE

The chandelier was crying, long tears of palest amber that streamed across her line of sight. Her mind was like shattered glass, jagged pieces that no longer fit together into a coherent whole. She lay, moored to the side of the large bed, that even now seemed to be pitching and heaving beneath her, and rummaged through her mind for thoughts that made sense. . .

Foremost in Melinda's mind was the paralyzing pain that ran down the right side of her body, emanating in dizzying waves from the welt on her neck. She probed gently at her throat, wincing as she touched the bruised and tender skin. Dried blood crumbled beneath her fingertips, as she ran her hands down her chest and arms to find the stinging traces of claw marks. She moaned and tried to turn over, but she was too stiff. She felt as if she'd been dissected and pieced back together.

Her memory yielded images unwillingly in self defense, as she fought her way back to consciousness. She remembered fighting with her boyfriend, waiting alone on the deserted subway platform, and the bright lights of the approaching subway. She recalled boarding the train and staring at the drunken occupant who had passed out in the seat across the aisle. The train crossed a junction in the tracks, veering off to the right and

downhill. The lights went out.

Something hunted her in the disorienting darkness, as she thrashed about the empty subway car trying to escape. Taloned hands tore through clothing and skin alike. She could still feel the hot breath upon her face, the odd pressure at her neck, followed by blinding pain, and the thick, black darkness that sucked her down into nothingness. . .

* * *

"You're awake," said a soft voice from the end of the bed. He turned into the candlelight, and Melinda looked into the face of her nightmare.

With a hoarse cry, she scrambled away from him, crouching in the corner of the poster bed. The sudden effort sent points of light searing through her vision. She fought for breath, for the tenuous hold on consciousness.

"Shh," he whispered, coming to sit on the bed beside her. Melinda tried to move away from him, but succeeded only in falling forward. He caught her in his arms and placed a finger against her lips to quiet her. Helplessly, she looked up into eyes that were a deep brown, bordering on black. He didn't look like the horror her fragmented memory insisted he was. Rather, he resembled a dark angel with his handsome face and head of unruly curls. But the powerful hands that held her with much restrained strength ended in ten, long, talons. He let her down against the bed and propped the pillows up beneath her head. His hands lingered against her neck.

"Stiff?" he asked with genuine concern. His voice was deep and melodic. She nodded dumbly.

With strong, warm hands he tenderly massaged the feeling back into her neck. "It'll pass," he said gently. And, for the first time he looked human, almost.

Solemnly, he surveyed the damage, carefully running a finger over the red welts on her throat and arms. "You're hurt," he said, more as a statement than a question.

"Yes," she croaked, her voice a rasping remnant of its former tone.

"I'm sorry, you must believe that."

Melinda choked back a sob and stared at him in mute terror.

"The first time is always a shock. But you're safe now."

"Safe?" she whispered in absolute horror, "I don't think so."

"You'll see," he said, almost sadly. For a moment he looked as if his mind was far away, dwelling on some old and familiar sorrow. He looked back at her suddenly, making her jump. "Besides Melinda," he said sweetly. "You really don't have any other choice."

"How do you know my name?" she asked, trying to keep the tremors that resonated out from her knees from working their way up into her voice.

"I looked at your driver's license, of course," he said, as if she was incredibly naive.

Then he remembered his manners and said almost apologetically, "Well, you've been asleep for a day and a half, it wasn't as if I could ask you."

She stared at him, waiting. "I don't suppose I'll need my license when I'm dead," she said finally.

"Dead? Whatever gave you the idea I was going to kill you?"

"Look what you did to me!" She wanted to scream. "You were trying to kill me!"

"I am trying to save your life," he said and looked away.

An icy shiver snaked down her spine. She hugged her wounded arms and shuddered.

"Really," he said gently. "I have no more choice in this than you."

"I don't believe you."

"As you wish," he hissed. He grasped her head in his taloned hands and turned her face so she was forced to look into his eyes. "But I want you to understand something. You are in a situation in which you have very few options. In a few short hours you will be thinking very differently about all of this. I will await your call."

He left the room, pulling the heavy metal door to with a loud resounding boom that had an ominous note of finality to it. As if in emphasis, she heard the jingle of keys as he locked the door.

The room was spinning, clockwise, then counterclockwise. Melinda looked about slowly, trying not to turn her head too fast and send the dizziness flooding back upon her.

The mammoth bed on which she lay was the only piece of furniture in the cavernous room. It was an imposing creation with its heavy curtains and towering columns. Judging from the tiled walls and floor and the persistent rumbling above, she suspected she was still underground. An abandoned subway station perhaps. She'd read once that there were a couple in the Toronto Subway System. The place had a haphazard look to it, as if he made do in surroundings less opulent than he was accustomed. Tapestries, embellished with gold and silver thread covered the walls, and Persian rugs warmed the utilitarian tiled floors. The foyer was flanked on either side by what looked to be a small study and a large closet.

Gingerly, Melinda placed a tentative foot on the floor, then stood, holding on to the tall posters for support. She willed herself to remain upright. Awareness was her only defense. She had to find a way out.

Slowly, she walked about the perimeter of the room, lifting up the corners of the heavy tapestries, examining the wall underneath. She pounded on the tile, bruising her hand on the hard cement it covered. Not even an echo. The place was as solid as a tomb. It was doubtful anyone would even hear her screams.

There were no windows, and the door was locked as securely as it sounded. She threw herself against it, gaining only an aching shoulder for her efforts.

Desperate for clues, she lurched toward a desk in an alcove off the main bedroom and almost fell into the fragile antique chair. She flipped through a stack of parchment papers on the side of the desk, searching for a means to defend herself.

Something silver slid from the paper, falling to the desk with a loud clink. Melinda turned the slender object over in her hands. Faded runes ran along the silver blade that was worn smooth by years of use. A blood-red jewel was set in the hilt. It could have been a dagger, but she guessed by its presence on the desk, he used it as a letter opener. She folded it tightly in her fist. As a last resort, it could be used as a weapon against him.

Melinda turned her attention to the row of leather-bound books that faced her from the back of the desk. A similar volume lay open before her, as if he had tossed it there expecting to return shortly.

She reached for the book, feeling its soft leather cover. The passages inside were scripted in a strong hand, a form of calligraphy so ancient and decorative it was difficult to read. The open page was dated the twenty-sixth of April. A few days ago then. Scrolls of red and black ink revealed the beginning of a poem, lovingly bordered with much care. Melinda read the words aloud, wondering at the odd imagery,

The blood of sunset stains the sky
lips, of ruby wine
darkness like a feather falls
into the depths of midnight
bless the glow of candlelight...

Was he the author of the poem? She replaced the book carefully, and selected another from the row behind it.

A huge plume of dust burst from the book, as she opened it, making her cough. The pages were brittle and yellowed with age. Some leaves were loose, their corners ragged. She gasped aloud as she read the date, The First Day of May in the Year 1795. Identical handwriting stared back at her, disguised only by antiquated patterns of speech. It had the look of a journal to it, an account of preparations for a trip to the country, including much annoyance over the hiring of a carriage.

The next entry was a sketch drawn in thick black strokes of ink. It was a portrait of two people, a man and a woman in historical dress. The inscription underneath read 'Kirsten and Me in the country'. The drawing was signed with a blood-red 'M'. She forced herself

to breathe. The man in the picture was her captor, and he looked exactly the same.

Hastily, she replaced the book, not wanting to think about what her eyes were trying to tell her. Could these entries, nearly two hundred years apart, actually be written by the same person? Who was this creature that lived below the city in a forgotten rat-hole in royal splendor? More accurately, what was he?

She wanted to scream. For the first time in her adult life, she wanted her mother. But her parents lived in Unionville, too far away to be of assistance. Hysteria would accomplish nothing.

Research, she reminded herself. That's what good detectives do before anything else. She decided to tackle the closet on the other side of the room.

The contents were a lesson in fashion history. The Textile Department at the Museum would love this! Medieval cloaks, jeweled, brocaded jackets, frilly lace shirts were neatly arranged among blue jeans and black leather jackets. Melinda reached out a hand to feel the rich textures, pitching forward suddenly, her vision going black. She came to staring at her knees, and huddled there a moment, shivering and sweating while her head cleared.

A flash of brass caught her attention. Hidden away behind rows of old-fashioned clothing was a small trunk. It was fashioned of dark wood and decoratively hinged in brass. Melinda tried the lid. It wasn't locked. She cast a backward glance over her shoulder. The room was quiet. She lifted the lid and peered inside.

The box revealed a medieval woman's gown. It was a beautiful piece of work, fragile with age, hand sewn and lovingly decorated. It seemed curiously out of place among such male accouterments.

Who does it belong to? A past victim, a lost lover, someone dear to him. . .the person who made him what he is? Strange, to keep an article of clothing instead of a portrait or a piece of jewelry. . .Perhaps she left suddenly. . .

Steadying herself on the closet door, Melinda clawed her way to her feet. Except for the letter opener, her search had not turned up anything else that could be used as a weapon. Each hopeful discovery seemed to quash another plan of escape. She felt like a child who'd just been told that monsters did exist, that all her nightmares were real. How could she reason with a being whose motives were nothing close to human? It was too much to think about, none of it having anything to do with logic or reason. She looked around at her absurd surroundings, the letter opener that was her only means of defense, and uttered a sob of hopelessness. She staggered back toward the bed, falling into the pillows, into darkness.

* * *

Melinda awoke to the sounds of her own tortured screams. Searing pain radiated from the center of her stomach. Her veins throbbed with an agony that rendered her limbs

useless. Every nerve, every cell in her body cried out in misery. Each rasping breath was an exhausting undertaking. She prayed and begged the empty air for anything that would end her suffering. Finally, he appeared beside her.

She looked up at him, desperately hoping against all reason that he would help her.

"You seem a little happier to see me this time," he said, gazing down at her.

"Make it stop," she whimpered.

Desire burned in those black eyes that flickered from her throat to her face. Desire and something else. . .reluctance? "Only one thing will make it better," he said sadly.

"No," she gasped trying to sit up, but her weakened body would not obey. Too much effort was required to hold the letter opener in her fist. It fell from her hand, a silver flash in the golden candlelight.

"And what were you going to do with this?" he asked with the faintest hint of amusement. "Slit my throat perhaps?"

Melinda offered only a groan in reply. He walked to the desk and tossed it back on the pile of paper. He returned and stood looking down at her thoughtfully. She felt the bed give as he sat down to wait, patiently, as if he'd been through all this before, while she valiantly tried to resist the crushing anguish.

"Why do you make this so difficult?" he said softly, when this had gone on for some time. "It won't get any better. You're half changed already. Either we continue, or you die."

She shuddered. "You're lying."

"Why would I do that?"

"So you can have it your way."

"I will have it my way."

"I'd rather die," she moaned, as a fresh wave of nausea washed over her.

"If I wanted you to die," he said quietly. "I would have killed you already."

Silence filled the room, punctuated only by her labored gasps.

"Why me?" she demanded through clenched teeth.

Whatever the reason, he didn't want to share it with her. "You were in the wrong place at the wrong time," he said at last. "Let me help you, Melinda. I hate to see you suffer so."

Her mind was a gray expanse of pain. The yearning within her urged to surrender to him, to let him do whatever unthinkable things would satisfying this intense longing. But logic reminded her how he'd pounced upon her in the empty subway car, torn at her neck with his piercing teeth and ripped through her flesh with his razor sharp claws. She whimpered and tried to slither away from him, but he stretched out beside her on the bed

and gathered her into his arms.

"I promise," he said compassionately, "it will only hurt for a second this time. A little pressure, a little pain, then you'll just feel very drowsy."

She wanted to tell him to go back to whatever hell he crawled out of, to leave her to die, but he was kissing her gently, wiping the tears from her eyes. And with every feather-soft touch, a little of the pain disappeared.

"Please don't suffer anymore," he whispered, "it's breaking my heart."

The last of her will crumbled. "Just do it," she sobbed.

He ran a taloned hand over her eyes, shutting them gently, and grasped her tightly. His lips traced a line of fire from her mouth to her neck. He lingered there for a moment, then she felt his lips draw back, baring his fangs. She heard him suck in his breath, and she held hers. His teeth pierced her neck.

She screamed in the first shock of pain and flailed against him. But he held her still, and soon she found she didn't have the strength to move at all.

Blood rushed from her neck under the gentle pull of his lips against her throat. Her body seemed to flow into his like melting wax. He shuddered in ecstasy, relaxing his grip a little, freeing a hand to caress her tenderly. She was feeling light-headed, it was difficult to hold on to consciousness. As he promised, the pain drifted away, dissolving into a total absence of feeling.

With great effort, he lifted his head from her neck and lay back onto the pillows, pulling her with him. He looked down at her, black eyes glazed with pleasure and lazily licked the last of her blood from his lips.

Moving was out of the question. Her body was unresponsive, her limbs as heavy as lead. She hovered somewhere on the brink of consciousness and tried not to think.

Pain jarred her back to wakefulness. She had the vague impression time had passed. But how much time. Hours? A day?

Something shifted in her jaw. With a wet sound, her gums tore. She probed with the tip of her tongue and gasped as she cut herself on the razor-sharp points of her new teeth. She swallowed a mouthful of her own blood and looked at him in agonized bewilderment.

Gently, he drew back her upper lip. What he saw seemed to satisfy him. "It's almost over," he said, stroking her swollen lips.

To Melinda, the torment seemed endless. Cracked and flaking remnants of her nails lay in bloody pools about her cuticles. Beneath she could see a new set of coarse, white nails sprouting. They looked like claws.

Deep within her a desire was awakening, a sinister, compelling lust. It was a longing

beyond sensual, a thirst that could only be quenched by something warm, red and salty. She stiffened in his arms, dismayed to discover it was blood she craved.

"Ah," he said. "Now you're beginning to understand."

"Oh God No!" Melinda pleaded, realization dawning on her with frightening clarity. She sat up, trying to free herself from his embrace, but he rose with her, preventing her escape.

He didn't seem perturbed at all, rather, he was patient, eager to have her participate in this carnal act. He held out his wrist in offering. "You might want to try the wrist. The neck takes a bit more skill."

She gagged and shivered. "I can't."

"You must."

"No--" She started to protest, but he raised his wrist to her lips.

"Come," he said softly, pointing out a thick, blue vein. "This one right here."

The desire was stronger than her will. Tentatively, she placed her teeth on his wrist. She was going to be sick.

"You'll have to apply a lot more pressure than that," he said kindly, placing one strong hand behind her head to guide her.

He kissed her tenderly on the forehead in reassurance, then fixed her with that black-eyed stare of his. She looked helplessly into his eyes. "It's all right," he said encouragingly, "You can't hurt me. This is a beautiful experience, the sharing of another's lifeblood."

She was falling, tumbling into the depths of those ebony eyes. She lowered her head and bit deeply into his wrist.

He winced at her clumsiness, drawing in a sharp breath. "Careful," he warned. He let the breath out slowly, going limp against her.

His blood was warm and thick like sherry. With each mouthful the pain and exhaustion receded, until she felt well and whole.

"Enough," he said abruptly. His hand gripped the back of her neck like a vice and gently disengaged his wrist from her mouth.

She swallowed blood and retched, letting her head fall to his shoulder. He held her quietly.

"Aren't you even going to ask my name?" he asked finally.

"Your name," she whispered. It was hard to think of him as having something as simple as a name.

He held her away from him, facing her gravely. "I am called Valdemar."

"Valdemar," she repeated, trying out the unfamiliar syllables.

He smiled and pushed a sodden lock of hair from her face. "You're a mess."

She reached for his wrist, to assess the damage she'd done.

The wound was already beginning to heal itself.

* * *

He took her hand and led her down to his bathing chamber, a level below the bedroom. Standing on the marble staircase, she looked in awe at the tiled pool that resembled a Roman bath.

"What is this place?"

"Lower Queen Subway Station."

"What?"

Valdemar smiled. Her interest seemed to please him. "From what I can gather, it was supposed to be a junction point for a proposed subway line. Apparently, the transit company decided not to build it. They locked it up and forgot about it."

"You built all of this?" In spite of her fear, she was fascinated.

He shrugged as if everyone constructed Roman Baths in their spare time. "Time is the one thing I have a lot of."

"No one ever found you here?"

"Not yet." Valdemar held out his hand. "Come, let's get you cleaned up."

* * *

"You'll need a shirt," he said, standing in the doorway to his huge closet. He tossed the torn and blood-stained blouse aside. "Your jeans might be okay once they've been washed."

Melinda sat before the gilded mirror in his dressing chamber and tried on the borrowed shirt of soft suede.

"That's better," he said, turning and startling her by casting a reflection in the mirror.

"Surprised I have a reflection?"

"Now that you mention it, I'm surprised I can see myself."

"Well," he said, gesturing toward the mirror. "There you are. And you look beautiful."

She looked again at the creature in the mirror, seeing familiar features that now glowed with a beauty that was somehow cruel in its intensity. Her skin was the color of palest alabaster, her lips the color of deep red wine. She drew back her lips, revealing two sharply chiseled eye teeth. They were only fractionally longer than her original teeth, barely noticeable, yet deadly sharp. Violet eyes stared calmly back at her. It was an

illusion. She certainly didn't feel calm inside.

Tentatively, she touched her face. The sight of her long, white claws made her freeze mid-gesture. They were easily as thick as a dime. She suspected that even filed down, they would still be deadly. She ran a tentative claw over the tender skin on the back of her hand and watched in horror as it left a streak that soon turned an angry red. Such talons were fashioned for dismemberment, Melinda thought with a shudder. They'd caught on her clothing as she dressed and snagged in the cloud of thick sable hair that before had been straight and fine.

"But I shouldn't have a reflection," she protested. "I mean, in all the books I've read--"

"You shouldn't believe the superstitious nonsense you read in books."

She turned and really looked at him for the first time. He seemed so ordinary, standing there in his black jeans and ebony shirt. It was easy to think of him that way, until you looked into that face that seemed carved from whitest ivory, and you knew that you were privy to a beauty too flawless to be entirely human. That striking face was framed by unruly black curls that spilled onto his forehead and over the collar of his shirt. He had the kind of innocent wide-eyed stare that beseeched your sympathy on one hand and looked right into your soul on the other. Melinda didn't want to look into those raven eyes that compelled her to do things against her better judgment. But, when he smiled, as he did now, he was blindingly handsome.

"Come to my parlor," he offered. "I'll explain it all to you."

The End