



LAGUZ



# DREAMWALKER

## K. A. M'LADY

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LAGUZ ~ RUNE OF HOPE

BY

K.A. M'LADY

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# LAGUZ:

That which conducts unseen powers. Powers that nourish, shape, and connect. Like Water the attributes of this Rune are fluidity, the ebb, and flow of emotions and relationships. It signals a time for cleansing; for revaluing, reorganizing, realigning. A Rune of deep knowing, Laguz may call you to study spiritual matters in readiness for self-transformation.

The Reversed: A warning against overreach, excessive striving; a counsel against trying to exceed your own strength. Laguz Reversed often indicates a failure to draw upon the wisdom of instinct. What is called for now is to go within, to honor the receptive side of your Warrior Nature.

While the sun strives for differentiation, the moon draws us toward union and merging. Laguz prepares the person to take on the task of helping others through their self-examination process, allowing them to empathize more strongly and share their own experiences, making it (among other things) the rune of the spiritual counselor -- the Rune of Hope, Dreams and Possibilities.

*To my DH – for putting up with the insanity  
and loving me still.*

# CHAPTER 1

Like a minion of Odin's army Gararic stood at the edge of the Kelljek Mountains watching in silence as the swirling mist capped the stone dark edifice. He stood tall and imposing as the Great Ash in the center of the forest, fierce and mysterious as the dark mountains themselves. As one with the night, he appeared as mystical and threatening as the Witch's dark army that was spread out over the valley before him.

With calculating eyes the color of the sky on the brightest day in summer he methodically took in the surrounding landscape as the chill winter air coursed through his veins.

Winter had settled deep in the land of the wolf where ice and snow capped the mountains. Where the lakes and streams stilled beneath the frozen surface of ice clogged waterways. The winds howled like the great grey wolf on the prowl as it barked its warnings to the heavens.

This was the land where his people gathered. It was the land of the Setting Moon. The land of the

wise ones who had passed this way before them. It now belonged to their descendants, who lived and hunted in the valleys and glens below.

The ancients had passed from this life to the next in the hallowed grounds near the Great Ash in the middle of this very forest. They lived and died so that this would be their history. And yet, in the crisp cold night of late December, as he dreamt, his vision was filled with a death army on the march.

Worry and anger coiled in his blood like a viper of deceit. His bones hummed with uncertainty as a grey haze spread through his vision, filling the valley with the pallor of death.

The screams of the dying echoed in the hills and all around him as he watched in horror as the army of the Black Witch attacked the innocent and unsuspecting people in the valley below. Unable to stop them, they tore through the village like death dealers. Leaving a trail of blood and carnage in their wake.

This was not the way of life he had envisioned for his people. It was not how he wanted to take over as a ruler to the Wolf People. Unable to hold back his anger, a scream erupted from deep within his soul. He tore down the mountainside, drawing his sword as he ran.

Filled with fury he ran until his legs burned. Running until he passed where the Tree of Life

stood in the center of the forest, its limbs bent, and wilting from the weight of the world; as if it too were dying.

Everywhere he stepped the ground ran red in a river of blood. It seeped into his boots and the very roots and bark of the tree. The dark hue of crimson exposed in each vein of wood and every life-line of leaf.

The death of his brethren seemed to burn through his soul. He could feel their blood on his hands as he passed the dead and the wounded as they lay scattered about the forest. Their blood splashing his clothes with every step he took.

Gararic tore through the field maniacally, yelling, "No! Stop! Brothers, I implore you." His voice cried out against the tyranny. "Stop! See what do you do here? You are killing the tree. You are killing the Tree of Life."

Men paused in mid-swing of sword. Each arc of axe suspended to stare at the crazy warrior running through the center of the battlefield. His black hair flowing in the wind like a banner. His sword raised to the heavens like a salute to Odin.

They looked on at the man with the dark visage of a god come to life as he called out for order and peace.

"Look what you do here," he continued as he pointed towards where the tree stood stripped of life. Rotting and dying in the field.



As he stood in the center of the field, covered in the blood of his brothers, death surrounding him, a cold empty ache filling his soul, the landscaped shimmered in a golden haze. Before he could speak, or understand what was transpiring before him, the field of death disappeared in a ripple of light.

The suffering ceased to fill the land and echo across the valley. It faded away like a cold blast from the north would steal across exposed flesh.

Gararic shivered as his emotions tore through him like a piercing of the flesh. The senselessness of his people dying tore through his soul as a scream exploded from within. His voice rang out like a cry to the gods.

"Great Odin, I beseech you!" he cried as he fell to his knees, sword clenched in his hands. Hanging his head low to the ground, his long dark hair sweeping the field, he closed his eyes tightly against the onslaught of misery and pain that tore through him. And, as his emotion overcame him, he wept.

He wept for a people who did not deserve this suffering. For his father whose soul now walked the halls of Valhalla. When he could feel no more but a deep, empty ache, and a frigid chill seeping into his bones, he opened his eyes.

Before him the blood stained field was gone. The butchered and screaming bodies that were

once strewn about the land were no more than dust to his memory, and in their wake the forest stood empty.

Trees in the stark relief of a barren winter filled his vision. Winter kissed shrubbery filled the landscape leaving no mark of death on the icy fields. Gararic had returned to an empty Elnorn and the frigid chill of late December. But just as quickly, the scenery change once again and wariness seeped into his bones as he watched first the birth of spring, then the lush green of summer spread as the leaves filled en masse. Then that too changed and Autumn filled the earth all around him.

The trees turned a multitude of beautiful colors. The full bloom of harvest erupted before his eyes in brilliant tones of orange, crimson, and gold. But just as quickly, a frigid wind blew from the north, stripping the limbs of their folds.

He watched in muted silence, too stunned at the advanced play of seasons changing before his eyes as winter spread its icy fingers all across the land. Burying it in a blanket of crisp white snow.

Suddenly, the Tree of Life appeared strong and hale before him. And oddly, an unfrozen stream bubbled and snaked around it. Gararic blinked, and the scenery changed again.

A woman now stood in the middle of the stream, winter's icy blanket thrown about her like

a shawl. Crystals reflected like shards of diamonds and spread about the landscape, as if specifically designed for her. The daylight surrendered to darkness and the night grew silent as moon-glow filled the creek with illustrious light.

Her long black hair hung about her shoulder like a midnight cape and fell past her waist to her knees. Beneath her raven mane the lush curves of her naked body were a sculpture of majestic beauty, and Gararic knew he had never seen such a beautiful creature before.

She had eyes as violet and perfect as an amethyst stone. Her lips — a perfect pout of cherry red that begged to be kissed. Her womanhood — a black thatch of darkness against her pale skin and Gararic yearned to reach out and run his hands up her body.

He felt the strong desire to caress the soft planes of her thighs. To run his hands ever so slowly up the curve of her hip and gently skim over her high, supple breasts. The image of burying himself deep within her burned across his mind. The need to touch her, possess her was almost more than he could bear.

Gararic woke with a start, sweat beading his entire body; his cock rigid with a want. He couldn't remember feeling such an immense desire for a woman — not since he was an untried youth.

"Sweet Freja," he swore throwing off his blankets as he reached for his sword. Standing in a rush he began to pace the small enclosure of his campsite as his anger beat down on him. It infused each step as he stomped back and forth like a trapped lion in a cage. Despite the lust coursing through him he tried to digest the meaning of the dream. But he could not shake the discomfort of the images of death, nor the lingering desire for the woman.

He had chosen this small outcropping on the mountain filled with thick shrubs and brush for the cover it provided. As he looked out over the valley he could now see the campfires of the Witch's army in the distance. His heart raced with a mixture of fear, lust, and hatred. He had never before experienced a dream of this kind — a dream that had felt so real.

Running his hand over his face and through his hair he attempted to clear the fog from his mind. As he gripped his sword tightly he looked out on the valley once more and whispered, "You seek to haunt me, Witch? To steal my soul as you did my father's? Is that what you seek Witch? Is it?" he asked the darkness.

*I seek many things, warrior,* came his reply.

Gararic jumped then swung around, sword extended toward the darkness. His eyes narrowed in on his surroundings. Was this a trick of the

moon or of his mind?

*Come closer and you will find me,* the darkness whispered.

Gararic stepped forward with his sword as he searched the darkness. There was nothing there. Nothing for him to kill. Not man, nor beast. Not even a Witch. Only laughter followed on the breeze.

"Witch," he swore, "I will find you."

*I am counting on it, warrior,* the wind whispered.

Cursing beneath his breath Gararic began to gather up his gear stuffing it roughly into his bag. It was obvious the Black Witch had made her plans to haunt him and he would get no rest this night. The longer he tarried in these mountains the riskier it was. For either she or the betrayer of his people would surely try to kill him before the night was through.

He had to get to the Witch first. Once he found her, then she could lead him to his clan's traitor. And, once he had the name, then the Witch was dead. No Witch, no army to descend upon his people. That was the only way.

Gararic knew his people were counting on him. He could not fail in this journey. With his father dead and a betrayer hiding among his people, he needed to be about this business. The sooner he found this Witch and destroyed her, the better all of them would be.

Rolling up his blanket he strapped it to his pack and started on his way. With any luck the night would take him further up the darkened mountain slopes. He knew he would have to take precautions for the Black Witch's army would be on patrol throughout the forest. He knew he would need a solid plan before he confronted her. Hiking up the mountain, the landscape quickly changing beneath his feet, he methodically formulated his plot to find the Black Witch's lair.

As the night passed and the day took him further up the mountain he thought back over the course of events that had brought him to his current destination and the strange visions from his dream.

He considered his dream and wondered if the fall of Yggdrasil — The Tree of Life — meant that this war with the Witch would mean the coming of Ragnarok — the end of times. The thought gave Gararic pause as he considered all of its possibilities. Slowly he discarded each one in turn.

If the end was near then the counsel would have found the signs in the runes. They'd have made more plans before they sent him on this journey. He knew that this could not be possible. They would never have sent him away at such a time.

He then thought of his father's death; how his absence tore through his gut like a festering

wound. What would happen to the people of the Chenia River Clan should he fail to find the traitor who helped to steal his father's life? What would happen if he failed to keep the Witch's army from advancing and slaughtering them all?

There were many things to consider and plans to be made as he slowly led his horse through the forest. The mountain's dark face grew closer with every step but he was no closer to his goal as he pondered who had brought such treachery amongst them and why. Too many questions remained unanswered.

Before he left his village the clan elders had gathered. The Wiseman had said the stones held the answers and the truth. The stones and the Witch. Gararic wasn't sure which one would be easier to decipher. The Wiseman had read his future; Nauthiz — had meant lessons, Eihwaz — would bring profound change, and Laguz — would reveal her secrets. The future was uncertain. For Gararic and the Witch, *Dianaria*.

Her name whispered through wind-stripped trees, swaying empty limbs in the frozen night sky. It danced along the bushes and bramble, stirring scattered leaves and rushing them down the pathway that he wandered. They whipped through the forest like his thoughts; jumbled and deranged.

The day wore into night as Gararic traveled

further into the darkness trying to stay away from the sentinels the Witch had hiding in the forest as he traveled closer to the mountain. He skirted only a few in the lower valley, and the further he climbed the fewer their number became.

The terrain grew darker, the forest more sinister as he traveled on. His mind wandered back and forth between the Witch's army and the betrayer of his clan. Who would make such a bargain with her? Who would gain so much by seeing his father dead?

The leadership of the clan was passed down through family succession. As it had been for hundreds of years. It had passed from Draeb's father, Maentec the Red, and his cousin Vlouf the Old. It was from Maentec, his father's cousin, for there had been no other brothers in the line. *By blood it continues – yes*, he thought as he pressed onward up the mountain.

But when the brothers were no more, to the next family member it would go. As decreed by their counsel for hundreds of years.

Gararic considered this for some time as he continued through forest. Deeper into darkness he traveled, his horse carrying him effortlessly on through the snow. He could hear the howl of the wolves that guarded the mountain; their wolf-song carried on the wind as each step took him further.



The moon began to rise high in the velvet black blanket beyond the thickening branches of stripped tree limbs as Gararic stopped and looked to the sky as he pondered his enemy. He knew in that moment who would be the next in line to lead the Chenia River Clan were both he and his father to die. He could only cringe with worry and repulsion as the realization dawned clear.

*Odin protect us all should I fail on this journey,* he silently prayed.

## CHAPTER 2

From a safe distance Gorlefd watched as the counsel gathered at the center of the forest. This was their ancient meeting place. A place he was not invited. Not a counsel member, nor a leader of his clan, he was cursed to watch from the shadows if he wished to glean their secrets.

His eyes glazed with contempt as he watched his — *great and purposeful* — cousin prepare to ride off to the Kelljek Mountains to slay the Black Witch, Dianaria. He spit at the ground in disrespect.

“Follow him. I do not want Gararic coming back a hero,” he said, his gruff voice filled with loathing.

“Aye, Gorlefd. And if the Witch gets in the way?”

“Kill the bitch. She’s caused me trouble enough. She was to have killed both Gararic and Draeb long since now. She’s not held to our bargain. As I

see it the bitch deserves to die," he spat.

"But, Gorlefd, were you not to leave her the gold, the goats, and Draeb's Fire-Jeweled Staff?" his man Tirnin asked.

Gorlefd reached out and struck his underling in one swift blow. The man fell to the ground, a large gash appearing beneath his eye where Gorlefd's wolf claw ring caught his flesh.

"Never question me again, Tirnin," he growled.

The stricken warrior didn't say a word as he picked himself off the ground. He simply nodded to Gorlefd and with three others, left the gathering to do as he was bid.

Gorlefd watched as his cousin Gararic, with the support of the counsel, gathered his traveling gear. Mounting the best horse the clan had he turned the beast westward and headed off towards the dark side of the Kelljek Mountains. Alone. Unknowing what was waiting for him on the journey before him.

Gorlefd smiled wickedly as he watched the lean frame of his cousin disappear into the thickness of the forest just beyond the village edge. Mirth danced in his belly. Gorlefd knew that if he played this out right, his men could ambush Gararic by nightfall and return victorious by morning. And, in a few days hence, he and his men could then set out themselves to kill the Black Witch in vengeance for the death of their leader. Being next

in line for succession, Gorlefd would be ruler of the clan in a senight.

The thought made him sneer with delight. He would rule this clan, even if he had to kill all of his kin to do so.

The afternoon waned on as the sun dropped in the western sky beyond the barren landscape of the winter forest. As evening passed Gorlefd and his loyal followers gathered at the main tent where the clan counsel and other warriors gathered for their evening meal.

There was much conversation passing among men of the recent death of their fallen leader, Draeb. Whispers went round of who could be at fault and how Gararic would survive the journey that the gods had now put before him.

The debate grew quite boisterous as the evening progressed. Having enough of the yelling and finger pointing the counsel Wiseman, Jé, stamped his staff for silence.

“By Odin’s blood,” his old voice creaked as he stood in the center of the tent. “You gossip and monger like old battle hens. Be silent,” he ordered as his long grey beard and silver hair caught the firelight and glowed like lightning at the peak of a storm. “Hath not the wind taught you to listen? Nor the wolf taught you to wait?”

“Cease your ramblings, old man,” Gorlefd mocked as he sauntered through the center of the

lodging, taking place of pride at the high table where the ruler of the clan would sit.

Jé's eyes narrowed in aggravation at the insolence of the young warrior. Men whispered across the room. Some in annoyance at Gorlefd's wayward actions and disrespectful reproach. Others in abject appreciation, no longer in agreement with the counsel and rules of the old ways.

The lines through the clan were showing, those who would be loyal to Gararic, if the need arose. And those who would not. Many were ready for action and battle. Jé took note of the division as he addressed Gorlefd.

"You are not yet ruler here, Gorlefd. Be careful what you speak," he warned. The air of mystery that surrounded the clan Wiseman flowed around him, a slight breeze, seemingly from nowhere, ruffling the cloaks and hair of those who gathered near.

Gorlefd eyed the Wiseman carefully, unsure of the true depth of his power, and unwilling to test his clansmen so openly. For now Gorlefd acquiesced, giving a nod of his head, more so in understanding than respect. "As you say, Stonecaster," he replied, sharply taking his cup and downing it one long pull. He wiped his lips on his sleeve and slammed the cup on the table, never once taking his eyes from Jé.

"The company of this lodge grows old and tiresome," he told his fellow warriors, who were never far from his side. "Let us leave this place before they begin with their stories of the old ways and Odin's glory — And how they wished for things to be," he mocked, his men laughing and grunting in agreement.

"Be careful not to mock the gods too openly. Or too often, Gorlefd," Jé warned. "For tis certain the repercussions could be harsh and quick."

Gorlefd harrumphed a response, giving the old man his back as he turned to leave.

"Perhaps you and your fellows could make yourselves useful to your clan for a change," Jé added loudly so that the others nearby could hear his decree.

"Perhaps a patrol of the eastern valley? To make sure that the Black Witch is not sending her dark army sneaking up our backside like a viper in the night. You'd not want to give Odin leave to think you a coward." Jé continued purposely, adding the insult to set Gorlefd's nerves on edge. The innuendo was not lost on Gorlefd, or on the others milling about the lodge.

Gorlefd turned and slowly stalked toward Jé like a great tidal wave, anger pooling around him.

Jé stood freely in its wake and let it wash over him calmly, serenely. Like a break in the tide. Completely unafraid of his wrath.

"You dare challenge me?" Gorlefd growled between clenched teeth, the fire in his eyes enough to set mere men ablaze.

"Take your anger and be gone, Gorlefd. You have no power over me."

"This conversation is far from over, old man," Gorlefd vowed.

"As the runes say, Gorlefd. As the runes say."

Gorlefd stormed out of the tent, his men close on his heels. Those who were close enough could feel the heat of Gorlefd's anger flowing from him as he passed and they quickly stepped out of the way so not to be singed.

\* \* \* \*

"Doren, gather our horses. I want that pathetic cousin of mine tracked down tonight. I'll not leave the task to Tirnin. I want him dead by sunrise," Gorlefd swore as they stormed through the camp.

His anger was like a cyclone swirling through him as he tore through his tent, gathering his gear and weapons. He hastily stowed foodstuff, clothing, additional knives, viles of strangely colored powders, and other weapons in his bags as his men wisely went to do his bidding. As his mind wandered with thoughts of whom next to murder and as his temper simmered the air stirred within his tent.

Looking up from where he was shoving more weapons in a bag he paused noticing the slight breeze that seemed to stir from within. As he looked around his tent a pale grey haze seemed to be filling the edges all around him with mist. Gorlefd froze as realization and fog overcame him.

“You’ve a bargain to see to, Gorlefd,” a voice said from within the grey darkness that now filled his entire tent. It was soft, yet rich like the earth. Smoky, like the Kelljek Mountains themselves. Gorlefd reached for the blade at his waist as he turned.

Instantly the fog had cleared and in its place stood the Witch, Dianaria. He stood, frozen in awe. Her beauty kept him from moving. It kept him from lashing out and sinking the blade into her heart like he’d planned to do once he found her.

Her long black hair flowed around her in thick waves like the wing of a raven. Her skin was pure ivory; and her eyes... her rich amethyst eyes glowed darkly in the remnants of mist that clung to her.

Gorlefd tried to move towards her. To reach out and touch her. He yearned to take her into his arms and ravish her beauty. But his limbs were too heavy to move. Frozen still like a statue, his heart began to thunder, his lids blinking rapidly in panic. His mind became awash in anger and then



fear. She had trapped him, and there was nothing he could do.

As Dianaria circled around him a strange scent feathered the air. The deeper he inhaled, the more leaden his body began to feel; his feet more firmly rooted to the ground he stood upon. She'd spell-cast him.

He was unable to move, unable to defend himself. He could hear his pulse hammering in his ears as his blood raced through his veins. He tried to move his arms, strained against the invisible bonds that kept him in place, but it did no good. As the knowledge of her power over him washed through him it evoked a mass of hatred that boiled his blood.

Sweat broke out on his brow as he tried to speak. "What...what do you seek, Witch?" he croaked, his tongue thick in his mouth.

"Payment, for a bargain made," she said as she circled him, her hand stroking the thick scruff of his unshaven jaw.

Gorlefd was a filthy man; with unshaven features, long straggly copper hair and an overall unkempt appearance; he repulsed Dianaria. But she had come here for a reason. She would have her answers. As she took in the dark bedraggled features of this man, she knew what his answers would be. But she wanted to hear them from his lips to be certain.

"You've not fulfilled your side of the bargain, Dianaria," he managed between clenched teeth, his small dark eyes round with hatred. "Tis you who broke the pact. What is to keep me from killing you now?"

"Can you kill me, Gorlefd?" she asked, her sultry voice flowing around him like a subtle surf as she circled him closely.

Her black cloak flowed around her revealing long sculpted legs covered to the knees by black fur boots, held in place with black crossed leather. Gorlefd's eyes traveled up her body taking in the full effect of her bare thighs to the short tunic she wore above.

It too was black with an under tunic of purple peaking out at the open neck that matched her eyes. She wore a wide leather belt with several knives tucked in place around her small waist. The tunic, opened from the neck down to the top of her belt revealed the full swell of her breasts.

Gorlefd's heart raced with want as he stared shamelessly from the opening of her tunic, following the line up her neck before finally reaching her eyes. He licked his lips as thoughts of tearing her clothes off and slaking his desire filled his mind.

Dianaria knew the moment all coherent thought was gone from his mind. She knew when he was overtaken by his lust for her, and at that

point, was more vulnerable than he could possibly imagine. She watched, patiently as the glaze of lust filled his flat black eyes. As his unshaven jaw, dark with stubble grew slack. As his large tense shoulders went lax.

"What is it you seek, Gorlefd?" she whispered softly from behind him.

Chills coursed through Gorlefd and ran down his spine lodging themselves in the hardness of his cock where it pulsed with his need to take her. He was overwhelmed with desire and the inability to keep from answering her. He wanted to tell her everything she wanted to hear, just so he could touch her. His large calloused hands all but trembled with the need.

"To rule all of Elnorn and the lands from the mountains to the sea," he whispered between clenched teeth. Clearly speaking against his will.

"What are you willing to do to for that power?" she asked softly.

"Kill."

"Who is it you would kill, Gorlefd? Who else besides Draeb and Gararic?"

She had to know. That is why she'd come seeking Gorlefd. To know his true heart. He'd not paid her his part of their bargain, and she's already helped Draeb to meet his end.

But what Gorlefd didn't know was that Draeb was already dying when she sought him out. That

in her dream-walks to his slumber, he'd revealed many things to her. Many things that his clan may not wish for her to know. Draeb was indeed the Wise, for he knew what Gorlefd was capable of. He'd known who had sent her to his slumber.

They'd learned many interesting things from each other before his passing. She had made certain it was well worth the price. But before she continued this journey of destruction, she had to know what Gorlefd was willing to do to achieve his final goal. Who else he would kill to obtain all that he sought?

Gorlefd made the motions to answer only nothing came out. His voice remained unspoken. He stood frozen, as the spell had made sure he would. Only he would not speak. Dianaria stared at him, angered by the strength of his will.

"You will tell me, Gorlefd," she ordered, her own anger infusing her words as she clutched the front of his tunic. "Who would you kill to be ruler of all?"

A commotion outside the tent brought voices too near for Dianaria's liking. The spell was waning, as was her control of Gorlefd. She would have to leave him for now. But this battle between them was just begun. Stepping forward she whispered a kiss against his cheek. "We will finish this another time, Gorlefd. Sleep well, my friend." In an instant, she was gone.

Doren threw back the tent opening, "The horses are ready."

Gorlefd stood, afflicted with immobility, staring at Doren for several seconds, his eyes blinking rapidly to clear the fog that rushed over him, leaving his body shaky and numb.

"How long have you stood there?" he finally asked, stirring as though from a dream.

"Just now. Why?" Doren asked, a look of confusion marring the chiseled features of his weathered face.

"Never mind," Gorlefd growled, moving about his tent with a renewed sense of purpose.

"Do you smell that?" Doren asked, his nose wrinkling and sniffing the air like a dog scents the wind.

"Smell what?" he asked, glancing sheepishly at his fellow clansmen, unwilling to admit to himself or anyone else that he'd let the Witch slip through his fingers.

"Smells like...I don't know. Smells a bit like summer wind."

Gorlefd stared at Doren as if he'd lost his mind. His gut wrenched with annoyance as his thoughts turned to the Witch and how she'd so easily slipped into and out of their armed camp. Cursing himself the fool, he glared at Doren, seeking an outlet for his anger.

"What? Not my fault your tent smells this

way,” Doren said, as if Gorlefd were addled for not being able to smell it too.

“Let’s get on with this. The longer we’re here the longer my pathetic cousin breathes.”

“Aye, but you might want to be wiping that blood from your cheek first, my friend. What have you been doing in here? Shaving before battle,” he mocked, reaching for the tent flap.

“Shut up, Doren,” he said, grabbing his bags as he stomped out of the tent to the waiting horses. Gorlefd threw his gear on his horse, tying everything down tightly before finally mounting his grey gelding. Taking his horse’s reins tightly in hand he turned towards the darkest entrance to the west side of the Kelljek Mountains.

“Let’s go hunt us a would-be ruler and kill us a Witch,” he told his men as he kicked his horse into a trot. “We’ve a kingdom to create. Now let’s go slay us its current King.”

His men grunted and hailed in reply as they got in the spirit of the hunt banging sword against shield. Gorlefd rode to the front leading his men into night, vengeance and death filling his mind. Before this journey was done, he would be ruler of this clan. *If it the last bloody thing that I do.*

In the darkness, as the moon slid behind the black veil of midnight, horses and warriors rode out of camp in a dark cloud of treachery. In the

shadows of a Rowan tree the Wiseman silently  
looked on.

## CHAPTER 3

At the first peak of the Kelljek Mountains, in a place called Grey Wing Perch, Dianaria stood in the shadows and watched as the warrior Gararic tethered his horse in the lowlands below. She knew from this place forward his path would grow more burdensome as he left the thicker forestry behind to climb the steeper inclines of the mountainside. Soon he would be right where she needed him to be.

Before her the sky turned rolling shades of grey, blocking out the light of day as the land quickly faded behind the coming storm's encroaching darkness. Standing like a sentinel of the mountain, Dianaria stood alone at the mouth of the cave. With her arms raised skyward she began her praise to the heavens. As the rhythm of her song increased in tempo so too did the wind as it whipped the length of her long black hair on the tendrils of the wind.



Currents of power danced along her skin as the power of the gods flowed through her body. All around her the crisp smell of the earth in the midst of the fury of a storm whipped through the land causing the barren trees to quake and the earth to tremble.

She danced in a circle, her body swaying to a beat as old as the wind itself; calling out to the Aesir, the Sky Gods, drawing on their power. The clouds thickened as her body pulsed to the magic of the earth. Lightning cracked across the treetops, brightening the sky with wicked flashes of blinding light as the earth pulsed and hammered through her blood. With one final call, one last sway, and one quiet breath whispered from her lips, the spell was complete.

The wind smelled of storm and fire, earth, and rain. It was as though the world were alive and sizzling with the force of magic as her spell carried on the wind.

The very earth itself trembled as a dark wave of blackness rolled across the skyline. The empty limbs of maple and elm swayed in the snow covered valley below. The winds cried out and animals took to shelter as the gods of earth and sky answered the Witch's summons, rolling dark clouds across the horizon.

She knew, with the encroaching storm, that Gararic would have to leave his horse at the low

end of the mountains if he wished to continue his journey. Dianaria was counting on him being stubborn enough to make the climb by nightfall to the very cave she dwelled in. Smiling to herself, she stood back in the shadows and waited for her quarry.

Gararic watched the dark clouds gather as he quickly tethered his horse. Noting the dismal sky he pulled the beast into an overhang of rock formation hoping to keep the animal as warm and dry as possible. He didn't want to leave the beast with a storm drawing so near but the animal would never be able to make the steep climb up the mountain. He knew he would have need of it again if he wished to return to his people.

Cursing the Witch for this fool's journey as well as the rest of the destruction she'd caused, he quickly tied the horse off to a shrub, gathered up what supplies he could and set off up the nearest path. He knew the next course of his journey was going to be difficult at best; the mountain was steep with many loose stones and crumbling ledges. He would need his hands free in order to keep as much agility as possible on the icy ledges above.

If he wished to find the Witch by nightfall then he had no choice but to continue on. He knew with a bone chilling certainty that somewhere, deep in the heart of these mountains, this was

where he would find her.

Being an excellent tactician; the first to defeat an enemy, hunt his game, or escape his quarry, he quickly chose the path that would take him from the lower basin up to the peak called Grey Wing Perch. The massive dark stones being named for the color and shape of the wing they represented. Tightening the pack he'd strung to his back, he eyed the snow dusted mountain and chose the course for his destination and began his upward descent.

The storm clouds continued to grow darker as the wind picked up, stirring the folds of his cloak and the length of his hair. It whipped the loose soft snow all around him, making visibility even more difficult. Grumbling under his breath about fools and their travels he grit his teeth and continued on, the thickness of shrubs and bush giving way to more rocky pathways.

Lightning and thunder danced through the sky in a symmetrical glow, roaring through the cliffs as Gararic hurried up narrow winding paths of loose shale. It would take him a morning's time in good weather to get up the path to the Perch. He knew that with the storm riding the edge of the sky he needed to be there in less. And, by the looks of the storm clouds they would not hold for long.

As lightning continued to arc across the sky

illuminating his way in intervals, each step grew more precarious as the small stones beneath his feet crumbled and the incline grew steeper. Half way up the rocky path the heavens opened up, unleashing the storm in all its fury; pelting Gararic with sleet and rain as it soaked through his garments within moments.

*Thor's Hammer!* he cursed as he quickened his pace, all the while keeping the opening to the cave in site. In a flash of light bright enough to warm the heavens a shadow appeared in the opening of the cave.

He paused as the light danced around the mountain giving him an excellent view of the cave's opening. Staring in disbelief he cursed her freely. "Witch!" he bellowed, his roar echoing off the mountain. "I swear by Odin's blood if you have brought this storm to torment me I will kill you with my bare hands."

"Is that not your wish?" she replied.

Startled Gararic turned on the trail, certain he would find her on the path beside him. But the path he climbed was empty. No one followed up the winding rocky pathway. No one could be seen in valley below.

He reached for the hilt of his sword certain the devil's army was on his trail. As he looked back to the opening of the cave, it too was empty. He stood silent on the path as the icy rain sluiced

down upon him, staring at the empty opening of the cave in disbelief.

"What do you know of what I wish, Witch?" he quietly questioned the wind.

"Come and tell me, Gararic, Leader of the Chenia River Clan. Leader of the Wolf People of Elnorn. There a many things to know this night." The wind silently whispered her seductive reply.

Chills of desire flowed over Gararic as her soft words danced over his body. "I'll not barter with a dead woman!" he yelled, angered at the game she was playing. He tightened his grip on his sword, angered at his body's response to her.

"Are you so sure?" she asked, her voice as sultry as a moonlit night. "Your father was not so quick to turn me away."

Gararic cursed under his breath as an image of her in all her naked beauty, alone in the creek with winter surrounding her instantly filled his mind. Cursing himself a fool, he tried to let his anger rule him as he turned his thoughts to his father's death. He tried to let his rage turn to molten lava and spread through his veins. Knowing it was the one thing that would keep her from affecting him.

He knew she had killed his father. That she sought to kill his people. Yet even now she wished to barter with him for his soul. He knew if he wished to be the victor of this battle he could not let his baser needs affect him. She would use her

womanly wiles against him if she could. And that he could not allow if he wished to live.

Amazed at her audacity he vowed he would defeat her. He would see who was more cunning. The Witch. Or the warrior. Aye, he would play her game. But it was a game that he was certain she would never win.

Bounding up the path, his anger fueling his every step, Gararic hastily made his way up the remaining length of the mountain through the snow, ice, and rain. By the time he finally reached the entrance there was no sign of Dianaria; the cave appearing as dark as his mood.

"Too afraid to face me I see?" he muttered, wiping the rain from his face and wringing it from the length of his sable hair.

The back of the cave burst into a brilliant red flame. Gararic jumped back, drawing his sword before him. As the fire died down to a single burning flame he was able to see the shadow of a woman reflected on the wall of the cave. Next to the fire stood the Witch, in all her dark glory.

At first he was unsure if she was real or another image — this time from a waking dream. His eyes narrowed as he took in the voluptuous figure before him. With her back to him, besides her lush curves, he could see the rich fall of her waist length black hair.

She wore no cloak and through the length and

thickness of her hair, all he could see was that the glorious length of her legs was encased in boots to her knees. As he recalled the visions from his dreams he wondered absently if she ever wore clothes. Her feminine laughter startled him from his reverie.

“Do you intend to stand in the cold all night, warrior?” she asked, her voice as soft and sweet as a gently flowing brook.

Gararic looked down to where he stood, realizing that he had backed up to the outer entrance where the sleet fell heavily, soaking him once more.

“What makes you so sure that I’ll not kill you where you stand?” he asked as he slowly entered the cave.

She gave him no reply as she listened to him stalk towards her like a wolf hunting its prey; each step silent as the night. She knew instinctively that his sword was drawn before him, ready to strike for the kill. Yet there was something thrilling through her as she stood waiting for this man to approach. Something she had never felt before.

She somehow knew deep in her soul that this warrior was different than all others who had gone before him. That there was something unexplainable in the destiny of their meeting. That somehow this one man would change the course of her life. When he was a foot away from her she

turned and faced him.

Gararic stood unmoving as he stared at the beguiling creature before him. His previous dream had not done her justice. She was younger than he remembered. Maybe twenty and five at the most; the deep amethyst of her eyes were more brilliant than any stone he'd ever seen as they caught the fire's light.

She wore nothing more than a short double tunic; black over purple and cinched tightly at the waist. The opening at the neck plunged deep between the fullness of her breasts, exposing their perfect swell to his view.

"If you seek to seduce me, Witch, with your many charms, you should have come unclothed," he told harshly, his gaze returning to the brilliance of her eyes.

Dianaria smiled in amusement at the boldness of the warrior who stood before her. Many men had been as he was now and they could think of nothing more than their own want. But not this one. He stood before her brashly and unafraid. Sure of the path before him. Unswayed by his desires.

She slowly moved away from the fire circling him, making sure to stay a safe distance from his outstretched sword. "I seek nothing that you are not willing to barter, Gararic of the River Clan."

He watched her closely. Aye, she was beautiful.



Probably the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. But his father was dead. If he did not stop her, so too would be his people.

"Again I'll tell you, I am not willing to barter my soul with you, Witch."

"Man is always filled with want and willing to trade for that which he desires," she whispered, her scent trailing behind her. Penetrating Gararic's senses. "So tell me, Gararic, what is it that you seek?"

Gararic stopped her circling by extending his sword to press against her flesh, just at the place her heart would be. "You try to barter that which you do not have the power to give," he told her as he watched the rise and fall of her chest against the blade of his sword.

"Are you so sure, Gararic?" she questioned, meeting his intent blue gaze.

"Unless you've the power to enter Valhalla itself and return to me that which you have taken. Yes, I am sure," he said, his eyes filling with anger.

His father's death consumed him. Tore at his very soul. He had been a good man. A good leader to his people and she had killed him. She deserved to be punished for his death. Gararic was more than willing to bring about his justice.

"So pure is your love for your father, Gararic," she said, as she stepped closer to the blade indenturing her flesh against its sharp tip. A small

trail of blood pooled on the sword's tip and ran down the valley of her breasts.

"Stop," he told her as he watched her purposefully pierce her flesh against his sword. He wanted her dead that was true. But on his terms. Not by her will.

"Is this not what you seek, Gararic?" she asked, pressing closer to the blade. "Is this not why you have come to my mountain, but to kill me in vengeance? To kill me as your father was killed?"

Gararic's heart began to race as his anger simmered. His heart screamed yes, a million times. This was the reason he'd been traveling this mountain. She had caused his father's death. Even now her army marched to slay his people. He wanted her to suffer — to suffer for it all.

But as his grip tightened on the hilt of his sword, and he looked deep into her fathomless eyes, he could not do it. He could not plunge his sword home and free his people of this curse.

Gararic swore vehemently as he threw his sword to the ground. With a fierceness he didn't recognize he pulled her into his arms.

Catching her off guard he wrapped his fist in the length of her hair and pulled her tightly against him. The scent of jasmine flowed over him filling him with want as he tightened his grip in her hair, arching her backwards. Crushing her against him, exposing the long line of flesh from

her neck to her breast to his view, he surveyed the prize before him.

“You know nothing of what I seek,” he told her as his mouth came down hard on hers and he plunged the hot warmth of his tongue between her lips.

Dianaria’s pulse quickened as Gararic took possession of her. She thought that he would kill her, so great was his love for his father, and his anger for his death. The last thing she expected was this — this dark possession that gripped him as he pulled her tightly into his sculpted arms; as he ravished her lips with all the dark hunger of a man possessed. In that moment, she was lost to his kiss.

For the first time that she could recall she herself was overwhelmed with lust. She had never had a man make her feel this mad with hunger and passion. And she did not want it to end as his grip tightened in her hair and he kissed her senseless.

Gararic tore his lips from hers in a growl and kissed a line of fire down her throat. Her body burned everywhere he touched her. Scalding her from the inside out as desire roared through her veins.

Her lips were the softest he had ever kissed. He swore she tasted of springtime and the sweetest

honey. His body thrummed with want as he kissed his way down her neck to the opening of her tunic. He had no idea what madness had come over him but he could not bring himself to stop.

He let his hand go searching up the coarse woolen fabric of her tunic to the small plains of her waist surrounded in the leather of her belt. Pulling one of the many knives she had tucked within it he sliced through the leather in one cut and let it fall to the ground; the blade following in its wake.

Returning to her lips, he stole her gasp as his hand swept up her tunic to the opening where he found the soft full swell of her breast. Its lush warmth filling his hand. Gararic tore his mouth from hers. Gasping he said, "What have you done to me, Witch?"

Dianaria's eyes fluttered open to find the drowning blue pools of Gararic's staring back at her. Her pulse was hammering. Her body on fire with need. "I could ask you the same, Gararic," she whispered, her deep purple eyes filled with desire.

It was all the look Gararic needed. Letting go of her hair he grabbed the front of her tunic and tore the opening in two. His mouth watering as he gazed upon the full view of her body.

She was the most stunning creature he had ever

seen. And he had to have her. All of her. Now. Pushing the tunic from her shoulders he pulled her against him, cupping her breast in his hand as he brought his mouth down to one tight peak. He whorled his tongue around the soft pink tip bringing a moan of desire from Dianaria.

He reveled in the sounds that echoed around him and he wanted more. He was possessed with a need for her. A need that was quickly spiraling out of control. In his hands her soft pliant body felt like touching heaven; and still he couldn't get enough.

He backed her up to wall of the cave, not caring about the rough edges pressing against her skin. He had to have her. Every way and any way he could take her. He suckled her breast, taking one hard peak into the fullness of his mouth. Nipping along the tight bud until Dianaria thought she would die of lust. Crying out his name in passion.

Gararic kissed a line of fire down between her breasts to her navel, to the flat expanse of her belly. He caressed his rough warrior hands up the planes of her thighs, spreading them apart for access to her womanhood. When he touched her shards of lightning exploded through her body.

Dianaria clutched the wall as Gararic ravished her body. She had never felt such exquisite pain in all her days. She had lain with men before but she could not recall it feeling so wondrous as her body

ignited everywhere he touched. Clinging to his hair he dropped to his knees before her, spread her nether lips and plunged his tongue deep within her folds. Ravishing her until she yelled out his name as her body rocked with release.

\* \* \* \*

Gararic laved the hot juices pouring from her as her body trembled in his hands. It was the sweetest nectar he'd ever received as he milked the release from her body. His staff grew harder as her body shook from the force of her climax. And still he wanted more.

With need coursing through him he stood in a rush, pulled her against him and kissed her senseless; delighting in the taste and feel of her lips upon his. Briefly he wondered who was bewitching who as he turned her around, bent her over and he filled her in one hard thrust.

She was so tight around him Gararic thought he would surely die. Her body still quaked from her first release as he held her hips and pushed himself deeper inside her. Slowly he pulled out to the tip of his throbbing cock then pulled her back onto him in one long hard sensuous stroke; increasing the thrust and tempo as he pumped into her. The wet heat of her body guiding the way as he stretched and filled her.

He clutched her hips tightly as he increased the tempo and rhythm of each of his thrusts. Each one harder and deeper than the one before as he felt her body tightened around him. Gararic held her in place, not allowing her to move as he slammed his staff into the deep wetness of her core.

He rocked into her harder and faster until he was mindless. Until they both cried out in release; their orgasms shooting fire through their bodies. Stars exploding behind his eyes as his seed poured deep into her womb.

They were both gasping for breath when he finally released her. He turned her towards him and pulled her into his arms; claiming her lips and stealing the remaining breath from her before she could speak. He kissed her slowly, thoroughly until she was wild with passion once more. Until he was once again rigid with his own desire.

He threw off his cloak and peeled his remaining clothes from his body. Taking Dianaria by the hand, he led her to the fire where she'd laid a pallet of fur. Pulling her down upon it he took her by the warmth of the fire. Its heat stoking the flames of their mutual desire once more.

Ravishing her breasts until the peaks were taut and glistened in the firelight from his kisses he suckled her until she writhed beneath him. Stroking her until her body wept with delight.

\* \* \* \*

Dianaria was coiled so tightly she thought she would surely die from the pleasure he lorded over her body. No man had ever touched her in such a way. No man had ever sought to give her such pleasure. He drove her body wild with need until she could stand it no more.

"I must have you inside me," she begged, clinging to him, her nails snaking a path down his back as she clutched the firmness of his buttocks.

\* \* \* \*

Gararic shifted above her spreading her wide as he thrust himself deep inside her; pumping and grinding himself into her lush hot core. Until they both cried out in release once more. Finally collapsing beside her, his chest heaving from the aftermath. He held her until their bodies finally cooled and their breathing returned to normal.

"You have truly bewitched me," he told her, running his hands through the length of her hair.

"Tis I who am ensorcelled," she said as she looked deep into the crystal blue of his eyes.

Gararic stared at the pure beauty of the woman who now rested beneath him and wondered what he was to do now that he'd taken her. His people were still in danger for her army.

"Tell me, Dianaria. Why did you kill my



father?" he asked without preamble.

\* \* \* \*

His question surprised her and she briefly wondered how he could go so quickly from the amazing lover to the calculating warrior. But she knew she shouldn't be surprised. This warrior was so different from all those who had crossed her path before.

He had shown her and given her body the most amazing pleasure she had ever known. But his warrior heart still ruled him. He did things that his heart ruled him to do. But he also did the things that he must. One of those had been to seek her out to destroy her. She wondered what he would do with the truth.

Dianaria lay in his arms on a pallet of fur and gave him the story he sought. "A long time ago I was brought to this mountain to learn the ways of the one who walked before me. She taught me many things: the way the earth speaks, how to control the sky, how to look into a man's heart and, if necessary, how to destroy his evil."

Pausing in her tale, she glanced at his patient blue eyes as he waited for her to continue; the storm raging beyond the solitude of the cave. Taking a deep breath she continued, "At times, in the cycle of life there are many things that must

occur. Most of us are creatures of the light. We keep the balance of the universe."

"But there are those," she continued, her soft voice mesmerizing, "that walk in the shadow of darkness and it becomes the responsibility of a few to make sure that the cycle and balance continues as it should, else darkness rule the land. Your father was a part of both the cycle and the darkness."

"How could he be both?" he questioned, his voice holding concern as he absently twirled the length of her hair in his fingers.

"A man came to me seeking his death. But the course of life had already been set for your father."

"How did you know the course had been set?"

"Tis much the same way your people read the runes; the earth speaks, and I listen. When I met with your father in his dreams I told him of the treachery that was afoot in his clan and the death price upon his head."

\* \* \* \*

Gararic lay still as he took in Dianaria's words processing each one in turn. If his father knew of the death threat then he had planned ahead. But why hadn't he told him of these deeds? Why didn't he include him in his plan if he knew that Gararic, as well as his own people were in danger?

What pact did he make with this woman? This woman whose life had become so intertwined with his own.

\* \* \* \*

Dianaria watched as Gararic took in everything she had told him thus far. Gararic was a true leader and warrior. He would listen to her entire tale and then he would make his plans. His father had indeed chosen well his successor.

"Don't you see Gararic?" she asked, emotion overflowing her words. "Your father knew what was to come. He confided in me that it was already too late for him. He was ailing, Gararic," she told him. "A sickness was eating away at him from inside. He had already spoken with your counsel and made the arrangements for your succession."

Gararic blinked in surprise. Sitting up he pulled her into the vee of his lap. "What do you mean he'd spoken with the counsel?"

"He told me he'd called a secret meeting and your counsel had been advised of his imminent death. Your pages were written, Gararic," she said, her word a soft shudder of burning power. "Written and signed by your counsel ever before he died. He had received word that there was a traitor among your people bartering goods and

gold, cattle and your summer lands for loftier lands to the east. And he knew who had sent me."

Gararic stared silently into the warmth of Dianaria's drowning purple hued eyes as the knowledge rolled through him. He had known, deep into his journey, who amongst his kin was traitor but to have her confirm the deceit. To have her words mark his thoughts with truth. That was a wound to the core of his soul.

"Tis Gorlefd," he said, his voice rough with betrayal.

"And what of my father's plans?"

"He only advised me that you were to seek me out. To learn the truth of my part from my lips and decide your course for yourself. Your father said that you would choose well and would know what to do — And in your actions my own path would be set."

"Ever the wise, my father," he replied absently as he traced the corners of her lips with the pad of his finger.

\* \* \* \*

He sat silent for some time holding her as his thoughts swam through his beautiful blue eyes. Dianaria thought she could spend a hundred years staring into their depths and never grow weary. But she waited patiently for him to think through

all that he had learned. She waited for him to choose the next path that they would follow.

"So where is it we go from here?" he asked his decisions finally made as he stared at her intently.

"Where do you wish to go?"

"Your army still marches from your mountain. If not stopped my people will suffer. What is it you wish that will end this?"

Dianaria stared into the fathomless blue of Gararic's eyes. He was a shrewd leader, concerned for his people even now as he lay with her; never letting rest his duties, merely placing them aside for but a moment. Gararic would lead his people well; for many years to come, if he was allowed but to do so.

\* \* \* \*

Caressing the rough stubble of his jaw she rose and stood before the fire. As Gararic watched she whispered a chant and was suddenly fully clothed. Amazed at the possibilities of her talents, he thought, were she not careful, if captured and in the wrong hands, she could be truly dangerous indeed.

Rising himself Gararic stood before her — Beautiful in all his naked prowess. "We have much to discuss Gararic. Perhaps you should clothe yourself," she said as she took in the sight

of his well sculpted body.

“Distracted?” he asked, his eyes sparkling with mirth.

“More than you could possibly know,” she replied, a smile upon her lips.

Gararic dressed quickly so that they could spend what little time remained of the night working through their plans. They would have to leave before first light, each to return to their homes and their people. The thought gave him pause as he considered when, and if he would ever see her again. For now he would have to take comfort that by dawn, he and his Witch would come to terms. On the morrow his people’s traitor would be revealed and vengeance would be settled.

## Chapter 4

Through the dismal icy rain Gorlefd and his men met up with Tirnin and the others, where they had tracked Gararic to the basin of Grey Wing Perch.

"He and the Witch have taken shelter in the cave up above," Tirnin told him, pointing up the mountainside.

"Could you not stop him before he met up with her?" Gorlefd questioned, his voice dripping with scorn.

Tirnin made ready to answer but Gorlefd struck him before he could speak.

"Do not say a word, Tirnin. Your incompetence sickens me. I suggest you stay from my sight," he told him, as he kicked his horse back into the front of the line.

The rain continued to fall in great drops through the thinning landscape, coating the trees, outcroppings of rocks and the mountainside in a

glistening haze. As the evening waned each man's mood had grown more vile as the rain soaked through their light armor. Cursing his cousin for this hellish journey and the Witch for not killing him in the first place, Gorlefd called a halt as they neared the overpass where Gararic had left his horse.

Dismounting their weary horses they left them to scatter about the valley as they searched for a place to hide. Gorlefd tried to read the signs of the sky, but the lingering storm made it difficult. He knew by instinct that night had lasted long and would soon be loosening its hold on the horizon. If they were going to find his cousin and finish this then they had best act fast.

They would never make it up the mountain in the icy rain. To do so would mean their death. So, despite his desire for action, Gorlefd knew they would have to find what shelter they could amongst the trees and bushes and wait for an ambush.

Impatiently he watched the trail up the mountainside, keeping an eye on the largest opening in the face of the cliffs. From the place known as the Perch he could see a warm glow emanating from within and he cursed his cousin more for the warmth of a fire and a dry bed to rest on while he and his men stood in the icy rain, rotting.



His anger made him reconsider the trail. As he watched in seething silence the storm suddenly subsided leaving behind a warm blanket of endless black sky.

"Bloody Witch. Look how she controls the skies," Tirnin swore as he came along side of Gorlefd watching the haze of dark clouds recede into the horizon. The raging downpour of rain and hail that had pummeled them the entire trip suddenly evaporated as if it never been. Gorlefd's men stood in the shadows; fear and weariness radiating from them like a glow in the darkness as they whispered at the Witch's powers.

"Maybe you should keep her, Gorlefd," Doren said, staring in wonder at the clear blackness of the cloud free sky. "Think of all the riches she could bring us."

Gorlefd looked from his friend to the opening of the cave. His thoughts dark as he considered the possibilities. *If properly possessed...*

"Valhalla might just be paved in gold," he told Doren, as he thumped him on the back.

"Men, I want that Witch. Alive," he ordered, as he looked out into the darkness to the mountain beyond.

His men suddenly smiled in evil agreement as Doren's idea took root in their heads. Drawing their swords they spread out in the darkness, blending with the shadows. They would wait, as

silent as the night, and as still as the darkness, for just the right moment to strike.

For once, luck seemed to be on Gorlefd's side. As they stood in the shadows of Grey Wing Perch he watched Dianaria and Gararic emerge from the entrance of the cave. In amazed silence Gorlefd watched his cousin and the Witch embrace beneath the ink black sky.

"Bastard!" he swore. "I want that whore in my possession by dawn. Do you hear me?"

He was six shades of envy as he watched their sensuous embrace. His hatred of his cousin was so palatable the air was thick with his loathing. Gorlefd swore he would see his cousin dead before he allowed him to keep possession of her; or *ever* allow him to live long enough to enjoy the memory.

Gorlefd's hatred for his cousin ran bone deep, going back as far as when they were children. And, as he stood in the darkness waiting for Dianaria to travel the path to where he and his men waited, he could still clearly see all the memories that haunted him.

Even in their youth Gararic had always been better than he was — better at learning his swords. Gorlefd could recall the times he watched him in the practice field taking on all the older boys of the clan. Defeating them, humiliating them, beating them senseless in front of all their peers.

When the swordplay was done, and Gorlefd returned home in shame, it did not match the beating he received from his father; the lashing and the fists he'd received at his own father's hand. His father berated him for not being strong enough or smart enough to fight a mere slip of a foolhardy boy. Gorlefd wasn't sure which wound hurt more.

Even then, Gararic had been better at the hunt. He was the first to make the kill when he was just a youth of six summers; long before even Gorlefd had made his own kill, and despite all his previous hunts. His father had beaten him for that one too. In fact, that had been his first in a long line of beatings he'd received because of Gararic being better than him.

His father had taken him deep into the middle of the forest and left him with nothing but a spear to defend him. He had told him if he lived and found his way home, maybe then he would think of him as a man. He had been a mere eight summers old when that had happened.

The counsel too had spoken highly of him, in their youth — *Gararic will be a great hunter. Gararic will be a great ruler.* He'd even had much luck with the girls; following him about, chasing after his dark looks and batting their eyes. They freely offered their wiles, while Gorlefd had to take what he'd wanted, when he'd wanted it. Even now, all

these years later, Gararic had had been given freely what he, Gorlefd, could never have.

*Well not any longer*, Gorlefd vowed. He would take this clan from him just as he'd taken his father. And, he would take Dianaria as well. He would show Gararic what it was like to live with pain and suffering. When he was through with him, Gararic would be praying to Odin himself for death.

As morning light crested the horizon Gorlefd watched as Gararic finally took to the trail, hopeful that he was completely unaware of the danger that waited for his lady below. Dianaria had left sometime before him and had already reached the lower basin. She would be completely unaware that Gorlefd and his men were waiting within the shadows for her. He smiled at his cunning and treachery.

Silently he waited, blending into the bushes, well concealed from any visible eyes as Dianaria made her way into the lowland before him. She paused just beyond his reach as she turned to look back up the path to where Gararic was, and Gorlefd struck.

Catching her completely unaware he jumped from the bushes and struck her on the side of the head with the hilt of his sword. The blow leveled her to the ground where she lay in a still, unconscious pile at his feet.

"That was almost too damned easy," Gorlefd laughed as he reached down and scooped her up from the ground, hefting her over his shoulder. His men laughed in agreement as darkness began to fade from the sky.

Gathering their horses Gorlefd threw Dianaria over the front of his horse and mounted up behind her. He could now clearly see Gararic on the trail above.

"Clear the forest. I want no mark of our presence left behind," he ordered. "We ride to the eastern border."

"The eastern border? But is that wise, Gorlefd?" Tirnin questioned. "I thought that Lord Yan had a grievance with you?"

Gorlefd glared at Tirnin for speaking aloud of his affairs. But he knew if he wished his men to follow then he must make clear his plans. "Aye, Tirnin, a small affair easily fixed now that we've the Witch. Thank you for reminding me," he said, filling with anger. "But have no fears, his lordship will soon play his part, for he hates Gararic as much as I." He stared coldly at his underling.

The battle lines were being drawn and those who would follow must choose now or be left to rot in the field for carrion. He cared not what happened to them once they walked away. "You may ride with me, Tirnin, and be victorious in my kingdom of plenty. Or stay and wait for my

cousin. But rest assured, to go against me is to choose your death," he warned as he clutched the reins of his horse in one hand and the hilt of his sword in the other.

Tirnin nodded his acquiescence to his liege and Gorlefd kicked his horse into a gallop as they rode off into the dawn. They left Gararic on the trail above, unaware of their treachery.

They rode all morning and into the afternoon as the warmth of the sun carried them down the mountainside beyond the eastern borders to the Clan of the Jekja — the Black Bear. Where the lands to the east of the Kelljek Mountains were ruled by Lord Yan.

Gorlefd owed Lord Yan a large sum of gold and Yan was not happy to see Gorlefd as he and his men rode into his camp. "You must be quite mad, Gorlefd, to come to my lands unannounced. I hope that you've come to pay your debts?" Yan snarled as he stood at the center of his encampment, his warriors gathered around him in a circle of strength.

Yan had the look of the great bear his people were named for. He stood well over six feet in height with hair a thick black mane past massive shoulders, and dark eyes set in grizzly features that brooked no form of argument. One harsh look sent most men running in the opposite direction.

Gorlefd had no fear of him. He was certain that

when he told him of his plans, and when his Witch produced him his gold, things would be set to rights between them. "You will have your coin, Yan. In good time," Gorlefd said, as he reined in before him.

"For now, I've a proposition for you. One that will make us both very rich and very happy rulers."

\* \* \* \*

Yan's eyes narrowed on his quarry and the bundle he had bound and hanging precariously over the side of his horse. "I thought it was your cousin Gararic leading your people, Gorlefd? Have things changed so suddenly?" He eyed Gorlefd intently.

Yan was a shrewd leader and did not trust others easily. Least of all Gorlefd. But he was, at the moment, more interested in the power struggle between the two cousins. It might bode well for him and his people if there was dissention among the River Clan.

"You might say that," Gorlefd remarked.

"I take it this is an interesting tale?" His dark eyes flashed with intrigue.

"Quite."

"Then please, come. Regale me with your tale. Then you can see fit to pay me. " Yan gestured towards his tent.

\* \* \* \*

Dismounting, Gorlefd grabbed Dianaria and threw her over his shoulder. As he did so she grunted in response to his roughness. "So my lovely pet has decided to return to me." He laughed, smacking her on the ass as he followed after Yan. "Just in time too." His words rang ominously as Dianaria struggled against him. She'd awoken to find herself hanging upside down on a horse, staring at the ground. She knew his voice the second she heard it and she knew she was in trouble.

She was bound; hands and legs. A gag was tied around her mouth to keep her from speaking. And there was a talisman tied around her neck.

It was a rune stone to control magic. The one who'd placed the stone controlled the Witch. She was effectively trapped. There was no way for her to call upon her powers to escape. The only chants and magic she would be conjuring were the spells she was ordered to. For now her fate was sealed.

She could only pray that Gararic had not been captured. That he was still alive and was, even now, on his way back to his people. *Dear Odin, make it so.*

Gorlefd continued to taunt her as he carried her through the camp. She had no idea where she was but things were definitely not looking up as he



entered a tent and deposited her roughly on the ground at the feet of a grizzled looking man. Looking up through her disheveled hair she met his cold black eyes.

"What a pretty package you've brought, Gorlefd. Is this how you intend to repay me?" Yan stared lustfully at the dark haired creature before him.

Gorlefd glared angrily back at him. He should have known that Yan would think that Dianaria was a present for him. He thought all women were but a possession for him to acquire. And, if he liked the package enough...

"No, Yan, and let me be quite clear on this fact, the Witch is mine. If you touch her I will cut out your heart and feed it to you myself," he swore, his eyes cold with death as his hand clutched the hilt of his blade.

\* \* \* \*

Yan looked from Gorlefd to the girl, all the more intrigued. "So tell me your tale, Gorlefd. Before I decide to forget my hospitality and kill you." He walked to the table at the rear of his tent and filled two goblets with wine. Giving one to Gorlefd he sat down on the only chair the small surrounding provided and waited for him to continue.

Keeping his eyes on the woman, clearly

interested in her part of Gorlefd's story, he considered her beauty and was beginning to give serious thought to killing Gorlefd and keeping her for himself.

Throwing back the drink in one long pull Gorlefd set the cup down and stood before him like any one of his servants would do. The intention was not lost on Gorlefd. "All right then, Yan. Have it your way." Gorlefd placed his hands on his hips, fingers near his sword.

"I present to you, Dianaria, The Black Witch of our majestic Kelljek Mountains."

Yan's brow drew up and he leaned forward in his chair to get a better look at the woman. "It would seem that my ridiculous cousin has taken quite an intimate liking to the whore." Gorlefd grabbed Dianaria by the back of the hair and pulled her head back so he could look into her eyes. "Now, you and I both know, that we cannot allow him to retain possession of one so powerful," he said, running his hand along the side of her face.

"How did you come to know this?" Yan asked as the intrigue deepened.

"Gararic was sent on a mission by our clan counsel to stop her army from reaching our people. An army that marches even now to our very borders. He was sent to slay her for the death of his father." He crouched down before her. "But

it appears she is quite adept at bewitching mere men, and has cast her spells over him too." He lied purposely, omitting his bargain with her, and the betrayals of his own people.

"So you have taken her from Gararic to keep her for yourself?"

"Aye. Right from under his pathetic nose." Gorlefd gloated.

"What do you intend to do with her?"

"Whatever I wish," he replied as he ran his fingers through Dianaria's hair.

\* \* \* \*

Dianaria's repulsion for Gorlefd grew tenfold as his lies spewed from his lips. She cringed inwardly as he continued to paw at her; making a showing of his game to his friend. She swore that if it weren't for the rune he'd tied around her neck she would kill him where he stood.

"When your cousin finds out you've stolen his woman? What then?" Yan asked.

"As I see it, my cousin is in league with the Witch. He has turned her loose on his own people. Tis even quite possible that it was he who had ordered the death of his own father for the seat of ruler of the clan," he told Yan, conviction glowing in his squinty dark eyes.

"What has this to do with me, Gorlefd? How

does this bit of knowledge intend to line my chests in gold?"

Gorlefd released Dianaria's hair and stood up. Walking over to the table where the wine was he refilled his goblet and carried the flask to Yan. Refilling Yan's drink Gorlefd spoke, quietly, so that Dianaria could not overhear, advising Yan of the remaining details. When he was finished Yan sat silently for several moments as he stared at him in disbelief.

"You show me that this is possible, Gorlefd, and we shall have a pact." Yan rose and walked to where the Witch still sat on the floor of his tent. If all that Gorlefd said were truly possible, then Gararic was indeed a dead man. And, if Gorlefd were not careful, he too may not see the passing of another moon.

Dianaria's heart began to race in trepidation as Gorlefd grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. She stood before the two men and knew their plans for her did not bode well for any who lived beneath her mountains. If Gararic didn't make it to his people they may all be meeting in Valhalla.

The singing of a blade from its sheath tore her from her thoughts. As the sharp edge pressed against her throat she looked into Gorlefd's flat, deadly eyes.

"Now, I'm going to remove this gag from your

lovely little mouth and if you so much as utter one word I do not wish to hear....” He pressed the blade in closer, just cutting the flesh at her throat.

The burn of air hitting her skin as her blood pooled on the blade stilled any thought of escape from her mind. Gorlefd held the power in this battle and for now, there was nothing for her to do but what he ordered.

\* \* \* \*

Gorlefd removed the gag as Yan eagerly looked on. The Witch was definitely a stunning creature. If she could create the gold that Gorlefd owed him...well, there were many things that he might wish for her to create.

It was true that Yan had a long hatred of Gararic. The man had made a fool of him on one too many tournament fields. He had taken one too many maids he'd had his eye upon. And, Yan decided, it might be worthwhile to see him paid back for all the years of humiliation.

\* \* \* \*

“Now.” Gorlefd pulled her against him; coiling her hair around his wrist with one hand and keeping the blade flush against her neck with the other. “I want a box of gold,” he ordered. “That

box.” He forced her to look at the empty chest on the floor next to Yan’s table.

Dianaria stood silently trapped by Gorlefd’s evil. She was afraid that if she didn’t do what Gorlefd ordered, she would be dead. And afraid of actually doing the deed. But she knew that if she didn’t do it, so many more would suffer. *May Odin protect us all.*

## CHAPTER 5

In the early hours of dawn Gararic made his way down the icy shelf of Grey Wing Perch to the basin below. The valley was covered in the folds of new snow and the trees hung heavy with the remnants of the storm that Dianaria had called down with the force of her spell-casting the night before. The crisp air burned through his lungs and built purpose in his veins as the morning dawned clear beyond the treetops.

As he made his way into the valley Gararic could easily read the signs along the brush and bramble where Dianaria's warriors had obviously tried to clear the tracks of their departure. From the tracks that he could still glean, at least fifty men rode with her. Gararic wondered how she'd had so many riders waiting for her, all without him knowing.

He could only hope that she'd return to the main force of her army in time to turn them

around, away from his people. They'd set their plan in motion before she left him at the cave and he knew that they had agreed that no quarrel would remain between them. But still, the thought of so many riders did not sit well with him. Despite knowing that when he returned to his village Gorlefd and his men would be brought before the counsel to meet their justice, his instincts still warned of trouble.

He skirted the trail, catching remnants here and there of signs of horses waiting in the brush, tracks that weren't cleaned away. It left a nagging concern whispering through his mind. *But it is possible she had her sentinels waiting for her.* It was a responsible answer.

Shaking off his misgivings he thought ahead to how he hoped their planning would pay off. They had agreed that Dianaria would meet him in two days time for a trial at the Great Ash. There the counsel and the proof would be laid at Gorlefd's feet. It would then be up to the counsel for justice to be served. By all necessary means it was a death sentence that Gorlefd now faced. And Gararic meant to see this through to the end.

He spent the remainder of the long cold day and all of the night riding. Not stopping once to rest so great was his urgency to return to his people. By dawn on the second day he rode into a village in chaos. People were packing up there



homes, making ready to move on to their summer hunting grounds, despite that the time had not yet come to move on.

Women and children were gathering up their homesteads, supplies, and anything they could carry, loading them on horses. They were packing up anything they could carry on their backs, just so nothing would be left behind.

Dismayed and angered he rode into the center of the village at breakneck speed, grinding his horse to a halt in front of the gathering tent. As he strode into the tent, there he found the counsel and half of the warriors; all yelling over each other as tempers flared out of control.

Gararic pushed and shoved his way through the center throng to reach the high table where he found Jé`, the counsel Wiseman, leading a heated debate with one of Gorlefd followers.

"And I say, Gararic has abandoned us," the man swore, as spit clung to the whorls of his yellowed beard and his eye glazed with the contempt of his convictions. "He's left us to face the wrath of the very Witch he is in league with," he continued, his voice rising over the crowd. "It was he who killed his father. Killed him for his seat as high ruler of this clan."

"And I say, you are a fool and a liar," Jé replied. "Why would Gararic kill his own father?"

Voices grumbled around the tent. Most in

disagreement with the rantings of the youthful warrior. Many questioned where his information came from and why Gorlefd was not here to defend them if he was to be their new ruler, as the debate wore on.

“Yes, Brak. Tell us. Why would I kill my own father when the seat of ruler was already mine?” Gararic asked, the cold hard edge of his voice ringing out clearly through the tent, silencing the barrage of arguments.

Brak stared at Gararic in dismay, clearly surprised to see him alive. “Gor...Gorlefd has the proof,” he clamored, as he looked on at Gararic with fear in his eyes.

“Would that proof be — as good as — say, a sworn statement from the Witch herself?” Gararic asked pulling a piece of sealed parchment from beneath his belt. Handing it to Jé he turned to address Brak and the others gathered about the tent.

His decision had been made. His father had already set the wheel of time in motion and Gorlefd had sealed his fate. It was now time for him to step forward and lead his people, if he wished to save them from the destruction and death that would be their certain fate if Gorlefd were not stopped.

“As of this moment, as leader of The River Clan People, I, Gararic, son of Draeb, order the arrest

and death of Gorlefd of Elnorn, Son of Gar, and any of his followers for the order of death against my father, your leader, Draeb the Wise. For treason against his people. For inciting war against the people of Elnorn and the Black Witch of the mountain, Dianaria. Let those who stand against us, their punishment be death."

He looked to Jé and the other counsel members for their acceptance of his decree. As their voice rang out in unison with their response of Aye, and So be it, and the pounding of their staffs on the hard packed earth, Brak drew his sword.

Hearing the blade sigh free of its sheath Gararic turned as Brak swung. But Gararic knew the man was Gorlefd toady and side-stepping he lunged into him with an elbow to his throat. The man was unprepared for blow and hunched over gasping, giving Gararic the time he needed to draw his own blade. As Brak realized his error he glanced up in time to see his fate as Gararic brought his sword down, cleaving his head from his shoulders. His body fell like a great oak in a silent forest.

In the midst of the silence that followed one of the look-outs ran through the throng of the tent; shoving bodies out of his way as he went. "Gararic. Riders approach," he said, huffing. "Tis an army, some five hundred on horses. They bear the colors of Lord Yan. And Gorlefd is at his side."

An uproar went through the tent as men grabbed their swords. "I want all the women and children removed from this camp," Gararic ordered. "Grogen, take your men and form a line to the front. Two by two. I don't want them breaking through. Archers to the rear."

"Aye, Gararic." The warrior nodded and with a group of men took his leave.

"There is one more thing," the look-out said, as he grabbed Gararic's arm as he was about to leave. "Gorlefd has the Witch."

"Then he will bring her army upon us for certain." J   looked to Gararic, worry reflecting in his eyes for the first time that Gararic could ever remember seeing.

"Do not set us for Valhalla, yet old man." Gararic told him. "I've still a few plans up my sleeve that my traitor cousin is not yet aware of."

"Then let us hope Odin is merciful," J   said

Gararic nodded and briskly strode from the tent. At the eastern edge of the camp Yan and Gorlefd rode side by side, their swords drawn, the colors of their standards glowing in the fading afternoon light.

The light was one of the advantages Gararic had on his side. The sun would be setting directly towards them and he would need to use that to his advantage. There was no point in drawing this battle into the night and the coming dawn.

As Gararic gathered his own army about the camp he briefly thought back to his dream. A small smile touched his lips as he realized he'd already swayed the gods in their path of imminent destruction. Now he only hoped he could sway them a bit more.

As he looked on Yan and Gorlefd rode to the front of their contingent, sure and headstrong in the outcome that Gararic's death was imminent.

"I believe, cousin, that you have something that is rightfully mine." Gorlefd bellowed across the field.

"And what, pray tell, would that be, Gorlefd?"

"My clan of course," he said, as if Gararic was the ignorant one in this situation.

"How does this clan belong to you, cousin?" he asked, interested in hearing the twisted tale that Gorlefd had conspired.

"I have it on good authority that you are in league with the Black Witch and have conspired against our people to kill your father." He stated it loudly so his voice could be heard by all who were gathered. "By all accounts you have forfeited your rights to rule this clan."

"And who would that leave to be ruler?" Gararic asked, knowing what his reply would be.

"Well me of course. As it is written — By blood it continues. So, my vile cousin, you can step down and face your punishment like a man for

your treacheries against our people, or I will be forced to remove you from this earth," Gorlefd advised, his hand steady on the hilt of his sword as he leered at Gararic with contempt.

Gorlefd's evil knew no bounds and Gararic was certain that he would try to use Dianaria to make his story hold truth. But what Gorlefd didn't know was that he and Dianaria had already signed their confessions and their treaty. A document signed and sealed in their blood, which the counsel now held.

He only wondered what Yan hoped to gain from this. He knew the man held no liking for him. But until this moment he did not know how deep his hatred went.

"What of you, Yan? What promises has Gorlefd offered you should he become ruler of these lands?" Gararic asked the burly warrior.

"Oh, there are many things I intend to gain, Gararic. Many things indeed."

Gararic knew that Yan could not be trusted. He would turn on Gorlefd the moment his back was turned, if only to gain all for himself.

Gorlefd would die and his people would suffer greatly at his hands. No, Yan could definitely not be trusted. Nor could he live. Gararic had to get Dianaria away from the both of them as soon as possible. But how was Gorlefd controlling her? And how would he set her free?

"Where is this Witch you so brag of, Gorlefd? Let us hear her tale," J  said as joined Gararic at the front of the contingent of armed warriors.

Gararic watched the old man, unsure of what he had planned. "Do not worry yourself, Gararic. If he holds her by magic I will know of it — For only I will be able to set her free. Let us just hope it is in time, before Gorlefd decides he's had enough of discussion and chooses to end this with an attack."

Gararic nodded to J , hoping that he was right. He would just as soon end this battle quickly with swords, for he knew that killing Gorlefd would be the quickest way to finish this. He did not want Dianaria hurt. Nor did he wish for the blood of his people to fill the earth.

He watched as Doren brought her forward through their ranks. She was bound heavily, gagged, and he could see the large talisman that hung about her neck.

"Rune magic," J  stated. "He keeps her powers bound and only the one who has placed the talisman has the power to order her spell-casts." His silver eyes were etched with concern.

"You must get the amulet from her neck to set her free. It and its owner must be destroyed. There is no other way."

"Where the hell did Gorlefd get something so powerful?" Gararic asked, his voice thick with

fury and concern.

"Where indeed? The vile little man appears to be full of many surprises."

As Gararic looked on Gorlefd reached down from his horse and pulled Dianaria up before him by the scruff of her tunic and the back of her hair. Gararic seethed with anger as he watched her suffer at the hands of his merciless cousin.

"She is a fine specimen, is she not?" he taunted. "Ah yes, but you've already sampled her wares. Now she is nothing but a whore to be passed around. Mayhap when I am through with her I shall give her to Yan. He seems to have taken a liking to her." He laughed as he openly fondled her in front of the entire contingent of men.

Gararic made to advance forward, his sword clutched so tightly in his hand his knuckles were white. Jé` stopped him with a touch to his shoulder.

"Patience, Gararic. He seeks but to torment you. To draw you out away from the others. Be still, like the hawk in the sky and you will see your moment."

Gorlefd continued to laugh and taunt Gararic with his lewd display as he humiliated Dianaria before both armies. Gararic's anger grew within him until it became a fist in the pit of his belly. Like a lion on a great hunt he waited silently; watching Gorlefd with dark eyes, waiting for his



moment to strike. He knew when the time came he would rip Gorlefd's heart from his still twitching body.

Gorlefd, being one to charge forward without waiting, didn't make him wait long. As the armies looked on Gorlefd began his power play. "Tis high time we end this cousin," he said his anger and loathing for Gararic carrying on the wind. He pulled his knife from his waist and held it against Dianaria's heart.

\* \* \* \*

As he leaned closer to her she could feel his evil permeating against her like a dark vapor rising from a bog. The stench of it made her eyes water and she could feel the gag of nausea forming in the back of her throat.

"I'm going to remove this gag from you and you are going to do exactly as I say, or I swear by all the gods you will never utter a word again. Do you understand me?"

He was pressed so close against her his taint of evil clung to her like a sheath of second skin. She could feel it creeping beneath the surface like maggots on an open wound.

Her fear became palatable as the tip of the knife pierced into her skin. Dianaria could only nod her ascent as she looked into haze of darkness that

had become his eyes. She knew he was deadly serious as pain tore past her fear and spiked through her body like a thousand shards of light. He was too far gone with evil as it swept up his soul and darkness looked back.

Gorlefd removed the gag from her, keeping the sharp point of the blade flush against her skin as he ordered her to call her army. She started to shake her head no. To tell him that she would not do it when he blade pressed deep.

Her breath escaped her in a rush. And, as quickly as she could she said the words he wanted to hear. From the depths of her soul, as pain lanced through her, she called on her army.

Like a shroud of shadow stalkers from the outreaches of hell they appeared on the wind as far as the eye could see. Gorlefd smiled as the wind carried the burning scent of death.

\* \* \* \*

Gararic watched in horror as Gorlefd drove his blade into Dianaria's flesh. He knew it had sunk too far as her army shivered to life on the vortex of his vision. But it was too late, he was already moving. Running at full speed to reach her.

He drew his sword on the run, yelling, "Kill them. Kill Gorlefd's traitorous army."

\* \* \* \*

Gorlefd finally looked down at Dianaria as her body twitch in his arms. With hatred and the first small glimpse of panic glazing his coal black eyes he swore at her, "Bitch. Look what you've made me do."

Her blood pooled around the wound where he'd shoved his blade. He hadn't meant to kill her but the stupid woman wouldn't listen. Now how was she going to make sure he became ruler and killed his cousin?

As he looked up from her twitching body he could see Gararic running through the camp and he knew he had but moments to end this. Grabbing Dianaria by the shoulders he ordered her, "You will kill my enemies now. Do you hear me? Say it. Before my cousin reaches me and drives his sword into my heart," he bellowed, shaking her as his measure of fear increased.

Gararic was getting closer; their armies already embattled, the clang of sword echoing all around him. Yan was off his horse fighting three men as Gorlefd sat clutching the Witch, in fear for his life.

He grabbed the hilt of the blade. "You will say it!" he screamed, pressing the blade further into her chest. "Say it! Say it now!"

\* \* \* \*

Dianaria yelled out in agony, no longer able to hold back the pain that shot through her. With eyes filled with raw pain and seething hatred she called out Gorlefd's command. "KILL MY ENEMIES!"

Her voice rose on the wind like the summons to all the gods in Valhalla. Dirt and snow sifted like tiny whirlwinds through the lanes as her army shifted on the horizon; the opaque of their darkness glimmering in the shadows.

\* \* \* \*

Gorlefd knew instantly he had ordered his destruction.

"Bitch!" he shouted as he threw her to the ground. He kicked his horse hard in the sides hoping to get away as Dianaria's army swept through the field like a plague of locust, the grinding buzz of their attack echoing in the ears of the men who died where they stood. Men fell to the ground screaming as limbs were severed. Flesh was rent and torn asunder as life blood seeped into the earth. Gorlefd's army was reduced to blood and bone.

\* \* \* \*

As Gararic reached for Dianaria he met the blade

of Yan's sword. "Not so fast, my old friend," Yan said

"Unless you wish to die where you stand, Yan, step aside," Gararic said, his sword clutched tightly in his hand.

Yan tapped the edge of Gararic's blade, an invitation, wishing for one last battle.

"So be it." Gararic drew back his sword for defense.

Yan struck the first blow. Gararic was forced to back-step each thrust as Yan remained on the offensive, hacking and thrashing with blow after blow. Each powerful thrust keeping him away from Dianaria as her lifeblood seeped into the earth below.

Yan swung left and right, a head shot then a gut attack. Gararic dodged and ducked, blocked and countered, until he'd had enough of the game. As Yan moved in for another head swipe, Gararic ducked, pulling his blade from his boot and as he rose up, countering the swing left handed, and driving his knife into Yan's throat with his right.

Yan sputtered and blinked but continued to fight. His strength was waning with each parry but still he kept on. Until Gararic dodged a strike to the belly, twirled and brought his sword across Yan's gut, spilling his innards before him.

When Gararic finally reached Dianaria he knelt beside her, brushing her tangled hair from her

face. Leaning forward he pressed his lips to hers, checking for the slightest breath. His heart was racing as he looked down at the paleness of her skin. She was alive but her breath was weak and her pulse was erratic. He wanted to kill Gorlefd a million times.

"Stop him," she whispered, as her eyelids fluttered open to find the intent blaze in his cool blue eyes. Gararic kissed her briefly on the forehead and stood. "Jé," he yelled out for the Wiseman.

"I am here, Gararic." He knelt beside the woman.

He knew that Jé would see to Dianaria. Grabbing the nearest horse he took off in the direction he'd last seen his cousin. It wasn't long before he'd found him riding hard towards the eastern border of their land. Through the trees he could clearly see him and the fear that rode his spine.

"Gorlefd," he called out. "I'm coming for you, cousin."

\* \* \* \*

Gorlefd Jerked his horse's reins turning the beast hard in the tree line. His eyes were filled with fear as he took in the sight of Gararic across the line of forest. "You'll never take me alive, Gararic," he

bellowed, as he kicked his horse giving it its head through the sparse trees and fauna.

\* \* \* \*

Gararic gauged the distance between himself and where Gorlefd was beating his horse, urging the creature on as quickly as he could. Unwilling to chase the bastard through the night he wanted this ended. Now.

Clutching his sword over his head like a throwing ax he said a brief prayer to Odin and flung the blade as far and as hard as he could. He could only watch and pray as it whispered through the tree line, spinning end over end.

The earth seemed to still and all the creatures lay silent in the wood as Gararic watched this small destiny play out. It was as though Odin himself carried his sword on the breeze, making sure to miss ever limb of tree. Every fern and every shrub as it swung like a rod of lightning in the sky until it found purchase in Gorlefd's retreating back.

It struck him like a shaft of light through the flesh, meeting its mark out the other side. He jerked in his saddle as the blade tore through him. His dark eyes filling with wonder as he looked down at the blade sticking out of his chest, realizing his treachery had just killed him at his

cousin's hands. As all of his plans for the future turned to dust before his eyes he fell from his saddle, dead before he even reached the ground.

Gararic rode forward through the trees, telling himself it was to retrieve his sword. Not to make sure his cousin was dead. He considered leaving Gorlefd's body in the woods to rot. To leave it for carrion for the creatures of the earth. But he didn't want his evil tainting the forest. No, he would bring Gorlefd's body back with him to be properly destroyed.

As he neared the body it burst into flames startling his horse. Tightening his reins as his horse danced beneath him, he could only stare in awe as Gorlefd's body smoldered and flamed before his eyes. Incinerating to dust in just seconds.

"By Odin!" Gararic whispered. Before the epitaph was gone from his lips the wind shuttered through the trees blowing the ash to the far reaches of the earth. Where Gorlefd's body had been, his sword remained. Untouched by the stain of death.

By the time Gararic returned to his people the marks of the battle were quickly being removed. The women and children were returning and the wounded were being seen too. He slowly made his way through the throng of celebrating people. Men and women called out his name. Praising



him as he passed them.

But he couldn't stop until he found Dianaria. He had to make sure that she lived. That she was safe. He found her in Jé's tent surrounded by candles and rune stones. He paused in the opening too afraid to move. Afraid he was too late.

Jé stood at her head, his eyes closed, his hands held above her as he chanted ancient words that Gararic did not understand. Light shimmered around her in waves of translucent blue stirring the air about the tent. Filling it with the scent of jasmine.

"Come, Gararic," Jé said, startling him from the scene before him.

Gararic hesitated in the doorway. Unsure what he should do. Finally shuffling towards the bed where Dianaria lay like a goddess in the guise of death.

"Come, give me your hands," Jé told him as he grabbed Gararic by the wrist and pulled him forward. He wrapped his bony fingers around the meat of Gararic's arm, pulling him closer until he had him positioned where he wanted him.

As Gararic stood near he could feel the power that seemed to flow around Dianaria like a shroud. Jé was pulling his hand into the center of the heat. He didn't stop until his palm rested on the wound at her heart.

Gararic could feel the chill that seemed to coalesce through its center; all but piercing the palm of his hand. It was frightening and mystifying. For the first time that he could recall, he was afraid. Afraid that he would lose her.

"She walks now in the lands of Dreams, Gararic. You must help her to return," J  told him.

Gararic looked up at the Wiseman, unsure what he meant. Unsure what to do.

"You must be her heart now, Gararic, and will her to return. It is the only way she will come back to you."

"But how?" he asked, uncertain.

"Follow your heart, Gararic. Hope will show you the way."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.A. M'Lady lives in the burs of Chicago with her husband, three children, and a rotten beagle who should have been named – Aughtabe – Aughtabe a dog... but we named him Spike instead. She's gone to school to be a Business Assistant, a Criminal Investigator, and an Insurance Agent but she's more at home lost in the pages of mythology and myth, fiction, the worlds of possibilities and all the dark creatures of the night that the night can possibly hold. And she's happily dragging her husband right along with her – though he questions her sanity at times. You can find more of her mayhem on her website – [www.geocities.com/mladyfair12](http://www.geocities.com/mladyfair12). Or drop her a line – [mladyfair12@yahoo.com](mailto:mladyfair12@yahoo.com) – sometimes she does come out of the Darkness to answer her email.