

Nina Kimberly THE MERCILESS

CHRISTIANA ELLIS

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Nina Kimberly the Merciless

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Chapter 1

NINA BLUSHED, THEN CUT THE MAN'S HEAD OFF... Or at least, *mostly* off. In her haste, she slopped the follow-through and failed to completely sever the neck, a lapse that did nothing to improve her mood. The end result, however, was much the same, and the remains of her would-be suitor slumped to the floor.

Reactions to the sudden violence varied largely along lines of heritage. The native Langian townsfolk grew quiet and avoided eye contact, while drunken cheers erupted from the Uhk barbarians in the corner. A few out-of-towners, including the ex-lothario's buddy, stared in shock.

"You killed him!" shouted the buddy.

Nina raised a finger in warning. "Don't even start with me."

"But you *killed* him!"

"Do you want me to kill you too?"

His mouth snapped shut and he gave her a second look. Her slender seventeen-ish frame, feminine auburn braid and figure-hugging dress tended to present the casual observer with a hot young girl looking for action. This impression was not *entirely* incorrect, though a closer inspection would also reveal lean muscle, a cool authority in her body language, and last but not least, an assortment of used, but well-maintained weapons. All of these, subtle

indications that Nina's preferred variety of action might differ somewhat from the norm.

"Well?" she demanded. "Do you want me to kill you or not? It's really no trouble. I've already got the sword out and everything."

The buddy directed his gaze to a non-threatening floorboard. "Um, no. Please don't."

"Fine," she said. "Shut up, then."

"Hey, Nina!" shouted one of the Uhks, raising his mug in salute. "Nice! That guy should have quit before he was a *head!*"

Her knuckles turned white against the hilt of her sword, but she took a deep breath and did not turn.

"But she didn't get through the neck," called another. "She must have *liked* this one!"

Nina seized a flagon from the hand of a nearby shepherd and hurled it across the room. It careened off the Uhk table with a wet clang, spilling their empties and splattering them with foam.

"This tavern is *mine*," she shouted. "I thought I made that clear. When you come here, you keep your stupid mouths shut." She paused, frowning. "Better still, *don't* come here."

The Uhks muttered under their breath but she chose to ignore them, heading instead for the bar. "Hey, Marco? I need a rag." She gestured to the dripping blade. "This is a new sheath, and I don't want to get blood on it yet."

Marco handed her his counter rag.

She thanked him and proceeded to wipe the sword clean. The even back-and-forth motion began to soothe her frustration and gradually, her shoulders started to relax. Handing the rag back, she took a moment to inspect the front of her dress, then leaned into the light. "Did that idiot's blood spatter my makeup?"

Marco shook his head.

"Good." She sheathed her sword and glanced around the room. The dim, wooden building held nothing but farmers, merchants and barbarian louts, all sitting around drab wooden tables. She sighed. "Not that it *matters*. I'm beginning to think that your tavern is defective."

"You know, Nina," Marco leaned both hands on the bar. "The sawdust can only do so much." He gestured to Nina's victim. "Could you at least drag him outside before you go?"

She glared, her dark eyes shining with teenage defiance.

He persisted. "That much blood is going to stain my floor."

"Like my evening wasn't already bad enough? I even *warned* this one!"

"I know you did, but—"

"Why don't you make *him* do it?" She pointed to the buddy, who was going through his friend's pockets. "*He* brought the guy."

"Come on, Nina. House rules. You know that."

"Yeah, whatever," she grumbled. But she still dragged the carcass out behind her as she left.

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Nina Kimberly the Merciless did not have many friends.

She had come to the palace ten years ago, and her new playmates had not much appreciated her conquering their dollhouses with ruthless, bloody combat. She'd explained quite reasonably that, given a quick and orderly surrender, her barbarian doll had no intention of slaughtering their civilian dolls, but they simply would not listen to reason.

This could have, perhaps, been expected from non-barbarian children, but the adults were no better. The entire native population seemed to regard war as something that happened to other people. Then, of course, they had been invaded by the Uhk, and still they didn't learn, rolling over and surrendering with barely ten percent casualties. In Nina's estimation, not one resident of the entire kingdom was worth spending any significant amount of time with. Marco was the only one who came close, and that was largely on the virtue of his owning the least-shabby tavern in the area.

And yet, her fellow Uhks fared little better as companions. Under the reign of her father, Marcus the Merciless, they had been an unstoppable horde. Now, without his disciplined leadership, they had settled all too easily into the lethargy and carelessness of routine occupation, sleeping until noon-hour and carousing until sun-up. After a year or two, they had even abandoned their daily training, relying instead on bar-fights and street-fights and whenever-the-mood-struck-them-fights to keep themselves battle-ready.

As it happened, these fights often involved beating up those who dared to interfere with Langian traders. Once, upon learning that their shipment of Surdilanish brandy had been intercepted, the Uhk horde had descended on the thieves like a swarm of bees. Angry, dead-sober bees. Trade losses to theft and fraud were eliminated within two seasons.

Furthermore, the formerly puny kingdom now had an in-house barbarian military, and was thus able to stop paying "respect taxes" to its neighbors. They even began to demand tribute payments of their own. As a negotiating tactic, "Or we'll sic the Uhks on you" proved far more effective than previously available alternatives, such as "Pretty please."

In return, the Langians waited on the Uhks hand and foot. But the easily satisfied Uhks demanded little more than food, beer, women, and beds, in that order. With all factors taken into account, the Uhk presence had bestowed net profits on the Langian economy, and the kingdom prospered.

The Uhk horde and the Langian populace had formed a new equilibrium, a pleasant symbiosis that left everyone happy. Everyone, that is, except Nina and her father. He was dead, and she was stuck.

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Nina stomped into the night, reflecting on the unpleasant turn that the evening had taken. In hindsight, she regretted killing the man. Grabbing her like that only merited a broken arm or a severed ear, but he had been one of those foolhardy dolts who ignored the whispered warnings. The “*she-just-needs-a-real-man*” type, and Nina had no patience with that sort today. Francis was getting worse.

But on such a fine evening, breezy and mild, Nina found it easy to imagine herself away from this pathetic little kingdom and its idiot monarch.

She dumped the body in the “Carcass Pickup” shack for the gravediggers and, once sufficiently upwind, took a deep breath of the fresh night air. *He wouldn't have come tonight anyway*, she thought, beginning to relax. She needed a storm. The stories *always* had a storm.

An owl *whoo-hooed* in the distance and the scent of wildflowers tinted the air. A bright crescent moon cast the surrounding forests and fields in a cool, even glow, instilling a sense of pleasant adventure that lifted her heart. She imagined herself strolling through the wilderness somewhere. Somewhere exotic; somewhere exciting. Somewhere other than the narrow, rutted road between the town and the palace.

It was not a new fantasy. In fact, she had it all worked out. She wandered through some strange, unfamiliar land, not sure where she would find her next meal, with a strong, handsome hero by her side.

Someone with chiseled features and dark eyes. Someone who could read. Someone who could teach her new sword techniques while still truly respecting her own abilities.

They would search an enchanted forest, looking to recapture some stolen mystical relic, or to find the hidden fortress of an evil sorcerer, when a monster would spring upon them.

The monster varied somewhat from night to night, an arbitrary combination of sharp teeth, scales, claws and the like. The rest stayed the same.

First he would save her from its jaws by deeply wounding the creature, and then she would save him from its reprisal by dealing the deathblow. Then, each in the other's debt, they would embrace beneath the stars. Settling down onto some conveniently soft, springy moss, they would... Well, suffice it to say, the palace library held more than just *adventure* stories.

Far too soon for her own liking, she reached the palace and the illusion dripped away like wet calligraphy, bleeding and blurring back into depressing reality. She began to wonder if she would *ever* find a quest.

Marco's should have been exactly the sort of small town tavern that attracted questing heroes. If the books in the palace library could be believed, quests invariably started in dinky little saloons. Usually on stormy nights. Strangers would come together, separate paths uniting into a common purpose.

So night after night, she snuck out of the palace and spent hours at a time just sitting at

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the bar, dressed to kill.

Boring? Very. But when a hero finally made his way to the tavern, she planned to be there, and by God, she was going to be *noticed*. But she had been waiting there for an awfully *long* time. Perhaps it was time to get a little more proactive.

As she approached the palace, she left the road and walked around to the rear, past the plain granite towers, and along the plain granite walls. Of all the words that described the Langian Royal Palace, and Nina had many, “interesting” was not one of them. Yet another nail in the coffin of mediocrity that interred the tiny, bland kingdom in perpetual boredom.

Once she had reached the blind spot between two guard towers, she found her rope and pulled, tugging it over to a nearby tree. The knot on the end fit perfectly into a hand-carved notch, stretching the rope taut all the way to the top of the castle wall.

With a tailored burlap sack to protect her dress, she climbed the muddy rope and over the wall. After letting out some slack, she shook the rope out of the tree-notch, gathered it up and hid it in a gap between the wall and the walkway, muttering all the while.

A meddling guard had compromised her last escape route through the dungeon tunnel. A shame, really, as that passage had been a lot less trouble, but if the rope trick kept the king out of her hair, then she considered the effort well worthwhile.

She crept down the stairs and into the grand corridor. Hiding in the shadows, she trailed her fingers along the wall, charting her progress with the alternating textures of fuzzy tapestries and cold, smooth stone. In this fashion, she reached her chambers unobserved. After muffling the squeaky lower hinge with one hand, she entered the room and eased the door closed, sighing in relief.

“Sneaking out again, eh? What a naughty girl. Somebody ought to spank you.”

She whirled to see Francis standing by her bed, grinning like he had just trapped a fox. Likely, he thought he had.

“Francis!” she shouted, the heat of pure fury flushing her cheeks. “Get out of my room!”

Since she had known him, King Francis the Ninth had grown from a gangly adolescent to a tall, strong, handsome young man. He *looked* like a king, but he *acted* like...

Nothing in Nina’s experience provided a suitable parallel.

“Don’t worry, baby. I won’t tell anyone you snuck out.” He leered. “Now, how about we do something else we won’t tell?”

“Get out!”

He reached into a pouch on his belt and pulled out one of her slips, now heavily wrinkled.

“If you wear this and give me a little dance, I’ll even let you be on top.”

In her mind, she drew her sword and stabbed him through the gut. She slit his throat. She broke his arms and set him on fire. She imagined dismembering him, torturing him, killing him in a thousand different ways.

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Instead, she punched him in the stomach. When he doubled over, she dragged him by the tunic across the room to her window. Once there, she opened her ornate wooden shutter and tossed him out, silently accepting that he would call her “feisty” in the morning.

She waited by the window for the splash, then stormed out of the room and down the hall. When she reached the royal study, she kicked down the door. Unfortunately, it didn’t hit anything. After the last time, the royal advisors had moved their furniture deeper into the room.

She stalked across the plush Orilandia rug and past the many scrolls and stacked parchments to where Collius and Fardukai sat reading by the fireplace.

Heavy incense and an ever-crackling fire kept the room filled with stifling heat and a thick saccharine fog. Nina had, on more than one occasion, made a crack about the two old men being cold-blooded, but in truth, she suspected that they simply enjoyed watching people cough and sweat.

“Ah, Miss the Merciless, how nice to see you,” said Collius, without looking up. “Need we remind you that we do not keep that door locked?” Fardukai looked up, but only grunted.

“I’m done!” shouted Nina. “I’m done with this place. I’m done with you two creeps, I’m done with His Royal Dorkness, and I’m done with this whole stupid kingdom!”

“Nina, please.” Collius met her glare with a condescending smile. “We’ve heard all this before. Haven’t we?”

Nina hated them, and the feeling was mutual. The Langian royal advisors made no secret of their dislike for the Uhks, and for Nina in particular. They put up with the Uhks for the kingdom’s financial benefit, but Nina knew they would relish the opportunity to rid themselves of what they saw as rude and unpleasant tenants. Their only difficulty lay in finding a way to do it without getting their heads put on the spike Nina had installed beside the palace drawbridge.

Frankly, Nina would have liked to see that done anyway, but unfortunately, running an efficient kingdom required endless paperwork that no one else seemed prepared to manage.

“I mean it this time!” she said. “I’m fed up with just waiting around. I’m going on a quest, and you had better keep Francis from following me, or I swear, I will kill him before he takes one step off the drawbridge.”

Fardukai chuckled, but said nothing.

“Nina, Nina,” said Collius, shaking his head. “We’ve heard *this* before as well. You *know* the king has no heir. An act of regicide would instigate a succession war. Quite a messy one too, I should think, given our recent wealth. There are, after all, multiple interested parties.”

Nina huffed, struggling to keep her anger from slipping into mere resentment. “If any of those parties tried *anything*, the Uhks would slaughter them first, and you next.”

“Of course they would,” said Collius, his face slipping into a contemptuous sneer. “That is

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not at issue. But we both know that, in doing so, they would cripple themselves.” The smile returned. “Whoever would bring them their *beer*?”

“We’ll go back to the veldt.” She folded both arms across her chest. “We did just fine there. We lived there for years before we even came here.”

“And who would lead them? *You*?” He laughed. “I believe that was settled ten years ago when your father was killed. You were the rightful heir, were you not? They *rejected* you, and rightly so. After all, a mere slip of a girl like yourself hardly puts forth the fearsome image they are accustomed to.”

Nina’s jaw clenched, but she didn’t say a word.

“And without your father’s leadership, your ‘mighty horde’ is nothing more than a thousand-odd excitable men with weapons. Do you *really* think they could still survive a single season out there? With no discipline? No reliable source of food? The king’s death would mean their destruction just as surely as our own. So why don’t you dispense with this ludicrous grandstanding and let us get back to our reading?”

Nina stood rigid, taking deep, harsh breaths until she could relax enough to speak again. “Well, maybe I don’t care about that anymore,” she said. “You said it yourself. They rejected me. What do I care about them? I’m leaving! I’m going to find a glorious quest and you two corpses are just going to sit here and rot in your moldy old chairs!”

“A quest?” said Francis from the doorway. His sodden clothes were covered with mud. “That sounds like fun. What are we questing for?” When he entered the room, his boots squished with each step.

“There’s no *we*, Francis! *I*’m going, and you’re *not*.”

He chuckled. “Don’t be silly, Nina. I couldn’t let you go out there by yourself. It’s a dangerous world and I’d miss you too much. Besides, it’ll be good for us to do some things as a couple.”

“We’re *not* a couple! We never have been and never will be! Get that through your thick skull!”

“You know, you’re sexy as hell when you pretend we aren’t together.”

She turned back to the advisors. “Tell him! Tell him he can’t follow me. He’s the king, he has to stay *here*!”

“Actually,” said Collius, closing his book. “This is something that Fardukai and I were discussing just this morning.”

Fardukai nodded gravely, closing his book as well.

“We think that young Francis could do with a bit more maturity and charisma as a leader. We can run the kingdom just fine without his physical presence, and this sounds like a tremendous opportunity for him to gain some valuable experience without undue risk.”

“Without risk?” She raised an eyebrow. “I’ll drown him in the moat on my way out the door.”

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Francis grinned. "She's a feisty one, all right."

"Ah, but you won't," said Collius. "We discussed that just a moment ago. Don't you remember?"

"I told you I don't care about the Uhks anymore."

"Perhaps not," said Collius, "but your father did. And you do still care about *him*."

She bristled, hissing through her teeth. "Don't you talk about him!"

"And so you prove my point."

Fists clenched, she pressed on. "I'll ditch him, then. He's an idiot. There's no way he could keep up with me."

"Running away? Tsk tsk, that doesn't sound like you, Miss the Merciless. Always looking over your shoulder?"

"Besides," said Francis, "you don't have to play hard-to-get with *me*. I'm *already* your boyfriend."

"You'll find," said Collius, "that we have given the matter a great deal of thought. In fact, we will even be placing a spell on His Majesty first thing in the morning."

Nina curled her lip in distaste. "A *spell*? Since when can you guys cast a spell?"

"Oh, it's a trivial thing, I assure you," said Collius. "We contracted a freelance mage and had him write up the whole thing. All we need to do is read the incantation."

She shook her head in disbelief. "I should have guessed. I should have known that there was no level that you two wouldn't sink to. Magic spells? You disgust me."

Fardukai snorted.

"Quite right," agreed Collius. "You are one to talk. We are quite aware of your 'research sessions' in the library. Your aversion to magic seems to last only until you need something from it."

The accusation brought her anger back to the surface, particularly because it was true. She *had* swallowed her distaste and done some research into occult solutions. It gave her the creeps, but in her desperation, she had sought to at least investigate all the options.

Love potions were available in abundance, but she found nothing to make Francis fall *out* of love. She had considered mind control, but to maintain the spell indefinitely, she would need a local source of power, something she just didn't have access to.

She had even considered a spell that transformed an animal into a suggestible doppelganger of the target. With it, she could create a double of Francis, a double that she could control. But the copy gained its shape and stability from the original target. If the target died, the doppelganger reverted to its original form, and what use was the copy if she couldn't kill the original? Magic had been a dead end.

Collius leaned forward in his chair, folding both hands over the book in his lap. "Let's be clear about this, shall we? You will *not* kill him, and you will *not* leave him behind, because you know that he would not last the hour."

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Francis grinned broadly. “Oh, I think she won’t leave me behind because I last way *more* than an hour.” He waggled his eyebrows and tucked both thumbs in his belt. “The word here is *stainima*.”

She turned on him in a desperate rage. “The word is *stamina*, you twit!”

He looked to the advisors. “See? Straight from the horse’s mouth.”

She slugged him in the jaw, toppling him over an empty chair, where he knocked over several stacks of paper.

“Furthermore,” continued Collius, “you will not kill him secretly in the wilderness. That is the spell’s purpose, you see. If anything untoward should happen to him, we will be alerted. He *will* follow you, and *you* will be responsible for his well-being. If he dies, your people will be ruined, and your father’s legacy will be shattered forever.”

Francis sat up from the floor, rubbing his chin. “Careful with those love-taps, muffin. That one could have hurt me.”

She gaped at the king and his advisors, her eyes wide with horror. Her breath felt shaky and she knew tears were not far behind, but she fought them, summoning all her strength in the effort. “Fine!” she shouted. “Fine! I don’t care! I’m going anyway. And I *will* kill him. Just you wait and s—*eeep!*”

Francis had snuck up behind her and pinched her rear, leaving a wet spot and a muddy smear on her dress. “So, baby, you still didn’t tell me what we’re questing for.”

She turned him a vicious glare and moved one hand to her sword.

“Go ahead, then,” said Collius. “Do it.”

She took a long, deep breath and her rage cooled. Turning back to them, she composed herself. “I will. But not now. I’ll kill him because I want to and because he deserves to die, not because you goaded me into it. You haven’t won. This isn’t over.”

With that, she left the room.

In the hall, her elegant stride grew more hurried. She made her way down the corridor, her steps and her breath coming faster and faster. The repressed tears brought reinforcements, and she rubbed at her cheeks, determined to hold them off. On her way down the hall, she kicked over two ornamental suits of armor and pulled down a tapestry, but as she entered her room and slammed the door, the tears broke through.

She kicked a stool across the room and threw her dagger, embedding it in the side of her armoire. “It’s not fair,” she cried, and hurled her washbasin at the bed. “How can they do this to me?”

The advisors could have just let her go. Sending Francis after her could only be malice for its own sake. And the Uhks! If they could just take care of themselves, she could have killed that idiot of a king years ago and have done with the whole awful situation. She had all the responsibility with none of the command. All because...

The rage drained out of her. Slumping against the wall, she slid to the floor, pulling up her

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knees and huddling there. “I hate this place,” she said. A lump swelled in her throat as she turned over her right hand, examining the ten-year-old scar on her palm.

She remembered the grief; shocking and unexpected in what should have been their moment of victory. The battle had been over, the fight won. Her father, the glorious, undefeated Marcus the Merciless, had been *negotiating the Langian surrender!*

She remembered the pain, her dagger’s cold sting. The heat of her father’s blood, still warm even after death, mixing with hers. The shake in her young voice: “*I won’t forget, Daddy. I won’t.*”

But his memory would stay forever tainted, because she could not avenge him. He had not died in battle, nor in a duel, or even at the hand of an assassin. Any of those would have been a worthy death, and would have provided Nina with a target for retribution, but his death had come in the most humiliating form she could imagine: a gopher hole. His horse broke its leg and her father broke his neck. He died instantly.

An accident. An *accident!* Uhks did *not* die in accidents! They died in glorious combat, or at the very least, when discovering that their adversary had more friends than previously apparent. To die over such a trivial thing as a rodent burrow? Only the public’s continued—and entirely justified—fear of reprisal had prevented them from mocking him outright. When large hairy men with axes aren’t laughing, nobody is laughing.

But worst of all, true vengeance could not be gained from gophers! Nina knew this well, because she had tried. Armed with a shovel and crossbow, she had systematically exterminated the whole gopher village, but it did little to quiet the scream of injustice in her heart.

Indeed, the cry had only grown louder when her father’s lieutenants overruled her, deciding to remain in this weak, stupid kingdom, marooning her in boredom and obscurity instead of returning to the life of glory and honor that she truly deserved.

“It’s not fair,” she whispered.

“*You’re right. It’s not fair.*” he had told her once. “*But complaining doesn’t help. So what are you going to do about it?*”

She had been about five then. He had been teaching her the sword, demanding again and again that she attack, only to parry every childish thrust easily. She had thrown down her sword in frustration. “I can’t do it!”

He knelt and placed one strong hand on each of her tiny shoulders. “That’s not true, Nina. You *can* do this, but right now, I’m *stopping* you. So think. How can you stop me from stopping you?”

Now, all these years later, the memory still brought a smile. It had been her first faint. He had beamed at her, eyes sparkling from over his thick beard, his half-hidden smile opening into a wide grin. “That’s my girl! That’s daddy’s little killer! You’re going to be more than just a barbarian, Nina. Someday, when you’re ready, you’ll take your place at the top of the world.”

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Nina closed her eyes, sending a tear down her cheek. She sniffed and buried her face in her hands. “Nothing is going the way it’s supposed to.”

It’s not fair, he’d said. *So what are you going to do about it?*

Nina lifted her head, and the shock of realization stole her breath. The advisors were *stopping* her.

They were stopping her from killing Francis, from finding her own quest. How? The *spell*. Without it, she could get rid of Francis somewhere in the wilderness and for all they knew, he would still be out there, “questing.” An idea tickled at her, and she raced down the hall to the palace library. Inside, she went straight to an old volume and opened it on the reading table.

She had seen it during her research. Legends and rumors of a nearly all-powerful wizard, deep in the northern mountains. The stories spoke of a mage able to do—*or undo*—any curse, hex, or spell.

Nina began to smile. “Looks like I’ve found a quest after all.”

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Chapter 2

TWO WEEKS LATER, OUT IN THE WORLD, NINA'S QUESTING HAD NOT LIVED UP TO THE PROMISE OF HER STORIES. For starters, the rolling green hills and thick forests of the neighboring kingdoms brought little change from the rolling green hills and thick forests of Langia. Worse still, the traveling required a sickeningly close proximity to Francis.

She told herself that she would soon be rid of him, hoping that it would make his incompetence easier to stomach. Light at the mouth of the cave, so to speak. She told herself that his boundless energy and joyous exuberance at her mere presence made him almost like having a dog. If only he wouldn't try to feel her up while she slept.

At the moment, he sat at the top of a tree, scouting the area and trying to deduce their location and bearing from a phony map that Nina had copied from a fairy-tale book about rabbits. It read like a children's treasure hunt, complete with dotted-line trail and "x-marks-the-spot." At the "x", the Staff of Crowe: an ancient, mystical relic that imbued the possessor with the ability to intimidate any man and seduce any woman. An ancient, mystical relic that did not, in fact, exist.

Meanwhile, she kept the real map hidden in her pack and only brought it out when she could do so unobserved. She kept the rising sun on their right and they made their way north, marking their progress toward the mountains... and to the wizard.

At a rough estimate, given the significant slowdown provided by Francis, Nina figured that it would take a few more weeks to reach the wizard's domain. Once there, she need only convince the mage to remove Francis's security spell, then she would be free.

She smiled at the thought.

With Francis otherwise occupied in the tree, Nina took the opportunity to change clothes. With luck, they would reach Homilatta before nightfall. It was the first city of any size that they had passed thus far, and the milestone deserved better than the worn tunic and leggings she had been traveling in.

A clean pair of riding pants, a nice green bodice and a white silk blouse were comfortable enough to ride in for the next couple of hours and would still look nice at the tavern for dinner. After all, she might run into her elusive hero at any moment, and it wouldn't do to be all muddy and smelling of horse.

Packing for her quest had been harder than anticipated, as she had grown accustomed to

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a large wardrobe. But for high-speed traveling, every item had to earn its weight. After food, weapons and other assorted supplies, she only had room for the day-to-day traveling clothes, and only one nice outfit. Her clubbing dress had gone in and out of the pack a number of times, but she had ultimately left it behind because it just didn't work without the right accessories, and her spiked club was too heavy to travel with.

Francis, favoring brute strength over planning or agility, dropped out of the tree like a cat with its feet tied together. Then he sprang to his feet and ran over to Nina, flashing a toothy grin.

"He-ey, Nina, looking good! But no time for that now, baby. I know where we are. I was fooled for a little while by this city right here." He pointed on his map to a picture of a scarecrow. "But now I can see that it was actually a river, and *this* is the path. See? We were going to end up totally lost."

Nina glanced at the spot he had indicated. "Francis, that's the way we were already going."

He frowned in consternation, peering back and forth between the drawing and the horizon. Nina waited patiently. Finally, he turned the drawing ninety degrees to the left.

"Ahhhh, right, right. But now we *know* it's the right way. We would have been going sideways... uh, I mean west. No, ea— wait." He tried to figure some bizarre mnemonic device with his fingers. "West. West is right." Satisfied that he had resolved the matter, he walked back to his horse, a long-suffering and neurotic palomino named Valiant, and mounted up.

She took a deep breath and reminded herself that nothing had changed. He couldn't die yet. Not until the wizard removed the spell.

A harsh snort brought her back to the present, and to her horse. A large black stallion named Magnitigorsk, or "Magni" for short, stood a few feet away, stomping his forehoof in sullen impatience. A butterfly briefly drew his gaze and he snapped at it, missing by a hair's breadth.

She had named him for an eastern city that she had pillaged with her father in the old days. It had been a tough conquest, but they won out in the end and took away more plunder than they had thought possible. Magni was much the same. It had taken her nearly a year to break him, then another six months to build him up again. But now, he obeyed her every command and wouldn't let anyone else near him; not merely stubborn, but actively hostile. Nina saw his vicious temperament as a sort of personal accomplishment.

Mounting up, she followed after Francis and Valiant. When she caught up, Francis resumed the chatter that had filled nearly every waking moment since they left the palace.

"Nina, I like the outfit. It's good to see you wearing something half-way girly for a change. I mean, you've got the goods, you should show 'em off! Why the sudden change of heart, though? Never mind, you don't have to say anything, I can read you like a map. But anyways, I'm glad that you're feeling better. I mean, after that scene you made the other day at the inn,

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I thought you were having *lady*-problems or something.”

Nina grimaced.

“Anyway though, it sure was lucky that you heard about the Staff of Crowe being rediscovered. Who’d have thought that anything good would come out of that scummy little bar you hang out in? It’ll be great when we find it. Not that I need it, of course, but it’ll be nice to hang it over the mantel or something. You know? Something we can take out for ‘special’ occasions?” He tried to nudge her with his elbow, but missed, nearly falling off his horse.

Nina had decided to humor him. He would follow her regardless, but she needed something that would interest him enough to hold his focus. The last thing she needed was Francis running off at random, chasing after God knows what.

Just then, she caught a whiff of smoke on the late summer breeze. Smoke, dust, and burning... *something* hovered in the air. She turned, and in the distance, several plumes of smoke climbed out of a cloud of dust. When the wind gusted from that direction, she heard shouting.

Francis heard it too.

“Nina, look! It’s a battle or something. Let’s go check it out.” With that, he clucked his tongue and rode off at a gallop. Nina sighed and took off after him.

The cloud of dust arose from a field on the outskirts of Homilatta, a middle-sized city under no one particular lord. Nina had planned to stay there for the night, to clean up a bit and check out the local dress and weaponry shops, but they wouldn’t make it before dark if they stopped.

As they entered the cloud, they saw a sheep farm. On the farm, they saw some sheep. Chasing the sheep, they saw a dragon.

Nina stared. She had never seen a dragon in person before. Smallish, if the stories could be believed, this one measured only twenty-five feet or so from the tip of its snout to the end of its tail, about five feet tall at the shoulder. Beautiful iridescent green scales glimmered in the sun, with an even, pebbled texture on the belly and sides, roughing up to bumpy ridges along the center of its back and down the long, flexible tail. Its long, pink tongue hung out the side of its mouth like a dog’s as it rampaged through a terrified flock of sheep, playfully attempting to set them on fire.

Every so often, it succeeded. Then it would change course and head after the rest of the flock while a frantic-looking boy of about twelve rushed up with a heavy blanket to snuff out the flames.

To one side, a scruffy-looking, thirty-something man with a shepherd’s crook and a large bald spot screamed hysterically at a pudgy man dressed in fashionable velvet.

“You told me you could control it!” screamed the shepherd. “Save me hours of labor, you said! Keep wolves away, save me money, you said! Look at it!” They both watched as the dragon bounded by, racing to catch a sheep it had tossed into the air. “I must be crazy, letting

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you talk me into this.”

“I’m sorry, I just don’t understand,” said the merchant. “He never does this at home!”

Nina groaned. A real dragon! Just the sort of adventure she had hoped to find. But not *now!* Not *yet!* Now Francis would screw it up and probably get himself killed. She heaved a deep sigh. Best to just move on.

She turned back to tell Francis, but he had already dismounted and run over to the men. She rolled her eyes and followed.

“What seems to be the trouble?” he asked, striking a pose. Standing there in his royal armor, his chest out, hands on hips, anyone who didn’t know better might think him heroic.

The shepherd spent a moment gaping, but when he overcame his surprise, his eyes shone with a glimmer of hope. “This idiot said that he had tamed and trained a dragon to be a sheepdog, and me, the bigger idiot, listened to him.”

“I’m telling you,” insisted the merchant. “He’s just a little over-excited, that’s all. It’s his first time with real sheep.”

“Over excited? He’s terrorizing and slaughtering my flock! Look at Clover, she’ll never be the same.” A flaming, bleating bundle flew over their heads, leaving the smell of burnt wool as it passed.

Francis leaned over to Nina. “Better stay here. I’ll handle this.” Stepping forward, he drew his sword. “Gentlemen, I will slay that dragon, and rid your lands of its foul presence.”

The merchant paled. “You can’t do that! Do you know how much I spent *feeding* him?”

The shepherd grabbed the merchant by the collar and shook him. “*Feeding him?* Well, I guess it wasn’t enough, because he still has plenty of room for my sheep!” Releasing him, the shepherd turned to Francis. “Please. I don’t care if you kill it or not, just get it away from my flock!”

“No problem, my good man, it will be my pleasure,” said Francis.

Nina cleared her throat. “Excuse us, please. My traveling companion here has prior commitments and cannot possibly stop to slay any dragons. I’m sorry, but we can’t help you.”

“Nina!” Francis’s jaw dropped open. “How can we just pass by and leave that fearsome beast to hurt these good people?”

“Francis, we’ll never get to the mountains if we keep stopping like this. Besides, do you know anything about dragons?”

“*Niiiiinnna!*” he whined. “You’re embarrassing me in front of the shepherd.” He pointed at the scruffy man, who regarded them with an expression of dull wonder. Straightening up, Francis declared, “I’m going to slay that dragon, and you aren’t going to stop me.” Then he drew his sword and ran toward the beast.

She picked up a fist-sized rock and ran after him. Before he could cross the dragon’s path, she hurled it, hitting Francis in the back of the knee. He tumbled to the ground and the dragon ignored him completely as it ran past, pushing a ram along the ground with its nose.

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She caught up to Francis and grabbed him, holding him up by his breastplate.

“Francis, listen to me! We don’t have time for this. You don’t know what you’re doing, anyway.”

“Do so. Me and Charles and Freddy killed a baby dragon a couple years back. Remember?”

“That wasn’t a dragon. It was the iguana from that traveling menagerie! And I also remember how you got that scar. You couldn’t sit down properly for a month.”

“Right, so now it’s time to settle the score.”

She shook him. “Francis, if you try to kill that dragon, I’m going to have to save you, and I don’t want that on my conscience. It’ll tire itself out eventually and wander off. We’re *leaving!*”

A stubborn frown crossed his face, but then softened. “Aww, Nina, you know I could never say no to those big brown eyes of yours.”

She let go of his breastplate, dropping him to the ground, then she dusted herself off and checked her outfit for any spots or smudges. Satisfied that her clothing was undamaged, she turned to leave. For a few steps, she heard Francis behind her, but about halfway back, his footsteps changed. She turned and saw him racing toward the dragon again, sword raised.

“Sorry, Nina,” he called over his shoulder, “but you’ll thank me when I bring you a trophy dragon tooth.”

Cursing under her breath, she ran after him.

He placed himself directly in the dragon’s path, and as it veered around him, he swung his sword, bouncing it off the dragon’s thick hind leg with a jolt that knocked the blade right out of his hand.

The dragon skidded to a halt, its large tail dragging briefly in the dirt. It didn’t appear injured; it just turned to stare at Francis, furrowing its scaly brow.

It studied him while he scrambled for his sword. Once re-armed, Francis stood, holding out the blade in challenge. The dragon snorted and the corners of its mouth turned up in what looked like a smile. After another snort, it turned away from Francis and back to the sheep.

Francis brought his sword around in a wide arc, slashing the hard scales of the creature’s side. The dragon halted, then turned to face him again, brow furrowed into a deep scowl and upper lip curled, revealing gargantuan teeth.

The blade had not pierced its hide in the slightest, but it did produce a dull scrape against the shimmering green scales. The dragon’s head arced around at the end of its long, serpentine neck to examine the scratch. When it looked back to Francis, an angry snort sent smoke billowing from its nostrils, and the lips pulled back in a snarl, baring even more teeth than before.

Francis prepared to swing his sword again, but the dragon batted it away with a huge clawed hand. Ducking its head, it shoved him with its muzzle and knocked him off his feet. Then it

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stepped forward onto his chest, pinning him to the ground and forcing the air from his lungs. It cocked its head back, inhaling deeply. Francis winced.

The blistering flames streaming from the dragon's mouth veered far to the side as Nina wrenched the dragon's head away. Rearing onto its hind legs, it attempted to shake her off its back. Nina fought vertigo and held on tight as the dragon spun around, trying to reach her with its snapping jaws.

When it stopped moving, she clung to the dragon's neck, grabbed her dagger from her belt and began to search for a weak spot in the armored hide. Suddenly, something ripped the dragon's neck away from her and her stomach lurched. As she sailed through the air, it belatedly occurred to her that the dragon had only stopped moving to shove her off with its long tail.

She landed hard, knocking the wind from her lungs and the dagger from her hand. Gasping for breath, her head spinning, she searched frantically for her lost weapon. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the dragon charging. At last, her hand wrapped around the solid hilt of her dagger, just as the monster reached forward to pin her down. She thrust it upward, seeking out the gap between the rough pads in its scaly palm and piercing the soft tissue inside.

The dragon roared and Nina felt its breath, hot like an oven and stinking of sulfur. Ears ringing, she rolled away. When it tried to chase after her, it only drove the dagger deeper into its forepaw. Snarling, it rolled onto its back and pulled out the dagger with its teeth.

Righting itself, it turned to glare at her. A deep intelligence resided within those angry, amber eyes. The dragon stood and started toward her again, wary this time, alert and suspicious.

Nina started to draw her sword, but something in the dragon's gaze gave her pause. Something in its eyes spoke to her.

Now if she could figure out what it said, she'd be all set. In the meantime, she needed a way to end this without getting Francis killed. She took a deep breath and spoke.

"Mr. or Mrs. Dragon, I cannot apologize enough for the behavior of my traveling companion. He can't help it, he's an idiot. I only stopped you because I need him alive for now, to suit my own purposes. I can offer you twenty-five gold pieces for his life."

The dragon's head recoiled at the end of its long neck, its eyes wide and mouth slightly open. It glanced over to Francis, who lay on his side, panting to catch his breath. Then it met her gaze with an expression of curious respect. It sat back on its haunches and waited.

She ran to the horses and took Francis's traveling money from his saddlebags. She held the leather pouch out to the dragon and it leaned forward to take the pouch with its teeth. She felt its hot breath on her hand again, but this time a sweet smoke, like incense, drifted through the air.

Finally, it nodded and turned away, walking over to Francis, who sat on the ground,

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rubbing his chest. The dragon met his eyes and glared at him. Nina held her breath and her hand instinctively moved to her sword.

After a tense moment, the dragon continued walking. As it passed, the end of its long tail lifted up and swatted Francis on the back of the head.

With that, it took a couple of loping steps past him, unfolded its huge wings, and started to lift off. But before the wings had fully extended, it dropped back to the ground, wincing and grunting. For the first time, Nina noticed a long, partially healed wound running across the smooth skin of its right wing. Without looking back, the dragon gingerly re-folded its wings and ran off, limping just slightly on its punctured foot. *Quite fast*, she thought. *Even on land.*

The merchant chased after it, calling out at the top of his voice. “Lucky! Lucky! Where are you going? Come back!”

Francis had recovered by this point and he walked over, now rubbing the back of his head. They stood in silence, watching the dragon run away until it disappeared into the woods.

“You know,” said Francis. “You looked really sexy fighting that thing.”

Nina looked down and saw that her blouse had a large tear down the side and there was a grass stain on the left hip. She sighed deeply but said nothing, turning instead back to the horses.

Francis followed. “Still, though.” His voice grew stern. “You should’ve asked me before you gave away my money like that. I could have handled it and saved us some gold.”

“Francis, don’t push it.” She dug into her saddlebag, wishing that something inside had the power to shut him up.

Francis leaned against Magni’s flank, and her mount snorted apprehensively. Proximity to the dragon and the generally high emotions already had him worked up. Contact with Francis couldn’t be helping.

“Seriously, Nina. You should have asked. But that’s okay. I forgive you. One of these days though, I’m going to have to teach you some business sense. I was going to use that gold to buy us some... ‘toys.’” He waggled his eyebrows at her again.

Nina bared her teeth and clenched her fists. “Francis, I’m warning you. If I didn’t need you alive...”

“Of course you need me alive,” he said. “Being dead would put a bit of a damper on our love life. Wouldn’t it?” Magni shifted his hooves and reached around to snap at him.

“We don’t have a love life, Francis! And we never will!”

“Oh come on, Nina. Don’t say that. You have to think positive.” He grinned. “Right, Magni?”

With that, he gave Magni a smack on the rump.

Nina watched in a surreal mixture of horror and amusement as Magni lurched forward and kicked Francis full in the chest. He dropped to the ground like a rag doll and lay there unmoving.

The shepherd and his son, who had been watching the proceedings with increasingly

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confused expressions, rushed over and knelt at Francis's side.

Nina looked down at the fallen king. He was unconscious, but still breathing. The shepherd held him by the shoulders and tried to revive him.

Nina chuckled and patted Magni's nose. "Good stallion."

"Your king is hurt!" said the shepherd. "It could be serious!"

"Ha!" she laughed. "I only wish."

The shepherd looked up at her, shocked. His son stared at her breasts.

"Don't worry about him," Nina continued. "Five years ago, I pegged him with a rock the size of a cabbage from the top of the castle wall..."

The shepherd gaped at her, aghast.

"Oh." She rolled her eyes. "I mean it, ah, *fell* on him. Anyway, he'll be fine." Nina put her hands on her hips, which reminded her of the damage to her clothing. She sighed and looked around, surveying the area. Now that the dust cloud had settled, she realized that the city was farther than she had hoped. "So much for reaching Homilatta before nightfall."

Nina turned her gaze to the shepherd's son again, who continued to stare, though he had now moved on to the tear in her blouse. "Hey kid, I think you'll have a lot more luck with the sheep." His gaze flicked back up to hers and he blushed, then he turned and ran off after the scattered flock.

She watched him go and considered recent events. Francis was out cold, giving her some time to kill. She licked her lips and stared at the forest where the dragon had gone. If only she had somewhere to ditch the cataleptic king for an hour or so...

She turned to the shepherd. "I need a favor."

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Chapter 3

I'M REALLY SORRY ABOUT THIS." Nina pulled the knot tight around the shepherd's wrists. "But I need Francis to stay put until I get back. If he wakes up while I'm gone, I can't have you untying him."

"What if we have to go to the outhouse?" the boy squeaked.

Nina hesitated, glancing around the shepherd's small home. Scarcely more than four walls and a roof, the tiny cottage had little in the way of furnishings. Two small wood-frame beds sat in the corner. A small table and two simple wooden chairs, currently occupied by their bound owners, filled the center of the small room. The whole place smelled of sheep. Francis sat in the corner, still unconscious, bound hand and foot with a blanket over his head.

Nina finished her brief survey of the cottage without finding any suitable outhouse substitutes. "Can't be helped," she said, shaking her head. "I'm sorry. Just be thankful that you have dirt floors." She walked to the door. "Don't worry, though, I'll make it up to you. If I see the merchant, I'll speak to him about compensating you for the damage to your sheep."

"Really? That would be wonderful," said the shepherd. Nina nodded and walked out. Through the closing door, he called after her. "So, we'll just stay here then?"

She made her way to the small stone well to wash her hands and face. Refreshed, she changed back into her simple white tunic and brown riding breeches.

Shame about her nicer clothes. The tear in the seam could be repaired, but she knew that the stain wouldn't come out without ruining the material.

Sighing, she stuffed the ruined garments back into her pack, hoping that some of the fabric could be salvaged. She put it out of her mind and mounted Magni, focused on catching up to the dragon and the merchant.

At Nina's urging, Magni galloped furiously. The fresh air rushing by her face and the pounding cadence of his hooves quickly drove out her frustration. Riding full out toward a specific goal always had a way of concentrating her mind and spirit.

Soon, they entered the woods to the east. Located in one of the more hilly areas, the forest held more than the usual number of evergreens, spreading the typically dense forests into a wide, sparse distribution of trees with a thick carpet of dry needles. The scent of pine weighed heavy on the air, and the needles crunched beneath Magni's hooves. She pulled him to a slow walk so she could track the dragon. Meanwhile, she wondered what she would do when she found it.

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According to the books she had read, dragon sightings were rare but not unknown for the last hundred years or so. By most accounts, dragons were vicious, territorial predators. Extremely cunning, but otherwise no different than a large wolf or wildcat. Feeding mostly on large animals, they were most often spotted in areas with lots of livestock, such as the plains to the west. Furthermore, they scavenged gold wherever they could find it, hoarding it away in their lairs.

Many experts believed that they had been hunted to near extinction by dragon-slayers and fortune-seekers. The theory held that, since dragons had an extremely slow reproductive cycle, they did not replenish their numbers quickly enough to recover from the losses.

The experts who approached their research with a more skeptical eye found extremely few *authenticated* accounts of dragon slayings. A few incidents, made famous by bards and traveling storytellers, tended to give the lazy mind an impression that such killings happened all the time, when in fact, dragons were very hardy creatures. There was a mostly-silent agreement amongst the more educated (and therefore less popular) researchers that the dragons had simply gotten fed up with all the constant harassment, and had moved on to somewhere they would be left alone.

Yet, this dragon's obvious intelligence had sparked her curiosity. An intelligent dragon presented too large an opportunity to pass up.

Nina edged Magni around a clump of thick junipers and over a small ridge before suddenly finding herself in a clearing, face to face with the creature. Magni ground to a halt, whinnying and nearly rearing up.

The dragon rested casually on its back, lying on a bed of dry pine needles and dabbing its injured hand with what looked like a chunk of fungus. It watched her with a passive bearing and one arched eyebrow. Or at least, an arched scaly ridge in the spot where an eyebrow would have been.

"Oh! Um, I'm, ah, sorry." She swallowed and steadied her voice. "I was, well, hoping to catch up with you, but I wasn't expecting—, well, here you are. What happened to that merchant guy?"

The dragon gestured with its head up the trunk of a large ponderosa. Nina followed the glance and saw the merchant clinging tenaciously to a branch some thirty feet in the air. The lowest branches were about fifteen feet above the ground and Nina didn't see any way that the fat merchant could have climbed the tree by himself.

"Help," he cried, rather pathetically.

Nina looked back at the dragon, who had resumed cleaning its paw.

"So..." she said cautiously. "What's the story with you and that guy anyway?"

The dragon gave an exasperated sigh and covered its face with its good hand. Looking back to Nina, it shook its head and rolled its eyes.

"I found him," called the merchant. "He had a hurt wing. I helped him, and how does

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he thank me? Makes a fool out of me in front of customers, that's how!" He attempted a dramatic gesture and nearly fell off his branch.

Nina looked over at the dragon, once again noting the long, partially healed wound running across its wing. The dragon glared up at the man, brow furrowed, and gave him a menacing snort.

"Um, well, to be fair, I guess it kind of was my fault he got hurt in the first place." The man paused uncertainly. "Lucky, I don't suppose you could let me down now, could you?"

Nina turned a skeptical eye to the dragon. "Your name is *Lucky*?"

It shook its head emphatically and waved a hand up to the man, then rolled its eyes again.

Nina chewed her lower lip. Apparently these two had a history together and it didn't sound like she would be able to get it out of the dragon. Somehow, it had not occurred to her that the dragon would not be able to speak. She steadied herself and turned back to the dragon.

"Would you mind getting him down? It would really help make this conversation easier. If you don't mind too much, of course."

It heaved a sigh, a deep rumbling sound that sent Magni whinnying again, and seemed to be thinking it over. Finally, it turned to face Nina, looked deep into her eyes, and nodded. After rolling onto its stomach, it proceeded to clamber up the tree with its clawed feet, all the while favoring its wounded paw. The trunk groaned in protest of the dragon's bulk, but held.

It weaved around the larger limbs but plowed right through the smaller branches, snapping them off like dead twigs. Nina covered her head as a few thin branches fell to the ground, accompanied by a shower of plummeting pine needles. Once high enough, the dragon wrapped its tail around the man's waist and let go of the tree. It dropped thirty feet to the ground, more branches snapping and the merchant shrieking all the way.

The dragon landed easily, and once down, it dropped the man to the ground and started back to where it had been lying. But then it hesitated, turning back and examining him. It raised its good hand with a single long, clawed finger extended.

Nina's eyes widened and her hand twitched toward her sword, but the dragon just used the claw to tear the man's shirt down the front. Then, turning the pale-faced man around, the dragon pulled the garment off him entirely. Settling onto its back once more, it tied the shirt around its injured paw like a bandage.

Nina relaxed her arm and grinned. "Thank you very much. I appreciate it."

It stared at her again, head cocked and eyebrow raised, a funny little smile on its mouth. It nodded again.

Nina turned back to the merchant, who gasped and wheezed, trying to catch his breath. Pale, sweaty, and flabby, he did not strike Nina as a man used to exerting himself. A large

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smear of pine sap covered his fancy trousers.

“You were saying,” Nina prompted. “It was your fault he got hurt?”

“Um, yes.” He gave the dragon a sideways glance and looked like he regretted saying anything. “Ah... I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced, young lady. I am Johan, the fabrics dealer around these parts. And you are?” He held out his hand.

“Trying to decide whether to kill you or not.” She smiled sweetly.

He lowered his hand and his cheeks paled further. “Ah... um... ah...”

“Let me point out here that your story will have some influence over my decision. So I’d suggest you get right to it.”

He swallowed and attempted to mop his brow with an equally sweaty forearm. “Yes... ah... well...”

Nina crossed her arms and began to tap her foot.

“It all started with my fabric business!” he blurted. “I bought a clockwork loom from a man in Potalaria, to help me cut costs, you see. It was *spring-loaded!* You just put in the wool or cotton, wind up the spring, and it makes fabric all by itself! I suppose I should have been a bit suspicious when he said he would only build it for me out in the middle of nowhere. ‘Believe me,’ he said. ‘You don’t want this thing in a densely populated area.’ But you *have* to understand, I thought he meant that someone would try to *steal* it!”

Nina gave him a skeptical look, but he insisted. “It’s the truth, I swear it! So I had it built in a little shack out in the middle of nowhere. And it worked! It was wonderful!” He paused, but if he expected Nina to comment, he was disappointed. “But I had to go all the way out there *every day* to wind it, and it took a lot of time out of my day, so...” He cleared his throat. “So I decided to wind it up twice as much.” He licked his lips, appearing somewhat uncomfortable. “It exploded.”

“Really?” Nina deadpanned. “Who’d have thought that deliberately using it incorrectly would be a problem?”

The dragon gave a snort of agreement.

“I got a nasty lump on the head and the machine was destroyed. Don’t get me wrong, I thank God that I wasn’t killed. But anyway, the thread cutter was on a long moving arm and it shot straight up into the air, right through the roof.” He waved his arm dramatically at the sky. “The next thing I know, I see Lucky there crashing to the ground, his wing all bloody.”

Nina glanced at the dragon. It tucked its head and studiously examined its makeshift bandage, pretending to ignore them. She turned back to Johan. “Okay, go on then.”

“Well, I guess I’m just an entrepreneur at heart.” He looked proud of himself, but then cleared his throat and looked at the ground under Nina’s impatient stare. “Anyway, as soon as I saw him lying there, I knew I had a special opportunity. So I brought him a little food, and helped him to bandage his wing. He understood what I said to him and didn’t look like he wanted to hurt me or anything, so I figured he was tame. He cost me a fortune in food,

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though. I knew a shepherd who had a problem with wolves, and I thought that I could make some money. I brought him to the shepherd's fields. Thought he'd be good at it. Instead, he goes crazy and chases them all over the place. Some gratitude. After all the work I did taking care of him."

"Let me get this straight." Nina furrowed her brow and placed her hands on her hips. "You recklessly overstressed a machine you knew little about, purely for your own convenience, caused severe injury to an intelligent, rare, and powerful creature. And then said creature, instead of killing you on the spot, allowed you to make it up to him by attending to his wounds. You then attempted to *sell* him to someone as if he was your property, and you're upset that he didn't just *go along* with it?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the dragon watching her intently.

Johan stopped and thought for a moment. "Hmm... Now that you say it out loud..."

"Well, food for thought," she said, smiling again. "But back to the subject at hand. You see, I promised that shepherd that I'd speak with you about his sheep and then mediate a compensation deal. So, I thought we could head on back to the shepherd's house, brainstorm it a bit and try to figure something out. What do you say? Sure beats a horrible, bloody death, eh?"

Johan gulped, his double chin wobbling. "Indeed."

"Thank you." She cocked her head and gave him a winning smile. "It's so good of you to help out."

The dragon had stopped tending to its foot, and watched the discussion with avid interest. Johan mopped his brow again. Nina watched his face carefully.

"Hey, I've got an idea," said Nina. "It's a bit of a trust exercise. You head on back to the shepherd's house, and I'll be along shortly. If I find that you are trying to get away, or hide somewhere, then I'll be very disappointed. But, if I find you on the way or waiting for me there, then we'll have an act of good faith to assist our trust in each other. Okay?"

The man's mouth worked, opening and closing without a sound, like a fish gasping for air. His face vacillated between relief and fear, exactly the reaction she had intended. He answered carefully. "I think that sounds like an excellent idea, Miss. I'll be on my way then, shall I?"

"That would be great. Thanks for being so understanding. I'll head out there soon myself. See you later." She waved goodbye.

"Um... If I may say, Miss? I am the finest fabrics merchant in all of Homilatta. Perhaps I could find you a nice piece? As a sort of goodwill gift?"

Nina smiled. "Say, that's not a bad idea. You *are* quick on the uptake. Aren't you?"

Johan nodded and backed away, forcing a grateful smile but trying not to turn his back on her. After a few feet, he tripped on a tree root and fell right on his rear, his stomach quivering on impact. With a nervous giggle, he stood and walked away in the direction of the shepherd's cottage. Nina watched until he had disappeared into the distance, then turned

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back to the dragon.

“What *is* your name, by the way? I mean, aside from it being a stupid name, you don’t seem particularly ‘Lucky’ to me, anyway.”

The dragon clucked its tongue and nodded its agreement, a wry grin on its face. Then, after a moment of thought, it shook its head and shrugged.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

The dragon frowned.

“You don’t really have a name?”

It continued to frown, then held one paw over its mouth and shook its head.

“Ah.” She smacked her forehead. “You have a name, but you *can’t* tell me.”

Nod.

“Well... what can I call you?”

Shrug.

“How about... hmm... Draco?”

It shook its head.

“Not Smoky.”

It raised the equivalent of an eyebrow.

Nina paused in thought. She tried to think of something with the right flavor and suddenly flashed on the name of an ancient wise man from the south.

“Tyrnon.” She blurted out. “What do you think of Tyrnon?”

Tyrnon liked it, pulling his mouth into a wide, mildly frightening, toothy grin.

“So... Tyrnon. I’ve got a problem.”



Nina proceeded to tell him the history of her situation. She described the delicate political situation of the Uhks and the Langian throne. And how she needed to balance her distaste for Francis with her desire to do the right thing for her people and the kingdom at large, finishing with an explanation of her plan.

Tyrnon listened in rapt fascination, occasionally waving a clawed hand, or shaking his head to ask for more details on any specific point. He seemed to be very interested in the intricate political workings of her plan and particularly attentive to the parts containing negotiations or detailed discussions.

“So, what do you think?”

He sat for a moment and considered it, then came to a decision. He pointed a long claw at her, then at himself, then pointed off to the northeast.

Nina frowned. “You want me to go with *you*?”

Nod.

Nina hadn’t really known what to expect, but it certainly hadn’t been this. “Why?”

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The dragon leaned in close. Pointing to her and gesturing to her throat, he nodded; then pointing to his own throat, he shook his head. He pantomimed speaking and being given something in return.

“You want me to go with you, because I can communicate with people and ask for things?”

Nod. Smile.

“But... Can’t you just *take* anything you need?”

Tyrnon suddenly hung his head, breaking eye contact, but then he appeared to have an idea. He picked up the pouch of gold she had given him in exchange for Francis, gingerly reached in with two clawed fingers, and plucked out one coin from the rest. He placed it to one side, then set the pouch on the ground and gestured to it, suggesting that she pick it up.

“I don’t need it back, I gave it to you,” she said.

He seemed frustrated again and shook his head.

“You’re not giving it back? You’re just showing me something?”

He seemed pleased and nodded again. Nina picked up the pouch.

Tyrnon immediately snatched it away from her.

Her eyes went wide and her dagger found its way to her hand without a conscious thought. But Tyrnon held up a cautioning hand and his eyes held no anger. He set the pouch down and gestured that she should pick up the single coin. She bent and picked up the small gold coin, and Tyrnon gently held out a paw, reaching for it. She placed the coin in the dragon’s palm and he grinned again.

He pointed at the pouch of gold on the ground and waved it away, seeming to dismiss it, then he held the single piece close to his chest.

“Okay, I think I get it. Something that is taken by force isn’t as valuable as something freely given?”

The dragon nodded solemnly.

She shrugged. “All right. So, what then? You want me to act as a sort of liaison for you? Negotiating for things and communicating with people?”

Nod.

“What’s in it for me?”

Tyrnon grinned broadly and held up one clawed finger, as if he had just gotten to the good part. He leaned down and began to sketch in the dust. Soon, he pointed at the mountains in the north, then indicated a point on the drawing. Next, he gestured at the woods around them and pointed at another part of the drawing.

Nina looked and nodded. “It’s a map, I see. There’s the pass, and that’s where Langia is, where I’ve been talking about.” Then Nina noticed a large landmass across the North Sea that she didn’t recognize. “Where is that? I’ve never seen that on any of our charts.”

He nodded excitedly. Pointing at himself again, then at her, he drew a line from their

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present location to the mysterious continent in the north. The dragon then began a strange pantomime of using a sword. She watched for a moment, then laughed when she realized that it was a fairly good impression of Francis.

When he saw that she understood, he quickly pointed to Langia on the map and began looking around all over the place, as if he had lost something. Finally, he pointed at her, then to himself and to the mystery continent.

“You’ll take me to that land, so that Francis won’t be able to find me?”

Tyrnon did a brief victory dance around the clearing. When he returned, the question was visible in his eyes.

Nina didn’t know what to say. He had made her the offer of a lifetime, but to just scrap her own plan? She hated to leave things unfinished. Now that she had set her heart on getting Francis out of the way altogether, simply leaving him behind didn’t seem good enough.

“I’m in,” she said finally, “but first I have to take Francis to the mountains. If we just leave him here, he’ll get himself killed. At best, he’ll find his way back and enlist some trackers to follow us. And I can’t kill him until I break the security spell. Once we do that, we can do anything we want!”

Tyrnon looked uncertain, so she continued.

“It’ll be fine! It’s on our way and everything. All we have to do is keep him alive until we get there.” She took a moment to consider it. “And if possible we can try to make him look semi-competent. That way, people will actually believe he could survive out here. Hey! I’ve got an idea, maybe we could stage a phony dragon slaying! Only with your consent of course, I mean no disrespect by the suggestion.”

Tyrnon seemed to find that hilariously funny. He reached up to a nearby pine and easily snapped off a long, thick branch. He stuck it under his shoulder as if he had been stabbed and then proceeded to reel back and forth in a melodramatic death scene, finally collapsing to the ground in a heap. His head lolled back with his long, pink tongue hanging out. Nina laughed aloud and clapped her hands. He looked up and winked.

“That’s great! That’s perfect. Once we establish his reputation as a hero, we break the spell, and then we can get rid of him and nobody will suspect a thing.”

Tyrnon frowned and looked away.

Nina frowned in return. She was losing his interest. Why? “So... we drag him along for a couple of weeks, we’re going in the direction you wanted anyway, no big deal, and then, I’ll be totally free to negotiate for you and we can do everything you said. Deal?”

Tyrnon sat back on his haunches and looked at the sky for a moment, then looked her in the eye and nodded solemnly, just as he had back at the sheep farm. She attempted to squat down in an approximation of the position and nodded in return.

His serious expression gave way to a smirk and he extended a hand (or foot, or forepaw, Nina didn’t know what to call it). Nina extended her hand as well and they shook on it.

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Chapter 4

ON THE WAY BACK TO THE FARM, NINA AND TYRNON WORKED ON A RUDIMENTARY SIGN LANGUAGE SO BASIC MESSAGES WOULD NOT REQUIRE TWENTY MINUTES OF CHARADES. Nina suggested important words and Tyrnon suggested signs, so they managed to establish about twenty-five words in the time it took to reach the cottage. It wasn't enough for real conversation, but for the short-term, it would simplify things a great deal.

Magni snorted and Nina leaned forward to stroke his neck. He had been giving Tyrnon wary sideways glances at regular intervals ever since they had left the forest.

They happened across the pallid, unconscious form of Johan less than halfway back and Nina guessed that he had fainted, either from fear or from exhaustion. Tyrnon wrapped his thick but surprisingly limber tail around the prone merchant and carried him right along with them.

As they drew near to the shepherd's fields, Nina turned to the dragon. "I don't mean to be rude or anything, but... are you going to be able to control yourself here? I don't really want to attract any more attention to this whole situation than we already have. Can you leave his sheep alone?"

Tyrnon rolled his eyes. *Yes* he signed.

"Okay, you just looked like you were having such a good time before. I didn't want to be a wet blanket or anything."

Hungry *Past* *Sorry* *Now* Tyrnon paused for a moment. *Human* *Want* *Gold* *Question*

Nina frowned. "Umm...I think I must be misunderstanding you. You want to give the shepherd some gold?"

Nod. *Yes*

"For the sheep?"

Yes

Her mouth dropped open. "Oh... Wow... Okay... Well, that's one idea, but let's hold that one in reserve for now. Okay? I think that we'll probably come to an arrangement with Johan to reimburse the shepherd. I mean, why pay if you don't have to? Right?"

No *No* Tyrnon stopped walking, his brow furrowed and his mouth turned down at the sides. *Me* *Gold* *Human* His long clawed fingers formed the signs with an amazing dexterity. *No* *Human* *Gold* *Human*

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Nina pulled her reins, bringing Magni to a stop and turning to face Tyrnon. The dragon's face held resolution and determination. Nina stared for a moment in wonder.

"Pardon my asking, but why are you suddenly so set on helping this guy? I mean, I remember what you said about not stealing, but if that's such a big deal, why did you do it in the first place? I highly doubt you were planning all along to pay him back."

"You *Speak* *True* Tyrnon hung his head and looked at the ground again. *Me* *Bad* He raised a sober, serious gaze to meet her own bewildered one. *Sorry* *Now*

With that, he continued walking down the path.

Nina had no idea how to respond. Guilt did not play a large part in the Uhk cultural identity. They were a very pragmatic people. "If you don't want someone to steal your things," her father had said, "then you had better damn well stop them." To simply rely on arbitrary "rules" for self-protection was worse than futile, it was an open invitation to be stripped of all belongings, and probably your life to boot.

Likewise, she thought, if you can steal something and get away with it, then it is your obligation to do so. How else will the owner learn to respect their property enough to protect it?

Tyrnon was talking about another issue entirely. He faced no real risk of being caught and punished for eating the sheep. In theory, the locals could band together in an attempt to drive him off, but Tyrnon didn't appear terribly concerned about torches and hayforks, and they were planning to leave the area anyway. Nina could think of no down side to simply walking away scot-free. It couldn't even have been pity for the shepherd, because Johan could have taken care of him. Instead, Tyrnon *wanted* to pay. Why?

He seemed to have lost interest in conversation for the moment and simply marched down the path, still holding the fat merchant aloft with his tail. Nina clucked at Magni to follow and they traveled in an awkward silence the rest of the way to the shepherd's house.

While approaching the small cottage, the sound of loud threats from within suggested that Francis was awake. The accompanying sound of desperate pleading suggested that the shepherd and his son took him seriously.

"Listen, peasant, I'm warning you. What have you done with Nina? You'd better untie me right now!"

"Your majesty, we can't! We're tied up too! I promise! I'm sorry! Please, believe me!"

"That's no excuse. I am the King of Langia! I command you to take this blanket off my head and untie me right now!"

"Your Majesty, we—"

"Do you think I'm stupid? I know what's really going on here and you won't get away with it."

Nina opened the door and walked in while Tyrnon waited outside. "Get away with what, Francis?"

His anger dissipated in an instant, his voice shifting into flirt mode with astonishing

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agility. “Hey baby, it’s about time you joined the party. How about you come over here and untie me? I’ll be sure to make it worth your while.”

Nina sighed and leaned out the window. “Are you listening to this? What’d I tell you?” Tyrnon had a tight-lipped smile on his face. She walked back to the center of the room and started to untie the shepherd and his son.

“No, please, Miss.” The shepherd’s voice trembled with fear, his eyes twitchy and red. “Untie him first, so he can see that we were tied up too and couldn’t help him.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about him,” said Nina. She walked over to Francis and thumped him on the head. “Francis? They’re tied up, too. It wasn’t their fault.”

“Don’t trust them, Nina,” he said. “That’s just what they want you to think. It’s all part of their plan.”

“And what plan is that?” Nina cut the ropes binding the shepherd’s wrists, then did the same for his son.

“He’s secretly developing an unholy cross-bred army of half-dragon, half-sheep monsters and then he’s going to use the evil creatures to force all mankind into slavery! But we’re onto you now, buddy. Ha!” He laughed from beneath his blanket. “So Nina, untie me already.”

Nina stared with one eyebrow raised. “No, Francis. I don’t think I’m going to untie you just yet.”

“Oh, I get it. Bondage, eh? Not really my scene, but hey, if it turns you on, I’m game.”

She gave him a small poke on the shoulder, nothing too dramatic, just enough to send him slowly toppling over. He fell flat on his back with a dull thud. She turned back to the shepherd and his son, who had finished freeing themselves. “Care to step outside with me for a moment?” She took the shepherd by the arm and walked him to the door. “We can conclude our business here and be on our way.”

“Did you find Johan and... *erk!*” As he passed through the threshold of his tiny home, he found himself standing face to face with Tyrnon.

Nina smiled. “It’s all right. Relax. He’s not here to cause any problems.” The shepherd just blinked, his jaw hanging slack. Tyrnon held the small leather pouch in his teeth and sat patiently in front of the house. Nina didn’t see Johan, but after detecting a soft whimper, she spotted him on the roof of the cottage, clinging to the stone chimney for dear life.

She returned her attention to the shepherd. “So, Sir... I didn’t get your name?”

The “sir” in question had a semi-vacant look in his eyes that suggested he was having a hard time accepting the present situation. “Um, I’m Robert.”

“It’s a pleasure to be properly introduced, Robert the Shepherd. I am Nina Kimberly the Merciless, daughter of Marcus the Merciless.” Robert’s eyes went very wide at this point. “I presume you are already familiar with Johan up there, and I believe you’ve also already met Tyrnon.” She waved a hand in the dragon’s direction. Tyrnon nodded.

Robert nodded back without a word.

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“Good then. Now that introductions are out of the way, you might want to send your boy after the sheep.”

“Boy? Oh! Yes.” He turned to his son, who peeked at them through the doorframe. “Edward, go round up the flock.” The boy stuck out his lower lip, but obeyed his father and ran off to the pasture again.

Tyrnon snorted to regain their attention. *Me* *Human* *Gold* *Now*

Nina put her hands on her hips. “Are you sure about this, Tyrnon?”

Yes *Yes*

“Okay. If that’s really what you want.” She turned back to the shepherd. “Robert, how much will today’s damage to your flock cost you? If you can put a monetary value on it?”

Awareness began to dawn in the shepherd’s eyes that he was not about to be violently devoured. That awareness soon shifted further to the glow of opportunity. He spoke cautiously. “Well, um, I wasn’t able to fully evaluate the damage as yet, because I was a bit tied up.”

She nodded. “I think we can all understand that. Just try to give us a best guess, if you can.”

“Okay, well, there were at least two sheep eaten. I think seven were seriously scorched... Small burns to approximately ten more, and...” The shepherd ticked them off on his fingers. “And of course, it trampled all up and down my pasture. I’d say that an acre’s worth of prime grazing land is just about ruined...” He licked his lips. “And I had just seeded it with a special very expensive grass. And of course, all of the sheep were absolutely terrified. Stress and anxiety like that is absolutely terrible for the wool. I’m afraid that none of them will be able to fetch the normal market price when they’re shorn this year. That’s my primary livelihood, you know. Not to mention my emotional suffering at seeing them hurt. They are almost like family to me, you see, and...”

Nina scowled. “Okay, that’s enough of that.”

The man’s mouth snapped shut.

“How much?” she asked.

“Twelve gold pieces?” He had clearly intended the answer to be a declaration, but the look in Nina’s eyes made him flinch before he had finished speaking.

“*Twelve?* Clearly you don’t think very much of us, Robert. I thought we had more respect for each other than that. For you to try to take advantage of us like that...” She shook her head sadly. “Well, I must say, it’s very disappointing. While we appreciate that they might have some sentimental value for you, there is no way those sheep are worth more than seven gold pieces for the whole flock. Tyrnon, don’t let this... Tyrnon? What are you doing?”

Tyrnon had counted out fifteen gold pieces from the pouch and started placing them on the ground before the shepherd one at a time. When finished, he sat back on his haunches and nodded.

Robert stared at the gold in wonder, then glanced at Nina for permission. She shrugged

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and he quickly scooped up the gold with both hands. Then he rushed back into the cottage, slamming the door and locking it behind him.

Nina rolled her eyes. In a moment, he would remember that Francis was still inside and that his son was still outside. Not to mention the fact that a simple locked door posed little problem for a motivated barbarian. Or a dragon, for that matter. For now, Nina walked over to speak with Tyrnon.

“What was going on there? You didn’t even haggle with the guy. You gave him *more* than he asked for.”

Yes

“That’s all you have to say?”

Yes

“Okay, well, it’s your money, I suppose. You can do whatever you like with it. But you won’t have it for long, if you can’t hold on to it a little better than that.”

Tyrnon smiled and clutched the small leather pouch close to his chest.

Nina grinned, then nodded at Johan, who was still clinging to the chimney. “I suppose you should get him down now. I think our business with him is finished.”

Tyrnon shook his head, then reached over to Nina’s traveling shirt and felt the material.

“Oh, that’s *right!* I can’t believe I forgot.” She turned to watch as Tyrnon reached up and took hold of the man, then gently lowered him to the ground. The pale skin on his arms and back had reddened considerably from the unaccustomed exposure to the sun.

“Well, I’d say you lucked out, Johan. Mr. Altruism here decided to pay the shepherd in your place. So I guess you and Robert are even.”

“Oh thank you, Miss.” A big smile of relief crossed his face.

Nina smiled too. “But you and I aren’t.”

His smile faded.

“This whole incident has really been a big inconvenience for me,” she said. “Now, I do appreciate that it gave me an opportunity to meet ‘Lucky’ over there, so I can forgive the time that I’ve had to spend here. But then again, my good outfit was ruined. That’s really upsetting. It was one of my favorites and frankly, I can’t imagine anything that could replace it. I guess I’ll just have to kill you.”

His face collapsed into dismay and a shuddering sob escaped his lips. “No! Miss, please! I am the finest fabric merchant in all of Homilatta. I have some truly wonderful material to try and replace your lost garment.”

“Well,” Nina sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Please, Miss! I assure you. I have some of the most glorious fabrics in the land. I can make you a dress so fabulous that it will make your old clothing look like sackcloth.”

“Now you’re insulting my wardrobe?” She clucked her tongue and shook her head. “You know, for a guy who supposedly doesn’t want to die...”

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Stricken, Johan dropped to his knees. “No! Miss, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean—”

Laughing, Nina shook her head waved him off. “Okay, okay. Relax. Some new fabric will be fine. Do you have any fine silks? Something with a floral print maybe?”

The merchant’s expression of terror flowed through disbelief and wonderment, coming to rest at hope. He blubbered for a moment. “Oh, thank you, Miss the Merciless! Thank you!”

Nina rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah... Okay already, I’m done with you now. You run along and I’ll stop by your shop on my way out of town to pick something out. All right?” Johan nodded earnestly and scurried off in the direction of town.

Tyrnon watched him go with an odd expression on his face and once again Nina wondered what thoughts went through a dragon’s mind. But when he turned back to her, he smiled, so she smiled back.

Nina felt pretty good. After the disagreement with Tyrnon on the path she had started to wonder if she had made the right decision. But now, Tyrnon didn’t seem to be holding a grudge, Johan would get her some good silk to replace her torn clothes, and all seemed right with the world.

Back in the cottage, Nina broke down the door and saw the shepherd sitting on the floor and rocking back and forth, mumbling to himself. He cradled a small clay jug that jingled with the motion.

Nina left him to his muttering and approached Francis. He had managed to sit up, so she tipped him over again and dragged him outside by the feet.

“Nina, baby, where is this game of yours going? My hands are starting to fall asleep. And believe me baby, you do *not* want these magic fingers to be asleep.”

She refrained from commenting and propped him up against a tree. Tyrnon came over to watch.

Nina brushed the dirt off her hands and sighed. “It’s going to be a lot harder to get Francis to cooperate with you along.”

“With who along? Who’re you talking to, baby?” Francis asked, still lying on the ground. “If she’s hot, I will *totally* cooperate.”

Nina spared him a glance, but only that, before moving some distance away and continuing her conversation. “I’m thinking that we may have to just keep him tied up indefinitely unless we can come up with some way to keep him from attacking you.”

Tyrnon looked thoughtful, then appeared to have an idea. He pointed to Francis, then at his own head. He stared at Nina, pointing at his head and posing, as if deep in thought.

“Um, you want to do something to his head? It’d be fun, sure, but I don’t think it’s practical to keep him unconscious.”

He shook his head vigorously, frowning in thought. *New Sign* *You* *Me* *Now* He pointed at his head and posed again.

“We’re thinking?”

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He nodded and smiled. *Human* *Think* *Me* He stood up on his hind legs and saluted like a soldier. Then quickly lay on his back and rolled from one side to the other. Finally he sat on his haunches and held up his front legs, begging like a dog.

“I think I get it. You want to make Francis think that you’re like a dog, that you’ll obey whatever we say?”

Tyrnon cocked his head appraisingly, but then shrugged and nodded.

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” she said with a grin. “If we can get him to believe it. It’ll be a hard sell though. I mean, he’s more likely to think that you’re too stupid to understand what we’re saying. No offense, of course.”

Tyrnon made a dismissive gesture. *You* *Speak* *Human* *Think* *True*

Nina blushed a little, but shook it off. “Well, I suppose I could convince him. Maybe we should start out without you though, then ‘find’ you on the path somewhere. That way, he’ll attack you again, and you can let him ‘defeat’ you. If he thinks he’s beaten you, then he’ll definitely believe it.”

Tyrnon thought it over. *You* *Think* *Good*

“You wouldn’t actually be in any real danger from him. Would you? I mean he’s not terribly good with that sword, but I would hate for you to be hurt if he gets in a lucky shot by accident.”

No *Me* *Good* *Human* *Think* *True*

“You know, I’m liking this more and more. If we can make him think he’s tamed a dragon, and then maybe convince a few other people, the news will get around and the people back in Langia will think he’s actually doing pretty well on his quest. I was starting to worry that he’d keep screwing everything up and nobody would believe he could survive out here.”

Yes *Good*

“Okay, so this ought to work. How about you head north into the forest a little way? Maybe a mile or so. And we’ll be along right after you. All right?”

Tyrnon nodded and then lumbered off toward the woods. Nina noticed that he still limped on the foot she had stabbed.

Suddenly, she felt a pang of unfamiliar regret. She reminded herself that she had only wounded him in self-defense, and that hurting him had been the only way to slow things down enough to gain his respect. She watched him until he left her sight, then walked back to where she had left Francis.

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Chapter 5

FRANCIS LAY ON HIS STOMACH, TRYING TO REACH THE KNOTS AROUND HIS WRISTS. So far, he had managed to tighten the ropes and pull his arms into what looked to be a very uncomfortable position.

Under normal circumstances she would have watched him squirm, but Tyrnon was waiting, so she reached down with her dagger and severed the ropes around Francis's wrists. His hands twitched and fumbled ineffectually at the rest of the ropes, far too numb to be of much use, so she cut the other bindings as well.

He stood up and pulled the blanket from his head. "I did it, Nina! I got free."

"Yeah, great job, moron. I cut the ropes."

"You know, Nina, it's really not nice to take credit for what other people do. It's kind of petty."

"Don't make me tie you up again."

"Sorry, kitten, not right now. I need something to eat first. Talk to me later tonight though. I'm sure we can come to a, shall we say, mutually beneficial agreement."

She sighed. "Let's get moving. I want to be through those woods before dark."

Despite Francis's consistent idiocy, Nina found excitement building in her heart. She had made *friends* with a *dragon*! In all her reading, she had never heard of such a thing actually happening. Not once! She grinned to herself. *Only weeks into my first quest, and I'm already charting new territory.*

Nina raced Magni across the wide fields, relishing the speed and the thundering rhythm beneath her. Fun, to be sure, but over all too quickly, for once they reached the woods their progress slowed to a crawl. The forest lay at the bottom of a shallow, fertile valley, with lush deciduous trees and a dense wall of underbrush filling the intervening space. A single narrow trail, carved through the foliage by routine travelers, twisted and turned its way through the vegetation.

On top of that, the dark clouds of an afternoon rainstorm had rolled in to block the sun and the light grew fainter by the minute. Soon, it started to drizzle. The canopy of tree branches caught the worst of it, but the moisture produced a cool, heavy presence in the air that unnerved her.

Tendrils of mist drifted onto the path from the underbrush, and the normal sounds of the forest, twittering birds, clicking of cicadas, were unnaturally absent. *Probably Tyrnon's fault*, she thought. After all, furry little animals hardly wanted to attract attention with a dragon

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nearby. It made sense, but the unusual silence still left her ill at ease.

Even Francis, who rode ahead of her, seemed oddly subdued. His blind charge had slowed to a cautious walk and he rode with his head cocked, like a dog listening for an intruder.

Navigating Magni through the tight path, with the rain and the quiet and the cramped quarters, Nina's excitement began shifting to concern. She much preferred an open field of battle, where she could see her enemy coming and meet them honestly with no pretenses. In these trees, danger could lurk around the next bend and she'd never know it until the trap had sprung.

Suddenly, something whistled through the air. Nina jerked in the saddle and rolled backwards off Magni's flank, somersaulting to the ground and landing on her hands and knees. The arrow buried itself with a *thock* into an elm several feet forward of her previous position, but the one that followed only seconds later, traveled right through where her head had been, before zipping off through the trees to God-knows-where, rustling a few leaves as it passed.

Several yards ahead, Francis tumbled to the ground with a thud, followed by the clank of his shield landing on his head.

She pulled her sword from its sheath and withdrew into the thick underbrush. Francis had not hidden himself, but at least he had the sense to get between his horse and a nearby oak. A twang sounded from the distance, sending another arrow whizzing over their heads.

"Nina, where are you?" he said.

"Shut up, Francis, and get down!" she hissed. Francis obeyed, squatting down in a bush while Nina found herself kneeling in mud. Cold, dark soil squished between her fingers and around her knees. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

The arrows came from somewhere to the right. From the interval between the shots, she knew that they faced either multiple assailants, or one *very fast* archer. Given the accuracy of the second shot, Nina suspected the former, but what did they want? Money or murder?

Francis stood up to retrieve his sword, still sheathed on his saddlebag. Another arrow whipped by from somewhere behind Nina and grazed the flank of Francis's horse. Valiant whinnied in pain and fear, bucking once and running off down the path with a mild limp. Francis dropped back to the ground, still without his sword.

A different angle of attack now, Nina thought, scanning the woods and seeing nothing. *More attackers, or are they moving?*

"Villains!" shouted Francis. "Do you know who you are firing at? I'm Ki—*mmf!*" Nina scurried across the path and tackled him before he could finish.

"We know exactly who you are," called a thin, snide voice. Nina could not quite place the direction, but began creeping toward her best guess. "And we thought that this would be an excellent opportunity for a little business venture."

"Huh?" Francis frowned.

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“We thought you’d have some money, and we decided to take it.”

Suddenly, a completely different voice, this one strong and deep, called out from somewhere else. “Stand down, bandits, this pair is under my protection. We have you surrounded.”

Nina looked around, but still saw nothing but trees. The snide voice sounded like the aggressor, though, so she resumed crawling in that direction.

“We’re outside your territory, Lochlan. Why do you care about some idiot king that none of us even serve?”

“Hey!” Francis stood and shouted. Another arrow *thocked* into a tree about six inches from his head and he dropped back into the bushes.

“I may serve no throne, but I respect them. And I protect the rights of those who cannot do it for themselves.”

“Sure you do, Lochlan, for a price. Don’t act so high and mighty; you aren’t any different than we are.”

“I offer my services in exchange for a fee. I do not engage in brute stick-ups or robbery. You will pay for daring to insult my honor in such cavalier fashion. These good folks will not surrender their gold to you this day!”

“Yeah!” Francis didn’t stand up this time. “Even if we still had some, we wouldn’t give it to you.”

“What was that?” asked the snide voice.

“What was that?” asked the strong voice.

“We did have some money, but my girlfriend gave it all to a dragon.”

Before she could stop herself, Nina stood bolt upright. “I’m not your girlfriend, you—” She dove back to the ground as an arrow streaked by overhead.

The snide voice sounded incredulous. “She gave your money to a...” He trailed off, and after a moment, a loud snort echoed through the trees, followed by the quick whoosh of a fireball, followed in turn by a receding cry of terror.

“Tyrnon!” Nina leapt to her feet and rushed in the direction of the scream. After about fifty yards of wading through rustling brush and scratchy sticker branches, she found a patch of scorched and smoldering grass, but the man with the snide voice had run off and Tyrnon had disappeared again.

“Attack, men!” shouted the strong voice. Lochlan, they called him. “Drive off the bandits, and be wary. There is a monster afoot.”

“Deal’s off, guys! There’s a dragon! He didn’t say *nothin’* about a dragon!” cried the snide voice.

As Nina listened to the distant sounds of fleeing men, it belatedly occurred to her that she had managed to lose herself almost completely in the woods. The bulk of her battle training had been on wide, open ground, or the sparse pine forests of the hills. After all, armies didn’t fight in dense brush. Nina found herself disoriented and confused in the crowded foliage, and

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that made her angry.

She rushed back and forth, pressing between thickets and saplings, trying to find her way back to Francis and unable to quite believe the situation she found herself in. The Langian king had become more of a burden than ever before. In the past, she had simply needed to avoid him. Now, if he got himself murdered, he would activate the spell and ruin everything. The sum-total of her plan had done nothing so far but make her personally responsible for keeping him healthy.

“Francis! You had better not be dead!” She tromped through the brush to where she hoped to find the path.

Instead, she discovered a large clearing. A clearing currently occupied by Tyrnon and a strange man. She stayed hidden in the undergrowth while she assessed the situation.

The man wore leather armor and held a drawn bow and arrow, pointed directly at Tyrnon’s chest. Tyrnon watched him like a caged lion: noble and passive, but angry. She could see that the thickness of the brush prevented easy escape for either party, so they faced each other in a wary standoff.

An ordinary arrow couldn’t kill a dragon. Nina had examined Tyrnon closely enough during their scuffle to know that the business about a single missing scale was a load of garbage.

Nonetheless, she couldn’t imagine him enjoying the addition of an arrow wound to his torn wing and punctured foot. Even still, she wondered why Tyrnon didn’t just attack and end it.

Then she noticed that he sat somewhat awkwardly, his haunches not fully settled onto the ground. Nina squinted to look underneath and saw Francis’s legs sticking out from below Tyrnon’s belly.

The man stood with his back at an angle to her, and Nina saw practiced skill in the way he tracked Tyrnon’s breathing with minute motions of his hands.

A tall man, and lean rather than overly muscular, he struck her as a man used to an active lifestyle. He looked cautious, strong, and maybe dangerous. The confidence in his posture suggested combat experience. He wouldn’t take foolhardy risks. Hard to tell anything about his character, but until he put down that bow, he posed a threat.

Nina still had her sword and dagger, but she didn’t like the idea of charging a drawn bow with nothing but a sword. She could throw her dagger, but then he would release the arrow and it could hit Tyrnon. Furthermore, he had information and she wanted it. Until she knew more about this guy and who he represented, it was best to try and talk him down.

She placed herself behind a thick oak tree before calling out, just in case. “Archer! Lower your bow!”

The man paused his tracking for the briefest instant, but didn’t flinch. “Miss, your king is in grave danger. If I lower my bow, he’s done for.” He spoke in the strong, deep voice she had

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heard earlier in the woods.

“I don’t know who you are, guy, but it looks like you’ve got a little dragon problem.”

“Well, I’ve kind of got a wolf by the ears here, so unless you have some way of calling it off, I’d say we have a *big* dragon problem.”

Tyrnon rolled his eyes, but made no other movements.

“No, no, it’s okay,” said Nina. “Seriously. Just put your bow down and we’ll talk about this.”

“Perhaps it has escaped your notice that the dragon is *sitting* on your *king*?”

“Oh, I know, but... well... the dragon isn’t going to hurt him.”

The man took a deep breath before he spoke, his voice tight with forced calm. “Miss, clearly you have never dealt with dragons before. Let me be perfectly clear here, they are fierce, brutal creatures with a cunning, evil intelligence. I don’t know what this one wants, but it won’t be good. Your king’s life is in danger. I’d suggest you try taking this a little more seriously.”

Tyrnon rolled his eyes again.

“Um...well, that might be true of most dragons, but not this one... This one’s nice.”

“*Nice*? You’ve got to be kidding me!”

She could see the man’s formerly calm demeanor edging toward agitated. Soon, he could be desperate and hasty. Nina grimaced. She needed something that the man would believe. “I, ah... I have a spell that will make the dragon do whatever I want.”

Tyrnon lifted his head and raised one scaly eyebrow.

The man stood in silence for a long time without speaking. Finally, he sighed. “A spell.”

“Yeah.”

“That will make the dragon do whatever you want.”

“Uh-huh.”

He nodded slowly. “Okay, fair enough. So cast... or throw, or whatever it is you need to do. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Okay, um... Ahem.” Nina cleared her throat and tried desperately to think of some appropriately magic-sounding words, but none came to mind. Finally she pulled a necklace pendant from her belt pouch and put it around her neck. One of her favorites, she’d gotten the smooth, teardrop-shaped white crystal from a southern trader.

Her makeshift talisman in plain sight, she strode into the clearing like a queen marching to the throne. She made her way to the center of the tension, passing in between the man and Tyrnon. She had planned to not look directly at the man, but couldn’t help a quick glance at the stranger.

He had dark hair and eyes. Not conventionally handsome, but his face held a lot of character. Character and... and something else she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

She realized with a start that she had been staring and looked away. But at the last second,

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she saw the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. She ignored him and faced Tyrnon instead, gave him a wink, and began to speak.

“By the power of this ancient talisman; given to me by the mystics of the South, blessed by the priests of the West, enchanted by the sorcerers of the East, now on its final journey to the North, I command you, dragon. Obey me!”

Doing his best to keep a straight face, Tyrnon relaxed his guarded pose and bowed to her, lowering his head almost to the ground. Nina gracefully climbed his neck and stood on his shoulders. Tyrnon eased back up and assumed a fearsome pose with Nina astride his back. The hint of a grin on the man’s features had disappeared.

“Now then,” Nina smiled. “Shall we discuss terms?”

The man scowled and did not lower his bow. “Terms? What are you talking about? I was *trying* to save your king. First from bandits, and now from a *dragon*, for crying out loud! Clearly, you’ve got the situation under control, but what makes you think you can dictate terms to *me*?”

“Well...” Nina idly inspected her fingernails. “For starters, I’d say that it’s because I’ve got a dragon here that will do whatever I want.”

The man considered that for a moment. “You have a point.”

Nina folded her arms. “Okay, look, I’ve got no problem with you, guy. I just want to know what’s going on. Who *you* are, and who *they* are, and where they are now, and the general situation we find ourselves in. Neither of us wants this to get violent, so now that we’ve demonstrated our positions, let’s put down the weapons and have a civilized conversation.”

His scowl finally relaxed and he chuckled, shaking his head, but not lowering the bow. “Okay, fine by me. But first, you dismount the dragon and send it away until we’re finished.”

“Well, I *could* do that,” Nina said. “Or I could just have you flame-broiled where you stand.”

“Yes, you could...” He narrowed his eyes and grinned. “But I don’t think you will.”

Nina stared at his smile for a moment. It was... distracting. She shook it off and regained her composure. “Fine, I accept your condition. Dragon, let me down, please.”

Tyrnon lowered his head, allowing her to dismount. As she did, she turned and whispered. “I’m really sorry about this. Can you just play along a little while? I’ll come and get you as soon as we’re done here and we can continue with our original plan. Take Francis with you. All right?”

Tyrnon gave a quiet sigh and nodded. Nina turned her back to him and composed herself. “Dragon, take His Majesty to a more private location whilst I negotiate with this stranger. Stay there until I call for you.”

Tyrnon nodded theatrically and lifted his tail, freeing Francis.

“Ah ha! Foul creature, you’ve let down your defenses and you will pay for this assault. Take

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thi...” Before he could finish the sentence, Tyrnon wrapped his tail around Francis’s waist and carried him off into the woods, pushing and shoving his way through the densely packed branches. Gradually the sound of crunching foliage receded, and he was gone.

The man finally lowered his bow and approached, nodding to Nina’s chest. “That’s amazing.”

“*What?*” She stared down at herself.

“The talisman,” he added. “It must be pretty powerful.”

“Oh,” said Nina. “Right.”

“I’ve dealt with dragons before. They can be extremely dangerous.” He turned back to the trail of broken branches and crushed plant-matter. “Fierce. Very cunning, very hard to predict.”

Nina looked up at the man. Relaxed now, he seemed much younger than before, perhaps no more than twenty-four or twenty-five. His eyes and bearing held a wisdom and weariness that had fooled her.

She shook her head and returned to the subject at hand. “Okay, first things first: who are you? I am...”

“Nina the Merciless,” he answered, “and you are traveling with King Francis of Langia.” He grinned. “Word of your travels precedes you.”

She scowled and refolded her arms. “Apparently it does. All right, so you know me. Who are *you*? That other guy called you ‘Lochlan’?”

He stepped back and gave a slight bow. “My lady, I am William Lochlan. I travel the countryside, helping those in need. Righting wrongs, avenging injustice, and generally looking for adventure.”

Nina snorted. “That other guy said you were a mercenary.”

William’s smile vanished and his jaw stuck out like a rebellious teen’s. He held up an accusatory finger while he spoke. “Now, wait just a minute. ‘Mercenary’ has a very negative connotation and it’s really undeserved. Look, I have living expenses too. If I were to just go around doing everything for free, what kind of sap would I be?”

Nina raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, it’s not like I’m a hired killer or some common thug,” he continued. “I help the weak and the virtuous, take money from misers who can spare it and give it to people who need it. All I ask is some token of appreciation. Blacksmiths get paid; farmers sell their crops. Should I provide this valuable service for *nothing*?”

Nina smiled and waved her hands. “Whoa, whoa. Hold on there. You don’t have to justify yourself to me. I was just asking, is all.”

His mouth dropped open, then closed into a sheepish grin. He looked at the ground and scratched the back of his neck. “Yeah, sorry.” He laughed. “It’s just kind of a sore point sometimes.”

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“A sore point? Why?”

“Well, you might be surprised,” he said with a smirk. “But there are some people who don’t much appreciate my services. Mostly the folks in the law enforcement community. You’d think that with all the good I do, they’d give me a little more credit. I give *almost* all the money to the poor.”

Nina frowned. “Why would you do *that*?”

He frowned back. “Well, I’m not doing it for the *money*.”

“Then why bother?”

“I’m good at it, and I enjoy it, but basically I just like doing good for people. Like here, I was going to save you from those bandits, and if you guys offered to reward me, that would have been appreciated, but—”

“Doing good?” Her jaw dropped. “Wait a minute! You’re a *hero*!”

“A *hero*?” He took a step back, startled, then laughed, a hint of red coloring his cheeks. “Well, I don’t know about *that*.”

Nina took a step back and looked him up and down. “Oh my God,” she muttered. “All that time in the tavern for nothing, then I finally meet a hero and I’m in my muddy traveling clothes, for Pete’s sake!”

“What was that?” he asked.

She looked back up to his eyes. “Um, nothing. Never mind.”

“Oh, okay.” His brow furrowed just slightly, his mouth tucked to one side.

She stood in awkward silence for a moment. “So, anyway, um, thanks, I guess, for helping with the... bandits, you said?”

“Bandits,” he agreed, and his voice returned to the strong, confident tone she’d heard earlier. “They’re actually how I found out about you. They intercepted a homing pigeon stating that you and the king would be traveling in this direction. I heard them planning the ambush and decided to help.” He paused for a moment. “Ah, help *you*, that is. Not them.”

“A homing pigeon? Who sent it?”

“Sorry,” he shrugged. “The note didn’t say.”

Nina thought *she* knew, but didn’t know what Collius and Fardukai were planning. Why would they set Francis up to be robbed? Or had the message been intended for someone else? If so, who? She shook the questions away; she had more pressing issues at hand. “Okay, so the bandits attacked. And then your guys went to fight them off?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“The reason I ask...” She gave him a crafty smile. “I only saw *you*. And you were trying to hold off a dragon all by yourself.”

“Yes, well, they went after the bandits, and my men are expertly trained to be silent, and cat-like and...” He squinted, looking at her carefully. “And you’re not buying a word of this, are you?”

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Smiling wider, she shook her head.

“Fine, you got me.” He laughed again. “I don’t have any men. I bluffed the bandits to avoid a fight. Fortunately, it seems that the dragon scared them away for me, but then...” He cocked his head. “You seem to know more about that than I do.”

“Yeah, about that...” Nina gently chewed at her lower lip. “Well, we, that is, Francis and I, ran across that dragon a little earlier today, rampaging through a sheep farm.” She stood tall, hands on hips. “I scared him away.”

He cocked his head. “Scared *him* away?”

“Yes... I scared him away—*it!* I mean, I scared *it* away.”

He smiled, unimpressed. “The king said that you gave it all your money.”

Nina deflated. “Ah... yes, well... Francis picked a fight with him.” She stared down at her feet. “I paid it to go away.”

He nodded with a wry grin. “Yeah, that sounds more like it.”

Her eyes flashed. “Now, you wait just a minute!” She drew herself up and poked him in the chest. “You listen to me, buster! I didn’t *have* to pay him. I got in a good blow! Stabbed him through the foot, as a matter of fact. I was handling everything *just fine*, thank you very much!”

Now he looked impressed.

She continued, crossing her arms and raising her chin. “I only paid it because we were in a hurry, and I didn’t want to waste any more time with it.”

A smile crept onto his face once again, before bursting into a full laugh. He stood there, laughing and shaking his head.

Nina scowled. “Something *funny?*”

He stopped laughing and held up his hands, but the grin remained. “I’m sorry. I meant no offense. I’m just surprised, that’s all. I had heard a lot of propoganda about you and how tough you were supposed to be. Naturally I assumed that it was mostly made up. And now here you are and I find out that the rumors are all true.”

Nina felt her face begin to flush. Fighting to retain at least a little of her indignation, she frowned again. “What rumors?”

“That you’re a worthy successor to your father’s name.”

Her breath froze in her chest. William looked down at her with serious eyes and she couldn’t speak.

Fortunately, he let her off the hook with another sly grin. “So, what happened after you paid off the dragon?”

Nina let her breath escape. “Um, well, I guess he wasn’t finished with us, and wanted to ambush us here in the woods. Good thing I had my talisman, huh?”

“Definitely... In fact, I have to say that I’m feeling a little useless here. Here I am, intending to save a king and a beautiful maiden, and now the maiden has saved both herself and the king without my help...” He laughed. “Kinda left me holding the bag.”

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“Oh... well,” she hedged. “You were *trying* to help, even standing up to a dragon! You get some points for that, I think. Besides, um, you kept it from hurting Francis until I arrived with the talisman. If you hadn’t done that, I might have been too late. You saved his life and we are in your debt.” She gave him a shallow, clumsy curtsy.

He chuckled. “It’s okay. You don’t have to reassure me. My ego isn’t *that* fragile. Only thing I don’t understand is, if you had that talisman, why didn’t you use it before, instead of paying off the dragon?”

“Well, you see... I was wearing a different outfit and the talisman doesn’t go with it at all.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, seriously, it, ah, takes a while to do all the chants to get it ready, and I wasn’t expecting to come across a dragon. But then, after the first time, I said all the magic words to activate it, just in case.”

“Best to be prepared, I guess.”

“Yes,” she nodded. “That’s right.”

The conversational momentum petered out and they stood in awkward silence. Finally, Nina spoke.

“I’m sorry we don’t have any money we can give you or anything. You know, to reward you for helping us out.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I wouldn’t accept it. You didn’t really need my help. That’s one of my criteria.”

Nina smiled demurely. She found herself wishing again that she had on her nice clothes, rather than these worn, grubby things. “Well, that’s very nice of you. Still, are you sure there isn’t something we *can* do to thank you? Maybe we can just give you a contract, or maybe...”

“Maybe...” He opened his mouth to continue, but then hesitated, shifting his feet and glancing down at the ground. “So, where’re you headed?”

“Excuse me?”

He laughed again and placed a hand on his forehead. “Sorry. I was just failing to think of a smooth way to ask if I could tag along.”

“You want to tag along? With me? Er, with us?”

He shrugged. “Well, yeah. If it’s okay with you, of course. It’s not like I have a busy schedule or anything. Usually, I just wander around, going wherever seems the most interesting. At the moment, the most interesting thing around here...” He met her gaze. “Is *you*.”

“It is? I mean—”

“And I’d like to apologize for the clumsiness of my request. Ordinarily, I would have had a far more sophisticated presentation, but to be fair, you’ve surprised me a bit, so I’m working on short notice.”

“Um... that’s okay.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Stay right here and I’ll be back with my horse and pack.” He

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pointed a finger. “Don’t you leave without me, you hear?”

Nina didn’t know whether to nod or shake her head, so she did both simultaneously. He walked off into the woods, and as she stood there in the clearing, she gradually realized that she hadn’t moved for over a minute.

The real world started to seep back into her stupor. If William tagged along, he would complicate things a great deal. She wouldn’t be able to talk to Tyrnon without looking suspicious, not to mention the fact that Tyrnon might not *want* to continue to play-act for him. Worst of all, how could she get rid of Francis with a witness present?

On the other hand, he might be nice to have along. As fascinating as she found Tyrnon, it would be a relief to have another person to talk to. He also seemed to know how to handle himself in a crisis. Maybe he could even help if they got into some big trouble. And after all this time waiting to meet a hero, how could she turn him away now?

She took a deep calming breath and decided to speak with Tyrnon about it. Things were *not* going according to plan.

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Chapter 6

TYRNON HADN'T GONE FAR. Nina found him only thirty yards away, resting behind the brush with his long neck and tail running the length of a little path. She didn't see Francis, but a muffled thumping from underneath Tyrnon's hindquarters suggested that he hadn't gone far either.

Tyrnon raised his head as she approached and Nina found it suddenly hard to meet his eyes. She bit her lip, then spoke. "We've got a little bit of a change of plan."

He nodded and waited.

"I just finished talking to that archer that you met in the clearing, and... um, well, he offered to join our party."

Tyrnon waited.

"I said yes."

Tyrnon's brow furrowed and his head drew back in surprise. He tried to stand up, but didn't have much room to maneuver in the narrow path and thick brush.

Why? he signed, settling down again.

"Well, uh, I mean, he *did* try to save Francis from... well, *you*. And he *was* going to scare off the bandits before... ah, *you* scared them off. Anyway, he was *trying* to help. That's worth something. Right?"

Tyrnon gave a small, indignant snort and settled into a pout. Pale curls of smoke rose from his nostrils with a bitter smell that she tried to ignore.

"Tyrnon, don't be that way. I'm sorry. I know he's misguided and all, but his intentions were good."

He turned away and stared into space for a moment, but then he met her gaze and sat up.

You *Know* *Human* *Good* *Question*

"Well, I mean, obviously I don't know him very well *yet*, but..."

True

"Please let me finish, Tyrnon. William isn't the one that messed up our plan; the bandits did that! Listen, he said that they intercepted a carrier pigeon that told them Francis and I would be traveling through here. It's Collius and Fardukai, I'm sure of it, but I don't know what they're up to."

Tyrnon perked up a bit and looked up at the trees in thought. *Want* *You* He drew a clawed finger across his throat.

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“Dead? I don’t think so. Or at least, I don’t know why they would. I mean, they have to know that I’m the only thing that’s going to keep Francis from getting himself killed out here.” She thought for a moment. “Speaking of Francis, is he okay under there?”

Tyrnon raised his rump off the ground.

“—ing mad now! You hear me, dragon? Now you’re going to get—”

Tyrnon sat down again.

Nina laughed and placed one hand on her cheek. “Okay, good. That’s a relief. I’d hate to have gone to all this trouble just to have him suffocated under a dragon’s... um...” She discovered that she had no way of ending that sentence gracefully. “Under a dragon.”

Tyrnon smirked.

Nina smiled and internally breathed a sigh of relief. Not so much for Francis, but because Tyrnon didn’t seem genuinely distressed.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t discuss this with you in advance, but it’s not like I had a lot of time to think about it. You can see that, can’t you?”

Tyrnon tilted his head from side to side and shrugged his massive shoulders. After a moment, he reached out and gently touched her pendant with the tips of his claws. She saw questions in his eyes.

“Yeah, did you like that? I couldn’t think of any magic sounding words, so I just grabbed this out of my bag. And the great thing about this is that, if we need to, we can let William or Francis wear it, and let them *think* that they can control you.”

Tyrnon frowned again.

“But, see? That’s a good way we can find out if William is trustworthy! If he isn’t, he’ll for sure try to steal this from me. Right? He’ll think that it will allow him to control you, but he’ll really just be wearing an incredibly stylish,” she posed dramatically, “but non-magical, necklace.”

Tyrnon finally grinned and nodded to himself, but still didn’t seem quite convinced.

Human *Know* *Question* He gestured to his rear.

“Does he know... *What?*”

Tyrnon pantomimed a sword, waving it about ridiculously.

“Does he know about Francis? Well, I think the note must have identified both of us and William heard it from the bandits.”

Tyrnon shook his head with a frown. *Human* *Know* *You* He stopped, clearly frustrated. *You* *Me* He pointed to the north, then gestured at Francis, drawing his finger across his throat again.

“Oh! You mean, does he know about our plans for Francis?”

Tyrnon nodded in relief.

“No, not yet. I’m not sure what he’d think about that. I mean, he’s a mercenary and all, but... I don’t know.” She looked down at Francis’s kicking feet and listened briefly to the

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muffled insults continuing to filter out from underneath Tyrnon's belly.

"On the other hand," she continued, "he doesn't know Francis like I do, and some people have pretty strong feelings about royalty. I was thinking that we should let him think the same thing that Francis does for now. Later, maybe we can clue him in, when we have a better idea of how he'll react."

Tyrnon's brow furrowed and his lower lip extended into yet a deeper pout. She wanted to change the subject, but they hadn't really settled anything yet.

"Come on, Tyrnon. The more the merrier. Right?" She winced. Even as she spoke, she knew how lame it sounded. "Okay, you're right. I don't really know anything about this guy yet, but I still think we ought to bring him along. I've always trusted my instincts and I feel good about this guy."

That caught his interest and he frowned, staring into space for a moment before turning back to her.

New Sign

"Okay."

Tyrnon raised a single clawed finger twice in quick succession. One word. One syllable. Then he assumed a posture looking to the right and extended a paw as if to shake hands. Before Nina could comment, he immediately assumed another posture looking to the left, reaching out as if to shake the first character's hand. Then he nodded.

"Agreement? Deal? Tyrnon, I know we had a deal, but I don't think that this means—"

Tyrnon shook his head and waved his hands. Thinking for a moment, he returned to his two pseudo-characters. This time the two imaginary people hugged.

"Love? Affection?" She shrugged. "Um, I'm not sure what you're going for here."

Tyrnon tilted his hand side to side with a thoughtful expression and then pointed to her sword. Nina raised one eyebrow, but then drew her weapon and held it low. He pointed at the sword again and held out a paw.

She only hesitated for a moment before handing it over, hilt first.

He smiled and nodded in gratitude, signing. *Why?*

"Why? Why what?"

He shook his head. *Why?* *You*

"Why did I give you the sword? You asked me for it."

Really smiling now, he moved his hand in a circular motion, urging her to elaborate.

"Well... I gave it to you because you wanted it. I figured you wanted to show me something with it so I can guess what the new sign is."

His brow furrowed slightly; he hadn't gotten his point across. He held up the sword in an *en garde* position.

Me *Good*

He then set the sword gently on a clump of soft leaves, taking care not to scrape the

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blade on the ground. He pointed to her and held out his huge, empty hands, not holding anything.

You *Bad* *Why?*

“You mean, why did I give you my sword when it would leave me unarmed?”

A big grin on his face, he nodded.

“Well, I trust you.”

He pointed at her and put one clawed finger to his nose.

“Trust?”

Tyrnon nodded and then showed her his sign. He held up two fingers close together, then tapped them to the center of his chest. Nina smiled, but his face turned serious, and he pointed off into the woods.

Me *No* *Trust* *Human*

Nina started to speak, but a stern glance from Tyrnon stopped her.

Me *Yes* *Trust* *You*

Nina released her held breath. “Thank you, Tyrnon. I trust you too. And I’m asking you to trust me on this. You won’t regret it.”

Tyrnon looked her in the eye for several seconds, his jaw set and his breathing slow and even. Then he appeared to come to a decision, and nodded.

“Great.” She smiled. “I’m glad we could work that out. This quest is really starting to get interesting. Just this morning, I was starting to think that I’d have been better off just beheading Francis with a big rock and burying him under a crossroads or something.”

Tyrnon choked a little, then snorted violently and doubled over. Nina took a step back, a little startled until she realized he was laughing. Smoke puffed from his nostrils in little round tufts. Now it had the sweet smell of burning autumn leaves. Gradually he stopped shaking and looked her in the eye.

The two of them spent a moment staring into each other’s eyes, and Nina couldn’t be certain what she saw there. He intrigued her, but she got the impression that he had a lot more to him than she could see. He had real depth and she had no idea what lay buried within.

Following the stare, a moment of awkward silence filled the air and Nina looked away. Through the dense trees, even what little sunlight had penetrated the cloud cover started to fade.

“It looks like we’d better find somewhere to camp for the night. I was kind of hoping we’d be able to make it to town first, but that doesn’t look likely now. Besides, it’s not like we can just check you into a room at the inn. Maybe that clearing?”

Tyrnon shrugged.

“Okay then, let’s head back. You’ve got Francis?”

Tyrnon rose off his haunches, freeing the king.

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“—think you’re pretty tough, don’t you, dragon? Well, I’m just biding my time with you. Tying with— *whoof!*”

Tyrnon wrapped his tail around the king’s waist and hoisted him into the air again.

“That’s right, toying with you. Letting you get overconfident until sometime, when you least expect it, I’ll strike with a fury you can only imagine. Just you wait—”

Nina rolled her eyes and tried to block out Francis’s chatter on the way back to the clearing, but his renewed presence just reminded her of two additional problems. The first: convincing Francis to go along with William joining the party. The second: convincing William to stay joined after meeting Francis.

When they reached the clearing, she saw William making a slight adjustment to the saddle on a beautiful chocolate-brown mare. He noticed them arrive and approached with a grin.

“Okay, good, you’re back. Are you ready to go?”

“We still need to collect our horses, but we’re starting to lose the light, so I thought that we could go ahead and camp here for tonight and head out tomorrow.”

“Cool!” shouted Francis. “I’m gonna make a bonfire! It’ll be—” Tyrnon squeezed a little tighter with his tail and cut him off. Nina didn’t even look back. Instead, she kept her focus on William, who watched Tyrnon with a wary expression, before turning back to Nina.

“Well, camping out in the woods is fine with me, but if I might make a suggestion? This clearing is too big to be easily defensible at night. Too much area for one person to watch, and right on the main path, besides. There’s a good one a little over a quarter mile that way.” He pointed approximately to the northeast. “It’s a better size, won’t be noticed. And the ground is a little softer there, I think.”

Nina felt a smile appear on her face through no conscious action of her own. She idly wondered if she could stop smiling even if she wanted to, but a few minutes later, the giddiness dissipated. She couldn’t find the horses. During her running around through the thick brush, she had lost her bearings and didn’t know which way to go.

William however, found them easily. They examined Valiant’s arrow wound and found it mostly superficial. Definitely a recoverable injury, but it would be best not to burden him too heavily until it healed.

Magni, as she had anticipated, was less than thrilled with William’s presence. He snorted and stomped, irritated with the world for forcing so many undesirable beings on him.

William, despite Nina’s warnings, approached him. “Don’t worry, I’m great with horses,” he said.

Magni bit him on the hand.

“Don’t worry,” said Nina. “If he *really* didn’t like you, he would have tried to trample you by now. The bite is a sign of respect.”

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“If you say so,” said William, nursing his bruised fingers. Then he smiled. “You sure have a knack for taming dangerous critters. Maybe you should start a business.”

They walked the horses to the clearing William had described, Tyrnon continuing to carry Francis along behind them.

On the way, they pushed and weaved through thickets and underbrush, and the rough terrain dried up most of the conversation.

Nina nonetheless found her attention drawn to William. He moved very... *purposefully*. Not *graceful*, per se, but with a certainty of movement. He pushed his way through the thick undergrowth with virtually no sound. She watched his feet, and he managed to avoid all potentially noisy twigs and branches without visibly changing his stride at all. Even his horse, who he had identified as Ardua, seemed to move almost magically through the forest without a sound.

Tyrnon, on the other hand, provided an entire stampede all by himself. Constant, crunching footfalls trailed behind her, occasionally accompanied by the creak and snap of larger limbs pushed past their breaking point. He held Francis mostly out of the way, but from time to time a branch found its way to the back of the king’s head. Once, Nina glanced back and caught Tyrnon with a guilty smile on his face.

William had been right about the new clearing. Approximately oval shaped, about fifteen yards across and twice as long, it provided plenty of room to camp, but without such a large perimeter to guard. With the additional security of being off the main path, long grass for the horses and a small stream trickling across one end, the clearing showed a marked improvement over their previous location.

William walked to a spot just off-center and turned to face her.

“I think that if we build the fire here, the smoke ought to just lift right out of the clearing and dissipate. Come on, you can feel the draft.”

Nina walked over and stood next to him. He reached out and gently held her waist. She gasped, but he just moved her a short distance to the left.

“Right there. Can you feel it?”

She nodded, but all she could really feel was the light pressure of his hands around her waist. She turned and looked up at him.

He smiled. “We’d better go get some firewood, don’t you think?”

She nodded, her face blank. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

Just then, Tyrnon finally crashed his way into the clearing, and Nina took the opportunity to step away from William. She watched as Tyrnon dropped Francis to the ground and rushed over to the water, where he began to drink heavily.

Francis stood and dusted himself off, then—apparently satisfied that the dragon threat had been resolved—walked over to William. Standing with his arms folded and his face stern, he gave William a long, appraising look. For his part, William gave an uncertain bow.

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Finally, Francis turned to Nina. "I could take him."

Nina covered her eyes with one hand and grimaced.

Returning his attention to William, he continued. "So, who the hell are you, anyway?"

William stepped forward and spoke with calm authority. "Your Majesty, I am William Lochlan. I am a traveler. An adventurer, if you will."

"If I will what?"

"If you..." William frowned. "Ah... never mind. I'm just a traveler, but I happened upon a group of bandits preparing to ambush you."

Francis showed no signs of comprehension.

"They were shooting arrows at you?"

"Oh, right, right. Well, I had everything under control."

William shot Nina a questioning glance. "I'm sure that you did, Your Majesty. I only meant to offer my services if needed."

"Well, they aren't."

William's eyes widened just a little, but he remained otherwise undisturbed. "Surely, you have everything well in hand, but won't you reconsider? Would you like to consult your... traveling companion?" He looked to Nina again.

"I don't need to ask her anything, she's just my girlfriend."

"I'm not your girlfriend!" Nina shouted. William and Francis both jumped and she started to blush. "I'm not his girlfriend," she repeated quietly.

"Oh, right." Francis chuckled to himself, and turned back to William. "That's not what she said last night." He winked.

Nina tackled him. She pinned his arms with her knees and held her dagger to his throat.

"Take it back," she said.

Francis just grinned and looked over to William. "See, she can't keep her hands off me."

Nina paled and she leapt to her feet, repulsed and mortified. She looked over to William, only to see a smile on his face and laughter in his eyes. Suddenly, her knees started to shake, and she was shocked and horrified to feel tears forming at the corners of her eyes. Before she quite realized what was happening, she had whirled on one heel and run off into the woods.

William called after her, but she ignored him and continued running, her pace erratic, careening through the thick brush and branches, just trying to put as much distance between herself and the others as possible.

Why did Francis always have to ruin *everything*? William probably thought she was an *idiot*. God only knew what Francis would be telling him now. Maybe this whole quest had just been a big mistake anyway. She needed to get away from Francis, but he continued to haunt her, like the wine stain that refused to come out of a favorite dress. And now she had *run away*. Her face burned with shame.

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How could she learn anything about being a heroine if Francis kept screwing everything up? Her foot slid in a patch of mud and she nearly fell. Stopping to catch her breath, she spied a large fallen log and sat on the ground, leaning against it. She pulled her knees up to her chest, closed her eyes, and tried to contain a sob. Running had only made things worse, and she beat her fists on the ground. How could she have allowed herself to lose control like that? Tears streaked hot-cool trails down her cheeks.

Several minutes passed before she heard William calling her name again. She turned onto her hands and knees and peeked over the log, but didn't see him anywhere. She wiped her eyes and looked again. For him to find her now? When she'd been humiliated and crying? She could hardly comprehend the embarrassment.

"Oh, *there* you are," he said, from directly behind her.

She flinched, but didn't turn around. Instead, she sat down facing the log and set her jaw. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay." She sensed his approach. He put a hand on her shoulder, but she pulled away. "*Are* you okay?"

"Just fine, thanks. I don't need you to take care of me." She crossed her arms. "The only reason you could sneak up on me like that is because of this stupid forest. I *hate* these stupid trees!" She finished louder than she had intended.

"Okay, okay, I believe you," he said, then paused, letting the silence have its place. "Um... I do have a question for you, though." He waited for a response, but she gave him none. "Okay, now, I don't mean any disrespect by this or anything, and maybe it's just me, but... Isn't your king kind of an idiot?"

She hadn't been aware of holding her breath, but a sudden, unexpected laugh forced its way out, triggering a minor coughing fit. When she recovered, she spoke softly. "It's not just you. You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

He moved slightly, not forcing her to face him but appearing in her peripheral vision. He sat down next to her in a single smooth motion. "I don't know about that." He spoke quietly and thoughtfully. "I think I would believe just about anything you told me."

She finally met his gaze. "Why would you do that?"

He didn't answer right away. "I don't know, really. Just a hunch, I guess. I get the feeling that you and I have a lot in common."

"Yeah?" She sniffed a little and cleared the rest of the tears from her eyes, finally turning to face him. "Like what?"

"Well..." William scooted forward a little, to better see her face. "I've really only just met you, of course, but I really admire the way you handled things back there after the bandit attack. Very mercenary-like of you. You stayed cool and you took command of the situation very effectively. I was impressed."

"Mercenary-like?"

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“Well,” he grinned. His smile warmed her heart. “What I mean is that you evaluated the situation quickly and determined how to take advantage of it for your benefit.” He laughed gently. “It’s supposed to be a compliment. It means that you know how to get what you want.”

Nina’s eyes returned to her lap. “I don’t feel like I get what I want.”

“Well, another part of being a mercenary is delayed gratification. You know, putting up with something for a while, in order to reap the benefits later?” His smile faded and his eyes grew earnest. “I get the feeling that you know how to do that, too.”

Nina tried to hide the flash of horror that crossed her face. Did he know something? “What do you mean?” she asked.

William nodded back to the campsite. “Frankly, I can’t see you traveling very far with *that* guy. Not unless there was something pretty good in it for you. What are you questing for? And why do you need him to get it?”

“I...” Nina stopped. She wanted to tell him about her plan, but she hardly knew him. She’d told Tyrnon, but he needed her, and couldn’t really go around telling anyone else anyway. William on the other hand, could do a lot of damage if he started spreading around rumors of regicide. She didn’t care about Francis; odds were, the king wouldn’t even *believe* him. But if Collius and Fardukai’s spies learned of her true intent... It could be disastrous.

She couldn’t tell him the truth, but she had to tell him something, and quickly. He had a very strong presence that she couldn’t quite make up her mind about. It was like he could read her mind.

William broke the silence. “Ah... secret, eh? Well, I can respect that. Anytime you want to compare notes or plans, though...” He flashed that *smile* of his again. “I’ll be around.”

Nina realized that she was smiling back.

“Well,” He stood and held out his hand to help her up. She took it and felt his gentle strength pull her to her feet. “I convinced His Royal Highness that a big pile of firewood would be just the thing to impress you. Shall we go see how he’s fared?”

Nina quickly wiped the last of the tears from her eyes. “Yes, let’s.” With that, she followed him back to the camp.

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Chapter 7

WHEN NINA AND WILLIAM RETURNED TO THE CAMPSITE, THEY DIDN'T SEE FRANCIS, BUT THEY DID SEE A SMALL PILE OF BRANCHES. From the wide, sloppy cuts and the greenish-white of the wood inside, Nina suspected that he had hacked them directly off the tree with his sword.

Tyrnon had finished with the stream and lay curled up asleep on one side of the clearing, not moving except for the rhythmic expansion and contraction of his breathing. Nina couldn't help but feel a little hurt that he couldn't even stay awake long enough to see that she was okay, but she refused to dwell on it.

"So..." said William. "Is it just going to sleep right here in the clearing with us?" He stood behind her and watched the sleeping dragon. "Is that safe?"

"Sure it is." She looked back to him. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Does that talisman still work if *you* fall asleep? Dragons are hardly the most trustworthy of creatures, you know. It might be angry with you for controlling it like this."

"Believe me, William, it's fine. I've got it covered."

He furrowed his brow and tucked both thumbs in his belt. "Well, okay. If you're sure." His thoughtful expression broke once more into a playful smile. It seemed to be his face's neutral state. "At least one thing's for certain, I don't think that any bandits are going to mess with us when we've got a sleeping dragon in our campsite."

She grinned back. "You got that right."

"We should still keep a watch though, I think. Just to be careful. What do you say, two shifts? I'm not sure about leaving it to His Royal Highness over there."

Nina followed William's glance and saw Francis re-entering the clearing, arms filled with more bundled branches. She almost giggled, but settled for an impish smile instead. "Yeah, no kidding."

Francis deposited the new branches on top of the old and walked over. "Hey Nina, check out all this firewood I got. This is gonna be one *kick-ass* bonfire."

"Uh, sure, Francis, that's great. How about you get started on that. William and I will make a little one over here, while we wait for yours to be ready, okay?"

Francis chuckled to himself. "Can't wait, huh?" He shook his head good-naturedly at William. "Girls. They're always cold. What's up with that?"

William gave a tight-lipped smile and shrugged.

Francis stood back on his heels and once again looked William up and down. "Yeah, I

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guess you're all right. You can stay, but you better keep your hands off my girl or I'll kick your ass."

William nodded slowly, his eyes wide and incredulous. "Thank you, your Highness. I'm glad I meet your approval."

"You see, Nina?" Francis asked. "This guy knows how to show *respect*. One of these days, I'm going to have to teach you to do that." He wagged his eyebrows.

"Yeah, whatever," she said.

"But then again, it's that wild spirit of yours that makes you so *hot*." Smiling triumphantly, Francis walked back to his woodpile and stared at it, as if suddenly unsure what he needed to do. When he selected two branches at random and began to rub them together, Nina left him to his efforts.

William went to catch something for dinner while Nina collected some useable firewood and some assorted berries and greens. She had never been a big fan of small game for dinner unless she had no other choice. When she returned to the camp, William hadn't yet returned, so she started making the fire.

Soon, a small flame crackled and popped within the little fire pit she'd made, and William arrived with a pair of quail. Once the pleasant smell of roasting meat began to fill the air, Francis wandered over to eat. A man of lesser confidence might have felt the need to justify this with some form of excuse, but Francis abandoned the bonfire as though he had never suggested it in the first place.

The sunlight had gone entirely now. Later, the moon would rise, but for now, their only illumination came from the small fire before them. Francis had taken one of the quail without asking and Nina didn't want to deprive William, so she waved off the other bird and made do with the berries she'd collected. For some reason, she didn't feel very hungry anyway. Francis however, polished off the quail within minutes and then started in on his traveling rations. William looked upon this with some distaste but said nothing.

Now that she thought about it, William had been oddly quiet throughout the meal. His default smile had gone and he seemed almost brooding. *Did I do something wrong?* she wondered, feeling awkward. She had so much she wanted to ask him, to tell him, but she didn't know what to say. She shot Francis a dirty look, but he didn't notice. After they finished eating, Francis went immediately to sleep, resting his head on his pack and snoring.

Nina and William lingered around the fire for a few minutes, still not speaking, but the awkward silence had metamorphosed into something else that Nina could not quite identify. Still a little uncomfortable, but not altogether unpleasant.

Nina kept looking in his direction, then looking away if he turned toward her. She felt foolish for it, but couldn't quite bring herself to either stop looking, or to hold his gaze. In increments, his smile began to return. Finally, he spoke.

"So, do you want to go to bed?"

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Nina's eyes went wide and her mouth snapped shut. She looked into his eyes and he looked back, patiently waiting for her response. Her tongue felt numb and stuck to the roof of her mouth. She didn't think she could speak. All she could manage was: "Go to bed?"

"Yeah. Do you want to sleep first or watch first? We agreed on two shifts, right?"

"Oh! Right. Yes. Okay." She felt a powerful heat flushing her cheeks, so she stood up from beside the fire and turned away. She clapped her hands together, rubbing them as if to warm them. Walking purposefully around the campfire, she rambled out her options. "Well, I have had a long day, but I think that, all things considered, I'd prefer to take the first watch, you understand? I kind of want to keep an eye on the dragon over there, and there are some things that I wanted to get done before I go to sleep. Just some maintenance, and oiling my..."

She found herself briefly transfixed by his smile. Pulling her eyes away, she continued her treatise on watch shift preferences, vaguely aware that she gestured too broadly. "Oiling my *armor*. I've got to keep the leather soft, or it starts to chafe my... Well, anyway, I mean, I'd like to get it done first. I hope you don't mind, I don't know what you wanted to do, and it's not that I don't trust you or anything."

Nina gritted her teeth. Why was she acting this way? She hadn't met this man but a few hours before, and yet... She realized that her words had trailed off. He stared at her. She felt another wave of heat cross her face. Finally, she dropped her arms to her sides and just waited for him to let her off the hook.

He let her dangle for a few seconds before speaking again. "I'll sleep first and you can take the first watch. How's that?" His eyes seemed to sparkle in the light of the campfire.

She nodded a little, feeling quite the idiot. He probably saw some indecisive little girl who'd managed to wander away from home, not a formidable young woman on a quest.

But he just continued smiling and rolled out a thin blanket from his pack, settling down just outside the range of the campfire's jumping sparks. "Wake me up when the moon gets to about...there." He pointed to the stars. "That ought to be about half the night."

"Don't you need more sleep than that?"

"Pretty much a standard watch, isn't it?"

Nina swallowed.

"Besides," he said. "I won't be able to sleep much longer than that anyway, so I'll just get up and relieve you then. How about that?"

"Okay," Now he probably thought she was some wimpy female, always needing her "beauty sleep."

William didn't say anything else. He merely lay down and closed his eyes. Soon, his breathing turned deep and regular. Nina just stood and stared over the fire at him for a few moments.

Eventually she pulled herself away and walked over to where the horses had decided to

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spend the night. Valiant and Ardua stood slightly huddled against each other in the mild chill of the evening air, but Magni stood well to the side, stubborn as always.

She patted him on the nose and he nuzzled her gratefully. She stood there with her eyes closed, leaning her forehead against his, idly rubbing his powerful neck, running her fingers back and forth over his fur, smooth one way, bristly the other. The powerful animal smell mingled with the late summer wildflowers and with the leftover moisture from the afternoon's drizzle.

She felt restless and exhausted all at once. Her hands fidgeted, seemingly of their own accord. With little else to pass the time, she decided to sort through the items in her pack; making an inventory, laying out her clothes to soften the wrinkles, inspecting each item for stains or mold or other signs of disrepair. This occupied her for a while, but soon enough, the restlessness set in once more.

Her mind wandered over to William's quiet form on the other side of the campfire, with his strong chest rising and falling, his eyes closed and mouth relaxed. The flickering light of the fire danced across his quiet features.

A powerful memory of her father flooded her awareness. Sitting next to him by a campfire when she was little. Relaxed, but with a sense of anticipation in the air. The plans were made; everything was ready for an attack at dawn. Some little harbor city on the Eastern coast.

They hadn't been able to see the city from the campsite, but her father had shown it to her from atop a large hill about a mile away. She remembered him pointing out the areas of interest. There, the banking district. There, the docks. There, the main trading house. She followed the direction of his powerful arm as it indicated their targets.

Tomorrow, they would ride in and take what they could find, but tonight, they rested. She snuggled in the crook of his huge arm, laying her head on his shoulder as he discussed battle strategies with his sergeants over the flickering light of the campfire. She idly ran her fingers over his forearm, playing with the coarse hair, so different from her own skinny limb, covered only in a near-invisible fuzz.

Then, everything would get quiet as the horde settled in for the night, and her father told her stories of strange lands and faraway cities. His deep, gravelly voice would soothe her as she drifted off to sleep. His powerful arms wrapped around her, keeping her warm and safe from the chilled sea air.

The memory faded and Nina smiled, wiping a stray tear from her cheek. Sniffing just a little, she looked up. The campfire had burned down to a small flame above pale embers, but the moon, having finally risen above the trees, filled the small clearing with a soft light. After all the activity of the day, the night felt quite peaceful and Nina found herself simply enjoying the momentary solitude. She sat on a soft patch of grass and listened to the quiet sounds of nature.

How many nights had she spent dreaming of being here, doing this? Questioning! Of course,

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she certainly hadn't envisioned lugging Francis the albatross all over the countryside, but just then, sitting there in the tranquility of the forest, it didn't matter. She slipped off her boots and enjoyed the feel of the grass and the earth and the air. Without the heavy boots, she felt light on her feet, and strolled around the clearing, almost skipping, occasionally giving a little twirl.

That made her wish for one of her formal gowns, but she'd left them all back at the palace. The moment clearly called for a long flowing dress that could swirl around her when she turned, but she had nothing but her imagination to make it so. She imagined it all the same, though, and danced for a while in the moonlight.

"Ahem."

She gasped in the middle of a turn and spun to a halt, facing William, who stood by the campfire, that same maddening grin on his face. She froze, watching him watch her. She didn't know what to do with her hands.

"Um, has it been four hours?" Her voice sounded quiet and unsteady.

He shrugged and took a few steps toward her. "I couldn't sleep. I was too excited."

She swallowed. "Excited?"

"I'm always excited when I start a new adventure. Aren't you?"

"I...I don't know."

"Oh, come on. You're dancing around in the moonlight. You're going to tell me you aren't having fun?"

She could feel the flush covering her face once more and she looked at the ground. "Oh, well, that. That is, I was just..."

"It's okay." He shook his head. "Don't worry about it." He met her gaze. "You were very graceful."

Her heart leapt, and warmth spread across her face and hands. "I was?"

He nodded. "You really were."

"How long were you watching?"

"Not long. I didn't mean to eavesdrop or anything."

Nina looked into his eyes and felt for a moment as though time had somehow stretched, putting everything in slow motion, but when she laughed, the moment passed and a semblance of normality permeated the small clearing. Going back and forth like this, between delicious tension and uncertain release, left her exhausted and slightly disoriented. Her knees trembled.

"Why don't you come sit down while I get the fire going again?" He took her arm, and she allowed him to lead her back to the campfire, unable to focus on anything other than his strong hand gently towing her arm. He helped her sit on the smooth stone she had used before and as he stood up again, his fingers trailed lightly across her back. She shivered.

If he noticed, he gave no indication, because he simply turned to the campfire and began

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stoking the glowing embers with a branch. Even through his tunic, she could see the muscles moving in his back.

After a few moments, the fire burned in earnest again, and he sat cross-legged a few feet away. Nina blinked, suddenly overwhelmed. She had no idea what to say. This man was a total mystery.

“What would you like to know?” he asked.

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

She scowled.

“Okay, okay,” he said, holding his hands in the air. “I’m not reading your mind or anything. I’m reading your face, your voice, your body language. It’s all part of what I do.”

“You read people?”

“In my line of work, it’s important that I know what a person wants to hear.”

Nina raised an eyebrow.

His smile vanished. “Oh! Not that I’m just telling you what *you* want to hear.” He leaned forward a little, shifting his weight. “I mean, maybe I am, but... It’s just...” Finally, he chuckled, covering his face with one hand. “I’m not used to telling people this stuff.”

Nina smiled. “It’s all right. I know what you mean.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad someone does.”

She laughed and gently chewed on her lip.

“But anyway, when I’m trying to liberate some money from a mark, I need to know what they want... It’s not all about stick-ups, you know.”

“No?”

“No. In fact, I very rarely resort to actual physical threats. It’s the cheap way to do things. I’m no common thug.”

“That’s for sure,” she said.

He stopped and smiled. “Well, thanks. I appreciate that. But I think you hold the minority opinion on that score. People in my profession are frequently misunderstood. I told you a little about that before.”

She nodded. “I remember.”

“Basically, what I do is travel around and look for places where the poor are oppressed and prevented from becoming anything more. I don’t usually have to look very hard. Then I liberate a little money from someone who has plenty to spare and I spread it around a little... What?”

Nina realized that she must have looked as confused as she felt. “I guess I still don’t quite understand what you mean.”

“Okay, well, I have no problem with someone getting rich because they have a good idea and they work hard to pull it off. I do have a problem when people use their wealth to make

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sure that nobody else gets any. When I see that, I feel obligated to rectify the situation.”

Nina grinned and shook her head. “It’s not the robbing part that I don’t understand. Why do you bother if you’re just going to *give the money away*? Is it just a hero thing?”

He laughed. “Now there’s that *word* again.” He rested his chin in one hand. “I guess I just like myself, the feelings I get, when I give money to someone who needs it.”

She shrugged. “Okay, if you say so. But anyway, go on. You were saying that it’s not all stickups?”

“Oh, right. Well, what I’m trying to get at is that I’m not some common thief or a hired thug. I don’t beat people up, or threaten them with a bow and arrow while they’re traveling. It’s cheap, and it’s bad business. It’s so much better to con them into giving it to you willingly, and so much more fun.”

“I think I get it. It’s like, ‘William Lochlan, Grifter for Hire.’”

He laughed again. “It’s really more like freelance, but sure.”

“How do you get started in something like that?”

“Are you asking in general, or about me in particular?”

“Tell me about you.”

“I was...” He hesitated, looking at her seriously, as though reconsidering what he’d been about to say. “Well, this is the part where I’m supposed to say that I was tragically orphaned when I was very young. And then I lived as a penniless street urchin until a friendly but morally ambiguous old man took me under his wing and taught me the tricks of the trade.”

Nina raised an eyebrow. “*Supposed* to say?”

“Yeah.” He leaned back and rubbed at a little scar on the side of his nose. “Doing what I do, conning people all the time... you start feeling like everything about you, everything about your history has to be... well, *interesting*.” He settled his hands back on his lap. “Or exciting, or romantic. Are you following me at all?”

She chuckled softly. “Sounds like a lot of pressure.”

“You know? It really is.” His grin had returned. “I grew up on a little farm in the middle of nowhere. As I got to be about twelve or so, I decided that I didn’t much like it there, so I left.”

“I can relate to that,” she said, nodding. “Only for me, I held out until now.”

“What are you trying to get away from?”

“You have to ask?” She nodded at Francis, who snorted in his sleep.

“I guess I could understand that, except... Isn’t the point of getting away from something to... Well, to *not* bring it with you?”

She dropped her shoulders and looked up at the stars. “If only it were that simple.”

“Why isn’t it?”

Nina buried her face in her hands. “You know, I really don’t feel like talking about him right now.”

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He shrugged. "Okay, that's fine." They sat in silence again. Nina felt awkward, but he seemed perfectly relaxed.

"So..." she said.

"So," he agreed, laughing.

He had that playful look again. Nina didn't know what to do when he looked at her like that.

"William, I... I've never met anybody like you before."

He reached out and took her hand in his. She swallowed again. "You're not exactly run of the mill either. You *do* know that. Don't you?"

Still holding her hand, he stood and helped her to her feet. He clasped her hands in his larger ones and she looked up at his soft, dark eyes. Suddenly, he leaned in to kiss her.

She panicked and pulled away, just a little. His lips stopped their forward progress and frowned for the briefest instant before smiling again. "Okay," they said.

Nina blinked, unable to think.

"It's late," said his lips. "You'd better get some rest."

No, wait! she thought. *Do that again! I wasn't ready!* But no words escaped her mouth.

"Don't worry. I can handle watch until morning."

They stood together, unmoving, for another few moments. He cocked his head to one side and looked down at her. "Nina, are you okay?"

She blinked again and realized that she'd been holding her breath. "Um, yeah... Yes. I'm fine."

"The fire's dying again. Can I have my hands back?"

"Oh! Oh yes, of course. Sorry." She released her grip.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "You may borrow them any time you like." There was that *smile* again!

He knelt down by the campfire, stoking the coals again with the branch, and she grimaced, humiliated again. Why had she pulled back? She felt silly and childish.

"Just get some rest," he said. "I'll see you in the morning. All right?"

Nina nodded dumbly. Then, with a conscious effort, she pulled her gaze away and walked back over to her pack to pull out her blanket.

Lying down just outside the firelight, she felt that she could not possibly get to sleep, but a few moments later, the events of the day finally caught up with her and she drifted into a peaceful slumber.

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Chapter 8

THE NEXT MORNING, NINA WOKE UP TO FRANCIS'S TOUCH.

Perhaps he had been trying to take her pendant and got distracted, or perhaps her breast had been his objective all along.

Regardless, she instinctively grabbed his arm and planted a foot in his stomach, flipping him to the ground. Awake now, she sat up and looked around, scowling and blinking the sleep from her eyes.

Francis stood and dusted himself off, trying to look casual. Off to one side, Tyrnon sharpened his claws on a nearby tree, his scowl surpassing her own. William sat by the remnants of last night's campfire, fitting feathers on the end of a long, smooth arrow shaft. He looked up and saw her awake, but kept working.

And much to her annoyance, the sun had risen hours ago.

She had hoped to get an early start and they had let her sleep through half the morning. "Why didn't you get me up?" she demanded.

"You were exhausted," said William. "I thought I'd let you rest up. You had a big day yesterday."

Nina frowned, rolling up her blanket. Somehow the magic of last night had faded away like a dream. "You don't have to baby me, you know. I don't appreciate it."

William set down the arrow he'd been fitting and looked at her, his eyes serious and his mouth a grim line. "Is that what you think I was doing? Babying you?"

Her cheeks pinked and she looked at the ground. "Sorry. Just woke up on the wrong side of the campfire, I guess."

"Don't sweat it," he said, and placed the arrow in the quiver at his feet. "It gave Francis and me a chance to have some manly talk."

She raised an eyebrow.

Francis wandered over and set a foot up on a rock, leaning on his knee in an adventurous pose. "Yeah, I told him all about the Staff of Crowe and everything."

Nina blanched and turned to William, who seemed amused but not suspicious. "Oh!" She tried to sound nonchalant. "Oh, well... good. Right. I was going to tell you, but if he did already, then that'll save some time."

"In that case," said Francis. "How about you come over here and show me how thankful you are."

She ignored him. "So, we'd better get a move on. That is, if we want to get in and out of

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Homilatta today. I figure we can re-supply a little bit, and I can collect a piece of silk that a guy there owes me.”

William stood and put his quiver over one shoulder. “Sounds good. I need more lamp oil anyway.”

Francis ran up to her. “I want to see if any of the new swords are in. So, how about you get the money back from the dragon now? I tried this morning but, well, it kinda freaked out.”

Nina glanced over at Tyrnon, whose scowl had deepened. He continued gouging his claws into the tree, tearing deep scratches into the wood.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Francis. I mean, we did give it to him, and you know how much dragons like gold.”

“What does that have to do with anything? You’ve got that necklace thing. Right? You can make it do whatever you want. What do you care if it gets mad?”

Nina looked between Francis, Tyrnon and William, not sure what to say. “Well, yeah, Francis, that’s true, but... we have to let him go eventually.”

Tyrnon snorted, but she ignored him. She couldn’t speak to him now without arousing suspicion. “The longer we make him do things that he doesn’t want to do, the angrier he’s going to get.”

That earned another snort. She looked this time, and Tyrnon nodded. *Yes* he signed. The small curls of smoke coming from his nostrils smelled vaguely of heated oil.

Francis put his hands on his hips. “So when we’re done with it, couldn’t you just tell it to kill itself or something?”

“*Francis!*” She gaped at him.

“What?”

“We can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“Because...” Nina hesitated, her mind racing. She stole a glance at William, who waited for her response with a raised eyebrow.

Tyrnon clenched his jaw and took long, slow breaths. His claws buried themselves deep into the side of the tree. Nina could almost hear the wood creaking in protest.

She could put off Francis fairly easily, but how could she explain to William without spilling the beans about the fake necklace? He had already said he didn’t trust dragons. No way would he agree to keep Tyrnon around, not without having any way to control him. “Because... dragons are endangered?”

Francis’s expression made it abundantly clear exactly what he thought of *that*, but after a moment of disdain, he chuckled and shook his head. “Jeez, Nina, if you wanted a pet, why couldn’t you have gotten a dog or something? At least dogs don’t try to set you on fire.”

Nina heard a succession of quick breaths approximating a laugh from Tyrnon’s direction. She noticed for the first time that Francis had scorch marks on the toes of his boots. She was

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rather sorry that she had slept through that.

“Baby,” said Francis, “if it’ll make you happy, you go ahead and let it keep the money. But tell me...” A lecherous grin slid across his face. “How do you plan to pay me back?”

She took a deep breath and stared Francis straight in the eye. “Francis, I swear upon all that is holy. Payback is coming.”

“*Excellent!*” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Just as long as we go somewhere with good food.”

William had unasked questions in his eyes. Lacking suitable answers, Nina turned and buried her attention in her pack instead. Fumbling through her belongings, she stumbled across her hairbrush and froze. She must look awful! Yesterday had been bad enough, meeting a hero in her traveling clothes, but after running, crying and sleeping too? She tried not to panic, but her fingernails carved ragged grooves into the leather of her pack.

After taking a moment to compose herself, she disengaged her fingers and tried to stay casual. *After all, what’s done is done*, she reasoned. *All I can do now is stun him with how good I look after I fix myself up.*

“Well, gentlemen,” she said. “I need to prepare for the day, if you don’t mind. I’ll be right back.” William nodded and sat again, returning to his arrows. Francis looked up from consulting his phony-map and winked. Stone-faced, Nina met Tyrnon’s eyes and nodded to Francis, then shook her head.

Tyrnon rolled his eyes and sighed, but then grinned.

Nina nodded, and left the clearing, entering the dense brush once more. As she followed the small stream away from the clearing, she heard Francis’s voice in the distance. “Well, I’ve got to do some...stuff. I’ll be right back too—*uhrwhoof!*” A crash sounded from the clearing, followed by frightened whinnying from the horses.

She smiled to herself. *Thank you, Tyrnon.* After a few minutes of walking, she found a relatively private patch where the water ran calm and she could see her reflection. She sighed in relief. Her skin and eyes looked pretty clear, considering the amount of sweating and crying she’d done yesterday.

In fact, it was just as well that she had not been more made up when she first met him. She could only imagine what might have happened last night if she had been looking up at him with drippy raccoon eyes.

After washing up in the cool, flowing water, she undid her braid and ran the brush through her hair, removing the occasional tangle and smoothing the flyaway strands. Once she had re-braided her hair, she applied some subtle cosmetics to her eyes and lips. The memory of her lost kiss sent up a flash of regret and embarrassment, but she suppressed it. *You can’t change the past*, she thought. *But you can change the future.* She stood and made her way back to the clearing, feeling much better.

Francis, William, and Tyrnon all looked as though they had been ready to leave for some

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time. She just smiled and refused to acknowledge their impatience. It served them right for letting her sleep so late.

As she readied Magni's saddle she noticed Tyrnon on his feet and watching her with wide expectant eyes. It occurred to her that they couldn't possibly bring him into town with them. She could only imagine the scene he'd cause if he just strolled into the public square. They would have a riot on their hands. She needed to talk to him, and that meant getting rid of Francis and William.

She cleared her throat and they all turned in her direction. "I need to give the dragon some commands. So it'll stay here while we're gone."

Tyrnon's mouth turned down in dismay and his eyes filled with disappointment. After heaving a deep breath, he sat back on his haunches and lowered his head.

William nodded. "That's good. You don't want it to wander off and hurt someone."

"Right," Nina agreed. "But, ah, the commands are more complicated when I won't be nearby, so I really have to concentrate. Could you guys go ahead to the path and I'll catch up with you in a few minutes?"

They agreed and walked the horses out of the clearing. Nina watched them go, then turned back to Tyrnon. He listened to the distance for a moment longer before meeting her eyes.

"I'm really sorry," she said. "But you just *can't* come into town with us. I'm sure you understand why. We won't be long."

Tyrnon cocked his head side-to-side and pouted.

"And I'm sorry you have to keep pretending. I know it's not fair to you. I promise, it won't be for much longer. I just have to find a way to tell William without freaking him out."

He scowled and the scaly ridges on his forehead wrinkled into deep furrows. *You* *Speak* *Human* *Now*

"Tyrnon, I can't! You didn't hear him. He says he's dealt with dragons before and doesn't trust them."

Me *No* *Trust* *Human*

Nina bit her lip and looked around the clearing, hoping in vain for something to help her. Finally, she turned back to face him.

"You're right, Tyrnon. I've asked you to trust him. It's only fair that I ask him to trust you. I'll tell him today. All right? Just promise me you'll let me handle it. Okay?"

Tyrnon huffed and looked away, but his frown relaxed. Finally, he nodded in gruff agreement.

"Thank you." Nina sighed in relief. "I know this has been frustrating, and I want to thank you for being such a good sport. Will you need anything while we're gone? Are you going to need something to eat soon?"

Tyrnon shook his head. *No* *Hungry* *Now* He pointed at the sun and traced its path

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along the sky to its late-afternoon location. *Hungry* *Future*

“Will you need a lot?”

No

“Less than you ate at the sheep ranch?”

True

“Ten pounds maybe? Will that do it? We can stop by a butcher on our way out of town.”

Yes *Good* He licked his lips. *No* *Past* *Yes* *Now* He waited to see if she understood.

“I’m not sure I follow. Is this about getting meat from the butcher?”

Yes

“You want us to... Oh! I get it. You want fresh meat, not preserved or salted, right?”

Tyrnon smiled and nodded, then unfolded his left wing, revealing the leather pouch she’d given him. He had tucked it into a fold of leathery skin. After grabbing it with his teeth, he tossed it to her. *Hungry* he signed.

“Oh, Tyrnon. You don’t have to—”

Yes *Yes*

Nina smiled. “Well, okay. I’m not going to insist. Do you need anything else while we’re gone?”

No

“All right, we’ll get your meat for you, and in the meantime, I’ll figure out some way to break the news to William.”

She started after William and Francis, but stopped and turned around again. “Oh, just in case I don’t manage it while we’re in town, don’t assume that I’ve told him already. I *will* tell him today, but please wait for me to tell you it’s okay. Can you do that?”

Tyrnon sighed and Nina felt the heat from his breath blowing past her, but then he nodded.

“We’ll be back in a few hours, by mid-afternoon at the latest. See you then!” She waved goodbye and started back toward the path again, but he snorted to get her attention. When she turned, he just waved back. She nodded and smiled, waving again before making her way back to the others.

She emerged from the brush onto the path and met up with William and Francis. Next step: the riding arrangements.

Francis’s horse, Valiant, couldn’t manage a rider on his wounded flank. Nina refused to ride with Francis. Francis refused to ride with William. Magni refused to let Francis within three feet of him.

Ultimately, the only option available required that she and William ride Magni together, and Francis would ride William’s horse, Ardua. Magni took quite a bit of convincing before he grudgingly accepted this arrangement. Even then, he made it clear by stomping, shaking

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his head and generally acting irritable that he was acting under protest.

Nina considered letting William ride in front, but she felt a little too independent for that this morning. Just the same, Nina felt a flash of anxiety when he mounted up behind her. He seemed unsure of where to put his hands.

Nina didn't quite know where she *wanted* him to put his hands. He finally settled them onto his own thighs.

Following William's directions, they left the forest after about fifteen minutes of riding and came out quite near the city. A little less than an hour later, they rode into the outskirts of Homilatta.

Even larger than it had appeared from a distance, the city's size surprised her. It had been built up with an astonishing number of new buildings. Dozens and dozens of structures filled what had previously been fields, most of them wooden and hastily constructed, with only the occasional stone wall. Hundreds of people must have labored for months to get the buildings up as quickly as possible.

As they ventured deeper into the heart of the city, they found honest-to-goodness paved-stone roads. The smooth cobbles covered the largest of the city thoroughways, leading the way to a large central plaza. It had been years since Nina had last ridden on cobbles and she grinned at the sound of the horse's hooves; a sharper clop than on earth. She felt as though she'd ridden right into a castle.

In the distance on the far side of the city, a tremendous circular structure, likely an arena, rose above the surrounding buildings. Also new, but this time sturdy and massive, its upper rows loomed over the city, well above even the two-story structures. The circumference could have surrounded multiple jousting lanes laid end to end.

Lowering her eyes back to the main road, she saw far more shops than she would have expected, even given all the new construction. They sold an incredible variety of goods, everything from toys to weaponry. Nina, William and Francis left their horses at a pay-stable and made their way into the city square.

Several dozen people wandered aimlessly around the plaza with an air of passive anticipation, as if killing time before something more interesting. The crowd browsed and shopped at a number of booths selling cheap, tacky baubles or meats on a stick. The entire display put Nina in mind of a bazaar, but apart from the plentiful food stands, none of the booths sold anything particularly useful.

They approached a cart lined with tiny flags, some adorable knight dolls, and dozens of folded tunics, each embroidered with the name and crest of a famous knight. On the shoulder, a logo: the insignia of the All-Region Open Knighthood Games.

"All *right!*" Francis shouted. "It's a tournament!" He rushed up to the little old man running the booth. "Hey, you! Where can I sign up for this thing?"

The man's wrinkled face jerked back with alarm. "Um, the entry office is by the arena,"

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he said. “That way,” he added, pointing a withered hand toward the immense coliseum, as though it were not visible from anywhere in the city.

“Yes!” Francis pumped his arm in the air and sprinted off in the direction of the arena.

Nina clenched her teeth and glanced at William. “If you’ll excuse me,” she said, then took off running after the scampering monarch. Ducking and weaving around the people meandering through the square, she soon found herself in front of the arena.

Up close, she marveled once again at the sheer size of the building. It seemed like overkill to Nina, but she had heard about the kind of crowd that the All-Region Games could draw. At a rough guess, she estimated the stadium’s capacity at over ten thousand people.

She spotted Francis at a simple wooden table next to the main entrance. She rushed over, seizing his arm and shaking the quill pen right out of his hand. “Francis, stop it!”

He pulled away, chest puffed out in defiance. “Come on, Nina! It’s a tournament! It’ll be awesome! I’ve only been in the stupid, little Langian regional. This is the official *All-Region Open Knighthood Games*! They only have it once every four *years*! They’ve got jousting, and broadsword, and archery, and melee fighting. And it starts in just *two days*!”

She folded her arms and tapped her foot. “Francis, I thought you wanted the Staff of Crowe.”

His face fell. “I do.”

“Well, how would you feel if we took the time to compete in this tournament, and then when we got to the mountains, someone else had already gotten the staff for *their* mantle?”

He stuck out his lower lip and furrowed his brow. “I wouldn’t like it.”

“So, do you think it’s a good idea to stay here for the tournament?”

Looking at the ground, he dug his toe around in the dirt. “*Nc*.”

Nina nodded curtly. “All right then, I’m glad we’ve got that settled.”

“What’s going on?” asked William, who had caught up to them at the table.

“The moment I turn my back,” she said, “he’s going to sign up for this tournament anyway.” Francis started reaching for the pen again, so she slapped him sharply on the hand. “*Nc*!” To William, she continued. “Can you watch him and make sure he stays away from this table while I get some shopping done?”

William looked stricken, turning a look of disgust at the king, who had started inching around behind her toward the table again. “Jeez, Nina. That’s a pretty tall order.”

“Well, you could come shopping for fine silks with me.”

He considered that. “I’ll keep him out of trouble.”

She smiled. “Excellent. Thank you so much. He can be such a handful.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

“Then I’ll meet you back at the horses in, say, an hour?”

“An *hour*? How long does it take to buy fabric?”

She smirked. “An hour.”

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He shrugged. “All right.”

She turned and sauntered away, grinning back over her shoulder at him. “See you later,” she said. Suddenly, she stumbled over a loose cobble. Her wild, arm-waving recovery kept her from falling, but didn’t do much for her pride.

She flashed a glance back to William who stood there with laughing eyes and one hand covering his mouth.

“There was a... a rock there.” She pointed at the cobble, trying to maintain as much dignity as possible.

He nodded. She walked away, grimacing to herself.

Once out of the main plaza, she made her way toward what she deemed to be the commercial district. This area looked much older, probably part of the original town. The buildings, constructed with stone brick walls and wooden beams, though weathered, looked sturdier than the hastily constructed wooden buildings in the new part of town.

She gazed at the various signs and shingles as she walked down the narrow street. Finally she saw a sign with “Johan’s Fine Fabrics and Incredible Cloths: Machine Woven!” painted in large, ornate letters.

She entered the store and looked up at the small brass bell that tinkled above the door, announcing her arrival. The store held many racks and shelves covered with rolls and squares of fabric. Some smooth with bright colors, some with stitched floral patterns, others with dye-printed designs. She saw no shopkeepers or clerks in the main showroom, but she heard movement from the back.

“Com-ing!” sang a voice. “I’ll be right there.”

Nina recognized Johan’s voice from her dealings with him the day before, though she detected less terror in his speech than had been present yesterday. He emerged from the back room dressed in a flamboyant green tunic and some loose, flowing silk pants with a marvelous deep blue color. “How may I help y—*erk!*”

When he saw her, he twitched and dove behind the counter. Nina heard a crash and a muffled “Ouch.”

The next moment, he sprang up again; disheveled, but smiling broadly through clenched teeth and worried eyes. “Miss the Merciless! How wonderful to see you! I had hoped, er, wondered if you had forgotten to stop by.”

“Nope, I just got caught up with a few things on my way here, and decided to camp out in the forest,” Nina said brightly. “By the way, I love that tunic. It’s a wonderful color. What dye did you use?”

Johan’s eyes widened, then turned down to look at his own tunic as though he had never seen it before. “Oh! Uh... thank you. It’s a new green I bought from a Southern trader a few months ago. Made from frogs or some such.”

“Did you design the tunic yourself, or did you use a pattern?”

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“I, um... I did it myself.”

“Well, it really suits you. Very slimming.” She reached out and rubbed the material of his sleeve between her fingers. “Do you design women’s dresses at all, or just men’s clothing?”

His face flitted back and forth between relief and concern. “I have a couple sketches, but they aren’t really finished.”

“Oh, but I’d love to see them anyway, if you’re willing?”

His jaw relaxed and his smile became more genuine. “Sure, all right. Just have a look around for a moment while I fetch them. You said you were interested in silks? I keep them over in that corner.” He pointed to a rack of smooth, glossy fabrics in a variety of colors. “I’ll be right back.”

She nodded and chuckled to herself as he rushed once more into the back room in search of his fashion sketches. Heading over to the rack of silks, she was pleased to discover several beautiful floral prints. Some were fairly cheap and rough, but she found a few pieces of very rich, high-quality silk.

She ran her fingers over the soft, smooth surface of an orchid pattern before lifting an end and draping it across her arm. White, with red and gold orchids, the material had a wonderful Eastern feel to it. She thought it complimented her skin tone quite nicely, then wondered what William would think.

Johan returned from the back room with an armful of rolled up parchments and carried them over to where she was standing. “Oh, yes. That’s an excellent piece. You have good taste Miss—”

“Call me Nina,” she interrupted.

“Very well. You have excellent taste. That pattern will look fan-*tas*-tic on you.” He paused uncertainly. “Do you want just the material, or would you like me to make something with it?” He unrolled a few of his drawings.

Nina looked them over for a moment. Most were nothing special, but here and there, she saw some really original designs. One in particular caught her eye, a light, slinky piece with a skirt that fell just below the knee.

“This one,” she said. “I like this one. How long will it take?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but she interrupted.

“I am in a bit of a hurry, as you might recall.”

He laughed a little, then stopped himself quickly and looked at her with his brow furrowed and mouth hanging open.

Nina smiled. “Relax, relax. I’m asking how long it will take, that’s all. I just want to know if it will be possible to have it done before I leave town.”

He considered the drawing for a moment. “I think that it would take me at least three days.”

She folded her arms and her smile disappeared. “I need it tomorrow.”

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He gave half a sigh and started coughing in the middle, sending himself into an extended fit. When he recovered, he swallowed. “I understand your hurry, Miss, ah, Nina, but I couldn’t possibly finish the dress any faster without sacrificing quality, and I’m sure that you don’t want that.”

She glared at him.

“Please!” he cried. “I’m telling you the truth! Not even if I worked day and night!”

She let the tension stretch out for a few moments before smiling again. “Oh well, I guess I’ll just take the material then, and make the dress myself.”

Johan swallowed again, but didn’t speak.

She picked up the material and the parchment with Johan’s design, rolling them together and placing them in her pack. “Thank you very much. It’s been lovely doing business with you.” She looked up. “But I’ve got to be going now, so I guess it’s time to say goodbye. Once I’m finished with you, I still need to get to the butcher shop before my hour’s up.”

“The *butcher*?” He lost all composure, dropping to his knees and raising both hands up to beg. “Please, Miss— Nina. I mean it! I cannot possibly do the dress any faster. I could work night and day, but when I don’t get my rest, I start to miss stitches, and once I even sewed my thumb right to—”

Nina cut him off, raising an incredulous eyebrow. “I need to buy some meat.”

“Oh!” Relief washed over him. “Oh!” He mopped his sweaty brow with his sleeve as he stood, leaving a dark splotch on the green fabric and a pale, green streak on his forehead. “Yes, of course. There’s a good one just down the street. Turn right when you go out the door, and it’s about three blocks down.”

“Thank you very much,” she said. “And you might want to reconsider that dye. I don’t think it sets properly.” She smiled sweetly and turned to leave.

“Ah... Miss?” He called after her.

“Yes?”

He looked down at fidgeting hands. “The meat... Is it for Lucky, er, the dragon?”

“Why, yes. As a matter of fact, it is.”

“Be careful with that one, miss. He’s a sneaky one.”

Nina scowled. “Sneaky?”

“I know we... you and I, we talked about what I did wrong. I’m not saying that I handled him right, but...” Johan leaned forward, sincere concern in his eyes. “Miss Nina, he acted very nice and friendly and docile for every moment, right up until we arrived at Robert’s ranch. Then he just went crazy for those sheep. Just like that.”

Nina glared, her voice quiet and cold. “Tyrnon and I have an understanding.”

“Miss, please, I meant nothing by it. He must like you better than me, that’s all... I just hope that he abides by your agreement better than he did mine.”

“He will,” she said. “Count on it.” Then, nodding curtly, she walked out. She proceeded

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swiftly down the street, her jaw set and her back stiff, feeling far angrier than she would have expected. Johan didn't know what he was talking about... So why had he gotten under her skin so easily?

Her scowl persisted as she found the butcher shop, and as she bought five pounds of mutton and five pounds of beef. She strapped the meat into her pack, still annoyed.

She hesitated before leaving and dismissed her anger with a deep breath.

Outside the butcher shop, she stepped directly into a human stampede, as a large proportion of the crowd from the plaza rushed down the street in a panic. Several were screaming.

Squinting into the distance, she couldn't see what was causing the ruckus, so she set out in the direction they had come, hoping that Francis wouldn't be in *too* much trouble. She forced her way through the terrified crowd, pushing and shoving past the mob. When she finally made it within sight of the main square, she stopped short, her eyes wide.

Tyrnon was running amok.

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Chapter 9

TYRNON BOUNDED THROUGH THE MAIN PLAZA, LEAPING NIMBLY FROM ONE BOOTH TO THE NEXT, CRUSHING THE CHEAP, WOODEN STRUCTURES INTO SPLINTERS AND SHOWERING THE PANICKED MERCHANTS WITH A CASCADE OF BEADS, PASTRIES AND TINY FLAGS. He toppled anything left standing with a flick of his tail, leaving a prodigious trail of debris in his wake.

Before the beads could bounce twice, a pack of knights swarmed after him. They trampled and pulverized everything that Tyrnon had spilled and plenty more besides. Each one waved his sword in the air and spouted his own brand of pseudo-heroic battle chatter.

Cries of “Avast!” and “Foul creature!” filled the air, accompanied by a spray of arrows from archers firing into the fray, breaking clay pots and piercing produce. The knights trailed behind Tyrnon like the spiked ball of a morning star.

Following the knights in turn, a cloud of pages and squires hurried after their respective lieges, bearing replacement weapons and pocketing the odd undamaged knick-knack from the spilled displays.

Nina watched from a side street as Tyrnon ran straight toward a melon cart and hurdled it with an agile hop. A few knights, unable to turn quickly in their heavy armor, crashed into the melons with a squelch, spraying the distraught seller with pulp and juice. The rest of the knights split, flowing around their fallen, sticky comrades like floodwaters around a sodden outhouse.

With no time for careful planning, Nina burst into action. Extrapolating Tyrnon’s current direction, she ran ahead, hoping to head him off, but he whirled suddenly on one leg, leapt over the nearest of his pursuers, and took off in a new direction. Nina stopped and looked around. Spying the arena, she had an idea.

“Tyrnon!” She cupped one hand to her mouth and shouted above the sounds of the crowd. “Tyrnon, over here!”

Already in mid-leap, he executed a lissome roll upon landing and twisted to face her, tripping a nearby knight with his tail. The others tumbled over their suddenly prone colleague and the clanking and banging of their colliding chain mail eclipsed even the screaming and commotion of the crowd.

Tyrnon abandoned his bounding gait and sprinted toward her, driving directly through the field of startled squires and shoving them out of the way with his snout. As he approached,

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Nina pointed to the coliseum and shouted. “You see that big gate? Do two more laps around the plaza and then meet me there!”

He nodded and veered once again back to the square. Nina sprinted across the cobbles to the arena.

When she reached the massive building, she examined the gate and nodded with satisfaction. An open stone archway, approximately twelve feet wide and fifteen feet high, capped with a heavy iron portcullis; perfect.

Glancing inside, she found a small corridor ending in a second gate, which led to the main arena stage. To one side, she saw stairs descending to the sub-levels, to the other, an unknown room. It would be tight, but...

The distant screams from outside seemed to shift, coming closer. Nina turned and saw Tyrnon racing toward the gate. She stood to one side of the entrance, near the portcullis control, and beckoned him inside.

Just inside the arch, he skidded to a stop, his claws screeching across the stone floor. Nina kicked a wooden lever and watched the portcullis drop. The heavy clank of metal on stone echoed through the tight corridor. Spying a pair of unlit torches, she wrenched one free from its iron ring and wedged it into the portcullis gears.

Tyrnon sat on his haunches, panting heavily. A glow at the back of his throat ebbed and flowed with each breath. His eyes held a wild, manic expression; the excitement hadn't worn off yet.

“Don't get too comfortable,” she said. “That portcullis won't hold them for long. There's got to be a dozen different ways to get in here. Follow me.”

He looked up at her, one eyebrow raised.

“Don't worry. I've got a plan.” She started down the dark stairs, but hesitated, glancing again at the remaining torch. Tyrnon followed her gaze, then took the torch from its ring and blew on it like an August dandelion. A tiny orange fireball the size of an apple enveloped the torch, igniting it immediately. He handed it to her with a playful grin.

She started to smile in return, but this was not the time. “Thanks,” she said, then turned and led him down the stairs to the lower level. His talons clacked against the floor behind her. Finally, she emerged from the stairwell into a holding area. The flickering torchlight revealed three barred cells, probably for rowdy spectators or the occasional unwilling participant.

A ring of sturdy keys hung from a peg on the far wall. She placed the torch in a nearby holder, then used the keys to open the nearest cell, darting inside and waving at Tyrnon to follow.

She stood to one side of the narrow door as Tyrnon squeezed through into the tiny cell. The room could barely hold him; his tail stuck out through the door. “Come on, Tyrnon, we've got to get you completely inside.”

He shifted around, struggling to pull his tail entirely inside. Once he succeeded, Nina

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brushed past him out of the cell, slamming the door behind her. The lock clanged into place.

Tyrnon roared in surprise and frustration. He turned around with some difficulty in the cramped quarters and glared through the bars at Nina. She saw a flash of fire in his eyes and he gripped the bars with his huge clawed hands. The thick iron bars groaned with the strain and a thin trickle of mortar dust drifted down from the ceiling.

“Okay now. I need you to settle down!” she demanded, pointing a stern finger. “This is part of the plan and I didn’t have time to explain. To prove it, I’m going to give you the keys.” She handed the key ring to him through the door. “But I need you to stay in there for now.”

He snorted, but released the bars and settled back onto his haunches.

Nina took a step back and stood, hands on hips and brow furrowed. “Look, Tyrnon, I’m sorry I tricked you, but what in the world were you *doing*? I thought we agreed that you’d stay behind and we’d meet you back at the clearing this afternoon. You said you’d let me handle things! How am I supposed to explain this to William? Like I didn’t have *enough* problems convincing him that you’re trustworthy?”

Uncertainty crept into his fierce expression. *Sorry* *Sorry* *Bad* *Humans* He paused, his hands momentarily trembling. *New Sign* *New Sign*

“Bad humans? Tyrnon, I don’t know what—” She stopped; hurried footsteps echoed from the stairwell. A lot of footsteps. “We don’t have time for this now. Let me handle this. Be mad, but not so mad that they’ll attack you. I’ve got it under control.”

Tyrnon took a deep breath through gritted teeth, but nodded, his eyes still angry. Just then, nearly a dozen men, led by a knight, charged out of the stairwell with drawn swords. Nina blocked their path with her hands on her hips and a smile on her face.

“Looking for something, boys?”

The man in front stopped short. The collection of pages, squires and merchants behind him didn’t. Instead, they stumbled over him and the whole lot crashed to the floor. Their armor and weapons clattered against the stone with an earsplitting racket. Nina gritted her teeth, but maintained her smile.

The leader, a knight in full combat armor, scrambled to his feet and removed his helmet. His face was wide with earnest concern. “Miss! You are in grave danger! There is a dragon about. We have pursued it into this very dungeon.”

“You mean...” She pointed a thumb to the cell behind her. “That dragon?”

The man did a double take, looking first at Tyrnon, then at Nina, then back to the cell. His mouth gaped, opening and closing like a fish. His companions fared no better. “The... the dragon!” he said. “You’ve captured it! But... how... what...?”

“Simple,” she said, slipping off her pack. “I have food.” She removed the bundles of meat and tossed them at the base of the cell door. Tyrnon seized them through the bars and began to eat with far more noise and mess than seemed strictly necessary.

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“Well, um...well done,” said the knight.

A merchant, his face smeared with crushed pastries, spoke up. “That was a good idea.” They all nodded and generally indicated their approval.

“Thank you.” She smiled sweetly and gave a shallow curtsy.

The knight tried to regain command of the situation by stepping forward and posing.

“You’ve done this city a genuine service, milady. Now stand back, and we’ll finish off the beast that you have so bravely assisted us in capturing.”

Nina snuck a glance back to Tyrnon and winked. “Well, you *could* do that, only...” She hesitated, then shook her head. “Oh, never mind.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I was just going to say... No, it’s silly.”

The knight smiled down at her. “Please, tell us.”

Nina heaved a great, melodramatic sigh. “Oh, all right, if you *insist*. I was just thinking that, you all are having a tournament or something coming up in a couple of days. Right?” She batted her eyelashes.

“That’s right, milady, and I intend to take the purse. Oh! What manners I have, I’ve not yet introduced myself. I am Sir Sievers of Moulin. Would you like to choose me as your champion?”

Nina continued to smile politely. “No, I’m sorry, good Sir Knight. As worthy a champion as I’m sure you would be, I’m afraid that I can make no such choice at this time. You see, I am traveling with King Francis of Langia.”

“Traveling with...” He grimaced. “You mean he’s *here*?” Several of the others held expressions varying from annoyance to depression, but of those who showed any recognition at all, none seemed particularly pleased. “King *Francis* the *Ninth*? Here in Homilatta? Right now?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“He isn’t entering the tournament, is he?”

“No, he’s not,” she said. “He is far too busy to compete right now.”

Several men sighed with relief.

Nina tried to keep the predatory gleam out of her eyes. “You wouldn’t by any chance be afraid of him?”

The bulk of the group managed straight faces, but one page snickered quietly until his neighbor shushed him.

Sir Sievers smiled benevolently. “Well, ‘*afraid*’ is perhaps the wrong word. Let us just say that we would prefer to compete against opponents of our own skill level.”

The page burst out laughing in earnest this time. After a few seconds, he clapped a hand over his mouth and fought to bring himself under control. “I think I need to get some air,” he said. Renewed snickering echoed down the stairwell as he left.

“Well,” said Nina. “It may shock you to hear that you have drastically underestimated His

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Langian Royal Highness, and he plans to show you all what kind of man he really is.”

Sievers’s eyebrows raised in surprise, then settled into a smirk. “And what kind of man, pray tell, is he?”

Another burst of giggling came from the stairwell.

Nina remained quite serious. “King Francis will fight that dragon in the arena tomorrow. All by himself, with only a sword and shield.”

All the laughter stopped and all the smiles disappeared. Incredulous, Sievers spoke. “Francis is going to fight the *dragon*?”

“I do hate to repeat myself, gentlemen.”

“Fight it to the *death*?”

“As a matter of fact, no. He’s not going to kill it at all. Any idiot with a sword can *slay* a dragon. Right?”

Most of the men looked away, turning their attention to their shoes, or swords, or whatever was handy. A little pale, Sievers nodded. “Um... yes... Of course.”

Nina heard a soft snort from the cell behind her, but she didn’t turn. “He’s not going to kill it,” she told them. “He’s going to *tame* it.”

Sievers frowned. “Tame a dragon? It can’t be done. Dragons are ferocious, dangerous beasts.”

“Well, Francis is going to do it. Tomorrow.”

“He’ll get himself killed!”

“It’s possible,” she said, folding her arms. “Ought to be a good show either way, don’t you think?”

His eyes widened. “Um... yes.” He looked back to his comrades, who all nodded in agreement. “Certainly a show I would pay to watch.”

Nina smiled. “My thinking exactly. So, it would hardly do to kill the dragon *now*, would it? Besides, you never know, someone who helps spread the word might be entitled to a percentage of the gate.”

He didn’t need to think for long. “I would be glad to offer the service of my pages and squires in publicizing His Highness Francis the Ninth’s upcoming battle.”

“You’re very kind.” Nina smiled.

“It’s my pleasure, milady,” he said. Then he just stood there, smiling back.

Nina cocked her head to the side, ready to stop smiling. “Okay... you can go now... I’ve got this under control here.”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Are you, um, sure that you don’t need any help?”

“I’m quite sure. He’s locked in the cell, after all.” She grabbed one of the heavy bars and shook it. “See? Nice and sturdy.”

“Well... All right, then. If you have it under control?” He seemed uncertain. “So, we’ll just

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be going, then.” No one moved.

“Okay, goodbye.” Nina stared at him until he finally turned and found the way blocked by his crowd of followers. He pushed his way through them and led the way back up the narrow staircase.

When she could no longer hear their footsteps or voices, she turned back to Tyrnon. “Well, that went pretty well.”

Tyrnon had settled onto his stomach, his tail wrapped around him in the cramped quarters. She stood before the cell door and folded her arms across her chest. “Okay, Tyrnon. Now you’re going to explain to me just what you think you were doing by destroying half the city plaza back there.”

Tyrnon scowled again, his brow line deeply furrowed and his chin jutting out. *New Sign*

“Okay, go ahead.”

Tyrnon took one hand and began walking it across the floor, using the first two fingers like tiny legs. His other hand hid just on the other side of his tail. As the first hand passed by the tip of his tail, the second hand leapt out from its hiding spot and began kicking and jumping on the first hand. Tyrnon looked up from his miniature theater and gazed at Nina, hoping for recognition.

“So the left hand attacked the right. Attack?”

Tyrnon waved his hand in a circular motion.

“Close to attack? Hmm, fight? Ambush?”

Tyrnon put one finger to his nose, then took two fingers and tapped them to the back of his other hand, demonstrating the new sign.

“You were ambushed?”

Yes He nodded, the anger gone and replaced by simple concern. *Bad* *Humans* *Ambush* *Me*

She winced, suddenly feeling foolish. “Really?”

He nodded again.

“Oh, Tyrnon, I’m sorry.” She touched the bars of the door with tentative fingers. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. I thought... I’m not even sure what I thought.” She straightened up and took a cleansing breath. “How do you think they found out where we were camped?”

At this, Tyrnon stopped signing for a moment, worry lining his face.

“What is it?” She leaned closer. “They *did* ambush you in the clearing, didn’t they?”

Tyrnon played idly in the dust with his fingers, not making eye contact.

She frowned again. “You left the clearing? Why?”

At this, he looked up.

She put her hands on her hips. “You followed us to town, didn’t you? You got spotted, and they started to chase you. Right?”

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Yes He stared at the wall. *Sorry*

Nina leveled a finger at him. “Tyrnon, I...” She took a deep breath. “No. Not now. We can talk about this later. Right now, we have to decide what we’re going to do.”

He nodded meekly.

“The way I see it, we have a couple of options. We’ve got the knights and townspeople pacified for the moment, so we could wait until nightfall and try to sneak out of town.”

Tyrnon cocked his head in thought while Nina continued.

“On the other hand, we can go ahead and try to stage this fight between you and Francis. It’ll be a little more work, but if we pull it off, we get money and safety. What do you think?”

He stared into space for a moment before signing. *Me* *Think* He held up two fingers.

“The second one?”

Yes

“Okay, good.” She nodded. “I agree. I think that we have a real opportunity here. But if we’re going to do this, I’d better find William and Francis so we can get our act together before Sievers spreads the word too far.” She hesitated, gingerly biting her lower lip. “I’m going to have to leave you here for a little while.”

Tyrnon’s cool vanished. He tried to stand up again, but had trouble gaining the necessary leverage in the small room. *No* *No* Distress shone in his wide, amber eyes.

“Tyrnon, I’m sorry. I really am. I’ll be back as quickly as I can, but I have to find William and Francis. You haven’t really left me many... We don’t have very many choices at the moment. I’ll hurry. All right? If there’s an emergency, you have the keys, but please try to stay in there until I come back. That’s the best I can do right now.”

He was breathing fast, but after a moment, he took a long, deep breath and settled down again, looking her in the eye. *Yes* The smell of his breath reminded Nina of burning houses after one of her father’s raids.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll come back as soon as I can. I promise.” She started for the stairs, but before she could climb them, Tyrnon drew her attention again with a plaintive snort. She looked back.

He stared her directly in the eyes. *Sorry*

Nina stood for a moment in the stairwell, watching him through the bars of the cell, his eyes resigned and sad. “Tyrnon, I...” she trailed off.

He touched two fingers to his heart. *Trust*

She swallowed. “I’ll come back,” she said. With that, she turned and rushed up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

When she reached the top, she saw that no one had managed to release the portcullis mechanism, so she had to wander around the unfamiliar passageways for a few minutes before she found another way out.

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Emerging once more into the light of day, she discovered that the semi-destroyed plaza was already well on its way back to normal. A pile of shattered timber from the broken booths sat off to the side in an alleyway and the knick-knack sellers had spread out blankets, exhibiting their wares to a fairly nice effect. Obviously, they did not intend to let the brief unpleasantness of a dragon attack hurt their sales.

She took in the scene for a moment, marveling at the efficiency of the clean-up effort. That would require organization, just what she needed.

She spotted a slender, well-dressed man with eyeglasses directing a group of burly men in their effort to re-hoist a fallen banner. Given his pale complexion, skinny frame and apparent authority, he seemed a good possibility.

She walked up behind him and observed the banner-raising. He took no notice of her.

“No! No!” he shouted. “The right side needs to go higher!”

Nina watched them struggle for a moment, then leaned toward the man. “So, that dragon caused you all a lot of trouble, didn’t it?”

The man jumped, then gaped at her as if she had appeared out of thin air. She just smiled sweetly.

He cleared his throat and straightened his collar. “Yes, it certainly did.” With a sigh, he drew himself up and adjusted his spectacles. “But, I suppose it could have been worse. If this had happened tomorrow, or the day after...” He shuddered. “Well, it would have been *much* worse.”

Nina nodded in silent agreement and they both watched the sign hanging for a while before she leaned in again. “You’re the tournament director, aren’t you?”

“Ah...” The man looked at the ground. “No, I’m afraid I’m not.”

“Oh,” Nina’s eyes fell in disappointment.

“But I *am* in charge of organizing all the non-games-related events.”

“Really?” Nina smiled again, whistling with appreciation. “You must be pretty important.”

He blushed and gave her a modest little smile. “Well, it *is* an essential part of any tournament. The booths and parties and merchandise are where all the *real* money from a tournament is made, you know.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that.”

Beaming at her, he swept his arm across the plaza in a grand gesture. “By tomorrow, this crowd will be tripled. Hosting an all-region tournament is a very special privilege, you see. It does *wonders* for the local economy too, as you can plainly see from all the new construction.”

“It’s pretty impressive, all right.”

He nodded in approval, “By the way, my name is Jonathan.” He held out his hand and she shook it gently.

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“It’s very nice to meet you, Jonathan.”

He waited expectantly, presumably for her own introduction, but she simply turned back to watching the repairs. After an awkward moment, he did too. They observed the straightening of the banner for a moment.

Nina held her hands behind her back, idly rolling her head to one side. “I caught the dragon, you know.”

The man gaped. “You what?”

“I caught it. It’s locked up in the arena dungeon right now.”

“In the arena...” His eye twitched, just a little. “Is it still *alive*? I can’t have that thing getting loose and rampaging about tomorrow, or God forbid, during the *games*! You must get rid of it!” His face puckered in distaste. “I’m sure one of the...*knights* can help you with that.”

“Actually, I was thinking that we might come to an alternative arrangement.”

“Arrangement?”

“Well, I propose that King Francis of Langia will fight and tame the dragon in the arena tomorrow, all by himself, with only a sword and shield.”

“*Tame* the dragon?”

“Or get killed by it.” She shrugged. “Either way, you can sell tickets. I want half of the gate, then you can keep the rest as you see fit. The dragon’s wing is injured, so you don’t have to worry about it flying into the crowd or anything. What do you say?”

He considered her offer, his face shifting from shocked confusion to restrained glee. “I think that... that you’ve got quite a good idea there. Of course, I’ll have to talk to the legal department and have the standard contracts...”

Nina waved her hands. “I don’t want to deal with any of that. You handle all the messy details and you get to decide how the other half of the ticket money gets distributed. Do the math.”

“Yes, of course! I would be most pleased to assist you in every way I can, Miss...”

“Nina Kimberly the Merciless.” She gave a gentle curtsy and smiled.

“The Merciless?” His brow furrowed slightly, as though he were trying to make out something being shouted to him from a great distance. “Have I heard of you?”

“Perhaps. I’ve got a bit of a reputation. Ask around. I’m sure someone can fill you in, but I have to be off. Details to finalize and all that. I trust you’ll carry out everything to my satisfaction, because you know that, among other things, I captured a dragon all by myself. Bye now!”

She turned to leave, but looked back. “Oh, you had better make sure that nobody goes in there and harasses the dragon. You wouldn’t want it to get agitated and break free before the big event, would you?”

He paled. “No, of course not. I’ll send someone right away.”

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“Excellent.” She pivoted neatly and walked back to where they had left the horses.

William and Francis hadn’t arrived yet.

Given everything that had happened, she felt sure that William would return to their rendezvous point unless he had been otherwise occupied. Of course, taking care of Francis practically guaranteed being otherwise occupied. She set out for the tournament enrollment desk.

It was a good guess, because she found William leaning on the table with both hands, breathing hard and frowning in earnest concern.

“You don’t understand!” he shouted. “He *can’t* compete. He’s like a child! He, ah, he just *thinks* he’s royalty. He’s crazy.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said the tournament official. “But this is an open tournament, and only the competitors are allowed to withdraw themselves. I can’t possibly allow you to remove him from the roster.”

William seemed prepared to go on arguing, but Nina interrupted. “So, anything interesting happen while I was gone?”

He straightened up and turned to face her. “Nina! I’m glad you’re here. The dragon—”

“I know,” she interrupted. “I’m handling it, but I’ll get back to that in moment. What happened here? Francis get away from you?”

“You can say that again! For Pete’s sake, he’s like a rabbit. You’ve got to watch him *every second* or he bolts! How have you managed traveling with him all this time?”

She nodded in sympathy. “He got away from you in the confusion with Tyr—, er with the dragon, and signed up for the tournament. Is that about right?”

He inhaled the beginning of a sigh, but expelled the breath quickly. “Yep, that’s about the size of it.”

“So where is he now?”

William pointed at a group of men chatting. Looking closer, Nina saw that the current speaker was Francis. The other men shifted their feet and kept looking around, planning to make a break for it.

“Nina, I’m sorry. I—”

“Don’t worry about it.” She smiled. “It’s less than ideal, but it’s not the end of the world. With the dragon barging into town, there’s been a change of plans.”

“Yeah, I can imagine. Nina, what happened? Did you command it to do all that?”

She hesitated; she couldn’t possibly tell him the truth. Not *now*, while he was thinking about all the damage. “Um, yes. Yes, I did.” She tried to smile. “All part of my plan. I had him come into town and make a little mostly harmless trouble. Then I locked him up in the arena. Then, tomorrow, we can have Francis pretend to fight and tame him.”

William’s mouth opened and he looked at the ground, contemplating the news. Then his face broke into a huge smile. “That explains it! Of course!” His smile took on a mischievous

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slant. “Clever girl, I’m impressed.”

Nina’s mouth hung open. “Um... what?”

“I know why you’re traveling with Francis! They’re *paying* you, aren’t they? They’re paying you to make him look good! You’re going to drag him around and fake heroic adventures for him, so that people will think that he’s not such an idiot after all. Right?”

Nina tried to manage a confident smile. “Uh, yeah. That’s it. You guessed it. I didn’t tell you before, because I didn’t want you to tell Francis.”

“So that’s why you had a dragon controlling spell.” He shook his head in pleasant disbelief. “I’ve got to say, Nina, defeating a dragon in front of a crowd of people ought to do the trick. How did you know you’d be able to find one?”

She shook her head and shrugged. “Well, I didn’t. I just thought I’d be prepared, is all.”

“Wow, this is a pretty gutsy plan, Nina, but I think it’ll work. I was really wondering why you were keeping the dragon around. Hey! Maybe we should take the opportunity to make some money here too. Are you selling tickets?”

“Got it covered,” she grinned.

He took half a step back and clutched his hands to his chest, gasping in mock surprise. “Be still, my heart!”

She grinned and looked at the ground, fidgeting with her hands and certain she was blushing again.

“While we’re here,” he said, “have you given any thought to the games themselves?”

“What, you mean like cheating so Francis will win?”

“Well, that’s a thought, but I’m not sure we have enough time to plan all that. The judges at these things are pretty good. We might be able to tweak the odds a little, though. After he tames the dragon tomorrow, everyone will be scared out of their wits and they won’t know what to expect. We can take advantage of that.”

“You think?”

“I *think* it’ll be a lot of fun.” He winked. “That is, of course, assuming that you’re up for it.”

Nina grinned up at him. She recognized a dare when she heard one. “I can handle anything that you can, buster.” She poked him in the chest. “It’s a deal. If we pull this off—”

“*When* we pull this off,” he interrupted, his smile remaining but his eyes growing dark and intense. “I think you’ll find you like the game.”

Nina laughed. “Oh? And what game is that?”

He tucked his mouth into a sly grin. “Oh, I think you know.”

Lost in his smile, Nina couldn’t help but agree.

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Chapter 10

IT WAS TIME TO BRING FRANCIS UP TO SPEED ON THE PLAN. He still had a small group of knights cornered by a food booth, regaling them with tales of his own imagined gallantry while they muttered their own thoughts on the matter under their breath.

Nina was only too happy to interrupt. “So, Francis, did you tell them how you’re going to tame that dragon tomorrow?”

The knights gaped. Francis stared blankly. “Huh?”

“You know! The dragon that just ran through the city destroying everything? And how you are going to fight and tame it in the arena tomorrow without any magic spells or anything?”

One of the knights stepped forward, incredulous. “*You’re* going to *tame* a dragon, Francis?”

“Uh...”

“Yes, of course he is,” Nina jumped in again. “Tomorrow, in the arena. Wait until you guys see. Just Francis against the dragon, and he’ll have nothing but a sword and shield.”

She leaned forward, waving her hands and flashing a mischievous, toothy smile. “An epic battle with only two possible conclusions. Tomorrow, the world will reach a crossroads, and the fates hang in the balance. You may see painful, visceral, *brutal* defeat. A hero torn asunder.”

She spied a sauced chicken leg on a nearby booth-counter and seized it like a snake striking its prey. Demonstrating as she spoke, she snarled in anger, tearing the drumstick from the thigh and spattering the red sauce all over the awestruck knights. “Ripped *limb* from *limb* by the most *hideous*, the most *vicious*, the most *ferocious* creature ever encountered by man!”

She tossed the torn chicken parts back onto the counter. “*Or*, you may stand witness to the greatest glory!” With an inspired, maniacal gleam in her eye, she painted the sauce onto Francis’s face like war paint. “Taming the untamable, facing down the fearsome beast to end all fearsome beasts, bending its wild spirit to man’s iron will, and standing, *triumphant*, as its *champion*!”

She put her arm around his shoulder and surreptitiously cleaned the rest of the sauce off her hand onto the back of his shirt. “That, gentlemen, is *exactly* what he is going to do.”

The men stared at her in wonder, Francis included, his eyes wide and his jaw slack. A drop of red chicken sauce dripped down the end of his nose, then fell, making a tiny splat as it hit

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the dusty cobbles. “Wow,” he said.

“So,” Nina smiled. “On that note, I need to borrow Francis, here, from you good people. You understand, lots of plans to make and all that. See you gentlemen tomorrow at the big event, all right?” With that, she towed him away from the group and started toward the horses to meet William.

“Hey, baby-cakes,” said Francis. “That was a new idea.” He wiped the sauce off his face and licked his fingers. “I thought you were sweet on that dragon. What’d he do, bite you? You want me to show it who’s boss? Give it a little... *discipline?*” He cracked an invisible whip. “*Whuh-ksb!*”

“Yes, Francis,” she droned. “That’s exactly right. I want you to tame the dragon so that it won’t run into town and break stuff.”

“What happened to that necklace thing? Did it get broken?”

“No, Francis, it’s not broken. I, uh, just don’t like it anymore.”

“No problem, sweet-cheeks. I’ll take care of everything.”

“I’m sure you will, Francis. I have every confidence that you will meet all my expectations.” She flashed a thumbs-up to William and he nodded. Together, they all made their way back to the stables and rented a horse for Francis to ride while Valiant healed.

While Francis terrified both the horse and the stable-master by trying to saddle the new mount himself, Nina drew William aside. “I’d, uh... I’d better go give the dragon some more commands now. We might not have much opportunity later.”

William agreed, and convinced Francis to return to the campsite by asking for an archery demonstration. That served the dual purpose of keeping Francis busy and letting William gauge his skills, so they could start planning for the rest of the tournament. She saw them off, then made her way back to the arena.

True to his word, Jonathan had posted a guard to keep the gawkers and wanna-be heroes away from Tyrnon. The guard must have been either claustrophobic or afraid that Tyrnon would breathe fire through the bars of the cell, because he stood at the top of the dungeon stairs, rather than in the actual holding room.

She started past him, but he blocked her path. “I’m sorry, miss, but you can’t go down there. There’s a dragon down there.”

Nina rolled her eyes and heaved a great sigh. “Yes, I *know*. That’s why I’m here.”

The man frowned in consternation, his logic defeated. “I was told not to let anyone down there to bother the dragon,” he said.

“Okay, look,” she said. “I have a couple of advantages here. The first one? I know what’s going on, and you don’t. So why don’t you get out of my way before I show you the other one?”

“Um, what?”

She took that as her cue to push him aside and walk past him into the stairwell. Though

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he hovered uncertainly in the archway, he didn't follow.

When she reached the holding area, she saw that Tyrnon had stayed in the cell as promised. Still curled up on the stone floor of the tiny room, he had tucked his legs under his long body and run his tail along the perimeter of the room, reaching almost back around to his nose. He looked up at her with a weary smile.

She approached the door and reached through it, stroking the end of his nose. "Everything's set for tomorrow. I've got one of the tournament officials making the arrangements for selling tickets and all that."

He nodded. *Good*

"I think you're going to have to stay here tonight, though."

He gave a huge sigh, his scaly chest heaving. Nina felt the heat of his breath as he exhaled. It smelled of glowing coals. *Yes* *True*

"I understand." She sighed. "I wish we could do it some other way, but I just don't see any alternatives. These townspeople are really angry with you for crashing through their marketplace like that, and it's not as if they particularly liked dragons to begin with. We have to humor their belief that you're a fearsome beast if we're going to pull this off."

He laid his chin down on his forepaws, staring at the wall.

"Tyrnon?" She gently chewed her lower lip.

He turned his head on his paw to look up at her.

"I have to ask... Why did you follow us into town when we agreed that you would wait for us?"

He raised his head off of his hands, so that he could sign to her. *Sorry*

"Yes, I know you're sorry, but I want to understand what you were *thinking*."

He hunched his shoulders and lowered his neck. Nina thought he looked embarrassed.

"I need to be able to count on you, Tyrnon. I need to be able to trust you." She tapped two fingers to her heart, making Tyrnon's sign.

You *Trust* *Human* He turned back to the wall.

"You mean William?"

He didn't respond.

"Tyrnon, that's totally different!"

Why? He raised his head and stared right at her.

"Well, I mean, he's..." She looked right into his dark eyes.

Human

Nina frowned, unsure how to proceed. "Well, that's part of it, at least. Tyrnon, I have lots of experience dealing with humans, I know what to expect from them. I've never dealt with a dragon before. And while getting to know you has been fascinating, there's just so much about you that I don't have any idea about. I want to trust you, but when you do something like this..."

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Tyrnon continued to stare at the ground.

“Besides... I don't... *fully* trust William yet either...” She stared into space for a moment. “But at least he's done everything he's said he'd do. I can't say the same for you at this point.”

Sorry

“You keep saying you're sorry and I believe you, but I still want to try to understand what happened this afternoon. Why did you follow us? Did you need something?”

His face grew thoughtful and he turned his gaze from the floor to the low stone ceiling, gently tapping his foreclaws against the rock. Nina wondered whether he was considering a new sign or whether he was just thinking about the question. His eyes held an uncertainty, even an insecurity, that she hadn't seen before. Finally he shrugged.

“Tyrnon, that's just not good enough. I need to know why you followed us. Were you bored? Were you lonely? Just wanted to see the city? What was it?”

Yes *Yes* *Yes*

“All three?”

He nodded, but reconsidered. He used one clawed finger to scratch lines in the wall. He drew three short lines and one long. Pointing to each of the short lines, he repeated his signs.

Yes *Yes* *Yes* Finally, he pointed at the long one. *No*

“So... those three things were all true... but they weren't the biggest reason?”

Yes

“What was the biggest reason?”

Me *No* *Trust* *Human*

She sighed and put her hands on her hips. “Why not? Why do you trust me, but not William? It's not like you've known me all that much longer. What has he done that makes you not trust him? Do you know something that I don't?”

Tyrnon looked at the wall again.

“This isn't about our deal, is it? Are you worried that I'm going to break our arrangement?”

He shrugged.

“I know it may seem that way, but I intend to carry out everything we agreed to. Letting William join us doesn't violate that, does it? I think he could even help.”

You *Speak* *Human* *False* Pause. *Human* *Think* He reached through the bars and fingered her pendant.

“Yeah, well, how am I supposed to tell him *now*? The only way I could explain what you did today was that I *told* you to do it! If I tell him the truth now, he'll *never* trust you.” She could feel a flush on her cheeks and she tried to restore calm to her voice. “Tyrnon, what do you want me to do here? If I tell him now, he'll leave.”

Good

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“Hey now, wait just a minute! We can do the plan with William along. What can he do to make you trust him?”

You *Speak* *Truth* *Human*

“I *will*! I promise. It’s just going to take a little while now. Maybe if the whole thing with Francis goes all right, then I’ll be able to tell him the truth. That will show him that you’re trustworthy. How’s that? Would that be all right?”

Tyrnon sniffed and looked down at his paws, tracing circles in the dust on the floor with a claw.

“It’ll work. I’m sure of it.” She stood there watching him for a moment, suddenly filled with wonder at this strange being she had befriended. “You know, you’re really not what I expected from a dragon. You’re far more complex than I thought you’d be.”

That got his attention and he looked back up to her.

She nodded. “I mean it. I’ve done a lot of reading in my time, and some of that was about dragons. As I’m sure you know, your species doesn’t exactly have a sterling reputation. Everybody thinks that all you care about is either gold or rampaging through the countryside. Damsels in distress and all that.”

Humans *Think* *True*

Nina recoiled. “What?”

Humans *Think* *True*

“Tyrnon, I don’t understand. Humans say that dragons are fearsome, savage beasts who care only about gold and destruction.”

Yes *True*

“But *you* aren’t like that. You’re even generous.”

His eyes went far away, as if staring into the past. He didn’t answer.

“Tyrnon?”

True *Me* *Good* *Now* He broke eye contact. *Past* *False* He paused for a long time. *Past* *Bad*

Nina took that in for a moment before speaking. “So... what happened? What changed?”

Past *Me* *Think* *Humans* He paused in thought. *New Sign*

“You thought humans were... New sign, okay. What is it?”

The sign was one word, one syllable. A small word. Tyrnon started waving his hand around in an erratic path while making a sort of buzzing sound with his tongue.

“An insect... bug?”

He held two fingers close together.

“A fly? Gnat? A bee?”

At this last, he nodded and put his finger to his nose.

“You thought humans were bees? Like bees?”

Yes *Bec*

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“Okay, let me think about that for a second. So... let me try to explain what I get from that, and you let me know if I’ve got it... When I think of bees, I think of a couple of things. I think of honey. I think of hives, and I think of... bee stings. So honey is probably gold. Right? Humans mine gold out of the mountains and make things with it, like bees make honey.”

Tyrnon nodded, smiling with most of his teeth showing.

“And, from what I understand, dragons are fairly individualistic and territorial. Right?”

Tyrnon seemed hesitant, thinking it over, but then signed. *Yes*

“So, you might look at humans all clustered together in cities, with kings and queens in castles, and think we’re like a bee hive? Then, when a human might hurt you or when a bunch get together and kill a dragon, that would be like a bee sting. Right?”

Yes *True*

“Okay, so my general thoughts of bees are that they can be useful, because they make honey, but that they can potentially be dangerous, or at least annoying, and I don’t really think much of killing one if it bothers me. Is that what you mean?”

Yes *Past*

Nina leaned against the bars with one shoulder. “I guess that would explain the typical dragon behavior pretty well. But what changed *your* mind?”

Tyrnon held his clawed hands together, then opened them like a hinge, palms up. He turned a few imaginary pages.

“A book?”

Yes

“You can read?”

No He shook his head, a sad frown lining his face. He pointed to one of the imaginary pages and then sketched a small figure in the dust on the cell floor.

Nina knelt to examine it. It was a simple outline of a dragon in flight.

“You look at the pictures.”

Yes He held the book again, then looked around the room, pointing at many spots all along the walls, finally holding out both hands to indicate a large room.

“A lot of books, a library maybe?”

He nodded, then proceeded to sketch several more small figures. A person, a horse with rider, and a small building that looked like a church. *Past* *Think* *Human* *Bee* He pointed at the pictures, leaning in to study them in greater detail, then looked up, his amber eyes wide with shock and his large toothy jaw hanging slack. *Now* *Me* *Think* *Humans* *Think*

“So that’s why you aren’t like other dragons anymore?”

Yes

After a moment, Nina laughed, but stopped when Tyrnon’s face broke into dismay. “Oh, Tyrnon. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just imagining the librarian’s reaction

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to a dragon sorting through all his books. What did he do?”

At that, Tyrnon hung his head and sighed. *Bad*

“Oh.” Nina looked at the floor, then sat cross-legged in front of the door. Reaching through the bars, she rested her hand on his massive shoulder. His dry, pebbled skin felt warm to the touch. “Thank you for telling me.”

He didn’t look up, but he took a deep breath and relaxed his hunched shoulders.

“You know...” she ventured. “Books can be pretty powerful. Maybe while we’re here in town, I’ll see if I can find some... I could read a little to you, if you like.”

When he faced her again, complexity filled his expression. What did that expression mean? Hopefulness? Tentative excitement, maybe. But she could just as easily see weary skepticism and even a little fear.

“I’ll take that as a yes?” Nina smiled, but her own feelings were nearly as convoluted as those she saw on the dragon’s face and deep in his eyes.

The similarity between Tyrnon’s epiphany concerning humans and her own discovery of a friendly dragon struck her as ironic. She wondered how long ago this breakthrough of his had occurred, but didn’t ask.

And yet, it didn’t really explain his current behavior. He seemed remorseful enough about everything after the fact: whatever he had done with the librarian, terrorizing the sheep, and now following her into town, but feeling guilty about his actions afterwards didn’t seem to stop him from performing them in the first place.

She recalled what William had said about dragons. “Cunning,” “unpredictable,” “dangerous.” She would say clever rather than cunning, but unpredictable sure fit. As for dangerous... When she looked into his eyes, she felt no danger from him, but she realized nonetheless that a clever, unpredictable dragon had the potential to be very dangerous indeed.

Nina pushed the thought aside and took a deep breath. Tyrnon was an intelligent, interesting creature and seemed genuinely friendly... to her, at least.

Tyrnon had picked up on her brief uncertainty and furrowed his brow. She smiled again; this time, it came easier.

“You know, I’m really glad I met you.”

Tyrnon’s worried brow relaxed into a grateful smile. He nodded, then pointed to her and to himself, placing the two of them together. *Good*

“And it’ll be so much better now. After tomorrow. You’ll see.” Nina pulled her hand back through the bars and stood up. She paced a little as she spoke. “We’ll be able to tell William that you’re smart and free and faithful, and then we can finally work together as a team. Won’t that be great?”

Tyrnon’s smile faltered, but settled this time into resignation instead of resentment.

“It’ll be great, Tyrnon. You’ll see.” She couldn’t tell if she had convinced him or not. “You’ll see,” she repeated quietly. Suddenly uncomfortable, she glanced up the stairs. “Well... I guess

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we'd better decide how things are going to go tomorrow.”

At this, Tyrnon nodded definitively.

“We'll need to make it a pretty good show to fool an audience that size. Some of those knights might have seen or dealt with other dragons before, so I think that you should start out pretty strong. You can't play weak right from the beginning, or else people will know something's up. They'll think you're drugged or sick. But then we'll need to turn the tables, and I think that we can count on Francis to be at least as inept as usual. It might be pretty difficult to convince anyone that he's taming you. Have any thoughts about that?”

To her surprise, Tyrnon nodded immediately. *Yes* *Yes*

“You do? What is it?”

He held up a finger, and then shifted his weight, climbing to his feet in the tiny cell. After a great deal of patient effort, he managed to stand. He curled his hand into a strange position, gripping, even pinching, nothing at all, and held it out for Nina to see. He then raised his pinched fingers to a spot just under his chin. All at once, his entire body seized up. His back went rigid, and his limbs twitched at random until he went completely limp and collapsed in a heap.

Nina rushed forward, grabbing the bars with both hands, her eyes wide.

His eyes fluttered, then opened, but didn't focus. Trembling like a newborn foal, he struggled to his feet, eyes wide and watering, mouth hanging slack, and tongue limp over the side of his jaw.

Nina's heart pounded in her chest. “Tyrnon. Are you all right?”

He stopped trembling, turned to her suddenly with a sly grin and winked.

Nina's mouth spread again into a wide smile. “That was fantastic!”

He grinned and ducked his head, giving a little bow before settling back to his position on the floor.

“Tyrnon! Buddy! You've been holding out on me. We won't have any trouble at all tomorrow if you can put on a show like that. I especially loved the twitching. That was a great touch.”

Still grinning, he looked down and fidgeted with his claws.

“So, everyone will think that Francis has got some sort of mystical dragon pressure-point grip, but if anyone else decides to see if they can do the same thing, it won't work. Maybe we can even use that against some of the other tournament competitors. Some of them will surely try to go around saying that Francis isn't so great. We give them the opportunity to try for themselves, and you can leave them, shall we say, unable to compete?”

Tyrnon's grin faded and he shook his head.

“No? Oh well, that's okay. It was just a thought...” She hooked her thumbs under her belt and shifted her feet. “Anyway, it sounds like you've got it all under control... I guess I'd better be getting back to the camp with William and Francis...” She nudged a pebble into a crevice

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with the toe of her boot, then looked up. “Do you need anything else before I go?”

Tyrnon sighed. *No*

“Don’t worry, Tyrnon. Tonight will be the only night like this. Tomorrow, after the fight, we’ll be able to make everything clear, and you won’t have to pretend anymore.”

You *Speak* *Me* *True* *Question*

Nina stepped back, vaguely hurt. “*Yes*, it’s true, Tyrnon. I *promise*.” She tapped two fingers to her heart. “Trust me.”

Tyrnon swallowed and nodded. *Yes*

Nina couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw the glint of tears in his eyes.

Trust *You*

Nina swallowed, then took another deep breath. “I won’t let you down.” She picked up her pack from the corner and hitched it onto her shoulder. “I’ve really got to be getting back... I’ll see you tomorrow, though. Okay?”

Tyrnon gave a tiny sigh and a weak smile. *Yes*

“Okay,” she said again, feeling a little awkward. “Um, if anyone else comes down here, act fierce and crazy. All right? You have to be prepared for it at any time. Got to keep up appearances, after all. Right?”

Tyrnon smirked. *True* *Yes*

“Excellent.” Nina smiled again. “All right then. Big day tomorrow, better get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.” With that, she finally turned and jogged up the stairs. When she reached the top, the guard gaped at her.

“It’s asleep,” she told him. “It must have gotten tired out after running around like that today. Now would probably be a good time to go down there and check to make sure the door is secure and all that.”

“Oh, thank you, miss. That’s a good idea. I didn’t much like the idea of hanging around down there when he was awake.” He trotted off down the stairs.

Nina walked out through the portcullis, which had been repaired since that afternoon, shaking her head and clucking her tongue. After a moment, she heard a muffled roar, a terrified scream, and the sound of someone rushing up stairs in a hurry. She smiled, but didn’t turn around.

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Chapter 11

NINA RODE BACK TO THE CAMPSITE, ARRIVING JUST AS THE SUN SLIPPED BEHIND THE TREES, COVERING THE GROUND WITH A HAPHAZARD MESH OF SHADOWS. Emerging from the brush, she spotted William across the clearing, digging at a tree trunk with his knife.

He turned to look when she entered the clearing, then returned to his task, smiling through gritted teeth. His movements had a sort of awkward, unfocused quality that suggested significant fatigue. Francis was nowhere to be seen. “I think that we’ll have to reconsider our plans for the tournament,” said William.

“Why?” With some concern, she walked over and saw him trying to dislodge an arrowhead from the thick trunk of an ash. “You didn’t do something to him, did you?”

He dug with the point of his knife until he had freed the arrowhead, then inspected it before placing it in his pocket. “No,” he said. “He’s fine. I just sent him to collect all the arrows he sent flying God-knows-where into the woods.”

“Then why will we need to change our plans?”

William reached under his right arm and pulled the loose material of his shirt away from his body. A small hole pierced his sleeve all the way through to the other side. He wiggled his finger through it, looking up at her with an eyebrow raised.

Nina winced. “Yikes, sorry about that. I suppose I should have given you a stronger warning.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” he sighed. “No harm done. I’m just disappointed really. I expected him to be incompetent, but he’s so obnoxious, I can’t even *use* his incompetence. Can you control him at *all*?”

“Well, a little, but not delicately. You have to handle him like a broadsword, not a fencing foil.”

He grinned. “You mean, both hands firmly around his neck?”

“Yes,” she said, laughing. “That’s it exactly.”

He nodded, but his smile faded. “Yeah, well, I tried working with him, but I don’t think that we’re going to be able to pull off anything solid enough to fool those professional judges... Not in two days, anyway.” He leaned against the tree with his arms crossed and a thoughtful expression on his face.

“We’ve still got the bout between Francis and Tyr—, the dragon tomorrow,” she said.

“Yeah, I know. But that’s kind of *your* thing. I’m looking forward to it, but I wanted to

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contribute in some way. I'm still kind of the third wheel on the chariot, here." He gave her another sly grin. "I'm just not a passive spectator kind of guy."

Nina couldn't think of an answer to that right away.

William hooked his thumbs in his belt and looked at the ground for a few seconds. "Oh well," he said. "There's always the next town. Right?"

She gave a small nod. She realized that she was biting her lower lip again and made herself stop.

"Besides, it's probably for the best anyway. You don't want to mess up your dragon thing because you were concentrating on the tournament. Right? I know I wouldn't want to mess up *anything* that involved a dragon." He held up his hands and laughed. "That's a good way to get charbroiled."

"Um, yeah... Ha ha."

William walked over to the fire pit and set down his quiver. "So what's his name? Tyr—something?"

Nina's eyes widened and her throat seized, but she hurried to cover. "His name? What do you mean? It doesn't have a name. It's a *dragon*."

As she spoke, he watched with an intensity that unnerved her, but then he smiled. "Nina, you're a good liar when you put your mind to it, but give me a little credit. You've slipped on that two or three times already."

She sat by the fire-circle and buried her face in her hands. "Yeah, I know."

"Don't worry about it," he reassured her. "It's probably a good idea to know its name if it means you can communicate with it more effectively that way." He picked up a few branches of leftover firewood and began reconstructing the campfire. "Make your commands more specific and all that. It doesn't make you best friends or anything. Right?"

Nina gave a small cough. "Yeah, well, about that."

William stopped building the fire. "Huh?"

"I've been kind of meaning to tell you this for a while now, since you actually joined up with us and all, but I was worried about how you would react."

William set down the firewood, brushed the dirt off of his hands and stood, waiting.

"The talisman is a fake."

His brow furrowed and he leaned forward. "Excuse me?"

"It doesn't really work. I just told you I had it so that you'd relax and lower your bow."

"I'm not sure I follow, Nina. If the talisman's a fake, then how are you controlling the dragon?"

"Well... I'm not. Not really. We just have an agreement with each other." She hesitated, but William didn't speak. "He wants me to negotiate things for him," she added.

He ran one hand through his hair and took a quick, deep breath. Finally he nodded. "All right. I knew you had another secret, but I didn't expect that one." He took another deep

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breath and folded his arms, unfolding them again only a second later. “That’s a big one.”

Nina just nodded again and waited.

William rubbed his mouth for a moment, wincing, as if the very thought pained him. “So, um... Can you try to explain to me why you think that’s a good idea?”

“We’re friends, William! It’s really okay. The stuff about how I first met him was true. He was eating some sheep, and Francis attacked him. I had to save Francis, so I offered him some gold to spare Francis’s life. But later, I followed him into the woods and we talked about a lot of things. I told him why I was out questing and all about Francis and Langia. Then he made me an offer. If I would be sort of a liaison for him, help him negotiate for things, then he’d help me find a good quest to go on after... Ah, after I’m done with Francis.”

William listened to all this without a word, nodding to himself and continuing his deep, even breathing. “How do you talk to it?” he asked finally, his voice quiet.

“We’ve worked out a basic sign language.”

He considered that. “Okay, hmm. So, you don’t have any way to control it at all? You’re just taking its word— er, sign for it?”

Nina swallowed. “Yeah, pretty much.”

William examined Nina’s eyes again, looking deep inside as though he saw answers there. His expression made her fidget. Eventually, he spoke, his voice returning to normal, but still serious. “Aren’t you worried that it won’t hold up its part of the deal? What if it kills Francis in the arena tomorrow?”

“He won’t. We have an understanding.”

“An *understanding*? Nina, do you have any idea what you’re saying? An understanding with a dragon?”

“He likes me.”

“Maybe he *does*, but what if he wants to eat a few people? You tell him to stop and he decides he doesn’t like you anymore?”

“That won’t happen. He’s not like that.” Her voice didn’t sound as confident as she tried to make it.

“Not *like* that? Nina, he’s a dragon! *That’s* what dragons are *like*.”

“Tyrnon isn’t. He told me all about it. He found a library and learned that we—Humans, I mean—we can think and can draw pictures and all that. So he figured that we can really think and feel and he takes that seriously. He’s not like other dragons anymore.”

“Anymore?”

“Well, he... That is... Okay, listen to this. He used some of the gold that I gave him to pay the shepherd for the sheep he ate. Explain that!”

“Nina, I don’t know what’s in its head, but I’ve dealt with dragons before. They aren’t what most people think. They aren’t just animals. You ask the average villager back there what they

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think of dragons and they'll tell you about fierce, greedy beasts. They've never seen a dragon doing anything other than aggressive scavenging. Raiding their flocks for food or stealing gold from caravans. So I can't say that I fault them for their impressions, but that's not what dragons are about."

Nina started biting her lower lip again, but said nothing.

He sighed and popped the knuckles in his right thumb. "Let me tell you about Teddy Symes. I worked with him on a couple of jobs a few years back. We weren't really partners or anything, but there are a couple of scams that really need two people..." He looked up. "Suffice it to say, we helped each other out."

Nina frowned. "I don't see what this—"

"I'll come to it. Please, just listen." He closed his eyes. "Anyway, like I was saying, we worked together. But then one time, we were heading into town with plans for a big score. We had this treasure chest-looking thing with a false bottom, so just a little gold would make it look full, you follow me? Well we were carrying it, empty, along the main road, right by this huge field of tall grass.

"I think it was the quiet that I noticed first. All the little sounds of the outdoors that you never really think about. Well, they'd stopped. Teddy and I stopped too. Something had the horses nervous, and I don't know about you, but when my horse is nervous and I don't know why? Well, I get nervous too. Now, this was pretty late in the summer so the grass was really tall, but after a while, I noticed a gap, like something really big was there, pressing down the grass. I looked closer and..."

William licked his lips and cleared his throat. "I saw the dragon's eyes. Just barely saw them, peeking at us through the tops of the tall grass. It must have been lying in a ditch or a hole of some sort, because it was nearly invisible. All I could see were its eyes.

"Teddy and I were sure it was about to take our chest, but it didn't. It didn't do *anything*. It just sat there and watched us. Well, needless to say, we got the hell out of there, and I don't think it moved an inch from that spot.

"Once we were in town, we both headed right for the nearest tavern and had ourselves a stiff drink, but then we put the whole thing behind us. We finished our score and left town, this time with the chest full. We didn't want to run into the dragon again, so we took a completely different route. But it found us anyway. Swooped right down at us, practically out of thin air, smashed our cart, and picked up our chest like it was a music box.

"Before it flew away, it turned to glare at us." William's eyes were dark and serious. "Somehow it knew we didn't have any gold the first time, but the second time, it knew *when* we were leaving, *where* we would be, and that the chest would be full."

Nina swallowed. "Well... I *know* dragons are smart. That doesn't mean—"

"That's not the end of the story," he said. "You see, after the dragon took our gold, Teddy was furious. Like I told you, I don't do it for the money, so I was disappointed sure, but it

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wasn't the end of the world, you know? But Teddy just couldn't let it go. He wanted to go *after* the dragon. He wanted to *kill* it. He went on and on, all that night, about how great it would be to kill the dragon and take its stash of treasure.

"Anyway, he found a couple guys in town that were willing to go along with him. They had some crazy idea about poisoning it or something. I wasn't interested in that and I told him so, but he wouldn't change his mind, so I left town without him.

"I wandered around for a while after that, ended up pretty far from that town and didn't make my way back to the area for almost two years. I hadn't heard anything about what happened, and frankly, I hadn't given it much thought, but in a tavern one night, I heard a familiar voice. It was Teddy. I looked around and didn't see him... until he spoke again." William swallowed, his face pale and clammy. "I'd traveled with this guy for the better part of a year, but I couldn't even *recognize* him until I heard him speak... His legs were crippled, all crooked and mangled. He'd lost an arm, and the one he had was half-useless from burn scars. And his face... He'd been blinded. Two thick scars ran down his face, across his eyes and splitting his cheeks." William dragged two fingers down his face to demonstrate.

"I rushed over there and talked to him, asked him what happened. At first he wouldn't talk about it, but I pressed him until he told me...

"The poisoning obviously hadn't worked out. The dragon picked up on the smell or something and didn't take the bait, but... Then it was mad. Teddy never found out what happened to the other guys, but with him... Well, it didn't just hurt him... It *broke* him.

"It didn't do anything but break his legs at first, but then, somehow it *knew*," William shook his head, his brow furrowed in concern. "Or it found out where he was from, and it flew to his *home town*, carrying Teddy along for the ride..." He sobered and his voice hardened into a strained monotone. "It held him with its tail and he had to watch while it burned down every building and killed *everybody* in his little village. His family. Women. Children.

"Then it finished with him. Burning him, torturing him, and last of all, it stared him right in the face as it blinded him, so that the last thing he'd ever see would be its eyes."

William's own eyes looked deep into Nina's. "I'll never forget the sound of his voice as he told the story. Scared, almost panicked, like a small child afraid of an imaginary monster. Only this was no child, and the monster certainly wasn't imaginary. It could have just killed him so easily, but it didn't... It left him like that, a broken shell of a man, forever reminded of the consequences of taking on a dragon."

It took Nina a moment to absorb his story before she could speak. "I've never... The stories in the library... They never..."

William gave wry, sad smile. "Well, what can I say? People want to hear about *happy* endings."

She thought of Tyrnon's huge amber eyes and wondered what kind of sights they had

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seen. He had said himself that he used to be bad. *Could he have? ... No. He used to be bad. Not anymore*, she reminded herself. She sniffed and set her jaw. “Well, that won’t happen to me. Tyrnon is different.”

William just watched her for a few seconds, once again examining her as if he could read the answers in her eyes. Finally, he spoke. “Look, Nina, my experience tells me that this is a bad idea... But there’s something about you that I’ve never seen before.” He crossed his arms and put one finger to the side of his mouth in thought. Nina imagined she could see the clockworks turning in his head. “Did you think of that talisman idea right there on the spot, or did you have that planned in advance?”

Taken off guard, her eyebrows shot up. “Um... Well, I improvised. I started to think of a spoken spell, but I couldn’t come up with the words, and besides, with the talisman—”

“The talisman’s better,” he nodded, tapping his finger against his lips. “You’re right. It’s something obvious. Tangible. Far more believable. It also takes the trick off of you personally and puts it on the pendant. People will wonder about the necklace instead of focusing on you. What about the fight with Francis in the arena? Was that improvised too?”

“Well, yes and no. The idea had occurred to me, but I wasn’t actively planning to do it. I just saw the opportunity and ran with it.”

He straightened up. “Tell me, Nina, what are your instincts telling you? What is your gut feeling on this?”

Nina didn’t hesitate. “My instincts are telling me that it’s okay.” But even as the words left her mouth, she realized she had doubts.

“Are you sure?”

No. “Yes,” she said.

“Okay, Nina.” He nodded. “You’ve got instincts, and I’ve got them too. You’ve got good feelings about this dragon, and I’ve got good feelings about you. I want to stick around and see how this pans out. Who knows? You might actually pull it off, and I certainly wouldn’t want to miss that!” He beamed his beautiful smile again.

Relief flooded over her and she smiled right back. “I’m so glad. I thought you’d be really upset. I didn’t know if you’d believe Tyrnon was good.”

“I’m not sure I do, but Nina, I *trust* you.”

Her voice wavered a little. “Trust?”

He gave her a sly grin. “Trust’ll do for now.”

She coughed and laughed a little at the same time, making an odd noise through her nose.

“But Nina,” he said. “Don’t get too attached to this dragon. You know what they say: ‘Trust your instincts, but have a Plan B.’ We can go along with this, but Nina, are you prepared for the possibility that it’ll turn against you?”

“Not it. *Him*. His name is Tyrnon.”

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“Are you prepared for the possibility that Tyrnon will turn against you?”

She swallowed. “Yes... Yes I am. Maybe I wasn’t before, but I will be now.”

“All right then.” The serious expression on his face relaxed once more. “As long as you’re prepared, no reason not to have some fun with it.”

Francis chose that moment to wander back into the clearing, and William glared at him.

“Well?” he demanded. “Where are they?”

Francis shrugged. “Don’t ask me. They’re gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yup. Gone.”

William rolled his eyes and sighed, turning back to Nina. “If you’ll excuse me a moment, I have to go retrieve the arrows that His Royal God’s-gift-to-archery-ness sent flying into the woods. I’ll be right back.”

Nina nodded and watched him disappear into the forest. For his part, Francis shook his head in amusement and approached her.

“Now that we’re alone, how about you and I—”

“Talk about tomorrow’s fight with the dragon?” Nina interrupted. “I think that’s an excellent idea. How were you planning to tame it?”

Francis paused in consternation for a moment, struggling to shift gears to the new topic of conversation. “Um, well, I was just going to... You know, hit it with my sword and stuff.”

“You weren’t planning to use the Super-Secret-Petrifying-Dragon-Taming-Grip-of-Death?”

That took another moment to sink in, and Nina was patient. Francis’s eyelids lowered halfway and he licked his lips. It was an expression that Nina knew well, as it inevitably crossed his face when he tried to be clever.

“Um, I was going to use *a* Grip of Death, but I know lots of grips of death. Why don’t you show me the one *you* were thinking of, and I’ll tell you if that’s it?” He finished with a self-congratulatory grin.

“Of course, Francis. This is the one.” She held her fingers in an arbitrary pinched position. “You just put your fingers like this and stick them on the dragon’s neck.”

Francis stared intently at her fingers, then smiled. “Yes, that’s the one. I’m impressed, Nina. You thought of the very one that I was going to use. Now why don’t you take off that tunic, and I’ll show you some of the *other* grips I know. I think you’ll find them scintifying.” He wiggled his fingers and reached for her.

Nina dodged and walked away. “No time for that now, Francis. We’ve got to get the fire going before it gets too dark.”

“Ah, by firelight. I get it.” He winked.

The sun, already blocked by the thick wall of trees, had started to sink below the horizon as well, and Nina wondered how many arrows William would be able to find in the coming

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darkness.

It was too dark to catch anything for dinner, so after she had a serviceable flame she searched through her rations for something tasty. Francis, distracted by the thought of food, began wolfing down his own supplies. At this rate, he'd exhaust his entire provision before the week was out. Nina made a mental note to buy some extra food in town the next morning. As entertaining as it would be to watch Francis starve to death, she needed him healthy until they reached the sorcerer.

She was trying to decide between some dried jerky or a mix of nuts and dried fruits when William re-entered the clearing, carrying a quiver full of arrows and a dead rabbit.

Nina's mouth dropped open in surprise. "How did you catch that in this light?"

He set his bow and quiver down beside the fire, but did not sit, weariness etching his face. "Luck, really. Just a target of opportunity while I was looking for my arrows." He glared at Francis. "Of which I found every single one, *thank* you very much."

Francis looked up from stuffing his face, shrugged, and resumed feeding.

William frowned, but just stood there, holding the rabbit and staring into space. From the way he held it, Nina would have thought the rabbit weighed fifty pounds.

"You look tired," she said.

Starting just a little, as if he had forgotten she was there, he turned toward her with a sigh. "Yeah. I was chasing Francis all over the place trying to direct him without getting shot. I like to think that I'm in pretty good shape, but..."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Francis could wear out anybody. Here, give me that. You have a seat."

He handed her the rabbit and sat down by the campfire, yawning and rubbing his eyes. "Thanks," he said.

"No problem." She smiled, walking over to the stream to skin and clean the rabbit. When she returned, William was asleep. Francis, having gorged himself into a satiated torpor, dropped off soon afterwards. Nina sighed and began to roast the rabbit on a thin branch.

As it cooked, Nina stared into the campfire. She was rather tired, herself, and she noted that gazing at the smooth flames was not likely to help her stay awake. But something mesmerizing, something primal in the fire drew her bleary eyes into the flickering depths.

As she stared, the fire began to split. There almost seemed to be two fires at once, occupying the same space: the campfire in front of her and some strange, almost mystical blaze inside it. She blinked and shook her head to clear the double vision and the campfire returned to normal.

Nina glanced around the clearing and saw nothing out of the ordinary. The moon had risen and the stars were out. Francis and William both continued to sleep. The horses stood off to the side, their breathing just audible if listened for. The smell of night flowers drifted by on a passing breeze.

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Nina returned to the fire. The dancing orange flames contained no hint of the stranger, more sinister blaze within... Or did they? She stared into them again, trying to repeat the peculiar sensation. Soon enough, the odd, magical flame reappeared, at one moment behind the campfire, the next inside it. The double image faded into place, yet Nina couldn't help feeling that, somehow, it had been there all along.

All at once, the normal campfire vanished, leaving only the unearthly parallel, and her surroundings changed. Nina tried to turn her head, to look around her, but found it difficult, her body not responding properly, her vision swimming. The fire blazed with a green light, and the flickering seemed too slow for a natural fire.

Magic, she thought, and her body should have shuddered, but it remained unresponsive to her mental commands. Her thoughts were unfocused at best as her mind plodded through a soupy fog. Nina heard vague, indistinct voices around her, but she could neither identify nor locate the speakers. The room—*Am I inside?*—was dark, and an oppressive claustrophobia pervaded the space. She could see nothing beyond the bright green flames. Time flowed in erratic spurts: slowed to a near stop one second, frighteningly quick the next. She struggled to rise and felt drunk, or as if her body was shaped all wrong. Her thoughts were hazy. Soft and heavy.

Summoning up all her willpower, she fought her wayward reflexes and wrenched herself away from the flame... And fell off her seat.

She gasped for air, filling her lungs like a pearl diver returning from the depths. She had returned to the campsite, if, indeed, she had ever really left. She lay on the ground for a moment, drawing great, wheezing breaths, her heart pounding. Looking up at the stars, she discovered that the moon had moved almost a third of the way across the sky since she had first looked into the fire.

She sat up straight and rubbed her eyes. At some point, the rabbit had fallen into the flames and was now charred beyond any use as food. The smell of burnt flesh still lingered heavy in the air.

Had she merely dozed off and had a nightmare? She didn't think so. The vision had been far more powerful than her typical nighttime dreams. A truth-vision then? Hard to say. She had never had one before now. She couldn't remember seeing that sinister flame anywhere in her experience, so if it had been a truth-vision, it had to be the future. She swallowed, but her mouth and throat felt dry.

She started her battle-prep mental calming exercises, focusing her breath, body and mind until she could feel her heartbeat slowing to a more reasonable pace. All of the future-visions she had read about tended to foretell *events* of some kind, not just situations, but nothing in her vision had given her any kind of new information or insight. Nina scowled. *What good is a stupid truth-vision if it doesn't tell you anything useful?* Her hands shook, so she clasped them together and held them still. Perhaps it had just been a nightmare after all.

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She spent the next hour or so avoiding the fire. Determined to keep a good watch, she patrolled the perimeter of the clearing, on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary and finding nothing. She heard Francis snoring, the occasional hoot of an owl, the rhythmic chirping of crickets. With Tyrnon gone, the assorted woodland creatures felt free to resume their normal routines.

Some time later, she heard William's breathing change. He opened his eyes and sat up, yawning and stretching his shoulders. "Wow, I was really wiped out. Sorry about that." He ran a hand through his sleep-mussed hair and gently scratched the back of his neck. "Are you ready to go to sleep, Nina? I can take over the watch now."

"William? Have you ever..." She hesitated. Strange mystery visions and nervous uncertainties were hardly fitting with her role as a young, independent heroine.

"Have I ever what?" He finished folding up his blanket and looked at her.

"Have you ever had truth-visions?"

"No." He frowned. "No, I haven't. Why do you ask?"

"Have you ever... *seen* things in the fire?"

"Seen things? What kind of things?"

"Never mind." She broke eye contact, looking first at the fire, then remembering herself and looking away into the woods. "It was nothing."

"Nina, did you see something?"

She faced him again. "I... I'm not sure. I was looking at the fire, and it seemed like suddenly I was in another place. I'm not sure where."

William spoke in a slow, thoughtful voice, looking down at the fire. "Sometimes... When people see a fire moving just right, it's like they can't control their bodies. They start to twitch, and even bite their tongue." His eyes flicked up to meet Nina's. "Was it something like that?"

"No, it was..." She slumped her shoulders. "I'm not sure I can explain."

"Do you think there might be some magic at work? There are sometimes strange things in these woods. It wouldn't be the first time someone was enchanted."

This time, Nina *did* shudder. "Oh *God*, I hope not. Magic gives me the creeps." She rested her chin on her hand and glanced up at the moon. "I don't *think* I'm enchanted. I feel fine now. I don't know *what* it was."

Concern lined his face. "Are you sure you're all right? Do you think we need to move camp?"

"Oh no, I'm fine. It was just... strange. That's all."

He relaxed a little. "Well... Okay, if you say so, but don't hesitate to let me know if it happens again. Enchantments aren't something to mess around with. I'll keep my eyes open, too. If I see anything unusual, I'll let you know. All right?"

She nodded. "Thank you, William."

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He grinned. "You're welcome."

She sat down on her blanket and settled in. Shifting her weight to one side, she removed a troublesome pebble. "William?" she called softly.

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you're here."

His grin widened into a big smile and he sat up just a little straighter. "Me too," he said. And she drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter 12

WHEN NINA OPENED HER EYES THE NEXT MORNING, SHE WAS HAPPY. The cloudless blue sky promised a beautiful day to come and the phantom blaze of last night's vision faded away like a bad dream in the early morning sunlight.

Nina took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the crisp morning air. Autumn loomed in the distance, but the flowering plants were reveling in the remaining weeks of warmth before they settled in for the winter. Her heart reveled with them.

The simple pleasures of the ride into town made her smile. The scenery. The company. She beamed at William and he smiled back without saying a word.

Now that he knew about Tyrnon, her jigsaw puzzle was nearly complete. The tension between William and Tyrnon could have destroyed their little fellowship before they'd even gotten to do anything interesting. Besides, Nina didn't like secrets. She would much rather that everything be... straightforward.

But now, William was on board with Tyrnon and before long, she might be able to tell him about her plans for Francis, too. In fact, if his irritation with Francis's idiocy continued on its current trend, he might well bring up the idea himself. As soon as she got Francis out of her hair, they could start working on an honest-to-goodness quest!

Even from the outskirts of the city, they could see that Jonathan's prediction of crowds hadn't been just wishful thinking. Thousands of people packed the central plaza, meandering among the booths, gawking like children at a fair, and filling the air with a constant murmuring of excited voices. Nina whistled in astonishment and wondered how they had all arrived so quickly. If the All-Region games had *this* kind of draw, it was no wonder that Homilatta had seen so much new construction.

Nina couldn't help but be a little mystified by the whole phenomenon. The idea of pretending to fight had never impressed her much. And awarding a prize to the best at pretending? Either you're fighting with someone, or you aren't. The closest thing the Uhks had to tournaments was the old "First one to the treasure keeps it unless someone else kills him for it."

In *these* tournaments, killing someone could actually get you *disqualified!* As if killing wasn't the whole *point* of fighting! Nina didn't see the draw in getting herself all sweaty just for a metal cup or a little bauble. Why not just kill the guards, take it from them, and save yourself all the trouble?

Nonetheless, tournaments seemed pretty popular. She grinned and rubbed her hands

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together. All the more tickets sold for the bout between Tyrnon and Francis.

Maneuvering the horses through the throng proved difficult, so they left them with a pay-stable and made their way to the arena on foot. On the way, she spotted dozens of posters publicizing the fight. “Battle of the Age,” they said, with a picture of a dragon. The crude lettering and cockeyed placement spoke of haste, but given the short notice, they weren’t half bad.

Bypassing her previous entrance, Nina, William and Francis went straight to the office wing of the arena. At some point during the night, Jonathan had developed a facial tic.

“Miss the Merciless! There you are!” He leapt to his feet from behind a wooden desk, wearing a neat blue tunic and a worried expression. “Thank God! I was really beginning to worry. Is everything to your satisfaction? What can I do for you?”

Nina frowned in surprise. “Worry? About what? What’s the problem?” She glanced back at William and Francis, who had occupied some chairs in the corner. Francis wasn’t paying any attention and William just shrugged. Returning her gaze to the nervous administrator, she cocked her head to one side. “If you’ve managed to take care of everything we discussed, you have nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, no! No, no! Nothing to worry about at all! Ha ha ha.” His laugh was as twitchy as his face.

“Ahh...” Nina closed her eyes and nodded with an understanding smile. “Jonathan, you seem stressed. I take it you’ve heard some stories about me?”

He tried to swallow, but failed, appearing for a moment to choke on his own Adam’s apple. It made an interesting gurgling sound that Nina could not recall ever hearing before. “Stories? No, of course not! No stories about you or your father at all. Ha ha ha.”

“Oh, Jonathan.” Nina spoke as if to a frightened child. “You need to loosen up. I know there are a lot of stories about my dad and me, but I don’t want you to worry about any of that. Most of those stories are made up by people who’ve never even met me *or* my father.”

She sat on a corner of his desk, and gestured for him to sit also. “It’s like folk tales. Everything gets exaggerated to make a better story. I’m here for a simple business arrangement. I’m not picky about how all the details get resolved; I know it’s short notice. I trust your judgment, Jonathan!” She patted him playfully on the elbow. “*Relax!* It’ll be okay.”

She could see his tension level drop and soon he managed a more genuine smile, one with less gritted teeth. “You’re right,” he said with a sigh of relief. “I am sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. Everything *is* going according to plan. We have a lot of promotional materials out, and we are all set to start a little after noon. Is that all right with you?”

She smiled. “Sounds great.”

He nodded, more confident now. “Kip Bravura, the announcer for tomorrow’s tournament has expressed an interest in calling the fight. A blow-by-blow commentary, in other words.

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Would you like to speak with him about that?”

“A commentary?” She considered it. “Not a bad idea. Tell him that’ll be fine. Probably better that way. My voice gets hoarse if I do too much yelling.” She patted her throat.

“Very well. I shall let him know. I think that we had best start with His Majesty in the arena, and then let the dragon out of the holding area. We can arrange the gates so that it cannot go anywhere but the main floor. A number of the better seats have been sold in advance, but for the most part, people will purchase their tickets on the way in. From some of the reports I have received, I do not believe we shall have any trouble filling the arena.”

Her smile vanished. “Then you should be *charging* more.”

He paled.

Nina grinned again. “I’m *kidding!* I’m kidding!” She gently batted his shoulder. “I told you, I trust you to handle all that stuff. Whatever you’re charging will be fine.”

He swallowed. “Um... Yes. Ha ha ha. Very good then. His Majesty will need to be ready in two hours or so. Will he need a sword and shield provided for him, or has he brought his own?”

“He has his own, thank you.”

“Excellent. So, ah, what do you intend to do if, well...”

“Yes?”

“What if His Majesty is, um... *unable* to tame the dragon?”

Francis had been picking his fingernails with the tip of his sword, but he spoke up at the mention of his name. “Oh, I’ll tame it, all right. I’ll tame it good! Oh, yeah.”

Jonathan stared.

Francis stood and posed with his hands on his hips and his chest out. “I’ll show that dragon what it means to be a Langian subject. That dragon will regret the day that it decided to be a dragon! And I’m going to be the one who makes it do that! I’ll teach it not to go and, you know... break stuff! It *will* bow to my might.” He pointed at the floor by his feet and glared at everybody in the room, as if demanding that they look. “And if it’s too stupid,” he finished with a shrug, “I’ll just kill it.”

No one spoke.

After a moment, Jonathan broke the silence, still staring uncomfortably at the ground where Francis had pointed. “Ah, yes...” He glanced up again and adjusted his spectacles. “I did not mean to impugn your honor, or imply any doubt in your, ah... technique, Your Highness. I was merely speaking of the chance, as unlikely as it may be, that you... That is, I mean to say, the risk that the dragon may...”

“The dragon might kill him,” Nina interrupted.

“No, no. I said that *I* would kill the *dragon*,” Francis clarified.

Nina folded her arms and ignored him. “That’s what you’re getting at. Right? Well, in that event, I’d say you have Kip announce that a prize will go to whatever other knight can slay

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the dragon. Surely, with all these tournament competitors in town, someone ought to be able to handle it. Right?”

Jonathan nodded. “Of course.” He smiled tentatively. “Well, I must say, that sounds like an excellent idea, Miss Nina. You really do have a knack for this sort of thing.”

She smiled sweetly. “Oh, Jonathan, *you’re* the one who’s got the knack. I’m just the idea girl. You’re doing all the *work*. I’m really impressed with all you’ve gotten done in such a short time.”

He beamed at her.

Nina stood up from the corner of his desk. “I have a few things I’d like to get done before the actual fight. Is there anything else you need me for?”

“No, Miss Nina. I think that’s all for now. Just have His Majesty back to the main floor in about two hours and I shall ensure that everything is prepared. Have you eaten?”

She shook her head.

“Let me give you some meal tokens. They can be redeemed at nearly any vendor in the city.” He took three small, wooden disks from a drawer and handed them to her.

She examined one for a moment, admiring the brightly painted tournament logo and smooth, polished finish. “Excellent. Thank you very much, Jonathan.”

“You are most welcome. Now, have something to eat and I shall take care of everything. You can leave it to me.”

“Wonderful. I knew I could count on you.”

Nina roused Francis, who had returned to picking his nails, and shooed him out the door. William followed. They had only made it a short distance down the corridor before she snapped her fingers and leaned back through the doorway. “Oh, Jonathan?”

He looked up from a stack of papers. “Yes?”

“I just wanted to clarify one thing. Not *all* of the stories about me are made up. Some of them are actually understatements.”

Jonathan blinked, then blinked again.

Nina smiled. “I just wanted to clear that up. I’d hate for us to have any... misunderstandings. Okay, that’s all. See you later!” She waved goodbye, then set off back down the corridor, leaving Jonathan’s increasingly pale face behind.

They made their way out of the administrative area and strolled back into the main thoroughfare. A number of ticket-holders passed them, already heading for their seats, holding flagons of ale and hunks of salted meat wrapped in bread.

William waited until they left the arena before speaking. “Nina, that was fantastic! You are *really* good.” She could see genuine admiration in his eyes.

“I’ll say,” laughed Francis. “And I would *know*, if you know what I mean.” He winked.

No one acknowledged him.

Nina knew she was good, but enjoyed hearing William say it. She smiled and gently bit

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her lower lip. “You really think so?”

He nodded. They passed the gate to the holding area where Tyrnon was waiting and William pointed in that direction. “So, can I meet him?”

“Meet who?” asked Francis.

“Well, I’d be happy to introduce you, but I’m not sure how the logistics will work. We can’t leave Francis up here. Who knows what kind of trouble he’d get himself into. But I don’t want to take him down there either. He’ll just complicate things.”

“Complicate what things?” asked Francis.

“You’re probably right. I can meet Tyrnon afterwards. You weren’t kidding yesterday. You really need to keep an eye on this guy *all the time*.”

“What guy?”

William finally glared at Francis. “*You!* For crying out loud!”

“Me what?”

William closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath. “Nina, as remarkable as you were back there, I couldn’t be any more impressed than I am already by your ability to deal with *him*.” He stabbed an accusatory finger at Francis, who smiled good-naturedly.

She blushed and looked at the ground, twirling the toe of her boot in the dust. “Oh, well. I’ve had lots of practice.” Looking up, she spotted a small booth selling something not immediately identifiable on a stick. “So, how about you go and get us something to eat? I need to duck in and let Tyrnon know what’s going on. Let him know you’re on board. All right? He was really worried that you’d be upset.”

William raised an eyebrow. “The dragon was worried?”

“Yeah, well...” She touched one hand to her cheek. “A little worried... But anyway, Francis shouldn’t be too much trouble if you get him some food. So get me a chicken leg or something. Okay? I’ll be right back.” She dropped the wooden tokens into William’s open palm, where they clicked against each other.

He nodded. “Meet at the statue in the main plaza?”

“I’ll only be a moment,” she said.

He turned and pushed Francis along by the shoulder. “All right, you. Let’s get some grub.”

Nina watched them enter the crowd, then started back toward the arena. Making her way through the narrow stone hallways, she almost felt like whistling. When she reached the room that led down to Tyrnon’s cell, a new guard tried to stop her. Nina imagined that the previous guard had requested a change of assignment.

“Who are you and what business do you have in the dungeon?” he asked.

Nina attempted to step around him, but he blocked her. “I’m sorry, Miss, but there is a *dragon* down there.”

Nina sighed. “I’ll consider myself warned.” Her voice turned cold. “You should do the

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same.”

“Um, what?”

Nina rolled her eyes. “Well, while you’re thinking about that, I’ve got some business to take care of down there.” She pushed past him, but he grabbed her arm.

“Miss! I’m sorry, but you can’t go down there.”

“Look, I appreciate that you’re just doing your job,” she said. “Believe me, I do. However, in this particular case, you’re inconveniencing me. And I *know* you don’t want to do *that*. So how about you take your hand off me before it gets damaged.”

“Are you Miss the Merciless?”

Her brow shot up. “Um... Yes, I am.”

He let go of her arm and stepped aside. “Sorry for the inconvenience, Miss. If you’d identified yourself when I asked, I’d have let you right through. Sorry for the confusion.” He saluted her.

Nina stared. “Oh... Well, thanks.” She gave him a suspicious sideways glance as she walked past.

Descending the narrow staircase, her footsteps echoed across the bare stone walls until a deafening roar eclipsed them. A flare of light pierced her dark-adjusted eyes from the room below. She squinted and covered her face against a gust of heated air, smelling of brimstone, blowing past her up the stairs. “Tyrnon! Call off the fireworks!” she shouted. “It’s just me.”

The glow from the lower level ceased instantly, the noise dissipating a second later. Nina rubbed her eyes, momentarily dazzled, before continuing down the stairs. Mold steamed from between the soot-covered stones. She imagined that if she stood in one spot long enough, she would feel the heat even through her leather boots.

Peeking around the corner of the stairwell, she saw Tyrnon through the bars of his cell door. When he recognized her, he released a tremendous sigh, accompanied by a small cloud of smoke. He started to get up, pawing at the cell door for a moment, but she waved him down.

“Sorry. I can’t get you out just yet. But don’t worry! You’ve only got a couple more hours to go.”

Tyrnon grimaced and settled back to the ground without taking his eyes off her smile.

“Tyrnon, you aren’t going to believe it. I’ve got great news!” She sat cross-legged in front of the cell door.

He opened his eyes a little wider and cocked his head to one side.

“You ready for it?”

He smirked. *Yes* *Yes*

“Okay, okay. Here goes.” She paused to flash a toothy grin. “I told William about you... And he’s all right with it! I told him everything! He was a little worried, but he said he would stick around and see how it goes. Isn’t that great?”

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Tyrnon's brow furrowed in confusion. *Question* *You* *Speak* *Human* *True*

"Yes!" she nodded eagerly. Too excited to sit still, she stood and paced around. "I did! At first he said he didn't think it was a good idea, but I talked him into it. I told him about how you paid that shepherd for the sheep you ate, and all that stuff. He said he's willing to meet you and see how it all works out. I just came from him, and he wanted to come down and meet you, but he needed to stay with Francis for now. He's willing to stay with us!"

As she spoke, Tyrnon's frown of confusion evolved into a scowl of frustration. He looked away, breathing hard and fast.

"Tyrnon?" Nina developed her own frown of confusion. "Tyrnon, this is *good* news."

He snorted, still staring at the wall as if it took all his control not to knock it down.

"What's the matter with you?" She tried and failed to keep her voice from sounding annoyed. "This is what *you* wanted."

False He made the sign without looking at her.

"Ha!" She tossed her head and felt her braid swing around behind her. "Well, apparently not! But that's what you told me yesterday! You haven't liked William from the start."

True

"Look, I can understand how he didn't make the greatest first impression on you, but I asked you yesterday what it would take for you to trust him and *you said* you wanted me to tell him the truth. And now that I've done it, you look like I just dropped your dinner in the fire. What is the problem now?"

His clenched jaw shifted forward into a pout and he didn't answer.

Nina stood and glared down at him with her hands on her hips. "Look, Tyrnon. I came down here all excited because I thought I had some great news, and now you're acting like a spoiled child who isn't getting his way. I know you didn't want William to come along, but it wasn't as if we had a 'no *new* friends' clause in our arrangement. I don't see why William and I can't negotiate things for you together just as well as I could do it by myself. So why are you so pissed off?"

He turned a glare at her, his eyes angry and disappointed, still breathing hard and fast. *Me* *No* *Trust* *Human*

"You keep saying that." She shook an accusatory finger. "But do you have any evidence to back it up?"

Tyrnon scowled and looked away again.

"You know, I'm not sure this is about trust at all! I think you're just mad because... I don't even know why! When I first invited William along, you told me that you didn't trust him, but you trusted *me*. Now, has that changed, Tyrnon?"

Some, but not all, of the anger faded from his eyes. He thought for a long time before answering, his gaze still locked with hers. Finally, he gave a long, slow sigh. *Me* *Trust* *You*

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“I’m glad to hear that, but that’s not all I want this time. Now, I’m not asking you to *like* William. I’m not even asking you to *trust* him. But I *do* want you to stop acting like he’s horning in on your action. If not out of respect for him, then out of respect for *me*. Understood?”

His eyes flashed with defiance, but only for a moment. *Yes*

“All right, then. Good. I’m going to take your word for it here, Tyrnon. You hear me? I’m going to *trust* what you’re telling me right now.” She tapped two fingers to her heart in Tyrnon’s sign. “Can I do that, Tyrnon? Can I trust you?”

Tyrnon’s expression no longer held any anger, and Nina recalled the solemn agreement she’d seen on his face when she first met him. He’d made no sign then, and he made no sign now; he just nodded.

Nina sighed, sitting again and resting her chin in her hand. “Oh, Tyrnon. I didn’t want to come down here and fight with you... Today was supposed to be *fun*.”

Tyrnon looked down at his paws, lower lip protruding.

She sat up straight and raised her hands to her chest, palms out. “Okay, let’s stop. Let’s not do this now. Let’s talk about how we’re getting you out of here. We’ll do the bout with Francis, we’ll get you out of town, and out of that *cell*. Get you something to eat, and then we’ll all sit around the campfire and talk this out until everybody’s satisfied. Deal?”

Tyrnon looked up and nodded with enthusiasm.

“All right then.” Nina smiled, slumping with relief before straightening up again. “Anyway, I just came from a meeting with Jonathan, the events coordinator guy, and he has everything set up. It’s going to be a sell-out crowd! Can you believe it? You and Francis are going to give them a hell of a show and we are going to *clean up*!” She wagged a finger at him. “And don’t think you don’t have a share of that coming.”

Tyrnon grinned. *True* *Good*

“So here’s what’s going to happen. In about, uh...” She did a quick mental estimate. “About an hour and a half from now, they’re going to have Francis up there on the main floor. They’ll bring you up by opening selected gates. They’ll probably have some soldiers too. I’d suggest that you act hostile and all, but don’t give them too much trouble. Let them bring you up, then proceed with everything else as planned. Okay?”

Tyrnon nodded again. *Yes*

“Great.” Nina cocked her head and looked at him, once again in awe. If William’s experience was at all typical, this might be the very first occasion of a *friendship* between a dragon and a human. She felt it was only right that *she* be that human.

“Do you need anything else before the fight? I can go get you some more meat if you want.”

He shook his head. *No* *Later*

“All right. So I have to get back to Francis and William. I told them I was only going to be gone for a few minutes.” She swallowed and looked down, suddenly feeling awkward. “We’ll

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get through this show and then afterwards, everything is going to be perfect. You'll see."

His smile was hopeful, but his eyes were still sad.

"So, I guess I'll see you in an hour and a half." She felt that something else should be said, but didn't know what it should be. He just nodded, so she turned and walked to the stairs. Looking back for a moment, she waved. "See 'ya," she said.

He waved back, looking up at her with large eyes.

Nina tromped up the stairs with her thoughts conflicted. Everything was highs and lows with Tyrnon. One minute they were having fun, the next it was... uncertain. She could only hope that his current grouchy mood was only brought on by the long night in the cell.

She emerged once more into the daylight and looked for the statue where she'd agreed to meet William and Francis. The cool breeze had picked up a little, spreading goose-bumps across her forearms.

She spied Francis by the statue, wolfing down a giant turkey leg and holding a rack of ribs in his other hand. William watched him from behind, lip curled in distaste. Soon, he saw her coming and waved her over. Francis grunted and continued eating.

William returned her meal token. His thumb caressed the back of her hand as she took it. "I haven't gotten anything yet, but I've been eyeing that little booth over there." He pointed. "He's got these little buns with seasoned meat in them. They look pretty good."

"Oh, okay." She glanced absently in the direction he had indicated.

"How'd it go with Tyrnon? Everything all right?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Everything's fine. Why do you ask?"

"You just looked a little concerned, that's all."

She licked her lips. "I just feel bad for Tyrnon, having to stay all night in that dark little cell all by himself."

William nodded. "I wondered about that."

She took a deep breath and brightened. "He's looking forward to doing this thing with Francis though, so he can get out of there. He'll cheer up when he's free again."

"Well, being locked up could upset anyone. Staying the night in a dungeon is never much fun."

Nina grinned. "And you would know?"

William sobered, straightening up and swallowing. "Uh, well... yeah. Like I said, not everybody approves of my methods. I mean, it's not something I like to advertise, but yes, I've been locked in a dungeon. It doesn't mean—"

She smirked and poked him on the shoulder. "Jeez, so sensitive! I'm just teasing you."

His cheeks pinked. "Right... Sorry." He cleared his throat. "So anyway, the dragon? He'll be okay, you think?"

"He'll be fine, but the sooner he gets out of there, the better."

William looked down at her with a funny smile on his face. Then he chuckled, gently shaking

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his head. "Nina, you are something else."

She felt her cheeks grow warm and she stared at the ground for just a moment. "Thanks. You too."

He frowned. "No, I mean it."

Somewhat hurt, Nina raised her eyes to watch his face, concern lining her features. "I mean it, too. Why would you think I didn't mean it, too?"

A flicker of something crossed his eyes. *Regret? Pain?* But then he smiled again. "Sorry, I guess I just have trouble taking compliments sometimes." He took her hand in both of his. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," she whispered.

He took a deep breath. "So, do you want to get something to eat?"

"Yes," she said, smiling. "Yes, I do."

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Chapter 13

AFTER LUNCH, WILLIAM BOUGHT NINA A SMALL PASTRY WITH CINNAMON AND RAISINS FOR DESSERT. She nibbled at it, savoring each bite while they wandered around the plaza, taking in the plethora of shops and displays. The square buzzed with activity, the endless murmuring and scattered shouting of the crowd filled the air with a pleasant energy.

Ordinarily, Nina didn't much care for crowds, but today, as she walked across the mall with William, she noticed wonderful little details everywhere she looked. Over there, she spied an elderly couple holding hands while they strolled along the cobbled street. There, a flower-seller displayed some gorgeous bouquets of multi-colored, fragrant blossoms in *adorable* woven baskets. And there, the bright sunlight glinted off a glorious assortment of daggers and hand axes. She could see herself, and William, reflected in the immaculate finish.

Yet even in the face of such wonders, her eyes constantly found their way back to William. Sometimes, she caught him in furtive glances of his own and her heart swelled.

Francis ran through the square, darting from one vendor to the next like a child in a sweetshop, so Nina and William followed several steps behind; close enough to keep an eye on him, but far enough away that his sudden changes of direction would not result in a collision.

Some unsuspecting tourists weren't so lucky. As Francis blundered through the crowd, several unfortunate individuals were sent sprawling, their packages and bundles scattered over the cobblestone streets.

In this fashion, Nina, William and Francis slowly browsed their way back to the arena. The time for the bout drew near, and the crowd began to thin considerably as the spectators took their seats. The tourists and townsfolk streamed into the arena, buzzing with enthusiasm, intoxicated with anticipation, and in many cases, literally drunk.

Dozens of men had been camped out on the backs of horse-carts outside the arena all morning, drinking heavily and placing bets. Nina cocked her head in thought. Next time, she'd have to involve the gambling community.

Just inside the gate to the staging area, Francis shrugged into his light leather armor, having decided against using his full battle gear.

"I need to be quick and un-cumbered," he said.

William watched Francis turning in endless circles, reaching for the straps behind his right shoulder, and shook his head in bemusement. "Are you sure about this, Nina?"

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“Yes. It’ll be fine,” she said. “You’ll see.”

He gave her an “if you say so” shrug.

She smiled. “You’ll see.”

He smiled in return, sending a little thrill up her spine.

“You know something?” she said. “This is a lot more fun now that I’m sharing it with someone. Secrets are too much pressure.”

That earned a thoughtful expression. “Yes,” he nodded. “They are.” Then he took her hand in both of his and turned to face her. “Nina, I still think this is dangerous, but then, where’s the fun without the risk? Right?” His dark eyes captured her with the most beautiful brown she had ever seen. “Good luck,” he said.

Francis’s face twisted up in derision. “Why are you wishing *her* luck?”

William let go of her hand and rolled his eyes. Nina devoted her attention to the remainder of her pastry.

“She’s not doing anything,” Francis continued. “*I’m* the one fighting the dragon.” He leaned in to Nina and spoke in an exaggerated whisper. “Is it just me, or is this guy kind of an idiot?”

Nina, in the middle of swallowing, suddenly choked. She coughed and sputtered, and a raisin sprayed out of her mouth like a blow-gun dart. With a tiny, wet smack, it struck the helmet of a passing knight and stuck there. The man turned around, looking for the source of the sound, but finding nothing, he continued on his way.

Nina watched the raisin disappear into the crowd with wide-eyed, horrified fascination, then felt her cheeks redden. She looked over at William out of the corner of her eye and saw his lips pressed tight, fighting to restrain his laughter.

Francis was enthused. “Wow, Nina! That was *awesome!*”

At that, William could no longer contain his amusement and he burst out laughing. Francis joined him. Nina sighed and allowed a sheepish grin to cross her face. She folded her arms and let them laugh for a moment before speaking. “Are you two *quite* finished? Because we really do have to be getting inside.”

“Okay, okay,” smirked William. “We’re coming.”

Nina nodded and turned to walk inside.

“But, you know,” he called to her back, “if you don’t like raisins, all you had to do was say so.”

They met Jonathan in the corridor near his office. “Ah, there you are. Everything is all set.” Still pale, but less twitchy, he pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose and addressed Francis. “Your Highness, please follow my assistant here.” He indicated a rather sickly-looking boy who sneezed when introduced. “He’ll accompany you to the arena floor. Miss Nina, if you and your, ah, companion would come with me, I’ll show you to your seats.”

Francis followed the boy down the hall in one direction, and Nina, William and Jonathan

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took the other. Glancing back, Nina saw Francis covertly step on the back of the boy's moccasin, pulling it off his heel. The boy yelped in protest as they disappeared around the corner.

Following Jonathan's lead, William and Nina traversed the arena's labyrinth of corridors, and with each new hallway the soft roar of the crowd grew louder and louder. When Jonathan finally opened the red velvet curtain leading to their private box, the sudden rush of noise and light nearly overwhelmed her.

Comprised of a thin layer of coarse sand over earth, the competition field held room enough for three jousting runs laid end to end, and two more on either side. Twin gates with heavy wooden doors—one red, the other blue—faced each other from opposite sides of the field, and a number of wooden posts ran the perimeter.

Approximately fifteen feet above, behind a thin railing, the stadium held thirty or so rows of seating, large white stone benches, ascending to the top of the arena wall like a giant staircase. Spaced evenly around the circumference of the arena, six entrances and six staircases allowed spectators to fill the seats quickly.

And fill it they had. Rows and rows of people spread around the oval circumference of the arena, the many faces blending into a single multicolor entity that rippled and flowed with anticipation.

Nina stood in the threshold, taking in the spectacle through wide eyes and near-deafened ears. She had seen crowds of thousands before, mostly armies, but never concentrated as tightly as the multitude before her. And spectators or not, they had come ready for battle. The shouts and raised voices, the rumble of thousands of feet on the stone benches; it was the sound of high expectations. She swallowed.

Jonathan had arranged for a luxury box. Ordinarily reserved for the tournament director and non-participating royalty, the unscheduled event found the box still available. Woven rugs covered the floor: thick, plush, and dyed a beautiful deep red. And while the rest of the spectators sat on stone benches, the private box held elegant chairs upholstered in rich, gold fabric with black trim. A short table sat in front of the seats, likely for food or drinks.

Jonathan and William had already moved past her and taken their seats. William turned around and leaned one arm over the back of the chair to his right. "Nina, are you coming?"

She released the breath she hadn't intended to hold and walked quickly over to the chair. William's arm still lay across the back of her seat, and when she sat down, he moved it to lie across her back. He placed his hand on her right shoulder and gave her a gentle squeeze. "Come on, Nina. You act like you've never been to a tournament before."

"Huh?" she blinked, mired in sensory overload. She turned to look at his expectant face. "Oh, right. Of course I have," she lied. "Just never sat in the luxury box before, that's all."

"Okay, if you say so."

The audience suddenly erupted into applause and she turned to see what had triggered the ovation. A small platform took up the first few rows of seating directly across the field

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from the luxury box, and on it, Nina saw a small, squat man striding out to a chorus of cheers. Though she had never seen him before, Nina assumed that he was Kip Bravura, the announcer.

The small man confirmed her suspicion a moment later by speaking with an astoundingly deep, resounding voice that by all rights should have come from a man twice his size... or an earthquake.

“Are you ready for some action?” he boomed. A wave of applause seasoned with shouts and whistles echoed throughout the coliseum.

“I can’t hear you! I said: Are you ready for some action?” The audience cheered louder.

“Well, if you people aren’t ready for some action, I guess we’ll just have to pack up our glorious battle and take it over to Hoverplotte.” The audience shouted and booed.

“What? You mean you are ready for some action?” The crowd, practically frothing at their collective mouths, indicated that, yes, they were indeed ready for some action.

“Well, that’s good, because we got some! Today, I have the pleasure to bring you something very special. Today, I am bringing you the Battle of the Age. Civilization versus nature. Good versus evil... Man versus dragon!” The sound in the arena now resembled a hurricane more than applause.

“Out of the blue gate, we have our champion! The heroic warrior who is going to kick that dragon right back to the hellmouth from which it spawned; our neighbor Langia’s glorious monarch, Kiiiiiiiiiiiiing Francis the Niiiiinth!”

The audience cheered, though by now they would have cheered for a little girl holding a chicken. Nonetheless, Nina caught some boos, hoots and laughter shading the ovation.

A chorus of trumpets sounded from the other end of the arena. Nina turned to see Francis entering the field through the blue-painted arch. He bowed to the crowd and blew kisses.

Kip continued. *“And in just a moment, coming out of the red gate, will be the most ferocious beast ever to take the arena field. A terrible, horrifying creature of greed and destruction. The enemy of man: the dragon!”* The audience cheered again, and the sound of their shouting seemed to shake the whole stadium.

A guard atop the wall above the red gate gave a thumbs-up. *“Well, the guard says they’re ready. Are you ready?”*

The audience suddenly hushed in anticipation, the tremendous commotion settling into near silence in a matter of seconds. Nina frowned in confusion until William leaned over and whispered to her. *“They’re waiting for his catch phrase.”*

The small man’s face turned red, and he inhaled until Nina thought his chest would burst. He appeared to be summoning up the power of a volcano from deep within his stocky frame, and then he shouted with ear-splitting volume: *“Let’s get ready for Baaaaattllllllllllle!”* The crowd went wild and the red gate burst open.

Tyrnon didn’t come out.

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In fact, he was nowhere to be seen. The guards at the top of the gate whispered to each other in consternation. The audience began to murmur in confusion until a huge fireball erupted from the darkness behind the gate.

The audience shrieked in delighted fear. Flames billowed from the darkness of the gate, followed immediately by Tyrnon, who charged out like a juggernaut.

He ran across the field to the far side of the arena and, coming to the wall, he turned and ran around the perimeter, as though searching for a way out. Both the blue and red gates had been closed and there was no exit to be found.

Tyrnon roared and breathed more fire, *near* but not *at* the spectators, eliciting *oohs* and *ahhs* and squeals of excitement. He charged back and forth erratically, playing the wild beast part to a tee, and Nina smiled.

“See, William? Isn’t he great?”

She glanced over to William, who looked a little pale, but otherwise pleased. “He certainly is very... impressive.”

“*The dragon seems aggravated,*” shouted Kip from his announcer’s platform. “*It’s running around looking for something to attack. I don’t think it has noticed His Highness yet.*”

“Dragon!” Francis called out. He walked slowly, regally, across the sand to the center of the field and stood tall, his shoulders back, his feet planted firm and strong. He inhaled deeply, invoking the sum of all his royal authority into the tone of his voice. “Dragon...” He pointed to the ground at his feet. “*Sit!*”

The spectators burst into laughter, but Tyrnon admirably stayed in character. He did not sit. Instead, he turned a fiery glare toward Francis and began to run straight at him.

“*All right! The dragon sure sees him now. Choosing to start off with such a demeaning command, His Highness has provoked the dragon into an attack.*”

Francis drew his sword and waved it wildly back and forth. Tyrnon shifted direction just enough to slide his head under the swipe of Francis’s sword, then, turning almost at a right angle, he brought his tail around and cracked it like a whip. Even forty yards away, Nina heard the sound of Tyrnon’s scales thumping Francis’s chest and sending him flying. Tyrnon whirled to watch him skid several feet across the hard packed ground.

About half the audience gasped in shock. The other half, most likely those with prior knowledge of Francis’s reputation, cheered.

“*And the first strike goes to the dragon, with a powerful hit that has got to have the king seeing stars.*”

Francis jumped to his feet almost immediately. “All right, you’ll pay for that, dragon!”

Chuckling, William leaned over to Nina again. “Wow, hand-to-hand combat *and* witty rejoinders. Is there anything he *can’t* do?”

Nina smiled. The color had come back into William’s face and he seemed more relaxed. Hopefully, his fears were dissipating.

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“The king has gotten to his feet. Not one to be defeated so easily, he looks like he’s moving in for a charge of his own.”

Sure enough, Francis now raced toward Tyrnon, his sword held above his head. For his part, Tyrnon stood motionless, watching Francis’s approach. An instant before impact, he sidestepped Francis neatly, tripping him with a hind leg, and using his clawed fingers to strip the sword from Francis’s outstretched arm.

Francis took a header to the ground and slid face-first on his shield while Tyrnon held the sword aloft for all to see, grinning a horrible tooth-filled grimace. Then he trotted about forty yards away from Francis, sat on his haunches and proceeded to pick his teeth with the tip of the stolen weapon.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I can’t believe what I’m seeing. The dragon has actually disarmed His Highness and is trying to eat the sword!”

Tyrnon rolled his eyes, then began to scan the crowd looking for Nina. She didn’t dare call out to him, but it turned out to be unnecessary anyway, as he spotted her almost immediately. Nina marveled at his eyesight. He gave her a subtle nod and she returned it.

“There, see?” Nina nudged William. “Did you see that? It’s all according to plan.”

William made a thoughtful noise, but said nothing.

By now, Francis had regained his feet. He held his shield forward like a battering ram and charged, shouting like a madman. Tyrnon turned away and threw the sword like a dagger. It twirled through the air, spinning across the field until it struck a post twenty yards away, embedding the blade in the wood. The sword wobbled for a moment but didn’t fall. Gasps of amazement rippled throughout the spectators.

Francis continued his charge, but before he reached his target, Tyrnon jumped right over him and ran forty yards down the field to sit near the wall. Undaunted, Francis turned in a wide arc to charge him again without reducing speed in the slightest.

“The dragon has disposed of His Highness’s sword and easily avoided an attempted collision. Folks, this dragon isn’t having any trouble with avoiding the king’s charges. His Highness is going to have to try something else, I think. He hasn’t done the obvious thing by retrieving his sword. Perhaps Francis the Ninth has some sort of trick up his sleeve.”

“And he *does* too,” Nina said, “if the moron will remember to use it.” When William raised an eyebrow, she smiled mysteriously. “You’ll see...” *I hope*, she finished to herself.

Francis continued his charge, still holding his shield in front of him. It occurred to Nina that he might as well be charging a stone wall.

It turned out to be an appropriate simile. Tyrnon dodged him again, this time grabbing the bottom of the shield, pulling it from Francis’s arm and, in a smooth motion, swinging it up and around to swat Francis on the rump with such strength and follow-through that it lifted Francis off his feet and straight into the arena wall, where his leather armor smacked

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the stone with an audible slap.

The crowd gasped and cheered again. Apparently, the thousands of spectators were divided on what they had come to see: dragon-taming, or king-crushing. Although Nina suspected that either one would suffice.

“The king has now lost his shield! He’s in real trouble now, folks. Without his sword and shield, he’s defenseless against that foul creature’s razor sharp talons, jagged teeth and scorching fiery breath. He’s going to have to get his sword and shield back, if he’s going to have any chance of showing this beast who’s boss!”

Francis peeled himself off the wall and shook his head back and forth for a moment before turning around. Tyrnon held out the shield, as if handing it over, but when the dazed king reached for it, Tyrnon yanked it away and threw it sideways, skipping it like a stone across the field.

“Hey!” Francis shouted, shaking a finger at Tyrnon. “That’s my good battle shield! You’re going to get it all scratched up!” He brought his fists up into a boxing stance and wagged them defiantly. Tyrnon stared for a moment, then ducked his head between Francis’s legs and reared up, hurling the king toward the middle of the arena. Francis thudded to the ground twenty yards away and slid another five.

Tyrnon swaggered toward him, assured of victory. Kip continued to belatedly narrate from his platform. *“It looks pretty bad for His Majesty the King, ladies and gentlemen! It looks like the dragon is coming in for the kill.”*

Tyrnon straddled his forelegs over the prone body and paused there to growl at the crowd, baring his neck to Francis.

“Come on, you idiot,” Nina whispered. “Do the grip.”

Francis’s wind had finally returned and his eyes focused on Tyrnon’s neck. He lifted a hand toward Tyrnon’s throat.

“Halt, dragon! You shall not dine on royalty this day!” A new voice shouted from the other side of the arena. Thousands of spectators simultaneously turned their heads with an audible swoosh. The multiple gazes fixed on Sir Sievers, who had taken the field, still dressed in his full battle armor. The crowd cheered in surprise. Nina smacked her hand to her forehead.

Tyrnon gaped at the man for a moment before glancing down at Francis, then up to Nina. He sat up on his haunches and shrugged.

“My goodness, ladies and gentlemen! We have a new combatant taking the field. It’s Sir Sievers of Moulin!”

“Nina?” William turned to face her. “Is he supposed to be there?”

Nina, lacking a good answer for him, turned instead to Jonathan, the one person in sight who didn’t look surprised. She kept one eye on the arena, where Sir Sievers had drawn his sword and started toward Tyrnon, pointing the end of his weapon like an accusing finger.

Her voice was very calm. “Jonathan? Why is Sir Sievers on the field?”

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“Ah, well, you see...” he stammered. “It was your idea, Miss Nina. Don’t you remember? You said that, if His Highness was unable to tame the dragon, we should have another knight step in. I thought it best if we had someone prepared. Sir Sievers came by the office with the same idea and volunteered. I told him that he could have first crack at the dragon if... well, the worst should happen, but it looks like he came out just in time to save your king! It was terribly brave, I thought.”

Nina glared.

His eye twitched. “Wasn’t it?”

She clenched and unclenched her fists, feeling her double-jointed pinky finger popping back and forth. On the field, Tyrnon had sidled away from Francis, warily circling the fast-approaching knight. “Yes, of course,” she said, gritting her teeth. “Very brave... I’ll have to remember to thank him properly when all this is all over.”

She took a deep breath and turned to William. “I’m going to wait a few minutes and see if Tyrnon can handle this, but be ready to get up in a hurry.”

His eyes serious, William nodded. “I take it then he’s *not* supposed to be there. How much of a problem is he going to be?”

Tyrnon and Sievers were still circling when Tyrnon whirled, whipping his tail around to sweep the knight’s feet. Sievers jumped it with an impressive high-kneed leap and slashed at it with his sword. He missed by only inches as Tyrnon swiveled his hips and pulled his tail back in the nick of time.

“A trial exchange of attacks. It looks like the two opponents are taking it slow, trying to feel each other out.”

“I’m not sure.” Nina spoke without taking her eyes off the fight. “I only just met him yesterday. He’s not the sharpest sword in the armory, but he’s a lot smarter than Francis. And from the looks of that jump-and-slash, he’s a much better fighter, too.”

Though the visor of his battle helmet hid Sievers’s face, his cautious footwork and readied weapon suggested that the formerly cocky Sir Sievers considered this to be deadly serious. He stepped forward to try another thrust when Francis suddenly shouted from behind him.

“Hey! Sievers! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Sir Sievers was only distracted for an instant, but Tyrnon took the opportunity to wallop him with another swing of his tail.

With the added weight of the full metal armor, Sir Sievers didn’t fly nearly as far as Francis had, but the crunch and clatter when he landed was considerably more impressive. The crowd let out a collective “Oh!” Tyrnon backed off and held the end of his tail gingerly, pain and frustration hardening his face into a scowl.

“And the dragon deals a devastating blow to Sir Sievers. It’s a good thing he’s wearing that armor or his chest could have been crushed like a pastry.”

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Nina scrunched her face in confusion and turned to William. “Like a *pastry*?”

He just shrugged.

Sievers scrambled to his feet. “Your Highness! I’ve come to save you from this ferocious beast!”

“Who said I needed saving?” Francis strode quickly toward his supposed rescuer. “I think you’re just trying to get in on my action. You thought that you could just walk in and steal my glory. Didn’t you?”

Sievers shouted out his reply more to the crowd than to Francis. “Never, your Highness. This noble knight wishes only to prevent your royal person from harm.” The audience cheered.

“There seems to be some sort of a disagreement between the king and his savior.”

The knight stepped closer to Francis and whispered something that Nina couldn’t hear. Then Francis abruptly shoved him away.

“Forget it Sievers! I’m not sharing squat with you! Find your own dragon.” With that, he tried to grab the sword out of Sievers’s hand, but the knight wouldn’t let go and the simple snatch turned into a full-out struggle.

With one hand on the hilt of the sword and the other on Sievers’s chin, Francis continued yanking the weapon, but the knight held it tight, slapping at Francis’s hand with his metal gauntlet.

“Damn it, Sievers! I order you to hand over that sword, or I’ll have my army wipe Moolon off the map.”

“Your Highness—ow!” Francis had just stomped on his foot. “I need this weapon for your protection!”

Tyrnon still absently held his tail, though it seemed all but forgotten as he watched, dumbfounded; his two human opponents, grappling with one another.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is a new one on me. Both King Francis and Sir Sievers appear to have forgotten about the dragon altogether and are fighting each other!”

Francis had moved around behind Sievers and had both arms around the knight’s waist. He yanked a few times while Sievers struggled to get away, and after a moment, the two of them went over together, falling in a heap. Sievers, in full armor, landed square on top of Francis and Nina could hear the grunt all the way from her seat.

Sir Sievers took advantage of Francis’s temporary incapacitation to climb to his feet and run at Tyrnon, but Francis seized one of his legs, causing him to trip and fall on his face. Francis jumped on top of him and they rolled around on the ground.

Sievers finally caught Francis’s chin with his elbow and dazed the king for a moment. He stood and ran at Tyrnon again. The dragon’s eyes went wide and he dropped his tail, resuming a defensive, four-legged stance. He shifted his weight back and forth in anticipation, then timed his jump to hurdle Sievers just like he had Francis.

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Sievers twisted in his run and slashed upward with his sword, narrowly missing Tyrnon's underbelly. Tyrnon kicked out with his hind leg and smacked Sievers between the shoulder blades, knocking the already off-balance and stumbling knight to the ground.

Tyrnon hit the ground running and didn't stop until he had put some distance between himself and the knight. He sat on his haunches and examined his chest and stomach. It had been a clean miss, but the crowd went crazy cheering for Sir Sievers.

"Sir Sievers has first blood! A cunning upward slash to the dragon's vulnerable underbelly has got to be making that dragon think twice."

Tyrnon flashed an angry glare at Kip on his announcer's platform, but quickly returned his attention to Sievers, making a low guttural noise that ended with a snort and sending curls of smoke emanating from his nostrils. After a moment, his face seemed to clear and he turned to look at Nina.

She mouthed to him. "Do you need help?"

His gaze shifted to William for a moment, then returned to her. He frowned and shook his head.

A string of cursing from the side of the arena drew their attention. Francis had recovered and was trying to pull his sword out of the wooden post. He had one foot up on the post and gave a mighty heave, finally freeing his weapon and tumbling over on his back with it. Sir Sievers had returned to his feet as well, and he renewed his wary advance on Tyrnon's position.

Tyrnon looked back and forth between them for a moment, then took off in a sprint toward Francis. Without slowing in the least, he ducked his head and aimed it between Francis's knees, popping the startled king up onto his back. Using his wings to hold him in place, Tyrnon continued running until he reached the wall furthest from Sir Sievers.

"I can't believe my eyes, people! His Highness has mounted the dragon and is riding it around like a horse!"

The audience cheered.

Tyrnon hopped up to sit on his haunches, and Francis tumbled down his back, crashing to the ground face-first.

The audience boomed.

Whipping around to face him, Tyrnon again bared his neck. Francis tried to swing his sword at it, but Tyrnon seized the weapon away from him. He looked up and saw Sir Sievers still coming, only twenty yards away now. Tyrnon threw Francis's sword at him, but Sievers dodged it and kept up his slow and cautious advance.

"I'm no expert on dragons, but that beast is starting to look desperate. I think it may be tiring. This could be the deciding moment, people!"

Returning his attention to Francis, Tyrnon began frantically pointing at his neck. Francis looked up at him with a dull expression, his eyes half closed and licking his lips.

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Sir Sievers was nearly upon them, so Tyrnon finally reached down, grabbed Francis's hand, and pulled it to his throat. The crowd sat in astonished silence as Tyrnon's body went rigid. Nina smiled as Tyrnon flipped over onto his back and twitched, if possible, even better than he had in the dungeon.

"The king has just done something to the dragon! It's had some sort of a fit, and it looks to be completely incapacitated!"

The audience began to clap and cheer for Francis, who, for his part, stared at his hand in astonishment. Tyrnon finally stopped twitching and began to slowly roll over onto his unsteady feet.

"It's still alive!" shouted Sir Sievers, and he rushed forward to slash at Tyrnon's neck. Tyrnon noticed at the last second and scrambled out of the way, saving his neck, but exposing his wing. The sword carved a deep gash along his already wounded wing, snapping one of the long bony supports as it went.

Nina didn't wait. She rushed forward and jumped the top of the wall, dropping down to the arena floor and drawing her sword in midair. She hit the sand in a crouch, then stood and sprinted toward them.

Tyrnon roared in pain, a terrible, deafening sound that eclipsed any of the meager growls he had made earlier. He whirled on Sievers, who had started to back away. After inhaling a deep breath, Tyrnon unleashed a frightening torrent of fire that enveloped Sievers completely.

The crowd murmured in dismay and a few women began to shriek in fear. After a few seconds, the fiery onslaught ceased, and Sievers was revealed. His armor, though it had protected him at first, was now hot enough to continue burning, even after the flames had gone. Covered with soot and shaking with pain, Sir Sievers dropped to the ground and tried to crawl away.

Tyrnon stepped forward and grabbed him around the chest with his jaws. Lifting him off the ground, the dragon shook the man like a rag doll for a few moments before whipping his neck around and throwing him against one of the wooden posts.

Sievers hit the post with a sickening crunch. Still not finished, Tyrnon grabbed a foot and yanked the now limp figure away from the post, then began to tear at the armor with his teeth.

"Tyrnon!" Nina screamed.

Tyrnon lifted his head and twisted his long neck around like a snake to glare at her. There was blood on his jaws and hatred in his eyes.

Nina took a step back, shaking her head in disbelief. Tyrnon left the still form of Sir Sievers on the ground and began to stalk toward her.

"Tyrnon, stop it! What are you doing?"

Tyrnon gave no indication that he understood and continued his hostile advance.

Nina backed away, holding her sword down and to the side, her other hand held up, palm

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out, to Tyrnon, in an attempt to look as non-threatening as possible. It didn't work; his expression didn't change and he was nearly upon her.

Suddenly she had an idea. She dropped her sword to the ground and tapped two fingers to her heart. If this didn't work, she would have no time for anything else. She closed her eyes and winced.

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Chapter 14

A GUST OF AIR BLEW PAST HER FACE, HOT BUT NOT SCALDING, AND NINA CONCLUDED THAT SHE WASN'T DEAD. Opening her eyes, she saw Tyrnon's face about three feet from her own, his eyes wide and afraid, his jaw slack.

As continued realization dawned across his face, he backed up, shaking his head as if he could deny reality itself. His hind leg tripped up against Sievers's lifeless feet and he turned to look. When his gaze returned to Nina, his eyes revealed a muddle of confusion, pain, and regret. His lower lip trembled and his hands shook. *Sorry* *Sorry*

Nina forced herself to breathe, and with new air in her lungs, she straightened up, only to see soldiers taking the field.

Thirty-seven men armed with pikes and tall legion-shields, presumably the arena security team, spread out in an efficient maneuver that had Nina and Tyrnon surrounded in seconds. From the looks of grim determination on their faces, and the sure, confident way they held their weapons, Nina figured that most of them had combat experience, or at least good training.

Very slowly, she knelt, picked up her sword, sheathed it, and took a deep breath. The situation was clear. She had no choice.

Dashing across the sand to a startled Tyrnon, she clambered onto his back and straddled his neck. "No time. Fight now, talk later. Jump over them and get us out of this circle."

He hesitated, but before she could speak again, he turned his head around and met her eyes. Raising his front legs off the ground, he held his hands where she could see them. He mimed gripping something tight. She nodded, tightening her arms around his shoulders and hooking her knees around the base of his wings. She could feel the muscles in his back pulsing beneath her fingers.

Tyrnon sprang forward, rushing the nearest soldiers. They brandished their pikes, but he never reached them. Instead, he whirled around, sweeping their feet with his tail. Nina fought vertigo and gripped his neck even tighter, listening to the clatter of people falling on their shields one after another. He finished his spin in a crouch and leapt into the air, sailing over the soldiers on the other side of the circle, who had lowered their pikes for a charge.

Nina would have liked to watch them go by underneath, just to see the surprise on their faces, but instead she buried her face into the back of Tyrnon's neck and held on tight to avoid being thrown off by the sudden changes of direction.

A thunderstorm of angry shouting from the huge crowd threatened to deafen her. Any

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affection they might have had for Tyrnon was gone.

He landed with a jolt and Nina almost lost her grip. Clutching at his scaly throat, she fought to maintain her seat as Tyrnon's bounding gait shook her stomach and rattled her teeth. She didn't relax and look up until they had reached the blue gate on the other side of the arena field. Unfortunately, the security men had closed the gates and Nina and Tyrnon had no route into the network of corridors beyond.

Tyrnon battered and clawed at the heavy wooden door, but by the flat sound of his pounding, it had been reinforced from behind, and the security men began to surround them again. Taking off like a crossbow bolt, Tyrnon sprinted through a gap in their ranks and ran across the field again, forcing Nina to hang around his neck once more. The crowd booed and cursed at them.

"You can't just keep running back and forth forever," she said, when they reached the other side. "It's just going to tire you out. We have to fight." She peered over at the soldiers and pointed. "Try to separate the four on the right. Maybe a fireball would split them up. I'll take care of those four while you keep the others at a distance. We need to start cutting down their numbers and put a little fear in them." She looked down and saw that Tyrnon had turned his head around again to scowl at her. He shook his head vigorously.

"What do you mean, 'no'? Tyrnon, they're going to kill you!"

He shook his head again.

"'No,' they're not going to kill you, or 'no' you're not going to fight them?"

He hesitated, but Nina didn't wait. "This is not a good time for pacifism, Tyrnon! We don't have a choice, here!"

He set his jaw; his large, amber eyes squinting in defiance.

By then, the men had surrounded them again, this time in a semicircle bordering the arena wall.

"We don't have a choice," she repeated.

Tyrnon surveyed the soldiers for a moment, then snorted derisively and jumped to the top of the wall, directly into the spectators.

The men and women there, who only a moment ago had considered themselves lucky to be seated so close to the action, began to reevaluate that position. Screaming, they jumped to their feet and shoved their way through the crowded aisles. They pushed into the next section, forcing the people seated there to either rise or be trampled, and Nina saw a wave of standing people ripple its way around the entire stadium.

Tyrnon tried to push through to one of the spectator exits, but hundreds of people all trying to leave at once clogged them completely, leaving no room for escaping dragons.

With no exits nearby, Tyrnon paused, and Nina watched him searching the far side of the arena, presumably looking for a less-crowded escape route.

Nina let go of his neck and sat up. Down by the railing, the soldiers were boosting up

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their comrades. Five men had already climbed up and more were on the way. “Look out!” she shouted. “They’re coming up! Breathe some fire at them!”

Tyrnon looked to where she had pointed and upon seeing the climbing guards, he abruptly turned and ran up the aisle, higher into the stands. Nina held tight around his neck again, trying to mold herself to his back and reduce the jostling motion of a dragon bounding up giant steps. Something spattered the exposed skin on her calf and began to burn. She gritted her teeth, but couldn’t reach around to inspect her leg without falling.

She struggled to look up and tried to focus her eyes as Tyrnon scrambled up the stairs. They had nearly reached the top and Tyrnon wasn’t slowing down. His wings started to unfold behind her, but then he snarled in pain and tripped on the uppermost stairs.

At full speed, he crashed into the wall at the top of the arena seating. Nina tried to hold the small ridges on the back of his head, but her forward momentum sent her up and over the wall. Her fingers scrambled for purchase, then found it, grabbing something that gave slightly but held as she somersaulted over, her back slamming hard against the outer arena wall. Hanging by her hands, she looked down at the cobblestone road, sixty feet below.

A nervous giggle of relief escaped her lips. It occurred to her that she had a pretty good view of the city.

Tyrnon began to pull her up, whining quietly, then he reached out and grabbed her around the waist. He set her down on the inside and she released his lower lip.

She sat on the top row of seating and watched Tyrnon rubbing his tender mouth. Then a fresh twinge of pain returned her attention to her calf. She had been spattered with Tyrnon’s blood... and his blood had burned her.

She wiped what was left of the liquid away with her sleeve and then gently ran her fingers over the small blisters that had risen on the skin of her calf. She sucked air through her teeth.

The blood suddenly reminded her of Tyrnon’s wing. She looked up and saw that his wound was even worse than it had appeared from the stands. Blood oozed down his back and around his side, and the injured wing hung crooked, broken.

“What were you *thinking?*” she shouted. “You can’t fly on that wing! We could have been killed!”

Tyrnon’s face held so much pain and remorse that she stopped speaking. The soldiers weren’t leaving them much time for quiet conversation anyway. They had spread out among the now empty upper rows of the stadium, leaving the panicked crowds to continue streaming through the exits below.

“Okay, we really don’t have any choice now,” Nina insisted. “You can’t take that drop in your condition. We’ve got to fight our way through here!”

Tyrnon sat up on his haunches and solemnly shook his head.

“What is the matter with you?” she protested. “A minute ago, you were about to bite *my*

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head off, and now you won't even fight the soldiers who are trying to kill you?"

Uncertainty flickered across his face, but the solemn visage returned and he didn't move.

"Fine! I guess I'll have to do it myself." She took her sword in her right hand and her dagger in her left, stepped into a good fighting stance for uneven ground, and narrowed her eyes. "All right, you guys. Who's first?"

"Guards! Guards! Stand down! Lower your weapons and back away from the dragon!"

Nina looked in the direction of the sudden voice and saw Kip Bravura, still standing on his announcer's platform. Next to him stood a man in a dark hooded robe, his face hidden in shadow.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," said Nina, under her breath. "Who's *this* joker?"

"This man informs me that he is a powerful mage," said Kip. *"He has bewitched the dragon. He can make it leave the city peacefully, but the guards must back away and stop angering it."*

Nina raised an eyebrow. She watched the uncertain guards retreating down the stairs and leaned over to Tyrnon. "Do you *feel* bewitched?"

Tyrnon, brow furrowed, shook his head.

"Well, you'd better *act* like you are. The guards are backing off. We'd better take our cue and get out of here."

The hooded man said something inaudible to Kip, then started walking around the bottom row of seats toward Nina and Tyrnon's stairway.

"Guards," shouted Kip. *"Please clear the spectators from gate number three, and make a path to the exit."*

The guards took one last look at Tyrnon before consenting to follow orders. They made their way down to the audience gate on Nina's left and began herding the gawking patrons away.

The hooded man had now reached the bottom of the stairs and began to wave his hands in a spastic series of seemingly random motions, ending with a dramatic gesture pointing down at his feet. "Dragon, I command thee!" he shouted. "Descend these stairs and bring thy prisoner with thee!" When he looked up, Nina spied William's face beneath the hood. He winked.

Nina's confusion broke into a big smile. She sheathed her weapons and turned back to Tyrnon. He was scowling again, but his posture had relaxed. "Okay, looks like I won't have to fight off those soldiers for you after all. William's going to get us out of here. See? I told you we could trust him!"

Tyrnon snorted in gruff assent, but his scowl remained.

"All right then. Be that way." She smiled, too relieved to be annoyed. "Now act bewitched. We're not out of this yet."

His eyes took on a glazed expression and he began descending the stairs in a slow, unnaturally smooth gait, his tail twitching idle little circles in the air. Nina followed a few

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steps behind. As they proceeded down the stairs, she could see that the guards had finished clearing the exit.

When they reached the bottom, Nina skipped ahead and hurried to join William. He whispered to her: "I'll get Tyrnon out of the city. You collect Francis and your gold. Jonathan has it in his office. He also has a message for you. I'll meet you at the campsite."

She nodded and grinned without moving. She felt an irrational urge to hug him.

"Nina?"

"Yes?" she chirped.

"You have to go. We can't stay together right now."

"Oh! Right, right." She started jogging toward the gate, but turned and mouthed, "Thank you!"

William smiled and nodded. Tyrnon had taken a seat on his haunches at the bottom of the stairs. "Dragon," called William, renewing his mage impression. "I have entranced thee. Your thoughts are my thoughts. Your will is my will. What I want is what you want." He paused meaningfully, nodding to Tyrnon. "You will follow my lead and I will take you out of the city."

Nina left them behind and returned to the labyrinth of corridors. After a few moments to get her bearings, she set off toward Jonathan's office.

When she opened his door, Jonathan was nowhere to be seen, but two very large leather bags sat atop his desk. She approached the desk and opened one, discovering to her delight that it contained scores, perhaps hundreds, of gold coins. The other bag held the same. A hastily scrawled note lay on the desk between them. "Ticket Share for NK the M." She nodded to herself and retied the bags. In the corner of her eye, she noticed a quill pen vibrating slightly in its inkwell.

"Oh, Jonathan?"

A loud thump sounded from underneath the desk, followed by some quiet whimpering.

"Might I trouble you for a piece of rope?"

Jonathan peeked up at her from behind the desk. His facial tic had returned. "Oh! Miss Nina. Th—there you are. I'm sorry, I was merely looking for my er— uh..."

"Pen?" she offered.

"Yes!" he shouted, then blushed. "My pen. Precisely. Thank you. Ha ha ha."

"It's in the inkwell." She pointed.

He turned and jumped as if the pen had startled him. "Yes, of course. How silly of me."

"Don't worry about it. The rope?"

"R-rope? Why do you n-need rope?"

"I'm going to tie the bags together so that they'll be easier to carry." She cocked her head in amusement. "What? Did you think I was going to torture you or something?" She laughed. "Don't be ridiculous."

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Another twitchy giggle escaped. “Ha ha ha. Ah, no, I guess not.”

“Besides, I wouldn’t need to *borrow* torturing supplies. I have a kit.”

He gulped. “I’m afraid I don’t have any rope here. You might find some in the stable wing. It’s one floor down on the left.”

“Thank you. I’ll try that. Do you have my message?”

Jonathan looked blank. “Message? Oh! Ah, y-yes. The young man ran out of the luxury box just after you, ah... left, b-but he returned a moment later. He asked if you would be so kind as to leave five gold pieces with S-Saint Hector’s Chapel on Choble Street on your way out of town. I’m afraid he didn’t tell me why.”

Nina frowned. “Why would he leave a message like that?”

“I really don’t know, miss. That’s all he said, I promise you.”

“Oh well,” she shrugged. “I’ll find out soon enough, I suppose. So, one floor down on the left?”

“Yes, that’s the stables. They will have some rope there, I should think.”

“Okay, Jonathan. Thank you. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you, but can I give you a word of advice?”

His eyes were as wide as a child’s, and he nodded uncertainly.

“You really need to relax,” she said. “Life’s too *short*, you know?” She winked and smiled. “See you around!” After waving goodbye, she picked up the gold—one heavy bag in each hand—and left the office.

She found the stables exactly where Jonathan had indicated and sure enough, they had rope. She cut a good-sized length with her dagger and tied the two sacks together, slinging them over her pack. She left the arena through the stable exit and began looking for Choble Street.

A throng of spectators packed the lanes outside the arena, all discussing the fight. Apparently, each and every one had been in mortal peril and was tickled pink to tell everyone else how they had escaped a gruesome death. Many hurried past Nina in the opposite direction, rushing to watch the dragon being led out of town.

Nina grinned in satisfaction. It had turned out to be a good show after all. Not perfect, of course. She remembered Tyrnon’s wound and grimaced.

Concern settled over her face. It had been a scary couple of moments following Sievers’s death, and she didn’t really understand what Tyrnon had been thinking.

Sievers wanted to fight a dragon, she thought, and he got his chance. She felt a brief pang of regret at his death. It had been... unfortunate. But after some thought, she decided that he had brought it on himself for butting in where he wasn’t welcome.

Tyrnon hadn’t. Sure, he had run into town when she had asked him to stay behind, but he didn’t deserve that wound. He had every right to be angry with Sievers... But the look in Tyrnon’s eyes afterwards had seared itself into her memory.

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Perhaps he had just been blinded with pain and didn't recognize her. She wished she could believe that. It presented a nice, *simple* answer.

But that look... It wasn't blind rage she had seen in those fiery, piercing eyes. It was calm, predatory hatred. All sorts of uncomfortable questions poked and prodded at her simple answer.

Turning into a narrow alley, she was so caught up in her wondering that she almost didn't notice the thief sneaking up behind her. He had nearly reached her when she stopped walking and whirled to face him.

The small man resembled a rodent of some kind, a trait so common to thieves that Nina wondered whether thievery simply ran in families, or whether the trade actually caused otherwise normal people to develop pointy noses and buck teeth. Her sudden movement startled him, but not for long. He brandished a filthy, tarnished dagger. Not much of an edge, for Nina's taste, but she supposed it would suffice in a pinch.

"Hand over them coppers, missy, and I won't cut'cha."

Nina rolled her eyes. "These are *gold* coins, not copper."

His beady eyes went as wide as the small lids would allow. "*Gold* coins?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Gold coins, not copper. And that's somewhat unfortunate for you in two ways."

The man didn't respond.

"First of all, it's a good indication that you have no idea what you've gotten yourself into. And second, gold is heavier than copper." She grabbed the rope and swung one bag around, bashing the small man unconscious. He collapsed to the ground and Nina continued on down the alley, whistling to herself and feeling much better.

She emerged from the alley into the bright sunlight of mid-afternoon and resisted the temptation to skip. After a moment though, she slowed her walk, a slight expression of puzzlement on her face. She felt *too* good. Almost like some weight had been lifted. She frowned, trying to figure out what had changed. She couldn't help but feel that she had forgotten something.

She heard shouting and turned to see a skinny, disheveled woman yelling at an older, potbellied man. The man whispered something to her and the woman slapped him in the face.

Nina's eyes went wide. "Francis!" She had left him in the arena! She spun around on one heel and crashed right into a man who had been standing behind her, sending both of them tumbling to the ground.

"Now *that's* what I'm talkin' about!"

Nina scrambled backwards off the man, who inexplicably turned out to be Francis. She fell to a sitting position on the ground, her mouth gaping open in shock.

"What is it, baby? Lose your nerve? I was gonna say, this is awfully public. But I figured,

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what the hell? I'm not shy."

"Francis? How on earth did you get here?" She jumped to her feet, but he remained on the ground, looking up at her, his legs spread wide.

"Well, I hung around the arena for a while, showing everybody my Grip-of-Death, and then I hurried to catch up. And good thing too, because it looks like all that fighting got you a little *excited*, if you know what I mean." He wagged his eyebrows. "Screaming out my name and jumping my bones right here in the middle of all these people. You're a pretty freaky little filly. You know that, sweetheart?"

She resisted the temptation to kick him in the groin only because she needed him able to walk. "Get up, Francis. We need to find Choble Street." She turned away and continued in the direction she had been heading before.

He jogged after her until he caught up. "Why? What's on Choble Street? Some charming little bed and breakfast for us to wake up in after we do it?"

"No, Francis. It's not a bed and breakfast. We're looking for a church."

"A church?" He paused for a moment. "Well, okay, but I figured you'd want to have a dress or something first."

"A dress?"

"Yeah, I thought chicks were supposed to be all crazy for those frilly wedding dresses, but hey, no skin off my nose. Those things look like a lot of trouble to get off."

Nina stopped walking. Francis continued for a few more steps before he noticed and turned to look back at her.

She struggled to keep her voice calm, clenching her fists. "We're not going to the church to get *married*, Francis!"

"Then what—? Ohhh, I get it." He winked, nodding slowly with a lusty grin on his face. "In a *church*? You *are* a kinky kitten, aren't you?"

She popped him on the nose with a closed fist, then strode past him again. "We're not doing *that* either." She didn't look back, but she soon heard him walking behind her again.

"Nina! You don't have to be embarrassed, I'm up for it!"

She ignored him and continued walking. The tourists gradually diminished, and by the time she had reached her destination, the streets were practically deserted. The church stood a block away: a small, shabby-looking building with a steeple that looked ready to crumble at any moment. Clearly, none of the new money coming into the city had made its way into the hands of Saint Hector.

Nina walked up to the half-rotten door and knocked gently, afraid that it would fall right off its hinges. No one answered so she knocked harder, and the door *did* fall right off its hinges.

With some weak splintering and a long creak, it pulled away from the ancient iron fittings and fell inward with a tremendous crash. A cloud of dust billowed into the street and Nina

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waved her hands to clear the choking powder. Behind her, Francis gave a tremendous sneeze.

When the air cleared, Nina stepped across the threshold and stood atop the fallen door. “Hello? Is there anybody here?”

She scanned the interior of the tiny chapel and saw a number of old wooden pews covered with what looked like bed sheets, all facing a small podium. Behind the podium, a partially boarded-up stained-glass window filled the room with a feeble, multicolored light. Francis pressed past her and began stripping the sheets from the pews and bundling them in a pile.

“Oh, dear.” An old voice spoke from the corner of the room, and Nina turned to see a frail, elderly man in a priest’s cloak, standing in a small doorway to the left of the main entrance. “I knew that door wasn’t going to last much longer.”

“So you just let it rot until it collapsed? Why didn’t you fix it?” Nina folded her arms across her chest and scowled. She didn’t know why William wanted her to drop off this gold, but it seemed pointless. This old man obviously didn’t know how to handle money. That his church had reached this level of decay was all the proof she needed. What could William have possibly gotten from this church that warranted five gold pieces?

The old man approached the fallen door and began to kneel. It took him nearly a minute to reach his knees, wincing at arthritic aches in his legs and back. Once down, he examined the broken hinges with an unhurried calm. “I would have repaired it, but donations have been slim recently. Jared and I... Jared is my deacon, you see, well, we’ve had to use all of our funds to keep food in the mouths of our needy families, so the building maintenance has slipped.”

“Wait a minute. Let me get this straight.” Nina spoke with heavy skepticism. “You’re going to tell me that you let your door rot and your building crumble because you’re giving all your money to *other people*? Aren’t they supposed to give *you* money?”

The old man peered up at her from the floor. “They *need* it.”

Nina raised an eyebrow. “So? People need a lot of things.”

He frowned at her in confusion and prepared for another laborious change of position. Nina sighed at the prospect of waiting again and helped him up.

“Thank you, young lady.” He grinned at her. “These old bones don’t move as quickly as they used to.”

“Yes, well?”

“Hmm? Well what?”

She gritted her teeth. “I asked you a question.”

“Oh yes, that’s right. I’m sorry. You wanted to know how we use our donations?”

Heaving another sigh, she rolled her eyes. “What you’re saying doesn’t make any sense. You can’t just go around giving people money for nothing. You must get something out of the deal. What is it?”

The man cocked his head to one side and considered it. “I suppose it makes me happy to

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do good for people.”

“It does? Why?”

“Well, I would say that, when I do good for someone, it makes them happy. And it makes *me* happy to—”

Nina caught the beginnings of an idea and she held out a hand to shush him while she explored it. After a moment, she lowered her head a little and looked up at him with realization in her eyes. “It’s like a present.”

He smiled. “Yes, of course it is. It’s my gift to them.”

“So you just get kicks out of giving presents to people?”

“Well... Yes.”

“Even when they haven’t done anything for you?”

“Yes, of course. I try to show love to each and every soul in existence.”

Nina wrinkled her nose. “What, *all* of them?”

The man chuckled. “I’m beginning to feel like a mynah bird. Yes,” he said. “I try to love everyone. I even love strangers whom I’ve never before met. Like you.”

“Ha!” Francis shouted from the corner. “Nice try, old man, but she’s mine! Are you ready, Nina? I’ve got a nice comfortable spot over here.”

The old man glanced at Francis, then back to Nina with a questioning look.

Nina closed her eyes and shook her head before continuing. “So you give money to people because it makes you happy. And other people give *you* the money to give to them because it makes *them* happy. Right?”

“Yes, that’s right, for the most part.”

“The reason I ask is... There’s someone who’s very... *special* to me, who asked me to come here and give you five gold pieces.”

Francis stomped over from the corner. “No, no, no. That’s not what I wanted. I wanted to—”

“Someone *else*,” Nina interrupted. “It sounded stupid to me,” she continued, “but I want him to be happy. Do you think that’s why he wanted you to have the gold? Because it will make him happy to give you money?”

The priest gaped. “Did you say five *gold* pieces?”

“Yeah, yeah, gold pieces, but you’re missing the point. I asked if you thought that he wanted me to give you money as a present because it will make him happy.”

Francis leaned over. “It doesn’t take *gold* to make me happy, baby.” Then he nudged her with his elbow and she slammed him to the floor, raising a new cloud of dust. He sneezed again.

“*Five* gold pieces?” repeated the priest.

“Hello?” Nina waved a hand in front of his face. “Are you even listening to me? I’m trying to ask you a question!”

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He blinked a few times, then seemed to recover his senses. “Oh yes, of course.” He licked his lips. “I’m sorry. It’s just that five gold pieces will buy food for three families for a week. This friend of yours is very generous.”

Francis, still on the floor, cocked his head. “I am?”

Nina, taken aback, raised an eyebrow. “Five gold pieces is very generous? Do you think that this guy I’m talking about would be even happier if I gave you more than that?”

The priest’s eyes went wide again. “*M-more?*”

“Oh sure! I’ve got lots. Hang on a second.” Nina pulled the pouches from around her pack. Each pouch landed on the wooden floor with a heavy jingling thump. She opened one and dug through it for a moment before looking up. “All right, five gold pieces was going to make him happy. How much do you think to make him *really* happy? Fifteen?”

“*Fifteen?*”

“Okay, here’s twenty.” She counted out four handfuls of five coins each and handed them over with a huge smile. “That ought to make him really happy, don’t you think?”

“Kitty-cat,” Francis climbed to one knee, then stood, brushing himself off. “If you keep giving away gold like this, I’m going to have to put you on an allowance. By the way, where did you get all that?”

The priest started at that, then turned back to her with concern in his eyes. “Miss, is this gold yours to give?”

“It is now.” She grinned and hefted the pouches of gold back onto her pack.

His eyes fell and he heaved a great rasping sigh. “I’m sorry, miss, but I can’t accept this.” He held out the coins in a double handful and waited.

Nina’s smile vanished. “Why not?”

“Oh, well, it’s just that... I mean...”

Nina’s voice turned low and sinister. “I don’t think you understand. It’s very important to me that my friend be happy. As a result, I think that you’ll find that it’s in your best interests to take this money, or *else!*”

The man paled. “Ah... Well, I guess... If you insist. I’ll make sure that the money is put to good use.”

Nina held the glare a moment longer. “See that you do.” Then she leaned back and smiled again. “Good, then. I guess I’ll be on my way. Come on, Francis.” Turning on her heel, she strode through the vacant doorway and stepped into the sunlight.

Looking up at the glorious, vibrant blue sky, her heart soared. She couldn’t wait to tell William about her present, and now that she thought about it, Tyrnon might be pretty impressed too. She walked onto Choble Street and glanced around to re-orient herself. Francis followed her out of the church and approached with a scowl on his face.

“Nina, I had a great spot all set up in there. Why are you leaving? This was *your* idea—oh...” He stopped short. “This isn’t one of those... female things, is it?”

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Nina was surprised to discover that she didn't feel the need to hit him. Instead, she simply took off toward the city stables. "Actually, no," she said. "It's one of those I-shudder-at-the-very-thought things."

Francis's eyes widened. "Really? Just at the *thought*?" His face lit up in wide grin. "Wow! Wait until I tell Charles and Freddy I could do it without even touching you."

Nina stopped in her tracks, her eyes wide with shock.

Francis ran ahead to the main street like an eager schoolboy and grabbed the first man he came across. "Hey! Guess what I can do!"

Nina stood still for a moment, her delicate brow furrowed in confusion, trying to figure out what had just happened. Once she had, she started walking again, this time more purposefully. *Now* she felt the need to hit him.

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Chapter 15

AFTER WRANGLING FRANCIS BACK TO THE PAY-STABLES, NINA DISCOVERED THAT WILLIAM HAD NOT PICKED UP HIS MOUNT. She supposed that he couldn't come back for her without giving away the show, but that meant a long walk back to the campsite.

Maybe, once they had left town, Tyrnon had let William ride him. She frowned to herself. Hopefully, Tyrnon would finally relax a little bit and accept William as a part of the group.

Nina used some of her stadium earnings to buy outright the horse that Francis had been renting, and to purchase more food and supplies. She regretted putting off her reunion with William and Tyrnon, but it occurred to her that she would prefer not to return to Homilatta any time soon.

As they left the boundaries of the city, she heard the soft jingling of gold coins on her back and smiled. She thought of the villagers excitedly telling their embellished stories of peril, and the priest's expression when she handed him the gold. In thinking of all these things, she felt a deep sense of satisfaction.

So this is questing, she thought. I like it.

About halfway back, Francis began to whine. "Come on, Nina. I'm *starving!* How come you're hogging all the food?" Fortunately, her good mood allowed her to ignore him completely.

When they emerged into the clearing at the campsite, she saw Tyrnon lying against a thick tree, sound asleep, with a crude bandage on his wing. William had removed the brown robe and now he knelt by the creek with his back to her. Francis immediately dismounted and rushed over to swipe food from Nina's saddlebags. Removing a large, greasy sausage and half a loaf of bread, he proceeded to stuff his face.

William looked over his shoulder, but didn't stand. He appeared to be washing his hands. Nina approached. "I'm glad you made it back okay. That was a fabulous idea you had. It saved me a lot of trouble."

He laughed softly and turned a pained smile. "Thanks, but I can't really take full credit, you know."

She frowned and looked closer at his hands. He saw her looking and raised them out of the water. They had been badly burned: bright red skin speckled with ugly white blisters covered his swollen fingers.

Nina gasped in shock. "Oh, William, your hands. They're—"

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“I’ll be fine.” He attempted a smile, but his clenched jaw and the tightness in his voice told a different story. He plunged his hands back into the water. “Good as new in a couple days. I’m more worried about him.” He nodded in Tyrnon’s direction. “Tyrnon’s wing is going to heal crooked unless he lets one of us set it for him. I tried, but he couldn’t hold still enough and his blood kept splattering me.” He glanced down at his hands again and took a deep, controlled breath. “I’ve got the bleeding stopped, so I don’t think it’s life-threatening. But I think his flying days may be over.”

Nina looked over at Tyrnon with sudden compassion. It had not occurred to her that he might *never* be able to fly again. She watched him breathe for a moment, his huge chest expanding and contracting with each breath. His face, eyes closed and relaxed in sleep, struck Nina as so peaceful that he hardly seemed the same creature that had stalked toward her during those few frightening moments in the arena. She blinked and realized that William had continued speaking.

“—crooked like that. Maybe he’ll hold still for you?”

She sat down on the grassy bank next to him. “Well, he looks pretty still *now*. Did you try—”

William chuckled grimly. “Mess with that wing and he won’t be still for long. I can assure you of that. He only dropped off to sleep after I stopped dressing it. I don’t know much about dragon anatomy, but the way he acted... The wings must be *very* sensitive.” He paused and they both watched Tyrnon take a few more slow breaths. “Good information to have, actually.”

Nina whirled on him with a scornful look.

He held up his hands to placate her, but quickly gritted his teeth and put them back in the water. “No, I just mean in general. I believe you about Tyrnon now. I can see that he’s not like other dragons... Well, not totally like other dragons. He’s definitely trying. I’ll give him that. That’s a great deal more than I’ve ever heard of up until now.”

She nodded her head vigorously. “See, I told you.”

“And yet,” he continued, a thoughtful look on his face, “just after that dim-wit knight cut his wing and you ran in there after him, he...” He looked her in the eye. “It looked like he was about to attack *you*, but then he stopped. Did I miss something? What happened there?”

Just the question she had hoped he wouldn’t ask. She started to prepare a lie, but standing there, gazing into William’s soft, dark eyes, and looking down at his burned hands, she didn’t want to lie to him anymore.

“I don’t know.” She stared down at her own fidgeting hands, and they suddenly looked very small. Frustrated with them, she held them still and looked up. “I think... I hope it was just that he’d been hurt and wasn’t thinking straight. Some of the guys in my father’s horde used to do that. They’d get worked up in sort of a battle frenzy. Anyone who got too close got slashed, friend or foe.”

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She stopped and took a breath, vaguely hoping that William would say something and save her from the rest of her thought. He didn't. Instead he just cocked his head as if to say, "But what?"

"But when they did that, they got a certain look in their eyes. Sort of out-of-focus. Almost like they couldn't really see you at all." She trailed off again.

"And Tyrnon's eyes weren't like that," he offered. "Is that what you're saying?"

Her hands started to fidget again, so she clasped them together, annoyed at how insecure she felt. "Yes, I guess that's what I'm saying. Tyrnon's eyes were *very* focused. Almost like a wolf, stalking its prey." She saw him nodding gently in recognition. "It felt very predatory," she continued, "and *angry*, too. I think that's what surprised me more than anything else. He seemed furious with me."

"Do you think..." He paused in thought, considering his words. "Maybe he thought that you had something to do with Sir Sievers showing up?"

Nina's head perked up.

"And not only that," he continued, "I remember you said that Tyrnon hadn't always been good. Maybe his old instincts just got the best of him for a moment? And then he remembered?"

She nodded to herself, thinking it through. "That could be it... At least part of it." She looked over at William's strained grin. "Thanks," she said. "I know you didn't really trust him. I can't thank you enough for helping him the way you did, and now... well..." Out of words, she climbed to her knees and threw her arms around him in a big hug.

William, taken both off-guard and off-balance, toppled under Nina's friendly onslaught. He fell to the ground underneath her and she heard him laugh a little and gasp in pain. "Ah! Careful! My hands." He lay on his back holding his hands out to avoid touching them on anything, but she wasn't looking at his hands.

Her eyes met with his, and a warm, tingling sensation spread all over her body, concentrating in a few interesting areas. "Thank you," she whispered. Suddenly very aware that she lay on top of him, a flush of embarrassment crept up her cheeks. She did not, however, move away. He looked up at her, she looked down at him, and neither of them spoke.

"Hey!" Francis shouted, and a hand grabbed the back of her shirt, lifting her off of William. Acting on instinct, she used her momentum to push back and spin, sweeping Francis's legs out from under him and slamming him to the ground. She ended up on her feet, glowering down at the king, who lay there spitting dust out of his mouth.

He sputtered for a moment before climbing to his feet, but much to Nina's surprise, he turned to William and shook an accusatory finger at him. "And let that be a lesson to you!"

William sat up into a cross-legged position and held his hands gingerly in his lap, looking up at Francis with annoyance. "Let *what* be a lesson?"

"You see what she did? That's what she's going to do to you if you ever attack her like that

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again.”

William stood up with a single fluid motion and narrowed his eyes, speaking in a hard voice. “*Attack* her?”

“Yeah, and you’d better hope that I’m not there too, because *I’m* not going to be satisfied with just knocking you down!”

William stared Francis in the face, stepping forward until their noses nearly touched. “Is that right?”

Francis didn’t back down in the slightest. “Yeah, that’s right. Just give me an excuse and I’ll hit you so hard that it’ll hurt a lot.”

Nina folded her arms and rolled her eyes. She watched the two of them stare at each other and began to tap her foot. After nearly a minute, she cleared her throat. “Ahem!”

William and Francis snapped out of it and backed away from each other, both watching Nina intently. She turned to Francis and cocked her head to one side. “Francis, I have an idea. There’s a really private, cozy little clearing about five hundred yards in that direction.” She pointed off to her right. “Why don’t you go get some blankets and set up a nice little love-nest over there?”

Francis’s eyes grew wide and his jaw dropped in disbelief. “Really? You want me to do that?”

“Absolutely.”

“And you’ll come and…”

“Why don’t you go get set up and find out?”

A big smile lit up his face and he nodded. “Awesome!” Turning back to William, he gloated. “Look, buddy. Don’t feel bad. It’s just that, once a gal has had the ‘Royal Treatment,’ she can’t go back to normal guys. You don’t know what you’re missing though. She’s a wildcat!” He leered at Nina again, then ran over to his saddlebags.

Nina and William watched him pull a couple of blankets out of the bags and run off into the woods. They didn’t speak for a moment, but then William turned to her with a raised eyebrow.

She shrugged. “Got rid of him, didn’t it?”

“Is there even a clearing over there?”

“Does it matter?”

He blinked and the corners of his mouth turned up a little. “No, I suppose it doesn’t.”

She gave him a satisfied smirk. “Nope. In fact, if he can’t find one, he’ll probably be gone even longer. He wouldn’t dare come back and ask for directions with you here.”

“Yeah well, if he did, I know where I’d tell him to go.”

“Ha! I’ll bet you would!” Chuckling, she reached out her hand and lightly caressed the side of his arm. She was pleased both that his arm felt as firm as it looked and that he suddenly stood a little straighter, gently moving his own fingers to the same spot. She smiled,

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then remembered her news. “Oh! I almost forgot to tell you. I went by Saint Hector’s chapel, just like you said.”

“You did? That’s great. I was worried that you wouldn’t have time.”

“And guess what?” She tossed her braid over her shoulder and grinned mischievously.

“Guess?” His brow furrowed, but his smile remained. Nina could almost taste his curiosity. She felt like giggling, or jumping up and down, but she did neither.

“I gave him *twenty* gold pieces, instead of just five.” She felt her impish grin broaden into a wide smile.

“What?” His jaw dropped, yet still maintained the appearance of a smile, and his eyes, though widened, looked upon her with surprise and admiration.

“Yeah!” She nodded excitedly. “I was talking to that priest guy about the five gold pieces you wanted me to give him, and he said that people give him money like a present because it makes them happy, and then I asked him if he thought that was why *you* wanted to give him money too, and so then I thought that maybe if I gave him *more* money than you asked me to then it would make you even *happier*, so then I decided to do it like as a present for you, and I was so excited because it felt really good to get a present for you, but then I got back, and I saw your hands, and I felt so bad that you got hurt, and I forgot, but then I remembered, and... and... and...” She trailed off, suddenly embarrassed. Her cheeks felt warm. She stared at the ground, then peeked up at him, her voice almost a whisper. “I hope you like it.”

William looked overwhelmed. It took him a few moments to absorb all that she had said. “Wow, Nina. That’s... That’s great! I mean, I don’t know what to say. Twenty gold pieces, that’s so generous of you! That’s a lot of money for a little place like that.”

Nina nodded, her eyes wide. “Yeah, I know. Their building was falling down and everything, but even still, the guy said he was going to give the money to hungry people.”

Equal parts incredulity and pleasant surprise permeated his expression. “Great! That’s great. I can’t believe it.”

She smiled in satisfaction and blushed again. “So you do like it, then? I wasn’t sure. I mean, I’ve always thought that just giving away money sounded kind of, well... stupid. But it was actually kind of neat. That old man was *so* happy, and I thought it would make *you* happy too!” She grinned. “So, was I right? That’s why you wanted me to give him money. Right? Because it makes you happy?”

He broke eye contact and ducked his head, a sheepish grin on his face. He reached up to scratch his head but winced at the contact on the burned skin of his hands. “Well, yeah. Most of the time anyway.”

Nina frowned a little. “Most of the time?”

He chuckled. “Yeah. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I really do like giving money to people. It *does* make me happy. And I *am* really happy that you gave him that money, but... Well, in this case I guess I had a guilty conscience.”

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“What do you mean?”

“Well, after you jumped into the arena like that, I ran out of the box, trying to think if there was anything I could do to help. Just down the corridor, I bumped into a deacon from Saint Hector’s and...”

Nina waited.

“I kind of... knocked him out and stole his robe.”

He gestured with his head to a spot near the campfire, where he had set aside the brown, hooded cloak that he wore in the arena.

Nina stared at it for a moment, then put one hand to her mouth and burst out laughing. “That is *too* funny. I wondered where you had gotten that.”

William’s face was full of earnest concern. “I didn’t want to hurt him! But he refused to hand it over and I didn’t exactly have a lot of time. That’s all I could come up with on such short notice.”

Still laughing, she gently poked his shoulder. “I can just see you there in the passageway, apologizing to this unconscious guy in his underwear while you put on his robe.”

“Well... actually...” He started to laugh a little himself. “He wasn’t *in* his underwear.”

She broke into a new fit of the giggles and it was William’s turn to blush. After a few moments, she finally stopped, but a wide grin remained on her face. She wiped the tears from her eyes before she spoke. “I’m sorry for laughing... It’s just that...” The giggles threatened to begin anew, so she didn’t complete the sentence.

“No, no, it’s okay.” He smiled, but then his eyes grew briefly serious. He opened his mouth to say something, but hesitated, an odd frown on his face.

When he did speak, Nina could tell it wasn’t what he had originally planned to say. “So, how much longer do you need to drag that guy around?”

“Francis?”

He grinned. “How many other royal idiots are you baby-sitting?”

She laughed softly and touched one hand to her cheek in a nervous reflex. In the back of her mind, she wondered whether he would think it endearing or immature. “Oh, just the one.”

He nodded. “So?”

“Oh, right! Well, it won’t be too much longer. A couple of weeks, I think, depending on how fast we travel.”

“Ditch him,” he said.

“*What?*”

“Just ditch him,” William repeated. “Forget about your mission, screw the advisors, and just ditch him.”

Nina blinked several times, trying to regain her mental footing. “Um, I... I can’t do that.”

“Oh come on,” he said, smiling. “Why not? He’s an obnoxious jerk. What do you care if

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people think he's a hero? And I *know* you don't need the money. Look at all those gold pieces you have from the arena." He gestured to the two bags still strapped over her pack.

Her mouth opened in a little "o". She'd nearly forgotten that William still didn't know her real plan. Covering quickly, she adopted a gently daring smile. "It's only a few more weeks. I'm taking him into the mountains. I heard there's a wizard there who can help me out."

"What, cast a hero spell on Francis or something?"

She stared at him, a playful smile on her lips. "Or something."

His brow furrowed for the briefest instant before he smiled again, intrigued. "Oh, so *that's* how it's going to be."

Nina folded her arms and gave him a tight-lipped smile. "I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

His eyes narrowed in pleased determination. "All right, then, I'm game. Let's see..." He put one hand to his chin and gingerly held his elbow with the other in a comic gesture of thoughtfulness. "Okay. So let's work this out. Whatever it is, Francis doesn't know about it. He thinks you're after that Staff of Crowe thing. I knew *that* couldn't be the truth, because there is no way that you'd allow *him* to get his hands on something like that. If you can't tell him what you're really doing, then it's got to be something that he doesn't want, or doesn't think he needs."

Nina kept her mouth shut, her eyes daring him to proceed.

"That leaves two branches of possibility. Either it's something that he's too stupid to realize that he needs, but his royal advisors know better..." He watched her carefully and she tried to present a neutral face, eliminating any incriminating body language. "Or the royal advisors have no idea what you're doing, and you're planning a double-cross."

Inwardly, she practically jumped up and down, but she fought to retain her inscrutable expression.

"Hmm... the double cross, I think." He clucked his tongue. "That's just terrible. A nice girl like you, betraying her king and stealing the kingdom's money."

She lowered her chin and looked up at him with a mischievous grin, but said nothing.

"Well, that leads into all sorts of interesting possibilities, doesn't it? ... And how does the dragon fit into all this? I find it hard to believe that you just 'happened across' him. You seem to be able to handle yourself physically, so it can't be protection. You don't seem to have much political ambition, not from what I hear anyway, so I don't think you intend to conquer anybody with him."

He had started down the wrong track and began to brush against some thoughts that she didn't want to have, so she let a little frustration creep into her face.

"Getting cold, am I? Okay, let me think..." He furrowed his brow and cocked his head in thought. "Well, I know that you know how to get the things that you want, and that you are willing to wait in order to get them. So in order to figure out what you're planning, I have to

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know what you want.”

He started to tuck his thumbs in his belt, but winced as he remembered his burns. After trying for a moment to find a comfortable position for them, he finally sat down on a rock by the small fire-pit and rested them gently on his thighs. She sat down next to him and they faced each other.

He stared at her for a moment before continuing. “I think we can take money and power off the table right away. You don’t want those.”

Nina was genuinely surprised. “I don’t?”

“Well, no.”

“And how did you come to that conclusion, exactly?”

“You parted with twenty hard-earned gold pieces at the drop of a hat and you carry those coins around like they’re bags of flour or something. You like to buy things, I think, but money is just a means, not an end. Am I right?”

Nina raised her eyebrows. “Uh, yeah. I guess so. And power?”

“The King of Langia follows you around like a puppy dog, and I’m willing to bet that you could command your father’s old horde if you really wanted to. If anyone was ever in a position of power, it’s you. But you left and you’re doing something else.”

“No,” She shook her head. “They don’t want to follow me.”

“Oh, come on,” he said, grinning. “Are you going to tell me you couldn’t be their leader if that was what you really wanted?”

Nina stared in open astonishment.

He went on. “So it’s not money or power.” He cocked his head, looking up at the sky for a moment. “Langia had to be a pretty dull place for someone of your background. I’ve been through there once or twice, and aside from the occasional bar fight, nothing much really happens there. Am I right?”

She nodded and found that her excitement had turned into something else, almost a longing.

“So I think that what you want is adventure. Traveling from place to place, doing exciting things, the way you must have when you were with your father in the barbarian horde. Nothing wrong with that. Anyone could stagnate in a place like Langia. Adventure is one of the things that makes life interesting.” The playfulness faded from his face, replaced by a sort of half-smile that conveyed both sincerity and affection. Nina thought she could lose herself in that smile.

“And I think that the Langian people aren’t the sort that you want to be hanging around with. They just rolled over and settled for the barbarian occupation, didn’t they? And they’ve been putting up with it for ten years now with no sign that they are going to change. Even the other barbarians are just sitting around doing nothing. That doesn’t sound like you. I think you want to be around people who are willing to make things happen.” He looked her in the eye. “People who *want* to make things happen.”

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Nina realized she had been holding her breath. William hesitated again and seemed to be deciding something.

“Nina... There are a few things that *I* want to make happen.”

She inhaled sharply and made a tiny squeaking noise.

“But I think we should take them one at a time. The first one is for you to be... For *us* to be partners. Not just traveling in the same direction for a while, but really traveling together, with common goals. I think we could make a good team. And then...” He grinned. “Maybe the other things will come along naturally.”

Nina’s lips moved for a few seconds before any words came out. “Oh, William. I... I don’t know what to say. I mean, I’d love to, but I have to—”

Something fell inside him. “Oh... Well, I don’t want to put any pressure on you.” His gaze had broken and he looked around uncertainly. “I guess you have obligations to Tyrnon and all. You don’t have to decide anything right now.” He raised one corner of his mouth in a disappointed half-smile. “I’m willing to wait for the things that I want, too.”

She felt her eyes welling up and looked down at the ground. “William... I... What you said... I think that I want those things, too.”

She looked up, hoping to see his smile again. Instead, she saw all the color drain from his face.

“What? What is it?” she asked, her voice catching in her throat.

Suddenly, from behind her, she heard an angry snort.

She felt the color draining from her face, too. “Oh.”

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Chapter 16

NINA SPUN AROUND TO SEE TYRNON GLOWING DOWN AT THEM, THE SCALY RIDGES OF HIS BROW FURROWED AND MOST OF HIS TEETH SHOWING. A small gust of wind carried the smell of brimstone.

The focus of his stare had been William, but when she faced him, his eyes moved to hers with an unreadable expression: wide and concerned, but at the same time disappointed, uncertain, forgiving, angry, all at once. The huge, amber irises pierced her to the core. She suddenly felt like a small child caught misbehaving.

Opening her mouth, she tried to say something, anything to make him stop looking at her like that. When she moved to stand, her legs gave out under the intensity of his stare. Falling to her knees, her eyes never left his. They seemed to flicker and change—at one moment his large, amber animal eyes; at another, almost black, but also old... and hateful.

No He signed.

“No,” she repeated, but she couldn’t hear her own voice. She could feel her head shake back and forth, only a fraction of an inch to each side, but startling in how involuntary it seemed.

“No what?” William’s voice was quiet, muffled, as if coming from another room.

But we were outside... weren't we? She seemed to remember that they had been, but everything felt confused. Somehow, she felt enclosed in a small space, but couldn’t make herself look around to see anything but Tyrnon’s eyes.

“Nina?” William’s voice sounded stronger, and yet more distant at the same time, like a shout from a great distance. She couldn’t place him from the sound. “Nina? What is it? Are you okay?”

Tyrnon’s eyes continued to shift, almost pulsing from one form to the other. *“You will not do that again. You will obey us.”* The new voice pierced her mind like an arrow and she couldn’t look away and a terrible feeling of guilt washed over her and she was falling...

She hit the ground with an impact that, under normal circumstances, would have knocked the wind out of her, but in this case, knocked it back in. She inhaled, a great, drawn-out gasp, filling her lungs with desperately needed air. She coughed violently and slowly began crawling back to awareness. She was on the ground, and something was on top of her. Something was shaking her. Someone. William. She blinked rapidly and tried to focus her eyes. William looked down at her, breathing hard, his eyes fierce. *“Nina! Snap out of it! Come back!”*

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The next moment, he was pulled away, disappearing with frightening speed. She struggled to sit up and saw him on the ground a few feet away, clutching his right shoulder and grimacing in pain. To one side, she heard a frightening growl. She looked and saw Tyrnon turn away from William, turning back to face her.

“Don’t look at him!” cried William.

Tyrnon’s head whipped around, back to William’s prone figure, and he snarled viciously before returning his gaze to Nina. Despite William’s warning, she looked, but the strange expression in Tyrnon’s eyes had gone.

Human *Bad* he signed. His face stayed angry, his jaw set, baring his lower teeth. *You* *Me* He pointed to the northeast, in a sign that Nina had come to associate with the place Tyrnon wanted to take her, the place where all the dragons had gone. *You* *Me* *MyHome*

Slowly, the anger faded from his expression until he seemed almost begging her to understand. *You* *Me* *MyHome* *Good* He lowered his hands for a moment before continuing. *Good* *True* *Right*

Only then did real awareness of the situation begin to dawn on her, as the fuzziness dissipated. “Tyrnon, what did you—?”

He stopped her, holding his hand out palm first, the long clawed fingers extended, and anger crept back into his face. *No* *Human* *MyHome* He took a moment to glare at William again. *Human* *MyHome* *Bad* *Wrong* *False* He nodded, as if the matter had been settled.

“Nina, what’s going on?” William tried to get to his feet, but that earned another snarl and he sat down again. Contemplating the dragon, William’s mouth stretched into a thin tight line and his eyes stayed cautious. Despite his burned hands, William continued to clutch his shoulder. Beneath his fingers, blood started to seep through his clothing. “Are you all right?” he called. “What’s he doing?”

She gasped at the sight of the blood and whirled on Tyrnon. Climbing to her feet, determination narrowed her eyes and clenched her fists. “You get away from us!”

The dragon’s huge jaw dropped and his head recoiled at the end of his long neck like he had been slapped.

She rushed over and knelt by William, but he waved her off. “I’m all right, it’s not deep.”

She nodded, relief flooding through her, followed by renewed fury. She stood again and stepped toward the dragon. “How *dare* you?”

Tyrnon backed up a few steps, confusion in his eyes.

Nina continued her advance and shook an accusing finger at him. “What did you do to me?”

He shook his head, staring into her eyes. *No* *No* *Me* He pointed at William. *Human* *Ambush* *You*

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“William *saved* me from whatever *you* were doing!”

Me *Trust* *You* Tyrnon moved forward again, his lip curling up into another snarl.
You *Trust* *Me*

“Not anymore, I don’t!”

Tyrnon’s face fell from anger into despair. *Why?*

“How can I trust you after what you just did? Trying to control my mind? Attacking William?”

He looked around the clearing, as if he expected to find something to help him. Finding nothing, he returned a worried gaze to her. *Sorry*

“Sorry? *Sorry*? Being sorry won’t get you back in my good graces this time, Tyrnon. It doesn’t do any good to be sorry if you’re just going to do the same things over and over again. How can I trust anything you tell me now? Whatever you did to me, you crossed a line that you can’t uncross by saying ‘sorry.’”

Tyrnon looked away. His huge shoulders hunched over and his long neck drooping almost to the ground. *Sorry*

“And on top of *that*, you attack William. After what he did for you! He saved your neck is what he did! And then, as if that weren’t enough, he burns his hands just to tend to *your* wound!”

At the mention of William, Tyrnon squinted his eyes and scowled.

“You know, Tyrnon. I don’t think this little agreement of ours is working out. You aren’t ready to deal with people yet. Maybe we had just better part ways right now, and you can go back to stealing sheep!”

His head recoiled again. *Question*

“You heard me. You just can’t control yourself, and I’m not willing to put myself and the people I care about at risk while you figure out *how*!”

Tyrnon’s eyes grew wide and afraid. He shook his head in disbelief. *No* *No* *Sorry*
No *Sorry* *Sorry*

She was suddenly overcome by a wave of compassion for him, but then she remembered the voice in her head: “*You will obey.*” She straightened up. “I’m sorry too, Tyrnon, but this is how it’s got to be.”

Me *Good* *Now* *Good* *Good* His eyes darted about wildly now; he seemed on the verge of panic.

She looked around for her pack and saw it on the ground a few yards away. Kneeling, she cut one of the bags of gold free from the rope with her dagger. She stood and presented it to Tyrnon. “This is your share. You earned it, and you deserve to have it. But now that I’ve given it to you, I’m officially breaking our arrangement.”

Barely looking at it, he took the leather bag and held it loosely in one huge, clawed hand, staring at her with wide eyes, the corners of his mouth turned down. Finally, he looked

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down at the gold coins. When he looked up, a new determination had spread itself across his features. *No*

“No? What do you mean, no?”

He hurled the pouch at her feet, where it burst on impact, spilling gold coins everywhere. Nina jumped, gasping in surprise. He scowled. *You* *Me* He gave the nod that had signified their agreement at the beginning. *You* *Me* *Deal*

“That’s right.” Nina was breathing hard. He had startled her, but she felt her anger returning. “We had a deal, but I don’t know what deal *you* thought we were making. I sure as hell didn’t sign on for mind control and attacking my friends! We *had* a deal, and I’m breaking it. Deal with *that!*”

Tyrnon suddenly reared up onto his hind legs and glared down at her from his full height. He spread his wings to their fullest, pulling the bandage loose and reopening the wound. His injured wing hung crooked where the bone had been broken. Tyrnon grunted, wincing, but soon renewed his angry stare.

“Nina, careful!” William stood up and edged around behind her. He grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

Distracted from Nina by the unexpected outburst, Tyrnon refocused his attention on William. A deep, guttural growl rose from deep in his belly. He dropped back onto all fours and inhaled deeply.

Nina stepped forward and calmly drew her sword. “Don’t even think about it.”

Tyrnon hesitated, watching her. After a moment, he turned his face to the darkening sky and blew a streaming torrent of fire into the air, briefly casting the campsite in an eerie yellow glow. Nina felt the heat on her face and the choking stink of sulfur filled the air. Finally, he refolded his wings, wincing again. Blood trickled down his side, steaming where it dripped onto the grass below. The fury in his face had disappeared, replaced by a cold bitterness.

You *Trust* *False*

With that, he turned and walked away. Reaching the edge of the clearing, he forced his way through the brush. After a minute or so, during which they heard the crunch of trampled foliage, he was gone.

Nina turned to face William, ready to admit that she had been wrong, but when she looked, his face was sad.

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

Her eyes began to tear up and she felt a lump in her throat. She raised her hand to his shoulder, running the tips of her fingers gently over the back of his burned hand, still clutching his wounded shoulder. “No. *I’m* sorry. This is all my fault. I just thought...” She looked back to where Tyrnon had gone and covered her mouth with one hand.

William moved in behind her and rested one hand lightly on her shoulder. “You thought he was a fascinating, intelligent being, and you wanted to know him better. Even if he might

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be dangerous.” He turned her around to face him. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t know the feeling.” He nodded to her.

She looked up at him without saying a word.

“If it means anything...” He put his arms around her shoulders, holding her lightly with his wrists instead of his hands. When he let go of his shoulder, she saw that the bleeding had mostly stopped, but the scratches continued to ooze blood through the tears in his shirt. “I don’t think Tyrnon is bad. Just wild. Dragons are intelligent, but they—”

Nina touched two fingers to his lips. “Shh...” He stopped talking and she caressed his cheek, feeling the strange texture of soft flesh sprinkled with the rough bristles of his growing beard. A memory of her father surfaced and disappeared in an instant. She felt a tear streak down her face and she lowered her hand to rest against his firm, strong chest. “Thank you.”

William swallowed, making an audible gulp, and Nina almost laughed. She raised her other hand, laying it alongside the first and pressing closer to him. He inhaled sharply and she realized that she had hurt his shoulder.

“Sorry.” She hadn’t meant it to come out as a whisper, but somehow, her voice had left her. His eyes were *so brown*. Until now, that description would have seemed meaningless.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words escaped his lips.

Nina sniffed and smiled. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Here, let me get that.” She leaned in and gently kissed him on the chest, near his shoulder but not putting any pressure on the scratches themselves. Looking back up at him, she whispered again. “Did that help?”

Finally exhaling, William’s breath came out in a soft laugh, but the movement hurt his shoulder again and he winced. “Ow.”

“No good, huh?” Nina took a deep breath. Her hands were trembling. “Well, maybe I got the wrong spot.” She raised up onto her toes and kissed him on the lips.

She had intended it to be short, but William brought his arms around her, embracing the small of her back, supporting her as he returned the kiss. Closing her eyes, she felt an extraordinary warmth spreading through her in beautiful contrast to the chills running up and down her back. Her arms went around his neck, interlacing her fingers and practically hanging off him. Not surprising, given how weak she felt in the knees.

An eternity later, and yet far too soon, they parted and William lowered her softly back to the ground. She opened her eyes and saw a pleasant, slightly mischievous grin on William’s face as he spoke. “Wow,” he chuckled. “In theory, I could check that off the list of things I wanted to happen.”

“In theory?”

“I think I’ll leave it on there.” He cocked his head and looked down at her, still grinning. “Just in case we want to do it again.”

Nina smiled and gingerly bit her lower lip. It was time to bare all. “William, the wizard is going to break the security spell on Francis that alerts the royal advisors of his death.”

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William's mouth opened and his eyebrows rose in surprise. "You're... You're going to *kill* him?"

She nodded excitedly.

William looked suddenly disappointed. "Are you sure that's really necessary?"

Nina's smile broke and her heart felt like it dropped into her stomach.

He continued. "I mean... Okay, yeah, he's a jerk. I can definitely see how you'd want to be rid of him. But do you really need to *kill* him?"

She shook her head in confusion. "What do you mean? Why wouldn't I kill him? Do you know how aggravating he's been over the years?"

His brow furrowed and his arms dropped away from her back. "If it's anything like what I've seen so far, I think I can imagine, but does that really merit a death sentence?"

Half upset to lose his embrace and half angry with him for questioning her plan, she frowned and stepped back. "Yes, it does! You don't understand what it's been like. Just because he's the king—"

"His being the king doesn't have anything to do with this. You can't go around *killing* people just because you don't like them."

"Why not? Why can't I go and kill anybody that I want?" she shouted, her eyes on the verge of tears again.

He blinked and didn't say anything for a moment. "Okay..." He watched her carefully. "Let's back up a minute here. I didn't mean to make you mad."

She felt her scowl settle into a sulk and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"All I meant to say..." He frowned, choosing his words carefully. "Are you sure you've really considered all the alternatives? All the consequences?"

"The consequences are the only reason I've left him alive *this* long. I couldn't kill him without upsetting my people's situation in Langia. If the advisors know he's dead, everything there will fall apart. There'll be a succession war! And then, when the Langians are all dead, my people will have to be nomads again. I was going to just take Francis out into the middle of nowhere and do it, but then they..." Her face puckered in distaste. "They put this *spell* on him that alerts them in the event of his death. But don't you see? The wizard is going to break the spell for me. No one will ever know he's dead!"

His eyes widened at that, but he pressed back to the first question. "And the alternatives? Why can't you just ditch him somewhere? Run away?"

Her eyes got hard. "I don't run away."

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to imply—"

"Besides," she said, her anger fading, "he'd follow me."

"So?"

"So? Francis is out there." She pointed into the woods. "He can't be bargained with. He

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can't be *reasoned* with. He doesn't feel pity, remorse or fear. And he absolutely will not stop, *ever*, until he is *dead!*"

William took a deep breath, his eyes serious. "But..." He paused for a moment. "What about his advisors? Won't they get suspicious when they don't hear about any heroic adventures for him?"

She frowned for a moment, confused, before she realized his error. "Oh, no, they won't. They never expected any."

"What? Didn't they think you could do it?"

"No." She shook her head. "That was never the plan. You guessed that the other day and I wasn't ready to tell you the truth, so I said you were right."

His brow furrowed deeply. "Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. His advisors *aren't* paying you to make Francis look good?"

"No, they aren't. Like I said, I just told you that because..." A lump in her throat forced her to pause for a moment. "Because I thought you might react just like this."

His furrowed brow did not relax. If anything, his confusion deepened. He opened his mouth several times before actually speaking. "So then... What *do* they think you're doing?"

Nina sniffed a little and thought about it. "I don't know, really. I told them I was going after the staff, just like I told Francis. I don't know if they believed me or not... Probably not, but I didn't really care. What difference does it make? They think I won't kill Francis because it would be bad for my people, but they don't know about the wizard."

William's puzzled frown remained for several minutes. He stood up and paced back and forth, while Nina waited silently, if not patiently, on her rock.

She didn't know what she would do if he left her now. She had already lost Tyrnon. If William left, she would be back where she had started: Alone with Francis. What if all heroes reacted like this? She might never find anyone. Then she realized she didn't want just anyone. The only reaction she cared about was William's.

Eventually, his pacing slowed to a stop, and he turned to look her in the eye. He took a quick deep breath and approached.

"Nina, I can't say that I'm entirely convinced, but I believe you when you say that he'll follow you. I know *I* wouldn't relish the thought of always looking over my shoulder for *him*."

He reached out to take her hand, but winced a little at the contact. "But I do have a proposal. I'm going to try to think of alternatives to killing him. Will you promise to listen to them with an open mind? If I haven't come up with anything by the time we get to the wizard, you can just proceed with the original plan. Okay?" His playful grin began to peek through from behind his solemn concern.

She blinked once, twice, and the sun started to peek through the clouds of her despair.

"Okay?" he repeated.

She sniffed and nodded. "Okay."

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“Okay what?” asked Francis.

Nina yelped and spun around to see Francis emerging from the woods.

“Oh, by the way, Nina,” Francis continued, walking toward them. “I think your pet dragon wandered off.”

Nina looked down at the ground. “Uh, yeah. He’s gone... For good.”

Francis screwed up his face in confusion. “Really? Hunh...” He put his hands on his hips. “That’s a bummer. I was just starting to think he was pretty cool. I mean, having a pet dragon and all. That was awesome.” He shrugged. “Oh well, can’t have everything. Lucky in love, unlucky with dragons, I guess. Are you ready? I got everything all set up.” He raised one eyebrow and leaned toward her with a leer. “I’ve got chocolates,” he tempted.

Her jaw dropped, then clenched. “I bought those for *me*, Francis!”

“Well, I was *gonna* share ‘em.”

She nearly hit him, but turned instead to slap William on the arm. “You *see*? You see what I’m talking about?”

William opened his mouth wide in a comical expression of pain. “Ow, watch it!” He gently held one burned hand to his arm where she had hit him. “Couldn’t you just tell him what you’re really planning? Maybe then he would just leave.”

Francis frowned. “Huh? What’s he talking about, Nina?”

She kept looking at William. “You think that would work, do you?”

He shrugged.

Turning to Francis, she spoke plainly. “Francis, we’re not really going to get the Staff of Crowe.”

“We’re not?”

“No. We’re going to find a wizard who’s going to remove your security spell, so that I can kill you without the royal advisors finding out.”

“Kill me? I think you may be underestimating my stamina, Nina.” He waggled his eyebrows.

She gritted her teeth and managed to not stab him in the eye. “No, Francis. I’m serious. I’m not using any euphemisms or metaphors. I’m going to murder you... Probably with a blade of some kind, I haven’t really decided yet.”

He took a moment to absorb that, but then his face opened into a wide expression of sudden understanding. “*Ohhh*... I get it!” He looked over to William. “We’re not really going to get the staff, and instead, she’s going to ‘kill me.’” He quoted with his fingers, then turned to Nina and winked.

William gave a wide-eyed nod, of the type people often used when speaking to a small child. “Okay.”

Francis held his hand to one side and gave Nina the thumbs-up sign.

Nina nodded curtly and once again faced William. “I rest my case.”

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Chapter 17

NINA SPENT THE EARLY EVENING TENDING TO WILLIAM'S WOUNDS AND BURNS. She tried her best to remain business-like when he removed his shirt, but when dressing the gashes on his shoulder, she found it hard to concentrate on first aid. Nonetheless, she soon finished treating and bandaging, and the need for him to go bare-chested had passed.

The sun settled behind the trees, finishing its day's work with a glorious tapestry of color. The clouds soaked up the brilliant reds and oranges like sponges, deepening into purples and dark blues as a calm sea of stars took their hold on the night sky.

Nina started a fire, then sat on her rock, enjoying the contrast between the warmth and wood-smoke scent of the small flames and the cool, brisk air of the night's coming chill. She longed to be near William. Somehow, she could feel the absence of his embrace, and it pained her, almost like a wound or illness. But Francis watched her constantly, winking significantly at ever-diminishing intervals.

Dinner passed without much conversation; bits of sausage and cheese occupied their full attention. The strong emotions and physical exertions of the day had passed, leaving nothing but an ambivalent calm. William volunteered to take the first watch, so Nina settled into her bedroll and lay on her back, looking at the stars.

The next thing she knew, she felt William gently nudging her awake. She sat up and blinked away the remnants of sleep. The moon had set and only the small campfire illuminated the quiet clearing. Opening her bedroll, she shivered at the sudden draft of cool air. Not too cold yet, but in the mountains they would need winter supplies.

She packed up her blankets while William spread his own bedroll on the ground near the fire. Francis snored quietly from the other side. Nina yawned and took a seat on her rock, holding her hands out to the warmth of the fire.

After a few minutes, she sensed William still awake. When he spoke, Nina clasped her hands in her lap and watched him.

"What was happening between you and Tyrnon?" he asked. "Just before I tackled you, I mean." He lay on his back, his arms crossed behind his head.

She frowned. "I thought you knew. You told me not to look at him."

"I know what I saw, but that's all. Your eyes locked with his... You looked enchanted, or in some sort of trance. Later, you said something about mind control?"

Nina stared into the darkness of the forest and sighed. "Well, I guess it *was* something

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like a trance. I couldn't look away, I couldn't move. I couldn't even breathe. I felt like I was somewhere else... I could hardly hear you when you spoke, and then..."

He waited.

She sighed again and scowled, straining to remember what now felt like a dream. "And then he *spoke* to me. He—"

"He *spoke* to you?" William sat up and looked straight at her. "You mean he *signed* to you. Right?"

"No." Nina shook her head emphatically. "He *spoke* to me. I heard him inside my head. He said: 'Don't do that again. You will obey us.'"

"Us?"

She nodded, then flashed a quizzical expression. "I didn't know that dragons could do that."

"Neither did I," he said, then looked at the ground, deep in thought. "I've never heard of that before."

They sat in silence for a moment before he spoke again. "It could just be that nobody's ever seen them do it and lived to tell about it before. Or..." He trailed off, then looked Nina in the eyes. "I've never heard of a dragon even *trying* to be nice to people before, either. Do you think that Tyrnon might be somehow...*different*?"

Nina shrugged. "How can I tell? He's the only dragon I've ever met."

"Yeah..." He trailed off, frowning at the ground as if it had deliberately hidden the answers from him. Suddenly, he looked up. "Wait a moment. You said you felt like you were somewhere else."

"Yeah?" She nodded uncertainly.

"That's the same thing you said about the vision you had last night. They must be connected. Don't you think? What was your vision last time? What did you see?"

Her mind raced to make the new connections and retrieve the faded vision of the night before. "I...I think I saw a room. Somewhere dark. Dark and small. Underground, maybe. I saw a strange fire. There were voices, but I couldn't make out what they were saying." She scrunched her face, trying to force the memories to resurface. "At first I couldn't move at all, but then, when I could, it was like I...like I didn't know how. My body didn't work right, like it was different, or just unfamiliar. I was...afraid." She rubbed her neck and shoulder, trying to relax the tension she suddenly found there. "But Tyrnon wasn't even here last night. How could he have—?"

"Tyrnon was in the dungeon cell..." William looked at her. "Underground."

Her mind opened to the new idea and her heart started to pound. "No... You don't think?"

His face was grim. "Whatever it is that he's doing... I don't think that he needs to be nearby in order to do it."

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Nina looked off into the woods where Tyrnon had gone, though she could see nothing there now but darkness. “He was so *angry* when he left. What if...?” She brought one hand to cover her mouth, unable to complete the thought.

“I don’t know.” He climbed to his feet and knelt by her side. “But Nina...” He waited until she looked back from the forest into his serious eyes. “I won’t let him hurt you.”

Nina laughed out loud, all her fear and worry breaking into a sad smile. “Thank you...” She reached out and touched his arm. “Thank you. But that was the *last* of my worries.” She took a deep breath. “I’m worried that he’s going to try to hurt *you*.”



With little left for either of them to say, William went to sleep and Nina sat by the fire, keeping watch with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

In the morning, they broke camp and headed north. They traveled quickly and she expected to reach the foothills in approximately two weeks. From there, a few more days of hiking through the Great Broken Mountains should bring them to the Korthan Gap: the last known location of the wizard.

Consulting her map, she saw the small town of Korstahl nestled in a small valley only a few days’ travel from their destination. They could stock up on cold weather supplies there. Even though the plains and valleys stayed warm well into the autumn, the mountains would be somewhat less hospitable.

So they traveled. Riding by day and camping at night, they made good time. The wide, rolling plains gave way to the drier, rockier soil and steeper grades of the foothills, while the mountains themselves loomed ever larger in the distance.

For the most part, the Great Broken Mountains had the smooth, rounded look of a truly ancient formation, but here and there, huge jagged gashes tore the horizon, as if the earth itself had been ripped apart from the inside. The splits made natural passes, allowing travelers a path through the mountains that avoided both the extreme altitudes of the peaks and the long, winding valleys between them.

But the terrain in the passes didn’t exactly lend itself to casual nature hikes. Huge craggy boulders, scarce vegetation and sheer cliffs lay waiting to punish anyone presumptuous enough to travel there.

Myths and legends spoke of gargantuan creatures, buried before history began, who woke and tore free of their prisons, causing the great rifts in the horizon, only to be bound there once more, sentenced by God to sleep until the time of man was over. According to legend, the very landscape had been infused with powerful magic, and *that’s* where they would find the wizard.

At night when they rested, they talked. William told stories of his travels and adventures. Nina spoke of a childhood with a barbarian conqueror. Francis occasionally interjected with

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tales of his own pseudo-heroic deeds. Nina mostly let these pass without comment, but couldn't help rolling her eyes or shaking her head when he got *too* obnoxious.

William's kiss had done something to her. She wanted more. More kisses, more embraces, more *William*. She longed to be with him every waking moment, and she would have her wish if not for the idiot-king. Francis was ever-present! They couldn't get more than a few minutes privacy without being interrupted. They tried to sneak away when he was busy, or asleep, but somehow he always found them before they could do more than stare into each other's eyes. Nina's frustration built higher by the day.

But the travels weren't all bad. William's hands began to heal, and after a week or so, even his shoulder didn't seem to bother him. Nina also started work on her dress, using the pattern and the fine silk she had gotten from Johan in Homilatta.

She finished it just outside Korstahl. They chose a miniature valley between two hills, out of the wind, with a single, large tree to prevent their campfire from being seen by anyone in town.

Johan's design, pretty on parchment, proved even lovelier in execution. With a hem that showed her ankles and a nice figure-flattering sleeveless cut, it hung nicely while still leaving enough freedom of movement to fight. Even with her sword fastened at her waist, Nina still felt quite stylish. Francis whistled at her, and for once, she almost didn't mind.

She did, however, knee him in the groin anyway.

William didn't speak. He just sat by the fire, looking at her with a funny little smile on his face.

She could feel her cheeks flushing and she fiddled with her fingers. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

He smiled. "Well, I was going to whistle, but then I saw what happens to guys who whistle."

She stomped her foot and folded her arms. "Come on! Seriously. What do you think?" She raised her hands over her head and turned all the way around.

He stood up and walked to her. "You're beautiful."

She smiled and stood a little taller.

"Won't you get cold up there in the mountains?"

With a smirk, she put her hands on her hips. "Not with the nice new coat I'm going to buy in Korstahl." Her expression turned thoughtful. "I haven't had to buy a heavy coat in a while. I hope I can find something that isn't too bulky."

"You know, I've actually been thinking about that a little."

"Bulky coats?"

He blinked, then smiled. "Ah, no. At least, not specifically. The winter supplies. Can you really afford them?"

She frowned. "What do you mean? We have more than enough gold. Way more."

"For supplies, yes. But how much is the wizard going to charge you for the spell?"

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Nina's mouth snapped shut and she thought for a moment. "Oh. Um, well, I don't really know... But it can't be that much, can it? I mean, it's not like I want him to wipe out an army, or blow up a castle or anything. How much could it be?"

William shrugged, but the expression of concern didn't leave his face. "I have no idea, but he's certainly in a position to ask for a lot. It's not like he has much competition. What's to stop him from asking for *all* your gold and more besides?"

Nina gave him a knowing look and gestured to her sword.

He laughed, covering his face with one hand. "Okay, well I suppose there is that. But seriously, Nina, how much do you really know about this wizard? It sounds like he's pretty powerful. What if he's crazy? Or evil? Even if he's willing to deal, who's to say it'll be worth his price? Maybe you'd be better off just looking for another way to deal with Francis."

She rolled her eyes and smiled. "Boy, you just aren't going to give up on that, are you?"

His eyes flicked away, to the ground, just for a moment, as if he had been caught at something. "You said you'd consider my suggestions until we got to the wizard."

"Okay, okay. Fair enough." With a great sigh, she considered it. "You're right, of course, that the wizard might be dangerous. You're also right that his price might be too high. But you can't seriously expect me to give up on my plan without even going up there to find out."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." He nodded in resignation. "That one didn't even convince *me*. But I'm not giving up. Not yet."

Nina approached him and started to take his hands in hers, but a quick glance to her right told her that Francis was beginning to recover. She suppressed a grimace and kept her hands to herself. "Come with me."

With that, she led William over the crest of a nearby hill, just out of sight. It wouldn't fool the king for long, but hopefully it would buy them a few minutes. "I know you're still not comfortable with my plan, William, but I hope you're starting to see that I'm not rushing into this blindly."

"No, not blindly," he conceded with a sigh. "Not hastily either. I wish I could say rightly. I'm still not convinced, but a deal's a deal. If we get to the wizard and I haven't changed your mind, then I won't interfere or object."

She nodded once, acknowledging the moment. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Even still," he continued, apparently glad to be off the subject, "I think my point about the wizard is valid. You don't have any idea if your gold will be enough, even without buying supplies. And I don't think threatening him is a good idea either. Wouldn't it be better to stay on his good side?"

She folded her arms and rolled her head back, looking at the overcast sky for a moment. "I suppose that's true. But then what do you suggest? We need those supplies. Those mountains are going to be *cold*. It's a little early for snow, but it'll be cold enough to freeze for sure."

"Oh, I agree we need the supplies, but maybe there's a way to get them without wasting

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too much of your gold.”

She cocked her head. “What? Do you think we should just take them? I was thinking that we’d stay a little more low-profile, now that we’re so close. I don’t really want to have some local sheriff trying to track us into the mountains.”

Then his smile turned mischievous, his scar dimpling a little at the side of his nose. “Well, that wasn’t really what I had in mind. Have you forgotten what line of work I’m in? I want to try running a con with you. Your work with Jonathan in Homilatta suggests that you’ve got the aptitude, but if we’re going to be partners, we’ve got to get a little more experience under your belt.”

His grin proved infectious and she found herself matching it without any conscious intention. “And what sort of experience do I need...” She nibbled on her lower lip. “...under my *belt*?”

“Um...” His face pinked and he took a deep breath. Finally, he laughed, pointing a playfully accusing finger. “Okay now, let’s not go down that road until we can travel unaccompanied.” He glanced knowingly back toward the camp. “It’s... frustrating.”

Nina blushed, but nodded. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” he said, his face still flushed. “It’s not a bad idea, but we’ve got to work on your timing.” He grinned. “So hold that thought. Okay?”

Looking around at the sky and the hills, then finally back to his face, Nina managed a weak smile with equal parts hope and frustration.

William sniffed, took another deep breath, and then cleared his throat. “Right then, so back to the subject at hand. I was thinking that we could try a con to get our supplies. I have one in mind that I think will be right up your alley.”

“Oh?” she asked. “How’s that?”

“Well...” He leaned in close, his voice lowering to a whisper. “It goes kind of like this...”

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Chapter 18

THE SMALL TOWN OF KORSTAHL LAY IN A NARROW, SHALLOW VALLEY AMONGST THE HILLS AT THE BASE OF THE MOUNTAINS. Though they had farms enough to feed themselves, the city primarily acted as a bartering center. Neighboring towns came to buy iron ore and precious metals from the nearby mines and the miners came to buy the equipment and supplies they needed. The town survived on trade tariffs.

Nina had been through it at some point with her father, and if she remembered correctly, they hadn't really found anything worth looting. "Mountain towns are tempting," he told her once. "They're out of the way, largely cut off, and you don't have to go very far to hide out afterwards. But they tend to be short on the luxuries. If you really want the quality goods, you need a manufacturing center."

It was a pleasant memory, but Francis interrupted her nostalgia by spilling a pint of ale on himself and across the table. She scooted her chair back to avoid being dripped on. The last thing she needed was a fresh beer stain on her new dress.

The tavern, *charmingly* dubbed "The Meandering Marmot," was Korstahl's equivalent of a hot nightspot: a relatively large tavern with a bar, a score of tables, and a dozen or so beds for rent on the second floor. The place stank of beer and its subsequent by-products. Thirty or forty men filled the room with a loud chattering of conversation and barroom singing. The ambiance reminded Nina of similar nights at Marco's, spent with members of her father's horde.

And yet, something troubled her. William's plan had sounded reasonable back at the campsite, but now, just as things were getting started, she felt a strange uncertainty. After a few minutes of self-probing, she wrote it off to missing her sword.

William had *insisted* that she leave her weapons behind, totally dismissing Nina's argument that even a bored mountain housewife could plausibly be trained in at least three forms of armed combat. She had ultimately deferred to his greater experience on the condition that she be allowed to conceal her dagger beneath her skirt.

Francis suddenly leaned over and put his arm around her, doing nothing to ease her discomfort, and in fact, increasing it tenfold. She flinched, but tried to stay in character, clenching her jaw and gripping the edge of the table.

"Boy, Nina," said Francis, waving at the barmaid for another beer, "it sure is nice to finally get some alone time. I mean, William's an okay guy, I guess, but he's just around *all the time!* How much longer are we going to have to drag him around with us?"

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Nina swallowed her building revulsion and channeled it into hidden fury. “Well, Francis, I’d say that he’s going to stick around at least until we get to the mountains. After that, *you* won’t have to worry about him anymore. I *promise*.”

He grinned. “Excellent. Now let’s forget about him and have a good time. You want another beer?”

Nina glanced to her own still-untouched flagon and paled. Even if the sickly yellow color and foul odor hadn’t been enough to put her off, the *texture* finished the job. Nina generally preferred her beverages less... *chunky*.

She cleared her throat. “Um, no thanks, Francis. I’m still working on my first.”

“Okie-doke,” he said. “Suit yourself, but I’m getting another one.” He got up and wandered off in search of the barmaid, who had wisely avoided their table.

Nina buried her face in her hands and took a deep breath. When she looked up, she glanced across the room to the bar. Her target was just ordering his third pint of the evening.

She had recognized him as soon as he came in: mid-thirties, average height, small paunch, but moderately good looking. Confident, even cocky. The kind of man who swaggered. After some brief reconnaissance, William had returned to the campsite with a detailed description. “Exactly the sort of guy we’re looking for,” he said.

He had also suggested that she wait until the guy had at least three beers in him, but looking around for Francis, she wondered if she might be better off making her move now. The king had inserted himself into one of the songs across the room and the other singers struggled to drown him out. The early part would be simpler if Francis was distracted.

Well, she thought, *no time like the present*. She picked up her flagon and made her way to the bar, trying to look as bored and indifferent as possible. Pressing up next to the man, she set her flagon down on the counter, gently nudging his shoulder as if by accident. He turned to look and she met his eyes.

William said that she should imagine him as her hero, her savior, even her lover, at which point they had both blushed for a moment. The memory itself carried the blush back with it to the present, and it had the effect she’d hoped for. The man stared back at her, his face a mixture of surprise and lust.

Nina broke the stare and looked at the floor, then peeked up again: demurely, but with a hint of desire. “Sorry, sir,” she said, flashing a coy smile. Holding his gaze a moment longer, she sauntered away from the bar, leaving her beer on the bar counter. Finally, she looked away and wandered back to her table.

She sat down, relieved to note that Francis had not yet returned. She looked everywhere but at her target, idly tracing little circles with her fingers on the rough grain of the tabletop.

“Excuse me, Miss?”

Smiling, she turned and saw the man smirking down at her, holding two flagons of ale and offering one to her. “I think you forgot this at the bar.”

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She didn't take the flagon from him, but instead, she simply watched him holding it. "Thank you," she said.

Finally, he set her flagon down on the table and held his own in both hands. "You forgot something else, too," he said with a cocky grin.

Oh boy, she thought. *Here it comes*. She arched one eyebrow. "Oh? And what's that?"

"Yeah, you forgot to tell me what such a *gorgeous* specimen of maidenhood is doing in a place like this... Oh, and your name."

Eh, I've heard worse. She gave him an amused smile. "I'm Nina."

She wouldn't have thought his grin could get wider, but it did. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Oh, I *insist*," she said.

He did, smiling, then extended his hand. "I'm Mark."

A snort escaped her nose, but she covered by pretending to cough. Then she held out her hand, which he kissed. "Ooh, a gentleman."

"I'll bet you're from out of town," he ventured.

Giving her best approximation of pleasant surprise, she gaped at him. "Yes, I am. How did you know?"

"I am too. Just got in from Hoverplotte." Switching to faux-humble, he pretended to examine his fingernails. I'm just here to negotiate some *big* currency trades. You know, exchange some gold ore, manage all the details and stuff like that."

I can't believe I'm about to do this, she thought. "Really? Tell me more."

He nodded, clearly happy to oblige. "Sure. You know, it's actually pretty interesting. The gold ore that comes right out of the mountains is usually too impure to make into gold coins right away. Sure, they could refine it themselves, but it's actually cheaper for them to sell the ore to a bigger city, where they can refine it all in bulk. The deal ends up benefiting everybody. The miners have more time to actually dig up the ore. The refiners can spend more time actually refining the gold and making the coins. Everybody makes money, and the people get a good, consistent currency. In fact—"

"That's *really* interesting," Nina interrupted, trying to maintain her smile. "Does that mean that you buy gold nuggets?"

"Oh, well, sort of, but not exactly. That's what I was just getting to. This is the really interesting part." He scooted his chair a little closer. "You see, the miners and the refiners need a middleman to handle the transactions. That's where I come in. *I* do the paperwork that arranges for the transfer of the contract between the middleman and the intermediary—"

"But still!" she interrupted again, a little louder than she had intended. "If someone had some gold nuggets to sell, they could come to you. Right?"

He blinked. "Um... Well, yeah. I guess so."

"Wow!" she said. "That's great. I can't believe my luck!"

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He blinked again. “Excuse me?”

“Well,” she said, “it’s just that, I don’t get to come into town very much, and even when I do, it’s usually pretty boring. But this time, not only has a *handsome* man come up to talk to me, but he’s also a *gold dealer*! Just the sort of man I needed to talk to.”

“You needed to talk to a gold dealer?”

She nodded. “You might be able to help me with a little problem I’m having.”

His grin returned. “Oh yeah?”

“That’s right. You see that guy over there?” She pointed to Francis, who was arguing with a group of men about the lyrics to “A Girl and a Goose and We All Go Home.”

Mark looked. “Yeah, what about him?”

Nina rolled her eyes and looked down at the table, hiding her face with her hands. “Oh boy, this is so embarrassing,” she said. “He’s my husband.”

His eyes popped wide and his face paled. “Your husband?” Looking over at Francis again, his mouth twisted with incredulity. “Okay...” After a moment he leaned closer to Nina and whispered conspiratorially. “Is he... um, you know... *cool*?”

“Ah, no.” She grimaced. “That’s not the word I’d use... ‘Idiot.’ That’s a good one. Or ‘Obnoxious jerk.’ That works too. Then there’s ‘Bane of My Existence.’” She smiled. “That’s my favorite.”

He spent another few moments glancing back and forth between Nina and Francis. “Okay, look. I don’t know what’s going on here, but I’m not interested in getting beat up by some jealous husband, so I think I’ll—” He started to get up, but Nina seized his hand.

“No, wait! Don’t go. I promise, that’s not what this is about.”

“No?” He looked skeptical. In the back of her mind, Nina decided he was marginally smarter than she had given him credit for. “What’s it about then?”

She released his hand and leaned back, glancing around the room suspiciously. Then she pulled a tiny pouch, just smaller than her fist, out of her pack and tossed it onto the table, where it landed with a dramatic thump.

His eyes widened in surprise, but he remained seated. At her nod, he picked up the pouch and looked inside. His jaw dropped. The pouch contained a gold nugget that she had made by melting down three gold coins and rubbing in some dirt.

“Mark, do you believe in fate?”

His eyes flicked away from the gold just long enough to shoot her a questioning glance, then returned to their original fixation. “Fate?”

She nodded earnestly, trying to look deep into his eyes, but he was still staring at the gold. She reached out and gently pulled the pouch down to the table. When he looked up, she nodded earnestly again, and looked deep into his eyes.

“That’s right, Mark. Fate. My husband only lets me come into town with him once a month. You’re here from out of town. What are the odds that you and I would meet like this?”

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Right here? Right now? Our destinies have intertwined, Mark. Two people, from totally different backgrounds, each with something to offer, coming together for a unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

“Uh... huh?”

“I don’t love my husband,” she said. “I never did. Our parents forced us to marry. I’ve made up my mind to leave him, but I need money. Fortunately, our land has a gold mine on it that he thinks is mined out. That gold right there, Mark? It’s only the beginning. I’ve dug out a whole lot more, but I need someone who can make the deal for me. If I do it, my husband will get wise and ruin everything. I need a guy to take the gold and sell it for me.” She paused dramatically and stared him down, the hint of a mischievous smile spreading across her lips. “What do you say, Mark? Will you be my guy?”

“Uh...”

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Francis approaching the table. “Shhh,” she hissed. “Here he comes!”

“Hey Nina,” said Francis when he reached the table, “those guys say that the second part of my song isn’t physically possible. I say it is, but I need a girl to prove it...” He suddenly noticed Mark sitting to his right. “Hey, who’s this guy?”

Mark stammered for a moment, so Nina stepped in. “Francis, this is Mark. He was telling me all about... uh, how the price of mutton goes up and down with the same frequency as mint crops.”

“Really?” Francis frowned at Mark in confusion, then turned back to Nina. “That’s boring. My song is *way* better than that.” With that, he wandered back to the bar.

Mark watched him go, then turned back to face Nina with an expression of incredulity and compassion. “I’m your guy,” he said.

She smiled.



Nina frowned around the corner of the livery stables to see Mark making the final adjustments to a mule-cart. She’d arranged to meet him just after dusk, promising to “take care of” her “husband.” Now, from her hidden vantage point, she could see food, furs and some digging supplies: a pickaxe, a shovel and several large wooden buckets.

All she really wanted was the food and the coats, but William had explained that, in addition to providing story plausibility, the extras were for giving away afterwards. “Without that part,” he had said, “we’re just stealing.”

She had tried to be reassured, but even now, as she prepared to enter phase two of their plan, her discomfort and uncertainty remained. Had she underestimated Mark? Were they being watched? Something that she couldn’t quite identify was nagging at her. *Oh, well*, she thought with a sigh, *we’re committed now. We’ll just have to deal with whatever it is when we*

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get to it.

She ducked into an unoccupied storage room to change out of her silk dress and into a cheap frock she had bought just for the occasion. Then, from a gourd she had filled at a butcher shop, she smeared pig's blood all over her hands and arms. Next, she splattered the front of her dress, taking care to make some obvious hand-shaped smears, finishing with a few drops flicked onto her face.

She had initially been concerned about using pig's blood, but ultimately decided that a lay-person wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

Finally ready, she hesitated, but one more deep breath did the trick and she rushed around the corner to Mark.

His jaw dropped when he saw her, but she didn't stop running until she had embraced him heartily and smeared blood all over his shirtfront.

"I did it, Mark!" She shouted, more than loud enough for anyone nearby to overhear. "I finally did it! Boy, he'll never bother me again!" Her eyes lost focus and her voice turned mocking. "Mend my clothes, Nina. Make me dinner, Nina! *Please don't kill me*, Nina. Ha! Never again, Francis! Never again!" With that, she returned her attention to Mark, jumping up and down, trying for crazed glee. "And now we can sell the gold and be together! You and me, Mark! Together forever!" She hugged him again, covering his tunic with dark red streaks.

He shoved her away and she allowed herself to fall to the ground. "Nina!" he shouted. "What did you do?"

She met his shock and horror with an expression of hurt and betrayal. "I just did it so we could be together, Mark. I, I..." She choked up her voice. "I thought this was what you wanted."

He didn't have time to respond, because a new voice interrupted. "You there! Stop!" They both turned to see William, dressed as a sheriff, running toward them. He drew a sword, Nina's actually, and brandished it. "There's been a murder," he said, "but it looks like I'm not telling you anything you didn't already know. I'm going to have to ask you both to come with me."

"No!" cried Mark. "I didn't do anything."

William snorted with derision. "You'll pardon me if I don't just take your word for it."

Mark shot Nina a panicked glance and backed up a few steps. "I didn't do anything!" he repeated. "She's crazy! She, ah, she came up to me in the tavern and started talking about how she hated her husband. I was just trying to be a kind ear. I never knew she was going to *kill* him!"

"Mark!" Nina cried, hoping she sounded appropriately horrified. "How can you *say* that! I thought we had something *special*!"

"She's crazy, I tell you! I had nothing to do with this."

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“Crazy?” William’s face turned grim. “Mister, you don’t know the half of it. You should see what she did to that sorry son of a...” He shuddered. “Suffice to say, it’s not a pretty sight. Feathers everywhere, and they *still* haven’t found the other half of that riding crop...”

Mark blinked. “Riding crop?”

“But you must like ‘em crazy, because it sure looks to me like you two were all set up to leave town.” William nodded at the loaded cart.

Mark’s eyes bulged. “Um, that’s... not mine. I swear! I don’t know whose cart that is. Maybe it’s hers. You have to believe me! I never met her before this afternoon at the tavern. I never thought she’d kill anybody or I wouldn’t have even talked to her.”

“Mark! Oh, Mark!” Nina sobbed. “How can you do this to me? After what we shared?” Her face twisted into a hateful sneer. “Betrayer! I’ll kill you!” With that, she lunged at him, only to be tackled by William. She let him pin her.

He bound her wrists and knelt by her side, looking up at Mark. “Okay, Mister. Maybe you’re telling the truth; maybe you’re not. But I’m taking this little chickadee to the jailhouse and impounding that cart. You can go for now, but we’re going to get to the bottom of this, so don’t leave town.”

Mark nodded gratefully, then sprinted down the street as though he was pursued by wolves. She watched him go with a frown on her face. If he was running from wolves, Nina supposed that made her a wolf, and she didn’t quite know how she felt about that.

“Ha! That was great, Nina!” laughed William while he untied her hands. “*You* were great! I knew you had a talent for this...” He looked down and saw her expression. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she said, sitting up and rubbing her wrists. “Something is, but I can’t put my finger on it. Everything went exactly as planned. Right?”

He nodded.

“Francis didn’t get into any trouble, did he?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” William cocked his head. “But it would have had to happen in the last three minutes. When I left him, he was still trying to show the barflies his Super-Duper Dragon Grip. As far as I know, he still thinks you’re in the outhouse.”

Nina stood and folded her arms, still frowning. “Hunh... I don’t know what it is, but...” She looked off in the direction that Mark had run. “Something’s still wrong. I can feel it.”

He took a moment to think, looking at her seriously. “Are you worried about that guy?”

“No! That’s not...” She paused, surprised at her own lack of conviction.

“Believe me,” said William. “I’ve been doing this for a while, and that guy isn’t going to give us any more trouble. He’s going to get out of town so fast... He’s probably half-packed already!”

“Oh, I know,” she said. “I don’t think he’s on to us or anything. He was *way* too scared to even *think* about questioning what happened. The way he ran off...” She frowned again. “He

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was *so* scared...”

William watched her for a moment with a look of confusion, then his mouth dropped open just a little and he straightened up. “Nina, do you feel *bad* about what we did?”

Her brows shot up and she took a step back. “Bad? Of course not, I...” Once again, she found her voice trailing off before she could finish the sentence.

“Nina. That guy may be scared *now*. Hell, anyone would be. But that’s just his immediate reaction. He came across an unexpected situation and he panicked.” He gently held her shoulders and looked her in the eye. “He’s going to rush back to the inn, pack his stuff and scam. But you know what? Once he’s a day or so out of town, he’s going to see that nobody is following him, and he’ll finally relax. That stuff?” He gestured to the mule-cart and its cargo, grinning from ear to ear. “That’s *nothing* for a guy in his business. Two weeks from now, he’s going to be laughing his head off, telling the story to his buddies over a pint. The close scrape he had with that crazy Korstahl chick.”

Nina listened to all this with a wary calm. “You think so?”

“Nina, I guarantee it. Believe me, I know the type. He is going to be fine.” He raised an eyebrow. “So? Feel better? No, wait! Don’t answer that yet.” He grinned mischievously. “After all, we haven’t finished the job yet.” Once again, he directed her attention to the cart.

Nina washed up and changed her clothes, then watched, with uncertain expectations, as William drove the mule-cart toward the cheaper side of town. The town hadn’t been luxuriant even in the wealthy bits, but everything had been well-maintained and in good condition. Now, as they moved further and further from the trading district, the homes and shops turned shabbier and shabbier.

She saw broken shutters patched with wood scraps or plugged with wadded up fabric. Boardwalks lining the dusty dirt roads had whole sections of rotten planks, sometimes splintered or missing entirely. But despite the general sense of improvised repairs to inevitable wear, the thing that stood out in Nina’s eyes was the general cleanliness of the place. Far from the filth and apathetic decay that she had seen in many larger cities, the mood here held an almost palpable sense of honorable determination... And something else that smelled suspiciously of cabbage soup.

William took the cart to a small commons, occupied by a well, an empty—and apparently long unused—set of stocks, and a half dozen people going about their normal routines.

“So, go on,” he said, his eyes sparkling. “Pick someone out and give them something.”

Nina looked around for a moment until her gaze settled on a middle-aged woman in worn, mismatched clothes, drawing water from the well. Assorted clay pots and bowls sat by her side, which she filled, each in turn, with water from the sodden wooden bucket in the well. It took her far longer that it should have, because the well bucket leaked quite a bit, losing almost half its water by the time it reached the top.

Turning around, she picked up the sturdy new bucket from their cart and approached

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the well with it. The woman watched her warily, but said nothing. Instead she continued turning the creaky metal handle to raise the well bucket. When she brought it to the top, Nina held out the new one. "Here. This one might work better."

The woman didn't take it. "I don't have any money," she said.

After an encouraging nod from William, Nina held out the bucket again. "That's okay. It's a present. You can have it."

The woman frowned, looking Nina up and down for a moment. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I am. Here, take it."

"This isn't some kind of a trick, is it? What are you doing here anyway? Slumming a little while your father does business?"

Nina, still holding out the bucket, had already started to feel somewhat awkward. Now a red tinge of anger began to flare around her thoughts. But after another quick glance to William, she just took a deep breath and seized the old bucket out of the woman's hands.

Startled, the woman gasped and backed away, holding one hand to her chest. Her foot knocked against one of her pots and overturned it, spilling its contents over the ground.

Grumbling to herself, Nina cut the rope from the old bucket and retied it to the new one. She glared at the woman and dramatically dropped the bucket into the water, where it sent a hollow splash reverberating back up the stone column. Then she brushed off her hands and walked back to the mule-cart. When she looked up to William he pointed behind her.

Turning around, she saw that the woman had followed her. "Honey, I am so sorry," she said, looking at Nina with an earnest expression. "There you were, trying to be nice, and I was so rude to you. Thank you so much for the bucket. It will really help. It will help all of us. That old bucket should have been replaced a long time ago. Bless you. Bless your heart."

Nina's mouth opened, but no words came out. After a gentle nudge from William, she finally managed an awkward: "Uh, sure. No problem."

The woman nodded again gratefully before returning to the well, to finish filling her pots.

Under William's guidance, they doled out the rest of the supplies to anyone who looked like they could use them. A couple of men took the shovel and pickaxe, presumably to be sold, and the mule and cart went to an elderly woman with a half-dozen young children in tow. Through it all, the smile never left William's face. He handed out the goods like a favorite uncle with gifts for the whole family.

"There, you see?" They spoke as they walked back to the tavern where they had left Francis. "Don't you feel better now? Think about all those people we helped. We've made a difference in their lives. Doesn't that make you feel good?"

Nina thought about the smiling woman, the happy beggars, the little kids who could ride instead of walking. She *did* feel better... a little. But then she flashed on different images: Mark, running away in terror, the two big bags of gold that they had hidden at their campsite,

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and oddly enough, Francis.

“Nina?” William waved a hand before her face. “Still with me?”

“Huh? Oh! Sure, yeah.”

“You feeling all right?” He seemed genuinely concerned. “Didn’t giving that stuff away make you feel better?”

“Uh, yeah... Yeah, I guess so.” Even as she tried to reassure him, she was aware that her voice didn’t hold much enthusiasm.

William must have sensed her hesitancy, because he grew very quiet. They returned to the tavern, collected Francis, and left town without another word spoken between them.

Nina stayed lost in her thoughts during the ride, but when they crested the hill above their campsite, a new concern pushed all others out of her mind.

At first, she thought that they had gotten lost, but the remnants of last night’s campfire confirmed their location. She knew they had put it out thoroughly before they left. There hadn’t been a single live spark. She was sure of that.

But since they had left it, there had been another fire, from another source. The large tree that had shielded their site from town had burned completely to the ground, leaving nothing but a stump of smoldering cinders.

Around the charred remains, a circle of dragon-tracks still showed clearly in the wind-blown ashes.

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Chapter 19

WILLIAM SMOTHERED THE STILL GLOWING ASHES WITH HANDFULS OF DIRT WHILE NINA TOOK A CLOSER LOOK AT THE TRACKS. Examining them more thoroughly, she realized that she didn't know how to read dragon tracks. It had never come up.

So when William approached her from behind, she was just crouched on the ground, staring at them.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She took a deep breath. "Yeah, I'm okay." Looking down again, she observed that some of the tracks showed claw marks and some didn't, but she didn't know what that signified, or even if it meant anything at all. "It's Tyrnon. It's got to be. But I don't know whether to be worried or relieved that he did this when we weren't here." Standing, she met William's eye. "This is a message, but I don't know what it says."

He shrugged. "How *can* we know? The only certain meaning is: 'I'm following you.' As for the other thing, I pick relieved."

"I wish he'd waited until we got back," Francis popped in, squatting by the charred remnants of the tree. "He burned this thing to the *ground!* That must have been *awesome!*"

Nina took another deep breath.

William's face turned thoughtful. "What do you want to do?"

She took a moment to consider their options, looking over their supplies and glancing at the looming mountain peaks on the horizon. "Well, for starters, I think we'd better move camp. I don't know how much good it will do..." She turned back to William. "But it couldn't hurt."

He nodded and she continued.

"We've got everything we need. We *could* just head into the mountains."

William shielded his eyes with one hand and glanced at the position of the sun. "There's not more than a couple hours of light left today. Do you think we'll have enough time to find a good spot?"

"I think that we'd better put as much distance between us and *this* camp as we can. We can survive a night in a less than perfect site if we have to."

He nodded again. "You're probably right."

A somber cloud seemed to weigh heavily over the camp as they packed up their supplies. They distributed the new rations and furs among the various bags and set off once more to

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the north.

Though they had not yet reached the rocky outcroppings of the mountains, the foothills made for slow going compared to their travels on the plains. Up and down, up and down, hill after hill; the riding seemed somehow more monotonous than flat terrain.

After an hour or so, apparently in an attempt to lighten the mood, William began again to suggest alternatives to Nina's plan, not to Nina this time, but to Francis.

"What if she were to...tie you to a tree in the middle of a swamp and leave you there?"

"Yeah, Nina likes the bondage stuff. She and I have done the rope thing before, so I'm pretty good at getting out of that."

"What if she found another girl for you? One who actually liked you?"

"What, you mean like a threesome? That'd be pretty cool, I guess."

"What if she set you adrift in a canoe above some rapids?"

"I'm the best swimmer in three kingdoms."

Nina emerged from her reverie for a moment at that one. "That's true actually. Francis swims like a fish. It's about the only thing he *does* do well."

"Not the *only* thing, pussycat."

She rolled her eyes and William laughed, but there was a taint of something else to the sound of his voice. Worry? Sadness? She couldn't really tell, but at the very least, she knew that there was more on his mind than he was saying.

For her own part, she tried to clear her mind, to think of nothing but the slow rhythm of Magni's hooves, the slower rhythm of the hills. Anything to quell the other thoughts trying to trample through her mind.

As the sun began to set, they chose a spot to stay the night. Very exposed, far more so than Nina would ordinarily even consider, but as beggars, they didn't have much choice. And under the circumstances, they decided to forego the campfire.

The night was cold and dark, so they sat huddled under their new furs, eating dried jerky in near silence. Once they finished eating, Nina found herself once again trying to blank out uncomfortable thoughts. She searched through her pack for a distraction. After considering and rejecting several options, she decided to polish her sword. Soon, the familiar, repetitive motion began to soothe her mind.

"Nina?"

She looked up to see William watching her, barely visible in the dim cloud-covered moonlight. Returning her attention to the sword she let out an impatient, "What?"

"I have to talk to you about something."

She redoubled her efforts on the sword, buffing it with far more vigor than strictly necessary.

"Nina?"

Again, she didn't answer, but instead continued polishing. The smooth back-and-forth

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strokes filled her awareness.

“Nina, can you hear me?”

Back-and-forth, back-and-forth. Polishing away every fleck of dirt, every speck of dust. Polishing her blade to a mirror shine. The flicker of candlelight glinted—*Candles? What candles?*—off the hard surface of her sword, making it appear to glisten. She stood and walked across the room—*Where am I?*—to her weapons display. Replacing her sword in its hilt, she began to examine her leather armor, feeling it throughout, systematically testing it for tears or weaknesses. The hard, cool leather held up under her inspection. It was ready. Her sword was ready. *She* was ready.

She gasped, a long straining breath as the room exploded into open starry sky above and coarse dirt below. Her lungs seemed to reject the air she had just inhaled and she coughed it out again. The next breath fared better and her eyes began to focus. William and Francis looked down at her where she lay on the ground.

“Dude, that was freaky,” said Francis.

“Nina, are you all right?” William asked desperately, his face lined with concern.

Struggling to sit up, she gave another small cough and nodded. “Yes, I think so.”

“What did you see this time? Did he say anything?”

She closed her eyes tight and took a long, smooth breath, her lungs seemingly back to normal. “I was...” Her voice broke when she thought of it.

He nodded expectantly.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “I was preparing for a battle.”



Nina didn't sleep well that night. Her new coat kept out the chill air quite nicely and the new blankets insulated her body from the cold, rocky ground, but she slept only in fits and spurts nonetheless. When the time came for her watch, she felt relief far more than fatigue.

In the morning, the air was brisk and fresh as the world began to wake. Light began to settle over the land, but in many ways, she wondered if she might not prefer the dark. The landscape illuminated by the rising sun held a lot of things that she didn't particularly want to see. A gust of morning wind blew by and she shivered, pulling her coat tighter around her shoulders.

When the others woke up, they all packed their things and smoothed away their footprints, working to remove any sign that they had camped there.

“It won't fool an experienced tracker,” William said. “Probably not a dragon either.” He looked over to her and grinned. “But it couldn't hurt.”

Nina smiled despite herself. After the sober, worried night, it was nice to have a little laugh. Even a very little one. They mounted up and continued north.

Early that afternoon, they left the foothills and entered the mountain pass proper. The

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terrain abruptly changed from dry but grassy foothills to craggy boulder fields. All vegetation petered out, leaving the ground now covered with nothing but miscellaneous rocks and gravel. In several places, they had to dismount and walk the horses for hundreds of yards at a time before the meager path evened out.

Once again, they decided not to build a campfire. Besides the fact that it would attract unwanted attention, very little foliage of any kind grew in the broken stones of the pass, and fuel was scarce. At night, they could do little save bundle up and choose a cozy spot out of the wind. Though in truth, to call anywhere in the pass “cozy” did an injustice to the word.

Travel continued much the same over the next few days. They did not see nor hear any sign of Tyrnon, and Nina had no more visions. By the third day, they began to have trouble with the altitude. They couldn’t travel as fast and they started going through their water rations much more quickly than she had hoped.

Nights in the mountains, tightly wrapped in their furs, tucked into tiny nooks of rock, were tolerable, but as she listened to the cruel wind howling through the boulders overhead, Nina wondered how long that would be the case. The higher they climbed, the colder they got. Soon, they might truly need to build a fire, regardless of the potential danger. Attracting unwanted attention became far less worrisome when compared to freezing to death in the dark.

Finally, near noon on the fifth day, they crossed the top of a ridge and found a small valley. Across it, at the base of a sheer cliff, they saw a weathered cottage sheltered in a niche within the rock face. A white trail of smoke emanated from the stone chimney.

Nina’s face broke into a huge smile. “William, we made it. There it is!”

William cleared his throat. “Uh, Nina?”

She turned to look and he pointed at the base of the small valley, where a ravine separated them from the wizard’s residence.

They rode down to the edge of the ravine and dismounted. Only ten feet across, and not terribly deep considering the surroundings, perhaps fifteen or twenty yards, the ravine nonetheless presented an obstacle. In both directions, the ravine stretched on into much rougher terrain. To go around it meant a lot of time and a lot of climbing. And it meant that the horses and most of the supplies would need to be left behind.

Standing at the lip, Nina was tempted to try a running leap. She could probably make it, she decided, but it didn’t look like much fun. Not to mention the risk to Francis. That would be *all* she needed, to have Francis fall to his death within sight of the wizard’s house.

“There *has* to be a bridge.” Nina put her hands on her hips and furrowed her brow in consternation. “How does he come out of the mountains when he needs to?”

“If he’s anywhere near as powerful as you’ve said he is,” William answered, “then he doesn’t *need* a bridge.”

“Ah.” She felt her ears redden. “Right.” She wrapped her arms around herself and bounced

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on the balls of her feet for a moment, trying to stay warm. It worked, but the ravine was unmoved. “So, what do you think?”

“Well—”

“Hey! Wizard guy!”

Nina and William both jumped in surprise as Francis cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted across the small valley.

“There’s a big hole out here. Do you have a bridge or something?”

She clenched her fists and glared at him. “Francis!” she hissed. “What do you think you’re doing?”

She looked back to the house and saw the front door fly open. A short, slightly overweight, middle-aged man came out. Sandy-blond hair, just fading to gray, was neatly groomed over a plain, clean-shaven face. Ordinary-looking breeches and shirt completed the package. He saw them and his face lit up with delight. “You’re here! Great! Great!”

He held his hands out palm first, beckoning them to wait. “Hang on just a second,” he said. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.” With that, he rushed back into the small cottage and the wooden door slammed behind him.

Dumbstruck, Nina could do nothing save shoot William a questioning glance. He just shook his head and shrugged. They waited in confused silence until the door of the house flew open again and the man emerged once more. He ran excitedly down the slope of the valley to the ravine.

Nina winced, certain that he would trip or break an ankle on one of the many loose stones strewn about on the rocky slope, but as he made his way toward them, she saw several of the rocks moving out of his way. He didn’t miss a step.

Skidding to a stop just shy of the edge, he took a moment to catch his breath, doubled over with his hands on his knees. He held up a finger, asking them to wait while he panted. After a few heavy breaths, he straightened up. “Sorry about that.” His face was flushed and sweat glistened on his forehead, even in the cool air. “Had to get my bridge.” He held up a stick about two feet long. “Whew! Didn’t realize how out of shape I was.”

No one spoke, though the strange man continued to grin at them. Then he seemed to remember something. “Oh, right. The bridge.”

He took the stick and casually tossed it into the ravine, but it didn’t fall. It froze in midair and began to expand. Lengthening and thickening, the stick branched out, new limbs shooting out to stretch across the ravine, twisting and curling around each other like frenzied snakes.

The rapidly forming bridge now spanned the ravine, about five or six feet wide, but the flurry of branches continued, making side rails, and then a covered roof. Soon, the bridge itself began to arch upward. Finally, the tendrils slowed, and stopped, leaving a beautiful, ornate covered bridge lying across the ravine, with plenty of room for the horses to cross.

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“Cool!” shouted Francis. Nina and William stared in awe.

The man looked embarrassed. He looked down at his shoes and fidgeted. “It’s just a little bridge. Sorry I didn’t leave it out, it’s just that... I don’t really use it myself, so lots of times I just forget all about it...” He looked up. “I don’t get many visitors.”

Nina finally tore her eyes away from the bridge and turned to look at the wizard. His eyes were lonely.

“But you’re here now!” He smiled again. “Please, come on across! Tell me about your travels! Would you like some tea or something?”

Francis crossed the bridge first, but Nina and William quickly followed, leading the horses. As each of them reached the other side, the man quickly seized and vigorously shook their hand. He apparently knew them.

“Francis... *King* Francis, I beg your pardon! So glad you could make it, your Highness. Mr. Lochlan... William. A pleasure to meet you.” When he took Nina’s hand, his smile quickly turned to a puzzled frown. “Where’s the other one?”

“What?” She jerked back her hand and took a step away from him, eyes concerned. “Other one?”

“Just a moment.” The man reached into his pocket and took out a pair of spectacles. He placed them on his nose and stared intently at Nina for long enough to make her distinctly uncomfortable. Finally, a smile of recognition broke across his features and he removed the glasses. “Oh, yes. I see, I see. Never mind.”

Nina shot William a sideways glance, but he just shrugged again. Returning her wary eyes to the enthusiastic man before them, she spoke. “Are you the Wizard of the Korthan Gap?”

“Oh, how silly of me. I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I? Sorry about that. Like I said, not many visitors. I am...” He took a deep breath, then suddenly started to grow. He stretched out, taller and taller, not stopping until he towered over them, at least ten feet tall. His clothes shifted from simple peasant clothes to a shimmering, elegant cloak the color of moonlight. A long white beard sprouted from his chin and trailed down to his waist. A staff appeared in his hand, eight feet long and a good four inches thick.

When he spoke, his voice seemed to rumble from the bowels of the earth itself. “*The Mage of Korthan! High Priest of the Order of Sentinels! I am he who was ordained by God Himself to guard the prison of the demon creature Maholtek, buried here until the end of the Age of Man!*”

The horses reared in terror and though Nina managed to hold the reins, Magni jerked her sharply off her feet, and she fell to the ground with a painful skid across the rocks. Ignoring her pain, she scrambled backwards several feet away from the huge apparition, and blinked.

When she opened her eyes, the powerful mage had vanished and the simple middle-aged man had returned. He blushed. “But that’s just my professional title. Please, call me Manny. What can I do for you?”

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Nina took a deep breath. *Okaaay*. “All right, then.” She stood and brushed the dust off her hands and clothes. “So you know who we are. I’m betting that you know why we’re here, also.”

“Well...” He blushed again. “Yes I do.” He raised a hand and absently scratched the back of his neck. “But I like to ask, anyway. The conversations just get awkward otherwise.”

Nina started to roll her eyes, but decided, under the circumstances, that it would be unwise. “So you can do it, then?”

He grinned and rubbed his hands together. “Oh sure, no sweat. Just the kind of work I like to do.”

Nina cocked her head in surprise. “Really?”

He nodded.

“Okay then, what do you want for it? We have gold.”

Manny laughed with a snort. “Gold? I don’t need gold. Take a look at your dagger.”

Nina frowned and pulled her dagger from her sheath. The blade had turned to solid gold.

“Neat!” called Francis. “Do something of mine now!”

Manny smiled, happy to oblige. “Sure. Check your belt buckle.”

Nina gave a frustrated sigh. “Can you turn my dagger back, please? Gold is too soft. It’ll never hold an edge this way.”

His face fell. “Oh, I’m sorry. Yes, of course.”

When she looked down again, her dagger had returned to normal and she sheathed it. “Thank you. I appreciate it.” She managed a smile, but couldn’t decide what to think. Surely there had to be more here than met the eye. And what met the eye was already an awful lot to take in. “So if you don’t want gold, then what *do* you want?”

“You don’t need to give me anything. This is more excitement than I’ve had in the last sixty years. That’s all the payment I require.”

Eyebrows raised, Nina smiled. “Okay, well, I’m not going to insist. So when can you do it?”

“As soon as he’s ready.”

Still forcing the smile, she shot a look over to Francis, who was busy polishing his new golden belt buckle. Back to Manny. “No time like the present.”

Manny’s grin faded a little, confusion in his eyes. “But he’s not even here yet.”

Nina checked again. Francis was still there. He waved at her.

The smile remained plastered on her face, but her brow furrowed. “Uh... He’s right there.”

“What, *him*?”

“Yes, him.”

“I wasn’t talking about him.”

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“Who were you talking about?”

“The subject of the spell.”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“No, he isn’t.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Nina waved her hands in frustration and looked at the ground for a moment. “Wait a minute, wait a minute.” She took a cleansing breath. Her neck and shoulders felt stiff. “I came to you so you could remove the security spell from *that* man right there.”

Manny put on his spectacles again and gave Francis a long, hard look. “Are you *sure*?”

She closed her eyes and nodded. “Pretty sure, yeah.”

He frowned, putting his glasses away. “Hmm... Well that *is* unusual. I’m usually pretty good about these things.” His eyes were concerned and his mouth turned down in dismay. “I’m afraid I’ve prepared all the wrong ingredients. It will take some time to get the correct ones together, but I suppose I could have them by tomorrow sometime. Would that be all right?”

Nina felt the tightness in her neck relax a little, but she was still unsettled by the whole episode. “That’ll be fine. We can just camp here tonight while we wait.”

He nodded absently. “I’ll need to examine the young man.”

She turned to Francis. “Go with this guy, Francis. He, uh... He knows where the staff is.” She looked at Manny again and mouthed: “Play along.”

“Oh yeah?” Francis asked. “It’s about time. I was beginning to think the thing didn’t exist.”

“I’ll send him out when I’ve finished my examination,” said Manny. He still seemed quite disturbed. “See you tomorrow morning, then.” He turned and began walking back up the hill to the shack.

Francis started after him, but paused and turned back to Nina. “I’ll be right back, sweetheart. The end of our journey is almost at hand!” He leered at her, then continued up the hill after Manny.

Indeed it is, she thought, and crossed her arms. She watched him climb the hill and disappear into the wooden shack. Then she frowned.

I should feel better than this.

Her frown settled into a scowl. *This is what I’ve been working toward for weeks. What I’ve wanted to do for years! What’s the matter with me? Am I getting soft?* She felt her jaw clenching at the thought. *All right, Nina. Suck it up. You’ve been working too hard for this to—*

“Having second thoughts?”

She gasped a little and turned around. William watched her with somber eyes. Feeling rather out of sorts, she scowled at him. “Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

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He looked down at the ground. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Anyway,” she said, “they aren’t second thoughts. It’s just... *weird*... knowing that it’s almost over. But I’m not going to let a little case of cold feet stop me from finishing a plan that I’ve devoted years of my life to.”

“Yeah, well, I kind of need to talk to you about that.”

She groaned, raising both her hands to rub her temples. “Come on, William. We’ve been over this and over this. You said that you wouldn’t object or interfere.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “I know I said that, but—”

“But nothing!” she interrupted. “William, I listened to all of your alternatives and reasons, and I wasn’t convinced. I don’t blame you for how you feel. You haven’t had to live with Francis like I have. You don’t—”

“Nina, you—”

“Why can’t you just trust me on this? Why do you have to make things so—”

“Nina, you can’t kill Francis!”

She bristled, shouting, “And why *not*?”

He shouted back. “Because that’s exactly what his advisors want you to do!”

Nina stopped speaking immediately. A cold gust of wind passed, whistling through the small valley and sending a shivering chill from the top of her head to the base of her spine. After a moment of stunned silence, she spoke. “What?”

William didn’t answer; he just watched her with the same morose expression as he had a moment before.

She swallowed, then took a deep breath. “William, what are you talking about? They don’t want... What makes you think—”

He looked her in the eye. “Because they hired me to make sure that you do.”

To Nina, it felt as if all the air had been sucked from her lungs, as if all the blood had drained from her head. Her knees threatened to buckle; she felt dizzy. The world seemed to spin. But somehow, she managed to remain standing. After a moment, she recovered her voice as well. “No.” She cleared her throat, trying to remove the hesitant wavering. “No, they couldn’t have. They—”

“They did,” he said, swallowing. “I staged the bandit attack with some men from town. I—”

“William?” Her voice was cold, and tight with restraint. “If this is something you’re making up just to keep me from killing Francis, then you need to tell me *right now*.”

He swallowed and took a shaky breath, then shook his head. “No. I’m sorry, Nina, but it’s the truth. My instructions were to meet up with you, join you if I could and to make sure that you didn’t go back to Langia without completing your mission.”

“My *mission*?”

“Nina, I thought they just wanted me to watch your back!”

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She folded her arms and began to force long, even breaths, trying to hold in the building tears by sheer will.

For his part, William's face held a deep sadness accentuated with desperation. He reached out a hand, but she didn't take it and after a sad moment, he let it drop. "I figured that they knew you would never accept help from them, so they hired me in secret. They never told me what your mission was! First I thought you were just supposed to keep him safe while giving him some experience. Then I thought you were actually *faking* experience for him! I never thought that... And by the time I knew what you were really planning, I had already decided that I wasn't working for them anymore."

Nina's frown deepened at that and William nodded in response. "I mean it, Nina. As soon as I met you, I knew you were something different. Something special. But when I saw you leap into the arena after Tyrnon, without even the slightest hesitation... Nina, from that moment, I decided that Francis's advisors could screw off for all I was concerned. I wanted to be with you."

Nina blinked, which had the unfortunate effect of dislodging a tear, which she wiped away hastily. When she spoke, she struggled to get the words out past her clenched jaw. "I'm still waiting to hear why I shouldn't kill Francis."

He nodded, his eyes glistening. "Nina, do you remember when I asked you what the advisors thought you were doing? You said you didn't know what they thought. But Nina, whatever they thought you were up to, it was important enough to them that they hired me to keep you from giving up before it got done. I ran through this over and over in my mind, and the only thing I can think of is that they knew *exactly* what you were planning and that they *want* you to do it. They've been manipulating you right from the start!"

"Manipulating?" She blinked again, her jaw clenching tighter and her hands forming fists. "*Manipulating?* And just what do you think that *you've* been doing? You've been manipulating me since the day we *met!* Everything you've done, everything you said... Everything we shared... It was all a *lie!*"

"No!" He shook his head desperately. "No, it wasn't! I—"

"How do I know?" she shouted. "How can I believe anything you tell me? For all I know, all this stuff about my 'mission' is what they told you to say so that I *won't* kill Francis!"

"Nina, please! You have to trust me on—"

"*Trust!?*" Her face twisted with rage and she took a step forward. He stepped back, fear in his eyes. "How *dare* you use that word with me? First Tyrnon, and now you. *Trust* hasn't gotten me anything except lies and betrayal! In fact, if there's anything that I actually can thank you for, it's teaching me that trusting people is for *saps*. Apparently, I can't trust anyone but *myself!*"

His mouth dropped open, then he shook his head, his hands held out pleadingly. "No... Nina, I..."

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“Shut up! I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to hear anything from you. Even if I believe that every word you’re saying is true, that still means that you’ve known all this time and you never told me until now.”

She laughed bitterly. “All that talk about ‘alternatives’ to killing Francis. You just didn’t want to have to tell me the truth, did you? Were you *ever* going to tell me? Oh, I know, maybe you should have waited until we could finally be one with each other, and then afterwards, you could just... lean over and whisper: ‘Oh, by the way, I met you under false pretenses by working for your enemies and I’ve been lying to you about it ever since!’”

While she shouted, he had sobered somewhat, and he stood there before her, eyes downcast, one hand to his forehead.

“Well? Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

He hesitated before answering, but when he did speak, his voice was quiet and sad. “I’m... sorry. I just thought that... I thought that maybe I could really be the person that you saw in me.” He met her eyes for a moment. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

Nina’s anger began to fade, at least lessening in proportion to the lump in her throat and the hole in her chest. “I think... that I need to think about this... alone.” With that, she turned and walked away, back across the ravine and over the ridge.

She climbed over several medium rocks, around larger ones, and kicked small ones, sending them skittering across the ground. After a while, she finally sat against a boulder.

She felt numb. Somehow all her normal thoughts and feelings had been involuntarily suspended, leaving her disoriented and exhausted, chasing after her fleeing mind, running rabbit trails that led nowhere.

What had William been thinking? Did he really think that he would have been able to keep this a secret forever? And why would he? He didn’t really care for her. Or did he? Tyrnon had known. That must have been why he didn’t like him. But Tyrnon was bad, too. Wasn’t he? Who was the “us” in “You will obey us”? The advisors? But why would a dragon work with them? What could they possibly offer him that would make him do all that? If he wanted gold, he could have taken it, so why would he go to all this trouble?

Why would the advisors go to all that trouble? What did they want? What did William want? It couldn’t be her, because if that was what he wanted, he wouldn’t have taken a job from the advisors. But that was before he knew her. He’d been working for them even when they first met in the forest.

She remembered his calm voice back in the forest, that first evening. “What are you questing for? And why do you need him to get it?” And the way he’d so casually offered to “be around” when she was finally ready to tell him. He’d been probing for her quest even then. Did that mean he was telling the truth about his instructions?

The advisors *had* let her go awfully easily, and William said that his instructions were to not let her return home until she’d done it. Maybe this was all a way to get her out of the area

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for some reason. But what? The Uhks wouldn't let them get away with anything dramatic. But again, what if this was all an elaborate bit of reverse psychology? Plant the doubt in her mind, so that she wouldn't kill him for fear of playing into their hands?

Distracted by her questioning thoughts, it took several moments before she consciously registered what she had been hearing in the distance. Gradually, she identified two sounds: a dragon's roar, and William's shout.

She summoned her resolve, drew her sword, and followed the sounds of battle. As she went, a light drifting of snow began to fall from the oppressive, overcast sky.

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Chapter 20

NINA HURRIED ACROSS THE BOULDER FIELD, LEAPING FROM ROCK TO ROCK WHERE NECESSARY. The stones and gravel shifted under her feet, occasionally sending her stumbling, but she dared not slow her pace in the least. The snow fell heavier now, and the hard wind whipped the multitude of tiny flakes into a frenzy. The sounds of conflict grew ever louder and the knot in Nina's stomach grew with them.

When she crested the ridge, she saw them circling each other. William limped slightly, brandishing an axe from their supply pack while he backed away from Tyrnon, who was nearly unrecognizable.

His color had faded considerably, from a rich, shimmering green to the color of pond algae, contrasting sharply with the wide streaks of dried blood plastered across his side. His injured wing now hung limp, unmoving, and he looked thin, almost gaunt. He advanced on William, but his movements lacked grace, his steps were clumsy, and his tail dragged on the ground behind him.

Nina stopped and stared, her sword suddenly very heavy in her hand. For a few seconds, she could do nothing but look back and forth between them. She had no time to learn any of the things she needed to know, and the likelihood of any kind of peaceful solution was low and dropping quickly. For the first time in her life, she found herself frozen in the face of battle, and it frightened her.

"Stop." The word slipped out almost before she realized she had something to say, but once said, the ones that followed came easier. "Stop it." She took a tentative step down the hill, then, gradually, began to run. "Stop! Both of you! William! Tyrnon! Back down! Please!"

Tyrnon didn't seem to hear her, because he continued stalking toward William without looking up.

William heard her, but his eyes didn't leave Tyrnon, not even for an instant. "Nina! He came out of the rocks somewhere. He waited until you were gone."

"Don't fight him, William! Try to get away!" She had reached the bridge and ran across it, still a good fifty yards away.

"He's not giving me any choice, Nina."

As if in answer, Tyrnon inhaled deeply, his chest shaking with effort, and breathed fire at him. The burst was small, a short stream that diminished after only a few feet, and William dodged it easily. It paled in comparison to the raging torrent she had seen him unleash on

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Sir Sievers, but it seemed to take a lot out of him and he trembled, his head wavering, his breath rushing.

“Tyrnon!” she called. “Please stop. I need to talk to you!”

His head snapped around to face her as if startled, and his eyes filled with a strange longing. Not willing to risk another trance, she stopped running and broke eye contact, looking at the ground between his forelegs instead. “Please.”

He paused for a moment and ducked his head, trying to meet her eyes, but she turned away. He snarled and rushed at William again, leaping into the air.

William dove to one side, away from Tyrnon’s extended claws, but not out of range of his long neck. Tyrnon whipped his head around and snapped at William’s chest, catching a bit of his shirt and wrenching it to the side. The fabric tore out of Tyrnon’s jaws, but William was still jerked off his feet. He landed at Tyrnon’s side and dropped his axe. Tyrnon raised a foreleg to crush him.

Nina sprinted toward them, but before she could do anything, William recovered the axe and slashed at Tyrnon’s leg. Tyrnon snarled in frustration and backed off a few yards to inspect the wound. New blood trickled down from the gash, running over his shaking claws, hissing and spitting where it dripped onto the cold ground.

A guttural sound emerged from Tyrnon’s throat and he leaned forward to attack again, but Nina rushed up and placed herself between them, sword raised but held out to the side. “William! Get out of here!” she shouted, her breath heaving in the thin air. “Tyrnon! Stop fighting. We need to talk about this. There is more going on here than we thought!”

Tyrnon hesitated. Standing there, breathing hard, erratic sparks sprayed from his throat, mingling with the falling snowflakes, the whole lot swirling to the ground in a flurry of fire and ice. He looked to her, and this time she met his gaze. He raised his hands off the ground to sign, but stopped. His eyes glanced past her for a moment.

She followed his glance to see William, who had removed Francis’s sword from the king’s pack. He stood at ready. “I’m not leaving you here alone with him, Nina,” he said. “What if he tries to put you in another trance?”

She scowled, but turned back to Tyrnon, whose fearsome visage had calmed significantly.

“Okay,” she said. “You see? We’ve all stopped. Can we just stay calm and work this out?”

Tyrnon looked at her long and hard, then equally long at William, before facing Nina again. *You* *Think* *Good* *Future*

She lowered her sword. “What will I think is good?”

He suddenly dropped back to all fours and whirled around, lashing out with his tail. Too late, Nina jumped back, but his tail still caught her hard on the shoulder. The impact spun her around and sent her tumbling down a small incline. She dropped her sword. Her back, arms, legs all scraping harshly against the stones, she rolled over a few times before sliding

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to a stop.

Momentarily dazed, she could do nothing but lay there with snowflakes stinging her face. She blinked rapidly, fighting to clear her vision, then shook her head and sat up, feeling pain from a hundred tiny injuries. Without the time to stop and examine herself, she climbed to her feet.

Tyrnon was advancing on William. He moved slowly, but was as unstoppable as an avalanche. William did his best to keep away, retreating backwards as quickly as he could, slashing at Tyrnon with Francis's sword and occasionally connecting with a glancing blow; on the neck, on the cheek, on the shoulder. Tyrnon, a rasping snarl resonating deep in his throat, pressed forward as if the slashes were nothing more than buzzing insects.

"No! Stop! Please! Tyrnon, don't hurt him!" she cried, running in their direction and ignoring the protests in her shoulder and her back, her right ankle and left knee. In a single smooth motion, she scooped up her sword without losing a step.

An errant rock turned under William's foot and he fell, landing sharply on his back. Tyrnon batted the sword out of his hand with swipe of his claws. William tried to scoot away, but Tyrnon leaned forward and pressed down on his chest with one huge clawed hand. Tyrnon's head reared up on his long neck, preparing to strike.

Nina put the tip of her sword to Tyrnon's chest, in the thick of his ribcage, just under his left shoulder, and thrust. The sword slid into his flesh with a series of barely perceptible jerks as it pierced layers of skin, muscle and tissue.

His head reared back in a silent roar, and a massive spasm pulled the sword from Nina's hand. Trying to pull away from the pain, Tyrnon twisted in a circle, and the base of his tail caught Nina on the back of her legs, flipping her over. Her head hit the ground first and she saw stars.

She tried to stand and move away before she ended up crushed beneath his feet. Tyrnon had turned around to face the opposite direction and reeled back toward her, knocking her on her rear again. She crab-walked backwards, but he reached out and caught her foot within his clawed fingers. She kicked and wrenched her foot out of his hand, then fell flat on her back.

He tried to walk toward her, but after one shaky step, his left foreleg gave out and he fell on his side. The impact jarred the handle of her sword, still jutting out from under his shoulder, and he grunted deeply. Making a futile effort to stand again, his right leg trembled with the strain before it also collapsed. He settled onto his chest with a heavy, ragged breath.

Nina caught the sweet smell of burning autumn leaves, tinged with the metallic scent of blood, and finally looked Tyrnon in the eye. The anger, the frustration, the cold bitterness was all gone, and he simply looked sad. His eyes were wide and glistening, his brow arched and his mouth open as if to cry out in despair.

He closed his eyes and licked his lips, taking a calming breath, but wincing at the

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movement in his chest and grunting; a terrible sound that degenerated into a wet cough. A feeble glow flickered deep in his throat and a trickle of blood seeped from the corner of his mouth. When he finished coughing, he opened his eyes again and just looked at her.

Nina tried to speak, but the lump in her throat refused to let the words through. This strange, beautiful, intelligent creature was dying, and she had killed him. In her mind's eye, she saw him giving the shepherd more coins than the sheep were worth, trying to show her the sign for "bee," winking mischievously after faking the seizure in the arena cell. A tear trailed down her cheek and her lower lip began to tremble.

He noticed her tear, and the despair softened. He tried to sign something, but he couldn't move his left hand and after a few straining attempts, he finally settled back to the ground. He stared deep into her eyes and gave a short nod, then a wistful smile. He closed his eyes again and took a series of slow, uneven breaths.

She noticed movement out of the corner of her eye, and turned to see William approaching her from behind. He had retrieved Francis's sword, but he held it loose, trailing the point in the dust. She looked away, but sensed him standing behind her for a moment, then kneeling. He dropped the sword to the ground and laid one hand on her shoulder. She pulled away and looked at the ground.

"Nina... I..." He sighed, then swallowed. "You know that I didn't want this... I didn't... I don't..."

She held up a hand to silence him, then closed her eyes tight and covered her mouth to keep from crying out.

He hesitated, then she felt him moving away. She opened her eyes again and watched Tyrnon breathing. His inhale was ragged and shuddering, his exhale like a sigh of relief. She looked down at her hands, then slowly took her dagger from its sheath and drew it harshly across her right palm, drawing blood in a deep gash.

"Nina!" William shouted. "What are you doing?"

"I need to remember this," she said calmly, surprised at the strength in her voice. The gash blazed across her hand, but she picked at it with her fingers, pulling it wider. The blood dripped down her wrist as perfect snowflakes disappeared into the pooling red fluid in her palm. Then she stood and approached Tyrnon's side, where tiny crimson rivulets trickled out from around her sword, steaming as they met the chill in the air. She took a deep breath, then pressed her palm against his wound.

The touch of his blood was like liquid fire. A cry of pain forced itself from her throat, but she held her hand there until she could stand it no longer and her knees buckled. Her hand trembled as she crawled back around to Tyrnon's face.

"Tyrnon?" she called quietly.

His eyes fluttered open, meeting hers for only a few seconds before closing again.

"I won't forget," she said, brushing away another tear. "I won't."

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He grunted weakly without opening his eyes, then coughed again, his whole body seeming to shake.

“Tyrnon, do you...” Her voice caught and she cleared her throat. “Do you want me to stop the pain?”

“Holy cow! What the hell happened out here?”

Startled, Nina turned to see Francis jogging down the slope from Manny’s cottage.

“Jeez,” he said, “I leave you guys alone for *five minutes* and look what happens!”

A slow, bubbling rage began to rise in Nina’s gut. This was all his fault. He had been the start of all of it. If only he had been different, none of this would have had to happen. She stood and glared viciously at him, her eyes narrowing and her breath shaking with fury.

He didn’t even notice. The oblivious idiot paid her no mind at all as he approached Tyrnon and squatted by his side. He looked at Nina’s sword, still embedded in Tyrnon’s flesh. After a moment, he reached out and gingerly touched the hilt.

“Don’t you *touch* him!” she shouted.

Francis jerked back his hand and stared at her quizzically. “Nina? What’s the matter?” He looked back to Tyrnon. “You know, he doesn’t look so good.”

“He’s *dying*, you idiot! He’s dying and I...” She looked over to her slain friend and her voice quavered again. The strength of her fury fell away from her like a cast-off garment, and her hand throbbed. “And *I* killed him,” she whispered.

His mouth dropped open and his face softened. “Aww, baby, is that what you’re so upset about? Why don’t you just have the wizard guy heal him?”

Nina’s heart leapt into her throat. Was it possible? Without another thought, she took off in the direction of the house, but before she had made it ten yards, she heard Manny’s voice calling out from behind her.

“I’m down here, Nina!”

She stumbled and nearly fell, but recovered. Turning around, she saw Manny standing beside Tyrnon with a double armful of herbs and vials.

“Sorry I was a little late. I had a lot to carry.” He grinned, shrugging his shoulders to display his collection. “I *knew* I had prepared the right ingredients.” He sat down cross-legged on the ground and began to set out the materials. He looked up again and chuckled. “You really had me going there for a while!” He shook his head good-naturedly. “Security spell... *honestly!* Ha!”

Nina felt a ray of hope begin to peek through her regret and despair. She sniffed, brushing the tears from her cheeks, and returned to Tyrnon’s side, crouching next to the wizard. “Can you really do it? Heal him I mean?”

“I can, but I can’t really stop to talk.” He spoke quickly as he adjusted the positioning of a vial. “Time is an issue just now.” Hunching his back and leaning over his display of magic ingredients, he began to wave his hands over them. After a few seconds, he reached one hand

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over to rest on Tyrnon's side, while the other continued waving.

Nothing seemed to be happening: no swirling lights, no smoke, no telekinetic movement. Nothing.

Nina stood again and wrung her hands. The burning gash on her palm throbbed in the back of her awareness as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Is there something—"

"Shh," he interrupted, continuing to wave his hand around, staring intently at the strange assembly of odds and ends.

She stood silently watching him, fidgeting and gently chewing on her lower lip. Nothing seemed to change for minutes on end, until Manny spoke again.

"Nina..." His voice was quiet, but strained, like someone lifting a tremendous weight. "Come here."

She nodded and approached him. She started to kneel beside him, but she hadn't even reached the ground when his hand shot out, lighting fast, and grabbed her forearm.

Something flashed, and she seized, as if every muscle in her body had cramped simultaneously. Her back went rigid and her head snapped back, as a flood of energy rushed past her from somewhere to somewhere else. She hurtled through a blazing tunnel of light with breathtaking speed, accompanied by a thousand radiant points of light which floated and danced all around her.

They began to overtake her, and then to pass her by, and she felt her progress through the tunnel begin to slow. The points accelerated, zooming by faster and faster, until something wrenched her suddenly away, pulling her toward the side of the tunnel and through it. She was outside.

The tunnel shrank away into the void, diminishing from a massive wall to an infinite rope, to a twine, to a spider's thread, to nothing. She sensed, felt more than saw, a glow behind her and began to turn, just in time to see a rapidly approaching sphere rush forward to envelop her.

She was inside, and it was like seeing stars in the daylight. She drifted toward them, then among them. A deluge of images swirled around her, some too quickly to see, others seeming to hover around her like multi-color fireflies, avoiding her direct gaze and staying always in her peripheral vision.

Then, one of them shot straight at her, and flashed.

Delight fills the heart when it's flying.

Creation flows by like a dream.

The bearer of truth travels quickly. In haste!

For humans are more than they seem.

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*Hidden in bound stacks of parchment,
Tiny portraits, hand-drawn with char.
The meaning of artwork in humans? Profound!
There are souls now where none thought before.*

*Up from the ground comes a missile,
Too quickly, one cannot evade.
The left wing is pierced, and the pictures? All Lost!
Awareness descends into shade.*

Flash.

Her awareness returned to the fluttering images, spinning around in a maelstrom of moving memories until another rushed at her.

Flash.

*A romp through sunny-green pastures.
A great feast, eaten with zeal.
Interrupted by man with a sword. The pest!
A quick swat, then on with the meal.*

*But a girl has joined in the fighting,
It's brave, and stabs with a knife.
One pauses and watches the human. What's this?
She's bargaining! Goldcoin for life!*

*One senses something within her.
An essence, and proof of a soul?
Perhaps 'tis kismet, but regardless, what luck!
Lost pictures, but lost—not the goal.*

Flash.

*So this is the price paid for folly.
A good wing, ruined by steel.
And thousands of humans stand screaming: Great show!
Hatred is all they can feel.*

Now here comes the one that felt different,

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*'Till lies, her heart led astray.
She wasted one's time and one's trust. False hope!
She lives life as if it were play.*

*No more will one let time be wasted.
It ends now, the whole fantasy.
But rather than fight, the girl signs! Signs trust!
It was there, but one could not see.*

Flash.

*The liar wants the girl to go with him,
Feeds her with sweetness that's false.
But now one sees magic upon her! Dark spell!
She's here, and yet somewhere else.*

*The liar has bewitched and entranced her,
He poisons her mind from afar.
One must save her from dark human magic. From him!
Hostility breaks into war.*

*But now she's awake and she's angry
At one! And not at her foe!
The girl does not want to be rescued. She says:
Deal's off! Now I want you to go.*

Flash.

*One has failed, and now one is slain.
The girl has been lost to the lies.
But she goes not to see him at all. She stays!
She sits by one's face and she cries.*

*One sees now that one needn't have worried.
Her strength and her trust never die.
Creation around one grows quiet, and dark.
Soon one will return to the sky.*

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Flash.

Nina once again found herself surrounded by the swirling images, but now they began to dissipate, floating away to somewhere else, and leaving her alone. Then the force wrenched her again and out of the sphere, flying, floating, through the void.

But she soon started to realize that it wasn't a void at all. Rather than emptiness, the space around her was full. Full of an energy that defied comprehension. She felt warmth, and light... and love.

Everything around her grew so bright that she began to feel ashamed by her own dimness. The light was so clean, so pure... and she began to feel as if she were an ugly mark, defacing the glory of the light. But soon, the light permeated *everything*, her body, her mind, and it ran through her... to the very center of her being.

She opened her eyes, and she was back in the valley, sitting calmly on the ground, facing Manny.

He looked up at her with a small grin. "Neat, huh?"

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Chapter 21

NINA FELT RELAXED AND RESTED, AS IF SHE HAD JUST FINISHED A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP. She sat cross-legged on the ground, her hands in her lap. Taking a slow, deep breath, she looked around. Several hours must have passed, because the snow had stopped and the setting sun peeked through the clouds, low on the horizon. A large campfire blazed nearby. Manny sat cross-legged on the ground in front of her. William and Francis had been beside the fire, but now they stood and approached her.

All her aches and pains, bruises and scrapes had disappeared. Suddenly curious, she turned over her right hand to inspect the gash she had put there. There was no sign of a wound at all. Her sword lay on the ground before her. It had been completely cleansed, but Tyrnon's blood had etched it, blotchy-dull patches marking the smooth shine of the blade.

To her left, she saw Tyrnon lying comfortably on the ground. His wounds had also closed without so much as a mark. He was still somewhat thin but his color had much improved, and he watched her, awake and alert. She stared at him in a mixture of awe and curiosity. From his wide, caring eyes and slightly open mouth, she perceived roughly the same emotions.

They stared at each other for several moments before William drew their attention.

"Okay, they're awake," he said to Manny, impatience hardening his voice. "Now tell me what's going on!"

She turned to look, vaguely angry, but a few more seconds passed before she remembered why. "You!"

His irritated scowl disappeared, a startled expression taking its place. "Huh?"

Nina climbed to her feet and stalked toward him, jabbing an accusing finger in his direction. "It was *you!* Tyrnon didn't cause my trances at all. Did he? It was you all along!" She heard a snort of agreement from behind her.

"What?" William took a few steps backward, his hands held up and confusion on his face. "What are you talking about, Nina?" He shot an angry glance at Manny. "What did you do to her? Why does she think it was *me?*"

"Because Tyrnon thought it was you," said Manny. "That doesn't mean it's true, Nina."

Nina stopped short and turned a quizzical look to the short, middle-aged wizard. "It doesn't?"

"Of course not. William had nothing to do with your, ah... episodes."

Nina looked back to William, who watched her with a sad expression. She noticed that she still held her finger pointed at him and lowered it. "Oh." She shifted her feet awkwardly.

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“Sorry.”

He sighed. “It’s all right. I just want to know what’s going on.”

“It’s that sort of jumping to conclusions that got you three into trouble in the first place,” Manny offered helpfully.

“Yeah,” agreed Francis.

“Just as you and William were certain that Tyrnon was responsible,” Manny continued, “Tyrnon thought that William was the culprit. You were given a peek at Tyrnon’s perspective, Nina, not the objective truth.” He turned to Tyrnon. “Likewise, you caught a glimpse of Nina’s thoughts and feelings. As it happens, all three of you were mistaken.”

“So...” William made no attempt to disguise his skepticism. “Tyrnon *wasn’t* causing Nina’s trances? But we saw—”

Tyrnon shook his head emphatically.

“No, he was not.” Manny insisted. “Dragon magic has no influence over humans, and vice versa.”

William cocked his head. “But you just healed Tyrnon, didn’t you?”

“Um, yes, well... that’s complicated.”

Nina put her hand to her forehead and concentrated. “But... if Tyrnon wasn’t causing the trances, and William wasn’t causing the trances, then...”

Nina, William and Tyrnon all looked at Francis.

He smiled good-naturedly. “What trances?”

After a few seconds, they simultaneously shook their heads. “Nah.”

“It was the royal advisors then,” William said. “It has to be.”

Nina nodded. “I think you’re right. It must be part of their plan.” She whirled back to Manny. “Are we right? Are these visions their idea?”

“No.”

“Right, so now all we have to do is...” Nina’s ears caught up with her brain. “Huh? What? No? What do you mean, no?”

“They aren’t responsible for your episodes. Not directly, at any rate.”

“Not directly?”

“That’s right.”

“But they’re involved.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Nina scowled. “So who is directly responsible?”

“Well... *you* are.”

“What?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Nina was starting to get a headache. “Are you *trying* to make this difficult? Why don’t you just give me a straight answer?”

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Manny held up his hands. “All right, all right. Calm down, and I’ll try to explain. The trances are an unforeseen side effect of a spell that the royal advisors cast on you shortly after you left Langia.”

“A *spell*?” Nina recoiled. She felt dirtied, violated. “There’s a *spell* on me?! Get-it-off—get it off!”

Manny started to speak, but stopped, as if reconsidering his words. “Ah...well, in theory, I *could*, but... No.”

“*No*? Why *not*?”

“I can’t tell you.” He seemed apologetic.

Her eye twitched. She forced her voice out through a clenched jaw. “Why...*not*?”

“For the same reason that I won’t remove the spell.”

Nina considered that for a moment. “That’s awfully convenient, isn’t it?”

“Truth be told, it’s actually a real hassle. I could explain, but it would take a lot of mathematics. It has to do with disrupting dimensional chronologies.”

She took another deep breath and considered her next question carefully. “Can you tell me what the spell does?”

Manny nodded approvingly, as if he had simply been waiting for her to get around to the right line of inquiry. “I can show you how to see for yourself. Close your eyes, and imagine yourself sitting on a grassy bank by a large, calm pond.”

She put her hands on her hips and raised one eyebrow.

“Trust me,” he said.

She rolled her eyes, but then closed them. As he had instructed, she imagined herself by the pond.

“Okay, hmm,” he said, “That’s not going to do it. Just a sec.”

Suddenly, the pond turned from a fantasy to a reality. Rather than simply imagining the pond, she seemed to actually be there. She could feel warm soft grass between her fingers. She could smell wildflowers on the gentle breeze. The pond before her was clear and calm, the smooth surface broken only by a pair of ducks who glided gracefully across the water a few yards away.

“Um...” she said.

“Just a little concentration aid,” Manny’s voice came to her from somewhere. “Do you like it?”

“Uh, sure,” she said. “The ducks are a nice touch.”

“Thank you, I thought they would add flavor and make the scene a little more dynamic.”

She nodded. “Oh, they do. But Manny? Why am I by a pond at *all*?”

“Oh yes, of course, of course. I want you to move toward the water and look at your reflection.”

She did so.

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“Now imagine that, instead of *looking* at that reflection, you *are* the reflection. It will feel somewhat like tensing a muscle.”

Nina’s mental reflection was unchanged, but she gradually noticed that the reflection seemed to be moving of its own accord, blinking, and breathing without her conscious control. She examined it carefully, and tried to match its movements, trying to // *She was aware of riding a horse. She sat high in the saddle, dressed in full leather armor. She tried to look around, but seemed to have no control over her body. In front of her, she saw dry, sandy soil and cacti. The terrain reminded her of the near-deserts of the east, near Lord Pendleton’s domain. A shout sounded and without any conscious action on her part, she turned her head. The entire Ukh horde rode along behind her.* // Nina relaxed and took a gasping breath. She opened her eyes and found herself back in the mountains. Manny nodded excitedly.

“You saw something, didn’t you? Like tensing a muscle, right? Good job!”

Nina was breathing hard. “Something” seemed a cheap understatement. “Was it a truth-vision then?” she asked. “Something that’s going to happen?”

“Actually, no. It’s happening right now.”

“Now? But that would mean...” It hit her like a splash of cold water. “No!”

Manny nodded, grinning like a small child. “Yes! You’ve got it now! You catch on so quickly!” He beamed at her. “It’s quite exciting.”

Her mind raced. Was it possible? It explained everything, but raised its own questions. Her heart started to pound, and her fists clenched as she worked through the issues. Collius and Fardukai must have been spying on her somehow, all those times she’d been researching magic in the library. How else could they have found the spell? For that matter, how could they have cast it? No, she shook her head, the “how” was a separate issue. The “what” was clear.

Collius and Fardukai had cast the doppelganger spell.

“I don’t *believe* this!” She stomped her foot and growled the words out. “Those bastards stole my idea!”

William stared blankly at her.

“That’s why they needed me out of the way! Don’t you see? Alive, but out of the way.”

“Nina,” he said. “How could I see? I still have *no* idea what’s going on. Am I supposed to do some spooky pond-vision thing too, or what?”

“Oh...” She looked into his eyes and saw an earnest weariness there, tinged with a little sadness. “Right... Well, you know how I told you about all the spells that I researched back in Langia? Looking for a spell that could get Francis off my back?”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Francis assured her. “If you don’t like it from behind, we don’t have to do it very often. I like the face-to-face stuff better anyway.”

Nina’s mouth snapped shut and her eyes popped wide. She tried to continue, but Francis’s comment had completely dammed up her stream of thought.

Off to the side, she saw Manny looking at the ground, his face bright red.

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William stared at Francis in awe and muttered under his breath. “How does he *do* that?” Tyrnon just looked confused.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Where was I?”

William returned his attention to Nina. “Uh... spells.”

“Right.” She nodded, remembering now. “Right. Yes. So one of the spells I found would transmogrify an animal or something into a controllable duplicate of someone. I thought that maybe I could make a copy of Francis. A copy that could take his place, but I could make it leave me alone.”

“Another me? That would have been cool.” Francis interrupted. “He could have done all the boring homework stuff and then I could just spend my time appreciating the *finer* things in life, eh, Nina?”

She sidestepped his attempt to nudge her with his elbow, and pushed through with the rest of her thought. “Only trouble was, the copy was unstable, it needed the original person to be alive, or else it would revert back to its previous form. So obviously, it was no good for my purposes.”

“I think I get it.” William nodded as he spoke. “So they made a twin of you, and that’s why they needed you alive, but out of the way. But what about him?” He gestured at Francis. “Why do they want him dead?”

“I’m guessing that what they really wanted was the same thing that I did. They wanted Francis out of their hair without having to go through a succession war. That’s why they had the security spell. It wasn’t so they could tell people if he died. It was so they could know when it was done!”

“Oh, so *that’s* the spell you were talking about!” shouted Manny. “I wondered what you meant. Nina, there isn’t any spell on him. I think they just told you that to keep you occupied.”

Nina’s jaw dropped. “No spell?”

“Nope. He’s completely magic-free.”

After a moment of stunned silence, she tried to speak. “That’s very...” her eye twitched again, “surprising,” she said.

William turned to Manny again. “Is she in any danger from this spell?”

“No,” said Manny. “The new Nina can’t survive without the original, but it doesn’t work the other way. And now that she knows how to control the visions, they won’t take her off guard anymore. The visions were sort of the magical equivalent of a muscle spasm. When Nina and her double were in similar situations or emotional states, then there was more pressure on their connection. She didn’t know what was happening, and she fought it, so she couldn’t control them.”

“Okay, so that’s good, but *why* did they cast it at all?”

Nina shook her head and tried to pull herself together. “I think that there’s only one

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possible answer. What else could they want with a perfect, but controllable duplicate of me?”

“A double of Nina?” Francis’s voice was hushed with awe, followed by a broad leer. “Excellent.”

She gritted her teeth and ignored him. “They want it to lead my people out of Langia!” William sobered immediately.

“And that just leaves the question of where,” she continued. “That’s harder to know for sure, but when I saw the copy just now, it seemed to be leading them to Lord Pendleton’s realm, east of Langia. They had to be close to his capital. No more than two or three days away.” Breathing deep, she looked at him seriously. “They weren’t just traveling, William. They were suited up for battle.”

He sighed, looking disappointed, but not surprised. “I guess you need to go back, then.”

She cocked her head to one side and raised one brow. “What’s wrong?”

He hesitated, his face pained. “It’s just that...I...” He looked at her with solemn eyes. “If you go back... what happens then?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

Looking at the ground, he shook his head. “No, it’s not important.” He swallowed. “I was just staying to make sure you were all right. It seems like you’ve got everything back under control now. And you’ve got a dragon and a wizard to help you out. I’ll... I’ll just go.”

“Go?” Nina leaned forward, frowning in confusion. “What do you mean, go?”

His eyes told her exactly what he meant.

Her heart suddenly dropped into her stomach and her throat grew tight. “No!” she shouted. “Why? What are you talking about? Why would you go?”

A glimmer of hope rose in the back of his eyes, coloring—but not eclipsing—the sadness there. He stepped forward and held out a hand. “Maybe... Nina... you could come with *me*.”

“William, I don’t understand. I have to go ba—”

“Do you?” he interrupted. A tiny hint of desperation joined the swirling of emotions in his face. “Do you really? I mean, first of all, you said they were only two or three days away from the battle. There’s no way you could make it back in time to stop them. And even if you could... Are you sure that’s what you want to do?”

“What...? William, they’re about to start a war!”

“And I don’t like it any better than you do!” William’s outburst seemed to surprise even him. “But it’s not about you. They aren’t your responsibility!”

“Not my responsibility? Yes, they damn well are!”

“Why?” he snapped. “Just because they were your father’s?”

Her eyes went wide and she took a half-step back.

William closed his eyes and drew his mouth into a tight, thin line. Then he seemed to summon a final reserve of determination. “You don’t have to be their leader just because your

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father was. You are your own person. You are a wonderful, smart, exciting young woman, and you don't have to devote your life to a rag-tag bunch of barbarians just because your father did."

Nina stood quietly, her face serious and her breathing slow and deep. She thought of her father, standing on that ridge, in the early morning darkness before that final battle.

One hand on her shoulder, warm and strong, his loving eyes looking down at her, framed by the rim of his helmet and his thick beard. "You have options, and I want you to know what they are," he had said. "I love what I do, but you have more choices than that. You're really going to be something special one day, and I don't want you to choose a life of looting and pillaging just because you didn't ever try anything else."

She closed her eyes tight to fight the tears she felt approaching, then summoned anger to fight them. "How can you do this to me *now*?" she demanded, shaking her head back and forth. "My people are in danger, there's a *spell* on me! How can you do this to me?" Her breath came hard and fast. "No... No. You're just trying to confuse me. You're still working for *them*, aren't you? You're trying to talk me out of going back and stopping their plan so that you won't lose your stupid money!" As soon as the words had left her mouth, she was sorry.

He swallowed, and hung his head for a moment. When he looked up, his face was filled with shame and regret. His jaw was shut tight, and his gaze still focused on the ground. His voice was strained, as if it struggled past a lump in his throat. "I...I just wanted..."

When he finally made eye contact, his eyes were weary and sad. "You're right. I'm sorry," he said. "I'll just go." With that, he turned and walked slowly toward the campfire. Halfway there, he turned back to Manny. "Thanks for everything." Then to Tyrnon. "I'm glad you're okay. No hard feelings?"

Tyrnon considered that for a moment, then gave him a sober nod. William nodded back and continued walking.

He kneeled to pack up his bedroll and took a small handful of the salted meat from the rations pouch. Nina watched in choked-up silence, feeling as if the world had dropped out from under her. There was so much to say, but she didn't know where to start, or even if she *could* start. She did nothing but watch as William finished packing his things and mounted his horse.

He rode Ardua past where Nina stood and started across Manny's small bridge. It was now or never, and Nina forced the words out. "William! Don't leave..." She swallowed past the tightness in her throat. "Not like this."

He stopped Ardua and looked down at his hands, his back to her. "No... It's better this way."

"I *have* to go back, William."

He nodded and sighed. "I know."

"Come back with me."

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That resulted in a long silence before William turned his horse around to face her again. He gave her a wry grin. "Sorry, Nina, but this stuff...saving armies, ruling kingdoms... there won't be a place for me there."

"But William, I'm not going back to rule! I'm just going back to—"

He shook his head. "You and I are destined for different things. I'm no hero, Nina." He licked his lips and looked her right in the eye. "And you shouldn't settle for anything less."

"But...I mean..." she stammered. "Shouldn't that be my decision to make?"

He shook his head. "I'm making it for you. It's better this way... Clean." He nodded slowly to her. "Good-bye, Nina."

She swallowed. "Good... bye?"

He nodded again, then turned and rode away. She watched in silence until he disappeared over the broken ridge. Then her knees gave out and she fell to the ground. Burying her face in her arms, she knelt on the gravelly soil, while in the west, the sun just started to sink below the horizon.

After a few quiet moments, she felt a hand on her shoulder, and she looked up into the concerned face of the Langian king. "I'm sorry he had to go, Nina. He was pretty cool, and I know you liked him."

Sniffing, she sat back onto her heels and stared at him in a moment of wonder and surprise. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "Thanks, Francis."

He chuckled. "In fact, if I didn't know better, I might have been a little jealous."

Nina had been in the middle of a snuffle, and suddenly exploded into a coughing fit. Francis patted her on the back until she stopped, then he gently brushed a tear off her cheek.

Then he grabbed her around the shoulders and dragged her toward him, planting a kiss on her startled lips. She tried to pull away, but his arms held her fast and she had no leverage. She struggled, making muffled sounds of protest, but he didn't let go until she seized a pressure point under his shoulder and pinched hard. His hands released and he dropped her. She scuttled backwards across the ground until she was out of his reach. Francis sat there, trying to massage out a cramp in his arm.

After a moment, he looked up and grinned. "Did I ever tell you you're a great kisser?"

She closed her eyes for a moment and nodded in silent acceptance, then stood up and dusted herself off. She felt her cheeks for leftover tears and, finding none, she started back to where Tyrnon and Manny were waiting for her.

Tyrnon watched her with earnest concern.

Manny had been collecting the assorted odds and ends he had brought out for the spell.

"I'm sorry," he said, climbing to his feet, still clutching a double armful of magic knick-knacks against his chest. He offered a compassionate smile. "I don't suppose it would help to know that things always work out for the best?"

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She managed a sad grin. Her voice caught in her throat when she tried to speak, so she just crossed her arms and shook her head.

“What I said just now? It isn’t just a line, you know. I know this from personal experience. I’d tell you more, but...well...”

She waved him off. “I know, I know. A lot of math.” She sniffed and gently wiped her nose. “So... I’m going back. What else can you tell me about what I’ll find there?”

He sucked air through his teeth. “Not much, I’m afraid. Whatever I tell you, you’ll be so preoccupied trying to figure out how it all fits into what’s happening and what you should do, that you won’t actually *do* what you should do. Besides...” He smiled and cocked his head. “I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

She couldn’t help allowing a small laugh to escape her lips. Once it was out, she rolled her eyes and managed a smile of her own. “All right, fair enough. What about magic artifacts? Any mystical elixirs, enchanted weapons? Anything like that?”

He laughed with a snort. “Oh, you don’t need any of that stuff. Those things are more trouble than they’re worth.”

Nina raised an eyebrow. “Oh, okay...well then, I guess we’ll be on our way.”

Manny gave her a fatherly smile and gently patted her shoulder. “Well, even though it’s not really a factor, I suppose it’s traditional to wish you good luck.”

Nina managed a smile of her own and nodded. When he withdrew his hand, she turned away, calling out, “Francis! Get the saddle-bags off of the horses. We’re leaving!”

Francis walked up, his face twisted in confusion. “*Off* the horses? Are we going on foot?”

She turned to Tyrnon, who smirked, then reared back on his hind legs, spreading his wings. Both opened flawlessly, not a mark on them, to a span easily as wide as his total body length. He flapped them once dramatically, sending a gust of air rushing past them and fanning the flames of the campfire into a momentary blaze of light.

Nina smiled. “No Francis. We’re going by air.”

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Chapter 22

AND HE LIKES APPLES. But you can't just walk up and give them to him. You have to approach slowly... And not from behind! Don't look him in the eye, either. Just keep your eyes on the ground in front of him, and when you get about ten feet away, gently toss it to him. Otherwise he gets... upset. And he can't be put in a common stable with other horses. He needs his own stall with empty stalls on either side. One on the end is best, actually, if possible. Oh, and I haven't told you how to groom him yet, they'll have to..."

Magni, of course, couldn't come with them. Tyrnon had assured them that he could carry both Nina and Francis, even over a great distance, but adding a horse to the already heavy load was out of the question.

Manny said that he knew a man in town who could take the horses, but as he stood listening to Nina's litany of instructions, his expression of surprise progressed into incredulity, then deepened into alarm.

"Goodness!" he said. "He's an ornery fella, isn't he?" He reached out to pat Magni's nose, but the stallion snapped at him, missing his fingers by a hair's breadth.

Nina winced, her heart sinking. She had always been fairly proud of his hostile demeanor and his refusal to let anyone else ride him, but now she wondered if she hadn't made a mistake in her training.

"Um, Manny? Is there..." She sighed. "Is there something that you can do about him? To help him so that he isn't so..."

"Ornery?"

Nina felt her throat growing tight. She sighed again and looked around, searching for something to look at besides Manny's too-understanding expression. "I'm just worried that stable owner won't be able to do anything with him. If Magni causes him too much trouble... I just don't want the stable owner to have to..."

She met his eyes again and he was kind enough to leave her sentence unfinished.

"Well," he said, "I wish I could tell you that it would be easy, but I'm afraid that he's in for a rough couple of weeks at the very least." He glanced over to Magni, who pawed at the ground uncertainly, then turned back to Nina. "But I'm pretty sure it won't come to... what you're worried about. He'll have to adjust, but he'll be okay."

She nodded, then walked slowly over to Magni. Leaning her forehead against his, she stroked his neck. "Bye, Magni. Be good. Okay?"

He snorted gently and nuzzled her, watching with his huge, dark eyes. She pushed past

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the dull throb of loss, knowing that to let it fully surface would leave her vulnerable to the sharper pangs that cried out for William.

She sniffed and brushed her fingers across his head one last time, then turned away. Manny stood waiting by the campfire, watching her with a wistful smile.

The fire, so bright in the dim moonlight, flickered in his eyes, revealing the slightest glistening in his otherwise happy expression.

“What about you?” she asked. “Will you be okay?” She lowered her head and looked up at him. “Do you... Do you want to come with us? It has to get pretty lonely up here. You can—”

His smile grew wider, but the wistful sadness in his eyes remained. “I can’t,” he said, shaking his head. “I have a job to do here. It’s my duty.” He breathed a quick, gentle sigh. “But thank you for asking.”

“There has to be something that I can do,” she said. “If it wasn’t for you...”

“No, please.” He waved his hands and walked forward to take her hand. “I need nothing in return. It has done my heart good to play a small and primarily expository but nonetheless critical role in your larger story.”

Nina frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Never mind,” he chuckled. “It has been my pleasure.”

She smiled. “Well then, at least accept this, as a small token of my gratitude.” She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Whoo-wooo!” Francis stopped chucking rocks into the ravine long enough to hoot and clap his hands. “Save some of that sugar for me, baby!”

Nina laughed despite herself. Just then, Tyrnon appeared over the nearby ridge and waved at them to follow.

After making it clear that the rocky, uneven ground in the small valley didn’t provide a suitable take-off point, he had gone off to find a better one. And now that he had apparently done so, it was finally time to leave.

Francis jogged over and slapped Manny on the back. “See ’ya later, Manny!”

She looked back and smiled warmly at the wizard. “Goodbye, and thanks again.”

He nodded, a fatherly grin on his face.

As she turned and started toward Tyrnon, she saw her dragon friend looking past her. His face grew serious and he gave a solemn nod. When she glanced back, Manny was saluting, equally serious. She stopped walking and stared, glancing back and forth between them as they held each other’s eyes for several seconds. Finally, they broke the stare and Manny smiled again. When she looked at Tyrnon, he was smiling as well. He waved at her to follow.

She climbed up to the ridge where Tyrnon waited. “What was *that* all about?”

Tyrnon’s face grew thoughtful, but his eyes were wide and bright, looking off into space for a moment. When he returned, he met her eyes and tapped two fingers to his heart.

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Trust

Nina's brow furrowed, but then she smiled. "Okay," she said, repeating his sign. "Trust."

He grinned, then hopped back onto his hind legs in a funny little turn and began to trot down the other side of the ridge, bobbing his head, and waving his tail cheerfully behind him.

She and Francis followed, and as they climbed over and around the various rocks and boulders, Nina watched for a large flat area where Tyrnon could build up enough speed.

But Tyrnon bypassed several likely spots, leading them quite an unexpected distance from Manny's cabin. Then he climbed to the crest of another ridge, where he finally stopped, pointing to the other side with a snort. She jogged up to meet him then skidded to halt. What had seemed like a ridge from lower ground was in fact the lip of a sheer cliff, looming an incredible distance over the ground below, where the moon helpfully illuminated a wide field of jagged rocks and boulders.

"Um...Tyrnon?"

He looked at her with wide, innocent eyes.

"You aren't planning what I think you're planning. Are you?"

He gave a little shrug with his wings and gestured with his head over the cliff.

Putting her hands on her hips and sucking air through her teeth, she looked tentatively over the edge. She nudged a small rock with her toe and watched it fall.

It disappeared from sight long before it hit the bottom.

She took a long, deep breath, then licked her lips. "Okay, Tyrnon. If you say so."

They tied the saddlebags around his hind legs and used some rope to form a pair of makeshift harnesses. Nina mounted Tyrnon first, straddling his long neck and sitting on his shoulders, while Francis rode the haunches behind the wings, steadied by Tyrnon's tail.

Nina gave the small rope handgrip a few experimental tugs and looked again over the edge to the distant ground below. It appeared even farther now, despite the fact that she was only a few feet higher. The harness seemed steady enough, but Tyrnon's neck wasn't wide enough to really straddle properly. She remembered the bumpy ride back in the arena, and the thought of such an awkward, unsteady position way up in the air made her stomach clench. She looked back to see that Francis had settled into place and seemed perfectly comfortable there.

Her gaze returned once more to the cliff, her eyes drawn to the abyss as if by magic. It was a *long* way down. "Tyrnon, are you sure we aren't too hea—?"

Tyrnon leapt over the edge.

A sudden weightlessness lifted her stomach to where it didn't belong and the rushing of wind stung her eyes. She forced herself to watch and so she stared, transfixed by the wide vista that lay before her, in particular by the ever-reducing distance between them and the ground. *It doesn't like us up here*, she thought. *And it's taking us back.*

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She maintained a white-knuckle grip on the small rope harness, even though it seemed a ludicrous trifle at this point. Behind her, she felt Tyrnon's enormous wings beginning to unfold. The wind caught them and they inflated to their full span with an audible pop. She started a sigh of relief, but found she couldn't exhale, as their descent didn't slow in the least. The ground loomed ever closer and individual specks gradually revealed themselves as huge boulders with an almost frustrating slowness. Just as she felt sure that they would be flattened and torn by the rocks below, weight returned with a vengeance.

All the blood drained from her face, leaving her light-headed as Tyrnon suddenly swooped up again, soaring into the air, his wings spread wide. They rose higher and higher, leaving the ground ever farther behind. Soon, they reached an altitude even higher than the cliff they had started from and Tyrnon finally leveled out.

Nina at last released the breath that she had been holding for what seemed like several minutes now. Tyrnon turned his head around and grinned mischievously. She looked way down at the ground and then met his eyes, breathing heavy. A small chuckle of relieved incredulity escaped her lips.

"Whooo-eee! That was awesome!" Francis shouted out from behind her. "Let's do it again!"

"No!" she blurted. Then, slightly embarrassed, she cleared her throat and continued. "I think we'd better just be on our way. Don't you?"

Tyrnon winked and then faced forward again. He flapped his huge wings a few times and they all settled into a smooth glide. Nina looked down at her hands and realized that she still had a death grip on the rope harness. She forced her fists to open and massaged her hands to return the normal blood flow to her fingers. Now, with a much lighter hold and a nice, even flight, she felt relaxed enough to take a look around.

The wind rushed by like a powerful storm, but she knew that it was not really the wind at all. Instead, they were the ones blowing across the countryside, high off the ground and at tremendous speed. How fast, she had no way to judge.

The landscape itself offered scant clues, as it was simply too far away for an accurate reference. Only the highest peaks reached above their current altitude. Below them, the various hills and ridges they had climbed and camped on now resembled nothing so much as folds of a blanket on the ground. Here and there, she spotted small clusters of trees. Whole forests, appearing to be simple flecks of lichen on a stone. The whole world stretched before her, sleeping in the moonlight, so beautiful that Nina felt for a moment that she must be dreaming.

She grinned and closed her eyes, feeling her hair blowing in the wind. She took a deep breath of the crisp night air rushing past her. When she opened her eyes, she saw Tyrnon watching her. He gave a knowing smile before facing front once more.

She watched the back of his head for a while and felt her heart filling again. Somehow,

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she knew she would be okay. Remembering the light she had felt during the spell with Tyrnon, she looked up to the stars that had accepted them so graciously into their company. *Thank you, too*, she thought, and smiled.

The moment over, she blinked her eyes a few times against the wind and tried to examine the ground below for any landmarks she might recognize. Unfortunately, everything looked different from above. Once they got closer to home, she might be able to use her map, but out here, it only covered the passable roads and paths, not every hill on the slope. Tyrnon however, seemed to know exactly where he was going, so she decided to just settle back and enjoy the ride.



Sixteen hours later, she felt decidedly less enthusiastic. First of all, the wind was cold. She had pulled her woolen cap and leather gloves from her pack hours ago, but she had little protection for her face. Her nose was almost numb and her cheeks stung from the wind. Even though she was accustomed to long rides, spending this many hours on the unfamiliar shape of a dragon had also left her legs and rear stiff and sore.

On top of all of that, she was exhausted. They had flown through the night, stopping only once, but even then, they had had little time for rest. And even if she could have managed to doze off in these less-than-comfortable conditions, she didn't dare fall asleep, with the emphasis on *fall*.

Francis however had snored his way through more than half the flight. Stabilized by Tyrnon's tail, he could afford the rest. At least the wind was loud enough to drown out the sound. She couldn't say the same, unfortunately, for the loud, off-key, tavern songs that he used to fill the other half of the flight.

On the plus side, they were making *astounding* time. Their sheer speed coupled with the ability to travel "as the dragon flies" meant that in less than a day, they had covered several weeks' worth of riding. Unfortunately, her map had proved to be less than completely accurate when compared to the view from the air. She tried to sketch quick corrections with a piece of charcoal marker from her pack, but after only a few minutes the wind tore the parchment from her grasp, swatting it against her face then carrying it away into the morning sky.

The rocky foothills of the mountains had given way first to wide rolling grasslands and forests; then, as they flew farther east, to the near-deserts of the Oriland. Spotty patches of green dotted the reddish rocks and sand. Only bordering waterways did she see anything larger than shrubs. Based on her rough figuring, she guessed that they would be catching up to her copy and the barbarian horde within a few hours.

Nina had been keeping tabs on her duplicate's movements by using the pond-vision trick and it looked like the Uhks had nearly reached Atticor Canyon. For some odd reason, the duplicate seemed to be leading them right through the bottom of the canyon.

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Why is it doing that? she wondered. It was violating half the rules of battle strategy! The doppelganger was leading a melee army through narrow, uneven, low ground that left them vulnerable to attack from above while simultaneously making it ridiculously easy to surround them.

At first, Nina assumed that it simply hadn't inherited her ability to plan battle strategy, but as time went on, and as Nina became increasingly certain of the duplicate's direction, she began to suspect otherwise.

Collius and Fardukai were controlling it, and though they had little experience with battle strategy, she could hardly pretend they were stupid. This was not a mistake that they would make. Nina could only reach one conclusion.

Collius and Fardukai weren't interested in conquering Lord Pendleton at all. They wanted to get rid of the Uhks for good, and they had finally found a way to do it. They had likely arranged the whole thing with Lord Pendleton weeks ago. They were leading the Uhks into a trap.

Two hours later, they drew near to the canyon and Nina's suspicions were confirmed. Easily seen from the air, but hidden from the low position of the Uhks, Lord Pendleton's army waited on the high, flat banks, ready to rain death upon anyone passing through the canyon. Tyrnon kept his distance. It wouldn't do to be spotted now, not when they were so close.

She looped the rope handle firmly around her wrist and looked into her mental mirror... *She rode toward the canyon, staring down at the reins in her hands. She sat straight up, her back stiff, her head down. She wasn't changing course, wasn't looking around, wasn't doing anything other than riding forward, directly into the canyon.*

Nina released the vision and took a deep breath. It was weird. The duplicate hadn't been this stiff during her earlier visions. What had changed? She sighed. She would just have to wait and find out.

She leaned forward. "Tyrnon, I know where it is. They haven't entered the canyon yet, so we still have time. Try to circle around to the left of those big reddish rocks, by the bend in the river there. Can you come in low enough that they won't see us?"

Tyrnon nodded and they began to descend, turning in a wide angled arc as he glided closer to the ground. Nina's white-knuckled grip returned as they zipped along the ground at break-neck speed, weaving back and forth between scattered boulders and cacti, aiming directly at a huge cluster of rocks that lay between them and the Uhk horde. All at once, Tyrnon shifted his wings and Nina felt herself being pressed forward. Only her grip on the harness kept her in place as they slowed nearly to a stop, seemed to hover just for a moment and then dropped lightly to the ground.

Nina started to dismount, but her left calf cramped and she fell to the sand with an undignified thud. She scooted away a few feet to lean against a rock and began to massage

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the cramp. As she rubbed her tender calf, Francis slid off Tyrnon's rump, only to catch his foot in the rope harness.

Tyrnon, after satisfying himself that Nina wasn't hurt, marched off to the nearby river for a drink, dragging a protesting Francis along behind him.

Nina grinned to herself as she continued kneading her stiff muscles. After Tyrnon finished drinking he wandered back over to their landing site, still dragging a now-soaked Francis along by the foot.

The cramp in her calf finally relaxed and she looked up at Tyrnon's wide expectant eyes. "Thank you, Tyrnon. I couldn't have made it here without you."

He smiled and nodded.

"But in the future, let's try to plan for shorter trips."

He grimaced and nodded again emphatically, gingerly flexing his wings. A frustrated grunt and an unintelligible string of curses at his rear reminded him of Francis, and he reached back with his long neck to bite through the ropes, which Francis had managed to twist around both his arms.

Nina untied the fastenings on her thick coat. Now that she was out of the strong wind, she discovered that the bulky winter clothes were a bit stuffy. Even her simple traveling clothes began to feel warm in the sunny desert air.

She stood up and cleared her throat. When Tyrnon and Francis looked her way, she spoke. "Okay, here's the deal. I don't think either of you are going to be able to sneak up on anybody, so I need you to stay here for now. I'm going to wrap up in a scarf, so no one will recognize me until I can get near the front of the pack. Then I'm going to reveal myself to the horde. They'll be a little confused at first, I'm sure, but I'll bet they're already a little confused about the duplicate's plan and behavior. When I warn them about Pendleton's army, they'll know I'm the real me and I can get rid of the copy. Then I'll lead the horde away from the canyon. Hopefully, we can get them out before Pendleton circles around to cut us off. Sound good?"

Francis blinked. "Huh?" She had expected his stupidity, but she didn't expect Tyrnon to shake his head.

"No?" She frowned. "Why not?"

Tyrnon started to point behind her, but she had already felt a flash of awareness. She turned around just in time to see the duplicate leaping from the top of a boulder, sword drawn.

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Chapter 23

NINA DROPPED TO THE GROUND AND ROLLED AWAY, HER ATTACKER'S THRUSTING HEEL MISSING HER BY ONLY INCHES. It should have been more, but Nina was tired, stiff, sore and hungry after the long flight. Her thighs ached with the unwelcome exertion and when she rolled, her shoulder hit the ground harder than she had intended. She started for her sword, but the duplicate was already spinning around in a new attack and she had no time. Instead, she pulled her dagger and braced for a strong block.

Legs planted and both hands on the dagger, she deflected the duplicate's sword far enough to avoid being filleted, but the blow painfully jarred her wrists. She couldn't fight this way for long. She needed to draw her sword, but her duplicate had already started another slash. Nina set her jaw in determination and tried to keep the cold stabs of fear from showing in her eyes.

The doppelganger was perfect. Nina fought a wave of disorientation; like the pond-vision, but ten-fold. Her own reflection now acted outside of her control. It wore a set of Nina's light leather armor with vest, arm and leg guards, and it had tied its hair back in the same braid that Nina always wore. Nina parried a few quick, light thrusts. Now that the surprise ambush had failed, the duplicate was testing her out, watching how she moved before it committed to a riskier attack, just what Nina would have done in its place. Unfortunately, Nina was not at her best; and, worse, the copy almost certainly knew that.

Nina feinted left, left again, then sprinted to the right, hoping to put enough distance between them to draw her sword, but the ploy failed, and the copy brought its blade around, catching Nina across the back with the flat, knocking her off balance, then slashing her left arm: painful, but thankfully not deep.

Gritting her teeth, Nina stumbled. She recovered her footing, but not soon enough to escape, as the duplicate advanced again. Nina backed away. The copy offered a few more light thrusts, which Nina parried easily, but her double continued to advance. It was trying to corner her. She tried to sense the shape of the rocks behind her without taking her eyes off the double. She couldn't let it back her into the rocks.

Ha, she thought to herself. *It's all fine and good to say that I don't want to be cornered, but what can I do about it?* She ducked a high slash, too slow. The tip of the sword nicked her braid, sending several strands spilling around her shoulders. *Well, if the copy knows all my normal moves...*

Nina parried the copy's next thrust with a little more strength, knocking its sword far

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enough to the side that she had room to leap forward and tackle her duplicate around the waist.

They went over together, but the duplicate managed to ram its knee into Nina's stomach. Gasping for breath, Nina tried to bring her dagger around for a stab under the leather vest, but the copy squirmed out of her grasp and caught Nina with a glancing blow to the forehead with the hilt of its sword.

Her vision swam, and consciousness threatened to abandon her. She fought her way through the heavy, dull throbbing and did her best to crawl out of the way, but the doppelganger had already regained its feet. A kick to the hand and Nina dropped her dagger. *And that's why I never do things like that*, she thought.

Then the copy reached down from behind her and grabbed her around the throat with one arm. Nina could have, in theory, broken the headlock, but the only way out required her to disembowel herself on the sword pressed against her stomach. The copy kept her leaning back, off balance, and Nina was caught tight.

She prepared for the end, but the copy didn't run her through. It didn't break her neck. It didn't even slash her gut. Instead, it just stood there, breathing hard. When it spoke, Nina heard the same tone of annoyance that she frequently used when dealing with Francis. "What kind of stupid move was *that* supposed to be?"

Nina blinked a few times, trying to clear the dizzy stars from her head. She craned her neck, trying to look up at the duplicate, then smiled. "It's known as a diversion."

Nina couldn't see its face, but her double froze for a moment. Then, slowly, it turned around, pulling Nina along with it, to see Tyrnon's angry face about three feet away. His upper lip curled into a snarl, and twin trails of acrid, bitter smoke rose from his nostrils.

The duplicate took a long deep breath, then completed its turn, bringing Nina around to place her in the middle. Then, in a slow, cautious voice, it spoke. "Mr. or Mrs. Dragon, I have no quarrel with you. This girl is trying to kill me and doom my people, and I'm not about to let her. But I don't necessarily need to kill her, so why don't we calm down and work this out?"

Tyrnon's scowl relaxed a touch and he raised a scaly brow.

Nina saw Francis standing off to the side with a pensive expression on his face and one hand to his chin as if deep in thought. "Now how do we tell which one is the real Nina?"

Both she and the copy spoke simultaneously and with equal contempt. "We're wearing different clothes, you halfwit!"

Nina tried again to see the copy's face. It seemed they had more in common than she had realized. On that note, Nina wondered why she was still alive. This thing was supposed to be her exact copy and she had never been one to hesitate. She wouldn't fight this way unless...

"Tyrnon!" She shouted. "This thing *knows* it can't kill me! Remember? The copy can't exist

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without the original. If it kills me, it will turn back into whatever they made it from.”

The sharp pressure of the sword twitched against her stomach and the duplicate’s arm tightened around her neck, nearly cutting off her air. It shifted its weight impatiently, rocking Nina back and forth.

“Right,” it said finally, still speaking to Tyrnon. “But let’s not forget, I’m still the one in control here, and it seems that I have three options. The first? I let her go, and one of you kills me... Have to be honest, I’m not a fan of option number one.”

While the doppelganger spoke, Nina slowly started pulling one foot underneath her, hoping to get enough leverage to push her double over, but the copy suddenly took a step back, pulling her off balance again. “Please don’t move, or else I’ll have to go with option number two. Meaning, I kill you and then I disappear. Again, not a fan. But it’s better than option number one.”

Tyrnon cocked his head and looked thoughtful.

Nina struggled to speak. “Tyrnon, don’t *ulp*—” The copy jerked Nina’s head up with its arm.

“Please don’t interrupt,” it said. “I’m just getting to the best one: Option number three. I give a little whistle, and none of you try anything stupid.” Then it whistled through its teeth, long and high. Almost immediately, about fifteen Uhks with drawn bows appeared from behind the rocks.

Tyrnon looked around at the archers, but didn’t seem particularly concerned. He looked back at Nina and the copy and nodded lightly.

“Right,” said the copy. “So we understand each other. Now that the situation is a little more even, I’m going to let go of her.” Speaking to Nina, it continued. “Please don’t try anything. I told them not to question my orders, no matter what they see. They might feel strange about shooting you, but at the very least I don’t think that they’ll have a problem turning your dragon buddy into a pincushion. But, just the same, I’d really prefer they save their arrows for Lord Pendleton’s guys. We have a deal?”

Nina gave an exasperated sigh, but relented. “Yeah, yeah.”

The copy released its grip around Nina’s neck and stepped away, letting her fall to the ground. Nina stood and brushed herself off, standing opposite her double. “Was that really necessary?”

The copy rolled its eyes, sheathed its sword and stood with its legs apart, hands on hips. “So, look. I know I’m smart, so that means you must be smart. Even though it apparently never occurred to you that the visions go both ways. Regardless, let’s be sensible about this. You don’t really want to be here. So why don’t you just take off?”

Nina frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“The royal advisors told me all about it. How you couldn’t handle the responsibility of leadership, so you just left. Went to do your own thing, leaving our people to rot in that

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po-dunk little kingdom even though you knew they were capable of so much more. So the advisors just said 'good riddance' to you and then magicked me up to take your place so I could lead our people back to the glory they deserve." The copy smiled at the thought, then scowled at Nina. "The only reason you're here now is because you're jealous that I'm going to succeed where you failed!"

"What?" Nina snorted in disbelief. "You've got *some nerve* talking about leading *my* people. You're leading them right into a slaughter! Where's the glory in that?"

The copy snorted with disgust. "Why shouldn't I lead them to a slaughter? That's what they were born for, or don't you remember? Just because *you've* gone soft doesn't mean *they* have! So why don't you just go back to whatever piddly little excuse for a quest you were on, and leave the conquering to those of us who can hack it!"

"Conquering?" Nina threw her hands up in frustration. "Who do you think you're conquering?"

"Duh? Lord Pendleton. That guy's been asking for it for years now."

Nina opened her mouth to shout again, but stopped short and just stared at the copy for a moment. "You don't even *know*!"

The copy folded its arms across its chest and rolled its eyes again. "Know what?"

All of Nina's anger drained away in an instant, replaced by compassion. "Lord Pendleton's army is waiting for you above the canyon. We saw them as we flew over." She looked back and gestured at Tyrnon, who nodded. "Collius and Fardukai set you up."

It... *she* kept her arms crossed, and her face was disbelieving, but Nina could tell that the bottom had dropped out of her confidence. "But..." She put one hand to her forehead, as if she hoped it could calm the conflicting thoughts running through her mind. "But they would never do that to me." Her voice was quiet and afraid, but then her eyes flashed and the anger returned. She stabbed an accusing finger at Nina. "No! It's a trick! You're trying to trick me somehow!"

Nina swallowed and remained calm. "You can send the scouts to verify it if you want, but I'm telling you the truth. I'm sure you have the impression that the advisors are trustworthy, but don't trust your thoughts. Trust your feelings here. Do you like Collius and Fardukai?"

The doppelganger's anger slowly deflated again. Her face uncertain, she thought for a moment. "No, I don't."

Nina nodded. "And do they like you? Or the Uhks?"

She frowned. "No... They don't."

"And your plan... It was their idea, wasn't it? I'm guessing it seemed risky and dangerous, but they promised you that it would work. Right? They probably told you that Lord Pendleton's army was farther south?"

All the time that Nina was speaking, her double grew increasingly pale. She looked on the verge of being sick. Her knees trembled, then buckled, and she fell to the ground. Her

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mouth hung open and her hands trembled. “But...I...” She looked up, horrified. “Why did I *believe* them?”

Nina approached and knelt by her side. “It’s the spell. Don’t you have my memory of researching it?”

Eyes glistening, she shook her head. “No, not really. I sort of have... shadows of your memories.”

“Okay,” Nina tried to sound comforting. “The doppelganger... *you*... you have a magical suggestibility. The spell wasn’t very clear what form it would take, but... I think it’s just that you always believe what people tell you. It’s supposed to be a way to control you.” She sighed. “I’m guessing the advisors didn’t tell you that part.”

The copy squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. A tear trailed down her cheek.

Nina swallowed, feeling her own eyes tearing up. She held out a hand to touch her double’s shoulder, but her new sister jerked away from the touch and looked at Nina in fear. “How do I know that *you’re* telling the truth?”

Ooh, Nina thought. *That’s a good point. How can I prove it?* Nina gave a quick sigh and chewed gently on her lower lip. “Um. Because...” She looked over at Tyrnon, but he just shrugged. Her face grew serious and she looked her copy straight in the eye. “Because I *am* telling you the truth. I really am. I promise.”

Copy-Nina relaxed a little. “Oh, good. I was scared there for a second.”

Nina nodded and gave Tyrnon an uncertain glance. He just shrugged again. “Okay, uh... Nina,” she said awkwardly, “now we have to—”

“Call me Kimberly.”

Nina was taken aback. She frowned and cocked her head. “What?”

“We can’t both be Nina, can we?” Kimberly sniffed and wiped the tears from her eyes. “And since I’m the fake, it should be me that changes.”

Nina’s mouth dropped open. She closed it and tried to look reassuring. “You... you’re not... *fake*... exactly. You’re just... new.”

Kimberly climbed to her feet with a new determination. “Save it. This is my decision, not yours.” She stepped forward and looked Nina in the eye, her jaw set and her eyes narrowed in defiance. “Or do you have a problem with that?”

Nina didn’t back down. To do so now could be disastrous. Her double didn’t need pity; she needed to win something. Nina stayed right in Kimberly’s face. “Fine by me.”

They stood there glaring at each other, facing each other down in silence.

“*Come on!*” shouted Francis impatiently. “Are you two going to kiss or what?”

Nina covered her face with her hands, but Kimberly stared at Francis in shock. When she looked back to Nina, she seemed to be thinking of something far away. “He’s... always that obnoxious, isn’t he?”

“Are you kidding? That was pretty tame for Francis.”

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Kimberly turned and stared at him, perplexed, for far longer than Nina felt comfortable. All she said was: “Hmm.” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

Nina fidgeted in silence. She didn’t know what her twin was thinking, but it felt rude and awkward to interrupt, not to mention frustrating. How could Kimberly be so like her and yet still so hard to figure out? Kimberly broke the stare and looked around. Nina followed her gaze.

The Uhk archers had long since lowered their bows and started whispering amongst themselves. Tyrnon sat off to the side, eyeing them and looking vaguely uncomfortable. Nina heard a rustle of parchment. She looked to see that Kimberly had taken out her map and spread it across a boulder.

“I think we had better figure out what we’re going to do here,” she said.

Nina nodded and joined Kimberly at the map, but as she examined it, her heart sank. Tyrnon had been flying too low to give her a good view of the Uhk position, but seeing it now on the map made things clear. It was too late. She quickly marked the positions of Lord Pendleton’s forces. “This is where they’re waiting, and here is where they are surely already moving to cut off our escape.”

Kimberly somberly examined the map. “Could have been a lot worse. If you hadn’t seen them... We’d have been in the canyon before we saw them. We’d have been helpless.” She looked Nina in the eye and hesitated, another sentence on the tip of her tongue.

She swallowed it and cleared her throat before bending over the map again. “So... um, Nina, I think we should lead the guys up around this way. Pendleton will see us moving of course, but I think that this way we can cut him off and take him while he’s coming down the slope. Hopefully, the forces behind us will just be waiting for us to retreat. If so, we can push forward instead and get back to them later.” She nodded to herself. “It’s making the best of a bad situation. We’ll lose a lot of people, but it could work. There’s still hope.” Kimberly nodded to Tyrnon with respect. “I can see having you around is going to be a huge advantage in battle strategy.”

Tyrnon frowned and straightened up his posture. He looked at Nina and signed. *No* His eyes were very serious. *You* *Speak* *No*

Nina placated him with a quick nod and held up her hands, asking him to wait.

Kimberly frowned. “What was *that* all about?”

“Well, I may have an alternative to fighting,” said Nina, then she looked around at the confused Uhks. “But first, I think we have some explaining to do.”



Kimberly didn’t like the plan until Nina told her that it would work, at which point she promptly agreed.

Exploiting her double’s weakness still didn’t feel right, but Nina had more immediate

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concerns in mind at the moment, and a solution to Kimberly's suggestibility would have to wait.

Nina put on Kimberly's armor to prevent, or more accurately, to *provoke* a sense of identity confusion, while Kimberly wore the lighter set that Nina had in her pack.

Nina returned to the horde first while Kimberly, Tyrnon and Francis stayed hidden in the rocks. She whistled long and high to gain their attention. The horde stopped their progress toward the canyon and assembled around her within a few seconds of her whistle.

Wow, thought Nina. *Kimberly has really whipped these guys into shape.* "Okay! Um, thank you," she said. "I know you guys were really eager to get in there and fight Pendleton, but I want you to hang back for a second. I've got a couple of things to show you all, but they are going to be a little shocking. So I don't want any of you to so much as draw your sword. You hear me? Weapons are off limits until I tell you different!"

The crowd mumbled their reluctant assent.

"Okay then, Tyrnon, Kimberly, come on out!"

They emerged from their hiding spots in the rocks and as soon as they were spotted, a cry of "Dragon!" sounded through the dry desert air, followed by the sound of swords being drawn and crossbows being loaded. The group surrounded them immediately and began to move in for the kill.

"*Hey!*" Nina shouted. "What did I *just* say? Back off!"

"That's right!" Kimberly agreed. "You had all better lower your weapons *right* now!"

Until then, all their concentration had been focused on the dragon. When they noticed Kimberly, they did what could only be described as a group double take. Their cohesive attack dissolved quickly into confusion.

Tyrnon maintained a passive stance, but Nina could still see the tension in his back.

"Okay, here's the deal," shouted Nina. "You guys are all going to calm down and I'll explain everything."

The barbarians had lowered their weapons, but were clearly still agitated. They turned frustrated glances to one another and whispered angrily amongst themselves.

"Good," she said, calming a little. "I'm glad to see that some of you at least can still follow orders. Let me start with the dragon. Here's the thing—"

"Chathar!" Kimberly shouted, glaring at the man approaching Tyrnon from the rear. "What are you doing with that axe?"

The tall, burly barbarian paused uncertainly. Shifting his feet awkwardly, his mouth hanging slightly open, he looked at the ground, then at his axe. He gasped, as if surprised to see it there in his hand, then quickly hid it behind his back and blushed.

Nina couldn't help staring at him for a moment. Somehow in the last ten years, this man, one of her father's favorites, had turned into an old man.

Nina crossed her arms and scowled at the assembled barbarians. The Uhk horde was not

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what it once had been.

“Tyrnon has traveled far from the distant land of the dragons to see you. The dragons there tell tales of the fearsome Uhk horde. Tales of your glory, tales of your viciousness and skills in battle. He came because he wanted to see the truth for himself. And now that he has laid his eyes upon you, he is truly humbled, and has requested to join our cause.” She surveyed the assembled barbarians with a grim expression. “No one is to attack him, ambush him, or attempt to harm him in any way. Is that clear?”

Jonath, her father’s short, thick lieutenant, sheathed his sword and stepped forward. His shoulders were bony now, and slightly hunched. He licked his lips and didn’t make eye contact. “We’re sorry, Nina...” he looked awkwardly over at Kimberly, who had walked up to stand beside Nina. “...um, Ninas... How can he join our cause? Dragons are evil, fearsome monsters.” He looked around at his comrades, who agreed with a chorus of nods. “We’ve got an ageless hatred of the whole race.”

“Get over it,” said Nina.

Jonath stuck out his lower lip in a pout, but pulled it back in again when Kimberly leaned forward and glared.

Nina looked around to address the rest of the horde. “Tyrnon is going to be hanging around for a while, and if I...” She glanced at Kimberly, who stood with arms crossed and a scowl on her face. “If *we* hear that any of you has given him any trouble at all, *we’ll* see to it that...uh...”

“We’ll bring back ‘spike-and-cucumber,’” Kimberly finished.

Collectively, the entire horde winced.

Nina frowned, leaning over to Kimberly. “Spike-and-cucumber?”

Kimberly smiled. “Oh, it’s a little something I came up with while you were gone. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Nina shrugged, then turned back to the horde. “Right. What she said. Everybody clear on that?” They all nodded. “Okay then, here’s the plan. We’re all going back to Langia. I think we had a pretty good setup, so I figure we stay there for a while longer. What do you say?”

The Uhks frowned and muttered amongst themselves. Slowly, a tentative hand rose above the crowd. “You mean we ain’t gonna fight Pendleton?”

“No, we aren’t.”

Their mood turned from simple confusion to deep disappointment and consternation. She heard weapons being shifted impatiently in frustrated hands.

She stood tall and surveyed the crowd. “Why do you think that we were bringing you here to fight Pendleton? Do you think that we care about conquering his land? Why would we? He lives on a stupid desert, for crying out loud. Do you really want to conquer a *desert*? What are you going to steal? *Sand*? Feel like picking cactus-prickers out of your backsides for the next few months? I mean, look how hot it is here! It’s like this *all the time!* You really

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want to conquer *this?*” She held her hands out to the side, encompassing the surrounding landscape. “Well?”

The crowd murmured some more, but she interrupted them quickly.

“Of course you don’t. I don’t either.” She glanced at Kimberly for a moment before returning her attention to the horde-members before her. “*We* don’t.”

Jonath stepped forward again, confusion visible on his wrinkled face. “Speaking of... uh... *we*. I mean, not *we* like you and *us*, but more like *you*. Not just you, but well, you and... um, *you*... Well, you know what I mean.” He looked at Kimberly. “You, too.”

For a moment, neither of them answered. Instead, she and Kimberly just glared at him, each with one eyebrow raised. After letting him squirm for a moment, Nina finally spoke. “She’s my sister.”

“Oh...” said Jonath, nodding. Then the confusion returned. “But you don’t have a sister.”

Nina rolled her eyes. “Sure I do,” she said. “See? Here she is.” She gestured at Kimberly. “Don’t you remember? Kimberly got accidentally left behind in one of the villages that we were pillaging when we were little. I can see it just like it was yesterday. Are you guys really going to tell me that you don’t remember? Or have you all had a few too many clubs to the head over the years?” She smiled. “Come on, show of hands? Who remembers her?”

The Uhks looked around at each other in confusion.

Kimberly stepped forward and glared menacingly. “You mean you pathetic excuses for barbarians really *forgot* about me? Why, I oughta—”

About half the crowd suddenly raised their hands. The rest quickly followed.

“I remember now!”

“Of course, it happened just after the, uh... *thing*.”

“The thing? Oh *right!* The thing! Of course.”

Kimberly glanced back to Nina with a mischievous smile. “I love that,” she mouthed.

Nina grinned, then stepped forward once more. She held up her hands until she had their attention again.

“Right. So now that that’s settled, I believe that I was talking about why we brought you all here. It wasn’t to conquer some stupid desert or even some wannabe ruler like Pendleton. No. It was to bring you back to *glory!*”

She smiled, pacing back and forth, raising her voice with joyous enthusiasm. “We’ve had a pretty sweet deal back in Langia for the last ten years, but it’s made us small. Don’t you remember the glory days? People all over all the known lands spoke my father’s name in hushed tones. People feared us! We were an *example* to the decadent rich. Don’t accumulate more than you can protect. Not unless you want to be cut back down to size by the swing of an axe.

“Langia’s neighbors are still afraid of us, but beyond them? People are starting to forget. And we thought it was about time that the Uhk horde reminds them all *what a barbarian*

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horde can really do!"

The throng erupted into cheers. Nina nodded excitedly back to Kimberly, who grinned and rolled her eyes. Nina returned her attention to the crowd, holding up her hands again.

"We thought that Pendleton would be a challenge. We thought that he would be an opportunity to show the world that the Uhks have *still got it!*" She paused for another few seconds of cheering. "But you know what? First, we get out here and find out that he lives in a stupid desert. Then, we take a look at his army, and they were, if I'm any judge, *truly* pathetic. They are *not* the worthy foes that we deserve. What kind of victorious return would that be? We show up and slaughter them inside of fifteen minutes? Is that how you want to show the land who we are? By stepping on a *bug?*"

The Uhks frowned and shook their heads. A few boos sounded over the crowd.

"Of course you don't! I don't either. No. We're going to find a battle worth fighting. It's going to be glorious. It will be legendary. It will remind the world to fear our names!"

They all cheered again, clapping their hands and whistling, whooping and hollering.

"And *in the meantime*, we're going to go back to Langia and have *beer and pork-ribs!*"

The Uhk horde exploded into the largest round of cheers so far. As they shouted and waved their hands, shaking their axes and swords in the air, Nina smiled. Her people might be simple, but she had to admire their enthusiasm. She sighed happily and took a moment to enjoy watching them as they grinned and cheered and slapped each other on the back.

"All right! I want you all to camp here for the night. I have a few more things to take care of and then we'll eat. After dinner, Kimberly and I are going to take Tyrnon and the king on back to Langia to get everything ready for your return. Jonath, you're in charge. Bring everybody back, and we'll have a feast *worthy of the Uhk horde!*"

The Uhks cheered again, sounding an ovation that lasted several minutes.

Nina turned back to Kimberly and Tyrnon. "All right. That went reasonably well. Now all we have to do is convince Lord Pendleton to get out of our way."

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Chapter 24

NINA WALKED INTO THE CANYON ALONE. The river was low this time of year, so she walked along a rocky bank that would be covered with water in the spring. The canyon walls towered above her and under different circumstances, she would have thought the multi-colored layers quite beautiful. At the moment, however, she was more concerned with the probability of Lord Pendleton's men dropping giant rocks on her head.

His officers, surely, were smart enough to wonder why she was alone and not order an attack, but you never knew when some bowstring-happy little rookie would think that she made an easy target.

Just as she had suspected, Lord Pendleton's men had already moved around to begin cutting off the Uhk escape. If it came to a fight, some of the horde might break through and survive. If things went well, they might even win, but if things went badly...

She didn't consult her map now, but she was nearing the center of a wide bend in the river, directly below the highest concentration of Pendleton's forces. She looked up to where the lip of the canyon wall met the sky and caught a couple of spotters looking down at her. They were fairly well hidden, considering. If she hadn't been expecting them, she probably wouldn't have seen them at all. Then again, under normal circumstances, she wouldn't be traveling through the bottom of a canyon.

She put her hands to her mouth and shouted. "Hey! You there! Tell Pendleton that Nina Kimberly the Merciless is on to his little ambush, and that if he doesn't get his butt down here and talk to me I'm going to have my berserkers go up there and send him down the short way!"

The spotters disappeared from view for a few seconds. Finally, one of them poked his head back over the lip of the cliff above her. "Um... Okay, just a second! We'll ask him!"

Nina folded her arms and waited some more. She kicked at a stone with her boot and sighed. The guy was probably off in a command tent somewhere. She hoped he wouldn't be long.

After a few minutes, another head poked over the cliff for a second, then withdrew. She listened carefully and thought she heard raised voices. Finally, the head looked down at her again. "I am Lord Pendleton. You are Nina Kimberly the Merciless?"

Nina put her hands on her hips and looked up. "Let's skip the small talk, Pendleton. Are you coming down here so we can talk like normal people or what?"

"In all honesty, I would really rather not. Talking is acceptable, but I do not intend to be

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a hostage.”

She nodded to herself; she had expected as much. “Can you control your men?”

He snorted, obviously insulted. “Of course I can.”

Good, she thought. *Now it's a point of honor*. “Well then, control them. I'm coming up.” She whistled through her teeth, long and high, and waited. Presently, she heard shouting and commotion from the top of the canyon walls.

After a moment, Tyrnon's huge silhouette soared into the thin slice of sky framed by the canyon walls. He circled the area a couple of times, making sure that everybody saw him before he swooped down into the canyon. He glided down, zipping along the canyon floor straight for her, Kimberly astride his shoulders with wide eyes and a death grip on the rope harness. Nina smiled; things were going just as planned.

She waved to them and then sprinted in the opposite direction, getting up to speed. After only a few seconds, Tyrnon caught her under her arms and lifted her off the ground. She rode underneath his belly, feeling the powerful muscles moving above her as Tyrnon flapped a few times and rose up and out of the canyon. He circled again and then came in for a landing by the spot which had until recently been occupied by Lord Pendleton.

For his part, Pendleton had retreated to a position well back from the cliff face and surrounded himself with soldiers, probably on first sight of the dragon.

Tyrnon slowed up a great deal before letting Nina go. She hit the ground running and almost stumbled, but managed to keep her feet as Tyrnon and Kimberly continued over her head another thirty feet or so before touching down. Once on the ground, Kimberly dismounted and both she and Tyrnon walked over to where Nina waited.

Nina approached Lord Pendleton nonchalantly, then stood with her hips tilted and her arms crossed. “There, that's better. I don't enjoy looking up at people when I speak to them. Makes my neck stiff.”

Most of the nearby soldiers looked back and forth between Nina, Kimberly, and Tyrnon, apparently unable to decide who scared them more, but Lord Pendleton just looked annoyed. He was a tall man with a short beard and slender build. He wore expensive armor, but it bore the slight imperfections of repaired battle scars. Finally, after watching Tyrnon for a moment, presumably to ascertain the likelihood of an immediate attack, he cleared his throat and stepped forward. He gave both Nina and Kimberly a long appraising look, then nodded, with a terse “Mm-*hm*. Which one of you is Nina Kimberly the Merciless?”

Kimberly stepped forward to stand next to Nina. “We both are.” Nina nodded in agreement.

He pursed his lips and contemplated them again. “Mm-*hm*. Care to explain that?”

Nina glanced at Kimberly, as if to consult her, before turning back to Pendleton. “No, I don't think so.”

He nodded and folded his arms. “And the dragon?”

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Nina smiled. "I think he pretty much speaks for himself."

Tyrnon grinned, showing lots of teeth.

"Mm-hm." Pendleton nodded again. "Well then, Misses the Merciless, it is an honor to meet you both."

Kimberly chuckled. "Right, and I'm sure it would have been a big honor to use intelligence information from a couple of traitors to ambush us from above instead of meeting us on an honest field of battle."

He didn't bat an eye. "Surely, a leader who cares about his people does not risk them needlessly when safer opportunities present themselves."

Kimberly gave a derisive snort, but Nina raised an eyebrow and considered the man for a moment. Finally, she nodded, gently shaking a finger at him. "I like your attitude. I like it because you sound like a man who can do the odds in his head."

"Odds?"

"You thought this would be a surprise ambush and that you would take out our entire force with minimal casualties. Right?"

He thought for a moment before deciding on honesty. "Yes, that's correct."

"Well, that plan doesn't really work for us. So you can forget about that. If you still want to fight, the battle will be messy, with heavy losses. And with all due respect... You'll lose. But that will take a lot of time that we would rather spend getting back to Langia and having a frank discussion with our royal advisors. So we have a counter-proposal."

"I'm listening."

"We're going to turn our army around and go back to Langia, and your men are going to get out of our way. In exchange, we won't kill them. What do you say?"

He blinked, staring at Nina with narrowed eyes. "You're running away?"

Kimberly's face grew dark, but Nina held out a hand to caution her while keeping her eyes on Lord Pendleton. "No. We, you and I, as leaders who care about our respective peoples, are mutually deciding that we would rather do business than kill each other."

After a moment, Pendleton looked over to Kimberly, who leaned against Tyrnon's shoulder with her arms crossed. She shrugged. "Don't look at me," she said. "I think we should fight. This is all her idea." She gestured back to Nina with her head.

He thought it over for several minutes. Finally, he spoke. "I must admit, your proposal intrigues me... But this sort of arrangement hardly seems consistent with your reputation. It seems quite possible that you are negotiating only because you feel you are at a severe handicap in the coming battle. In which case, I would be foolish not to take advantage. Wouldn't I? Doubling yourself and controlling the dragon may be mere trickery." He watched them, his eyes cautious and his thin lips pursed together behind his dark beard.

Nina didn't blink. "Well, then..." She stepped forward and stared him in the eye, calm and inscrutable. "I guess you'd better call our bluff."

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He cocked his head and examined her again. At last, he nodded. "My men will stand down and allow you to leave."

Nina smiled. "I'm glad we could come to an arrangement."

Kimberly had stepped forward and rejoined them. "Needless to say, Collius and Fardukai will no longer be handling Langia's affairs, so whatever agreements you had with them will be void. But I think that we can do business with each other. Send us an emissary in a few weeks and we'll talk."

He nodded. "I'll do just that."

Nina and Kimberly climbed aboard Tyrnon, Nina in front and Kimberly in back. "We'll circle around until we see your men on the south slope moving out of our path, then we'll be on our way."

"Of course," he said, and they turned toward the cliff for takeoff. "Oh, and ladies?"

"Yes?" They spoke in unison.

"It has indeed been an honor." He gave them a deep bow.

Nina nodded and smiled. "For all of us," she said.

Tyrnon waited for the moment to end and then leapt off the edge. They picked up speed and then soared into the air, leaving Pendleton and his soldiers behind. Once they leveled out, Tyrnon settled into a slow lazy circle around the whole area. Nina turned and looked back past Tyrnon's wings at Kimberly. "I told you it would work!" She shouted.

"I know," Kimberly nodded, shouting back through the wind. "I believed you."

Nina bit her lower lip again. *Yes, you did*, she thought. *Something's going to have to be done about that.* "So," she shouted. "What do you say we go back to Langia and have a little chat with the royal advisors?"

Kimberly grinned. "I'd say that sounds like an excellent idea."



Lord Pendleton kept his word and soon, a series of flag-wavers signaled the order from his command tent to the troops waiting below. Nina, Kimberly and Tyrnon watched from the air as his men began to withdraw from their position behind the horde.

She brought Tyrnon in for a landing near the Uhk horde and they began preparations for one last meal before heading back to Langia.

Dinner with her people filled Nina's heart in a way that she hadn't really expected. Sitting around a blazing fire far larger than strictly required, laughing and joking over roast whatever-they-could-catch, Nina thought about her father, and his love for these people.

She wasn't like them. Not really. And she didn't wish to be. But eating with them, watching them enjoy themselves, she didn't want them to be anything else.

After the meal, Nina, Kimberly, and Francis prepared for the flight back to Langia. They left most of their things behind. When they returned to the palace, either they would have

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time to find new supplies or they wouldn't be around long enough to need them.

What they would find at the royal palace remained to be seen. Certainly the Langian Royal Army would hesitate to attack their own king, but she had no way of knowing what Collius and Fardukai might have told them since Kimberly left with the Uhks.

So they brought only their weapons.

With three passengers now, seating space on Tyrnon's back was in short supply. One in front on his shoulders and two in back on his haunches seemed the obvious solution, but it presented at least one potential difficulty.

"So who's sitting with me?" asked Francis and his expression gave Nina the heebie-jeebies.

Kimberly bravely offered to endure him, but Nina insisted that he sit in front while she and Kimberly sat in back. She could only hope that Francis would manage to stay aboard without Tyrnon's tail holding him in place.

And worse, with yet another passenger, Tyrnon insisted on another vertical takeoff. Nina soon discovered that riding the rear did not provide much improvement over her previous position. As Tyrnon bounded toward the cliff over the canyon, his leaping stride felt all the more exaggerated, and when he leapt off the edge, she found herself falling at an even steeper angle than before.

Only Nina's tightly clenched teeth kept her from crying out as Kimberly's fingers dug into her arms.

When they leveled out, Nina finally managed to breathe again. Once she had refilled her lungs and settled back into her normal rhythm, she reached back and carefully disengaged Kimberly's fingernails from her upper arms.

"*Wheeeeeeeoooo!*" Francis shouted. "I will *never* get tired of *that!*"

When they arrived at the Langian palace some hours later, they didn't bother with stealth. Instead, shouting over the wind, Nina directed Tyrnon to land right in the middle of the courtyard, taking the palace soldiers completely off guard.

The Langian Royal Army scrambled to surround them, but Nina found them even less organized than usual. Half were still struggling to pull on their armor and they tripped over feet, both their comrades' and their own, on the way into the courtyard.

It took them several minutes before they had collected more than a handful of soldiers, and by that time, Nina, Kimberly and Francis had all dismounted. The guards approached and when they saw Francis standing next to the dragon, many tried to bow while still keeping their swords pointed at Tyrnon.

The effect was not impressive.

Nina sighed.

Kimberly strode forward purposefully and grabbed a young man in a captain's uniform by the front of his tunic and shook him back and forth until his helmet dropped off and clanked

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onto the ground. “*Where are they? Where are those back-stabbing creeps?*”

The captain tried to answer, but Kimberly shook him again, and it just came out as an incoherent stutter. When she let him go, he tried to compose himself. “I’m sorry, Miss, but I’m not sure who you are referring to. Which...ah, creeps, did you mean?”

Nina stepped forward, too. “Collius and Fardukai tried to betray the king and we’d like to discuss it with them.”

“Right,” Kimberly added. “Like asking whether they prefer ropes or blades.”

The captain watched them in wide-eyed consternation. “Collius and Fardukai betrayed his Majesty?”

“Yeah!” Francis nodded. “I specially told them not to have any wars until I got back.”

The young soldier shook his head. “I don’t know where they—*uh-yuh-yuh!*” Kimberly had shaken him again. “I’m telling the truth!” he shouted when she finished. “They fled the palace! A few hours ago, they took a little food and some papers and then they just left. It was so sudden.” He gestured to the other soldiers, who nodded. “We didn’t know what was happening. A lot of people thought an attack was coming and fled the palace. No one was here to tell us what to do.” He glanced over to Francis. “Thank goodness you have returned, your Highness, and that you’re safe.”

Kimberly’s face twisted in fury, deeply frightening the young captain until she dropped him and kicked his helmet clear across the courtyard. She turned to Nina and spoke emphatically. “Did you hear that? They *ran off!* They must have found out we were coming and they *ran away*. Those dirty, evil, two-faced, scheming, *cowardly* bastards!” She stormed over to Tyrnon and prepared to remount. “Come on, we need to go after them!”

Nina opened her mouth, then closed it again without saying a word. She felt a strange hesitancy inside and she didn’t know for sure where it came from. Kimberly waited expectantly.

“Not yet,” Nina said finally. “Let’s have a look around first. See what we can find out. They must have had something magic that told them we were coming. Who knows what other spells they might have to protect them? We’d better check everything out first.”

Kimberly crossed her arms and frowned. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Her face lightened. “Besides, it’s not like we can’t catch up with them, what with Tyrnon and all.”

“Yeah, sure.” Nina paused for a moment in thought. “I’ll check out their study. Can you look in their personal quarters? Those guys lived for paperwork; they must have documented everything. Hopefully, they left some of it behind.”

Kimberly nodded. “All right. But their personal quarters may be locked. I need the master key, and they probably took it with them. Should I just break down the doors, you think?” She looked as if she hoped for a yes.

“Oh, that’s okay. No sense busting up perfectly good doors.” Nina gestured over to Francis. “He has a master key. He *is* the king after all, so they had to give him one.”

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Kimberly looked over at Francis with an odd expression on her face. Nina was sympathetic; she didn't much like the idea of needing anything from Francis either.

Tyrnon would have to wait in the courtyard for the simple reason that he couldn't fit through the doors. So Nina explained to the guards in no uncertain terms that he was to be left unprovoked. Apparently, they had also heard of spike-and-cucumber.

Her threats may not have been strictly necessary however, as not one of them looked particularly eager to get any closer to the dragon than they absolutely had to. Satisfied, Nina turned and walked inside, making her way to the royal advisors' study.

Collius and Fardukai had left their study in a shambles: books open on the floor, papers scattered about on the rich, red carpet, and chairs overturned. They must have left in quite a hurry indeed.

Nina sighed. She suddenly felt very tired. Even though she hadn't slept in more than a day, somehow there was more to it than that. She righted one of the upholstered chairs and sat down.

Resting her chin in her hand, she looked around at the mess of books and papers, unable to raise much enthusiasm for paging through them. *Why?* she wondered. *This was my idea.* She reached across the heavy wooden desk for a stack of parchment scrolls.

The first one held trade balance statistics.

The next pile documented average crop yields.

She didn't want to go after the advisors.

The thought came upon her unexpectedly and she dropped the scroll onto the floor.

What am I thinking? She wondered. *They tricked me and nearly got my people slaughtered. They cast a spell on me and then they manipulated Kimberly like a puppet. I have to go after them. Don't I? What they did is unforgivable... Kimberly wants to rush off and get revenge. That's what I should want too. Isn't it?*

She sat and thought about everything, and realized that she didn't even know what she wanted.

She had spent ten years wanting to get out of Langia, but now she was bringing her people back here. And what then? With the royal advisors gone, nobody left in the kingdom knew how to handle all the tedious details of running a kingdom. Even if she could manage to lead her people somewhere else, what would they do there? And what about the Langians?

She couldn't just leave them here. Could she? Everything would collapse in a matter of weeks and they would be overrun by one of their stronger neighbors. There might even be a war over the land. Nina sighed. She had assumed responsibility and now she was stuck.

William had known this would happen, she suddenly realized. She saw him in her mind's eye, his face sad, his eyes sincere. "If you go back... What happens then?" Her throat tightened up and she blinked back fresh tears.

He had known. He had known that, once she took up the reins of leadership, she wouldn't

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be able to put them down again. It wasn't *fair*! She had made a choice without even realizing it, and now he was gone and she was stuck.

The question remained. *What happens now?*

She needed to talk to Tyrnon. She stood and brushed the parchment dust off her hands. Starting back toward the courtyard, she remembered that the Advisors' personal quarters were on the way and decided to stop in and check on Kimberly's progress. She found the heavy wooden door slightly ajar, so she pushed it open and walked in.

Her eyes bugged out and she inhaled a choked gasp through clenched teeth.

Kimberly and Francis were *making out* on Fardukai's bed.

Not merely kissing, there was definite groping and tongue work taking place.

Horror prickled over her skin and clenched her gut. She had to make them *stop*. Hit them. Scream at them. *Something!* But Nina found herself unable to move. Her feet froze in place and she could only make a strange, high-pitched, squeaking noise at the back of her throat.

They must have heard her, because they broke the kiss and sat up. Francis had a big grin on his face. "Hi," he said.

Kimberly was flushed and breathing hard, looking slightly embarrassed, but traces of a smile lurked at the corners of her mouth. "Uh, yeah. Hi."

Nina squeaked.

Kimberly gingerly chewed on her lower lip for a moment, but then she cleared her throat and stood up from the bed, a determined expression on her face. "Okay, look. There's no sense in pretending that you didn't see what you saw, so we might as well discuss this like grown-ups."

Nina squeaked again.

"I've been thinking about this a lot," Kimberly continued, walking slowly around the room. She idly trailed her fingers over a stack of books and an ornate crystal brandy bottle, then finally placed her hands on her hips and looked Nina in the eye. "And I have a proposal. I know you never really wanted to rule the Uhks. I know that because when Collius and Fardukai first made me, I didn't want to either."

Francis frowned. "They made *you*?"

"Just a minute, honey, I'm talking to Nina."

Nina gave another squeak.

"Maybe it's the spell that changed my mind." Kimberly took a deep breath. "But that doesn't matter now, because I *do* want to lead them. And I know that you don't like Francis, but you just don't see him the way I do. So I'm going to marry him and be his queen. He and I can rule over Langia and the Uhks together, and that way you can go on a quest, or go with Tyrnon, or do anything you want to do. You'd also be welcome to stay here, of course. What do you think?"

Nina didn't make a sound. Instead, she just stood there wide-eyed and unfocused.

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Kimberly's look of expectation soon turned to a frown of concern. She walked around behind Nina and slapped her on the back.

Nina's breath finally escaped in a coughing fit. Kimberly helped her lean over and put her head between her knees until she could breathe normally again.

When Nina managed to straighten up, she looked back and forth between Francis and Kimberly, and walked shakily over to a desk in the corner and sat down. Her cerebral clockworks had seized, and she was afraid that she may have slipped a gear. After a moment, her mind began to regain its function and she realized what she had been offered.

It was a choice, and she would never be able to say she didn't know. It was a way out, if she really wanted it. She prepared to think about it long and hard, but quickly realized that she already knew her answer.

"No."

Kimberly recoiled. "No?"

Nina stood. "No. I'm not going anywhere. And no, you aren't going to get married."

Kimberly set her jaw and her eyes narrowed in defiance. "Shouldn't that be my decision to make?"

"I'm making it for you," Nina said. Kimberly started to protest, but Nina cut her off. "You know I could make you agree with me. It would be easy. All I would have to do is tell you what to think."

Kimberly's defiant face sobered in an instant.

"But I won't," Nina continued. "I also won't leave you here to lead our people by yourself." She paused and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, but in my opinion, you aren't fit to make your own decisions."

Kimberly swallowed and the corners of her mouth turned down, her eyes glistening. She looked at Francis, then back at Nina. The sadness turned to anger. "It's not fair!" she cried. "How can you do this to me? You have everything, and I have nothing. You're just going to come back here and start..." Her voice caught in her throat. "I can't trust *anything!*" she shouted, grabbing the brandy bottle off the table and throwing it against the wall. It shattered into pieces and spilled the amber liquid all over the floor. Next, she reached for the stack of books, but Nina gently grabbed her arm.

Kimberly smacked her away and took another step, but then stopped without touching the books anyway. She looked at the ground, so Nina couldn't see her face, but her shoulders sagged, and she swayed.

Nina stepped forward to catch her, but she didn't actually fall. Instead, Kimberly just leaned one hand against the cold stone wall, then sank to the floor, burying her face in her arms.

Nina swallowed. She could feel her own tears coming on, but she blinked them away and took another deep breath. "I'm going to try to phrase this carefully... And then you can make

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your own decisions... I hope that, by only telling you what I'm feeling, and not telling you what *you* should think, that I can earn your trust without imposing it on you."

Kimberly sniffed and lowered her hands. Her eyes were red and her cheeks blotched from crying.

Nina knelt by her side and continued. "When I first heard about the spell, I was freaked out and I wanted to kill you, because I thought you were nothing but an evil magic creature. I don't think that anymore. I think that you're like me, but you have a problem. That problem makes me feel... sad. And I want... I want to do whatever I can to help make it better. I won't give you decision-making authority yet, but I care about you. It's not... I don't feel like it's a perfect solution, but it's the best offer I can think of."

Kimberly took a deep shuddering breath, then blinked and raised her hand to wipe at her eyes. Then, she swallowed and reached out to take Nina's hand in her own. Nina clasped it and gave a gentle squeeze.

"So let me get this straight..." Francis spoke with a puzzled expression and pointed at Kimberly. "You're the copy, and you—" He pointed at Nina. "Are the real Nina?"

Nina and Kimberly released their hands and stared at him. "Uh, yeah." Nina said, helping Kimberly to her feet.

Francis rolled his eyes. "Oh, *man!* No wonder you freaked out, Nina! Jeez, I'm sorry. I thought she was you! You have to admit it's a pretty easy mistake to make." He turned to Kimberly. "Sorry sweetie. You're hot and all, but I'm taken."

They both gaped and shouted in unison. "*What?*"

Francis walked up and smiled affectionately at Nina. "Come on, baby, I *love* you. You know I'd never cheat on you..." He cocked his head. "Unless you were cool with that?"

Nina felt her eye twitch. The man defied any logical explanation. And now she was doomed to... She frowned. Something tickled at the back of her mind. Then, suddenly, she had it. She licked her lips and put an angry scowl on her face.

"I'm not cool with that, Francis. And you had better make it up to me."

"Can do, honey-bun." He leered at her and waggled his eyebrows. "What did you have in mind?"

Nina smiled. "Catch Collius and Fardukai for me, and I'll consider you forgiven."

His eyes widened. "Is that all? No problem, I'll go get them right now. Okay? Hold dinner for me."

With that, he ran out of the room.

Kimberly turned to Nina with a raised eyebrow. "Collius and Fardukai will be expecting *us* to look for them." She gently rubbed her cheek. "They won't be easy to find. And as cute as Francis is, I don't think he's very good at tracking."

Nina's eye twitched again. "I'm going to pretend that I didn't hear you call him 'cute.'"

Kimberly shrugged and grinned mischievously. "He's also a great kisser."

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Nina stared for a moment in shock before she could speak again. “I’m going to go talk to Tyrnon now, and then I’m going to take a bath. And then I’m going to bed. When I wake up, I hope that I will have been able to eradicate that thought from my mind. If not, I may have to stick a hot branding iron in my ear and shake it around until I can no longer remember what you just said.”

Kimberly smiled and Nina left the room. She started down the hall, but then snapped her fingers and stuck her head back inside. “Oh, and Kimberly? This is just a thought, but I had an idea about your condition. The suggestions seem to get stronger with repetition, so maybe you could try telling yourself to trust yourself first. If you say it over and over again, it might start to help.”

Kimberly smiled again and chewed on her lower lip. “Thanks. I think I’ll try that.”

Nina nodded, then walked along the corridor, down the stairs and out into the courtyard. The sun had begun to set over the western horizon, shading the sky with beautiful reds and oranges, and the air was settling into the cool of twilight. Tyrnon sat on one side of the yard, giving the guards on the other side a large, toothy grin. For their part, the guards appeared to be contemplating a change in career.

Tyrnon saw her coming and his exaggerated smile turned more natural. She approached and stood in front of him for a moment, her arms at her sides, feeling very tired again. Finally, she sat against the cool, gray stone of the courtyard wall. The stone felt good against her back. It felt solid, steady.

“Tyrnon, I just made my life a lot more complicated.”

He raised one eyebrow and cocked his head. He padded over, settled onto his stomach and watched her with a calm face and patient eyes.

She rested her chin in her hands and sighed. “I’m not going after Collius and Fardukai, and I’ve just volunteered to stay here and lead my people even when Kimberly gave me a way out. Now I’ve got her and her condition to take care of, my people to rule... At least I was able to send Francis off after the advisors. That ought to keep him busy for a while.”

She rubbed her eyes and yawned, but then looked up in horror. “You don’t think that he’ll actually find them, do you?”

Tyrnon shrugged.

“That’s a scary thought.” Nina looked down at her hands and sat in silence for a moment. “I’ve done all this stuff. I gave up William to come back here for *this*? I don’t even know if I’ll be a good leader. I don’t really have any idea what I’m doing.”

She looked up and saw Tyrnon staring down at her, his brow peaked and his mouth tucked to the side in a strange smile.

Me *Trust* *You*

Nina furrowed her brow and her mouth hung open a little as she looked into his huge, soft eyes. After a moment, a gentle laugh escaped her lips, and she smiled a tired, little smile.

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“Thank you,” she said.

She held his gaze for another few seconds, then gave a small sigh. “I’m sorry we never got to go see the other dragons like you wanted.”

He grinned and shrugged again. *Future*

She nodded. “Future.” She stood up and brushed the dust off her clothing. “But in the shorter term, I’m going to hire some masons to widen these doors so that you can come inside. You’ll like it, it’s just like a cave...” She considered that for a moment. “Only with tapestries.”

He smiled, and trails of sweet-smelling wood-smoke drifted into the twilight air. *Yes*
Good

“You think that’s good? Wait until you see the library.” She smiled. “Tyrnon, I am going to teach you to read.”

His jaw dropped, then immediately snapped closed into another smile. He gave her a slow nod, no longer solemn, but rather quietly pleased and gently respectful.

She nodded back, then caressed her fingers across his warm, scaly cheek. “I’m really glad you’re here, Tyrnon. I have to get some sleep now, I think, but I’ll see you in the morning. All right?”

He agreed, and she left him then, climbing the courtyard stairs to the upper wall-walk. Traveling along the western side of the palace wall, she watched the sunset and trailed her fingers across the stone of the battlements, feeling the rough texture, occasionally speckled by a patch of fuzzy moss.

Then she stopped short.

She found herself staring out across the Langian valley to the ridge from which her father had led the attack, all those years ago. A lump tightened in her throat, but the feeling passed. She stood there for several minutes. Finally, she spoke, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“I think I’m ready now, dad.”

She lingered there for a moment, then continued along the wall and into the castle.

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Author's Bio

CHRISTIANA ELLIS IS AN AWARD-WINNING WRITER AND PODCASTER, CURRENTLY LIVING IN CARY, NORTH CAROLINA. Her podcast novel, *Nina Kimberly the Merciless*, was both an inaugural nominee for the 2006 Parsec Award for Best Speculative Fiction: Long Form, and a finalist for a 2006 Podcast Peer Award.

Christiana is also the writer, producer and star of *Space Casey*, a 10-part audiodrama miniseries that also reached thousands of listeners, and enlisted dozens of “Casey’s Cadets”, fans who became active promoters of the show. *Space Casey* was awarded the Gold Mark Time award for Best Science Fiction Audio Production by the American Society for Science Fiction Audio.

In between major projects, Christiana is also the creator and talent of many other podcast productions including *Pickle Tales: Battle of the Podcast Stars*, *Hey, Want to Watch a Movie?* and *Christiana’s Shallow Thoughts*.

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