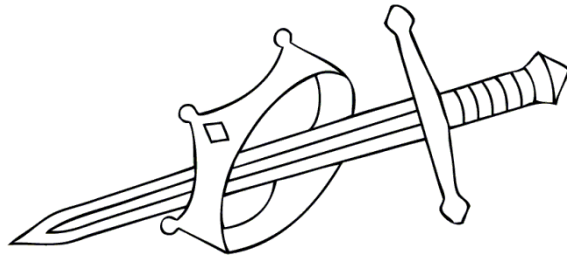




# All Things Impossible

## Heartstealer



This book is dedicated to Mike.

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## Prologue

“She’s dying, Erastus.”

The elderly man’s legs creaked like an old door as he sat on the edge of the pallet. Sorrow scarred his wizened features. Methodically, he put his head in his hands. Each finger touched his face one at a time until all ten digits dug in. His voice finally rasped, “She’s only seven summers old.”

The village healer tapped his chin. “We could bleed her.”

Erastus scowled. “What do you mean?”

The healer thrust his hands deep into his canvas bag. “We only do this these days when we don’t think that... It’s just the last chance...” A wooden bowl and a slender knife emerged from the bag.

The old man felt his skin tighten at the sight of the knife. “Don’t you dare!” His hand shot forward for the blade, slid beyond it, but managed to bat the bowl across the room.

The healer recoiled away from the old man and lifted the knife out of reach. “Then there’s nothing I can do. I’ve already done everything I know!”

Erastus turned back to the child and tucked the coarse blanket under her chin. Gently, he ran a wrinkled hand over her forehead. Her feverish skin seared his fingers. The fair hair, as yellow as a flower, stuck damply to the straw pillow. Her eyes remained closed, and her breath was shallower than before.

The old man whispered, “I wish I could save her.” The sweat instantly felt cold on his fingertips as he withdrew his hand.

“I know.” The healer dragged a hand through his own chestnut hair. He glanced around the bare-bones, single room cabin. “You’re doing everything yourself around here. I could send one of my sons to help you.”

The old man shook his head. “No, no, I’ve already stocked up.”

“I saw the firewood outside. You’re old, Erastus, you shouldn’t do that yourself.”

The grandfather grunted in reply.

The healer fought against a shiver at the sickly sound. “I also don’t think you should live out here all alone. I know she’s here with you, but she’s too young to do much, and now she’s deathly ill. You should move into the village.”

“No, no, I can’t.” His voice rasped as dry as if it had arisen from an abandoned well.

The healer sighed loudly. “How did you even get this cabin built at your age? I remember, it was exactly seven years ago, when she was brought to you after her parents died. You weren’t young seven years ago, and you ain’t younger now.”

The old man sat motionlessly. The purple canyons under his eyes seemed to darken further.

On the bed, the girl erupted into coughs. The men rushed to her, tripping over the mismatched floorboards and each other to reach her. She never truly woke, but her brown eyes flashed open for the briefest of seconds. The healer forced a waterskin against her lips when the coughing subsided.

Erastus shuffled to the back of the room. “Her shirt’s all damp again from the sweat. Time to change it.”

“‘Tis about all we can do.” The healer pulled the waterskin back. “Damn, man, I don’t even know what she’s dying of.”

Erastus’s face hardened, and he looked away.

“Magic!” the healer burst. The air around him thickened at the word, and shadows seemed to lengthen out from the corners. He scrambled away from the bed and made a warding symbol with his fingers. “That’s why you wouldn’t say!”

This time, the old man’s shoulders drooped.

The healer began to pace, and he wiped the sudden, cold sweat from his forehead. “I’ll write to Second Acron, perhaps get a wizard.”

“No! I couldn’t afford one anyway.”

“Right. What about Ahtome’s temple? They don’t charge for healings.”

“No. They could do nothing.”

“But if it’s a magical ailment...” The healer shivered. “Oh, why didn’t you tell me before, Erastus?”

The old man looked away. “It is a secret.”

“Tell me. I might be able to do something, or, at least write a letter to someone who can. Somebody must know something!”

“There is one.” Erastus’s voice darkened like an oncoming storm. “He’s gone for help. He’s out there tonight, traveling by starlight.”

“Who? Hired help? I didn’t think you had any.”

“No. No one you know.”

“In this village? We know everyone.”

“Not him.” The grandfather buried his head in his hands again. “If he returns and if she’s cured, we’re leaving this place. Somewhere he can’t find us. I pray such a place exists.”

The healer retreated a step. “Who is this man?”

Erastus inhaled deeply. “He’s not a man.”

## Chapter One

### Stir in a Small Town

“I know they said this place was small, but I’m feeling claustrophobic.” The red knight passed through the propped open gates of the village on his jet black warhorse. The massive horse had to be at least twenty five hands, if only to carry this huge armored knight. The mount also boasted tree trunks for legs and his glossy coat stretched tightly over colossal muscles. The rider pushed up the visor of his helmet and looked around.

The wooden palisade was a laughable defense. If marauders ever did attack, the villagers could hope it was a rainy day. As it currently stood, the whole village could be burned out like ants. Once through the gate, the knight saw an ancient stone bridge straddling a fat river. A mill’s waterwheel lazily rolled through the brown water. Just like the thin trail leading here, the dirt of the town was churned and outlined with puddles. It had obviously been an extremely wet summer. That much, at the very least, was evident on his horse’s legs.

The bridle-less horse snorted and rolled his eyes. He pawed the ground with his shoeless hooves and stirred up a deeper layer of mud.

“Now, Spike, just because I’m tall doesn’t mean I’m afraid of small spaces!”

The horse named Spike shook his head and shoved his nose into an errant patch of grass poking out of the mud.

“Look, I’m just saying this village is miniscule.”

The horse spat out the grass and then tried to nibble on the wall of a nearby house.

“I’m sorry, but it’s not like this place is on any map.”

Now the horse began to wander further into town.

“No, I did not need a map to get here!”

Finally, the horse locked his knees and rolled his eyes again.

“Fine, fine.” The knight disengaged himself from the war saddle and dismounted lightly, despite the incredibly heavy looking plate mail he wore. He looked around the village again.

Sighing, he left the horse to explore alone as he headed toward the inn. He noted there was no sign painted on its front, but inns and taverns looked the same the world over. The knight literally ducked through the door into the common room. He still felt the helmet slide against the top of the frame.

His pale blue eyes adjusted quickly to the dim room. A few small round tables and simple wooden chairs decorated the space. Two men sat in the center table. Several empty mugs clustered in front of the scrawnier of the two. The other man, who was much broader across the shoulders, carefully sipped his only tankard.

Their conversation evaporated when the knight entered. He smiled through his open visor.

The scrawny one hopped to his feet, fumbling his mug and spilling some beer on his tunic. “Sir knight! In Riversbridge!” He laughed nervously and smiled wildly. “Welcome to my town. I’m Oric Halvorson, the lord mayor.”

The knight nodded once.

“Uh, fine day, isn’t it?” the mayor persisted jovially.

The knight nodded again.

“Um.” Oric licked his lips loudly in the empty silence. “Been rainy this past season. Little flooding here and there.”

“So I’ve seen.” The knight eyed the second man, who was watching him just as intently. There was something familiar about him.

“Er. Sir knight,” the mayor began, but petered out. “And you are?”

“A dragoon knight.” The second man set his mug on the table and watched him intently.

“Aye, I am. Sir Jakkobb, knight-captain of the Silver Dawn Dragoons.”

“What business have you in this village?”

Jakkobb pulled off his helmet and neatly clipped blond hair fell into place around his pointed ears. “I’m looking for someone. An inn’s usually the best place to start in a small town.”

“An elf! But, elves aren’t that...big...” Oric paled and spilled a little more beer. He set the mug down with an unsteady hand. “Who, sir knight?”

“Girl of about eighteen summers, Derora Saxen.”

The mayor laughed anxiously again. “Oh, yes, lass has a lot of spunk indeed.”

“Why?” the second man’s tone was level.

Jakkobb raised an eyebrow. “What’s it to you, sir?”

“Fair enough.” He stood and dusted his trousers. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Riodan Saxen, and I would like to know what trouble my daughter has caused this time that the legendary dragoon knights are searching for her.” His face remained stern, but there might have been a twinkle in his eyes.

The knight grinned. “Ah.” He chuckled and looked again at the man. Now, the familiarity was obvious. “To be honest, quite a lot of trouble, but I’m just here to speak with her, this time.”

“Uh, trouble?” Oric asked.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the stories. I don’t think the bards stayed away.”

“The elves!”

Jakkobb nodded slowly. “Yes, the elvish bards.” He glanced around the common room, noting some of the iron items above the bar. “I see the dwarves have been by too. Clan Heavyaxe, by the design.”

“Oh! Oh! The caravan!”

Riodan glanced pityingly at the mayor. “They were quite a surprise. Somehow, I knew my daughter was involved.”

“The trade’s good for the town!” Oric blurted.

Riodan smiled, but it was forced and fragile. “Yes, it is. We don’t quite know how to deal with this rather abrupt explosion of trade, but we’re adapting. Some of us aren’t as ready as others for our sudden outside contact.” He glanced at the mayor again.

“Good, good,” Jakkobb said, avoiding eye contact with Oric.

“If you’re looking for her now, sir, she’s out training with the militia in the meadow south of town.”

“Thank you, sir.” The captain nodded and ducked under the door again. He walked past his

horse, who was now experimenting with the door latch on Oric's house.

The meadow wasn't hard to find. The knight just followed the well worn – and muddy – path going south. He slid the helmet back on his head, for comfort's sake. Before he even came to the field, he heard Der shouting.

“Hold ‘em straight! They're spears! Like this, rigidly! Ivis, I see you rolling your eyes!”

Jakkobb grinned beneath his helmet. Der, dare, it was no longer a wonder to him why they were pronounced the same.

The trees thinned and opened into a well trampled meadow where several lines of ragged teenage boys moved more awkwardly than when they first learned to walk. The non-uniform poles that were supposed to represent spears quivered and tilted randomly.

The dark-haired teenage warrior yelling at them whipped her head in his direction. It was rather hard to miss his shining red plate mail in the sun. “Corporal Donley! Take over!”

She jogged up the hill toward him. Derora stopped between the knight and Riversbridge's militia to block his view. The effort was in vain since he was a foot and a half taller.

Jakkobb stared over her head and put on his best officer face, blank and deathly stern. “You're training them.”

“Yes, sir. Good to see you too, sir.”

“Even though you've never had training yourself.” She opened her mouth, but he was quicker. “Oh, you've had survival training and sword drill, but not formation drill. And you've only trained with highly experienced warriors, not novices.”

She scratched her head and glanced back at them. “Well, it's all common sense, really.”

“Right.” He folded his arms and raised an eyebrow. “You're figuring out all the secrets of warfare just by thinking about them.”

“No, sir. Just the obvious things.”

“They say the Blackhound taught himself warfare too.”

She balled her fists at her side and stamped her foot. “I am not teaching myself warfare, sir!”

He pointed. “Then what's that? I personally know you've never been trained with spears, and now you're instructing?”

Der crossed her arms. “I could have last winter.”

He chuckled. “Yes, you could have. But you didn't. Otherwise, you would've just said you did, right now.”

“Damn. Am I truly that obvious?”

He fought against a laugh. “Bluffing is not one of your skills.”

She glanced over her shoulder again. “Honestly, how bad are they?”

“Honestly, they need professional help.”

She frowned for an instant, and then a wicked grin materialized. “You're a dragoon!”

He backed up a step. “Oh no. I'm not here to teach a bunch of infants how to march.”

“So, when brigands come sweeping through this area, and everyone gets their throats torn open because no one could stand up to defend themselves...” she said with a smile that completely clashed against her actual words.

“Alright!” He caught her shoulder and steered her toward the ranks. “Don't think you get to



sit down and watch. Get yourself and your corporal in line too. Be in the back.”

She ran ahead of him. He waited for a twenty count, and then strode into the meadow like a red thunderstorm. The loose formation backpedaled away from him, but Der was already behind them, yelling them in the opposite direction.

“RIP THOSE SKIRTS OFF AND PUT ON SOME TROUSERS!” The captain’s voice was louder than a deity’s from the sky.

The militia stumbled and jumped and scrambled for some sort of line. Except for one. His hands reacted directly to the voice of command and bypassed his mind completely. He jerked his trousers down to his ankles.

The wind was the only sound across the meadow for an endless second. Jakkobb blinked a few times. “That is, if you’re not already wearing trousers.” He slapped the visor down over his face.

The boy was turning as red as an apple as he struggled to raise his trousers. The rest of the unit was choking on their guffaws.

The captain coughed. “Good man! You know how to take orders!” He clamped his mouth shut again before anything else could escape. The laughter was creeping up his spine, and his shoulders began to shake with suppression.

He didn’t allow the others time to tease the boy, nor did he allow the boy time to think about what he did. He drilled them into the mud. Their faces glistened like many suns. He marched them, with and without their makeshift polearms, until their minds shut down and their bodies learned to move at his voice.

Finally, when dusk blanketed the land, he called them to a halt. Their bodies froze instantly. He stared at the tenfold improved troupe. They stared wordlessly back.

“Very well! *Dismissed!*”

The Riversbridge militia ran for it, despite the intense leaden sensation in their muscles. They didn’t dare chance getting trapped out there all night.

Der grinned as she trudged up to the knight. She panted and rested her hands on her knees. “They’ll be talking about this for years, training from a dragoon knight! And Ivis’ trousers.”

“At least they learned something.” He tucked his helmet under one arm.

“I was training them,” she muttered as they started to walk toward the village.

“And you weren’t doing a bad job,” he paused, “For someone who has never had training herself.”

Der narrowed her eyes. “Why are you here, sir?”

“About that proper training of yours.” He moved fast, and hit her on top of the head with a white tube and a loud thwap.

She ducked far too late.

“Your reaction time needs work.”

“Do it again!”

He smacked her with the hollow tube again, but along the side of her head instead of the top. She failed to block again, but this time she reached up and punched him on the chin.

“Ow.” He rubbed his face. “Better.”

“A scroll?” She snatched it out of his hand, and twisted it toward the dying sunlight.

“We’re supposed to meet Kelin in Malfax. Well, at least I am, but I’m assuming you’ll be coming too.”

“I haven’t seen Kelin since he left with the dwarves and Thistle and Thalon last winter. But that doesn’t answer why you’ve suddenly shown up here.”

He grinned. “Have you read that scroll yet?”

She diverted her attention back to the document. “It’s official. I’m... what! I’m accepted into the Silver Dawn Dragoons!”

Jakkobb held up a finger. “No, you’re accepted for an interview with the knight-commander to see if he’ll accept you for training. It’s the first step.”

“Huh.” She mashed the scroll back together while staring into the setting sun. “You mean that’s it? After all I’ve been through? This is trading a chicken for an egg.”

He shrugged. “We’re the elite; we can’t just let anybody in.”

Der’s fingers crinkled the paper between her hands. “Just an interview?”

“Yes.”

She bit her lip. “That’s it? I couldn’t afford it anyway, but...”

Jakkobb laughed. “Do you honestly think I would’ve come personally to deliver that if this was going to be an impossible obstacle? Besides, we only make the people we know that won’t stay with the Order pay and secondly, the king already vouched for you.”

“He said yes?”

“His words were, ‘Good idea, if you don’t give her something to do, she’ll probably conquer her own kingdom out of boredom.’”

“He said that?”

“Near enough.”

She nodded. “Having the king of the elves as a friend has its advantages.”

“You have a supreme talent for understatements.”

She sucked her tongue. “So, I’ve truly been accepted? For this interview?”

“Aye. We’re going to have to fly to make it there by the date though.”

“Spike’s still saddled, right?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because we’re leaving as soon as I saddle my horse.”

The knight glanced at the darkness expanding from the horizon. “Don’t you have to pack?”

“No. I keep my saddlebags already prepared. I just have to snatch some fresh food and put my armor on. You know, no one around here wants to believe I actually have elvish mail, even though they’ve seen it.”

He chuckled dryly. “I’m not surprised, by any of that. But it is getting dark, Der.”

“So? I know that doesn’t bother you.” She clapped her hands and danced a quick jig. “I’m truly going to see the knight-commander! This is wonderful! But, wait, I’m not like most recruits, I’ll wager. Usually recruits haven’t already been to war and then go for training. And most of them won’t have a sword like mine.”

“You’re not even wearing it, Der.”

She waved her hand at him as if the statement was a pesky fly. “I don’t have to here. It’s a Pallens sword, sir! It might be the only one left.”

“Could be, yes.”

“Why did the chemmen even have it?”

“Why are you asking me? My answer is the same as it was last winter, I don’t know any more than you.”

“Yes, but I can complain about it to you and you don’t look at me as if I’m crazy.”

“Because I already know you are.” He grinned.

His expression faded as they stepped through the gates of the village. Everyone in town was out to watch them. Jakkobb slipped his helmet back on. He saw other townsfolk glaring at Spike. The horse thoroughly ignored them and was partially through his self-appointed task of draining the village water trough with the most annoying sucking sound he could manage.

The knight slid into elvish. “I know they’ve seen elves before.”

“You’re not a typical elf, sir,” she replied in the same language. “You’ve said as much yourself. And you’re a dragoon knight; they’ve never had one of those in Riversbridge before.”

He watched a woman pull her daughter back from their path. She stared at him defiantly. “They’re nervous, Der.”

She bit her lip. “We don’t have an actual need for warriors around here; mayhap they think we’re bad news. Everyone just ignored me for the longest time. And now, ever since I’ve been back, I’ve been some sort of stranger. I know all of these people too.” She pointed. “My parents’ cabin isn’t far. Just on the other side of the river and up a ways.”

“Perhaps training the militia wasn’t such a good idea. They’re looking at me like I’m going to steal them away now.”

“Derora Saxen!”

She whirled with her hand going for a sword that wasn’t there. Avice marched down the lane as proudly as any of the militia members. Her lips were as straight as a sword’s edge. “You’re leaving again, aren’t you?” She stabbed an accusing finger.

Der glanced to Jakkobb for support, and he shook his head a tiny fraction. She held up open hands toward Avice. “I never planned to stay.” She glanced fretfully at the crowd.

“You’ll miss my wedding! You know that my trial marriage is over and now it’s time for the life-binding ceremony!”

“I’m going to join Silver Dawn’s order!” Der squeaked, hiding behind the legendary name.

“This may be the most important thing in my life!” Avice continued to advance like she was an entire army herself.

Der raised her fists defensively. “Well, it’s not in mine.”

The population of Riversbridge collectively gasped. Der waved her hands frantically. “No! No, I didn’t mean that harshly! I meant that your wedding is far, far more important to you than it is to me. Ha... You see, if I miss it, the wedding will still happen, but if you miss it, it won’t. Um, see, Avice?” Her smile froze on her face. “Jakkobb, run.” She twirled on her heels and dashed over the stone bridge.

Jakkobb swiveled around slowly and walked very, very rigidly after her. He didn't bend his knees. Behind him, Spike stopped waterlogging himself and trotted after the running girl with a sniggering whinny, if horses could do such things.

Der bounced from one foot to the other around the corner of a cottage, hiding in the evening's shadows. The knight smiled awkwardly at her. "You should ask the king how to weave words eloquently. That was horrible!"

She made a face. "I don't understand them. Don and Avice got married and now they've decided to stay together until death and I'm just starting to figure out my life."

"Getting married isn't a death threat, Der, even if you treat it as one." Jakkobb chuckled. "I'm certain you'll meet a young man soon enough."

She stuck out her tongue as if she'd eaten something sour. "Ugh. Romance. I don't understand it. There's barely enough room in my life for me." She jerked a thumb toward herself. "Besides, swordplay is much more interesting than boys." Behind her, Spike whinnied suspiciously.

"Good, because you'd probably get him killed on your first adventure together."

"That would solve my problem!" She glared at Spike. "He's laughing at me, isn't he?"

Jakkobb looked sideways at his mount. "Horses don't laugh."

"He's not a typical horse, sir."

"I'm not a typical elf, and you're not a typical, well, you. You're absolutely unique."

She shook her head firmly. "I saw him fight at Gladioli Fields."

"There are lots of horses in battle."

"Not without riders."

"Actually—" he began brightly.

"That don't *start* with riders." She glared.

"Well, I wasn't around at the start of the battle to saddle him." He patted his stomach and his armor clanged. "I smell cooking. Is that your parents' house?" Spike wandered out behind the farmhouse, obviously not bothering with who owned it.

Again, Jakkobb had to stoop to fit inside the door. Candlelight illuminated the interior of the house in a warm, cheery glow. The home was small, with two bedrooms and a large kitchen area. They observed that Riodan had already ordered an extra place for supper set.

The Saxen family's eyes widened as the knight entered. Der smiled. "Alright, Jakkobb, this is my father, Riodan Saxen."

"We met at the inn, Der." Riodan tapped the ash out of his pipe.

"Oh. Right. My mother, Rhoesia." The lady met Jakkobb with a flurry of smiles. She looked very much like Der.

"My older sister, Chera, and my older brother, Emil. He's away from his family visiting; he doesn't live in Riversbridge anymore. He's a scribe for the Count if you couldn't tell by the ink stains on his fingers."

"And you've some interesting calluses on your hands from your sword, Der." Her brother winked. He looked very much like their father, with dark hair and broad shoulders.

"True enough." She gestured at the knight. "This is Sir Jakkobb, knight-captain of the Silver

Dawn Dragons, and a good friend of mine.”

“Yes.” Riordan chuckled. “You’ve mentioned his name before, many times.”

She nodded. “Right, so Jakkobb, take a seat there.” Cautiously, he hovered over the suddenly very small wooden chair and eased himself on to it with a sigh. It creaked warningly, and he dispersed the weight of his mail and himself as carefully as he could. Meanwhile, Der vanished into one of the two other tiny rooms.

“Derora, what are you doing?” Rhoesia put her hands on her hips and walked toward the bedroom.

An eager voice answered, “You all eat! I’m going to get my packs!”

Her mother nearly collided with her as she reemerged with saddlebags tossed over one shoulder, and a slim mail shirt over the other. Rhoesia pointed. “Put those down. You’re going to sit down and have the meal with us.”

“But, Mother, it’s already dark!” She set the bags down and darted back into the room. Almost immediately, she came back out, buckling on her elven longsword.

“Take your seat at the table, please!”

“But—”

“Sit, Der,” Jakkobb said quietly.

She immediately took her seat at the table. “Yes, sir.”

The family stared. Jakkobb glanced around awkwardly. “Is something wrong?”

Emil set down his fork and applauded slowly. “Impossible things do happen.”

“Oh. Der taking an order.” He looked directly at his recruit. “Yes, I had to put her on trial for her life to get that effect.”

“I thought you were friends!” Chera nervously twisted her fork in her hand.

“Oh, we are,” Der answered hurriedly. “The whole trial thing was all a big misunderstanding.”

Jakkobb laughed. “At least you aren’t bitter about these things.”

“Unlike Farallon,” she said darkly.

“*Duke Farallon.*”

She snorted.

“Who is this duke? I’ve not heard of him,” Emil said cautiously.

“Elvish duke.” She stabbed at her food. “Right pain in the arse if you ask me.”

“Yes,” the knight said. “But he is on our side.”

“You don’t like him either, sir.”

“Der, just be quiet.”

“Yes, sir.” She thrust at her food again.

Riordan cleared his throat. “I must say, you are the first elf we’ve ever entertained.”

Der slammed her fork down, and exclaimed in elvish, “Elf! I thought we were hosting an ogre!”

“Well, they’re used to having an imp,” the captain fired back in the same tongue. The family was conscientiously quiet.

Chera coughed politely. “Do you sing, sir elf? I remember when the elvish bards came, I

could not stop listening... Derry, what's wrong?"

The young warrior was bright red and biting her fork with all her strength. The utensil slipped from her mouth and she sprayed her food back onto her plate. She exploded with coughs.

"I happen to have a very good singing voice!" Jakkobb shot back.

"For a tavern!" She gasped the words.

He burst into *Victory Over the Bridge*. The light in the room grew in response to the elvish song. His voice was brighter than the sun as he spun through the verses. Der remembered he actually fought at the famous Battle of the Bridge, and tried to imagine what it was like. She pictured rivers of fire roaring up against a thin strip of a bridge that according to legend spanned an abyss between worlds. She opened her mouth to ask just exactly what it had been like, but saw the look on the knight's face as his song recounted the battle, and for once, bit her tongue.

The music's spell lingered for a warming moment. Chera sighed. "Such a sad tale."

Rhoesia nodded. "Indeed, but very well sung."

Der rolled her eyes.

"Quite. Well done, sir." Riodan shook his head and blinked experimentally. "Pardon me, Sir Jakkobb, but why are you in town?"

"I've been accepted to Silver Dawn!" Der exclaimed through a full mouth.

"For an interview," the captain corrected.

"Accepted?" Rhoesia brought her hands to her mouth. "You'll be a dragoon knight?"

The captain grinned. "Not yet. She's been accepted by my recommendation and that of the new elvish king to join the Silver Dawn Dragoons. This means she is granted an interview with the knight-commander. He is the only one who decides who is admitted for training and who is not, and this is dragoon soldier training. Then, if she makes it through that and serves for five years, she might be accepted into knight training."

"I still can't believe that, Derry," Emil whispered. "It's too mythical."

Riodan sighed. "If it were anybody else, I wouldn't." He dropped his eyes. "Sadly, we cannot afford it."

Der nodded. "I said the same thing, but Edillon sponsored me."

"Edillon?" Rhoesia asked. "That's not a name you've repeated."

"The elvish king, King Edillon now, I guess. I said Kaleb in all the stories I told you." She shoved another forkful in her mouth. "I don't think they've had time for the official coronation yet though."

Jakkobb pressed a hand over his eyes.

"What!" Emil lost his grip on his fork.

"You called him by his *name*?" Chera demanded.

"People have names for a reason!" she shot back through partially masticated food.

Riodan held up his hand and they quieted. "Derora, will you owe him any service for sponsoring you?"

She looked at Jakkobb. He shook his head. "She won't. If anyone gets picky, this is payment for services already rendered during the elf-chemmen war."

"Then it's settled," her father said.

"You're truly leaving again?" Chera asked softly.

Der glanced away. "I knew I wasn't going to stay for long."

"But it's just late summer!" her mother exclaimed. "You haven't even been back two seasons!"

"Mother, it's the world's elite!"

Emil smiled ruefully. "She'll go anyway, Mother."

"We'll have to fly to get there on time," Jakkobb said.

"Right." Der piled a mountain of food onto her fork. "So, eat quickly and we can be on the road by the time Mendelin's star comes up."

"Silver Dawn's Horizon, that must be where you're going," Riordan said. "I've heard many tales of the fortress. None battle related though."

Jakkobb grinned. "There's never been a battle there."

"Why is it called Horizon?" Emil asked. "That's an unusual name for a castle."

Jakkobb grinned. "Because it takes up the horizon."

"And we're going!" Der punched the air victoriously. "It should only be a few days to get there, right? We'll use the tree paths."

The knight shook his head. "Sorry, kid, but the knight-commander made certain that there were no tree paths anywhere nigh when the citadel was built. So we're hoofing it, and it'll take a few months."

Her face fell. "Oh."

He chuckled. "I almost forgot. The commander is especially interested in the Pallens sword. You've kept it safe?"

She nodded. "I hope he can give me some answers about it."

"Pallens sword?" Riordan straightened in his chair.

"Pallens as in the paladin empire?" Emil mouthed 'Pallens' again.

"Uh. Yes." She looked at Jakkobb.

"Why don't you show them?" he offered softly.

Slowly, she rose from the table and disappeared into the room she shared with her sister. A reverential silence grasped the household. Der came out holding the longsword across both of her hands. The blade reflected blue and golden light off of the very plain yellow candlelight. The sapphire, encased by the pommel, winked a thousand times. Along the hilt, blue and green rivers of perfectly melted gems forever intertwined and dispersed.

The Saxen family became very still. They didn't even gasp as they gazed at the mesmerizing sword.

"Sorry, but the elves told me to keep it a secret."

"That's been in our house!" Rhoesia gripped her husband's hand. She brought her other hand up to her mouth.

"Yes, Mother." Der winced a little. Then her head bobbed back up. "So, we're done with the meal, yes?"

"Der!" The knight broke into a grin. "We're leaving tomorrow, so relax."

She slouched back into her chair. “Fine.”



## Chapter Two

### Nowhere Meetings

"I see you staring at my horse, sir! You've been doing it since we left Riversbridge."

Jakkobb looked away. "I wasn't going to say anything."

Der patted her horse's neck soothingly. "He's an excellently bred human horse, sir."

"But he's not even a warhorse. He's a messenger's mount."

"I wanted to get home as fast as I could. He's bred for speed. Besides, I'm not trained to ride a warhorse."

A burst of laughter escaped the captain. "You've never let minor details like *that* stop you before. And also, I'm a trainer!" Beneath him, Spike snorted and shook his mane. Jakkobb continued, "I'm sure the king would've given you a horse if you'd asked."

She bunched her face. "I didn't want an elvish horse. They all don't like me because I'm mostly human."

"That's another thing I noticed. Your family still doesn't know."

She nodded. "This isn't something I can exactly tell them. How would I phrase it? Dad, did you know you married an eighth elf? Actually, I know you don't know, and she doesn't know either." She shrugged.

"I can see you wording it precisely that way."

"Well, I didn't." She shook her head and grinned. "I can't believe I'm going to join Silver Dawn."

"Interview, Der, you have an interview."

"You and Edillon both recommended me. And I was the one who came up with the plan that won the war."

"Yes, we did. And, no, you didn't. You had the idea, but as you recall, it was more complicated than an idea."

"So."

"So?" He laughed. "So, that makes a vast difference! And this interview is between you and the commander; neither the king nor I can speak for you there."

"But you're here, now, you can coach me on the way."

"I'm not going to." He chuckled. "I think he should meet Derora Saxen as she truly is, with the word charge written on the inside of her eyelids."

"It is not."

"The only defensive move you use is to hit your opponent first."

"Well, it works."

He coughed purposefully and lifted his eyebrows.

"Of course not against you, but against everyone in Riversbridge! I even defeated the king's sergeant when he came by to check on the militia. He was *easy*. I disarmed him in one move."

"So, Thealith's army is actually training people now. Good. Well, you're a natural, and on top

of that, you've had some serious training. That was in swordplay alone. You don't know what the real military is like yet."

"I fought with Silver Dawn's ranks at Gladioli Fields."

"You've fought. You've done quite a bit of fighting. That's only one side of the military coin. You haven't lived as a soldier among soldiers."

"I will soon though."

"If you're accepted."

She looked at him pleadingly like a puppy staring at food.

"Alright, I'm damned certain you'll get in too, but don't go around saying it. Oh yes, another thing, you might be the only girl out of the lot of recruits too."

She shrugged. "That doesn't upset me, sir."

"Good. It might upset some of the other recruits though."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A quirk about any of the three dragoon orders is that we will accept anyone. Yes, we are very select, but we don't turn away people because of race or gender, and we never have in our history. There are dwarves and elves and all different types of humans, any other race – male and female alike. This is often troublesome for many recruits. Some of them don't want to accept female fighters and others may just be awkward because of it. Most don't dare ask the dwarves if they're male or female. Hell, even I can't tell." He frowned. "That is one of the major sources of troubles in the first year. The other is between the races, elves don't get along with dwarves or humans well; part elves are stuck in between; humans are ridiculed for having such short life spans, and so on."

"So me being a barely part elven female warrior means I'm going to be the most awkward."

The knight grinned. "Not for you, but maybe for everyone else. I daresay you won't even notice."

"The concept sounds unsteady, sir. People don't just overcome that."

Jakkobb winked. "Oh, the first year is the hardest, but we sweat it out of everyone."

Der leaned back in her saddle. "Now, I'm beginning to become worried."

"You should be," he whistled cheerfully. "We make training our recruits – none of whom are novices to combat – hell. We have the harshest training of anyone in the world."

"Thus, you remain the world's elite."

He laughed. "Yes, but that's not why we do this to ourselves. It's because the battles the dragoon knights and soldiers choose are the ones no one else dares to."

She straightened her shoulders and grinned. "I think I'll fit in perfectly."

"If you make it through training, fellows often leave."

"You know me better than that, sir."

"Oh, right. In a few years, you'll be our youngest captain ever."

She flashed a white grin. "I think so too."

"Der, I was joking."

"I know, but I wasn't!"

"The day you're the same rank as me is the day King Edillon decides to abdicate to Prince

Alsalon.”

“That’ll never happen.”

“You’re right. Besides, if you even – years down the road – become a captain, you’ll always be junior to me.”

She pretended to frown. “Well, I’m not going to grow another three feet, sir.”

“That was a low blow.” He wagged a warning finger at her.

“With you, it has to be.” She reined her horse away from his, grinning in both amusement and wariness.

Finally, Jakkobb smiled. He halted Spike. “Derora, I think it’s time I see how much your swordplay has advanced since last winter.”

She shook her head. “Oh no you don’t. You’ll grind me into the dirt.”

“I am your captain, recruit.”

“I still have the interview first!”

“*Dismount!*”

The order didn’t register in the mind until her body was already through the action. Der blinked and she was standing on the ground holding her horse’s reins.

“Take his bridle off, Spike’ll make sure he doesn’t wander.”

Grudgingly, she obeyed. Then she started to stretch her muscles and limber up. It wasn’t going to stop what was coming from hurting though. She jumped up and down in place and a smile broke onto her face. How much she’d missed fighting with a real warrior!

She gently freed the Pallens sword from its sheath. It was perfect to her hand, in weight, size and length. She never sharpened the blade, because it had never nicked or dulled.

“You’re going to fight me with the Pallens sword?”

“It feels better than the other.” She nodded to the elven longsword on her saddle. “I mean that other is marvelous, but this one has my personality. It responds to me, sometimes before I know what I’m doing.”

“It’s a relic from the Empire! You can’t just fight with it.”

“It’s meant to be used, sir. I don’t think I rescued it from the chemmen not to use it. Swords like these have a purpose.”

“But for sparring?”

The point of the sword sagged. “Oh.” She switched the blades around. “Well, when you word it that way.”

They began to circle each other. Der clenched her jaw while Jakkobb merely grinned. He may have been the only elf in the world to use an axe, but he had yet to meet someone who could best him with it. Battle and hunting scenes adorned the sides of the blades. The knight also wielded it on a short handle.

She closed distance first. After a convincing high feint, she dropped her point and slashed at his waist. The axe, against common sense, was faster than the lighter weapon and circled downward to block her blade.

“I saw you coming,” he said conversationally while attacking.

Der didn’t waste breath replying. She was too busy keeping the axe away.

“You bunch your muscles; it’s obvious when you’re going to attack.” He suddenly increased the speed of his onslaught, his axe moving like an attacking dog.

She flailed to make her parries, and found herself moving quicker than she had in months.

He stopped abruptly. She attacked immediately.

“Good!” he shouted above the clashing metal. “You’d have been in trouble if you’d stopped too!”

She couldn’t find an opening and didn’t expect to, no matter how hard she worked for it. Suddenly, his axe wasn’t where it should have been, and she reeled forward. She turned as fast as she could, but it was too late.

Der’s face slapped against the side of his weapon at full speed. She fell to the ground and blinked stupidly. Above her, the axe vibrated slightly.

Jakkobb chuckled and reached down. “Sorry about that. You might get a pretty bruise.”

She rubbed her cheek. “Well, it’s not usually the flat of the axe, so it could be worse.”

“Yes, it could be.” He pulled her to her feet. “Don’t forecast your moves. Be relaxed and then just go.” He dueled them for another sweat stained half hour. When he finally called halt, she was red in the face, but still willing. “We may make a soldier out of you yet.”

“You still beat me.”

“I’ve survived doing this for a long time. If you could beat me, I’d know it was time to quit.”

A pained expression painted her face.

“Der, don’t take it personally. You are good, but I fought in the Centum Wars. That was over two thousand years ago.”

She sighed. “I know, I know. I just won’t ever be that good, if for nothing else because I’m mortal. Age will claim me.”

He glanced around awkwardly. “I know. But you held your own against the chemmen, and they’re immortal too. You also have a sword from Pallens, and who knows what history’s tied up with that thing? Although, I am still upset with you for disobeying my order and going back for that blade. I won’t forget that in a hurry.” He retired the axe in its custom sheath. “Speaking of that. Spike! Over here!”

The warhorse lifted his head and trotted over. His shoulders were higher than her head as he passed by. Jakkobb removed a pale scroll from the saddle. “Get the sword, Der.”

“Yes, sir.” She returned with the Pallens sword in hand. “What are we doing, sir?”

“Most people probably wouldn’t know that as a treasure from the Empire, but they can recognize shiny gems.”

Der frowned. “If the chemmen couldn’t destroy it, a thief certainly couldn’t.”

“But the thief won’t know that.” He handed her the small scroll. “On this is a specially prepared disguise spell. The knight-commander thought it to be a good idea. Just hold the sword in your right hand, and the scroll in the left and read it aloud.”

“I don’t know magic, sir.” She tilted her head. Surely, he knew that.

He shook his head. “You don’t have to, the magic’s already there, you just have to read it.”

“But I thought you had to be a magic user to be able to do anything magical.”

He sighed. “Magic’s a world of complications. Let’s just say for now a competent wizard

prepared the spell for you, and you just have to read it.”

“Is it written in a language I know?” she asked suspiciously.

“Elvish, most likely.”

She unrolled the scroll, and held it and the sword at arm’s length. She cleared her throat and looked at him again.

“Go on, Der, you won’t explode. Probably.”

She cleared her throat yet again and began to read. The words weren’t any more lyrical than standard elvish speech, which was far more lyrical than Common, and they didn’t rhyme. She read ahead and glanced over at her sword. The sapphire still protruded from either side of the pommel. She looked back to the scroll and said the last phrase. She didn’t feel any strange swirling energy around her.

She looked back to her sword. A sharp but definitely not as shiny blade extended from the hilt. The hilt itself was serviceable steel, and the pommel was just a weight to balance it. She whipped her eyes back to the scroll, but it was blank. She caught the last words evaporating from the page like smoke.

She dropped both and jumped back. “It worked!”

Jakkobb nodded. “I would have had a few words with that wizard if it hadn’t.”

Cautiously, she lifted her sword. It still felt the same after a few experimental parries and thrusts. “How do I take the spell off?”

“I think the wizard will, when we get there.”

“So that means you’ve already been talking about me – if they know about the sword.”

The captain laughed. “Der, I don’t think there’s an elf or a dragoon in the world that doesn’t know your name right now. The story spread, not just yours, of course, but you were a very instrumental player in the war.”

“But the knight-commander knows about me?”

“Oh, indeed. At my first meeting with him after the war, we talked for a good ten hours about all the events.”

Der felt her face heating up.

“It’s nothing *too* bad, I promise. I did, however, mention your little problem with obeying orders that you don’t like.”

“Only if they’re stupid.”

“You’re going to have to learn this the hard way, aren’t you?”

“Probably.” She sheathed the sword and rubbed her hands together. “Ooh! I just want to get there.”

He grinned. “Then mount up and let’s ride.”

The journey through the forests of Thealith was uneventful. They passed around many villages almost identical to Riversbridge, with almost identical people laboring over identical chores. The days and nights and scenery drifted into one blur. Swordplay and training were the only things that kept Der sane.

Der glared into the trees, daring them to look different from all the others. They remained

resolute, as they had for days. She leaned forward in her saddle as if she were going to fall asleep. "It's so-oo boring."

Jakkobb laughed. "A few weeks without a fight and you're bored."

She shrugged. "I'll get enough of it at Silver Dawn, I'm sure."

"And then some more." He grinned lopsidedly.

She nodded. "I have a question, sir."

"You usually do."

"Why don't we take the highway?"

"This way is faster."

"Thank you for the short and incomplete answer, sir."

"You're welcome."

She almost grinned. "I don't think I know an elf who did travel on a highway in human lands – except when he was hiding."

"We're like that."

"Right. How much farther to Malfax?"

Jakkobb looked up at the sun. "Not far now, but I'd rather make camp here than have to pay an innkeeper. We're meeting Kelin there too, remember?"

They pitched camp with efficient ease and were ready well before dark. Der set down the freshly filled waterskins. "Quail again?"

"It'll go bad if we don't finish it tonight."

She poked her face; it was still barely tender. Her complexion had returned to mostly normal by now. She tensed and cocked her ear into the breeze. "Do you hear that, sir?"

Jakkobb nodded. "Easily." The rhythmic hoofbeats grew louder.

"Out here?" Both of them rested their hands on their weapons. "He's coming this way."

The knight shrugged. "We didn't hide our tracks."

A roan trotted into the clearing, but the rider stopped at a respectful distance. "Hallo the camp!"

Der leapt to her feet. "Kelin!"

The large young man laughed. "May I approach?" He allowed the horse to trot forward.

"What do you think?" She ran over to meet him. "I haven't seen you since last winter. You look the same."

His curly brown hair fell over into his eyes and he looked, as always, as if he hadn't shaved in about five days. His slightly curved sheath slapped against his leg as he dismounted.

"Not being a blacksmith I see," she said.

He flashed a grin. "At least I can mend my own armor."

"What have you been doing?"

"I've been with the dwarves and Thistle and Thalon. We went to War'kiln. The dwarves have this entire, amazing city underground. I know you've heard the stories, but they're nothing like what it truly is. Then this summer we traveled south to the deserts of Quon."

Jakkobb called, "I don't mind if you stand there talking, but I'll eat your shares of supper."

Kelin rubbed his hands together. "I arrived just in time."

They sat with the fire in the center of their circle. Der bit into the meat. "Your parents are doing well, and so's the old blacksmith."

"Sigard?" Kelin laughed. "Good for him."

"Oh, Don and Avice are done with their trial marriage and they've decided to stay together."

"What?" He looked around and settled for staring into the campfire. "Uh, huzzah for them. Avice is a fine young woman."

"I'm sorry that I pulled you out of competition," Der said.

He shrugged. "I'm not. My life is turning out just fine. I've seen so many incredible things. It's been great since the war ended. Thalon took to the dwarven caverns like an ant to honey. I don't think that his father was too pleased, however, but you know how he is."

"How is Thistle?" Jakkobb asked.

"Alright. He's still, um, angry about the death of his wife. A couple of months ago, he decided to have time with just his son, so they left me on my own. Thalon mentioned something about Thistle taking him to learn about were-creatures, even though they're also supposed to be watching for any chemmen."

"What, like werewolves?" Der inquired. "Why would the boy need to know about them?"

"I don't know. Apparently, it's not just werewolves. They can change into just about every creature out there."

She frowned. "So, one night a wolf, one night a rabbit?"

He shook his head. "No, no. What I meant was they only get one animal, and they don't get to choose. But they don't *have* to be wolves. There are probably were-horses out there too or something."

"Oh." She sucked her tongue. "Huh. So, on the full moon, we've probably already seen a fair number of them."

He shrugged. "Possibly. The full moon is when the magic forces them to change, but they can choose to at any time they wish. At least, that's what Thistle told me."

"It doesn't matter when?" She glanced furtively into the darkening forest.

"Yes, it does. They have to change at the full moon. Any other time is optional, day or night."

"I never knew that Thistle knew so much."

Kelin nodded. "Thistle's been teaching me fighting too."

"I can't think of a better weapons instructor for you, Kelin," Jakkobb said.

"I know." He grinned. "We all now have dwarven armor. Personally, I think I like this mail better than the elven mail we were gifted with. That was too light to feel real." He rapped his knuckles against his chest. "Whereas, this has got some comfortable weight to it." He pulled aside his jacket to reveal his mail. Small, overlapping plates of metal shone against the firelight.

Der frowned. "Then which is better?"

Jakkobb laughed. "Now that's a never-ending argument."

Kelin shrugged. "Yeah. The dwarves even made Thalon a tiny chainmail shirt of his own. He tries to wear it like a warrior."

Der chuckled. "That sounds like Thalon."

“He turned seven this summer solstice. That’s the last I saw of them.”

“Where’d they go?”

“I don’t know. You know Thistle; he won’t tell you anything you don’t need to know in order to survive in the immediate present.”

She nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. I miss Thalon.”

“He told me to send you his regards, and not to kill too many monsters without him.”

“He’s only a boy!”

“And already a smart fighter.”

“I wonder how good he’ll be when he grows up.”

The knight interjected, “Probably like his father. Whatever you do, don’t make him angry.”

“Especially since he’s lost his mother.” Her eyes clouded over with memory. She saw Thalon screaming futilely over his mother’s body. He was only six then, but he knew what death meant.

“We couldn’t have had worse timing.” Kelin drummed his fingers on his knee. He shook his head. “Oh well, how have your lives been?”

She dropped her quail. “Oh! Kelin! I’m on my way to join Silver Dawn! Dragoon knights!”

He swallowed and coughed simultaneously. “Alright, don’t expect me to be surprised.” He glanced between her and Jakkobb. “Wonderful, now there will be two of you!”

“I don’t use an axe.” She began picking the dirt out of her meat.

“Yes, but you use your sword to the same effect.” He nodded to her hip. “That’s not your sword, Der.”

“It’s disguised,” Jakkobb murmured.

“Oh. Good idea.”

Across the clearing, Spike neighed and reared. The knight stared quizzically. “What does he want now?”

Spike reared again, and his dinner plate hooves clawed at the air. His whinny was urgent. Der stood, and tossed the dirty meat into the fire. “I think something’s wrong.”

Jakkobb said, “I agree. He wants us to follow. Get your weapons and we’ll investigate.”

Spike led them on a game trail into the forest. His movements were amazingly silent and he traversed the path as if it was a road well traveled for him. The warhorse stopped and swished his tail.

Jakkobb, Der and Kelin slipped forward like ghosts through the mist. The deciduous trees surrounding them were spread thin with few grasses and weeds to slow their quiet speed. The fallen leaves, soaked by recent rains, absorbed the sounds of their footfalls.

They crouched at the rim of a large, ancient ravine and listened to noises drifting upslope. Der used elvish without thinking about it. “I can’t tell what they’re saying.”

“People in the forest are usually up to nothing good,” Kelin whispered in Common.

“We’re out in the middle of the forest,” she pointed out, still using elvish.

“We’re different. We know us. Besides, it could be a forester chopping firewood for Malfax.”

The voices almost became audible as those in the ravine approached nearer. Der squinted, but still couldn’t make out exactly what she was seeing through the trees and brush, which



seemed much heavier below. The scrape of metal dragging over rocks crept up to the observers.

“Chains!” She craned her neck forward. “Chains are never a sign of ordinary people cutting firewood.”

“They are too; you have to chain the tree trunk to something to haul it back.”

“Alright.” She snorted. “That’s true, but chains and low muttering together?”

“Hush already!” the captain ordered. “Nobody cuts wood this time of evening.”

Der opened her mouth to reply but suddenly felt hot breath on the back of her neck. Despite the warmth, her body chilled. Gripping her sword hilt, she turned. “Sir!”

“What?” he growled.

“Spike sneaked up on us. He walked silently, and he did it on purpose!”

“Shut up about the horse and listen.”

She swore the horse smirked and bared his white teeth. He tossed his head and mane as if he were flipping his hair. Kelin gave her an apprehensive nod of agreement.

Below, several men stepped out from behind trees. They swung axes and swords around like toys. Most of them bore visible scars on their arms and faces. One of them looked as if he may have had dog in his ancestry because of a massive underbite. Almost immediately, a couple more brutes emerged from the darkness. Behind them, they dragged seven quivering people, fastened together by one long chain.

The trio scanned them with practiced eyes. There was not a great deal of difference between any of the captors, except their mismatched weapons.

“Alright, they’re up to no good,” Jakkobb whispered. “Here’s the plan, we’ll talk to them first and find out who they are. We’ll try to avoid a fight if at all possible, especially since they outnumber us.”

“Yes, sir,” Der agreed.

The bald man waved his arm in a circle, and then another circle going the other way. He looked very much like he just didn’t know how to stretch.

“Slavers!” Kelin breathed. “That’s their secret signal. I saw it with Thistle once this spring when we were way down near Quon. They’re not prisoners!”

Her jaw dropped. “In *our* kingdom?”

Jakkobb was already charging down the slope. He freed the axe from its sheath as he ran and it flashed dangerously against the torchlight. Spike leaped over their heads, from standing still to a flying jump in a single motion. He rushed down the steep slope with a whinnying battle cry of his own.

“What about the plan?” Der asked, thunderstruck.

“It appears to have become barbarian smash,” Kelin replied in his most cultured accent. He stared as the knight took a slaver’s head and most of his shoulders off with an incredibly acute crunch. “What pissed Jakkobb off?”

“I don’t know!” She thrust a finger forward. “Fight!” She threw herself feet first over the lip of the ravine and half-ran, half-slid into the fracas.

Below, the slavers took flight away from the armored nightmare of the knight-captain, and

ran directly into Spike. The warhorse reared, and brought one sharp hoof down *through* the skull of one and into the soil. His former partners wailed aloud, but at least had time to draw their weapons. However, their blades seemed far too thin against the giant equine as they fanned out around the horse.

They never saw the runner approaching from behind.

Der drove all the momentum she had gained down the slope into her sword, and shoved it through the nearest slaver's back all the way to the hilt. She wheezed in relief. The sword still moved and felt the same extension of her arm as it always had.

The man spasmed and went limp with a sigh. She didn't waste any time putting her foot on his back and yanking the Pallens sword free. As Jakkobb had said previously, in the fight you did anything to ensure survival of everyone on your side. Honor was what you did after the battle.

She whirled to her next opponent, who jerked a screaming slave woman in front of him and pointed his heavy sword at the young warrior over his captive's shoulder. The chain gang of slaves fell into line behind them.

Instead of cursing, Derora just frowned thoughtfully. The slaver retreated a step from that expression of mild concentration, dragging the kicking woman with him. Somehow, that expression on the face of a girl was more frightening than the bellowing knight.

Several feet away, Jakkobb moved like an unstoppable siege engine. The doubled-headed axe swung endlessly. No one even tried to fight him anymore. And yet, he moved faster than they could get away.

At last, Kelin made it into the fight. He let the nearest man have the first attack. He parried and grinned devilishly. "Ha-HA!" Then he riposted. The slaver backpedaled away from him. Moving like a performing dancer, Kelin followed. He moved deftly for such a large man. The slaver lunged again. Kelin parried, and instead of riposting, he slapped his free hand to his waist and thrust his sword high into the air. "You'll never win, fiend!"

Thunderstruck, the man went for the obvious opening. The laughing swordsman parried him again.

"This isn't theater, Kelin!" Der shouted. She didn't move her eyes from her opponent and his human shield, but it was hard. She had *never* witnessed Kelin act like this before in combat!

"Oh, alright. Spoil the drama." He smiled like a street magician and saluted with his foreign, slightly curved sword with an edge on only one side. He began to spin the sword in mesmerizing circles. The slaver stared stupidly at the sword, until it stopped spinning. By then, it was too late.

Derora tilted her head to the side. She regained the expression of a student trying to think of the answer to the teacher's question as the man brandished his weapon over the woman's shoulder.

When she moved, she thought his reaction was pathetically slow. She angled her sword perfectly, and graced its way within an inch of the woman and straight through her target's leather armor. He gasped and reared away.

Der immediately pulled back and thrust her sword into his exposed neck and the slaver's eyes bulged as he met his sudden kismet on her blade.

She withdrew her weapon and looked around in the deafening silence. “Is that it?”

The bloody mêlée was all over in less than two minutes.

Jakkobb lowered the axe slowly. The chained slaves stared nervously at it. He shrugged. “Appears so.”

Spike gleefully jumped down on the back of a dead slaver. There was another explosive crunch coupled with many other smaller crunches.

The knight frowned. “Spike.” Then he passed his gaze onto the slaves.

The horse snorted and stepped to the side. He dragged his hooves through the thick grass to wipe off the blood and bits of bone.

Kelin knelt to clean his sword on the cloak of one of the fallen. “He’s the strangest horse I’ve ever met.”

Der wiped her face. “Jakkobb, are you sure that’s it?”

The dragoon sighed. “Yes, Der, I’m sure.”

“Oh.” She glanced back to the woman she’d saved.

The middle aged woman held up a cleanly severed chain. “You must have the strength of ten men!”

Der wrinkled her nose. She didn’t recall doing *that*. “Um,” she forced a smile, “No, it’s all about angles and momentum, and an extremely worthy sword.” She held up the Pallens blade, which was still dripping blood. The slaves shrank away from her.

Kelin stepped beside her. He grinned. “Allow me. Let’s get rid of these chains, shall we?”

Der nodded. “Ah, yes, of course. Which one will have the keys?” She waved her blade at the bodies.

He shook his head. “It’s not like that, Der. Most of the time people are chained, they just hammer the chains on, no locks or keys used. See, no keyhole.”

“Then how do you get them off?”

He held up his dagger. “Leverage and a good hammer. Fortunately, I have both.” He sighed. “The hammer’s back with my saddle though.” He looked up toward the slaves. Most diverted their eyes, but a raven haired young woman stared evenly at him. Her face was wide and flat, and she boasted elliptical dark eyes. Her thick, black hair ran in waves down to her waist. She wore a ripped and faded robe, which had once been brilliantly red with gold brocade. She certainly didn’t look like the humans born and bred around here. Maybe she’d come from a far off land like he’d been learning so much about in these last few months. A knot lodged itself in his throat.

“Camp isn’t far,” Jakkobb said from behind them. “We also have a dying campfire there. Kelin, you take them there and strike their chains, feed them with whatever we have. Let them clean themselves in the brook too if they so choose.”

Kelin nodded. “There’s a temple to Ahtome in Malfax. I just came from there. The nuns will take these people in, I’m sure.”

The captain nodded. “Good idea. We’ll head there tonight after they’ve eaten.”

“Sir, it’s already dark.”

“I noticed. Now, get going.”

“What am I doing, sir?” Der asked.

“You’re helping me sort out and burn the bodies.”

“Yes, sir.”

Spike and Kelin led the way up the steep ravine. The slaves followed slowly and carefully. Der counted on her fingers. “We could fit three of them on Spike, and a couple others on the other horses.”

“Only the ones who shouldn’t walk. Save them what little pride they might still have, because the gods know they don’t have much.” He began to clean his axe. “Damn, I should’ve checked for broken bones.”

“Wouldn’t they have complained?”

He shook his head. “Probably not. I will when we get back to camp.”

“Why do you care so much?” She knelt at the nearest corpse. Heat still radiated from the body. She wiped her sword on the dead man’s clothing. “It’s not like you, sir. You’re the one with the plans and you just charged...”

The knight stopped moving. “You honestly wish to know?”

“Aye.”

“Fine. You know that I don’t use my elvish name.”

“I didn’t know that you had one. And, besides, Jakkobb is easier to shout across the battlefield than something with sounds I’d never heard until last year.”

“Yes, but that’s not why I have this name, that’s why I kept it. Do you remember when I told you that when I first became a warrior that I was forced to kill people who had done me no wrong?”

She nodded.

“Because I was a slave once.”

“What?” She nearly dropped the Pallens sword.

“You asked, kid. Some slavers kidnapped me when I was a small child, oh, about the human equivalent of four.”

She gasped. “By the holy Empire, what happened?”

He scowled and stared angrily at nothing. “Never you mind, Der. Now’s not the time.”

“But I want to know.”

“No, Der.”

“Yes, sir.” She stared at the surrounding carnage.

“What’s on your mind now?” he asked roughly.

“This fight was too easy.”

“Der, you’ve fought chemmen, not humans.”

“But I thought these quick fights were just in Riversbridge, because they’d never been in combat. These slavers here, however, were seasoned.”

“You had to learn so much so quickly during the war that you don’t yet realize how much you improved.”

“You and the rest of the elves still beat me.”

“Yes, but you’d be hard pressed to find an average human who could. Especially since you

use the Pallens sword. But,” he shifted to a cheerful voice, “You have yet to join the army and learn what the military is truly all about.”

She patted the hilt of the blade like a good dog, and reluctantly sheathed it.

“We’ll start with the bald one.” He grabbed the ankles.

She bent to grab the shoulders of the man’s heavy cloak. She hissed and hopped back.

“What is it?”

She pointed. On his throat was a tattoo of a vicious snake with a head, poised to strike, on each end.

Jakkobb growled. “Not these fellows again.”

## Chapter Three

### A Stranger's Need

Der's mind rolled with a hundred questions. She especially wondered how the invincible knight could have ever been in the same position as the tattered group of people they'd rescued. But a single look at the knight-captain's stern face was enough to save that one for later. Instead, she tried to think about the hundreds of questions she had for her best friend. She poked him in the back. "What was that swordfight all about? You *never* dance around like that."

He straightened his shoulders. "Well, after what hells we traveled through and somehow survived last year, I've found that nothing scares me. I tried to be scared when I left Arborn because I knew damn well what could happen, but nothing did the trick anymore."

"Oh."

"It's still all your fault. I would have never left Riversbridge if it weren't for you."

She held out her hands. "Yeah, but you were saying what amazing sights you saw with the dwarves and all. That would've never happened if we hadn't left home."

He let loose a grin and punched her shoulder. "I know. War'kiln was so amazing. They even have this thing where they put these waterwheels in underground rivers, and somehow, doing that, causes lights to travel on wires throughout their cities!"

She held up her finger. "Magic?"

He shook his head vigorously. "I asked, but they wouldn't explain it to a non-dwarf. It wasn't magic, though. Carak muttered something about lightning, but he got a very nasty look for it. He absolutely refused to say anything else about it, even in private."

Der's face screwed up. "How do you get lightning – underground – from a river?"

Kelin shrugged. "Yeah, it didn't make sense to me, either."

"We're here," Jakkobb's heavy voice cut into their conversation. He stopped at the base of the stone steps.

The temple's pillars were higher than any other building in Malfax. The roof they supported was painstakingly carved with relief scenes of historical and religious heroes in their moments of glory. Der slid behind Jakkobb. The former slaves retreated back behind her.

Kelin poked her in the rib. "What are you hiding for? Holy symbols don't ward you off."

She shrugged, eyeing the temple from around the knight's arm. "I had a bad experience the last time I was at a temple. I got in trouble for wearing my sword inside."

"Come on." The knight rolled his eyes and marched up the decorative steps. Der swallowed and jogged to catch up. Kelin and the slaves skittered after them toward the entrance.

Inside, the temple boasted a high ceiling squatting on even fatter pillars. White marble swirled across the floors and walls. A slender chryselephantine statue of Ahtome watched over the interior of her temple. She held a golden branch in one ivory hand and an open book in the other.

Despite the darkness, the people in the temple were still awake, bustling around in white

and gray robes with rope sandals. The knight cupped his hands to his mouth. "Attention!"

All activity slowly spun to a halt and every set of eyes turned toward the entrance. Quickly, a white robed figure detached itself from the crowd. The priestess, with flowers woven into her long white hair, stepped forth and bowed her head.

"What do you require, sir knight?"

He nodded his head in return. "On my word as a dragoon knight, we were passing through the forest and discovered men trading slaves. We fought and freed them. After the skirmish, we discovered one of the men was a follower of Sennha." He gestured behind him and stepped to the side. "He was killed in combat."

"Was he a priest of the adversary?"

The captain shook his head. "No, my lady. He had only the double headed snake tattoo on his throat, no medallion."

"Then Ahtome thanks you for your bravery and skill, good warriors." She looked past them to the former slaves. The nervous huddle shied away from the powerful gaze. She smiled warmly, and her eyes sparkled with warmth like a cheery fire. "Do not fear, you are among friends here."

Her smile seemed to melt their fear. A few offered hesitant waves in return. "Step forth and be welcome in this place." She opened her arm behind her and several nuns in gray robes hurried forward. They took the freed people by their hands.

The raven haired girl stared at Kelin as the nuns led her away. He ran his finger around the ring of his collar.

"Feed them and clothe them," the priestess ordered. She turned back to the warriors. "Walk with me in the temple gardens, please."

They stepped outside into the enveloping kiss of the cool night air. They walked around stone paths through rows of well manicured, bright flowers. It didn't feel natural like the elvish gardens, but it was certainly beautiful in its colors.

The priestess closed her eyes as she treaded on the familiar path. "I know Sennha's will was dealt a serious blow early last winter, but I knew it was not gone. Now we have proof of it." She took a few more quiet steps. "Tell me of your fight."

The three of them quickly recounted their individual roles. Der went on to say, "This isn't the first follower of Sennha we've killed. Kelin, Ed— another friend and I personally killed another priest autumn of last year in Duelingar."

"Then truly you are a warrior for good."

Der blushed.

Jakkobb bowed his head. "My lady, since our stories are told, I must excuse myself. These two may answer the rest of your queries. I must go to the inn and reserve a room before the innkeeper goes to bed."

"You are most welcome to stay here tonight."

He smiled. "We have horses and you no stables. I'm also certain the rescued folk will take all your spare beds."

"Very well, then tell the innkeeper we insist on paying for your stay."

He bowed his head again. "Thank you."

Kelin took a quick, circumspect glance around the gardens. "You know, he's going to need help with the horses. My lady." He bowed hastily and scuttled off after the knight.

Der suddenly stood an awkward ten feet tall under the priestess's shrewd gaze. The lady smiled. "There are many dangers in our world. Slavery, war, the will of the dark gods, even the things that appear human... We are fortunate to have the protection of the heroic gods. Do you pray to the goddess?"

She twisted her hands. "Um."

"Oh, you'll pray to Zine, patron of warriors more."

The young woman shook her head, and pulled the elvish medallion out from her shirt. The circle and blade of the Dawn Sword reflected the moonlight. "Carenth, actually. Zine too, and Ahtome, of course."

The priestess gasped quietly. "I've never heard of someone actually wearing Carenth's warrior symbol."

Der hastily tucked the medallion inside her shirt. "I know. It's not been popular since the fall of the paladin empire."

The older woman smiled. "Very well, my child. Our prayers shall go with you. Come back inside and we shall grant you your reward."

"Reward?"

The smile widened. "Yes, we would give you a reward for the rescue of enslaved people, but you also destroyed a worshiper of Sennha."

She shook her head. "Oh. Give it to the slaves, er, former slaves, er, the people we rescued."

The priestess nodded. "Carenth must be pleased with you."

Der stammered her thanks and glanced up at the white moon. "I must be going too, I have to meet my friends. We're leaving tomorrow before dawn. I'm going to Silver Dawn's Horizon!"

She caught up with the other two at the stables. "Thank you so very much for leaving me there!"

Kelin rolled his eyes. "You weren't even a minute behind us."

"At least we don't have to pay for tonight." Jakkobb lifted one of Spike's dinner plate hooves onto his leg and quickly picked out the dirt and organic remnants from the fight that the horse had collected.

"That's true," Kelin said. "I just thought of something, aren't we supposed to get a reward for killing a follower of Sennha? Didn't that get reinstated last winter?"

"Yes, actually." He gently set the hoof down.

Der studied the stable wall with absolute concentration and apparently failed to hear him.

"Der." Kelin waved his hand in front of her face. "Did the priestess mention a reward?"

She dropped her shoulders. "I gave it to the people we rescued."

Jakkobb smiled, but Kelin didn't see it. He slapped his hands against his hips. "What? That wasn't wholly your money to give away!"



“They needed it more than us.”

“Ahtome’s nuns are going to care for them, so no, they don’t.” He turned his back to her. “I’m going to rub down my horse.”

She stared at him, absolutely unhinged. “When did you become like this?”

“Since I started living in the real world, which costs money!”

“Der.” She whirled toward the captain’s voice. “Why don’t you get something to eat?”

“It’s too late, sir, the inn stopped serving its meal.”

“There’s another tavern down the way. We’ll meet you there.”

She pointed. “I’ve got to care for my horse too.”

“I’ll do it. Just give Kelin some breathing room, alright?”

“Yes, sir.” She sighed as she shut the stable’s door, and again as she walked alone down the dark street until she found a tavern.

Der read the sign above the door. She reread it. The Hero’s Tavern. She scratched her head and looked around. She instantly thought of a number of ways to describe it, and heroic wasn’t one of them. The wooden structure had never been painted, but the weather had stained the wood to gray. There was no door in the entrance, and by the marks on the frame, it had been torn off and never replaced.

She glanced up at the sign one last time and stepped inside. Immediately, she dodged a drunk as he staggered past her while trying to sing and belch at the same time. Beyond him, she thought she had walked in on a brawl. She ducked under a flying flagon as it smashed against the wall behind her. After a few seconds, she saw that everyone was just in alcoholic high spirits. The whole tavern was engulfed in a turbulent sea of noise. Except, she noticed, one quiet corner where a figure lounged quietly. An opaque shadow fell across his chest and face.

She weaved and elbowed her way to the bar, and finally squeezed into a space between two drunken loudmouths. She banged loudly on the counter. Someone shoved her to the side. She didn’t have the body mass to resist and rolled away. She fisted the bar again, but the barkeeper didn’t notice.

A metal flagon bounced on the counter beside her. She whirled to glare at whoever threw it. This meant glaring at potentially everyone in the tavern. “Watch it!” she yelled to the crowd at large. She turned back to the bar. “Keep! How about some service here?”

Suddenly, a small space of quiet opened to her left. A white hand pushed a delicate tankard in front of her. Der blinked at it in surprise. “I think you’ve already had enough.” She pushed it back “You’re sitting over there.”

“Thanks, but I don’t drink this drink,” a drowsy, mellifluous voice replied. The hand pushed it back.

She looked at the melodious speaker. He was only a couple of years older than she was, with high cheekbones and a graceful face. He looked almost elvish, but his ears were rounded. His face was crowned with dirty blond, cleanly cut hair that was barely long enough to stray into his eyes. Her eyes locked with his and she felt herself falling forward into them. Those eyes were too bright for the dark tavern. They weren’t just green, but rich and glowing like an emerald’s reflection.

Her mind tickled, but she shrugged off the feeling and looked back at the drink. “If you don’t drink it, you think that encourages me to?”

“Well, it’s just too sweet for me.” He smiled without teeth. “I promise I didn’t spit in it. Or worse.”

She raised the drink and sniffed it carefully. It smelled like alcohol. Alcohol was usually safer than water, she mused, especially since most people used their water sources for sewage. She sniffed again. “I’ve heard stories about drinking with strangers in taverns—”

“And waking up on a ship, forced to be a sailor. No ocean around here.” He winked.

She poked the side of the tankard with her index finger. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” He smiled again.

“Do you always buy drinks for people?”

“Only the ones I take out for a meal. Come on, I’ve got a booth over there, and you look like you could use some leg room.”

She glanced around the raucous tavern again. “Well, I’m waiting for my friends, so only if they can come with me.”

He patted her sword’s sheath and nodded to her dagger. “Don’t they always?” He took her elbow before she could fight him and steered her away from the bar. He left the untouched drink there.

“I never agreed—”

“Yes, but you’re curious. I can tell.” Those brilliant eyes smiled infectiously.

She dropped into the wooden bench and he slipped around the other side of the table. Casually, he leaned in the corner where the walls met and propped one boot against the table. A blood red rose rested on his side of the table. It looked as out of place in this tavern as he did.

“What do you want?”

He chuckled winsomely. “What makes you think I want something?”

She shrugged.

“I see that there is no need for verbal fencing with you. You’re right, there is a favor I ask of you.”

“I knew it!”

He chuckled again. “No, you just look like the only educated person in this wretched heap, and I am wondering if you could read something for me.”

She leaned back and looked at him critically. His tidy black shirt and trousers were too black to have ever been worn more than maybe twice. His boots were soft, supple leather with no scratches. She thought of her own travel stained apparel. “If you can afford those clothes, surely you can read.”

He waved his hand dismissively. His other hand produced a light green cloth. He pushed it across the table. “Read this.”

Carefully, Der opened the cloth to find a neatly folded piece of paper. She frowned and unfolded it too. “It just says water.”

“Good, very good.” She offered the paper back to him. “Fold it back up first, please.” When

she had done so, he took it from her hand and it disappeared about his person.

“You have cold hands.” She rubbed her own fingers together.

He shrugged and reset his features with a tight lipped, but charming smile. “Oh!” He rolled his eyes laughingly. “I forgot to introduce myself.”

“You do that.” She started to stand. “I’m leaving.”

“A moment yet, please.”

Der sighed but sat back down.

“I am Thomas Delauncey. But, please, call me Tom, and I need your help with a task.”

“Derora Saxen. I assure you, there are many people who can read the word water.” She drummed her fingers rapidly on the table.

“Do you have a few moments to spare? To talk?” His voice was mesmerizing.

She pushed a hand against her forehead to keep her head from falling over the table. “No, I don’t. I’m already rushed to get to where I’m going.”

“Where is that, pray?”

“Silver Dawn’s Horizon.”

Tom cocked an eyebrow. “What? Is your village in trouble?”

She shook her head. “No, no, I’m going to become a dragoon knight. I’m a warrior.”

He nodded his head slowly. “Of course. Cute. Honestly.” He looked pointedly at her sword. “You do know how to use that, right?”

“You don’t believe me.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t. I know how near impossible it is to get accepted into any of the three orders.” He leaned across the table so quickly that Der didn’t have time to respond, and she ended up just staring into his incredibly green eyes. His honeyed voice was thick and heavy. “You will come with me. Forget about Silver Dawn.”

She swayed in her seat while her dark green-brown eyes glazed. She brought both of her hands to her face and dropped her head onto the table. “Ow...” She looked up at Tom. “What just happened? You said something about a dragoon order and then my head just started hurting.” She glanced over her shoulder, noticing how the exit looked a lot farther now than it did a minute ago.

He leaned back into his corner, put his fingers against his chin and gazed at her. “I don’t know. You simply grabbed your head. Have you been injured there recently?”

She shook her head and immediately realized how bad of an idea that was as the hammers drummed away inside her skull. She looked up and blinked the stars in her vision away. “I’m sorry.” She closed her eyes and counted her breaths. “Well, Tom, I must be going. You’re a very strange person.”

“But you haven’t eaten yet. Surely a warrior such as yourself isn’t afraid of a vagrant in a tavern.”

She raised a doubtful eyebrow at him.

He hid a smile behind his hand. “What? You can’t be afraid of me.”

“No, I’m not, but I have one of those nagging voices saying I should be.”

“Nag! Nag! Nag! That’s all they ever do.” He leaned over the table again and lowered his

voice. "Haven't you ever just wanted to have a wild, crazy and even stupid adventure before?"

"I was in a raiding party on the chemmen in their colorless world. I know about stupid."

His rhythm faltered for the smallest moment, but then he chuckled. "Well, that's considerably stupider than having supper with a complete stranger."

She sighed. "You don't believe me."

He winked. "Of course not. The chemmen don't exist. I am, however, on a quest and I need aid. My seven year old ward is dying. I can save her, but I require a certain component before I can heal her. I don't have much time."

Der still held her head. "If you need healing help, there's a temple of Ahtome's here."

"Her grandfather tried. They couldn't help. I know how."

"Wait. If she has a grandfather, why is she *your* ward?"

He shot her an irritated look. "It's just an expression. I provide for the both of them."

"Then why do you need me? There's naught I can do if Ahtome cannot."

"You don't have to help heal her, I just need your help to retrieve the... necessary material."

"Why me?"

"Why not you?"

"This has something to do with that paper I know. But it just read water, as plain as day."

An insouciant smile lit his face. "Perhaps, or perhaps I just wanted to be certain you could read. So, truly, where were you going?"

Der frowned. "I'm serious about going to Silver Dawn's Horizon. I was recommended after the elf-chemmen war, for my role."

"What war?"

"The war that ended last winter."

"There was a war? You'll have to excuse me, but I don't keep with current events."

"Well, there's a new king of Arborn."

Tom's eyes widened. "Did the old one retire?"

She shook her head. "No, he and the queen were murdered by a chemman named Vlade."

"That's impossible. Chemmen aren't real – they're just another fantasy perpetuated by the rumor mill of the Centum Wars."

"Most of the elves wish they were."

His brow furrowed. "And how does a human know this?"

She tried to match his blank stare, but felt her eyes begin to water immediately. "Because I was there. Anyway, you seem to know much about the elves, too."

"I'm a merchant's son, we used to trade with them." He glanced at her sword again, but his eyes passed onto the sheath. "I'll grant that's an elvish sheath, but that's the most boring sword I've ever seen."

Her eyes narrowed, but she shrugged indifferently. "I did fight in the war, I even know the new king."

Tom rolled his brilliant eyes. "Oh, naturally." He smiled to himself. "Aren't you a little young to be making up war stories?"

"I'm not!" She crossed her arms.

He paused. "Not too young?"

Der pulled out the Dawn Sword out of her collar. "See? I'm not making it up! The elves made this for me."

Tom immediately pressed his back tightly against the booth as the point of the medallion's sword dangled in front of him. "So I see," he said quietly, gripping the table's edge. "How did you get that?"

"I just told you." She pushed the pendant back into her shirt.

"But you're human, what were you doing with the elves?"

"I'm part elf."

He stared at her eyes, and then her ears. "Not enough of one."

She glared. "You're not impressing me enough to help you with your quest. I can't anyway, I've got to make my interview with the knight-commander of Silver Dawn. Furthermore, there's too much you're not telling me." She held up her first finger. "First, you have no proof of the girl. Secondly, you haven't told me what you need."

"My, for someone who is going to join the world's elite order of knights, you certainly aren't trusting."

"That has nothing to do with my suspicions of you."

"No, but knights are supposed to aid those in need. You're also wearing the Dawn Sword, which means..." He blinked. "No one's worn the Dawn Sword since—"

"Not since the destruction of Pallens at the end of the Centum Wars, I *know*."

He looked at her for a long moment with a slight frown weighing on his handsome face. He suddenly glanced toward the entrance. "That's a huge knight. Now, perhaps if he told me your story, I might consider it plausible."

Der swiveled her head around and waved. She yelled over the roar of the tavern, "Ogre-face! Over here!"

Tom coughed. "Are you stupid?"

Jakkobb, standing by the door, lifted one of his boots and checked the bottom. "Der?"

"I'm over here! And I am *not* short!"

He lifted the other boot. "Where?"

She slapped a hand over her eyes and turned back to Tom. "He leaves the armor on and the sun heats it up, but he's only half baked."

Tom watched the knight's approach as he easily pushed the noisy people out of his path. "You like to make trouble, don't you?"

"Trouble against the ogre? I'll be alright." She watched Jakkobb pull up a chair to the table and sat in it backward. "Did I fight in the elf-chemmen war or not, sir?"

"Not."

Tom smirked. Der's jaw dropped.

The knight grinned through his open visor. "Oh, you killed stuff for our side, but you didn't fight. You didn't know how to fight then, and you still need proper training."

"She did?" Tom asked skeptically.

"But you wouldn't believe it." The chair groaned dangerously beneath him.

“You’re right, I don’t.”

“I’m right here,” she said sulkily.

“Where?” Jakkobb theatrically looked around, and then finally, down. “Oh, sorry.”

Tom looked at her. “I have to ask, does she truly know the elven king?”

Jakkobb shrugged. “Well, she was invited to the ceremony at the end of the war, and introduced along with some other warriors, so I guess she can say so.”

Der opened her mouth, but the captain’s heavy foot pressed down on hers. She grumbled under her breath. “Sir, Tom here doesn’t believe that I’m actually on my way to Silver Dawn’s Horizon and wants me to join his quest.”

“He’s a dragoon knight, that’s obvious enough,” Tom said. “So you know people.”

Jakkobb pursed his lips. “We could stretch a few days worth of time. What does he need?”

“When does a good adventure ever take just a few days?” He looked closely at Jakkobb, and the two stared at each other. “Besides, I only honestly need her and lighter parties travel faster.”

The knight nodded slowly. “Yes, but lighter parties die sooner.”

“You’re an optimist.”

“No, just experienced.”

“You wouldn’t accept a bribe, would you?”

“Absolutely I would. It won’t change my mind though.”

Tom’s verdant eyes narrowed to slits. “What does it take to get you to go away?”

“Near fatal wounds and war.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “You may get a war soon enough.”

The captain removed his helmet. “And what exactly—”

“Oh, you’re an elf. A very *large* elf.” The young man smiled stiffly. “Well, the evening is growing old. I must be going.” He unfolded himself from the table. He bowed his head and clicked his heels. “Derora Saxen, until we meet again.”

She shook her head. “We won’t. Farewell.”

Jakkobb watched him leave through narrowed eyes. “There’s something very odd about that man.”

“I noticed. He started out being nice, but then he just seemed irritated.” She rubbed her forehead. “I think he’s maybe a magic user too. Magic users are weird.” She looked up at him blearily. “You’re an elf, man, you should be able to just somehow know these things, like what’s weird about him.”

“I’ve always been a warrior, not a magic user, you know that.”

“You’re a strange elf, sir. All the stories say that all elves know magic. And yes, I know better, but you’re still strange.”

“In all fairness, you’re one of the strangest part elves I’ve ever met.”

“I’m one sixteenth. I’m just human.”

“Fair enough.” Jakkobb looked back to the door. “I can’t think of what was wrong with him.”

She pressed her fingers to her temples. Her head still ached. “Probably his magic then. You can’t trust that stuff.”

“Right. We’ll keep watches tonight, and we’ll leave before dawn.”

## Chapter Four

### A Doleful Melody

"I still can't believe you gave away our reward money." Kelin shifted his weight in his saddle and ducked under a low branch. He glared ahead.

"It was a good deed!" Der frowned at the back of her horse's ears.

"But not very practical. The nuns will care for them, and we could use the money."

"We have enough cash and I don't fight for money."

"Good intentions or not, you have to pay for meals like the rest of us."

She more or less hurled him her coin purse. "There. That's what's left of what Edillon gave me to come home."

He weighed the bag in his hand. "You couldn't have spent this much in Riversbridge."

"I gave most of it to my family."

"And now they're as rich as the Count." Kelin tossed the purse back. "A person can't sleep on a bed of honor, Der."

"Yes, I can. It's made of dirt."

"What? What does that even mean?"

She ground her teeth. "It means that I do have a bed of honor, even if it's just the ground."

He sighed. "Alright, alright."

She narrowed her eyes. "You didn't used to be this way."

"Did you think that you're the only person who can be reckless and successful?"

"You mean lucky," Jakkobb said. "Try spending a long time with Thistle, Der. Your attitude will change too."

"I have before, sir. I'm still me."

"Only a lot better of a swordsman," Kelin remarked.

The knight suppressed a grin. "Yes, Der, but you are also one of the most stubborn things ever created."

Kelin finally grinned. "Cast iron bends easier than you."

"Indeed." Jakkobb exaggerated his nod.

"But I feel funny when I'm not in danger," she protested.

"No, Der," Kelin corrected, "That's feeling safe."

"It's still awkward."

"Have you ever turned aside a challenge?"

She started to shake her head but stopped. "I did, actually, last night. There was a man asking for my help in the tavern."

"That was because it was the smart thing to do." Jakkobb's face darkened.

"I'm still not certain about walking away."

"Now, Der, we both know something was wrong with him."

"I know, but what if there is a girl?"



“A girl?” Kelin asked.

“Then it wasn’t truly about him, was it?”

“We don’t know that.” The knight raised a warning finger. “Just forget about him.”

“What girl? What man?” Kelin demanded.

“Some dark and mysterious character propositioned Der in the tavern last night.”

“Uhh... Excuse me?” His eyes fell wide open.

Der scratched her head. “I just don’t understand it.”

“I don’t think you do,” Kelin said carefully.

“He just didn’t seem the kind of man who would care about a child. Then again, if there is... Oh, I don’t know.”

“Der.” Jakkobb’s voice was metal. “Forget about it.”

“Alright, sir.” She sighed. “Why are mysteries always complicated? Why can’t I deal with a simple mystery?”

“Yes, but if the mystery was simple and straightforward, it wouldn’t be a mystery,” Kelin remarked.

“Fair enough, but I’d still prefer it that way.”

“Oh, if life were that simple.”

After that, they rode in silence for a while. Der started a traveling song but her spirit wasn’t in it and it faded quickly.

They made camp before long. Der drew first watch. So she stayed up, idly tossing some more sticks in the fire and listened to both men snoring. She hadn’t known elves to snore, but she never really thought of the captain as an elf. He was everything elves weren’t. What was strange was the fact that it was normal to her, she mused.

Strange... like the stranger in the tavern. Tom? That was his name, right? She yawned; even thinking about him seemed to make her drowsy. She frowned into the dancing flames. She couldn’t figure him out; too many things were just a little bit out of place. Those incredibly fine clothes in such a horrible little tavern, and yet, no one else seemed to see that. He should have been bloodied and his coin purse stolen in under a minute.

Oh well. Another mystery. She pondered if she’d always wonder what might have happened if she’d gone with him.

She fed the fire another branch. Silver Dawn’s Horizon, she thought and felt the tingle rise in her throat. The unconquerable stronghold of the most legendary of the dragoon orders. *And she was going there!* She saw herself, sitting straight backed on a mighty steed, with her own banner flapping smartly in the wind as she approached the fortress. She had just come from an amazing victory and—

And there was Tom, standing right in the path. She blinked and sat straight up. No one was there, of course.

She looked around the campsite, and was surprised to see that the fire had burned off most of its fuel. She chanced a glance at Jakkobb and sighed in relief. He was still sleeping. She’d half expected to feel the flat of his hand on the back of her head for drifting off.

The rustling of cloth and leather exploded in her ears. She snatched up her sword and

jumped to her feet before she was fully aware of herself. "Alarm! Alarm!"

It was him! Tom had found her! She launched her arm for the Pallens sword, and stumbled to her feet.

The small figure bent over Kelin's saddlebags seemed to shrink and freeze. Der stopped with her sword halfway out of its sheath. That most decidedly was not Tom.

Jakkobb and Kelin struggled into consciousness while Spike trotted up silently behind the lithe thief. The culprit, a mere sliver of a girl, dropped what she'd gathered in her hands. Packaged food tumbled to the ground.

"Who are...? You're one of the slaves." Der narrowed her eyes, still holding her sword halfway out of its sheath. "You thief!"

The raven haired girl dropped her eyes. Her wide face paled even further.

"What's going on here?" Jakkobb demanded. His hand was on his axe, but he hadn't drawn the weapon.

The girl dropped to her knees, weighed down by the tears springing from her jet black eyes. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I was just so hungry!" She covered her face with her hands, revealing intricate tattoos all over them. They were just patterns; at least there were no symbols that Der could recognize.

Kelin set his weapon down and held up his hands. "Wait. It's just a little food. No harm, alright?" He knelt next to the food that had fallen and lifted it off the ground. "Here, just take it."

The knight cocked his head. "They would have fed you at the temple. Why aren't you there, child?"

The young woman's hands clasped the proffered food. She tried to swallow a sob. "It's— it's— they were asking too many questions when they washed our feet in that stupid ceremony of theirs. And— I— I couldn't talk about it. What had happened to me." She choked. "They— those men you killed— they did horrible things to me... and the other women." She broke off in tears. "And— and at the temple, they asked... I got scared, so I ran." She raised her hands up against another bout of tears.

Jakkobb's face softened. "Well, you're certainly welcome to share some food."

Der scowled. "You could have just asked; you didn't have to try to steal it." Both of her traveling partners glared at her. She retorted, "What? She was stealing." She rolled her shoulders against the heat of her best friend's stare.

Meanwhile, Spike began to walk in a slow circle around the girl.

Kelin dropped his eyes back to the young woman. "What's your name?"

She gulped. "Mora. Morana Kemprial." Her tattooed fingers explored the details of the burlap packages of food in her hands. She didn't look up. Some of her thick, long hair had drifted in front of her face. Her entire body trembled against her tears.

"Mora," Jakkobb said, "You may have the food you require. However, if you try to steal from us again, you will be running back to Ahtome's door and we'll be hardly a step behind."

She gasped. "I didn't mean to— I was just so hungry! I didn't know what to do!"

"Staying at the temple would have been wiser," the knight replied evenly. He shot Der a look just as her mouth was beginning to open, and she clicked it closed.

“How were you captured by the slavers, my lady?” Kelin helped to open the cloth wrappings around their meat and cheese.

She twisted her finger around in her thick hair, still staring at the soft dirt. “There was this accident and my cottage burned down. And I was lost on my own and I just wandered around in the forest, and they found me. They already had the others chained up by the time they found me, so they just added me to them.”

Kelin fumbled his cheese. “And they just chained you? No questions at all? Where did this happen?”

She plunged her face into her hands and just started sobbing.

Der scowled. “I’ve never heard of things like that happening in this kingdom. And that still doesn’t excuse you stealing.”

Jakkobb’s hand appeared faster than the wind and slapped her on the back of her head.

“Ow!” She stumbled forward. “But her story doesn’t make sense, sir! Everyone knows that you go immediately to your nearest village if you live alone! And there are no slavers here!”

He exhaled. “Yes, there were. You killed them. And after what she’s been through, I wouldn’t expect a complete saga of what happened. Hell, I couldn’t believe that you didn’t have problems trusting people after you were tortured by the chemmen.”

Der threw up her hands. “Exactly!”

“Derora!” Jakkobb snapped sharply with steel echoing throughout his voice. “Enough.”

She opened her mouth.

“Der, shut it!” Jakkobb raised a stern eyebrow. “We will hear her side of the story first, in its entirety after she’s calmed. We elves did the same for you and Kelin when you were caught in much worse circumstances.”

“She stole! At our trial, we hadn’t done anything wrong, sir.”

He exhaled as loudly as his horse. “There are worse crimes than stealing a little food. Hell, I’ve done it. I thought you were a little older than you’re acting.”

Mora’s voice surged through her tears. “I’m sorry! But if something this horrible ever happened to you...”

“Oh, it did.” Der started to pace. “I’ve been tortured with acid. And, yes, I cried. I’ll admit that, but at least I didn’t break my honor and steal something the next day!”

“Der!” Kelin barked.

“Go for a walk,” Jakkobb ordered softly. He continued in elvish, “Look, I know you don’t understand because crying isn’t your way and stealing most definitely is not. But, there are times when it’s forgivable. And you’re both just on the cusp of adulthood, which I’ve learned in humans usually means insolence. But it looks sincere enough to me. She’s frightened and is acting out of fear – whereas you don’t seem to comprehend fear at all. So, just take a walk to cool down and think about things for the first time in your life!”

She matched his gaze, and then slouched. “Yes, sir.” She paused, “Dad.”

He raised a warning finger. “And if you keep acting like a child, I’ll tan your hide like your dad.”

Her eyes darted around as she considered it. After a moment, she spun on her heel and

left. The knight sighed exactly like his horse. "I don't deserve this."

Mora curled in on herself even tighter. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to cause trouble. I just didn't know what to do!"

"You're not in trouble with us," Kelin soothed. He couldn't take his eyes off her. "Please, have some food." He thrust whatever was in his hands forward.

Her fingers wrapped around the proffered cheese. "She's upset with me."

Kelin shook his head. "Don't mind Der. She just doesn't know how to handle life when she's not in immediate danger of torture and painful death with the fate of a kingdom in her hands."

Mora coughed. "Are you serious?"

Jakkobb shrugged. "Probably."

"I didn't mean to cause trouble!"

Kelin hesitated, but patted her on the shoulder. "You're safe now. It's alright." His mouth dried when she brought her dark eyes around to him. Behind that mask of fear, he saw her beauty's potential and she was gorgeous.

"Safer, at least." The knight sighed. He looked up to see Spike approaching. The horse lifted his eyebrows imperiously.

The raven haired girl gazed upward at the warhorse. He snorted his challenge, and sprayed the contents of his nose all over the already weak campfire.

She backed away from the massive horse. "My gods! He's huge! What's his name?"

"Spike," Jakkobb replied.

Immediately, she looked him up and down. Spike turned his head as if he was at a horse show. "Why is he called that? There are no spikes on him."

The knight shrugged.

"I've never seen a horse this big before."

"That's because he's not a horse."

"Then what is he?"

"A monster," Jakkobb replied definitively. Spike immediately tried to take a bite of his plate mail, but the knight moved faster.

Kelin chuckled. "Yes, you have a point there, sir." He turned back to Mora and felt flushed again. "So, please, eat."

She blushed and looked back down with a small ghost of a smile.

Der bit into the jerky she carried in her belt purse. It tasted like leather and it wasn't too far from it in its makeup either. She chewed and tried to think about Silver Dawn's Horizon. She masticated as heavily as she could as she plodded through the dark forest.

Eventually, she stomped to a halt and exhaled. She knew what she could do to feel better.

Der eased the Pallens sword reverentially from its sheath. When she closed her eyes she could still see it in its true glory. The sapphire shone brighter than the moon. Still with her eyes closed she guided the perfect sword through a series of parries and attacks. It moved the same as it had before, and she felt like she was fighting with sharpened starlight in her hand. She lost herself to the motions of the weapon.

She slowed to a stop. There was something rubbing against her ears on the wind. Something that had been moving along with the rhythm of her practice. Some sigh of the wind or some hum of a late night bird. It had been in sync with her movements. Odd.

She dropped the sword point. It wasn't a bird, but a flute's song whispered along the edge of hearing. She listened, but only caught a few fragmented notes.

Der slammed the sword home in its sheath, and set out in search of the eerie song's origin. The music grew louder only by inches. The night was calmly quiet, and no insects joined in a chorus to the flute. Nothing else made a sound. That was odd too, she observed. She glanced back in the direction of camp, but felt the reassuring weight of her sword on her hip. She let her hand dangle over the hilt. More notes drifted around the leaves.

The Song of Mendelin and Tara! Everyone knew that tune! She frowned. What was anyone doing out here playing it? She brushed aside the thought of wood nymphs and fairies; they weren't known to be in Thealith.

The ancient elvish prince's legend was as strong today as it had been before the fall of the Empire. Mendelin loved to travel abroad and crossed upon a lost human peasant girl one day. She was starving and dying of a disease no human could cure. He nursed her back to health. They fell in love. When old aged claimed her, almost in the blink of an eye for an immortal, and the prince could not bear the weight of grief. He tried for many years to overcome it, and when he could not, journeyed to the end of the world to find her soul. He supposedly sang to the spirits the very melody from which his epic was composed.

Her spirit came to him, drawn by his music. However, now they were worlds apart and she could not touch him and he could not reach out to her. Alone, he returned to the elven kingdom of Arborn, climbed the highest tower of Long Range Palace and took one short step off.

The thought made her look down at her own feet. The music flowed like wine, and her head seemed to start to hum. She sighed in relief, having confirmed her feet were on the ground. Then she frowned; only elvish music had made her lose her thoughts like that before. She bunched her fists and stopped.

But the song continued its siren call and the legend brightened in her mind again.

The gods pitied the prince and spared his distraught spirit. They made him the brightest star in the night sky. Der often wondered when stargazing how turning him into a star helped him and his lover with their problem. She'd always gotten irritated glances whenever she'd asked.

The solo flute amplified the loneliness of the tale. The aching beautiful music sounded almost elvish, but she'd never heard such a haunting undertone in Arborn. It wasn't hollow, as she first thought, but instead full of spirit and emotion, just not in the same rhythm with the rest of the world.

She slowed her pace and began to creep. The moonlight above cooled her head and she felt the chill extend down her spine. The flute filled her mind and she fought herself to concentrate on the forest around her. She started to weave from behind tree to tree.

She almost missed the dark silhouette sitting on a half rotted tree stump. Only his fingers moved as they flew over the openings in the instrument. She almost stopped breathing as she watched. In her mind, she let herself believe she was part of the natural forest and nothing invasive or foreign. She was nothing to be noticed.

The figure didn't turn. "I know you're there."

She sighed and leaned her head against a tree for a moment. "I think you're a dangerous man." She walked around to face Thomas Delauncey. His features held a sharper edge than before, especially his blindingly green eyes.

She shook her head. "I'm leaving."

He rose as fluidly as water. "You don't yet understand, girl. I need to use you, so you are coming with me."

"No, I'm not. You don't even have proof of this child. I want nothing to do with you."

The corner of his mouth lifted, and it reminded her of a dog beginning to growl. "Believe me, I want nothing to do with you either."

"Then leave me be."

He glared. "You could be this child's final hope. She will die. If you're truly going to become a knight, you have honor and it won't let you walk away."

"That doesn't mean that I have to believe you."

He smiled coldly. The flute disappeared into his cloak and he stepped toward her. Derora did not retreat.

"You're a lunatic." She eased her hands onto her swordbelt.

He turned his face upward to the sapphire moonlight. "Ah. Lunatic. The word comes from lunar. Ah, sweet, graceful silver light."

She didn't move her eyes from him. "You're only proving me right."

His face twisted as he looked at her again.

"I didn't like you at first glance," she said.

"Too bad, you're going to be seeing a lot of me."

Der hopped back a step, her hand moving to her hilt. She glanced at his weaponless hands.

He laughed softly to himself. "I dare you."

She tried to draw. Tom's hand flew toward her throat faster than a serpent's strike.

## Chapter Five

### The Dismal River

“DER!” Jakkobb cupped both hands around his mouth. Half a mile away, deer scattered. The captain dropped his hands. “When I said go for a walk, I didn’t mean around the continent.”

Kelin tried to smile. “Uh, sir, this is Der.”

Mora lagged behind them while Spike had gone searching in the other direction. She shoved her hands underneath her arms. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make her run away!”

Kelin had been inhaling to yell, but blew it out in a long sigh instead. “You didn’t, you didn’t.” Kelin coughed. “One truth about Der, she doesn’t run away, and that includes the times when she should.”

“She doesn’t like me.” She clutched and re-clutched her arms over her chest.

He took a moment to compose his thoughts. “Well, she saw you stealing at first. Der upholds a very strict code of honor, and she expects others to do the same.”

“I was starving.”

“I know. At least Jakkobb and I understand. Der still expects you to ask for food then. She can be, uh, well, stupidly stubborn.” He chuckled and slapped his forehead. “I remember when we were alone in a chem— in a city full of very bad people and she *still* wouldn’t loot anything.”

Jakkobb breathed deeply. “Something’s amiss here, at least, has been recently.” His eyes rested on a large, half-rotted stump. He approached slowly. “Music? There’s an echo of a song... the Song of Mendelin.”

Mora whispered to Kelin, “How does he know?”

“He’s an elf.” He put his fingertips above his ears, mimicking points.

“I know, but he’s too tall and big to be an elf.”

He shrugged. “I remember in Arborn, the elves are way more sensitive to music, like. Dogs have a better sense of smell and elves have a better sense of music is how I understand it.”

Jakkobb ignored them completely. He scowled at the stump. Finally, he looked up into the starlit canopy to Mendelin’s star. “Who have you seen tonight?”

“He’s talking to a star!” Mora squeaked. “You can’t do that!”

The knight brought his eyes level with hers. “It was just something to say while I was thinking. I’m fairly certain I know who was here.”

“Ah.” Kelin nodded. “This stranger from the tavern you mentioned?”

Jakkobb nodded.

“You don’t think she went off with him?”

“Not willingly. You know Der though; she thinks the only way to solve a problem is to confront it.”

“If he set up a trap... But, Der’s been in traps before,” Kelin said.

“Not by herself.”

Kelin bit his lip. "But she always figures something out."

"Not if he's smarter. That's what I'm worried about."

"Or she'll drive him outright insane. She never was a very good prisoner."

Jakkobb laughed darkly. "Yes, that is true."

Mora pointed. "I found some tracks!" Half of a boot print remained against the dirt.

"Good eyes!" Kelin looked down and scuttled backward and laid a hand beside a footprint. "They must be Der's, and it looks like she was approaching the stump." He backtracked to a tree and circled it.

"Anything more?"

Kelin shook his shaggy head. "Not yet, sir."

The captain grunted. "I don't see anything over here."

"That's bad, isn't it?" Mora asked.

"It looks like Der walked up here, and she didn't walk away. There's no sign of anyone else. Yes, that's bad."

A small whimper escaped Mora's lips. She bunched her lips together and looked away.

Jakkobb sighed. "That anger wasn't toward you. I'm sorry."

They searched for an hour. They found a few more of Der's approaching footprints, but nothing leading away. There was no sign of anyone else.

"What about forest spirits?" the raven haired girl asked suddenly. "They wouldn't leave tracks."

Jakkobb tapped the side of his helmet above his ear. "I'd know. Besides, we're still in Thealith, and the forests here are...quieter," he finished delicately. "Let's return to camp. There's nothing else here."

"I wonder if she'll be back at camp waiting for us," Kelin suggested.

The knight half smiled. "No, even if she had returned, she'd be out looking for us by now. You know Der better."

"If she's missing, where are we going to go to find her?" Mora asked.

"Back to Malfax. That's where he last was. We won't find her there, but we may find information about who he is, where he's headed and what he wants. Morana, you'll ride Der's horse. We're going, now."

The sun was hanging high in the sky by the time they arrived. Riparian forest outlined the road. The town was larger in the day than at night; and they had missed most of the detail in the dark.

Malfax had everything required for a riverfront town, except the river. Dozens of specialized rafts and flat bottomed boats lay uselessly behind the buildings. A wide and entirely empty riverbed bleached in the sunlight. Large deposits of gravel and sand covered the channel. Along its bank, remains of levees slowly slumped into the dry riverbed. One or two canvas bags coughed out sand as they sagged over the earthen dikes.

"There's all the signs of a flood, um," Kelin murmured. "But there's no river. This is very strange. I didn't see this on the night I met you, I came after nightfall then too."



With a little more exploring, they found several respectable taverns just down the street. Beyond that, the city was dominated by the temple of Ahtome and a small, squat castle.

The small party dismounted and approached the castle on foot with Jakkobb in the lead. “Kelin.”

“Sir?”

“Take the horses to the inn and have them stabled there while we’re in town.”

“Yes, sir.” He took the reins of his and Mora’s. Spike had none, of course.

“Start asking around the town and see if anyone has seen either of them.”

“But neither of us have seen him.” Mora held up her hands.

“I told you what he looked like. Ask for a man of that description. Now, get going.”

A fair haired soldier in the dark blue uniform of Thealith’s army stepped out of the guard tower in front of the castle. He called over his shoulder. “Tell him that I said he can’t use my horse!” He turned his head and nearly collided with a statue of red plate mail. Carefully, he craned his head upward.

Jakkobb smiled without teeth through his visor. “Just getting off duty,” he looked at the uniform, “Sergeant?”

The man licked his lips. “Yes, sir.” He glanced around anxiously, but the knight took up the significant majority of his vision.

“What’s your name, soldier?”

“Lynon, sir.” He half stepped backward to the guard tower.

The captain smiled openly. “Now, don’t run away. I’m going to buy you a few rounds of drinks and we’re going to talk, Lynon.”

“Uh.” He glanced at the guards behind him who were wearing the same expression as he was. “Who are you?”

“Sir Jakkobb, Silver Dawn.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to The Hero’s Tavern. “And I’m going to buy you that drink.”

Lynon’s jaw dropped. “A dragoon knight! What do you want with me?”

“Just to share a drink, my good man.” The knight escorted the bemused sergeant to The Hero’s Tavern. He ducked through the doorway. The atmosphere was much calmer in the middle of the morning. A serving girl smiled as he entered, and he stared at her for a moment until recognition seized him. This was one of the rescued slaves. He smiled in return. “A booth, please.”

As they took their seats, Lynon asked again, “What do you want with me?”

“Just to answer a few questions. You can have all the drinks you want, on me. And a meal too.”

“Questions, sir?” He wiped the sweat from his forehead. “I don’t know, sir, perhaps I should get my captain.”

Jakkobb shook his head. “What soldier turns away a free meal? I won’t ask you anything that will compromise your honor.”

Lynon relaxed into his bench, but just a little.

The knight removed his helmet. “Why does everyone get nervous when a dragoon begins to

ask questions?”

“Cause there’s usually a war with them, sir.”

Jakkobb waved his hand. “Not this time. I’m not getting involved around here. I’m actually just searching for a friend of mine.”

“The other dark-haired girl, sir?”

He nodded. “You’re quick.”

“I noticed she weren’t with you today, and she was when your party left yesterday. Me and my mate was on duty then, sir.”

“You’re a good guard, Lynon.”

He flushed. “Thanks, sir.” The former slave brought them over a flagon of black ale apiece, as well as the afternoon’s meal. She set the bowls of potatoes, mutton and a sprinkle of peas in front of both men. She refused payment.

Jakkobb sipped his drink. “Well, she’s missing. I believe she’s been abducted by a young man we met in this tavern the other night. He’d better hope that I don’t find him.”

Lynon looked the captain over again. “You’re an enemy I wouldn’t want to make.”

The knight flashed a dark smile and took another drink. “Anyway, I don’t think he’s that forgettable. He had dirty blond hair and the oddest eyes I’ve ever seen in a human. They looked like an emerald’s reflection. Well dressed too, looked like a noble’s son.”

Lynon shook his head widely. “No, sir. I ain’t seen anyone like that.” He took a deep drink. “I would remember someone like that. Uh, sorry to make you buy these drinks for naught, sir.”

“That lass was my personal recruit and friend.”

The sergeant stared heavily into his ale. “I’m sorry, sir. I ain’t seen no young man like that.”

“I understand. That was too much to hope for anyway. However, if I am going to search this area for my friend, you can help me out with my local geography and the local goings on.”

“Like what, sir?”

“Where’s the river?”

Lynon slid down on the bench. “Disappeared into Urael.”

“What’s the name?”

“A reason for drinking!” The sergeant was about ready for his second ale. Jakkobb waved the serving girl back over.

“A decent enough toast, but an odd name.”

Lynon shook his head. “No, no. It’s called the Dismal Horvath – it’s one of the three branches of the Horvath, upper, lower, and dismal.” The sergeant sighed and fished his nose into the second ale. “It used to come up to Malfax here, until a month ago. Malfax is a border city, sir, with Urael.”

“I knew we were close to the border,” Jakkobb said softly to himself.

“There was a lot of flooding this past season.”

“I do recall squishy roads.”

“The river flooded, and most of Malfax was under water for awhile, and then when the flooding receded, the river didn’t flow through town no more.”

The knight closed his eyes. “An avulsion, you mean.”

“Aye, I think,” he paused at the unfamiliar word, “When the river suddenly changes its course. Now it flows through Urael completely.” The thick foam of his ale dripped onto his collar as he drank. “I know it opened up some good cropland, but...”

“What’s the trouble, man?”

“It’s obvious really.”

“I’m not from around here.” Jakkobb closed his eyes and sighed. “But I think I know what’s coming.”

“Well, that blasted river was the border between the kingdoms.”

He squeezed a fist. “I knew it. Now it’s moved and no one’s sure exactly where the border is anymore.”

“Thealith and Urael have never truly gotten along either, sir. This has also left more than half the decent folk of Malfax with no work since there ain’t shipping, and the other half is feeling it because no one can buy anything anymore, hardly.”

“Let’s see if I have this correct. The river is the border and it’s inside this big floodplain we’re on. The Dismal Horvath is suddenly part of Urael now.” He slapped a hand on the table. “Why do you draw borders on rivers? They meander! It’s part of nature!”

The sergeant winced and hid his face in his tankard. He waved his hand for a third drink.

“Alright, now what’s happening?” the captain asked.

“That blasted river moved ten miles! It’s now ten miles in Urael! Urael claims the border is where the river originally flowed. Thealith maintains the boundary is still the river.”

Jakkobb’s breath hissed between his teeth. “This is only trouble, lad.”

“I know.” Lyon ran a hand through his hair. He was definitely falling in love with his drink. “Urael’s already moving some troops, to defend their border. I suppose we will too shortly enough, now that the ground’s dry enough.” He glared at the wall beyond which the empty river channel dozed. “Urael’s a dangerous place, you know, I ain’t never liked being this close to them. Evil King Manus used to rule there, and the king they’ve got now ain’t much better, so they say. He’s also got an evil wizard helpin’ him.”

Jakkobb took the comment at face value and made no reply.

The clouds were lightly brushed across against the rich blue sky. Morana dogged on Kelin’s heels as they exited the inn’s stable. “We won’t find her here.”

“I know, but we may be able to find out where he’s going.”

“I doubt that.”

He smiled cheerily. “We won’t know that until we try.” He surreptitiously straightened his tunic. “So, Mora, Der and I are from a village called Riversbridge, here in Thealith. Where are you from?”

This time, she looked away. “My cottage? It was, um, actually in Urael.”

“Really? I’m sorry, you just don’t look like you’re from here.”

She smiled. “Well, I was born on a ship. So my parents told me. They said I could crawl before we made port. I don’t know where they sailed from.”

“That sounds fascinating. I had a cottage with my parents too. I suppose they’re still there,

but I haven't been home to see them."

She stopped walking. "My parents are dead."

His face fell. "Oh. I'm so sorry."

"Morana Kemprial wasn't always my name," she volunteered. "I changed it when I started to study magic."

He nearly tripped and waved his arms around wildly until he felt steady again. "What? Magic? You know magic?"

She grinned for the first time, and green sparks charged across the tattoos on her hands. "Just a little."

He leaned back. "My gods! That's incredible!"

The sparks crackled and popped out of existence. She shot furtive glances around the town, but no one seemed to have observed them. She cupped her hands together and he watched as the air began to spin. He gulped – he could see the air! Soon, a little cocoon of ice rested between her palms.

Kelin fought from backing away. He ground his teeth. He had crossed blades with the chemmen in battle after all! He should be able to face a pretty girl who wasn't even threatening him.

"There's usually just a little bit of water always in the air. It's easy to pull it out. Want to see something special?"

He simply nodded. He couldn't get his tongue away from the back of his throat to say anything coherent.

She narrowed her eyes at the little orb of ice. He watched as sweat formed on her forehead and then, inside the ice sphere, he saw a tickle of flame.

He couldn't help himself. He gasped and rocked backward.

The little flame eased its way through the ice, emerging like an orange butterfly. It evaporated as quickly as it had come. She uncupped her hands and water splashed down toward their toes.

"That's amazing!" was all he was able to breathe.

She looked down. "Thank you. Too bad I don't know any spells to track your friend."

He couldn't help but smile. "That's alright. We're no worse off for it."

"But we don't even know where to start. We don't know anything about this man who stole her either!"

Kelin's smile faded. "Jakkobb said he was odd, and he got a sense of menace from him, and that could mean a thousand things. This man also didn't believe Der's tale of the war."

Mora nodded. Kelin had told her his tale on the way back into Malfax. "I hardly want to believe it, it's too incredible. Chemmen don't exist."

"Oh believe me, they do."

"It's impossible. I don't want to believe it. No more than I want to remember what happened to me."

He smiled sadly. "It's the truth. If you think anything is impossible, try telling Der it is, and more often than not, she'll prove you wrong. Of course, there are also the times when things

actually *are* impossible, and that has led to broken bones and some coarse words that I pray you never hear. Like the time she thought that the mule wouldn't kick her while she tried to tie the sled behind it."

Mora twisted her fingers together. "She doesn't like me."

He sighed and ran a hand through his curly hair. "She's fair, Mora, I'm sure she'll give you another chance when her temper cools. You just made a bad impression on her by stealing that food instead of asking for it, even in your situation. She's not normal in that regard. I know her though, she'll let it go, eventually."

"If she'll even speak to me. She and the knight started speaking the strange language."

"Elvish."

Mora blinked her wide black eyes. "You know elvish? How do you know that?"

Kelin shrugged. "Der's part elven, and I'm an elf-friend. I also know some phrases in chemmen too now."

Mora shook her head, and her hair flowed in waves down her back. "I don't believe that."

He winked. "Believe it."

She blushed and looked down.

He grinned again. "Well, I want to learn about you. Before the slavers, of course, like. Where did you study magic?"

Once again, her eyes locked down on her hands. "Um. Um. Aren't we supposed to be looking for your friend?"

Kelin paused and then nodded. "Aye, we should start asking around." He glanced around the town. "Let's start with the temple."

She grabbed his arm. "No, we shouldn't." She stared up at the pillars and elegant relief drawings.

"Why not?"

"Um. Because if this stranger is so mysterious and bad, he would avoid it too, so there won't be any clues there."

"Oh, right, that makes sense." He looked around.

"Why not start over there?" She pointed farther down the road to where the docks stood over sand and gravel.

Jakkobb sipped his own ale. It was bitter, but far from the worst drink he'd ever had. "Anything else, Lynon?"

The sergeant shook his head gloomily. "I can't think of anything. May the gods poison the water of that river." He drained the last of his most recent drink.

"I understand how you feel." He raised his mug in greeting to Kelin and Mora as they entered. "Find anything?" His tone suggested he already knew the answer.

Kelin shook his head as he approached the table. "A few people recall Der, but she hasn't been back in town. That's all. Nothing about your mysterious stranger, and I say nothing."

"I thought as much." He gestured to the sergeant. "This is Lynon, Thealith's Royal Army. Lynon, these are Kelin Miller and Morana Kemprial."

Lynon barely lifted his mug and didn't look up.

"Then no one at all has seen him?" Jakkobb asked.

Kelin shook his head again. "No one. They all said they wouldn't miss a fancy dressed fellow like him either. All the traders and rivermen don't have anything to do but watch these days." He shrugged. "I've never even seen him either, sir."

"Oh believe me, he exists." The knight scowled. "I don't like it, Kelin, none of it. *Especially* since we caught Sennha's cultists around here."

"Cultists? Here?" Lynon looked up.

"That could be coincidence, sir," Kelin said.

He smiled coldly. "And you've been training with Thistle? That's awfully optimistic of you."

"Yes, I know. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst."

"That's right, and sometimes hope is optional."

"But you killed them – the cultists," Mora pointed out.

"Yes, but we haven't burned the nest."

Lynon swallowed. "I thought they were routed last winter!"

"Yeah," Kelin agreed. "Guess the king didn't get them all."

Jakkobb took another drink. "We've angered them before, but I don't think there were survivors to tattle."

"The god still knows," Mora said helpfully.

Lynon spit his beer back into his mug. "That's an odd thing to say."

Jakkobb sighed. "Well, he can't exactly tell his followers to go kill us now can he? Deities don't work that way, and the good gods help us if they start acting like that. However, the cult is still agitated, they'll try something." He stood from the table. "Well, sergeant, thank you for answering my questions."

"Of course, sir."

"Kelin?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I know nothing will come of this, but go ask the barkeep if he's seen anyone named Tom, or anyone who even looked like Tom."

"Yes, sir." He slipped out of his seat.

Jakkobb dumped a sizable pile of coins onto the table. "This is for the serving woman." He flicked a gold coin off his thumb to the guard. "And this is for you."

"Thank you, sir." Lynon nodded. "I'll see she gets it. I hope you find your friend, sir."

"So do I. Before something bad happens, like a war."

## Chapter Six

### Troublesome Captive

"It's been a week! An entire week! And you still seem to carry this illusion of escaping!" Tom grabbed Der's bound wrists and ceased her struggles.

She shrugged. "You might not notice next time."

"The fact that I've caught you every other time has no bearing?" He glared at her through emerald slits.

She grinned brightly. "I won't know until I try!"

He bunched a fist. "Give up already!" She thought she heard knuckles crack or it just could have been the leather of his gloves creaking.

"No!" When he turned his back, she lifted up her wrists and rubbed the purple bruise across her throat. It still hurt, especially when she raised her voice like that.

Tom picked up his pace and dragged her faster. "Hughling is ahead. You need a horse." His frown deepened; the frown itself was a permanent feature. "I don't trust leaving you here, and you might call for help in town."

"You have that right."

He sighed and tugged her onward. She looked forlornly at the knots. Her fingers couldn't reach them, and he had tied several of them in awkward places.

"Why are you wearing a cloak, Tom? It's still warm out." The smooth, creased blackness that covered his body moved like a fluid, not like cloth.

"It's a summer cloak, and very lightweight."

"Then why do you keep the hood up? You're not ugly."

"Ocular trouble."

"Is that why your eyes are such an exquisite color?"

"Perhaps." His words came clipped and sharp. "You ask questions like you've just learned to speak."

She narrowed her eyes and muttered a common phrase about cows and their children in elvish.

Tom chuckled to himself. "I wouldn't say *that* in front of an elf."

"You speak elvish!"

"I told you, I'm a merchant's son, and knowing languages is important."

"But the elves don't teach it to traders!"

Ahead of her, Tom shrugged.

"Not many people know elvish," she insisted.

"Sure they do."

"They don't."

"Ask any elf."

She stumbled and glared with all her strength at the back of his hood.

“How do you know it?” he asked. “You’re barely part elven.”

“The elves still expected me to. And I told you, I was in the elf-chemmen war.”

“Yes, but I don’t believe you, so you’ll have to sing me another song.”

“I’m honest!”

He looked over his shoulder. She saw him start to smile as he turned away. “Alright then, humor me.” He set the backpack he carried onto the ground. Der looked longingly at her sword wrapped up in a thick blanket and tied to the pack. She watched him fasten it there the night he kidnapped her. She thought that he could tell something wasn’t normal about it, perhaps it was too plain, but he’d been careful not to touch it. Or, perhaps, he simply didn’t want to cut himself.

Then again, neither Jakkobb nor Carak of Clan Heavyaxe had been able to pick it up. Why had Tom? Perhaps it was all part of the disguise spell. Of course, sometimes she wondered about the blade. Because, if he hadn’t have been able to pick it up, it would have been left behind. It certainly *felt* like it had a will of its own sometimes.

“So, your fantasy?” Tom prompted.

“Oh. Right. The chemmen murdered the elvish king and queen. They were killed inside Long Range Palace.”

“The *chemmen* set foot inside the palace itself?” Tom shook his head in calm disbelief.

“Yes.”

“Well, I suppose if you don’t exist, you can go anywhere you fancy.”

Der recounted her tale for the most part. She remembered Jakkobb’s foot on hers inside the tavern, and worded her story around revealing Edillon’s identity. It wasn’t easy, even when she wasn’t exactly lying. She watched his eyes as he watched her. His gaze was like a sharp knife, and she felt its pressure.

Tom shook his head. “You fought chemmen? Actually crossed blades with them? In this place you call Darkreign? I’ve heard the ancient stories about Darkreign.” Cold laughter saturated his voice. “I don’t believe you.”

He smirked. “According to your story, you were an amateur swordsman and you survived. Also, a council of elves took the suggestion of a sixteenth elf. I can’t believe you. In all reality, the elves would have patted you on the head like a good puppy and sent you home to your mother.”

“Are you at least going to let me finish it?”

He rolled his verdant eyes. “If you want to.”

“It all ended at the battle of Gladioli Fields. We—”

“Gladioli Fields? That’s a ridiculous name. A battle is named after flowers!”

“It means sword-flag.”

“I know what it means. By all means, finish your fairy tale.”

She finished the tale in short, brusque sentences.

Tom chuckled softly to himself. His hand politely covered his mouth as he laughed. “Now I know you’re lying.”

Der’s face burned. “The chemmen became pinned between the dragoon knights and the



castle.”

“Yes, this elvish castle. Does your make believe castle have a name too?”

“Yes! Moonrise Castle in Elloan!”

Tom immediately looked away. His face was perfectly calm. “Yes, that’s a real place. I still maintain my refusal to believe you though.”

“If you trade with elves, you must have heard something about the war.”

He shrugged and took a sip from a small flask. “No, my father does. I tend to avoid them. So, if you were lying about your past, are you lying about your future too?”

“What do you mean by that?” She wrinkled her nose at him.

“Are you honestly going to Silver Dawn’s Horizon?”

“I was, yes, and because of you, I may not make it on the date of my interview.”

He grunted noncommittally while reaching into his pack and produced a small parchment. “Here’s a map of where we’re going. I’m not certain where the destination is, but it’s within this region here, northwest in the Dead Forest.” He rolled his finger around a small circle in the unclaimed forests north of Thealith. The map itself was minutely detailed, probably even more so than the king’s surveyors could manage.

“Where did you get this?” She breathed.

“I drew it.”

She whistled softly. “You have a steady hand.” Her eyes searched critically for any flaw. “Why do you have such a fine map?”

“Again, I’m a merchant’s son,” he answered shortly. “We’re here.” He pointed.

“We’re right on top of Hughling. How far is it?”

“Ten minutes at most.”

“Why are you even showing me this?”

“My, aren’t you suspicious?” He tossed a waterskin to her with his free hand. “Drink up.” He turned away and rolled up the meticulous map.

She managed to catch the skin even with her tied hands. The plug came off easily in her teeth and she drank the water hungrily. She hadn’t thought about how thirsty she was until now.

A burning sensation began to tickle her tongue, and then an explosion of pain ripped through her entire mouth. She coughed and dropped the waterskin, spraying out whatever water was left in her mouth.

Tom chuckled to himself with a wicked twinge. He snatched the waterskin back.

She hacked and pointed at her throat. No intelligible voice came out. She managed only a coarse moan.

His eyes glowed beneath his hood, and he flashed a tight, toothless smile. “Oh, I’m sorry. I must’ve accidentally put something extra in with the water. Stings quite a bit, doesn’t it?”

She gagged and clawed at her throat. She threw a very strong kick in his direction, missed entirely and watched him laugh as she crashed to the ground.

His shadow captured the sun as he stood over her. “Too bad it’s not permanent. As you probably don’t know, there are these string-like things in your throat that vibrate and allow you

to speak, and well, they're too swollen now. Of course, I didn't intend for the pain, but I can't help the medicine." His chuckle danced with iniquitous delight. Tears welled up behind her eyes and her face flushed.

Tom grabbed her shoulder and hauled her to her feet. "That's why I showed you the map, it was a beautiful distraction." He pulled out his long knife he carried in an upside down sheath on his back. It was almost as plain as her sword was currently, but it had a well used look to it.

Der pushed herself back away from him. He followed with a cold smirk and his knife tip pointed directly at her. He grabbed her arm with his other hand and in one neat motion cut her wrists free. She gasped with relief. He kept a hold of her wrist.

She twisted her wrist around to yank her arm free through his thumb. It was always the weakest point on any person's grip, but he didn't even flinch.

He smirked. "I was expecting it."

She tugged on her arm, but his fist was steel.

"Now that we have this small formality out of the way, let's get you that horse."

Hughling was smaller than Malfax because it had never been directly on the Dismal Horvath. It carried all the essential buildings for a town, but boasted nothing like a temple or large market. Tom didn't waste time sightseeing, and headed to the back of the inn directly to the stables. He still held a hand on Der's wrist, but it was low enough it didn't appear hostile to anyone but her. She fidgeted with his grip, especially since his glove itched.

Tom entered the horse barn and pulled her inside behind him. He pushed his hood back and looked around. Several horses whinnied, and one of them even kicked the wall. He led her to the tack room at the back of the barn and rapped loudly on the door.

A short, white haired man answered. "Yes? Come about your horse, sir?"

"Come about buying one."

The stablehand bit his lower lip. "Oh, well, I've only got one at the moment. I could show her to ye if ye'd like."

Tom nodded and stepped aside to allow the man to pass. He led them to the center of the barn where an aging black mare dispassionately chewed her oats. She looked up toward them and retreated farther into her stall.

The stablehand stepped inside. "I don't know what's gotten into her. She's usually friendly." He held out a hand and the horse came to him, all the while eyeing the newcomers with distrust. The old man smiled to the mare. "We haven't had her two months since she was sold to us."

Disapproval marred Tom's face. He rolled his eyes toward Der and sighed. Then he looked directly at the old man. "There's a better horse in here, I know. Show us a better one."

"Of course, of course." The stablehand ambled out of the stall. "It's just that she's such a pleasant horse and she's honestly the only one for sale."

"I think we could afford another mount in here." Tom nodded to a taller mare. "What about her? Prime condition." He glanced back over to Der. She was staring through narrow slits at him. He winked and dropped into elvish. "We merchants know the tricks of the trade, alright? There's bound to be more than one horse for sale."

She glared harder.

The stablehand rubbed the tall brown mare on the nose. "I'd hate to see her go."

"We'll give you more than fair compensation." Tom reached his free hand toward his belt purse and caught sight of the stable's dirt floor. He looked up at Der, who shrugged innocently. He jerked on her arm, and turned back to the stablehand. His foot swung out a little wider than it had to and scuffed up the word her foot hadn't finished tracing.

With a tight smile, Tom dumped a handful of coins into the man's hand. "Tack is included? And perhaps some food for our journey?"

"For this! Absolutely! Let me go fetch it for ye!" He hustled back into the tack room again, his shoulders and chin hunched over the money.

Tom snorted. "Give up!"

She shook her head emphatically. She held up her index finger of her free hand.

"No! No more questions! By the gods, even when you can't talk!" He rubbed his forehead.

She pointed toward the mare, and then herself.

"Yes, that's your horse."

Then she pointed to him and lifted her hand into emptiness.

"Why am I not getting a horse too? I don't need one."

She furrowed her brows in further suspicion.

The stablehand returned amazingly quickly with his arms overloaded by a saddle stacked high with folds of food. "I'll help ye saddle her right up!"

Tom dropped Der's hand and bent to place the food into his backpack. She walked to the horse to inspect her cautiously. She ran her hands down the mare's legs. Next, she trailed her arm across the rump and walked around behind. She knelt and asked for a hoof by gently pinching the leg above the rear foot, and the horse lifted it up.

She glanced underneath the belly. Tom's legs shifted as he stood back up, and the stablehand was brushing the horse's flank. Both of them were on the other side of the horse and she was closest to the stall door. That was enough. She darted on tiptoes out the barn.

Behind her, she didn't feel the wind of pursuit. Der turned the corner and burst into a sprint. She cringed at the thought of leaving the Pallens sword behind; she would have to recover it later when she had the upper hand.

She whipped her eyes around the unfamiliar town; the foreign buildings rose much higher than they seemed to five minutes ago. She glanced behind again and there was still no sign of her captor.

She had to find somewhere to hide! More buildings flew past, and she was beginning to run out of them. She stopped running as she saw the stone communal barn. She could hide in there and—

She skidded and bounced to a total halt as she stared at the wall.

Her eyes found the hidden door like a lodestone finds metal. It was actually just some extra scratches in the gray stone, but it was a gateway to freedom for her. She would have to thank Thistle the next time she met him for his hurried but ruthless tutelage. Her hands flattened against the stone wall of the barn.

Her questing fingers flipped the switch and the stone rumbled and slid into the wall. She pressed her weight on the door to make it move faster. She didn't stop to wonder why someone even built this secret chamber.

The scent hit her first. It was as tangible as a wall. Der slapped a hand over her nose and gagged, but the smoke and blood still nearly overwhelmed her. Her eyes widened even further as she suddenly saw that whoever built this place was currently using it.

Seven men and women clustered around a stone slab representing an altar. They stared at her with as much surprise as she stared back. She eased back up a rickety wooden step, and then saw the sigil carved into the side of the stone table. Senna.

She cursed – words weren't required. Shaking an angry fist at them, she scrambled back out the door and into the alley. She sprinted away to the sounds of unorganized pursuit starting up behind her.

Of course! Why couldn't the blasted secret chamber be empty? Despite her rage and desperation, Der grinned. She always, always, always stumbled into those bastards! Sometimes, even she couldn't believe her bad luck. And that included the times she was traveling through the unpopulated Wild Lands!

And these were her enemies! She'd made that declaration in another blood soaked cellar last winter. They'd aided the chemmen's bloody quest for vengeance, willingly and then as undead fodder. But, even if she had a weapon, she might concede that the odds were in their favor this time.

She ran back into Hughling. It seemed smaller than it did before – if that were possible. Now, she had too many people after her. And her newest pursuers would certainly know their way around town, and she had no idea where her original captor was.

She jumped around the next building and nearly collided with Tom. He slammed his hand against the wall next to her head. The closed corners of his mouth were turned up tightly, and in the loosest interpretation could have been a smile. They were nearly nose to nose, and his breath was cold as he snorted.

She slouched against the wall. Her gaze slid away from him and back down the alley. When he grabbed her arm she didn't fight him. He growled under his breath. "You are so much trouble. I don't like trouble. I like things to run smoothly, and you're not a wrinkle, you're a godsdamn mountain."

She had the grace to nod, and spared another glance over her shoulder. She mounted up willingly and didn't even try to take the reins from him. As he led the horse out of town, she craned her neck behind her. The bulk of her sword bulged beneath the blanket on his backpack, and she pondered fishing for it with her foot.

When the trees closed in around them, Der breathed a small sigh of relief, but kept listening anyway.

Tom stopped the horse. "You hear it too, don't you?"

She bobbed her head a little. She wasn't sure until he mentioned it.

"You should be able to speak again." His radiant eyes pierced into the trees behind them. "It sounds like people, running."

She dropped off the horse. Tom whipped his head around. "You were better at the subtler

attempts.”

Der knelt on the ground and snatched up a rock. In the soft soil, she drew a curving figure.

He hissed between his teeth. “What are you doing? Don’t you know whose symbol that is?”

Insistently, she pointed back toward the town just beyond the trees. Now, she heard sounds of pursuit as clearly as bracken crunched beneath hurrying feet behind them.

“What!” He whirled in the direction of the town.

She nodded. With the rock, she enthusiastically obliterated the symbol.

Anger flared around him like an aura. “We were only in town for a quarter of an hour! *What did you do?*” He held his hands out like he was choking someone.

She shrugged and coughed. “R-ran.” She struggled with her breath, and then just stabbed a finger toward Hughling.

The seven devil worshipers emerged at a run from the trees. The man in the lead pointed. “That’s her!”

Tom’s face was a physical slap as he glared at her. She shrugged innocently again, and gestured hopefully to her sword.

He shook his head resolutely. She wrenched her head back toward the oncoming attackers. Without her sword, this wasn’t going to go well, she thought.

And suddenly, Tom wasn’t behind her. She looked around and didn’t see him anywhere. “Cow-ward!”

As her pursuers began to close, she glanced down in the hope of finding a large rock. She shook her head, even she wasn’t going to try that. Spinning on her heel, she ran for the horse. But the mare already had the same idea, and was running away without her. She stumbled after it for a few steps, but it was already too far ahead.

What to do? She needed a weapon! Where could Tom have vanished to? The godsdamn coward! She looked behind again and six of them were holding pace. She blinked, she thought she had counted seven. This wasn’t the time to worry, she told herself as she started to sprint away.

Behind her, she watched as the quickest runner gained distance on his companions.

She would have to be fast. She slowed just enough to let him close the gap. Behind her, she could hear the rhythm of his feet and his heavy panting. The sounds were almost on top of her.

She ducked to the side and stuck out her leg. Her pursuer tumbled headlong over her leg and his wild sword swing passed overhead. Before he hit the ground, she pulled her leg free and dived for his weapon.

Success! His hand relinquished his grip before he fully realized what was happening.

She dragged the blade’s edge along his neck and slammed it back down for good measure. It felt bulky and in her hand when she came on guard to face the remaining four.

Der shifted her weight anxiously. Four against one.

“No...” She started running again. There was still no sign of Tom, damn him!

She looked behind her again, and saw how they were spacing themselves since they couldn’t run as fast as each other. She subtly slowed her pace again. The fools, she thought,

they saw what happened to the fastest runner! The leaders ran harder and a little faster as they gained, again leaving their comrades behind.

She waited until they almost overtook her.

Their blades swung madly at her back and whiffed by within inches. Then she wrenched to the side so suddenly the front two runners shot past her. A cultist woman whirled around and thrust at her with her shortsword. Der parried and riposted. The woman folded around her blade with a gasp.

But, while she stabbed the woman, the remaining two caught up to her and the last one turned around. Der struggled to move her sword nimbly enough as the blades clawed toward her body.

She felt the blow coming before it landed, but there was no space to dodge. The sword struck her back squarely. She gasped as the blade rebounded off the elvish mail. Her confidence blew out with the explosion of air from her lungs.

The young warrior staggered forward as if she'd been sliced. She patted her chest and felt the mail underneath her shirt; she'd forgotten about the featherweight mesh.

She turned slowly. Her breath came in ragged chunks and burned all throughout her swollen throat. The cultists were so surprised that she survived they didn't even press their attack.

Der jumped forward with her sword ahead of her in point-in-line. She cut the arm of the nearest one and ran to the side. The cultists followed her quick lead painfully slowly. She clashed blades with one and spun on her toes to the next. She had to move, despite the fiery pain growing in her back. If she were caught between two of them, it would be her undoing.

She gasped for air and kept circling the group. The shortest man was the brightest and jumped the other way and Der was suddenly trapped between the three of them. To her surprise, she was quick enough to parry on both sides of her body.

She kicked out at the short man and spun away. She hated the thought of spinning and exposing her back to her enemy, but it was a much quicker move than turning and she needed that speed against multiple opponents. She parried behind her back, twisted, and brought her sword around to the short man's head like a club.

Two left.

Two too many. The remaining woman's sword slid into her right leg like the world's heaviest bee sting. Der yelled and swung for the woman's throat. The cultist brought her sword up as fast as she could, but it was only even with her stomach by the time she was dead.

Der put all her weight on her left leg and brought her sword up to meet the last challenger.

Only silence assailed her ears. The corpse of the last devil worshiper lay on top of the others. Above him, Tom cleaned his knife. He sneered, "What the hell was this all about?"

She leveled her sword at him. Hot blood dripped down her leg. She tried not to notice as she kept her weapon trained on him. He wasn't even breathing hard. She growled, "I wondered why you didn't carry a sword. Now, I know, you coward." Her voice was shredded in her throat, but the words finally came.

"Save your strength." His eyes narrowed. "You didn't tell me you wore elvish mail."

She didn't lower the blade. "You're not the only one who can keep a secret." Her throat was

raspy and painful, but it was nothing comparing to the pain in her back. She pressed a hand against her leg; she felt her energy draining out of the wound.

He glanced at her bloody hand and his lips formed a curse, but there was no sound. His frown deepened. "You're good, but you're not quite good enough."

"I wouldn't be hurt if you hadn't run away!" She yearned for him to try to take this sword away from her now. She had proven that she could use it.

Tom shrugged nonchalantly and tossed her a clean cloth from the folds of his cloak. "You need to bandage that. I noticed a stream on our way out of town, it's around that hill. You'll walk that far whether your leg can support your weight or not. I'll retrieve the blasted horse."

"What! If I walk around that hill you'll never see me again!"

He smirked to himself. "On that leg? With the blood trail you're leaving? Spare me, Derora."

Her face flushed and she glared at him with all her might. *Especially* since he was right, and she hated him all the more for it. And the way he just turned her aside as if she were a child!

The sword thrashed around in her grip and she cursed and dragged herself toward the water. She felt him watching her until she was out of sight.

Then she tried to run, flailed wildly and collapsed. Swearing vivid oaths, she picked herself up and limped to the stream. Before she could entertain thoughts of escape again, she thought through the red mists across her vision, she had to clean and bandage the cut.

Carefully, she set the sword down within easy reach. She arched her back. It already throbbed worse than the leg, and this was only a prelude to how much it was going to hurt tomorrow.

With practiced hands, she began to clean her wound. A hollow sensation seized both her leg and mind. She remembered why it was better to have someone else dress wounds. Someone else wouldn't feel so badly drunk, as well as dizzy and in pain. She did her best to just get it done.

After she secured the cloth around the cut, she dug her fingers into the water and took a long soothing drink. The cold shock cleared her mind.

Her shoulders stiffened. She reached for the sword, but it was missing. Two bear trap-like arms snatched her from behind.

"You are good," Tom's voice hissed beside her ear. "You almost knew I was here."

Der kicked back with her good leg to try to force both of them off-balance. Nothing happened but her foot digging its heel into the mud. He shoved them both to the ground. The soft mud did little to lessen the impact. Tom's palm slapped against her wound and hot spasms of pain coursed through her body.

"Stop struggling or I'll dig my fingers into it!"

The threat only increased Der's fight. Tom pinned her between him and the ground. She finally quit when she had absolutely no possibility.

"Alright," he said calmly. "Now, I know you've got some brave ideas in your puerile mind about fighting me and I won't have those."

She ground her teeth. "You won't even fight face to face, coward!" She swallowed against the pain in her throat as her voice started to give way again.

“Yes, but I’ve got you.” He pulled back one arm, but kept her expertly pinned. A heavy and very expensive velvet bag dropped in front of her. “I’ll strike you a bargain. Help me and those are yours.”

He allowed her one arm free to pull the string on the bag loose. Gems sparkled within. The multitude of colors reflected the sunlight in a rainbow of bold colors. Her mouth went dry at the sight of the fortune. She had never seen so much! Not even in Arborn!

Clumsily, Der tightened the pouch again and lifted it from the ground. She weighed it in her hand. Then she hurled it as far downstream as she could. “That’s what I think about that.”

“You fool.” He tightened his grip. “Understand that you’re going to help me regardless, so I suggest you fish that bag out and get something out of this ordeal.”

“No!”

He sighed. “You are more trouble than you are worth.”



## Chapter Seven

### Blood Trail

“The inn is always a good place to start,” Jakkobb murmured under his breath.

“It looks like the only place in this town.” Mora straightened her stained and faded robes. She picked at some dirt stains with her fingernails. “Where did Spike go? Shouldn’t you mind your horse, sir?”

Jakkobb shrugged. “I’m sure he’s fine. He does this a lot.”

Kelin coughed into his hand. “The Mad Frog? Who names their inn The Mad Frog?”

The sign creaking in the wind displayed a leaping frog with crossed eyes that just about exploded from its skull. Its tongue was also wrapped around its head. Below, the inn’s name was painted in small, yellow letters.

“I don’t know,” the knight snapped. He sighed. “Look, at least we’ll get a meal along with a few answers.” He ducked under the doorframe. The interior was just the same as inns everywhere, decorated with tables, chairs, some items on the walls, except it was painted a hideous green. The usual afternoon crowd populated the common room, from those passing through or those too old or injured to farm. Sighing again, the captain took a seat at an empty table. The humans took their chairs opposite him.

A surly barmaid slammed down three tankards and three bowls of stew. Mora delicately pushed her mug of beer away. She sniffed the steaming bowl. The fermented carrot smell pushed her back. She prodded it with her wooden two prong fork, trying to find a single carrot to blame. Despite the odor, the stew was bereft of carrots. She shared a look with Kelin, and he wore the same expression. She spared a glance at the knight. He seemed not to notice.

Mora said, “They say that the poorest man in Pallens eats on silver, and this is definite proof the Empire’s gone.”

Kelin suddenly grinned. “You know, I used to say that all the time.”

She smiled. “It’s always been one of my favorite expressions.”

“Well, I’ve always thought—”

Jakkobb slapped his hand on the table. “Quiet, and listen.”

“We don’t have your hearing, sir,” Kelin said.

“Then don’t add to the noise.”

Mora cupped her hand and whispered, “Why’s he in such a foul temper?”

Kelin shot a frantic look to the knight and shook his head rapidly at Mora. Jakkobb smiled coldly. “I can hear you perfectly fine. My recruit has been kidnapped by some dark stranger after I told her to take a walk. I take this personally. And as of now, we don’t know where they are.”

“It’s Der, sir,” Kelin said. “She probably found a way out of it by now.”

The knight scowled. “Der’s good, but I think he’s better. I also think he’s a magic user of some sort.”

“But, it’s Der.”

“She’s young and she honestly doesn’t know what she’s doing. Now eat your stew and let me listen.”

Kelin and Mora glanced at their stew, and then at each other. Kelin cleared his throat. “Um, sir, how about we search the village?”

Jakkobb sighed. “As long as you can do it quietly.”

The young man nodded and he and Mora tiptoed out the door. Outside, the sun breathed down on them. Its warmth easily relaxed the tension from the tavern. Kelin smiled, and immediately blushed when she smiled back. Suddenly, the sun felt a little *too* warm.

He couldn’t define it. She reminded him vaguely of Avice, back when he thought that Avice was the entire world, back when the world was the far-flung village of Riversbridge. At least, the good parts of the world and not the white-knuckled terrors wrought by his best friend.

He’d always liked Der. He wouldn’t dream of replacing her friendship. But, well, she wasn’t exactly a girl. In a physical sense she was, although she had always been able to run with the boys and punch as hard as she got punched. He was starting to wonder about that... That wasn’t what he was thinking about, he told himself, the point here was that Mora reminded him of Avice. Only, the yearning burned a thousandfold stronger.

A sugary fragrance always flitted about the air around her, and he knew that she had no perfumes hidden in that stained and ripped robe. He wondered if it was some sort of magic. He didn’t know. In fact, he mused, there was quite a lot about her that he didn’t know. But he really wanted to.

However, when she wasn’t mulling about what horrors she had so recently endured, she moved like a witch dancing over coals. Her hair constantly swayed and gave the appearance of a shimmering waterfall when she walked. And on those rare times that she smiled he could hear the woodland songs of the fairies.

His smile stumbled as she smiled back again. He managed, “Uh... This village looks like every other village I’ve ever seen. You know, one tavern, one forge, one stable, one well, one barn. Same old, same old.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

He tried not to stare, and ran a sweaty palm through his hair. “I wonder where Der is. Hopefully alright.”

She reached out and touched his arm. “You’re worried about her.”

His goofy smile retreated. “Aye, I am. However, I know that she can handle herself. Usually. Sometimes. If she’s lucky.” He ran a hand through his curls. “Well, I’d worry about you much more than her.”

This time, Mora’s face flushed. “I thought I could handle myself. On my own, in the world. I don’t want to admit it, but I was wrong.” Her shoulders slumped. “I guess I’m lucky you’re here.” Her hand brushed over his arm.

Kelin licked his lips. He wasn’t sure what to say.

“After my parents died, I had to care for myself. I even tried to learn magic, as I told you before. I used to dream of soaring over mountains and unicorns as a little girl.”

“So you said. That’s amazing.” He frowned. “But I didn’t think there were any magic schools anywhere in the kingdoms. The closest is in Tenmar and that’s nowhere near here.”

“Well... you’re right. But there are those willing to teach.” She twisted her fingers together and dropped her eyes to the ground.

“Well, I guess that makes sense.”

She nodded but kept her face away from him. “They’re not all good teachers.”

Kelin murmured in agreement. “I’ve met blacksmiths in Duelingar that knew what they were doing, but completely failed to explain it.”

She pushed her thick, black hair behind her shoulders. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh.” He forced another grin. “I don’t know anything about magic. I was a blacksmith from a farming village. Being able to read is a blessing, so I’ve still got a fairly country uncomplicated mind.” Immediately, he fought from slapping his own forehead. What an imbecilic thing to say!

“Oh.” She glanced at him from the corner of her dark eyes. “I guess I can explain. If you want to hear?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“I heard once that magic and its use was very similar to using a weapon.”

“What?”

“I know, I know, not what I expected to hear either. But, you can either spend years studying it or bash your way through pretending to learn and then die horrifically.” She knotted her hands together. “You can use it to protect people – or to rob them or serve yourself.”

He nodded. “I think I see what you’re saying. So, like a weapon, it can scare people who don’t know how to use it. I know because it scares me.”

Mora shook her head. “I’d never hurt you. You saved me.”

Once again, the sun glowed a little too warmly. “Uh. When can I see you use some?”

She shrugged. “Well, you can’t just use it whenever you want.”

“Why not?”

“You know, you can’t just use magic without spiritual rewards and punishments, like.”

“Alright, that’s *not* like a weapon.”

She held up her hands. “It’s like what you do gets written on your soul, and they say that if you do good, good things will come back to you and if do evil, greater evils will happen to you.”

He frowned and leaned away from her for the first time. “Uh, of course. Then why would people do evil at all?”

She shrugged. “Because they don’t believe it. Look, it’s what we’re told. It might just be a story to scare us so-called students straight, or then again, it might be real. I guess I haven’t lived long enough to find out.”

“What?” He tried to hide his flinch. “Have you done something bad? Are you waiting to find out?”

“Oh! No, of course not. I just was saying. We should try to find something out about Der. We’re here for her, after all.” She smiled and shook her hair out in the sunlight and actually smiled. It was the first time he’d seen her since they’d met with a real smile, and not just the polite, shy gesture. Her raven hair glowed with a small halo in the light and the sun reflected from her dark eyes brightly.

He stared, and he knew he was staring, but he didn’t care.

Meanwhile, inside the Mad Frog, Jakkobb sipped his horrible ale while the noise of many conversations danced around him. Most voices vibrated with a tremor of excitement. He took another sip and listened.

“Strangers come through here all the time, Elbriel!”

“I know, but how are we sure it wasn’t someone in Hughling? I mean *they* were all folk we knew!”

“Maybe it was a judicar of Zine, they fight evils like these all the time,” a third and much younger voice chirped.

“It wasn’t,” said the first voice. “I mean, they always announce themselves, and one of them wouldn’t show up here, not for us!”

Elbriel’s voice shivered. “I can’t believe Allis was one of them. She was always sweet to me.”

“And now she’s dead,” the first voice sneered.

“But, *Sennha? Here!*”

They all wound down into silence for a moment. Jakkobb heard at least two people slurping their ales.

“Who killed them?” the third voice asked.

“And who ran away from it?” Elbriel demanded. “Why did they run? Answer me that. Someone who runs away is also up to no good.”

“They couldn’t have gotten far,” the first voice mused. “The bodies were still warm when Sheen found them.”

The thud of a tankard slamming against the table echoed like a small thunderclap. “But it’s been two days! Whoever did this has disappeared too, and that reeks of evil.”

The knight-captain smiled widely, but it lacked humor. “Tom may be able to hide himself, but no one, not even the god Mask, can disguise Der.” He turned to look at the speakers.

The old man shifted anxiously. Beside him was a red-headed freckled man in his middle teens and a small child with identical freckles and an explosion of the same red hair. The old man coughed into his hand. “I don’t know. What happened in the stables doesn’t mean anything.”

“But you haven’t told anyone, Grandfather?” The red-headed teen, Elbriel, glanced conspiratorially around the inn’s tavern. “I mean this is important, you should at least tell the mayor.”

He waved his hand. “Bah. ‘Tis only a coincidence.”

“But they found hoofprints!”

The old man shook his head resolutely. “I don’t think it’s anything.”

“They were killed by strangers, and *they* were people we knew too!”

“We didn’t know them,” the grandfather spat darkly. “Besides, I don’t think it’s important.”

“You sold a horse *mere minutes* before that fight!”

“Aha,” the knight whispered to himself. “He’d need to get her a horse.”

The man continued, “I didn’t see nothing foul!”

Jakkobb stood and crossed the few steps to the table. “Bought the last horse you said?” The stablehand stared up and up at the mountain of red armor. The knight smiled through his visor. “Young lass, about this tall with dark brown hair and just seemed incredibly eager in general?”

“Uh...” the man trailed off. His grandsons shrunk in his chair.

“Was she with a man as well? Dirty blond hair, unusually bright green eyes?”

The stablehand shook his head dumbly. “Don’t remember anyone like him.”

“But you remember the girl?”

“Uh.” His face wrinkled in thought. “I think so.”

“But not the man?”

He shook his head. “No, no one like that.”

Jakkobb frowned. “Alright. Your astute grandson mentioned this happened immediately before this slaughter everyone’s talking about.”

“Aye, sir.”

“I thought so.”

“Amazing coincidence, eh?” The old man lifted his mug in a small salute.

“Probably not.” The knight pivoted a chair toward the table and sat down in one motion. “I’ve been hearing these far-fetched stories flying in this town about the fight.”

The old man stared at the tiny portion of Jakkobb’s face visible through his open visor.

“Well, now, young man—”

Jakkobb coughed.

“Something the matter?”

He waved his hand. “No, no, carry on, please.”

“I wouldn’t even believe this if I hadn’t seen the bodies and the temple for itself.”

The captain raised his eyebrows. “Temple?”

The man dropped his shoulders. “Not in fact, ‘cause the dark gods all move underground, but they had a hidden altar!”

“Alright, alright. Start from the beginning, please.”

The old man nodded to his youngest grandson. “Go fetch us some more drinks, lad.” While the child hopped out of his seat, the old man turned back to the knight. “What are you, sir?”

“Dragoon knight.”

“Are you investigating this now? You arrived quickly.”

“I am now. So, what happened, please.”

“Fair enough, fair enough. Sheen – he’s the miller’s oldest – found the bodies, all decked out in their wicked robes.”

“How many bodies? Where did he find them?”

The grandson returned wordlessly with the flagons. The grandfather took a long drink before answering. “Seven, and all folk we knew from this town too. None of us ever suspected. He found them just out of sight of town to the northwest. Looked like they were in an awful hurry too.”

“How old were they?”

“What do you mean by that?”

Jakkobb sighed. “All I’m asking is if they were old or young.”

“Most of them were, like Allis, under twenty summers, but Joris was forty.” The old man took another swig. “He must’ve been the leader. You know, stranger, most of this town doesn’t want to believe this happened. They honestly don’t.”

“I buy that. Who killed them?”

“No one knows. That’s the mystery. Someone said that the hand of Carenth and Zine extended down from heaven.”

“And left sword wounds?” the knight asked dryly. He glanced up to see Mora and Kelin entering the doorway. While they approached the table, he looked back to the old stablehand. “What you’re saying is, the bodies were found dead and no one knows who did it.” He pulled some coins out of his belt pouch and pushed them across the table. “Thank you for your time, sir. I’m going to search where it took place.” He nodded to Mora and Kelin. “Let’s go.”

Kelin rubbed his hands. “I hope Der was able to leave some sign. If it was her.”

Jakkobb exhaled. “Could you name someone else?”

“Good point.”

They met with curious glares from the townsfolk as they slipped through the town’s gates. Bent and broken grass marked the way to the skirmish. The whole town must have gone to see it, two or three times apiece by the look of it. The old man was right though, the fight happened barely out of town.

Kelin waved his hand around the forest. “Now, Mora, you’ll notice that there are hundreds of footprints around here. Most of them are actually quite damaging to the original tracks, and we’ll be hard pressed to find anything useful in this mess.” His eyes scanned the ground quickly. “Ah. There.” He pointed and puffed up his chest. “That’s where the townsfolk piled the bodies up. You can tell by the way the grass is flattened and there are no actual proper footprints.” He’d never even attempted to explain what these signs meant to someone. Thistle and Thalon always just knew.

“How do you know they were piled up there?” Mora demanded. “They could’ve died there.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think they all died in one spot. There were seven cultists and only Tom and Der. Two people cannot kill seven without moving around themselves.”

“How do you know they weren’t killed?”

“Those people they were talking about in town – the townsfolk knew them. We would have heard about a dead stranger, believe me.”

“Well, alright.”

Further up ahead, Jakkobb surveyed the ground. He looked meticulously at where the grass had been smashed. Splotches of faded brown stained little patches of grass all over the place. He walked along their general pattern.

So, it had been a running fight. They’d stopped for actual combat here, and then run ahead further. His eyes scoured the ground. There were also hoofprints, but the horse had been cantering, not galloping. Why had it only been cantering? His eyes drifted back to the blood trail.

The captain stepped around the stains, watching them closely.

And the fight ended here. Ahead, there was no more blood on the grass. He knelt to inspect the ground. "Kelin, get over here! I found a proper trail."

The young man jogged over. Mora gathered up her robes and regally stepped around the dried blood as best as she could. Kelin ran a hand through his hair. "Where does it go?"

Jakkobb shrugged. "Why don't we find out? It doesn't look like the villagers found it either." They followed it to a small, swift stream. The rocks on the bank had been washed in blood. The knight's eyes cringed just a little bit as he surveyed the bank. "Someone licked their wounds here."

"Der?" Kelin knelt by the water. "There's been only one person here too. The tracks on the shore haven't faded. Thank the gods for mud."

Jakkobb frowned again. "Or someone else can walk very lightly. It looks like someone fell and sprawled out over here."

Mora glued her hands to her mouth. "What happened? Was someone trying to escape? I've never seen..."

"No, someone tended to a wound."

She lifted her robe's hem away from the ground. "But there's blood everywhere."

The knight nodded slowly. "Yes. There is. Wounds tend to bleed."

She looked down and retreated a couple of steps. "I didn't mean..."

"Doesn't matter," Jakkobb growled.

Kelin stepped into the water and picked up an object. He held it up to the sky. "Look at this!" A sapphire played with the sunlight.

Mora clapped. "Out of the stream! We should search for more."

Jakkobb shook his head. "That's the cleanest cut gem I've ever seen come out of water. And in an alluvial stream no less."

She twisted her fingers together. "That's not what I meant, sir!"

"I know, I know."

Kelin patted Mora's arm. "It's alright. Here, you can have this." He handed the gem over.

"Oh, you don't have to give it to me."

He closed her fingers around the jewel. "Please."

Jakkobb frowned. "I know Der doesn't carry gems like that. Tom must've been here too."

Kelin shook his head. "But we didn't see tracks, sir. Someone else could've dropped it upstream."

"I don't think so. It was right here and on top of all the other rocks and dirt."

Kelin nodded. "That does make a sort of suspicious sense."

"Right. Tom didn't leave tracks at the tree stump either. Well, we know we're two days behind them. However, they're in the forest now."

"Is that good or bad, sir?" Kelin asked.

The captain shrugged. "Tom's the wild card, could be either. Does he know woodcraft, and is he a magic user?"

"We never did find tracks the first night, or right here."

"I know. That's why I'm thinking this is bad for us." He held up a finger. "He also has a horse

now, probably for her. We'll have to ride hard."

Kelin's eyes glanced back to the footprints. He looked around the stream. "Here's something else."

"Anything of Der's?" Mora asked.

He moved over to investigate. He splayed out a hand over the new tracks. "They're bear prints, very large bear prints."

Der flinched awake as the wolves howled at the low hanging moon. She sat up in the saddle and pretended she had been awake the whole time. She had been fighting it, but apparently her exhausted body played its hand well and she had drifted off. Sleep also dulled the pain, or at least, she didn't have to feel it when she was out.

"Go back to sleep," Tom said quietly. He led the drowsy horse around the forest trees. The mare's head was drooping, but she still occasionally sidestepped him.

Der idly watched the large bear tracks as they crossed paths. Bears weren't unknown in Thealith, but she'd never seen so many fresh ones in one place before. She stretched in the saddle. "We should camp."

"Soon enough, but I want more distance, and I'm wide awake."

For once, she didn't argue, and instead watched the moonlight reflect off his hair. His face was pale; and that was because he always wore his hood. He said that he had to cover his face because of an eye illness, but she'd noticed that he didn't have troubles with seeing anything.

She wet her lips. "The horse is still shying away from you. She doesn't like you very much."

"She'll have to get over it."

"I don't like you very much."

"Good."

She leaned against the saddle and stretched her back. Pain spurted throughout her body, and she wished she could see how awesome of a bruise had blossomed on her back.

Tom glanced over his shoulder. He almost smiled to himself. "Why were those cultists trying to kill you? I know for a fact that you're not one of them."

"I was looking for a place to hide from you. I saw this hidden door, so I decided to use it. They were too."

He chuckled to himself. "What makes you think I wouldn't have found it?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "It was better than any of the other choices."

"This means you ran into them by mistake. I was worried the cult had a marker on you."

"And hunting me? By rights, they should, but I don't think they know who I am."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Early winter last year, Sennha's influence in this kingdom was nearly broken," she recounted.

"I know about that. They went mad in Second Acron and the king set about routing them out of his domain."

"Oh. Well, do you know why they went mad?"



“Yes, actually. The cult leader in Thealith, who was in Duelingar for some unknown reason, got killed by some children and the rest of them didn’t know what to do so they panicked. Dark snowflakes, the lot of them.”

“How do you know that?” she queried, and then frowned. “Dark snowflakes?”

“Never you mind how I know. I call them that because they’re about as harmful as a snowflake.” He continued, “So, what did you think you did to cause the cult to reveal themselves?”

“My friend Ed– my friend and I killed him.” The memory washed over her; they’d been ambushed in the middle of a public street, and they’d won through the cult’s attack on Edillon. She tried very hard not to think about the priest’s dying words. But they played in her mind as if he’d spoken them yesterday. *The sword of Sennha will cut you down.* She fought against a shiver. It didn’t mean anything.

Tom slowed his pace. “Oh. They don’t know it was you though.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Good.” He tossed something back to her. She caught the metal brooch. “One of the women was from Urael, or at least pretending to be. I found that on her.” Der turned the ornament over in her hand; it was a servant’s symbol of a noble family. What would servant like that be doing over here?

“A spy?”

“Worshiping Sennha? Doubtful. They probably stole it.”

“Probably, Sennha doesn’t work openly.”

He shrugged. “However, none of this is our problem now. They’re dead, we’re not. It’s over.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I run into these fellows all the time. They’re my enemy.” She shrugged. “I’m not too worried about them though. Sennha’s followers are a joke, and a pretty bad one at that.”

“Did you know that the Blackhound was a follower of Sennha?”

“No! The man who singlehandedly killed the Empire? You’re telling me that one of them was actually competent? Is this some sort of jest?”

He turned toward her and raised an eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, right. You never joke. You have no humor.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, you don’t share it.”

“Is there any reason why I should?” He glared at her and all she saw were two brilliantly green slits so bright they glowed.

She slouched. “Well, no. You’re still a mysterious stranger.”

“I know. It’s not an accident.” He glanced around. “We’ll camp now.” He watched Der nearly overbalance as she dismounted. “No, you just sit here. I’ll go build a fire.”

Her eyes shot to the horse before she could stop herself.

Tom sighed. “On another thought, you’re helping me gather firewood.”

“How about I take care of the horse?” she offered through a forced, brittle smile.

He shook his head and smiled coldly. “No. Now, you get the firewood and I’ll see to the

horse.”

She started to protest but looked around the darkened forest. She'd found hiding places in Darkreign, in the chemmen homeworld. By comparison, a dark forest was child's play, and it far exceeded the chance she had in Hughling. She exhaled dramatically. “Fine! I'll go fetch some wood!”

Tom quirked an eyebrow. “You're a tragic liar. I think we'll just settle for doing everything together. Besides, you can still barely limp.”

By the time they had the fire built, the horse was dozing. Der sullenly chewed her meat. Tom's meal sat in his lap, and he hadn't touched it yet. She swallowed “What—”

“No.”

“What is—”

“No.”

“What are we—”

“No!” He glared hotly over the flames.

She leaned her head to the side. “Come on, man. What is it we're after?”

He pointed to himself. “What *I'm* after is my concern.”

“Well, your concern has me abducted, so I want to know.”

“Tools exist for their function, not their conversation.”

She rolled her eyes. “You're not answering me. You haven't even given me a hint. Is this honestly about saving a child's life. And why me?”

“I'll tell you what you need to do when I need you to do it.”

“How do I know if I can even do whatever?”

His mouth twisted into a closed, grotesque smile. “Oh, I know you can. Now shut up and eat.”

She took another bite. “Fine. Tell me about this child. You didn't lie about her, did you?”

“I did not.”

“Then what is her name?”

He sighed. “I'll tell you if you shut your mouth.”

“What's her name?”

He held up a finger. “First, you must agree.”

She rolled her eyes and nodded.

He closed his eyes and sat his back straight as if he were meditating. He didn't speak immediately. “Chloe.”

“Sweet name.”

“You'd said you'd be quiet.”

“All I said was sweet name.” She fiddled with a pebble. “What is she dying of and how much longer does she have?”

Tom silently shook his head.

The young woman huffed. “I'm trying to help. I have a friend with an excellent physician in his service. Personally, I do not get on with the man, but he is a genius at what he does.”

Again, Tom shook his head. “A surgeon couldn't understand her illness. I can heal her. I just

need something to do it.”

“Yes, but how much time do you have? He can get there soon.”

“Listen, girl, I don’t need anyone, no physician, no priest, not even you, so stay the hell out of my affair!”

“Wait! You obviously need me! I want to know!”

“And you’re a damn fool for thinking you’ll get an answer!” His glare singed more than the fire between them and his voice faded like thunder around the campsite.

Der finished her meal quickly in the echoing silence. She looked up to see how far Tom was into his and saw that all the food had neatly disappeared from his hands and lap.

## Chapter Eight

### Surprise!

Der blinked at a flash of light from the ring on his hand. That woke her back up. It was so hard to stay awake this late. The fire was burning very low, but it still reflected the ring brightly. She'd tried to stifle a yawn and wondered how long she'd been dozing.

They'd long done away with their food, but Der wasn't going to sleep with him still up and wandering around. So, she sat stubbornly by the fire. Of course, it hadn't worked exactly like she'd planned. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "That's an interesting ring."

Tom pulled his hands back out of the firelight.

"Can I see it?" She shuffled back up into a sitting position.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's mine."

"Please?"

He rolled his eyes. "Ha. Now you're being polite. No."

Grumbling, she grabbed her waterskin.

"Good girl. This ring is mine and you're not even allowed to look at it. Understand?"

"Yes, but that's not going to stop me."

He scowled and looked away.

After another yawn, Der pushed herself to her feet and limped around the fire and sat next to him. He inched away. "Tell me about Chloe, please."

"No."

"I'm helping to save her too."

"No." He pointed at her. "You are a means to an end."

She ducked her head and stared at the ring as he extended his hand. A platinum circle knotted around a light blue stone. There was a very detailed picture of something cut inside the gem itself, but she couldn't make it out.

She gasped. "That's an elvish ring!"

Tom leapt to his feet and covered the ring with his other hand. "Get away from me!"

"I'd recognize that style of cutting gems anywhere. There are pictures inside too, and only elves do that!" She rose to her feet and advanced. "Why do you have an elvish ring?"

He whipped his hot, angry gaze at her. His green eyes burned brighter than the fire. "Like I've said a hundred times before, my father traded with the elves!" His left hand still obscured the ring.

"The elves seldom give away rings and they don't sell them."

"The elves sell plenty of jewelry, you naïf."

"Well, yes, they do," she admitted. "But not ones like that! The elves make a different style that they sell to the other races – and those are quite different than the ones they make for

themselves. They don't share those."

"Oh? Then how do *you* know so much about the elves?"

She tapped her ear. "I am part elven, one sixteenth. I also spent last winter in Arborn." She pointed stubbornly to his hand. "I know well the elves wouldn't trade for a ring like that. It's one of their own."

"Then perhaps I found it somewhere. I could have stolen it for all you know."

She tightened her jaw.

"Shut the hell up, girl." He turned away and reached down to his backpack to lift out the scroll case.

She opened her mouth.

He tilted his handsome face to the side. "You know, I'm beginning to wonder how well you would scream with your tongue torn out." Reverently, he unrolled the map. The fine lines of his pen were so thin they were almost invisible, and yet the thousands of the delicate lines added up to a delicious treat for the eye. She still had troubles believing he drew it himself. He traced his left index finger over the parchment. "We're going northwest. To here."

She found Hughling and pointed to their approximate location northwest of the town. "Only one more village along the way too."

"We're going around it." He pulled the map away from her.

"Why?"

He began to roll up the parchment. "Because you seem unable to avoid trouble in villages."

She sighed. "Alright, I have to admit you're right about that."

"What? You're bowing to agree with me?" He caught himself between a snicker and a cough.

She shot him a look and pushed her hair behind her ears. "I am not. It's just the way things are." She followed her eyes to where he had pointed. "The Dead Forest. Where are we going in the Dead Forest? That's a rather disconcerting name too, I might add."

"An old monastery."

She blinked. "Pardon? A monastery?" She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "There's a temple to Ahtome back in Malfax if you need a holy man."

He shook his head. "There's something particular at this monastery, and it's abandoned now."

She scratched her head. "But why is it in the middle of a forest with a sinister name?"

He sighed audibly. "You know so little. After the fall of the Empire, monasteries were no longer built in the cities and instead excluded themselves from society, like they originally were even before Pallens existed."

"What?" She blinked.

He inhaled deeply. "Alright, even before monasteries existed, monks were men who chose to separate themselves from society and went out into the Un Desert or other very austere locations to pray. These were the first monks, and nuns too, probably. Soon, those people gathered followers."

"Even living out on the edge of nowhere?"

“Yes, now shut up. Alright, they attracted people and thus, founded monasteries. Over time, these orders moved into cities, especially with the rise of the paladin empire. However, after the destruction of Pallens, monasteries went back to a life of seclusion from society. Follow?”

“I think so.” She nodded.

“Some say that people wanted them out of the cities, because they failed to protect them.”

“Why did people blame them? It’s the Blackhound’s deed! Besides, isn’t it the army’s job to protect the people? What’s a monk going to do anyway? Stab an armored man with a quill?”

He smiled his tight toothless smirk. “People aren’t rational creatures.”

“They can be.” She shook her head. “So, how does that explain why this monastery is in the middle of a forgotten forest?”

“Weren’t you listening?”

“Yeah, but that still doesn’t say why this thing you’re after is there.”

“Yes, it does. Look, during the centuries after the Empire, monastic orders were the keepers of knowledge. People stopped learning how to read and write, and became farmers and ignorant peasants for the most part. It was the monks who preserved the ancient texts that survived the Centum Wars, until the world slowly began to rise back onto its feet in the last century or so.”

“Knowledge!” She snapped her fingers. “There must be some knowledge that you’re after that’s stored in this monastery. A spell or something.”

He looked at her coldly and didn’t answer.

She smirked. “And if it’s abandoned, that mean no one’s guarding the precious tomes there.”

He rolled his eyes. “Mayhap.”

Her grin unfurled. “Is it something from Pallens?”

“What? Why would it be? Do you know how rare items from the Empire actually are?”

She shrugged. “The elves had some things, and I got— well, I’ve seen them.”

“No, it’s not. It’s...older.” He rolled his eyes. “And what you do truly know about the Empire? Honestly?”

She squirmed under his gaze. “A little. The Blackhound and King Midan the Merciful.”

“Just that?” He sighed. “Nothing about the thousands of years of history?”

“Um, um. A little.”

“Right,” he drawled. “Did you know that Pallens at her end was a democracy?”

Der frowned. “Uh, yes, I did. It means they, uh, got to pick their king or queen and their vassals.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do you even know what a democracy is?”

“Yes,” she said confidently. “The people got to pick the king.”

Tom sighed. “No, that’s not what it means.” He rubbed his forehead. “Never mind.”

She leaned closer toward the map, and didn’t see Tom leaning away from her. She sighed. “You don’t have my village. No one knows about it.”

He gently tugged the scroll away from her and carefully sealed it in its tube. “Who cares about your two plough village?”

“Everyone in the village, we even got a caravan of dwarves last year!”

“I’m sure they lost money in the deal.” He reached down to replace the tube in his pack tied on the back of his saddle. He dropped it and hissed.

She whirled to see him bent over his hand. “What is it?”

“I cut myself on your sword. Damn! That hurts!” He bent over his hand.

She frowned. “But you had it wrapped in a blanket and it was sheathed.” She looked down at his pack. The blade had slipped out of its sheath and out the side of the rolls of the blanket. She frowned; the odds of that happening were pretty severe.

Her eyes fell onto the sword and she gasped. Even though the hilt was covered by the partially unrolled blanket, the reflection of the blade was unmistakable. It wasn’t reflecting normally any more, but instead its ethereal blue-gold sheen.

“Let me see your hand.” But she still stared at her own blade.

“No.” He was already wrapping a cloth around it. “Damn, your sword is sharp!” He dropped the rest of the length of cloth and stared at the blade. “What’s *that*?”

“It’s a sword!” She pointed. “Hey! You ruined the disguise spell! How did you do that?” Gingerly, she shook the sword free of the blanket. The beautiful hilt glowed in the moonlight.

He scrambled backward so quickly he left fingernail grooves in the ground. “Pallens! That’s a sword from Pallens!”

“The art on the hilt is rather obvious if you’ve seen any Pallens art at all. It’s the way they use melted gems, however they did that.” She scratched her head. “But why is the disguise spell ruined?”

Tom kept staring, and his complexion faded even paler than usual; he was truly white. “Perhaps it was a weak spell on a very powerful object.” He raised his voice, “*Why do you have a Pallens sword?*”

“Because I found it. Raiding chemmen.”

He jerked as if he was twisting with spasms. “You *weren’t* lying? That war truly *did* happen? I mean, I saw that you thought you were telling the truth, but I believed you were just insane!” He grabbed the sides of his head. “And you can use it? But, no, they were all destroyed!” He pawed at his face. “Why— how? No!”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but I found it.”

“And you can use it?”

Der ran her fingers soothingly over the blade. “Yes. Why wouldn’t I be able to?”

“Because that— that *thing* was probably a paladin’s sword!” He inched further away. “And paladins don’t exist anymore!”

She found herself fighting against grinning. “I’ve always wondered about that, but, honestly?”

“Most likely!”

“I didn’t dare get my hopes up about that! It’s not as if we’ll ever know, like.”

“You didn’t *dare* to dream something, *Der*?”

She shrugged. “Dreams can be broken, especially if they’re told.” A smile leaped onto her face. “But it truly could be?”

“Yes!”

“But, hold on...” She turned to look at him. “You don’t sound like that’s a good thing.”

He inched further away. “When Pallens was destroyed, the Blackhound ordered that all of its weapons be destroyed as well.”

She cradled the hilt in the crook of her arm. “Well, they missed one. I don’t know why the chemmen had it, and from what I saw they didn’t like the Blackhound either.”

“And *you* just happen to have it?”

“Yes, I do!”

“Wait. *Where* did you say you found it?”

“Raiding chemmen, in Zazocorma in Darkreign, but I don’t think you’ve heard of that place.”

“I don’t believe you.” He could not tear his eyes away from the elegant weapon. His mouth slipped open as he stared.

She looked at him. “What? You sound—” She bit her own tongue and stared right back. Slowly, almost carelessly, she let the sword drift between them.

Tom followed her line of sight back to his own face. Carefully, he brought his hand to his mouth and fingered the long, deathly sharp canines. Silence bounced between the two of them for an endless moment.

“Oh.” Above anything else, she sounded disappointed.

He gave her a long, heavy stare. “Don’t let this bother you.”

She tried to smile, but didn’t move the point of her sword away from him. “Um...”

His hand had already healed. He threw his arms wide. “I am a vampire!”

“So I see.” She very carefully did not move a muscle.

“And you’re not afraid?” He snarled and ground his teeth.

Der thought she saw sparks when he mashed his molars together. “I’ll admit I’m a bit surprised.” She narrowed her eyes. “Then again, I should’ve been able to guess it. Now, it’s obvious. I mean *dead* obvious.”

His mouth fell open again.

“Sorry.” She swallowed a cheap laugh and shrugged.

Tom materialized in her face, nose to nose. Nothing living could move that quickly. He pointed to his elongated fangs. “Did you miss these by any chance?”

She leaned away from him. “No-o. Um...” She raised her index finger and poked the bottom of one of them.

His emerald eyes exploded wide. He reeled back and shoved her away simultaneously. “*What the hell are you doing?!*”

When she sat up, she held her bleeding finger out in front of her. She tried to shake the blood off. The sword tip still aimed at his throat in her other hand.

The vampire crossed his arms and sneered. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I just wanted to see how sharp they were.” She looked back to her finger. “I think they’re a little sharper than my sword even. How do you not constantly cut your lip?”

He retreated into a shocked silence. His mouth opened and closed several times. “You’re crazy,” was all that came out.



She shook her finger again. “Huh.”

He was suddenly kneeling in front of her. Der backpedaled away from him, but he followed faster than she could move. “Now I know your secret and you know mine.” He smiled at her with a smile only a vampire could give and his eyes flipped from green to a bright red. “However, your precious holy sword is out of reach and,” he pressed a forefinger against her throat, “I could kill you with this.”

She winced and closed her eyes. It hurt! “But you won’t.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that I could.” He pressed a little harder.

She pretended that the escaping wheeze was a growl. “From my perspective, it changes the fact by a whole lot.”

He pulled back his hand. “You were never to find this out.”

“I’d rather know the truth, you liar!” She lunged with her finger at him and pushed it into his chest. “You lied to me! You’re not a merchant’s son and you don’t have vision troubles!”

He scooped a rock off the ground and crushed it in one fist. “That’s the least of your troubles, you imbecilic daughter of a cow. Of course I lied to you.” He ground the remaining chunks of rock into dust between his fingers.

She set her jaw firmly and crossed her arms. “Well, it bothers me!”

He poked his own fang, as if reassuring its presence. “Once again, are you blind?”

“No! You lied to me!”

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook vigorously. “What is wrong with you? I am a thrice-damned *vampire* and you’re more worried that I lied to you? What the hell is wrong with you? You are—” He stopped and looked at her in amazement.

“What?” she dared to ask.

Slowly, he swallowed. “I just bit my own tongue.” He stared at nothing and then rammed his fingers into his mouth. “You made me bite my own tongue! You are the most aggravating human I’ve ever met!”

“I’m one sixteenth elven.” Rubbing her forehead, she blinked until her vision resettled from the shaking. “You know, Duke Farallon said the same thing when I broke his nose.”

He sat back and just stared. “You broke Farallon’s nose? I knew you were clumsy.”

“No. I punched him intentionally.”

He stared as if she was a new species of fish absolutely determined to fly. “You realize he is one of the most influential men alive.”

She shrugged in her defense. “He called me a fool, among other things.”

“Thus, you proved him right.”

She scowled at him. “Well, we never started on good terms. He helped capture me when I was aiding a chemman in the war.”

Tom straightened his shirt and frowned for a long moment. “Whose side did you fight for?” he drawled finally.

“The victors, of course.” She shook her finger again and glared at it. “It’s still bleeding.”

Tom folded his arms. “Funny thing, that. It won’t stop, ever.”

“Well, this is a bit of a problem. Wait, you mean it won’t stop ever unless...”

“Yes. Until I stop it. The thing about a vampire’s bite is the blood won’t clot...”

“Unless you do something about it. You know, I think you’re lying. Again. You’re just having a laugh.”

He pressed his palms over his heart. “Are you trying to call my bluff? If you’re wrong, you’ll die.”

“So, do something about it.”

“No.” He smirked. “It’s your own fault, child.”

“Eh.” She held up her finger. “Um, would you then?”

“Why?”

“Because I want it to stop bleeding. You need me.”

“Yes, but I’m certain I’ll be done with you before you bleed out from that.”

She scowled up at him. “If you don’t, I’ll become more stubborn than you can imagine.” She thrust up her hand.

He glared back at her, his scowl deepening as he considered her words. He rolled his emerald eyes. “Alright. Fine. However, you have to admit you were being a bloody fool.”

“Bloody. Ha.”

He folded his arms and smiled with his fangs. “You’re going to have to say it.”

“Can’t I just admit something else? Like my, ha, *undying* hatred for you.”

His face twisted into a snarl, but he said, “That’s welcome as well, but you’re going to have to say it or very, very slowly bleed to death.”

She stared cross eyed at the tiny prick on her finger. “That would take weeks!”

He smirked again. “I know.”

“Alright, alright. I... Iwasbeingabloodyfool.” She spoke so rapidly even she could not separate the words.

“What? You mumbled and I didn’t hear you.”

“You did too.”

He leaned over her. “Are you calling me a liar?”

She stared with the intensity of the sun.

He inspected his fingers. “You’d better say it again, and slower.”

She glared daggers at him. “I was being a fool – and I hate you.” She thrust the finger upward toward him.

“You might want to look away.”

She shook her head resolutely.

He shrugged and gingerly took her hand into his mouth. Immediately, he pulled it out, turned his head and spat.

Der glared at her finger. “Heh. You can barely see the cut. That’s convenient.” Her face darkened. “A little too convenient. You can hide the bite marks!”

He rolled his eyes. “It was a tiny cut, child, there’s nothing to hide.” He sighed loudly and threw up his hands. “I was right about you – you are the most annoying mortal ever born.”

“So?” She shrugged. “Honestly, you’re a vampire. Everything makes much more sense now.”

“And this doesn’t bother you? I could be *drinking your blood* every night.”

She shook her head calmly. “I don’t think you have.” She smacked her own forehead. “Only the ones I take out for a meal! I just got that!”

“What? Oh, when I met you...” He waved a fist at her. “Argh!” With a swirl of his cloak he marched off into the night. Der didn’t know whether to count this as a victory or not. She poked her finger again, it wasn’t even sore. Moments later, she heard furious flute playing from somewhere in the midst of the night. She had heard softer notes played on the hammers in the forge in Riversbridge. The music was still amazingly gorgeous, but right now, it could compete with war drums.

She glanced at the horse. It would only take a moment to saddle her up. Hell, she wouldn’t even need the saddle. Der slowly rose, eyes locked toward the sound of the flute. She wouldn’t make it, she told herself, but she should at least try. She buckled her sword back onto her belt. How much she missed the weight of it! If he tried to stop her again, she could just stab him. At least, she knew what she was dealing with now. Then again, how did one fight a vampire? Something about wood, right?

She frowned at the mare and wrapped her fingers around the handle of her weapon. Well, perhaps not this time. He was already angry enough, and her back still burned in anguish and she knew it wouldn’t work. He might be upset enough to do something cruel. Of course, she felt duty bound to keep him upset. In fact, she was happier when he was angry. It meant she was doing something right.

In the darkness, the flute began to slow its tempo, like river rapids smoothing out into laminar waters. Cursing, Der fought herself to sit back down. She kept a tight hand on the Pallens sword though.

Tom reappeared at the campfire half an hour later. She was not about to admit how she surprised herself by yearning to hear the flute. She put more wood into the cheery flames.

He closed his claret eyes. “If you had run, I was going to break your ankles.”

“I almost did.”

“Now that, I believe. But you didn’t.” He opened his eyes again. “I am not going to allow you to carry that sword.”

She reached down and gripped it. “Try to take it from me.”

He sighed again and sat down by the fire.

“Speaking of swords, since you’re a vampire, you have to be able to fight. Why the hell did you run away in Hughling?”

“I wasn’t going to let you die, if you were worried about that.”

“I nearly did!”

“That was your own fault!” His nostrils flared. “I removed myself from sight because you couldn’t see me fight, that would give too much away.”

She snorted. “You know, I could have believed that you just got very, very lucky, that would’ve been less suspicious than disappearing, you moron. Hell, I found out anyway, and I would’ve appreciated the help.”

“You weren’t supposed to!” He balled a fist on his knee. “I carry my knife, but most of the time I fight with my hands. An outnumbered barehanded fighter without armor against

swordsmen? Not a chance. Even *you* would recognize that. Normally, I'd go ahead and kill the lot of them and then hypnotize you to forget about it."

"Hypnotize?"

"Mind control, wonderful trick on humans' weak minds that my ilk has cultivated. Most of the time," he added bitterly. "It doesn't work on you, believe me, I tried."

"You tried that on me?" She raised a fist.

He laughed. "Yes, I did."

She jumped to her feet, ignoring the shouts of pain from her leg and back. "You bastard!"

Still chuckling, he rose and dusted his trousers. "Alright, one hit. I dare you."

Her torso swiveled as she threw every pound in her body into the punch. They stumbled away from each other in opposite directions.

Tom's hands flew to his face. "You broke my nothe!" His face audibly snapped as he set the cartilage. "How did you do that? I'm like punching a wall!"

Der, dropping to her knees, pressed her hand against her chest. "And now your face is flat enough to match." She squeezed her eyes shut and wheezed. "Oh, I think it's broken."

He pointed at her. His voice returned to normal as the injury healed itself almost instantly. "You shouldn't be able to hurt me!" His other hand prodded his nose in disbelief. "*How* are you able to hurt me?"

She growled. "I hit you. Violence does that. But I broke my hand!" The first two knuckles were both almost an inch further down on her hand than they had been a minute ago. "It hurts! By my gods, it *hurts!*"

Tom tapped his nose again and peered down at her. "Do you have any other special powers that you don't know about?"

She glared at him through a haze of agony. "What?"

"Never mind." He sighed. "Let me see that hand."

She swiveled so she was not facing him. "I'll see to it."

"Fine by me if you never want to hold a sword again."

She turned around to look at him. "I don't trust you."

His nostrils flared. "Thank you very much. However, I need you whole, and I'm going to need you to fight."

"No." She turned away from him again.

Tom grabbed her from behind and wrestled her to the ground. He plucked up her right hand with both of his. Der tried to kick, but one leg of his somehow confined both of hers. Her sheathed sword and left arm were stuck fast between her and the ground.

He fingered her hand and she yelped in pain. He sighed again. "Scream if you want." He forced the bones back into position. She yelled and tried to kick again in muscle reflex and pure anguish. Next, he reached back with one of his hands and dug into a pocket, producing a small vial with a light blue liquid in it.

She gasped and hacked. "What's that?" She watched as he brought it over her head.

"Healing vial. I figured whoever I kidnapped for this was probably going to get hurt. However, this is absolutely not how I expected it to be." He flipped the cork off easily with a

fingernail and poured it out over her hand and splashed a little on her leg. Apparently, the chance that it could kill her didn't bother him. When the healing vial or salve forced such rapid, instant healing on the body, there was always the chance that the body would fail to absorb it.

"That stings! That stings!" She tried with all her strength to jerk her hand away but his steel grip wasn't challenged.

He chuckled. "Maybe I switched it with a vial of acid."

"No! No! Oh, please, by the gods, not acid!" She thrashed all the harder.

He blinked.

"Not acid..." But the burning sensation was already cooling.

He released her and she elbowed him in the gut and rolled away as quickly as she could. She glared at him and flexed her fingers.

Tom patted his stomach. "Alright, that hurt too." He pressed his lips together. "I don't know why you can do that; you shouldn't be able to hurt me. You're just a girl. Grown men are as dangerous as a housefly. Honestly."

"Well, I'm certainly happier about the news." She fidgeted with her hand. A cool wave seemed to sweep over it, as if she had just pulled it from a fire.

He laughed. "However, I'm not too worried about you, child."

"What do you mean by that?"

"How old are you, Derora?"

"Eighteen summers," she said defiantly.

"That's why."

"But I can hurt you."

"If you don't mind breaking your hand every time, and you don't have many to spare. Also, I heal immediately, you don't." He tapped his chin and looked at her as if she was an interesting book. "Well, you're not supernaturally strong or fast, not like anyone else I've ever encountered."

"What are you talking about?"

"When humans attack a vampire one on one, it's over before it starts. I'm faster, stronger, more experienced and my skin is like hitting stone. However, somehow you – without possessing any of those attributes – are able to hurt me."

She shrugged. "I don't know why."

His eyes narrowed on the Pallens sword. "You also have that, which gives me a very large suspicion."

She clutched the sword. "What?"

He shook his head. "Not in a thousand years, and you won't be around then anyway."

## Chapter Nine

### Two and a Half Spies

“Being a warrior is dangerous. My duty is to protect people and fight creatures of—” Spike snorted and hacked so loudly that Kelin gave up for the moment. He smiled toward Mora once the horse’s fit subsided. “As I was saying, I don’t fight common brigands—”

Spike hacked again, as if trying to dislodge something deep in his throat.

“Is something wrong with him?” Mora asked Jakkobb politely.

The knight shrugged. They rode in silence for a few minutes.

Kelin patted his curved blade. “You see, this sword’s—”

This time, Spike whinnied as loudly as he could. He lunged forward and buried his thick teeth into the rear of Kelin’s horse and then stepped to the side. The roan laid his ears back, screamed and kicked uselessly behind him. The horse bolted forward, taking a hollering Kelin along for the ride.

Jakkobb bit back a smile. Beneath him, the warhorse stepped smugly. “Spike, quit being an ass.” At that, Spike laid his own ears back and tossed his mane. He started to trot as uncomfortably for his rider as possible.

“He understands every word,” Mora said. Der’s messenger’s mount trotted with ease alongside Spike’s display.

The knight rolled his eyes. “He just pretends to.”

“How can a horse do that?”

“I told you, he’s not a horse. He’s a monster.” Spike locked his legs. Jakkobb crossed his arms. “No, I am not going to walk.”

“See? He’s trying to make you walk!”

The captain shook his head. “I said that, Morana, not him.”

“Oh. That’s not what it sounds like, sir.” She shaded her eyes. “Did you know that your suit of armor is too bright?”

“It’s called a harness of armor, child. It’s not a suit.” He looked down at his own breastplate and tapped it reassuringly. His eyes traced the armor’s subtle designs that caused arrows and swords to hit at angles and bounce harmlessly off.

Kelin had calmed his horse and trotted back. “Sir, I don’t like your horse.”

Spike snickered gleefully.

Jakkobb grinned. “Neither do I.” The black warhorse whipped his head around and tried to bite his rider’s knee with a metallic clang. The captain looked up, still smiling. “And the feeling’s mutual. Why do you think I always wear armor? Because I’m afraid of enemies attacking me in the random wilderness? Hell no.”

“Um. Then why don’t you get another mount?”

“Because I break most horses’ backs.”

“Right.” Kelin jerked his head back to the road. “I think that I saw someone up ahead, sir.”

“You think so?” Jakkobb asked. “Or did you see someone?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t sure.”

The knight sighed. “We’ll find out soon enough then.”

There was indeed someone standing ahead on the road. Sunlight shimmered off something shiny in each hand. Mora squinted. “Is he far away or just very short?”

The figure held a long knife in each hand. As the riders approached, they saw that in fact, he was just short.

“Stand and deliver!” He twirled his knives in opposite directions.

“It’s a child!” Mora jerked back on her reins causing her horse to jig backward. “We’re being robbed by a child!” She stared again at the youth, who wore a hood without a cloak that hid his face entirely, especially his eyes.

Jakkobb nudged Spike forward. “Well met, Thalon.”

The child grinned. “You too. But, sir knight, I will require all your money.”

“Why’s that?”

The points on his knives sagged a little. “Because I’m robbing you,” he said hopefully.

Mora reached out and yanked on Kelin’s shirt. “They know each other?”

He nodded and slid out of his saddle. “Of course. Thalon!” He gestured to Mora. “I’d be honored to introduce you to Morana Kemprial. Mora, this is Thalon.”

“But you’re just a little boy!”

“I’m seven, lady.” He sheathed his knives in one fluid motion. “Come on, Dad’s got a camp this way. He has a guest he wants to talk to.” He started to walk into the forest.

Jakkobb winced. “Oh, a guest... right. Lead the way, Thalon.”

The boy beamed. “I saw you. I was watching the road and I saw you.” He looked up at Mora. “You’re not Der. Where’s Der?”

“We don’t know. We’re chasing her,” Jakkobb said.

“Why is she running?”

“She’s not, Thalon. She was kidnapped.”

His expression became one of thoughtful calculation. “We’ll have to find her then.”

The boy led them through the trees, which grew thickly just a few yards from the highway. He followed a path that even an elf would have had trouble finding. Thistle sat calmly and nodded at the knight. Beside him, a man sat bound and gagged with a blindfold tied around his head.

Mora cried aloud when she met with Thistle’s bright orange orbs. The waterwheel in her mind began to spin as the current of the old stories quickened. She pulled back hard on the reins but Kelin was faster and snagged them. “Mora! He’s a friend!” The roan scooted awkwardly beneath him.

“But he’s... isn’t he? Is he...? The stories you told... I thought you said that he was gone!”

Thistle raised one eyebrow expectantly.

“But, a *chemman*!”

Jakkobb tapped his fingers against his armored forearms as he folded them. “We’re not blind. Thistle is an ally.”

The captured man may have been artificially blinded but he wasn't deaf, and started screaming into his gag and kicking.

"Aw, why'd you have to say it aloud?" Thalon asked. "He'd just stopped struggling too."

Mora brought her hands up to her mouth. Her eyes darted between Thistle, Thalon and the bound man.

"Mora, look at me!" Kelin shook her reins in his hand. "Look at me! Thistle is my friend." He started to lead her horse away with one hand and his own with his other. He glanced back to the others. "I think I'll go explain the war again, alright?"

He eased a smile over his shoulder as he led her mount away from the others. "He's one chemman that we can trust. He's saved my life."

"But." She rubbed her hands against the saddle's leather. "But that story you told, it couldn't be real. It's impossible."

"I wish." He smiled again and dismounted. "Look, it's all alright and it's over." He dropped the reins and held out his hand for her to dismount.

She let him take most of her weight until her feet touched the soil. "But that child! He's a chemman child!"

"Half chemman." Kelin put his hands on her quaking shoulders. The world slowed down for him as he realized that he'd never had to calm a girl before. The only girl he was really used to was usually the cause of anxiety, not the recipient. It was honestly refreshing. He grinned, despite the gravity of Mora's honest fright. "Listen to me, please. Thistle and Thalon proved their allegiance. They're friends."

"But, Kelin, the chemmen – the stories..."

He looked into her wide, dark eyes. "I hope that you know that you can trust me. Believe me when I say that he's a friend. I told you everything that happened."

Slowly, she looked back toward the party to see the massive red knight, the dark clothed chemman, the boy and their prisoner. She finally nodded. "Alright. If you say so. I still don't want to believe it. But I trust you."

"You're still safe with us. Safer," he corrected.

She almost smiled and looked away. "I fear that it isn't safe here, not between Urael and Thealith. Especially on the border."

"We're better together." He grinned. "I know this company, they'll keep us safe."

"But we need to get out of here, Kelin. I'm afraid. I'm from Urael!"

His smile began to fade. "Aye, but, you were captured by slavers. You weren't invading."

Her face paled. "I know. It's different." Tears dampened her dark eyes. "But, when I was in their hands, I— I think I overheard something..."

"What? What did you overhear?" His grip on her shoulders tightened. "About the impending war?"

"No, no, nothing about that. Only, I heard, but there's something about a girl."

"A girl?"

She started shaking her head. "Just that there's something about a girl. They were to search for a girl. That's all I know."



“Could it be Der?” Kelin asked. “Is that why she was kidnapped?”

Mora held up her hands. “I don’t know. I hope your friend wasn’t taken by those fiends.”

Kelin sighed. “I hope not. From Jakkobb’s description, Tom didn’t seem the type to keep friends. Besides, it doesn’t matter anyway. Jakkobb said that we’re not getting involved in anything other than rescuing Der.”

Jakkobb glanced down at the bound, struggling man. He moved his gaze over to the chemman. “Why is he important?”

“A spy from Urael.” Thalon tossed a knife up and caught it easily; and he laughed as if he was toying with a ball. “We were playing guards and brigands one night and—”

“Thalon.” The knight shook his head. “Don’t play the sweet child with me.”

The boy’s shoulders hunched. Behind him, his father smiled, which was as close to laughing as he usually came. Thalon said, “You know how the king has us patrolling for chemmen activity?”

“I wouldn’t expect it.”

Thistle shook his head. “The storm-readers won’t be bothering us for a long time to come, but I don’t disagree with the king in the need for eyes toward them. It’s possible, however doubtful, that some were not at the battle and not in Darkreign.”

“Wise king. I didn’t expect anything less from him.”

“Which is why we came into Thealith,” Thalon explained. “Because we knew chemmen were here in Thealith and Tenmar before the battle.”

“Fair enough, but why did you capture this fellow? He’s human.”

The boy stamped his foot. “I was getting to that! We found this fellow about to be captured because he’s a spy from Urael, and Dad wanted to know what he knew, so we captured him instead.”

“Right,” Jakkobb responded mildly. “You’ve had more fun than us.”

Thistle held up one hand. “Where’s Der? And why did you replace her with that?” He shifted his orange eyes quickly to Mora and back to the knight.

“We rescued Morana from slavery near Malfax, and then Der was abducted, not by slavers, but by one stranger. We’re two days behind her last I knew. We’ve found some recent hoofprints leading this way.”

“Damn!” Thalon snapped his fingers. “All the prints we’ve seen were bears. Oh, Dad, we have to rescue Der!”

Thistle snorted. “Is it her own fault?”

The knight met his gaze evenly. “No, actually.”

Thalon bounced up. “Dad! You always blame—”

The chemman waved his son down with his hand. “I’m surprised her captor hasn’t given up on her yet.”

Jakkobb smiled a little. “That’s true, Der is one of the worst prisoners I have ever had.”

Thistle nodded his agreement.

“We’re pushing a hard pace to catch up, but I’m sure that won’t bother you.”

The chemman shook his head. "You should leave the girl behind though."

The knight sighed. "Kelin doesn't want that. Besides, she claims to know magic, and that could be useful."

"Have you seen anything useful?"

"No, but she's not in a state of mind to be wandering alone, especially now."

Thistle shrugged. "So be it."

Thalon flipped out one of his knives and pointed with it. "Let's talk to the spy now. Then we can go after Der."

"I suppose you're right, lad," Jakkobb said.

Thistle nodded. With a nonchalant flick of his wrist he pulled the blindfold from the spy's eyes to reveal a man no older than eighteen with curly blond hair and brown eyes. He kicked and lunged backward across the ground when he saw his captors for the first time. Thalon leaned forward and cut the gag from his mouth with one of his long knives. He didn't even scrape the spy's face.

"Oh ye gods above! It's true! Thealith is evil!"

Thistle's face twisted as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. Thalon put forth his most innocent childlike expression and scooted closer to the spy's round face. His orange eyes glowed. "Why's that?"

The spy rolled further away. "Chemmen!"

Jakkobb sighed. "He has nothing to do with Thealith, lad. Alright, we're just going to ask you a few questions so we can stay with current news around here. If you play fairly, we'll let you go no worse for wear, understand?"

The spy stopped thrashing, and paled as he stared at the mountain of plate mail. "Alright." He smacked his lips with his tongue.

"Good. We'll start with something easy. What's your name?"

The young man's eyes darted between the knight and the chemman. Then they dragged themselves down to the child, who was now juggling both of his long knives.

"Thalon, stop that," Jakkobb said, never looking away from the speechless spy. "Name?"

The spy twitched his head back and forth vehemently. Thalon glared stubbornly at the captain, threw his knife points into the soil and then crossed his arms.

The knight never glanced at the boy. He leaned toward Thistle. "If he doesn't even know *this*, I'm giving up on the younger races."

The young man yelped like a kicked dog. "If you know my name, you'll put a spell on me!"

"If you don't tell us I won't need a spell, a knife will do me just fine."

"Corran!" the spy squeaked.

The captain's face was as stern as an iron bar. "Well, that was more difficult than it should have been. What's your business here? I'm going to guess it's to gather information about what this kingdom is doing and how Urael should respond."

Corran nodded dumbly.

"What do you know about Thealith now?"

"That they're trying to make us give up our rightful land by the river!"

“Yes, but what do you know about, say, the army?”

“I will never tell you.” He looked directly at Jakkobb and added, “Sir.”

He allowed a grim smile. “You know, Thistle and Thalon here saved you from capture by Thealith’s troops, you might want to consider us to be on your side.”

Corran’s jaw dropped. “But he’s evil!”

“How do you know that?” The captain secretly winced at Thistle’s tornadic expression, which was rather lending to the young man’s point at the moment.

“Because he’s a chemman!”

Jakkobb closed his eyes. “As if that defines the way the world works. That was very stupid, lad, I suggest you wise up. What is Thealith doing?”

“Probably worshipping their dark gods, like Sennha and Catoliaya, even Mask!”

Jakkobb sighed again. “Indeed. Sennha seems to be abundant in this region, despite the fact that the king of Thealith routed them last winter.”

“And there’s evil creatures in these forests!”

The knight glared. “Who are just swimming across the river to bite the innocent, peace lovers in Urael. Tell me, did your kingdom believe these stupid stories before the river’s avulsion?”

Corran fidgeted against the ropes behind his back. “Yes, we did! I won’t say that every word of them is true, but they have to be grounded in truth!”

“Just like the chemman here is evil.”

“Exactly!”

“Well, you’re wrong about that too. Now, make it easy on yourself, and start answering the questions we ask about, oh, the army, or I let the boy there take over. What is Thealith’s army doing?”

Thalon piped up in elvish, “Dad and I already know that, actually. They’re marching down from Second Acron right now, three thousand strong. There will be more coming too. We captured him to find what Urael was doing.”

“Why didn’t you say so then?” Jakkobb sighed loudly.

“Tell us what Urael is planning,” Thistle ordered quietly in Common.

“I – I don’t know much, I mean my lord would be daft to send a spy with information across the river!”

“We know,” Jakkobb said shortly. “But he wouldn’t even send spies unless he was planning something; an invasion’s always a favorite.”

Corran’s shoulders dropped even farther.

“Ah.” The knight smiled mirthlessly. “Urael is planning an invasion after all.”

“What!” the spy jerked backward. “How did you know?”

Jakkobb raised an eyebrow and shook his head.

Corran grabbed two handfuls of dirt behind his back and squeezed them so tightly that the dry grains erupted between his fingers. “Yes! We’re defending our kingdom’s border!”

“Right, by invading first.”

“We can’t let Thealith into our lands!” He dropped the rest of the dirt back to the ground.

“The king’s wizard chose me personally to gather information here! On this very foreign soil!”

“Which I bet is the same color as the dirt in Urael.” The captain pressed a hand against his helmet. “Wonderful, now there are wizards involved too. Just wonderful.” He looked up to Thistle. “That’s all we need to know.” He looked intently back at Corran. “I’m sure you haven’t lied to us. We wouldn’t appreciate that.”

The young man paled a little more. “No, sir!”

“Humans seem to be getting younger and younger. Are you even old enough to shave?”

“I’ve been shaving for years!”

“Huh. Have you ever been in combat before?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Not enough. I can see that. Look, lad, you’re being a fool, going to war over a few miles of land. Ask yourself is it worth all the people who are about to die? Including yourself, possibly.”

The spy’s jaw hung loose. “I’m just following orders, sir.”

“Yes, and good for you, but your king is still being a fool – as is the king of Thealith.”

“But, if we do nothing, they’ll claim our rightful lands! The river is just the start!”

Jakkobb sighed again, deliberately. He glanced up to see Kelin and Mora returning. Thistle kept his eyes trained on the spy. He said, “I don’t need him anymore.”

Jakkobb grinned sickly. “You got lucky we showed up. Get out of here and go home.” He nodded to Thalon, who crept around and cut the spy’s ropes with a spin of his long knife. Corran erupted vertically and sprinted until he was far out of sight.

Kelin shook his head slowly. “He’s probably going to follow his orders first, sir.”

Jakkobb sighed. “I know, but we’re not involved in this.”

He sucked on his tongue. “Der would’ve been in this war too, she would’ve joined the king’s army if we weren’t captured by the chemmen.”

“Somehow, I don’t believe that could have happened.”

“But she would have! If it weren’t for... Oh.”

“That’s fate, lad. And this isn’t a war yet.”

“Shouldn’t we do something?” Mora asked.

“Absolutely.” Jakkobb nodded. “Morana, summon us a magical army out of the river that doesn’t allow anyone across either way.”

“I– I can’t do that! That’s impossible!” She twisted her fingers together. “You’re a dragoon knight, you could call a real army.”

Jakkobb paused. “You don’t know much about the dragoon orders, do you? We do not fight in political wars like these. That’s taking sides. The rest of the armies of the world would rally against us if we did that.”

“But people are going to die!” Kelin protested.

“War does that,” the knight answered.

“This is our kingdom, sir.”

“I am not repeating this again: we are not getting involved. We’re supposed to be finding Der.”

“I know,” Kelin said. “But–”

“Kelin!” Jakkobb snapped.

He ducked his head. “Yes, sir.”

“What will happen when there is a war?” Thalon asked. “Will it be like last time?”

Thistle shook his head.

Jakkobb snorted. “No, this appears to be over a strip of water.”

“Who would win?” Mora asked.

The captain shrugged. “Hard to predict, that. Neither side seems to have the upper hand – which means this war could go on for years. One kingdom’s territory will be increased, and there will definitely be a new border established. What more the victor will do to the loser, if there is a clear victor, I don’t know.” His fist bounced on his leg. “Drawing boundaries at rivers is stupid, and yet mortals always do it. They know rivers meander, that’s the way things are, but humans never plan ahead!”

“They’re awfully willing to fight each other,” Thalon offered.

“Neither side wants to compromise,” Kelin admitted. “I think there’s a lot of political pride mixed in this too.” He closed his eyes and hummed a little tune to himself. “I’m trying to remember. I know this won’t be the first war these kingdoms have fought, but it’s been generations since the last one. I think my great-grandparents’ times.”

“Do you know what sparked that?” Jakkobb asked dryly.

Kelin shrugged. “Um, I don’t know. But the two kingdoms are natural enemies, just look at their locations. They’ve always been in competition over that blasted river. In fact, I think the river was mentioned in the last war. I’m not sure whether it was the cause or not, but it certainly was involved.”

“How do they fare toward each other?” the knight persisted. “When they’re not fighting.”

“They trade some, but I think one has to pay almost the goods’ weight in gold to be allowed to take it across the river.”

“Why can’t they talk it over?” the boy asked. “When we were fighting the chemmen, I know we didn’t have a choice, but this isn’t the same, is it?”

Jakkobb spat on the ground. “Thalon, the war with the chemmen was about hatred and ancient vengeance and trying to kill a race for just being themselves. This is just a feud over a few square miles of land.”

“Aren’t wars usually about that?” Mora looked expectantly at Kelin.

Jakkobb snorted. “More often than not.”

Kelin shook his head. “The last war we were in had a legitimate purpose. The chemmen wanted to kill all the elves.”

“Then why were *you* fighting it?” The young woman’s eyes narrowed.

“I was traveling with Der. That’s explanation enough.”

Jakkobb half smiled. “True enough, but, Morana, the river isn’t worth the price that it’s going to cost.”

Kelin patted her arm. “War isn’t as glorified as it is in song, especially not something like this. Don’t worry, we’ll protect you – from the war and from the cultists.”

“We warned them. But it doesn’t matter,” the knight said with iron earnest. “Because we’re not getting involved. We’re finding Der.”

## Chapter Ten

### Honor Bound

Der sawed her pink and throbbing wrists against the saddle horn. Tom had tied her to the saddle that morning and then her sword very securely in the blanket behind the cantle. At least it was on the saddle, and not in the forest where he threatened to leave it. She spent most of the day struggling against his knots to no avail. She even tried chewing on the rope, and that proved even less effective than rubbing it against the leather.

Tom pushed back his hood in the expanding darkness. He pulled his gloves off with a loud leather snap. "Oh, stop it. I've been listening to you all day."

"You're very irritable during the day."

"You noticed." He carefully folded his gloves into his belt. "We'll keep going awhile yet. After this, we'll travel at night and sleep during the day."

"Why? Oh, you don't have to keep your charade anymore."

"Yes, and you'll be sleepy and won't annoy me as much. Also, I can move us faster during the night. We'll camp late tonight and sleep in tomorrow, and then just keep going throughout tomorrow night. You can sleep on the horse if you want."

"We're increasing our pace too."

"We've already wasted too much time talking." He glanced back and half smiled. "Arguing, at least."

It wasn't until midnight they finally settled to make camp. Soon, the campfire was bright and the food smelled delicious. She noticed he only prepared enough food for her this time. He'd done everything so amazingly quickly: the fire, the food, tending to the horse. Of course, he also seemed to be hovering over her shoulder, just in case...

He pulled the hare off the spit. "Here. There's some peas and carrots too." He gestured to the cast iron pot.

She accepted the meat. "Thanks."

He narrowed his eyes at her. He looked particularly dangerous with his head bent low and his brilliant eyes lifted up toward her. She watched as his eyes swirled and the bright, blood red clashed against the verdant brilliance. Quickly, the red overtook it.

She bit into her meat. "Why do your eyes do that? Does it have to do with heat vision? I remember the elves talking about that once last winter, that they can see images in heat instead of light if they want to. And dwarves, too. I don't really understand it."

"Part of it." His voice was distant and chilled, and his misshapen smile widened. His eyes glowed the color of blood. "But not the important part."

She nodded and continued to chew her meal thoroughly. "What about things like holy symbols? Do those work?" She licked her fingers and reached for the chain around her neck.

"Yes." His shoulders visibly sank and he growled beneath a louder sigh. He blinked his eyes back to green. "Don't pull that out. I already saw it at the tavern."

"The Dawn Sword," she said wistfully.

“It’s powerful too, but what else can one expect from an elvish crafted medallion?”

“Why does it work?” She tore off another piece of meat.

He pointed to where the medallion lay beneath her shirt. “Holy.” He pointed to himself.

“Unholy.”

“Right, then, how does it work?”

“No.” He took a sip from the flask tied to his belt.

“Come on.”

He sat back and sighed. “Alright, if you’ll shut up, I’ll tell you.” He pushed a hand through his hair, and it immediately fell perfectly back into place. “I can’t believe I’m actually going to explain this. It’s like getting too close to a bonfire. You step a little too far forward and the intensity becomes unbearable, you have to either back up or burn up. I hate the times when people suddenly pull them into sight.” He glared at her again.

She shrugged. “I didn’t know at the tavern. So, it has to be in sight then.”

He shook his head. “Look, I shouldn’t even tell you these things if you don’t know them.”

“But I already know holy medallions work against you.”

He waved his hand as if shooing an errant fly. “Actually, most of them don’t, especially human crafted ones – unless they’ve been properly made and blessed.”

“Why—”

“Stop asking so many damn questions! You’re supposed to *fear* me! You didn’t even notice that look I gave you a minute ago!”

“I did, and I am scared of you.”

Tom looked like he had run into a tree at full speed. “What?” He blinked. “You’ve fooled me. You see, when mortals fear, it makes them shut up and cower.”

“Look, I’m just trying to understand you.”

“Well, stop it!” He slapped his hands on his knees.

Bruised innocence spilled across her face, and he turned his shoulder to her. She finished her meal in silence while he sat on the other side of the fire breaking whatever was within his reach: rocks, sticks and even roots. After she finished, she threw the stick from the makeshift spit into the flames. With nothing to do, she drummed her fingers on her knees and finally began practicing parries and thrusts with her hand.

Tom gazed critically at her. “I saw you fight, and you were good. No one would believe that by the cute look about you that you have though, especially since there’s no way you could conceivably be that strong. However, if we’re unlucky – and I myself have come across a great sea of ill fortune—” he paused to glare at her, “We will encounter many worse things than a few cultists.” A slow smile carved its way across his perpetual scowl. “I think a sparring match is a wonderful idea.”

She frowned. “Every time someone says that to me I end up face first in the dirt.” She rubbed her face where Jakkobb’s axe had left its mark.

He dusted himself as he stood. “I won’t disappoint. Why else do you think I’m doing this? Because I want you to be a better fighter? Gods, no.”

She took her time in getting to her feet. “I mentioned it before when I told you about Gladioli



Fields, I've fought undead before. The chemmen used undead in an ambush in the Riverfall Mountains."

He chuckled to himself. "Good for you. I'm much worse." He opened his hand to the empty darkness beyond. "Let's go."

Der hesitated. "I'm a swordfighter, and you won't let me use my sword."

"You're right. Now, come on."

"What am I to do then?"

He grinned openly and grabbed her arm. "Time you learned not to depend on weapons. They are so easily lost anyway."

Der cursed as she limped away from the campfire. Her eyes expanded as they adjusted to the darkness, but it was too dark in the thick forest for them to be useful.

Tom grinned when he turned to face her, and she dropped into a fighting stance. She felt absolutely naked without a sword. No, worse than naked, she was unarmed! She felt panic begin to rise in the back of her throat.

Suddenly, he was gone. She hopped backward in reflex, despite that he could be anywhere.

The blow that felt like it ripped off her shoulder was too fast for her to even see. She tumbled to the side, but managed to lift her foot in a kick that only connected with air. Then he struck her from the exact opposite direction. Her body didn't even register his hands on her until it was far too late, and his strength felt like the full force of a flood. She crashed down, finally gasping. There had been a long moment where she hadn't been able to draw even the smallest breath.

A disembodied snicker fell over her. "You're hopeless."

She pushed herself up away from the grass. "This is teaching me nothing."

"I know," the bodiless voice derided. "But it is fun."

She didn't pay the voice heed and closed her eyes. She spun on her heel, and saw only a brief blur and felt as if she'd been hit by Jakkobb's axe. She flew through the air before colliding with the ground.

"Did you know where I was or were you just lucky?" He appeared out of the darkness and walked casually up to her. "Now you know how helpless you are against me."

She rocked herself back to her feet. This time, he let her face him while he fought almost negligently. She worked harder than she ever had before to land one punch. It had never been a challenge before. Sweat drained off her face as she threw every move against him, but she could do nothing against him. He landed a hard fist underneath her ribs. She never saw it coming.

Der doubled up and staggered back, but kept her fists raised.

"I pulled that punch." He circled around her. "I can rip through your body like wet paper, you know."

She was panting too hard to reply and waited for him to start the combat again. They quickly settled into a pattern where she struck with all her force and skill, and he lazily countered. After a moment, he yawned widely. She tried to kick out his knee. Her foot connected with nothing. She couldn't pull it back. She chanced a glance downward.

Her foot was neatly trapped between his legs. He dropped her to the ground by rolling his knee over her ankle. She didn't even understand how he did it. Hot pain exploded throughout the joint.

She coughed into the dirt and heaved herself up again.

His face glowed with sinister amusement. "You're weak and you're slow, but I'll admit you surprised me that you aren't dependent on light."

"I learned more than one thing in Darkreign. There's no color there, you know. Darkness and shadows are black."

"I don't care, Derora."

She sucked in her breath. "I'm better than this though."

He folded his arms and the smirk spread. "No, you're not."

She gasped until her breath slowed, and pulled her shoulders back. "Let me use the sword and I'll show you how good I can be."

He just raised an eyebrow.

"Look, I've seen I won't be able to kill you even if I tried."

He shook his head. "I'll give you a stick."

"Wood can hurt you."

"I'd rather the stick, than, oh let's say, a sword from the holy empire that shouldn't even exist." He kicked toward her a stick approximately the length of her sword. "Besides, you're right, you can't hit me."

She broke off the extra arms on the branch and waved it back and forth. She carefully shifted her weight onto her good leg. "Alright."

Tom stayed in sight as she crossed her stick against his fists. Der's pretend weapon expertly thrust and cut only air. He laughed softly to himself as she punched and kicked.

The stick never made contact, and he never truly hit her. She couldn't recall ever having to defend all sides of her body, especially against a single opponent. She even parried over her shoulder to block an attack from behind, and once over her head.

He vanished again. She instantly slammed her eyes closed. She let her mind unroll to the forest like the elves had taught her.

His motion again was too fast for her to see, but it suddenly halted as fast as he was moving. Tom jumped backward into the air and hung there, several feet off the ground. Slowly, he pressed a hand to his cheek and smeared the blood from the narrow cut. He stared. "How did you do that?"

Der's eyes widened. "You can fly."

The cut was already closing. He licked the blood off his fingers. "How did you hit me, Derora?"

She kept staring. "You can fly!"

"Answer my question!" he thundered and squeezed his fists.

"Oh. Simple, honestly. I had to be where you weren't expecting me and let you run into my blade – stick." She offered a quick smile. "I know I can't force or coerce you into doing what I want, so I let you move and do all the work and I just had my stick there at the right moment."

“So you just stood there and I ran into it?” He sank back to earth slowly and ran a hand over his mouth. “I was just outsmarted by an infant. I don’t believe it.” The cut had fully healed. “I mean – *me!* And *you!* You’re just a child!”

“You’re an arrogant fighter; I just used that against you. It was the only thing I could do.”

“You weren’t supposed to be able to do anything!”

“That’s not going to stop me.” She lowered herself to the ground and stretched out. “Oh, my back hurts. And my leg, and—”

“Oh no you don’t! Get up!” He reached down and hauled to her feet. Her face visibly twisted in pain. He said, “You know, this means I am *never* going to let you have that sword while I’m around, not with that trick.”

She pressed a hand to her chest and fought a surge of nausea. “Yes, but you’re not the kind to fall for the same trick twice.”

“And you’re the kind to notice that and think ahead.”

She coughed. “And you are too suspicious.”

“Am I? I’m not the one with all the surprises.” He tossed her away from him.

“I didn’t know you were a vampire! That was a surprise.”

He stamped both his feet against the ground in a small hop and pointed at her nose. “You weren’t *ever* supposed to know that! But up to now, you’ve managed to cut my face, break my nose and you have a holy sword from the paladin empire!”

“I was wrong, you’re not suspicious enough. You should’ve known more about me before you abducted me in the first place!”

“I didn’t have the time!” He rubbed his hand over his smooth cheek again. “I still can’t believe it.” He spun on his heel.

She jogged to catch up, pressing a hand against her throbbing back. “Wait.”

“We don’t have the time to wait, actually,” he snapped. The fire was embers when they returned. Der fell to her knees and remained there. Tom silently sat on his side of the camp, and stared darkly into the smoldering remnants.

Der lay on her back and ignored her pain as best she could. She knew she dozed for a while – it felt as if she’d only blinked – but the fire had almost completely died when she reopened her eyes. Tom was playing his flute again, and by the tone of the music, was in a slightly better mood. The song was one she could only imagine hearing at a funeral. It was just a little out of tune, at least to everyone else’s ears but his, she mused.

Finally, he pulled the instrument away from his lips and pocketed it. He looked over at her but said nothing.

She poked the ground with a twig, and her eyes followed a small trail of ants back to their high mound several feet outside the ring of firelight. “Hm, the anthills are high; it’s going to rain soon.”

Tom glanced where the ants were heightening their little dome to trap the water. “Oh? You know something about nature.”

“You can’t live with the elves for even a month and not learn something about nature – if you can figure out the riddles and general vagueness. But I’ve known that trick since I was a

child.”

“You still *are* a child.”

She shrugged. “The elves not only taught me tricks about nature, but their philosophy about it as well, you know?”

“I do know, better than you.”

“They said that one of the significant fallacies of humans was to believe we fight or conquer nature in order to survive, when in reality, we require it.”

He looked at her through his scowl. “Don’t pretend to lecture me, Derora.”

“I was just saying my thoughts aloud.” She closed her eyes against the pain in her back. She threaded her fingers idly against the latchet of her boot. “Tom, I have to know, why me?”

“I have no reason to tell you.” He sighed. “Can’t we just go one night without conversation? Please?”

“I want to know.”

He threw up his hands. “Fine. I don’t care. I was haunting Ahtome’s chapel, and then you just happened into that tavern. I could tell – don’t ask how.”

“How?”

All motion evaporated from the vampire. After a moment, he sighed enormously. “Do you even listen? Or is that too much for your little mind? *Anyway*, you were good enough, and you at least carried a sword, because I know we’ll have to fight something when we get there. You weren’t my first choice, by far.”

“Alright.” She reached out and shifted the wood in the fire. “You didn’t answer me. I’m special and I know it. Especially if you could ‘just know’ with me.”

“You already know enough.”

“Tell me.”

“You wintered with the elves, they must’ve realized it too.”

“No. They said nothing.”

“They wouldn’t. They would say you need to learn for yourself.”

She tossed a rock into the fire. “No, they didn’t say anything.”

“They didn’t tell you about the sword either.” He smiled to himself.

She shrugged. “No, I asked them about it, but they said they didn’t know anything about it.”

“Perhaps. Or they just lied to you because you wouldn’t be able to understand it.” He smiled slowly. “I bet you want to know, too.”

She fired a barbed glare at him. “Yes.” She turned her face away. “The elves are wise though, and I would be wise too to listen to them. Well, most of the time they are. Sometimes, they’re just cows.”

“That’s the smartest thing I’ve heard you say – you’re not going to listen to yourself, but to people that actually know things about the world.”

“Shut up. You’re just trying to bait me into an argument that you’ll win.” Immediately, she slapped a hand over her mouth and stared up at the stars. She pulled her hand away after a long moment. “Did I just say that?”

His emerald eyes blinked. “I’m relieved that I’m not the only one surprised by that.”

“But I don’t say things like that, I just pick the fight.” She half smiled. “I remember traveling with my friend Ed – Kaleb – who turned out to be an elf in disguise. He was the one who told me to stop picking fights, later on.”

Tom said nothing and just looked at her.

Der shrugged. “This is the second time I’ve traveled with someone who disguised himself because he had secret plans and wouldn’t tell me what those were.”

The vampire scowled and looked away.

“Only I wasn’t a captive last time, well, not at first. That’s how I got involved in the elf-chemmen war.”

He stretched his shoulders. “You shouldn’t stay with the elves so much, but with mortals like yourself. You see, to the elves, you’re like befriending someone with a dying disease, in this case, age. They’re just being nice to you because you’re young and you’re going to die soon. Stay with your own kind.”

“Why tell me this?”

“I’m not your friend.”

“I know that.”

“Good, because I thought I saw you faltering for a moment there. You don’t share your stories with someone who isn’t your friend.” He shook his head. “I don’t understand you. Why aren’t you afraid of me like you should be?” Both eyebrows lifted.

Der shrugged again. “I don’t know. I hate you.”

He snorted. “Do you even know what hate is?”

She closed her eyes against the sharp memories of the war that constantly simmered in the back of her mind. “Yes, I do. And now, I’m learning what it’s like to hate an individual person.”

He grinned openly, fangs and all.

“However.” His amusement evaporated from his face as she spoke. “There was a lesson I learned during the war, that evil and good is an individual choice for everyone because all individuals have free will... and it took a lot of thinking in the past few days, but I think you do too.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You aren’t that smart. I drink blood, you idiot.”

“But I don’t trust you.”

“I’m relieved to hear you say that.”

“Then I realized that I honestly don’t care what you are.” She leaned back and watched his face which remained as blank as the ocean from horizon to horizon.

He shook his head evenly. “I don’t believe you.”

She leaned forward. “I have a friend named Thistle, who is even a bigger secret than you are.”

He barked a laugh. “You are a pathetic liar.”

“I’m not lying, Tom.” She looked out into the dark forest. “Thistle’s a chemman.”

The vampire blinked and then laughed louder.

Der muttered something beneath her breath.

He paused. “I don’t know that language, and I’ve heard all of the languages on this

continent. What did you say?"

She chewed her lip. "Um, a very bad curse."

"Learned that off your friend, did you?"

"No, I actually got that one from his son."

He shrugged indifferently. "So, you speak a few words of chemmen, I can insult you in more than thirteen languages."

Der disguised a grin behind her hand. "Well, I only need one."

His mouth fell open. "You little runt!"

She bowed in her seat.

"No matter." He brushed his sleeve. "You mentioned the chemmen again. I have an inquiry. The other night when you stupidly broke your hand, why did you nearly start crying when I mentioned acid? It's something to do with them, I assume."

She suddenly swallowed, and looked away. "You want to know? I was tortured by the chemmen. The first thing they did to me was make me drink acid and then they poured it into my wounds." Her body shuddered at the physical memory. "I didn't even know what acid was at the time."

"Look at me."

Slowly, she raised her face. Tears lined the corners of her eyes.

He tilted his head to the side. "You're not lying."

"Which is why your acid joke wasn't funny!" She wiped her face.

"Well, I didn't make it to you."

"That's it, Tom! You don't share your amusement!"

"I have no one to share it with. No one else is important to me. Don't you comprehend that?"

Der frowned. "You're lying again."

He chuckled underneath his breath. "No, not this time. You're a fool if you think I am."

"What about Chloe?"

He stopped laughing.

She leaned forward. "You must care about her, or you wouldn't be doing this."

He pointed. "I'm warning you. Don't talk about this. If you do, I will make you regret it severely – in ways blissfully unknown to you at this moment and much worse than acid, I promise."

"Why does this girl mean so much to you?"

She never saw him move, but suddenly he was above her and an iron hand pressed her throat into the ground. Her eyes watered and he wasn't allowing her any air. She tried to kick, but her feet never connected. She stared helplessly up at him and saw his burning red eyes.

"I warned you!" he hissed through his fangs.

She tried to shake her head.

He retracted his hand with a jerk, and she gasped for breath. Rolling into a sitting position, she coughed. "But you—"

He raised his fist.

She swallowed her breath. "You obviously care about this girl. I don't think you are evil."

“Don’t judge me.” He lowered his hand unhurriedly.

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

She coughed again. “No. I’m just figuring you out.”

His expression froze her spine. It was even colder than those chemmen surgeons who tortured her. “I’m complicated.” He patted the top of her head like a dog and smiled tightly. “If you open your mouth again and words come out, I’ll bite off one of your ears. This is not a bluff.”

She shook her head. “No. Tell me about her.”

He jerked toward her, and in the next instant, she felt her head wrenched to the side. “What is wrong with you?!”

“Tell me about her and I’ll help you!”

She felt his teeth against her ear. “You’ll help me anyway.”

“I’ll promise to help you willingly!”

He twisted her head around and laughed scornfully in her face. “A promise to a dead man? How much is that worth, to either of us?”

Der looked him in the brilliantly green eyes. “I’ll give you my word. If you make a promise to me in return.”

“Ah, of course you wouldn’t be selfless.”

She tried to shake her head, but his grip held firm.

He snorted in her face. “So what then? Perhaps I shall take your ear still.” He jerked her ear toward his mouth again.

“No! No! Tell me about her and I’ll promise! Please.”

Tom pushed her away, and pulled his silence about him like a dark cloak as he sat down beside her. His gaze settled into the campfire’s ashes, at the stars, at the moon.

He diverted his gaze back into the dead fire. “I was just passing through Urael’s capital, and in an alley, I heard a baby crying.” He shrugged. “No matter. However, when I tried to fly away, I immediately found out that I couldn’t. I walked toward the sound, and someone opened a window, and the stench of blood and death suddenly ruled the night.

“Here, I guess curiosity stole over me. I jumped and managed to pull myself up onto the stone ledge beneath the window where someone had tried to grow some sad roses. Holding myself by my fingertips, I saw some armored men, thugs the lot of them, removing a naked baby from the floorboards. She must have been hidden there, not very original, but I think the dead woman on the bed didn’t have much time left and she knew it.” He cupped his face in his hands. “The baby screamed all the louder. I don’t know why I did it, but I wanted to know why I couldn’t fly and this made as much sense as anything else.”

“Alright.” Der’s face bunched up in perplexity.

“Because it was strange that I couldn’t fly and this event was also strange. I’m suspicious, so understand I looked around to see if anyone was covertly hunting vampires. They use devices or magic to cancel our abilities, but it seemed that I was just an unfortunate passerby. So, I pulled myself through the window.”

“What about the baby?”

“She kept screaming, Der. What did you expect an infant to do? The guards, or whatever they might have been, were naturally surprised that someone climbed through the window, so surprised that I was able snatch the baby from the one’s hands.”

He almost laughed. “Here I was, without flight or an explanation as to why. I didn’t know if my celerity or strength were gone too. I wasn’t going to chance things.”

“So you were afraid?”

“Cautious!” he snapped. “It’s a word I don’t presume you know. Well, there I was, facing four armed men while holding a naked baby. I did what any rational person would.”

“You kicked them to death?”

He rolled his emerald eyes. “*Rational*. I jumped out the window.”

“How is that more rational?”

He half smiled. “I was so used to flight that it didn’t occur to me that I wouldn’t able to fly, despite the contrary evidence. Oh well. I managed to crash into the building on the other side of the alley, shielding the infant from the impact and clinging to the edge of the roof by one hand.

“I crested the roof, all the while I heard those thugs cursing and running through the house and down the stairs. I still took time to examine this infant. After all, I couldn’t name a damn single good reason why I’d done what I did. I held her up in the moonlight and she stopped crying and just stared at me with those huge brown eyes. I didn’t know why she was special, but at the moment, I let my sensibilities of what I used to be once upon a time overcome me and I promised myself to get this child somewhere safe.”

“Then what happened?”

“Oh, then she urinated on me. It ran down my hands and onto my shirt. Quite ruined the moment, as well as my shirt, but I’d already made my promise. It was also then that I tried – because it’s just second nature – to fly. And I did. I heard the hammering of armored footsteps heading toward the roof, but that suddenly didn’t matter because they would never find me. We rose into the low hanging clouds so that I could observe. Then, she started to cry again and I was without my ability.”

“Oh, no.” Der winced.

“Oh, yes. We fell right into the middle of the very startled guards. I landed on my back with the baby on my chest and we crashed straight through the roof.”

“And the guards came for you?”

“Of course. But I managed to limp downstairs and out the door with the baby before they could reach us. After that, they couldn’t find *me* in the night.”

“Alright, so each time she cried, you couldn’t fly.”

“Exactly. I figured that out after some more painful experimentations.”

Der cocked her head. “I thought it’d have only taken once.”

He shrugged. “Well, it’s not like I could die trying to figure it out.” He sighed. “I remember this as if it were yesterday evening.” He shook off whatever smile was growing. “To end this tale, I delivered her to an old childless widower on the other side of the Dismal Horvath. Hell, I



even built the cottage where they now live. I remember that first night when I gave her away, he asked me for her name.” He shrugged and his emerald eyes focused on seven years ago. “So I gave her one.”

“What happened next?”

“After that, I should have left the continent for at least a century. I think now that I certainly should not have named her, because then I started to worry about her. I went back to see her and how she was faring.” He almost smiled. “She has the brightest brown eyes.” He dropped his head. “I shouldn’t care, I truly shouldn’t. Old Erastus discovered what I was when her powers started to manifest and took us both by surprise.”

“She’s a mage?” Der frowned. “Wait, why didn’t you just do your little mind control trick on him like you tried on me?”

He glared. “I have a small amount of pity for the old man. He’s going to die as soon as I turn around. For your former question, no, Chloe is not a mage. At least, I don’t think so.” He sighed and pushed a few stray hairs from his eyes.

“What do you mean you don’t think she’s a mage?”

He snapped another glare toward her, but it lacked the virulence of previous ones. “That means that I don’t know, Derora.”

She held up her hands. “I got that. But she has this power though. What does it do?”

He took a long moment before he replied. “I’m not exactly certain. I have never heard of such a power existing in a person. She can—” He broke off and scowled. “She somehow just absorbs magic or any sort of power and can change it. I’m saying that she absorbs the energy and can do whatever she wants with it. It takes master magicians decades to even attempt it, and even then, they need spells. This is just something she does. She has no other magical ability. I haven’t had time to truly study her because she’s so young and recently she was somehow exposed to magic and she became ill.”

“Ill?”

“She’s dying, Der. I think that she absorbed raw power and she doesn’t know how to release it. So, it’s killing her. There’s too much power, and well, think of it like an arrowhead buried deep inside someone’s body, and you can’t get it out. Imagine what that would do to a body.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He nodded. “When she was still able to, she told me of a dream that she’d had. A great storm closed in from all directions, and lightning struck her. She said that it didn’t hurt, and while she stood there the bolt just froze around her, and then it just sucked in through her skin. She awoke with a fever, and she’s been getting closer to death every night.” He held up his pale hands. “That’s all I know.”

Der knotted her fingers together. “How can this be healed?”

“I know how.”

“So, how?”

He shook his head again and continued staring into the forest. “I don’t have the time; which is something I don’t often say. I have eternity, but now Thealith and Urael are being fools over a bloody river. This forces me to rush to get Chloe out of the area, and I can’t move her until

she's healed."

"What?"

"Thealith and Urael will go to war soon."

"What! Are you certain?" Her jaw fell open. "I haven't heard of this."

He laughed shortly. "Yes, the fools. I'd be amused if my ward were not in peril."

"Why would you be amused?" She narrowed her eyes. "You know how glorious war isn't."

"I do." He held up a hand. "Because they're such fools. Der, I lost hope in humanity long ago, but I kept my sense of humor about it." His features sobered. "This cursed thing is inevitable, and this blasted war will roll over her. I'm racing against her sickness and the war."

"It isn't so funny for you now, is it? Not when your bacon's in the fire."

He snapped his fingers and pointed at her. "Stop."

"I am sorry though. For her, and you."

His nostrils flared and he stared directly at her. "I neither need nor want your pity. I just need you."

"Why?"

He shook his head. "No. Perhaps when the time comes."

She stared at him for a long moment before glancing up at the lightening sky. The sun would come peeking soon. "I keep my word. I'll promise to help you, if you promise me what I ask."

He lifted an eyebrow, already squinting at the growing dawn. "Oh, indeed? I'll let you name all the terms!" He pulled out his gloves.

She freed the Dawn Sword from her shirt. Tom grunted but didn't turn away. Der held it out toward him. "Swear on this to Carenth." She watched his eyes flare red for a second. "Swear to Carenth that Chloe exists and you're doing this to save her life. Promise not to hurt or kill me."

"And I get what in return?" His question hung damply in the air like fog.

"My promise."

He studied her face for a long moment.

Slowly, he closed his fist over the elvish medallion. She instantly inhaled burning flesh. He stared at her and she couldn't read the dark look in his eyes. "I swear to *your* god, Carenth, that Chloe exists and she is dying and I can save her. This is my quest. I promise not to harm you or kill you for the duration, and after she is healed, I will take you home."

"Malfax," she said. "I don't want you to know my home."

"I will deliver you safely to Malfax." He dropped the sacred pendant. He turned his palm over and his skin was fried in a large circle. As they watched, the torn flaps of skin crumbled into ash and new skin began to form.

"I'm going to miss my interview with the knight-commander, but that can't be helped now." Der retrieved her necklace; it was hot to the touch. She gripped it in her own fist so hard the tiny blade point pinched into her skin. "I, too, swear to Carenth Almighty, I will act neither to harm nor kill you. I will aid you in your quest of my own volition to save this child."

Tom gripped her wrist and smiled as widely as a vampire can. "Now, you are mine."

## Chapter Eleven

### The Promise Demands

Tom was out there somewhere. Der looked out across the moonlight forest. Over the past few nights, he vanished into the darkness for most of the evening, out hunting, but was always back before dawn. He was used to solitude, he had said, he liked it and he didn't like her. She had smiled at that.

She bit into her dry bread, chewing through another meal in the saddle as the horse plodded on beneath her. She glanced over her shoulder again; she had access to her sword, but she had decided against carrying it. Still, she found herself constantly considering it. He was not around to stop her, but... She just wasn't sure.

The small game that he returned with tasted quite dry, and she had stopped herself from asking several times. He was a reliable hunter though, and always came back with something. Der swallowed the last of her food. She glanced upward to the plenilune. Its light was icy tonight. It was also the same electric blue as lightning.

Her ears itched. She cleared her mind and listened. There was something in the forest. Nothing she could see, hear, or smell, but she knew. Her back stiffened, something was wrong. It wasn't Tom. Her hand reached for the Pallens sword.

Tom smelled blood. He could recognize it through water. Bears grumbled behind him as he moved through the forest. Their growls didn't sound right, but everything was always a little off in a sense of awareness as heightened as when he smelled *that* scent. He easily covered a quarter of a mile faster than any mortal could, but he knew he was too late. Blood had already been freed from its vessel.

The horse was dead. Tom circled the corpse before he approached. Its body was still warm, saddled and bridled. Bitter curses slipped out from behind his teeth. That blasted sword was missing too, but nothing was strewn across the ground, except a copious blood pool. He could smell out individual blood scents, and this was all the horse. A small sigh of relief escaped his lips before he caught it.

He pulled a flask off the back of his belt. The steel tin was always biting cold to the touch due to a very simple enchantment. He set it to catch the blood still dripping under the mare's wound. He put his hand on top of the horse and pressed down. It was too much to waste.

He frowned. The cut across her throat was thin and accurate, a level of precision most humans never achieved. A major artery had been punctured perfectly with only a whisper of broken skin. He searched the saddle. The saddlebags were neatly looted, and only a few items were missing.

He sniffed. Another person had definitely been here. His upper lip curled. This visitor wasn't human, but he didn't know what it was. He sniffed again. This stranger and Der had gone off this way, with Der following. He closed his eyes. He never imagined the night he would be relieved she was still alive.

He sped along after them. Their trail was so fragile sometimes he could only go by scent alone. An expert at stealth, he noted. Who was this stranger? Whoever he was, Tom silently promised, as his hands curled into fists, he would rue his encounter with this vampire.

Thalon tried to tackle Der when she followed Thistle back into camp. She dropped to her knees and hugged him. "Now let me up, I want to warm up by the fire." He didn't release her leg and she dragged him all the way to the campfire. He banged his head against her sword's sheath, which was comfortably around her waist again. She patted his head. "You look older."

"I am! And Dad got me new knives!" He released his grip and whipped them out of their sheaths, nearly cutting her knee.

She laughed and sat down. "Aye, I see it."

He crawled into her lap. "I missed you!"

She hugged him again, knives and all. "I know, me too."

Jakkobb smiled tightly. He towered over her, loomed even. "You look well – for being kidnapped."

She nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm well." She looked around. "Kelin! Oh, and– and, uh, Mora, right? Have you all been following me this whole time?"

The knight nodded. "What did you expect? Oh, and your sword looks like its normal glory, what happened to the spell?"

She patted the weapon's hilt. "The spell just sort of broke, sir."

He raised both his eyebrows. "I'll save that scolding for later, and your ears will burn off from it. Now, where is he?"

She glanced back at the forest. "I don't know. He was out hunting when Thistle showed."

Kelin pointed. "Wait. He had gone off by himself and you didn't run away? When you had a horse?"

"She was a prisoner, and I've seen the things that those bastards do to their captives," Mora said. "She wouldn't dare–"

"You don't know Der," Kelin replied. "Her name is said 'dare' for that very reason."

"I remember you as a prisoner," Thistle inserted softly. "You didn't break when you should have." He looked directly at her.

"The chemmen?" Der shook her head. "What else was I supposed to do?"

"Right," Kelin snapped. "Why didn't you run when you had the chance? That's not like you."

She dropped her eyes. "I agreed to help him."

"What?" Jakkobb snapped to attention.

"Then why did you go with Thistle?" Mora asked.

She cast a meaningful look at the chemman. "I tried to explain, but I'm sure you know by now how he doesn't like extra talk. So he killed the horse to prove his point, and thus I went with him."

Thistle shook his head. "The horse panicked and attacked me." He thrust out his arm to show a blood-ringed hole in the sleeve.

"It wouldn't have done that if you hadn't of sneaked up like you always do!"

He raised both his eyebrows. "I wasn't sure if you'd been bewitched or not. Jakkobb mentioned that the target had some magical ability. I watched the camp, you were alone and you weren't trying to escape. I didn't know that you'd made a deal with the devil."

The knight frowned. "Why did you agree to help him, Der? What could have convinced you? Did he magic you?"

"No! I agreed because he needs it. Look, I didn't agree until after I came to know him, a little. He's got a good reason. And no, no magic."

"There's something very wrong about that man, and you know that." His eyes slid toward the depthless darkness of the forest.

"I know, I know. But he's not evil, kind of like Thistle isn't."

Jakkobb raised both of his eyebrows exactly like her dad did at home before she found herself drowning in trouble.

She ducked away from the expression and waved her arms over her head. "Can we talk about something else instead? I don't want to defend him. Uh, so, Mora, I've been thinking that perhaps we started sour with the theft and all and—"

"Der!" The knight's voice cracked like a whip. He shook his head. "Break camp, we're leaving, *now*."

Der gripped her fists and squared her shoulders. "I can't go, sir. Not after I promised. Look, we could all—"

He glared at her with the anger of a thousand suns. "Der, what is he?"

A voice shot out of the darkness, "Very angry." The wind picked up, and Tom's dark form suddenly stood outside the ring of firelight. His jaw was set and his arms were crossed and not a muscle on him moved; he could have been a statue. His hair and clothes whipped sharply in the growing breeze. His eyes glowed with their unnatural emerald brilliance.

The group around the campfire jumped. Der felt her hand go to her hilt of its own will as she rose. "This isn't good." Behind her, Spike whinnied and bucked and charged forward, nostrils flaring and dinner plate hooves rearing.

Tom cocked his head to the side, eyes wandering around the campsite and locking on Thistle. "A true chemman."

"I told you!" Der pointed.

"Ah, that makes sense now. I didn't know what else had been there."

Der pointed. "Hey! You said you didn't think they existed."

"I lied." He looked at her through a veil of disgust.

Spike pawed the ground with his front hooves and whinnied again. He flashed his teeth viciously between Jakkobb and Tom. An 'O' formed on the captain's mouth. He drew his axe.

Tom glared coldly. "What's with the horse?" Then he shook his head. "That doesn't matter." He unfolded his arms and stepped forward. "I demand her, and a horse to replace the one you killed." His eyes dragged themselves back to Spike. "Not that one."

Jakkobb grabbed Der's shoulder while he pointed the axe at Tom. "That's not happening. Vampire." Kelin, Mora and Thalon gasped collectively. Thistle rose smoothly to his feet.

Thalon stabbed his finger toward Tom. "I knew you were wrong! You're a funny shade of

gray!" His storm-reader eyes picked up on the subtler shades of gray that human eyes could not distinguish.

Tom smiled widely, fangs gleaming in the full moonlight. "Yes, she is coming with me. You see, she promised me and therefore, she's mine."

Jakkobb squeezed her shoulder with his gauntlet covered, shovel sized hands. She yelped, "Ow! Ow! Look, we could all travel together!"

"No!" Tom and Jakkobb snapped.

The vampire sneered. "I know your do-gooder ilk; you're not to be trusted." He leveled a finger from the knight to Kelin.

"And me, Tom," Der stepped in line of his finger.

He blinked. "What?"

"You don't trust me either."

He snorted and stamped his foot against the ground. "Of course! That's so obvious I didn't think I'd have to say it."

"But, if you don't trust me, why do you expect me to keep my word?" Her brow furrowed intellectually.

He curled his lips back, revealing his shiny white fangs again. "Because you're a stupid, oath abiding little brat!"

"That means, in some fashion, you do trust me."

He choked the air in front of him with his hands. "No, it does *not!* Shut up! Just remember that you promised me!"

"Der!" the captain yelled. "Why the hell did you do that?"

She shrugged. "Well, sir, he promised not to hurt me in return."

Tom whispered, "I didn't promise anything about your friends."

She ripped the Pallens sword from its sheath. "You bastard!"

His wicked smile reflected in the moonlight and he bowed. "Remember, you can't hurt me."

Mora raised a finger to Der. The tattoos along her hands began to slither and move. "We've been out here chasing you all this time to rescue you! I mean, we thought, like me – you were..."

Her jaw dropped. "I...I..."

Kelin finally wrenched his gaze away from Tom. "Der, you always do this!"

"Don't put me on trial!" she hollered back.

Sparks crackled between Mora's fingers. "We're all going to de—"

"SHUT UP, THE LOT OF YOU!" Jakkobb ordered in his parade ground voice. "Thalon, stop trying to sneak around! Morana, stop casting that! Der, you are in more trouble than you ever have been before!"

She bit her lip. "Um, does this include the time we were in Zaz—"

"Yes!"

Tom, his gaze hammered only on Der, extended his hand. "You promised, and if you don't come with me *right now*, I shall consider your word broken and then I'm free to break mine."

She took a tiny half step forward.

“Derora!” Jakkobb shouted.

“I promised,” she said, “And he promised me my safety.”

“Der, he’s undead!”

“And Thistle’s a chemman.” She glanced over to where he had been standing quietly throughout the exchange. “We’ve been through this before.”

“I’m alive.” Thistle’s eyes never left the vampire. “Have you forgotten the undead cultists so soon?” His hands lay conspicuously empty at his sides.

She took another half step. “This is about saving a dying girl’s life, not about vampires.”

“Der, no! Don’t go!” Thalon drew his knives and hopped between her and Tom.

She shook her head at the boy, and glanced back to Jakkobb. “I don’t think I’m wrong, sir. He’s really doing this to—”

“Der, stop it,” Tom ordered softly. “I don’t need myself justified to them. Now, take my hand.”

Thalon lunged with his knives leading. Tom snatched Der’s arm and kicked the boy in the chest at the same time. The child flew screaming over the campfire. The vampire sprang into the air, and hauled Der along with him by her arm.

Der stared down at the rapidly shrinking camp beneath her. She heard Tom snort from behind her ear while locking his arms around her waist. “I’m amazed. You were actually going to come with me. You are stupid.”

“I promised.”

“You don’t always have to keep promises, you know.”

She sighed and shrugged. “And now my friends are upset at me, again. I hope Thalon’s going to be alright. You’ve made an enemy of his father.”

“That doesn’t bother me.”

“I know, but Thistle is not a man to cross.”

“Neither am I. We wasted too much time talking during the past few days and they must’ve pushed a hard pace.”

“Wait, you *knew* my friends were following me?”

It was Tom’s turn to shrug. “I didn’t verify it, but back in Malfax, the knight didn’t seem like the kind to leave his friends behind.”

“Aye, I knew it too. So, you’re not going to let me go back?”

“No. Now, we have to outdistance them again.”

Below, she could make out individual treetops below thanks to the bright moon. She squinted as she looked up at the silver glowing circle, even from here it didn’t look too much bigger. She relaxed and let her arms and legs hang loose in the wind, and started to laugh.

Tom squeezed. “This isn’t funny.”

“But it is!” He increased the pressure a little more.

“Aren’t you scared of *anything*?” He finally released his grip enough for her to breathe comfortably.

“I already told you that I’m scared of you.”

“No! I mean flying! I could drop you, and I’m tempted.”

“You won’t let me fall.” She tried to twist her head so she could see his face, but he turned it

away. She sighed, and then craned her neck further. "I don't believe it."

"You're not going to trick me. They're not following us because horses don't fly."

She narrowed her eyes and stared for a little longer. Finally, she said, "I bet you a gold mark then."

Tom whipped his head around and suddenly stopped, absently catching Der's body as she kept moving forward. He held her like a sack of flour, while he stood on the air as if it were made of stone. "Horses don't fly!" he yelled at large.

"Apparently, that one can," she said conversationally as she watched Spike and Jakkobb soaring over the night sky. Spike galloped over the air as if it were a racing track with his rider perched in his saddle. Electric fire surrounded his incredibly shiny silver hooves.

Der surreptitiously pressed a toe down onto the air, but encountered no secret solid surface.

Spike slowed to a trot and finally halted, standing on nothing but air. Jakkobb called out, "Alright, far enough."

She tilted her head to the side. "Sir, how is Spike able to do that? Amazing!"

"This isn't quite the best time, Der."

Spike raised his head. Twists of silver and golden lights appeared above his forelock. They spun around one another and coalesced. In a flash of starlight, they came together in a silver and gold alicorn.

Tom and Der both gasped. "That's not right!" She shook her head vehemently. "Unicorns are shy and petite and don't have a bastard's sense of humor!"

"The same thing is said about young ladies," Tom muttered.

Spike bowed his head low over his extended front hooves. His black hair shone exactly like the night sky with silver pinpricks of light swirled underneath his hair.

She chuckled. "Now it makes sense. Spike, when he very obviously had no spikes on him. Heh. That's rather clever."

"No, it's not!" Tom squeezed her again. "Gods above, you are far more trouble than you're worth!"

"Then let her go." Jakkobb's voice was calm. He shifted his weight in the saddle and glanced down. "Um. Give her up to us, I meant."

Tom lifted his lip like a growling dog. "I sincerely wish I could, but I don't have time to find another."

*Another what?* a voice echoed in their minds.

"Spike?" Der asked slowly. "You can talk? Sort of. Well, it suddenly makes sense why Jakkobb loses his arguments with his horse. We all thought he was just crazy."

"This isn't the time, Der," the knight intoned in a voice of steel.

Tom slid his hands around the girl's stomach. "This has been surprising to say the least, and surprises disgust me." He slowly slid away over the air without moving his feet.

*We both have passengers. Do you think you can outrun me?* The silver hooves sparkled with electricity.

He didn't answer. Instead, Tom and Der dropped as if through a trapdoor and then lunged forward. She felt her face stretching backward on itself as they flew. The night air grew a



thousand times colder, and she had troubles taking in any breath. Treetops and clearings passed below her almost too quickly for her to realize what they were. The only thing stable in the world at the moment was Tom's arms holding her aloft. The tendrils of doubt began to whisper that perhaps she shouldn't have antagonized him so much.

She glanced over to see Spike and Jakkobb galloping as hard as the unicorn could. His legs pumped like a machine beneath him as he ran. They were gaining.

Tom suddenly rolled onto his back and Der found herself staring up at the sky and Spike's massive, electrified hooves right over her. She jerked her arms over her face. Spike flew forward over them and Tom shot off in a different direction.

Der watched the world shift again as he rolled them back upright. Over to the suddenly distant side, Der saw Spike rear and spin on a single hoof, like the most graceful dancer, and the chase resumed. The warhorse's long strides ate up the distance between them.

The vampire abruptly stopped and stuck his foot out. Jakkobb crashed into it and the foot mashed him against the high cantle. Spike whinnied as the saddle's girth yanked at his skin. He ducked away and struggled to keep his rider on his back. Meanwhile, Tom and Der descended beneath the forest canopy, and started to wind their way through the maze of trees.

The vampire finally slowed, underneath the shadow of an ancient elm. He glared at the sky and shook his foot. "Ow. What is that man's armor made of? Argh, it's definitely broken." The bones cracked faintly as they realigned.

Der gasped for breath and couldn't respond.

He chuckled to himself. "Well, well, you have a vulnerability after all." He opened his arms and dropped her to the ground.

She coughed. "Moving too fast, couldn't breathe." She remembered how cold it was and started to shiver.

"At least now I know what to do with you."

Her teeth chattered together. "No, that was actually enjoyable – under better circumstances."

He shook his head. "You're insane, child."

"M-Merely cold, at this point."

"Well, we're not stopping." He again glared darkly up at the sky while they landed. "The unicorn will find us, it's only a matter of time." He grinned. "That means we'd better not be here to be found."

"I think I rather want to be found, actually."

The vampire started to walk ahead. He stopped, and turned. "You promised me."

"I know, but *they're* my friends." She pointed in the general direction.

"Then I pity them. Now, shut up and let's go."

"Where are we?" She bunched her arms across her chest against the chill.

Tom whirled on her and very slowly closed a fist. "I said shut up!"

"I heard you." She pushed passed him, and looked around. "Oh, we're back here." Their campsite looked exactly the same as when she and Thistle left, dead horse and all.

Tom shouldered his pack and picked up the steel flask from the ground. He glanced upward

to the sky again. "We'll have to fly to keep ahead of them now."

"You haven't tried flying up until now!"

"Because you weren't supposed to know, stupid! And that means traveling like a normal human."

"But I found out anyway!" She glanced over her shoulder. "I'm going to try to stall you know. I want them to catch up."

Briefly, he dipped his face into his hands. "Then don't tell me that! The art of subterfuge starts with a little subtlety. Please at least try it for once in your life!"

"But you'll figure it out anyway, so what's the point?"

His mouth hung open for a moment. He licked his lips. "Uh, false hope? Pretending that you're smarter than I am? Because that's the way things are supposed to work!"

She turned back to the dark forest with her hands on her hips. "I wasn't going to break my promise. I just hoped that we could all—"

The rumble and audible growls of angry predators split the air. Der flinched at the sudden sound. "Heh." She rubbed her forehead. "Sounds like those bears are going at it." She eyed the tree line, and rested her hand on her weapon.

Tom grabbed her around her waist as he started running.

"Hey!" She beat on his shoulder, looking to the sky. Had Spike and Jakkobb caught up with them already? She and the vampire hopped into the air as he twisted gracefully and glided with the breeze.

She wrapped her arms around the narrow trunk when she and Tom perched near the top of the oak tree. She looked down, she wouldn't be able to get her arms most of the way around the trunk at the base, but up here it was easy. "Why are we staying? Spike will find us."

"No, we're staying downwind, and not making any noise."

"Why—"

He slapped a hand against her mouth and sternly shook his head.

"Mmmf. Mm!" This time, she received most of his fist in her mouth.

She did the only sensible thing she could think of, and bit down as hard as she could.

He glared with all the fury of a hurricane. His eyes widened in amazement at the same time he tried to narrow them in pure anger. His whole face contorted.

With that small victory, she released her jaws and let her attention fall back to the dead horse.

From out of the long shadows of the night, they watched as five bears, running on all fours with the momentum of a rockslide, pounced on their camp. Their fur was black; their claws were easily as long or longer than Der's entire hand; and each one must have weighed four times her mass. They ripped into the horse's flesh as violently as the calvar beasts Der had seen a year ago.

When they had devoured only half of the dead animal, one of the bears reared up onto its hind legs and roared. The others joined the baritone, rumbling chorus. As a whole, the sloth of bears began to lumber off again, covering the ground with a loping run.

Der shivered when they were out of sight. "Those were the biggest black bears I've ever

seen. And I've never seen bears act like that before. They don't go for dead meat like that! And they don't just run off!"

She looked at Tom when he didn't answer. Silently, he pressed his finger to his lips and she followed his gaze upward to the full moon.

"Bears? Were-bears?!" She leaned her suddenly heavy and throbbing head against the tree trunk, and remembered what Kelin had said about the creatures taking many shapes. "But, here? In Thealith? Hey! They're following the path Thistle and I took!"

"Yes, they are, but our route is still going the opposite direction, so we should be fine."

"No! They're heading toward their camp!"

"I know."

"They are my friends, Tom!"

He chuckled in the back of his throat. "Not for too much longer."

Der tried to draw her sword, but he slammed his hand down on her wrist. He shoved his face into hers, his upper lip drawn back in a snarl. The moonlight reflected off his fangs. "You promised not to hurt me."

She gasped. "I— I wasn't, I have to— You're doing this to save Chloe! They mean as much to me!"

"They mean nothing to me." He squeezed her wrist sharply and let go.

She sagged against the tree. "How can you be so heartless?"

"Heartless! Ha!"

"Please, Tom!"

He looked up to the stars. "The unicorn will sense them and return to help. We can escape."

Der growled at him and jumped down to the next limb. She slipped against the bark. Tom caught her before she even had time to fall. She never even saw him move. He calmly shook his head. "No, I need you alive, if you please."

Desperation stormed in her eyes. "What would you do if they attacked Chloe's cottage? You'd fight. Tom, please, I'm the reason my friends are out here."

"No, they made the choice to follow you."

"Let me go to them!"

"You won't make it there in time."

"You can. Please!"

He closed his eyes. "No!"

"Please!"

"Alright!" He held up his hand. "Now, just shut the hell up." He leaned his dirty blond head against the trunk. "I have a silver knife and I'll wager your sword can kill them. A single were-animal's bite, like a vampire's, doesn't mean you'll become one — that has to be intentionally done. However, when they bite, unlike me, it's going to leave one hell of a laceration and you'll probably die from it. If you're wounded, I will take you out of the fight, your friends be damned."

"Thank you."

He held the small silver dagger to her nose. "Never thank me for anything."

Spike galloped to the ground with his horn still glowing. Jakkobb swung off the saddle, battleaxe in hand.

“By the Dawn Sword!” Kelin cried. “He’s a unicorn!”

“Yes,” the captain answered, dismounting. “That’s not the only surprise.”

“Where’s Der?” Thalon demanded.

*We don’t know*, the unicorn’s voice echoed in their minds.

“He can talk!” Kelin exclaimed.

“Of course. Now, Der will have to wait. There’s a sloth of five were-bears heading this way.” The knight pointed his axe to the forest. “They’re following the trail Thistle and Der took.”

“Were-bears!” Mora yelped. “I thought there were only werewolves!”

“No,” Thistle said softly.

Cold sweat prickled on Kelin’s forehead. “I guess that playing dead isn’t going to work with them?”

Jakkobb shook his head. “Only if you fancy a quicker death.”

“How about clapping your hands together and backing away slowly?”

“They aren’t bears, Kelin! They take the form of bears, but inside they’ve got their nasty human side. Real bears tend to avoid people! These creatures are choosing to hunt them!”

“Did Tom sic them on us?” Mora slid behind Kelin and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Those tracks!” Thalon piped up. “Dad and I have been seeing them around!” He looked up at his father, his face paling against the moonlight. “We’ll be alright, right?”

Jakkobb exhaled loudly. “We have seen the tracks too, near Hughling. There must be a sloth around here.”

Thistle pressed his hand down on Thalon’s head. “They’ve been pushing south from the Tollrian Shield for a long time now. Bad luck.”

“Bad luck?!” Kelin burst.

“Can we run?” Mora hitched up her robes and bit back a whimper. She stared into the forest, but it only offered darkness in return. She imagined gigantic paws barely whispering over the ground as the bears flew at their throats.

“We wouldn’t make it. Not with all of us.”

She stabbed her finger at the trees. “Spike can fly! We could hide in the trees!”

“Morana! Spike can’t fly this many people and black bears can climb trees! They’ll smell your scent running right to its base. Even in animal form, they’ll bring a burning branch from our fire – or make a fire of their own – and burn us out or alive. Our best chance is to fight. Now, do you know any attack or defense spells? And can you modify anything else you know?”

She gulped. “Um, um, I can try.”

“Good.” He did his best to smile. “I’m sure you can do this. We all have to pull our weight on this one.”

“Are we going to die?” Thalon reached up and grabbed the back of his father’s shirt.

Thistle sighed, and kept his hand on the boy’s head.

“We’ll fight like hell not to.” Jakkobb looked around to the rest of the party. He breathed in

and out sharply. "Alright. My axe's is magical, as are Thistle's sword and Spike's hooves."

"Why?" Mora inquired.

"Silver and magic can slay them. Mora, throw everything you can think of at them. Now, does anyone have any silver on them? No? Damn, too much to hope for anyway. Kelin, you'll just have to use your sword, but they'll heal and very rapidly."

Kelin lifted his sword. "Mine's magical, too. Gift from King Edillon."

"Right. I hope its enchantment is powerful enough to do some damage then. Now, Thalon and Mora, I want you two in the center and try to stay out of the combat. Kelin, scare our other two horses off – we'll find them later if we can. No, wait. Don't scare them until the bears get here, if they're frenzied maybe they'll go for the horses instead."

"Not the horses!" Mora protested. "They don't deserve that!"

"I like them too," Jakkobb snapped. "However, I'm trying to keep *us* alive, and the horses can outrun a bear. Probably. They'll be fine."

Thistle pointed to forest. Rustles emerged and everyone held their breath. Mora started to hum underneath her breath, and the tattoos began to slither across her hands. Kelin, licking his lips, drew his sword.

From out of the darkness Der ran forward, Pallens sword wildly mirroring the moonlight. Tom followed at a cautious distance.

"Der!" Thalon yelled. He waved with his long knives.

She grinned. "I talked him into it."

Jakkobb nodded. "Good to have you here. We'll kill each other later." He nodded to Tom.

"Yes, sir," she replied. Tom appeared not to have noticed.

"Spike, Thistle, Der, Tom, Kelin and myself – on the front. Thalon, Morana, behind us. We'll fold back into a circle because they'll surround us when they attack. Don't charge, let them come to us and use that against them."

They ran into their line as the distant growling broke the stillness of the night. Tom stepped in front of Der, and glared at her when she shifted to stand beside him. He pushed an arm in front of her.

"I don't need you to protect me." She waved the glorious Pallens sword at him.

He kept his verdant eyes trained forward. "You won't be saying that in half a minute."

A bellow from deep in the trees swept over them and it felt as if it shattered their eardrums. Sticks and bracken crackled and crunched, and the five creatures emerged, shedding darkness from their furs. The were-bears never even slowed when they saw the line of fighters. The massive black bears charged at them with the inevitability of a flood.

Their paws never seemed to make full contact with the ground. Tongues flapping in the air, they pulled their lips into a permanent snarl. Their teeth made Tom's look tame as they bared their many jagged points.

Der wished she had a shield. She fought every leg muscle she had to keep from running at them. She didn't have to fight herself for long. She stared at the bear, and realized how much of a predator it was. She'd only ever seen bears shuffling through the forest before, eating berries and playing with their cubs. She'd never seen one charging her with all its fangs

revealed, and several hundred pounds of weight underneath that dark fur. Its claws left grooves into the mud as it thundered toward her. It roared.

She braced herself behind her sword as the massive beast bounding straight at her leapt. She raised her sword, and tensed to jump to the side.

Then, Tom's pale hand flashed in her face, and shoved her backward out of the fight. The last thing she saw before she crashed against the ground was Tom reaching out and grabbing the bear on the shoulder and its jaws closing fast over his head.

Jakkobb smashed his axe into the chest of the bear charging him. The forces clashed with the energy of two suns colliding. The knight staggered under its weight and momentum, and the creature drove his heels into the dirt, but he stopped the were-bear in its tracks. Massive claws screeched hellishly against the metal of his arm, leaving grooves in the armor and tearing the red finish off.

Jakkobb roared and swung the axe again, slamming them against the ground with all his might. He smiled grimly as he felt the splintering of ribs through the metal of the battleaxe. The weapon didn't glow or do anything special, but it was enchanted. He yanked it back up and the nicks and burrs closed over as if the blade had never been used.

Beside him, Spike brought one crackling electric silver hoof down on its head. He whinnied cheerfully and jumped on the corpse again. One down.

On the other side of the circle, the chemman's sword was as silent as the grave. The midnight black weapon sang with no music of metal. Sound around the black blade ceased to exist in a small sphere of silence. Thalon, a step behind him, danced around and mimicked his father's moves.

Thistle thrust for the mouth of his attacker, striking home and ripping off one vividly sharp tooth. The bear screeched and backpedaled furiously. Its scream tore from its heart. The bear, its muscles and jaws heaving, put all of its might into that roar, and made absolutely no sound.

Then, the were-bear double fainted, dropped low and slashed Thistle's ankle with its claws. The chemman grimaced, and fell to one knee. The bear roared at him, face to face. Hot saliva sprayed his features.

But the were-bear had exposed his back. Thistle slipped the silent sword down like the hand of death. The bear screamed again in noiseless agony. It heaved the chemman off his feet. Thistle yanked the sword free while it thrashed and wailed, all silently.

Thalon dived between his father's legs and struck the bear's jaw with one of his long knives.

The were-bear wrenched and struggled against the impaling sword. Thistle shifted all his weight to his functioning ankle and glared down toward his son. Sound galloped back into the world again as the chemmen blade stopped moving.

Thalon pulled the knife back slowly. "Sorry." He slunk backward.

Thistle shook his head and turned his attention back to the were-bear. It was dead. If it stayed that way would be an inquiry for later.

Inside the circle of combatants, Mora's gritted her teeth against the sounds of chaos and combat, and did her best to just concentrate. Strands of red light swirled between her fingertips and they grew thickly into a tangled weave.

In front of her, Kelin tried every move that Thistle had drilled into his memory. He knew he

had improved so much since last year, and those slavers had been easy! But this was so different. He tried to stop thinking and remember those sword strokes that were so desperately keeping those massive paws away from him. He kept his one edged sword in front of him in the correct position to defend against low attacks. Blade low, but point raised. He jerked from one parry position to another against the fangs and claws.

He missed a parry. He hopped back and swept the sword wide to catch anything, but the bear pressed itself against the ground and the blade passed overhead. It struck at his unarmored leg.

Kelin yelped and crashed down to the earth. He found himself eye level with the were-bear, which snarled like a primeval nightmare. Time paused in that terrible moment. There was intelligence – those were human eyes! And they screamed bloodlust and malfeasance. He raised the tip of his blade, but he knew he was far slower than this beast. He thrust wildly as the bear's jaws closed in.

Behind him, the thick red light in Mora's hands vanished.

The bear squealed at the sudden scent of burning fur. It hopped up and ran in circles, roaring as it flailed. The red pattern of light appeared on its chest, and its fur exploded into flame.

When its circles brought it close again, Kelin thrust with his sword. He struck bone. The were-bear howled. The howl faded as it sagged against the blade. Kelin breathed out and retracted his suddenly glowing blade. Light, Edillon had said, may it be a light in the darkness for him.

He knew it could get back up; he didn't know if the enchantment was strong enough of magic to keep it down. For now, the best he could do was keep himself alive.

However, would his attacks combined with Mora's magic work?

He wished for his silver knives. They'd been a gift from the dwarves he helped to save in Darkreign. He remembered the old stories, on top of Jakkobb's earlier declaration that silver worked against most were-creatures.

Meanwhile, the vampire remained entirely in front of Der, who was still rising back to her feet. Everything had been happening too fast around her. He used the small dagger with the silver blade and iron handle, but the were-bear intently avoided it.

The creature growled and thrust toward him, but immediately pulled back. Neither of them made any truly threatening attacks, and instead kept testing each other for weaknesses.

Behind him, Der held a hand against her previously injured back and watched for an opening to jump in. She tensed–

“No!” Tom sidestepped in front of her. “Stay there, Derora!”

“Make me,” she replied tartly. She started swaying with her sword on guard. From the corner of her eye, she fleetingly saw Jakkobb slicing out merry hell with his axe.

She couldn't see Tom grin. “If you insist.” She was behind him, but he might have had eyes in the back of his head. He fainted with the silver knife and the were-bear hopped back, and then he kicked out behind him and hit her perfectly in the chest. All without turning around.

She landed a few feet away on her back, coughing explosively.

“Der!” Thalon slid in the dirt next to her. “Are you alright?”

She started to nod when she saw the shadow from above growing on the ground. There wasn't even time to gasp. She launched herself. The were-bear was rising over Mora and Thalon.

Mora had her eyes closed with whatever spell she was casting; she didn't even see it coming.

Der shoved the magician forward. She intended to push both of them out of the way, but there wasn't enough time. Claws buried themselves in her back, through the featherweight mail, as the flying were-bear smashed into her. Der buckled under the weight of the bear's front paws.

She opened her mouth to yell in pain but no sound came out but a weak wheeze. The Pallens sword crashed uselessly against the dirt. She couldn't inhale, and purple blotches started to dance across her vision.

The were-bear kept its front paws on Der's back, saliva oozing down its bloody muzzle. The world seemed to slow. She felt the claws pressing through her mail and flesh. She squirmed as the claws slid across her shoulder blades underneath her skin. The mail had proven impenetrable to swords! She heaved for air, but the weight on her back was too much.

"Der!" Kelin whirled.

Thalon screamed and stabbed both of his long knives into the bear's hindquarters. The were-bear whipped around and snapped at the boy.

He rolled away. "Dad! Dad!"

The bear turned back and flipped Der over onto her bleeding back as if she were a squirming trout. It remained standing over her.

Der took a precious moment to breathe, and then reached up and slipped her fingers around the handle of her sword. She shoved her sword upward, at the same time Kelin brought his sword down in a beheading arc. The curved sword crashed into hers in the middle of the neck. She swore she saw her sword glow for the briefest of seconds. The luminescence was so faint – it might have just been another light-headed flash. Still, odd thing to notice at a time like this, she mused.

The head dropped onto her face and bounced off.

The bear's body remained upright for a second and then collapsed. She closed her eyes and mouth and scrubbed her face with her free hand, trying absolutely not to think about what she was scraping off and spitting out.

"I do *not* have time for this!" Tom took a chance and grabbed the muzzle of the were-bear he'd been fighting. He jerked the head up and punched the silver dagger home through its chest. Claws dug themselves through his shirt and chest as the were-bear tried to escape. Hot, wet flesh steamed against the vampire's arm as he pulled it out of the beast's chest.

The last were-bear leapt at Jakkobb, who swung his axe. The bear flew backward as if it'd been hit with a club. Despite the deep gash in its side, it rolled when it landed. It tried to rise, but Spike brought his electric hoof down through its spine.

Jakkobb had to look around twice at the bodies before his muscles began to relax. All the were-bears lay bloody, steaming, maimed and probably expired at their feet.

As if on tiptoes, with the back of his hooves never touching the ground, Spike inspected the



carnage. Small wreaths of lightning orbited his hooves.

Jakkobb lowered the axe. "Injuries, everyone."

Mora leaned over Kelin. "His leg's hurt, bad."

He hissed and held one hand over his bloody leg. "I'll be alright, sir." He forced a smile to Mora. "Really, it's not bad."

"But, but—"

The captain nodded, and moved on. "Thistle?"

The chemman pointed to his ankle.

"Thalon?" the knight asked.

"Only this." The boy rubbed his cheek where he'd been scraped by a paw.

"Der?" Jakkobb looked down.

She blinked. Her vision wasn't in focus. "Um. Yes, sir." She tried to push herself up off the dirt, but collapsed after the second try.

He hid his expression as he looked at her back. He could only speculate how deep those massive claw tears went, especially since the beast had landed with a running jump. "Der, stay down."

"Yes, sir."

"Good." He straightened up. "Spike..."

The unicorn had turned his back to the biggest bear and raised his tail. He looked up at the knight. *What? Horses do this all the time.*

"No, they don't! That's disgusting! Spike, stop that!"

Der heaved herself to her feet while Jakkobb yelled at Spike. Dizziness attacked her like an army, and she nearly toppled back over.

Tom reached back to his belt and pulled out his flask and took a long draught. When he capped and replaced the flask, he reached down and plucked his bloody and ruined shirt. "Another perfectly – Der?"

She smiled vaguely and took a step toward him.

He caught her by the shoulders. "Well, you're a fine mess." He quickly plucked some bloody bits from her forehead. The Pallens sword dropped out of her hand. Over her shoulder, he peered down her back and cursed. "I know the chemman has my healing vials, go take one, or three."

She shook her head. "Give them to Kelin."

"No. I'm watching over you. Sit down."

"Shove off." She tried to stagger away from him. Her knees began to shake like grass in a windstorm as her adrenaline faded. "Go saddle the horse."

"What horse? It's dead, remember? Now, lie down, you're wounded."

She backed away from him, using her stubbornness as a crutch.

He shook her shoulders. "Of all the bull-headed, contumacious fools in this kingdom... Someday, someone is going to name a siege engine after you!"

She smiled and tried to push him away, but didn't have the strength at her strongest. "Stay away from me."

"I wish I could." He frowned. "Hm. I think you're weak enough now." His luminous green eyes bored into hers. "Fall asleep."

Der tried to bat him away. Her eyes closed as she shook her head. She felt her eyelids clang shut, but she forced them open again.

"Stubborn..." He grabbed her chin and forced eye contact again. "You're hearing only my voice. It is the only thing to you in the entire world. Now, fall asleep." He caught her as she fell, soundly slumbering. "Next time, I think I'm just going to hit you over the head."

"If there is a next time, you won't have the hands to try," Jakkobb said, still holding his bloody axe. Thistle and Kelin stood on either side of him, weapons still drawn.

"What? She's too stubborn for her own good."

Kelin looked at the knight. "Alright, he's right about that, but I don't like it!"

"Now what do we do?" Thalon asked, industriously cleaning his long knives. The large claw scrape still bled across his cheek.

"There's that last village half a day's walk from here." Jakkobb hadn't moved his eyes away from Tom. "We're all wounded and we need to rest."

"I can get her there faster," the vampire snarled. Spike pawed the ground behind him, scraping his bloody hooves across the grass.

Jakkobb shook his head. "She's not the only one. We'll all go. Then, once we're there and decently healthy, we'll talk."

"I'll be healed in a few hours, the rest of you won't."

"And neither will she. She's too wounded to travel and you know that. Since you need her alive, you won't risk it."

## Chapter Twelve

### Daedle's Locke

"There are too many tracks." Thalon knelt on the road.

"I know." Tom scowled beneath his hood. He carried the sleeping Der as lightly as if she were a leaf. Thistle, Kelin and Der's wounds were healed by the vials. Thistle and Kelin had scoffed at the danger. However, the little bottles of miracles did nothing to help blood loss or exhaustion. Mora dozed on Spike's back while Kelin rode his own horse beside her, keeping a watchful eye. Der's mount that Mora had borrowed had never returned. No one had the strength to attempt to find it.

Thalon crossed his arms. "Why are there this many people on this road? That village can't be too big."

Jakkobb shrugged. "I don't know, do you humans have any wheat festivals or something?"

Kelin licked his lips. "Uh, I've never been here. I don't even know if they grow wheat here, sir."

"What's the name of this place?"

"Daedle's Locke," Tom answered. "It lies right on the river, but it's north of a knickpoint, so there's no shipping on it. The avulsion was south of here."

"A what?" Mora asked.

"I'll just say a waterfall – not a very large one either, but enough to deter any rafts and boats."

"How do you know this?" the knight asked.

Tom shrugged. "I decided to map the area awhile ago. I was bored. It only took a few years to do."

Daedle's Locke bulged into view like a blister on the landscape. The town walls stood besieged by a shantytown of canvas tents. Hundreds of people milled around with no discernible pattern to their actions. Most of them, however, seemed to hover around the river.

"Malfax will be worse than this now," Jakkobb murmured.

Tom smiled cheerfully, fangs and all. "Wonderful, we're walking into a pot of water and it's heating up rather quickly. I wonder, how long until it boils over the river?"

The knight sighed. They walked in silence for a moment.

"Inn's going to be full," Thistle observed.

"Leave that to me," Tom ordered quietly.

They sifted through the open palisade of the village. Traders wheeled their carts around in spaces that filled in with people when they passed. Daedle's Locke had more people than it could fit, and still more streamed in. The inn wasn't hard to locate, it was the only two story structure.

A small beagle barked as loudly as he could when the vampire entered the common room. Tom covertly glanced around, and satisfied no one was watching, hissed at the dog. It squealed and scurried back to the kitchens, tripping its hind feet over its tail stuck fast between

its legs. Tom smirked to himself and set Der down on a bench. Then he found the innkeeper and “talked” to him.

He returned to the others. “I secured us the room upstairs in the back.” He took Der back and led the way.

“Won’t there already be people there?” Thalon asked from somewhere behind Tom.

“For the moment. I’ll ‘talk’ with them too.” He kicked open the unlocked door into the room. Several surprised men looked up at him. “Everyone, look at my eyes.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “You, out.” They walked past him in a pleasant daze out into the corridor.

Jakkobb’s hand fell over his axe handle. “I don’t like it.”

“This is better than sleeping in the street.” He laid Der out on the only bed in the room, and paused to check her pulse and breathing. “You know, she’s actually peaceful when she’s unconscious. You should keep her that way more.”

“She’s not my pet, vampire.”

Tom snorted. “If you say so, elf. I’ll be downstairs. Don’t try anything.” He left the door open as he walked past the captain. Once downstairs, he ordered the man in the darkest corner out.

He barely had five minutes to rest his back against the wall when Thalon crawled into the bench opposite of him. Tom met him with a stoic expression while his hands quickly rolled up the paper boasting a hand drawn portrait of a laughing, brown eyed girl.

“Dad says if you ever kick me again, he’ll have your heart ripped out with a wooden spoon.”

“Mmm. Then you should leave me alone and not tempt me.”

“Aye.” Thalon’s shoulders barely crested over the top of the tall table.

Tom tilted his head to the side. “You must be half elf, half chemman, and I thought I was an outcast.”

Thalon’s small face bunched up. “What do you mean by that?”

The vampire shook his head. “Nothing, child.”

Thistle appeared on the bench next to his son.

Tom sniffed. “There’s wood on you now, I can smell it. You procured them quickly.”

The chemman shrugged nonchalantly.

“She swore an oath to me.”

Thistle shrugged again.

“Ah. Well, it might not matter to you, but it matters to her.”

“We want to know why you stole our friend,” Thalon piped up.

Tom shook his head.

The boy looked up to his father, who nodded slightly. He grinned when he turned back to Tom. “You first stole Der in Malfax, and before the were-bear fight, Der mentioned you were doing this to help a girl. Now, Dad and I have heard of a dying girl in a village west of there. Lives in a one room cottage with her grandfather well outside of the village proper.”

Tom dropped a heavy hand flat on the table and glared. Finally, he asked, “How did you know?”

Thalon shrugged. “We’re spies now. It’s our duty to know things – that’s what the king said. She’s bad; the town healer says that she won’t make it.”

“She will. I’ll see to that.”

“You’d better hurry up.”

“Be quiet, boy. I’ve calculated my time.”

“But you don’t have long!”

Thistle put a hand on his son’s head and Thalon immediately closed his mouth.

“I have a query now,” Tom said. “Why are you friends with this crowd? They aren’t your kind.”

“Why do you care for a dying girl?” Thistle countered. With that, he slid out from his seat.

Kelin and Mora slipped around a small knot of people. To Kelin, this town seemed more crowded than the capital, Second Acron, a year ago. They walked beside a young woman pointing at the sky. “I say Horthen saw it yesterday as huge as...” and then Kelin and Mora were past.

“What’s that about?” Mora pressed a little closer. The noise around them swelled like any large city and it was easy to forget that this was just a tiny river village on the brink of war. Of course, there were rallies and shouts against Urael, the great oppressor, but inside the village square, most people meandered around blindly, and other people were there to make money from them.

He smiled. “I heard it in the common room at the inn. Rumors about a huge gold dragon on the horizon. But they don’t make sense. Jakkobb says there aren’t dragons anywhere near this kingdom anyway, and he would know.” He cast a sideways glance at her, and his grin spread. “You make that new dress look amazing.”

Mora blushed. She ran her hands over the forest green dress again. The only break in the color was provided by the leather belt that crossed her waist. “It just doesn’t feel right.”

Kelin tried to look at the dress instead of the way it revealed her slender curves. “Well, you look incredible. I promise. In fact, you looked a little strange in your robes, not just because they were torn and stained. Nobody wears robes away from cities. Now, you look normal. It’s a new day for you.”

She half smiled. “Well, there’s not much about my old life I actually enjoyed. In fact, ever since I met you, I’ve been thinking about my former life, and that wizard bastard who sent me to those slavers.”

“You want revenge?”

She shook her head. “No. I thought about it, but no. I think I just want a new life and I just want to forget everything.”

“Forget it? After everything? Surely that’s impossible!”

“I don’t know.” She turned her face away. “I just— I just want to let it go. Since I’ve met you.”

He put a hand on her shoulder and smiled. “I think that is very wise.” Then some of Der’s practicality that had rubbed off on him pulled one of the bells in his mind. “Stop. You were *sent* to the slavers? Intentionally? You said they captured you.”

Mora gasped, and immediately stammered, “Look, I didn’t want you to know. My teacher turned on me when he sold his soul. Please, I just want to forget all of it. Like you said, it’s a

new day.” She forced a weak smile.

He gazed at her for a long moment and then sighed. “I’m sorry. I won’t ask.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I wish what you went through had never happened to you. I wish that I’d never been tortured either, but I’m learning that without that horrible, awful thing I wouldn’t be here where I am today. You and I wouldn’t be here, together. Still, I wish that I had met you without those scars you bear because then I think that you wouldn’t be so afraid.”

She tried to smile. “Afraid of what?”

“Anything. Everyone. I’ve been there, Mora. I understand. And then,” He gulped and fought against the sudden knot in his throat. “Then I wouldn’t be afraid to tell you... Ah-hem.” He felt his entire body wince. “I know how scared you are, and I wouldn’t even dare think of talking to you – about you and me – after what you been through, but...” He felt his face starting to steam and his tongue suddenly fall limp.

She kissed him. He almost backed away in surprise. Through his surprise, he wrapped his arms around her and let the warm waves of emotion carry him out to sea. He kissed her back, and suddenly, he didn’t care about the staring onlookers, her past, the vampire, or even this imminent war. In this moment, everything was right.

Der tiptoed down the stairs. Tom still sat in his corner, writing to himself on parchment with a sleek feather pen. His portable inkwell sat neatly on the table. The rest of the common room was almost empty despite the crowds in town. She couldn’t explain why.

He didn’t look up while his pen continued to osculate the parchment. “You’re supposed to be asleep.”

She took the other bench. “Well, I slept. What are you writing?”

He covered the paper with his arm and set the pen down. He waited for the ink to dry, and then rolled up the paper carefully in his hands. “My personal affairs.”

She sighed, and then straightened. “I have a question.”

“You usually do,” he muttered. He rubbed his face briefly. “Well, what is it?”

“Why do the undead need to eat? Walking corpses or vampires or whatever. I mean, you’re dead. Things have to eat to stay alive, and well, you don’t. And why blood? Is it part of the curse or something?”

His emerald eyes narrowed. “Why do you want to know? And no, I’m not telling you.”

“Through understanding comes peace,” she quoted a common phrase.

“No, you’ll just use it against me.”

“How can I do that?”

His mouth slipped a little open. He closed it with a click. “I’m not telling you that either.” He leaned back and folded his arms. “Why do you want to know?”

She shrugged. “I’m just curious.”

He stroked his chin. “Curious. No one’s ever just curious – not that I’ve encountered.” He watched her intently for a moment. “Perhaps you are. Fine. Although bereft of what you define as life, the undead still must maintain corporal coils. Bodies need to feed. The body needs energy and the ability to heal and those always come from feeding – animal or human or elf or

dwarf, alive or undead. Understand?”

She nodded.

“Those puppets that the chemmen used, well, they’re just reduced to the most base instinct, feeding. The chemmen certainly wouldn’t allow them to retain their thought processes, not when they could turn back on them. It all boils down to survival – partially, anyway.” He finished packing his belongings into his belt pouch. “We’re done with this conversation. Now, we’ve got to get some new clothes. Our only ones are ripped and conspicuously red.” He pulled his gloves on.

“I’m not going out with you. You’ll kidnap me again.”

He looked up. “I don’t have to. You promised me.”

“I know, but I’d like my friends to come too.”

He shook his head. “No. I will steal you away again if I must. When you can walk for more than an hour without fainting. We are in a hurry, after all. Besides, the last few days of a warmer autumn are almost gone, it’ll be cold soon. We need new clothes.”

“Does the cold actually bother you?”

“No, not really, but I have to dress to blend in. I’m not immune to it, if that’s what you’re asking. However, for the both of us, walking around in bloody rags doesn’t bode well.” For now, they had their dark cloaks drawn over their ruined shirts and trousers.

“I left my coin purse upstairs.”

“If you insist,” he sighed. He waited for her at the bottom of the stairs. She stopped at the height of the landing and stared at him.

“Do I look funny, Derora?”

She shook her head. “No, you look normal, but you’re acting funny.”

He half grinned. “No, I’m just keeping you off balance. How are you?”

“Stiff and tired, but I’m alright.”

“Good. It’s been a very long time since I’ve protected someone in a fight, and you had to play hero and nearly get your stupid self killed.”

“I saved Mora’s life. She’s not my favorite person in the world, I’ll admit, but I’d do it again.”

“Derora, I need you alive, not her. I won’t allow you to do that. Even if I have to kick you again.”

A grin sprang onto her face. “Oh, that’s right! Please, Tom, will you teach me that kick? I mean, I was behind you, and you brought your leg up that far and—”

“What?” he interrupted.

“Teach me how to kick like that. That was incredible!”

He shook his head. “No.”

“But I want to know.”

He waved his hand in frustration. “Go ask your chemman. I’m sure he knows how to do that too.”

She crossed her arms. “Fine.”

He covered his mouth with his hand and laughed softly.

“What?” she asked more sharply than she’d intended.

“You’re pouting.”

She instantly uncrossed her arms. “I am not. Now, will you please teach me?”

He shook his head.

She snorted. “You broke your promise, you know.”

He stiffened. “No, I didn’t hurt you. You probably don’t even have a bruise. After we’re done with this quest, and my promise fulfilled, I can show you what I can do with that kick,” he said with brittle brightness.

“Stop trying to frighten me. I see right through your façade.”

All expression evaporated from his face. He folded his hands together on the table. “It is not a façade, child. I think that you just can’t understand this, so you let your imagination lie to you.”

“No, I disagree.”

He cleared his throat purposefully. “I must say that your motley assemblage of friends did impress me. I thought at least two of you would have been dead to those were-bears.”

“I still disagree with you about you, but, uh, thanks.” She drummed her fingers briefly. “Kelin must be proud. I remember when he didn’t even want to fight, but I suppose that changed during the last war. Now, he’s killing were-bears. Hell, I’m proud of him.”

“Did you ever think about how were-bears are people too, Derora?”

“They are people...” She trailed off. “We killed people, not animals.” She covered her mouth with her hands.

He scoffed. “What were you going to do? Just let them rend your body in twain because they’re people too. You’d have killed a person who ran out of the darkness trying to slaughter you. There’s no difference, really.”

“But... But, they were doing it because of instinct.”

“Instinct?” He shook his head. “No, instinct is to kill in order to eat, not because it’s fun. That lust for the kill doesn’t make them more animal, in fact, it makes them more human. They were out there because they wanted to give into the bloodlust. Believe me, I know how strong that temptation can be; and there are many were-creatures and vampires who don’t think of it as a temptation at all.”

She bit her lip and glared at him.

He grinned without his teeth. “Besides, we may have only seriously wounded some. A couple might survive.”

“You’re joking.”

He shook his head. “Like with my ilk,” he jerked a thumb to his chest, “You have to make *certain*. However, if any did survive, I don’t think they’ll bother us.”

“But we, er, smashed them into meat.”

He put a hand on her shoulder and smiled unpleasantly. “Wounds that are mortal to you aren’t necessarily mortal to every other creature out there.”

“I know that.” She pushed off his hand. “So, those fantasies I have about running you through with my sword, they wouldn’t kill you. Good, so the next time I’m frustrated—”

“Oh, shut up. You’re under oath not to hurt me.” He winked. “However, it is absolutely



flattering to know you're daydreaming about me though."

She stopped. "What! No! I meant about killing you savagely!"

With another wink, he took her arm and walked her outside. He chuckled against the rising noise of the sea of people. "Oh, right, I believe you."

She opened her mouth, but clicked it closed again, and instead balled a fist. He chuckled again and patted her on the head. He escorted her by the arm through the throngs of people. He nodded. "There's a clothes shop over there."

"The tailor must have been busy, look at all the clothes he has already made."

He offered a hint of a smile. "Not quite like that, Der. You see, there are so many people here, the tailor went ahead and already made clothing for people to immediately buy."

"You mean, no one's ordered these clothes?"

"No, we need some now too. We don't have to wait for him to make some."

"That's quite different." She stopped. "Wait, I remember something like this in Second Acron with Kaleb. Maybe it's just my village. But what if he doesn't sell what I want?"

"Then you're luck runs dry. Or, rather, shifts its course and causes two kingdoms to go for each other's throats."

They crossed into the shop, and she didn't take even an entire minute to peruse the shop. She grabbed the first plain, long sleeved shirt that looked like it would fit. She felt relieved her cloak covered the back of her old shirt, even if it was torn as well. At least the blood didn't show on dark fabric.

Tom sighed over her shoulder. "Is that what you're really going to buy?"

"Yes. It's all I need."

"Don't you ever get what you want?"

"What do you mean?"

"I saw you looking, well, glancing for the barest second, at the blue shirt, the one with the dragons embroidered on it, as well as that blue cap."

She nodded. "But they cost more money – and this is all I need." She held up the plain shirt.

"I will purchase them for you." He rubbed his forehead. "On the condition that you actually shut up when I ask you to."

"No—"

But he had already snagged them off the shelf. She followed him doggedly to make certain he actually paid for them. Then she wondered where he got the money in the first place.

"Do we need anything else?" She pulled the blue shirt on over her older shirt.

Tom shook his head. "Not that I can think of." He pulled them down a space between the buildings, and more importantly, into the shade. He threw back his hood. "Let's explore."

"But the sun's up." She tugged at his hood.

"I'm not in it. Come on. Not everyone in this town is brooding about the war." He dragged the now bemused young woman behind him.

"You're confusing me."

"I'm enjoying that fact immensely."

Der slowed to a stop and he finally halted in front of her. "Music?" It drifted through the wall

of the tavern they were behind. The violin, a human derivation of the elvish instrument, resonated steadily through the wall.

Tom nodded. "Song of Mendelin and Tara." He offered his hand. "Shall we dance?"

She hopped back a step and brought her fists up. "What's gotten into you?"

"I like the music, even if the lad can't play too well." He shrugged and his eyes thawed for the first time she could remember. He grabbed her hand and waist, and she was helpless to fight the dance. The notes twinkled around them, and she heard the tale of the prince and his lover in the melody.

"You have an almost elvish addiction to music," she said.

He smiled without his teeth and one hand tapped his rounded ears. "I just have good ears in general."

"Was that a joke? Did you just make a joke to me?"

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

The story of the tragic lovers curled around them like fog in the shaded alley. She again refrained herself from asking about his mood. She feared she might ruin it.

Tom stepped back when the music faded and pulled his hood back onto his head. His face receded back into its usual frown. "Let's get back to the inn. I need to rest too, despite that we're in a hurry."

She blinked in confusion as she followed him. She never expected this. She walked slowly behind him, and absently stuffed her hair up inside the cap. After all, it'd been quite some time since it had been washed. Then she nearly tripped over her own feet. She'd *never* thought about how she looked before in her entire life! She grunted in growing frustration as she couldn't name a reason why she would suddenly care.

The others were clustered around a table in the common room. Thistle and Thalon had their hoods drawn. Jakkobb had actually cracked a grin as he drank his beer. Kelin and Mora also boasted new clothes. A stupid grin resonated between the two of them, Der noticed as she pulled up a chair. Thistle flipped a knife into his hand openly for a second and then hid it again, possibly in greeting.

Kelin pointed to her new shirt. "Where did you get that?"

She glanced between him and Mora, still trying to figure the reason for the small giggles erupting from both of them. Der licked her lips. "Uh, probably the same tailor where you got yours."

"You shouldn't be walking around, Der, you're wounded," Jakkobb said dryly.

Kelin cocked an eyebrow. "I know you, Der, you'd buy the plainest shirt available."

She rested her chin in her palm. "Tom got it for me."

"Oh." Kelin nodded slowly.

"What's that look supposed to mean, man?"

"It was a bribe," Tom said irritably from behind her. He yawned, but covered his mouth. "I'm going to rest for a few hours. Don't try anything, it won't succeed."

Der waited until he disappeared up the staircase. "I just had the strangest afternoon. He wasn't mordant."

“What does that mean?” Thalon asked.

“Tom’s usual self,” Kelin explained.

Jakkobb thumped a heavy hand on the table. “And that makes him alright suddenly?”

She hunched her back and spoke in elvish. “You’re angry with me, sir.”

“Yes, I am. Der, you remind me of myself when I was young and very hasty, even stupid, ever since I met you. I don’t think you made the right choice here.”

Thistle nodded beside him.

She stared dully at the scarred tabletop. “Yes, sir. I’m not sure myself.”

“I don’t want you to make the mistakes I did.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kelin said, “Have you heard anything about a gold dragon, sir?”

The knight shrugged. “Yeah, some.”

“Is this town in danger?”

“Nobody’s hired us to slay it,” Thalon said.

Jakkobb coughed into his hand. “It’s not that easy, Thalon. Dragonslayers are mostly a myth because it’s damn near impossible to do. Believe me, I would know.”

“Yes, but that won’t stop them from hiring us,” Der pointed out.

“Agreed, but there’s no way they could offer us anything for what it would be worth – and not all dragons are evil, many of them are good. Besides, these rumors are about a gold dragon, and golds usually won’t harm anyone unless you threaten them.”

“You don’t think there is one here, sir.”

“Believe me, golds are the biggest color of dragons. If they had seen a gold, they’d know it. I wouldn’t attack a gold myself, and half our party is already wounded. Hell, I wouldn’t do it with an entire army.”

“We took care of those were-bears,” Kelin said smugly.

“But we’re getting better,” Thalon put in. “After we rest up...”

Jakkobb shook his head resolutely. “You lads really don’t understand it. Don’t consider it further.”

Kelin turned to face Der. “You’re doing better too, and you’re the one we were worried about.”

“Yeah. I think we all are. We needed a day of rest.”

“Indeed. I awoke and even our fearless captain here was sleeping.”

Jakkobb rolled his eyes. “I have to sleep too.”

“Yes, but in your armor, sir?”

“And you have very pronounced helmet hair,” Mora added.

Jakkobb ran a hand through his blond hair. “Alright, so I’m not vain. I’m an elf, and that’s plenty enough.” He drummed a beat on his helmet.

“You do sleep with your armor on,” Der pointed out. “I’ve come to think that it’s grafted onto your skin.”

He cringed. “Ow. I do bathe, you know.”

She paused for a long time. “Without the armor?”

“Yes, without the armor.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Neither do I,” Thalon said.

“Well, I’m not about to let you watch, so we’re even.”

Her expression evolved with slow horror. “Jakkobb without his armor isn’t Jakkobb.”

The knight looked down at his brilliantly red mail that boasted new scratches and dents.

“Then who am I?”

“I don’t know, but not Jakkobb.”

“It’s true, sir,” Kelin said. “You even had it on when we met the chemmen. Of course, you did lose it temporarily when we were prisoners.”

He slapped his massive hands on the table. “Alright, enough, lads.”

Mora folded her arms. “We’re not lads, even if Der looks like one right now.”

The knight sighed. “It was a general term.”

Der fingered the hair stuffed up inside the cap. She glanced around the common room – most of the men had hair longer than hers anyway. She pulled her cap off and her dirty hair fell onto her shoulders. She shrugged again. “It doesn’t bother me.”

The magician hesitated. She glanced at Kelin and then back at Der. “Why not?”

“Why should it? I know what I am.” Der glanced imploring at Jakkobb, who held up his hands and shook his head. Kelin immediately followed suit. Thistle ignored the conversation, rolled his eyes and sighed. Thalon rolled his eyes too, and sighed, mirroring his father’s exact motions.

Mora sighed loudly. “Well then, should I just call you sir from now on?”

Kelin punched Der in the shoulder. “Somehow, I don’t think that will bother her as much as you, Mora.”

Der half grinned and rubbed her shoulder.

Mora gasped. “Kelin! It’s wrong to hit women!”

He paled. “I’m sorry, it’s just Der, and…”

Mora grinned.

“Oh, you little—!” Kelin gasped. “Don’t you give me a start!”

Jakkobb laughed. “Yes, but some women, like our Der here, should never be told that. She’ll just hit first.” He raised a finger. “In the dragoon orders, everyone just says ‘sir’ regardless of gender. It avoids confusion and that split second hesitation to remember which to say, all the while not drawing attention to, ah, differences. Also, some, like the dwarves, there are no distinctions between gender in their language, and they simply don’t understand what everyone’s crying about.”

“Chemmen, too,” Thistle put in quietly.

Der stood up from the table. “Listen, Morana, it truly doesn’t bother me.” She jammed the cap back on her head. “I think I’m going to check on Kelin’s horse.”

“Spike’s watching over him,” Jakkobb said, but she glared at him. He held up his hands. “Oh. Alright then.”

The sun was rapidly darkening and she wrapped her cloak around her as she ran to the

stables. She wanted to talk with Spike anyway. She didn't know what about, but it beat out talking with everyone else right now. She pushed through the large doors into the dark interior. The unicorn, however, wasn't in the stable. Then again, he must have his own agenda. Perhaps he was spying on Tom, she mused.

She whirled, drawing her sword, when the stables lit up as brightly as noon.

"Stop! It's me!" Mora stumbled away from her. The light streamed from her fingertips and cascaded up the walls and across the ceiling. Several horses kicked their stall walls.

Der held out her hand between her eyes and the light. "You're scaring the horses!"

Mora lowered her hands and the light dimmed. "I think we should just talk, you said yourself that we started badly."

Der folded her arms and rammed the Pallens sword back into its sheath. "Look, Mora, I hardly know you—" The squeals of a cat in a fracas interrupted her. She held up a hand for silence. With their footsteps masked by the angry feline wails, they tiptoed to the other end of the stable. Der slid a horse's coarse blanket off a stall door and held it ready. Suddenly, a gray dart of fur flew past their ankles followed by a burst of white-hot flame.

The women flattened themselves against a stall door. Nothing happened for a moment. Then they heard the clicking of tiny claws echoing against the wooden walls around the corner. But it sounded high up on the wall...

Der waved Mora back and readied the blanket. Mora started to move her hands and closed her eyes in concentration.

There was a soft thud as whatever the creature was dropped onto the floor and started to follow the cat. A shadow emerged from around the corner. Der gritted her teeth; she couldn't tell what all those points and curves could possibly be.

No time to wonder because here it was! She hurled the blanket over the second combatant.

The blanket burst into flames and she immediately threw it against the wall. Before it even impacted, she was drawing her sword and running for it. She almost hesitated as she saw a tiny gold tail slither back into the burning rags of the blanket.

Mora pushed herself away from the wall. Icicles formed on her fingernails. "What is it?"

"We're about to find out." Der pushed away the remains of the cloth with the tip of her sword. A tiny gold dragon shook its wings free of smoldering bits of the blanket. It swiveled its triangular head on its long, elegant neck toward Der and opened its mouth.

The warrior's feet moved faster than her mind, throwing her out of the way of the gout of flame. Its heat was hotter than Sigard's forge back in Riversbridge had ever been in the summer!

She tossed her sword away and held up both hands.

"What are you doing?" Mora flinched as something brushed past her ankles. She looked down to see the gray barn cat hissing at the dragon. Her eyes shot back to the small, marvelous creature. The dragon! It was a real dragon! He was very intricately detailed from his form to his tiny individual scales and talons, as if an engraver stayed up late for years carving him out with a fine needle. Of course, the little dragon was also as round as a ball. Bright brown eyes were angled forward like a predator's, but still in the side of his head, giving him excellent peripheral vision.

Der slowly knelt in front of the chubby dragon. "You just surprised me there, little fellow, I'm not going to hurt you." She spoke as if she were talking to a frightened puppy.

If the dragon had feathers, they would have been ruffled. Instead, he folded his wings across his back. "Then why—"

He never finished as the gray cat tackled him. The little dragon yelped and both animals started clawing each other. Der slapped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing.

Mora leaned down and snatched the cat out of the combat. It struggled for a moment, and then twisted out of her hands, landing a few feet away. Sticking its head and tail up in the air, the cat walked around the corner as if nothing had ever happened.

Mystified, Der extended an arm out to the dragon, who glared suspiciously at her while coils of smoke curled around its mouth. She smiled. "You can talk."

"Of course!" he hollered, but his voice only carried far enough to startle the horses.

She still stared. "Are you hungry? I reckon some beef or mutton would taste delicious now. I know I'm going to be eating as soon as I get back inside the inn."

The dragon flapped its glistening wings once and alighted onto her shoulder. "Absolutely. I'm so hungry I could eat a whole lamb. Let's go! Let's go!"

"Are you joking?" Mora coughed.

He shook his tiny head.

"No, Der," Mora said, "Are you joking?"

Der smiled at the dragon on her shoulder. "Uh. No."

"It's a baby dragon! It's a real dragon!" Mora erupted.

Der shrugged and turned her head; she was nearly nose to nose with him. "What's your name?"

He responded with a quick long string of syllables neither of them could hope to duplicate.

"Um." The warrior chewed her lower lip. "How about Goldie?"

The tiny dragon stared at her for a long time and said nothing.

"I don't think we should walk back inside with a hatchling." Mora glanced toward the stable door and into the street.

Der nodded. "Would you mind riding inside my cloak? The townsfolk scare easily right now. We have an elven friend inside who is a dragoon knight and knows much more about dragons than we do."

The dragon now dubbed Goldie nodded again. "People here are mean." He curled up as Der stuffed him underneath the cloth of her dark cloak and scrambled for purchase.

"Oh! That tickles!" She grabbed her ribs with her other hand.

They ran back into the inn, and Der let Mora lead and gently push people out of the way back to their table. Thistle and Thalon sat with Jakkobb and Kelin. The knight's helmet shone crimson against the room's candlelight as it rested on the table. Mora retook her seat next to Kelin. Der sat next to the captain and grinned so widely that he set down his ale.

"Alright, what did you do this time, Der?"

"Nothing. We, uh, you know those rumors."

He raised an eyebrow.

“The dragon,” Mora prompted.

“What dragon?” Thalon asked.

“This one.” Der reached into her cloak and set the golden creature on the table. He waddled in a circle and wrapped his tail around himself.

Jakkobb yelped in elvish. He picked up his helmet and slammed it on top of the dragon. The red helmet rattled and rolled while flames escaped through the eye slits. “A hatchling! His mother’s going to tear this town apart to find him!” He scooped up his roving helmet and stood in the same motion. “We need a distraction! Der, start a bar fight!”

“Yes, sir!” She saluted by thumping her fist to her chest in the ancient style.

As the others moved for the door, she jumped onto the table of the biggest drunk man in the tavern. “You’re ugly!” She kicked him in the jaw. The man and his chair tipped over backward and sailed to the floor. His drinking partner sat there absolutely thunderstruck for a second; and then grabbed after her ankles as she leapt for the next table.

Der drew her sword in the air and landed lightly on the next table and fought off a wave of dizziness from her most recent blood loss incident. The man lunged after her. She cut his sword belt clean off with a precise, small stroke. He still tried to jump after her, but his trousers remained mostly in their chair. As pink as a pig, he spat oaths after the escaping fighter.

Meanwhile, Jakkobb cradled his rattling helmet beneath his arm. Thistle and Kelin led the way, shoving everyone out of their path. They not only cleared the way, but also stirred the agitated rabble. The common room was already too crowded and too tense. The ineluctability of the fight grabbed the entire common room by its throat.

Der jumped from a table onto the top of the bar. She kicked another drunk in the face – but not as hard as she could have. By now, the tavern was in an uproar, and everyone seemed to be fighting for themselves or running out the door.

A hand snatched her ankle and she brought the sword down in reflex. Cursing, she stopped it less than an inch away from the brawler’s arm. He looked up, paled and disappeared backward into the fray.

Der, wheezing, caught up with the others outside. The sword was safely at home by her side again. The sweat on her forehead prickled against the cool evening air. Jakkobb shook his head. “That is not the proper way to start a barroom brawl.”

Goldie crawled out of the opening of the helmet. His talons clicked against the metal. “Where are we going?”

“Out of town.” The knight started to walk. With one shovel-sized hand, he stuffed the little dragon back down into the helmet.

Thalon jogged along and reached up toward the helmet. “I want to see it. I want to see it.” Around them, a stream of people rushed toward the inn.

“What should I have done, sir?” Der asked.

“Alright, never draw your regular weapon unless they draw first – you’re not out to kill people here and that’s the intention of your weapon. Secondly, make the start of the fight look like the *other fellow’s* fault – especially if there are any guards nearby.” As they strolled casually, a couple of guards ran past them toward the rumbling fracas.

The village walls weren't guarded, and with so many people camping outside of town, the gates were still open.

"We need to get far away enough from town." The captain checked over his shoulder.

"You're far enough." A mysterious voice rolled silkily out of the darkness.

"Tom!" Der gasped. Like a hunting cat, he appeared silently out of the night, not more than two feet away from them. He was too close for them to run away.

He smiled sickly, but his voice was sweet. "We had an accord, Derora, you weren't going to run out on me."

She grinned desperately. "This isn't what it looks like."

He lifted one eyebrow.

Jakkobb shoved his upended helmet toward the vampire.

Tom blinked. "A hatchling! Where did— No, get it out of here before its mother finds us with it!"

"What about my mother?" the dragon demanded as the party picked back up their trot out of town.

"That's what we're doing," Jakkobb replied slowly.

"We found him losing a fight with a mouser in the stables." Mora looked anywhere but at the vampire.

"Fine." Tom straightened his shirt. "I'm coming with you, so you don't get any ideas. And so nothing happens to her." He pointed at Der.

Mora tried to peer ahead into the darkness of the riparian forest. "I wonder what's out there."

"What? Like more spies?" Thalon chirped.

"I don't know. I've heard stories about dragons and monsters and—"

"Vampires?" Tom interrupted brightly. "Don't worry. There's no point, we're already everywhere. And most of us prefer relaxing in a civilized town rather than jumping out from behind trees to frighten little girls."

Mora dropped her eyes and stepped behind Kelin.

Jakkobb took the dragon and set him on the ground. "We're far enough, as long as he doesn't come back to town."

Goldie waddled around to face them. "But it's just me!"

"Stop it." The knight shook his head. "No, you stay away from town before you get people killed." He spun his back toward the little creature before the dragon could respond.

"I don't wanna be alone!" The little creature sniffed, sniffed again, and started to cry.

Tom caught Der's elbow as she spun back. He wrapped a stiff arm her shoulders and peeled her away from the baby dragon's tears.

The vampire escorted them back into town. No one spoke on the way. Daedle's Locke had finally quieted and a few guards paced the streets. The noise at the inn had subsided, and people were wandering back toward their tents. Tom looked up at the inn, but turned away and melted into the darkness. The others silently trudged up the steps.

In their room, Mora crept under the blanket on the coarse mattress. Kelin stretched out onto the floor. "You've noticed Tom's out there alone tonight."



“Night is his domain.” Der closed her eyes.

“Probably off biting the necks...”

“Kelin!” She reached out and smacked him on the shoulder. “I don’t think he’s like that.”

“We have to eat continuously too.”

“Well, I don’t want to think about it.” She buried her face in her pillow and didn’t listen to anything else. But she thought of Tom and wondered very much what he was doing now. At some point, sleep caught up to her.

She awoke sometime during the night with a warm but firm nose pressed into her ear. She heard Kelin snoring and the noises of everyone else sleeping. She batted at her ear and rolled over. Her eyes flew open when something chomped down on her nose.

She burped out a yelp, but managed to swallow any remaining sounds as she found herself cross eyed with a triangular, golden head resting on her nose.

Goldie pressed his face against her. “Good morning.”

She shook her head. “What d’ you’ wan’?”

He curled up on her pillow like a puppy. “I’ve decided, you’re my human.”

Der yawned and rolled back over. “Great. I’ll never need a tinderbox again.” She drifted off once more.

## Chapter Thirteen

### The Dragon

“Derora Saxen, wake up!”

She didn’t want to, but Jakkobb’s voice had that special trick of circumventing the mind and ordering the body directly. He also threw a pillow at her head.

She shoved the pillow off. “Yes, sir.” Glancing around, she saw that the others were gone. She yawned and blamed Tom for her daytime, nighttime routine’s balance being skewed.

“What are you doing with the dragon?” He stood at his full height over her prone body. Der blinked and stared up and up at him and then at the curled up little dragon.

“Um, losing my pillow apparently, sir.”

Goldie’s brown eyes opened at the raised voices. “What’s going on? Whoa!” He shouted as the knight scooped him up in one hand.

Jakkobb brought the tiny gold dragon up to his nose. Claws clicked rapidly against his armor. “Alright, little one, what are you doing back here? You’re putting this whole town in danger. Your mother is looking for you.”

Goldie squirmed in his hand. “I’m fifteen hundred! My mother’s not searching for me!”

“What? You have to be a hatchling.”

“What’s going on?” Der rubbed her eyes and sat up.

“That is, um,” he stopped to frown. “He’s like a teenager, but even if he was, he’ll be bigger than that. Or he’s a midget.” He turned the dragon around in his hand. “The rumors said it was a huge dragon too.”

“That’s me! That’s me!” Goldie’s nose smoked and his stumpy legs paddled the air.

The knight held the dragon at eye level. “Then the people around here have very big imaginations.” He dropped him back onto the pillow. Der snatched up the shiny gold beast in both hands. Jakkobb pointed. “He can stay, but if there is any sign of another gold dragon *whatsoever*, he’s out on his scaly arse.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered immediately.

“Breakfast, downstairs.” He left the door open.

Goldie twisted his neck so he faced Der. “He’s grumpy.”

“Well... yes, but he’s a really great friend.”

The gold dragon wrapped its tail around her wrist and lowered his head and looked up at her with the most soulful eyes. “I don’t have any friends.”

“Cheer up, little fellow.” She swallowed, feeling an anchor crash down into her stomach. She thought she was used to this by now. She had elvish friends – she was used to people, equivalent to her age, being incredibly older. But no, she was absolutely not prepared for a child to be so much older. “I’ll be your friend.”

The dragon batted his wide, brown eyes. “Honestly truly?”

She nodded, crawling out of her bedroll. “Certainly, and I’ve always wanted a dragon for a

friend.”

The dragon’s face lit up. “Reeeee! Great!”

“Why are you out here on your own anyway?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You’re certain? Oh. Well, fair enough, Goldie.” She stood up and he hopped onto her shoulder. She smiled. He wrapped his tail around her neck loosely and stretched his wings. She said, “You’re a pretty creature.”

He bobbed his sinewy head gracefully. “Thanks.”

“I’m hungry too.” She pulled on her boots and headed for the door. She stopped and looked at the dragon. “Perhaps you shouldn’t be seen. The folk in this town are already too frightened as it is. They’ll probably panic if they see a dragon, even a little one. Please, stay under my cloak and then in my lap.”

“Can do!” He nodded. “Let’s go!”

Der pulled her cloak onto her shoulders and tied the cord across her chest. The dragon ducked under her arm. She arrived at the table when Jakkobb, Mora and Kelin were standing up. Thistle and Thalon were nowhere in sight. “We’re already packed,” Kelin explained. “The captain wants to get out of town as quickly as we can.”

“But after a hot meal,” Jakkobb said. He waved the serving girl over. “Get another meal here for my friend.”

She bobbed her head and turned for the kitchen.

“A soldier’s logic indeed.” Der sat down at the table. “Any sign of Tom?”

They shook their heads mutely and left. Der knew better than to hope he had vanished. Besides, over the past few weeks she had grown used to his company. She didn’t enjoy it though, she reminded herself sharply.

When her meal arrived, she broke the bread in half and stuffed the larger piece into her cloak. Goldie snagged it with his talons and jammed more than he could fit into his mouth with gusto.

“Easy! That piece is *four times* bigger than your head.”

The dragon grunted and kept munching with mechanical determination. Crumbs and bits sprayed everywhere and Der wondered if he was even eating any of it.

“Look! You’re getting crumbs all over.”

He finished the bread with one massive gulp. “Meat, please.”

She sipped from her morning pint of ale, and then shook her head. “No, you’ll get it all over me!”

A cold hand suddenly squeezed her shoulder. Der barely flinched. “Good morning, Thomas.”

“What is he doing here?” a dry, dead voice drawled.

She turned her neck backward to look up at the vampire. “Eating.”

He tightened his grip. “Try again. We’re not going to be caught with a hatchling. If his mother catches us, you’ll be in more trouble than even you can manage.”

Underneath the table, Goldie twitched his tail like a cat’s. “I’m not a hatchling, pin-tooth!”

“Pin-tooth?” Tom raised his eyebrows. “Then you have the vocabulary of one.”

Smoke curled up from the dragon’s mouth. Der reached down to grab him. “You’re not going to flame in my lap. I just got these clothes.”

Tom took the empty chair next to her. “You’ll have to dump him in the river this time.” He caught her expression. “No! He is not coming with us! Absolutely not!”

“Why not?” She held onto the dragon a little tighter.

“She’s my friend now!” Goldie declared, and looked up at the vampire with the largest puppy eyes he could manage.

Tom’s gaze passed right by the dragon’s. He slapped his hand on the table and seethed at her. “Are you a lodestone for trouble? I swear when I am done with you—”

“Don’t you threaten my friend, pin-tooth!” The dragon bunched his muscles.

“Oh?” Tom laughed coldly. “And what are you doing to do about it? Lose another fight to a barn cat?”

Goldie lunged. Tom caught him by the shoulders. The dragon inhaled and his nostrils were already smoking.

The dragon fire singed his clothes but Tom dodged. The gout of flame raced passed his head, and he hurled Goldie back away from him. “You’ve picked the wrong fight!”

Goldie flared his wings madly beneath the table. “Leave my friend alone!”

“Uh, Tom?” Der reached out and tugged on his sleeve.

He slapped her hand away. “What!” Then he immediately sat back down and looked around the common room. But Der wasn’t looking at the other patrons, and they hadn’t seen him or the dragon as he feared. All eyes were cast upwards.

Goldie’s flame was already rooted deeply into the wood. The fire expanded as if the wood were oiled. The ceiling was fast becoming a fiery pond.

Der jumped to her feet. “Everybody out!” She started to sprint for the stairs but Tom caught her around the waist.

“Everyone includes you.” He dragged her outside, and Goldie was not more than a hair’s breadth behind. Tom scowled at the small dragon. “This is your fault.”

Goldie shook his head and started to cry. “I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it!” He ducked to the side as people shoved by the three of them in desperate flight. More people were even rolling out of the narrow windows of the second story and onto the ground.

Der took a few silent, circumnavigating steps around the arguing dragon and vampire, and darted back inside. A natural fire wouldn’t have spread so quickly. A support beam burned itself free from the ceiling and crashed onto the floor with a sound like an explosion. She shielded her face with her arms and looked around. She saw no one in the searing common room, but the fire burned too fast, not everyone would have had time to escape.

“Anyone?”

“Yes, you!” Tom snatched her shoulders and hauled her irresistibly backward.

“Tom, no!” She dug her heels down, but they slipped on the smooth floor. “There’s still people upstairs!”

“I don’t need them.” His voice was damnably calm.

She pushed uselessly against his grip. "They'll die!"

"Death isn't so bad once you get used to it, trust me."

"They're going to burn!" she screamed as he hauled her outside and spun her around.

"Der!" He looked her in the eyes and the roar of the flames became distant for a moment.

"Just stay out here, I'll get them."

"But—"

"Stay here!" He disappeared. She ran back to the door, but the heat pushed her backward this time.

Goldie perched on her shoulder again. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it."

"I know," she said softly.

The dragon suddenly hopped off her shoulder and latched onto her belt with his talons.

"Hide me!"

She turned to see the street behind her. Everyone in the town seemed to be here, silently staring at the flaming building. Despite the raging heat, the sweat on her forehead chilled at the sight.

Behind her, she heard several surprised yells. Two old women and one young boy were pushed out of the alley and into the wave of people before they could get a look at their rescuer. Der smiled for a second and stepped away from the building and into the shadowy alley. She checked back over her shoulder at the crowd. None of them moved.

Tom looked back to the building, where the roof was disintegrating into ashes before it collapsed. He looked back to the three people, and then back to the inn. He violently dusted soot off his sleeve. "Why the hell did I do that? I know better." He raised an accusing finger at Der. "You! You made me!"

"I did no such thing! How could I?" She eyed the building more than him.

He snarled and turned away.

She looked back to the people. "Thank you."

Tom shook his head. "I told you, never thank me for anything." He pulled them both deeper into the shade of the other building as the crowd pushed itself closer to the burning inn.

"This isn't right," she hissed. "They should be running to put this out before it spreads to the rest of the village! It's made of wood and thatch, nothing more than tinder!"

"You noticed that too," he sneered.

"This is too strange. They're mesmerized by it. I don't understand."

"Der," he pointed toward the river, "Over there is Urael. Who do they want to believe started this fire? If the village burns, Thealith will have evidence of aggression."

She shook her head. "No, they won't."

Goldie looked back at the fiery inn. "It's my fault."

Tom smiled brightly. "Oh, they don't care about the truth."

"Urael." It was an indrawn breath from the crowd. A man punched the air with his fist. "Spies from Urael did this!"

Der set Goldie on the ground and cupped her hands around her mouth. "No! Stop and think about it! Why would they burn down an inn?" She stepped astride the burning building and

hundreds of accusing eyes swung their weight onto her. “That doesn’t make sense! Now, we need to put this out!”

“The lass’s right!” A louder shout carried with concrete authority. Jakkobb rode Spike bareback. “Alright! Form a bucket chain from the river! Use whatever will carry water! Helmets, bowls, *anything!*”

Amazingly, people started to peel away from the rabble. The citizens of Daedle’s Locke and its many visitors kept their eyes downcast as they shuffled toward their supplies.

Der held her breath. It looked like this was going to work. Then, the same man who hollered about spies hurled a rock so hard at the red knight that he spun himself in a circle. Jakkobb caught the rock before it hit Spike’s mane, but, like the extra weight of snow that starts an avalanche, its effect was irreversible. A sort of fever spread like the fire, and Daedle’s Locke erupted like a volcano.

“Urael!” The mob ran in all directions at once. Everyone started yelling, shouting, screaming and kicking. People shoved people who were in their way, or accused them of being spies. Several clusters advanced on Jakkobb and the local lord’s guards approached from behind him. Others ran at Der.

Tom grabbed her by the shoulders. “Why must I always save you?” They ran down the alley between the now fiery wall of the inn and the neighboring blacksmith’s forge. Fire leapt between the buildings overhead onto the thatch roof of the forge.

The already narrow space seemed constricted further. It was suddenly much longer than it looked, and the heat pressed Der into the opposite wall. She slowed; the force of the heat was too intense. Tom grabbed her arm and dragged her faster than she could move. Not even the most zealous rioters tried to follow. Tucked away, she heard Goldie start to cry again.

A smaller mob gathered on the other side of the inn. They didn’t acknowledge the two at all when they leapt out from between the two burning buildings. Tom pulled Der’s hood up. “Keep your head down and by any means necessary, keep your mouth shut!”

She pointed to her teeth. “I’m not the one who has the worry about *that*.”

He pulled her along. “Oh, that was hilarious. Come on.” Behind them, the wall of the inn collapsed loudly on top of the forge in a groan of tortured agony.

“HALT!”

The running rioters in front fell forward as their legs locked themselves in place at the voice of command. Their fellows behind them ran into the wall of people and everyone collapsed into a giant human knot.

Jakkobb snorted and turned his head toward his own party and the local guards. He swung off his mount. “Don’t just stand there! Get to the river, keep anyone from crossing! Don’t kill anyone unless they’re going to kill you! If you do, *I’ll* have your head!”

Thistle wasted no time in lifting Thalon onto Spike’s saddle-less back. He nodded to the disguised unicorn, who pawed the ground and flared his nostrils in a challenge to the rioters. Thistle fell into line with the others, and they chiseled through the mad throng toward the river.

Kelin held onto Mora with one hand, and kept his other on his sword hilt. “Sir!” He nearly sprinted to keep up. “What about the fires? And the riot?”

Jakkobb shook his head. "Let them go. There are only ten guards here and us. The only thing we can do is protect the river." The fat, muddy water came into view. The village was only walled on three sides, and the fourth was open to the waterway.

"What do you mean?" Mora shouted above the fire and the riot.

"We have to stop them on this side of the river, because if they cross over, that means war."

"What about Der?" Thalon yelled from Spike's back.

Jakkobb ground his teeth. "Tom will keep her safe."

"What truly started the fire?" the boy asked. "It spread so fast!"

Spike replied directly in their heads, *Nothing from Urael. And I suspect nothing intentional.*

They fanned out along the riverbank. The angry citizens of Thealith weren't two seconds behind, but they skidded to a stop short of the line of warriors and guards. More people piled up behind those who had already stopped. They swayed with barely controlled energy. Behind them, their village continued to burn with everyone still in it.

Thistle rubbed his gloved hands together. His face, and especially his chemmen eyes, remained buried beneath his hood. With a swift motion, he sprayed a wide arc of white powder through the air. People paused and stared upward as the snow-like powder fell onto them. Meanwhile, Thistle peeled his gloves from his hand and tossed them to the ground.

"Amiery's staff, that burns!" A woman clawed at her face. Everywhere the powder touched on skin suddenly felt like a poisonous snake bite.

"It's in my eyes, my eyes!" a young man wailed, dropping to his knees.

"Water! Water!" A second woman cried, running blindly for the river. Thistle caught her with an open palm in the chest and shoved her backward.

"River's guarded!" Thalon yelled from his perch in Spike's saddle.

A wide space opened up in front of the cloaked chemman, who held his hands out openly and empty in a dare.

"At least it wasn't lethal," Kelin whispered under his breath. He stared back out at the crowd. They'd had their turn, and now it was time to wait for the opponent's move.

Jakkobb waved the giant axe over his head. "This has got to STOP! Go home!" The mob retreated a couple of extra feet from the terrible axe. A slight pause slowly began to ripple through the crowd. The knight realized that they weren't staring at him, but instead at his weapon.

But, someone, from deep within the crowd, accurately tossed a rope around Spike's neck in a superbly lucky throw. The unicorn snorted indignantly, and instead of panicking and fighting the rope like a horse might, he charged. The rope wielder cried aloud and dove into the mob. Spike caught him expertly in the back with a hoof, but he pulled the power of his kick. The man was sent sprawling, scrambled to his feet and didn't look back.

Spike backed himself to the bank again. Thalon grinned and tugged the rope off his neck.

Mora loosened up her arms and closed her eyes. She inhaled slowly and raised her tattooed hands skyward. But, she couldn't concentrate. She relaxed even further, but the noise was too loud in her ears. Her eyes fluttered open in surprise as a rock hit and threw her backward. She found herself flailing on the very edge of the river's steep bank.

Kelin caught her around her back with one arm. He smiled as he pulled her upright. "Don't fall, I don't think we could spare a hand to save you."

She flashed a grin while he pulled her upright. "Thanks."

The pressure of the surge shoved against them. Jakkobb growled as more people came to replace the ones who were beaten back or injured. They were holding the line, but they were outnumbered at least twenty to one. He knew it was only because the people didn't want to fight their own to get to the enemy. The guards would all be people they ate and drank with. No one had drawn a sword, axe, or cudgel yet. He waited for it though. It was only a matter of time.

Der hadn't drawn her weapon yet either. She was too afraid she would kill someone with nothing more than muscle memory. Her fists were bloodied from fighting, but there were too many punches and kicks to block.

Tom caught a fist inches from her face in his black gloved hand. He glanced dispassionately at the would-be assailant, and with fingertip pressure, snapped his wrist. He negligently tossed him back into the turbid sea of people.

"You don't have to protect me!" she yelled.

"I think I do," he replied conversationally.

The fire was devouring over half the village. The parts of the palisade wall that weren't burning were dangerously enclosing people inside the inferno. Other parts of the wall were searing ashes, and the canvas tents smoked and burned like dry pine. "They're— we're all going to burn!"

Tom smirked in the expanding ring around them. "This gives us the perfect opportunity to escape without your friends following."

She twisted out of his surprised grip. "No, Tom, we have to help!"

"This is my fault!" Goldie still clung to her belt.

"No, it's not," Der said. "The inn was your fault, after that, it's theirs."

"Get rid of that thing!" Tom yelled.

Der closed her hand protectively over her cloak. "No!"

He pinned her arm and grabbed at the dragon with the other. "Give it to me!"

Goldie dropped out of the back of her cloak and landed with a thump on the ground. He whirled around on all four paws. His wings flared out behind him.

Tom ripped his knife off his back. Der tried to grab his arm, but he was too fast. "Don't!"

He shoved her away. "Stop me then. Remember, you swore not to hurt or kill me." He cocked his arm back.

"Goldie!" Der shouted as her peripheral vision caught a flicker of golden scale. She looked down – he wasn't there! Then her jaw dropped as the gold mass continued to rise and expand. The riot around them sputtered and slowed to nothing as all eyes turned upward.

One of Goldie's wings was now larger than the town itself, let alone his entire wingspan and his body. He beat his wings once, and most of the fires ceased to exist. The winds tossed the rioters off their feet and the waters of the river splashed over the far shore.



He lowered his head toward the vampire. If Der stood on Tom's shoulders, they wouldn't have the height of one of his nostrils. Black smoke coiled ominously into the air out of both of them.

The knife slipped from Tom's hand. He was as speechless as everyone else.

## Chapter Fourteen

### An Act of Trust

If Jakkobb's helmet had a jaw, it would have dropped open too. Even the wind around them was silent in awe of the brooding dragon. The knight licked his dry mouth. "That is the biggest damn dragon I have ever seen."

Kelin tore his eyes free. "But you *work* with dragons – you're a dragoon knight!"

Jakkobb remained staring upward. "Yes. I know."

"He's fifteen hundred," Thistle said. "You mentioned that."

The knight's jaw dropped again. "Oh yes. I remember."

"Fifteen hundred?" Kelin repeated. "What does that mean?"

"He's not done growing."

"What!" Mora yelped and then bit her dress's sleeve at the sudden noise. Everyone else had gone silent. "How can a creature of that size exist and then get *bigger*?"

*Magic.* Spike's voice echoed in their minds. *Dragons are very magical creatures; magic is as vital to them as the circulation of blood is to you.*

"But he's young." Jakkobb spared a glance around the rest of the town. "He won't know much magic, he's just using it instinctually."

"Well, at least we know where Der is," Thalon said brightly, watching the dragon's head, which could have focused on any place in town it wanted to without moving.

Tom pulled Der very carefully in front of him by the back of her belt, though at this range, it wouldn't matter.

Her mouth hadn't closed yet. "Is this some sort of illusion?"

"I hope so." Tom gripped her around her waist.

Goldie's voice was a thousand heavy yet musical hammers, and every word felt like a mountain's weight descending upon them. "No, this is my actual size." He lowered his hind feet onto the ground, well outside of town. The earth groaned beneath him. "This is my human, vampire."

Tom shook his fist at the great wyrm. "You can't have her. She was under my protection first!"

Goldie raised his first talon warningly. They could see it rise over the wall it was so tall.

"Stop this!" Der tried to step forward between them, but Tom kept hold of her. "This human has something to say for herself! Alright then. Goldie, I've agreed to help Tom, and he's not going to harm me."

"He was going to knife me."

Tom's boot rolled over his knife on the ground. "And for that, I see that I was wrong."

"Good. Der, step away from him."

"I won't let her go." The vampire tightened his hand on her waist.

“Why not?” she asked softly. “There’s no need to hold on. Tom, I promised to help you.”

“Yes, but if I let you go, he can stop you no matter what you do.”

She sighed and looked back up at the dragon. She couldn’t fit him in all of her vision at once, and his golden scales reflected the sun brighter than ice. “Goldie, I’m alright with him despite all of his threats. Come on back down and we’ll talk about this, eye to eye.”

The dragon’s head swiveled around the landscape and then back down to the miniscule mortal in front of him. In a small thunderclap, the cat sized dragon dropped into her arms. He curled up instantly and yawned and rings of smoke came out of his mouth. “Being big makes me hungry... and I can’t always remember what I say.”

“We can eat outside of town!” Spike’s hooves electrically flashed against the cobbles as Jakkobb charged up to them. “We’re leaving. Now isn’t soon enough.”

“Why?” Der accepted his hand up and swung onto Spike’s back. They never stopped moving.

Jakkobb rolled his eyes as the unicorn started to canter. “Consorting with a dragon, and you know the common person thinks all dragons are evil. He also announced you’re knowingly working with a vampire. Dear gods, Der, you’re in more danger of being lynched than Tom is.”

Tom sheathed his knife as he ran beside them. “Because they couldn’t catch me.”

The crowds around them thickened again. The way to the gates was blocked by the re-energizing mob. Through a still smoldering section of the wall, they saw the rest of the party on the outside heading across the grass.

“Form a line!” Jakkobb bellowed. The startled local soldiers immediately did, and consequently blocked more than half of the rabble. The line only lingered a second, but it was more than enough. Spike and Tom both jumped over the half burned down wall as if was an inch high.

The vampire looked at the knight. “You see, *that’s* exactly the reason why I didn’t want to take her to another town.”

Jakkobb frowned. “Yes, I still regret going to Malfax myself.”

“Next time you take her anywhere, keep her on a shorter leash.”

“Funny, I thought she was your charge, Tom.”

“And I can’t keep her out of trouble!”

“It’s not my fault!” Der shouted. “Shut up! Both of you!”

Jakkobb snapped, “I am your commanding officer right now!”

“I haven’t joined yet!”

Finally, the knight broke a grin. “Der, I do not believe you have ever been in a town or city and not caused trouble.”

“But Riversbridge— Oh, wait. I take that back. What about the chemmen city, Zazocorma?”

“Der, have you forgotten what we went through there?”

“Duelingar?”

“That’s where you met Edillon, and you also told me about the incident at the temple there.”

“Riverfall.”

“I recall, from personal memory, you climbed over a wall into the secret high elven war

council, took a seat, and asked what you'd missed."

"Second Acron."

"You were captured by the chemmen there."

"I didn't cause that!"

Tom snorted. "Still trouble and you were still involved. That settles it, she's not allowed in another city again, ever."

"Oh stop it, Tom, you won't be around to enforce that." She scowled at him.

"Yes, I'm looking forward to when I can go back to a quiet, peaceful death."

"Can we stop for food?" Goldie's small voice penetrated the argument. "I'm hungry! I'm hungry!"

Jakkobb said, "Looks like the others already have the same idea, so yes." Spike slowed to a trot and then a saunter when they caught up with Kelin, Mora and Thalon.

Der frowned. "How'd you get out here so fast?"

"We ran as soon as we saw a distraction, and could tear our eyes away from it." Kelin pointed to the squirming gold ball.

Der twisted around to see down the slope to the ruined settlement.

Tom shot a glance over his shoulder. The town was barely in view. "They won't follow us. I'd berate them for stupidity if they tried."

"How are you?" Der lifted the tiny dragon away from her so she could look at him.

He whimpered. "Hungry."

Jakkobb dismounted smoothly and took the dragon from her. "We'll set him on the ground and he can hunt for himself. After a few rodents, he'll feel better."

"Rodents?" Mora echoed. "Raw?"

Jakkobb stopped halfway from putting Goldie on the ground. "Um, he can cook them if he wants."

Der glanced around. "Thistle's missing. Oh, that might not be good."

"He stayed behind to get our supplies," Thalon said. He squatted, following the dragon as Goldie wandered away from the group.

Her eyes wandered back to the smoking wood and thatch. "We burned their town."

Tom stepped up beside her and shrugged. "They deserved it."

"No, they did not. We could've at least done something to help. Help rebuild or something."

"There was an angry mob after us ready to start a war! They wouldn't have welcomed your help! You are such an altruistic fool!" Tom turned away.

"Der," Kelin said. "I've hardly had a chance to pick a fight with my best friend on this adventure. Just try to relax."

"Relax." Her arms hung loosely in the breeze. "I don't see any brigands to fight." She sat down and hugged her knees.

Mora audibly broke her bread. "Brigands, that's your idea of relaxing?"

Der nodded.

"That must impress the lads at home. Any offers?" She draped her free arm around Kelin's neck.

Der choked.

Kelin grinned. "I think Donley had his eye out for you though."

She shook her head. "No, he and Avice are married now."

"So you mentioned. That's not the point that I was trying to make."

"Then what was it?" She looked at him, and then to Mora, searching their faces for some sort of clue.

They grinned and shook their heads.

"Well, Avice is absolutely livid with me for missing the life vows."

"Good for them then." Kelin smiled again. "I think you'll be delighted to hear that you won't ever be married."

Tom suddenly loomed behind Der. "Well, I'm certainly delighted to hear that, but I don't think she'll ever be twenty."

"But I'm already eighteen!"

He crossed his arms. "Then I don't have much longer to wait, do I?"

Der's face seemed to melt.

He patted her on the head. "Good, you're finally learning your place, mortal."

She turned her face away. "Leave me alone."

"I've been saying that to you for quite some time," he sang softly over his shoulder as he walked away again.

Der glared at his back.

"You know that there is no girl." Mora smoothed her skirt. "He has to be searching for whatever this thing is for his own gain, somehow."

Der opened her mouth to argue, but then just sighed. "I hope not. I don't think that he is."

"There is a girl," Thalon said. "We've heard about her."

"He could be lying about a verifiable fact," Mora said. "Those little bits of truth make for the best lies."

"And how do you know that?" Der demanded.

"We're talking about Tom here." Kelin glanced at his friend. "He is a liar, Der. You've said as much yourself. He could be having our blood every night and we wouldn't even know about it!"

Der shook her head. "Not with an elf and a unicorn around. Tom's not stupid. You have to consider that."

"Vampires have mind controlling talents," Mora said. "I learned that in my studies."

"Well, I learned that from personal experience!" Her shoulders sagged. "I think my Pallens sword protects me from it. And it apparently doesn't work on Spike, Jakkobb, or Thistle. I think. Or, he would have used it by now and left you all behind."

"*When* he used it on you," Kelin growled.

"You promised to help him! He's undead!" Mora leveled an angry finger.

"He's trying to help a dying girl!" Der shouted back. She straightened her shirt. "You don't have to be here, you know."

"None of this changes what he is. Besides, you've proved that he's lying! It's all just a ploy!"

"You have no proof of that."

“And you have no proof that we’re wrong. I’m just trying to help.”

She sighed. “I know, I know, and we’re all grateful. Look, all I know about this adventure is that Tom is after something in an ancient, abandoned monastery. And that he’s desperate.”

“He’s not desperate,” Mora replied flatly. “He’s always calm, irritatingly calm. I think that it is all a trick. Because, if he really was trying to save this girl, he would at least look desperate.”

“How many other vampires do you know? Do any of them *ever* look desperate? I just don’t think we understand. I mean, he’s not human like we are.”

“Derora,” Tom said as softly as a knife hidden in velvet. Once again, he appeared behind her with his hood casting impenetrable shadows over his face. “I already told you, I don’t need myself justified to them.” He knelt beside her and winked one brilliant eye. “I’ve heard everything you said, and if I cared, I’d do something about it.” Before anyone could reply, he glanced up at Mora. “You look thirsty.”

She blinked and shook her head. “I am, a little. Der, please hand me that waterskin.”

Der noticed the waterskin propped against her leg that hadn’t been there a moment ago. “Um.” She looked back at Tom. “Where did this come from?”

“It’s yours, Der. It’s been there the whole time.” Tom tossed the waterskin up to Mora.

“No, it hasn’t— Wait!” She lunged, but it was too late.

Mora took a drink and immediately sprayed the water out of her mouth. Tom chuckled as she grabbed her throat and wheezed.

“I *knew* that was the waterskin you gave me!” Der gasped. “You used your power!”

Kelin grabbed onto Mora by her shoulders. He ripped his furious expression to the vampire. “What have you done?”

Der jumped between them, holding out her hands. “I know it burns, she won’t be able to speak for awhile! She’s not hurt, I swear!”

Tears leaked from Mora’s eyes. She gagged as she tried to talk and thrashed around in Kelin’s grasp.

Kelin held onto the young woman with one hand; his other went for his sword.

“No!” Der lunged forward, but Tom caught her shoulder.

“Der,” he said icily, “If he wants to attack me, let him. I’ve made no promise not to hurt him.”

“I know!” She shoved against his chest as hard as she could. She couldn’t even move him.

Kelin forcibly pulled his hand away from his hilt, all the while promising blood with his eyes at Tom. He put an arm around the panicking Mora and glared at Der. “I don’t know if this is worse than the last time with the elf! You meet someone who has disguised himself as human and then we all drown in a river of trouble!”

“That finally sounds more like the Kelin I know.” Der shook her head. “I’m sorry. I had nothing to do with this.” She held up her hands. “If you want to fight Tom, fine. I won’t stop you. Mora will be alright.”

Kelin stiffened, but instead took Mora by the shoulders and led her away. Tom smirked.

“That was disgusting.” She put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

For the slimmest fraction of a second, his eyes widened, but it was quickly overcome with his usual blank face. “You should have seen what I might have done to her if I didn’t need you.

After that, you wouldn't help me at all. Consider this a look at what I really am."

"You said you didn't care about what anyone thought, and then she bad mouthed you and—"

He grabbed her tongue. He was so fast that he actually snaked his forefinger and thumb through her teeth and snatched her tongue. "Walk away right now."

"Uhh-amm!"

"Stop trying to talk! Argh!" He let her tongue slide free, and marched away from her.

Der shook her head at him and then spun on her heel and walked toward Jakkobb. He was watching Goldie not too far away. Thalon sharpened one of his knives nearby.

The captain raised an eyebrow. "What's bothering you?"

"All three of them are angry with me."

"Well, perhaps if you learned some tact..." He sighed. "You, Mora and Kelin are certainly very young. I fully expected you to fight. I just hope it doesn't get out of hand." He didn't look away from Goldie, who squatted facing away from them. A patch of burning grass blackened the ground next to him. The chubby dragon whirled around and trotted back. He stretched his wings like a dog stretching his back. "I'm full now."

Jakkobb half grinned. "Wait until you're older and you learn to sustain yourself more on magic than on food. You'll feel much better being big, and I think that you'll find you can process thoughts and ideas better too."

"You can do that whenever you want?" Der asked. She picked up the tiny dragon and perched him on her shoulder.

"Yes, but it makes me so hungry it hurts."

Jakkobb rubbed his forehead. "Yes, most dragons can't do that. I think that he's just so huge that the magic adapted his body for him and gave him this ability."

"What?" she and the dragon asked in unison.

He waved his hand. "Never mind, you'll figure it out eventually. You also need to learn not to flame all the time. Especially not when you're angry, surprised, happy, or bored."

She held Goldie up to eye level. "Why are you out on your own?"

"I told you I didn't want to talk about it." His graceful head swiveled away.

"I think it would be a good idea," Jakkobb said softly.

The dragon's muscles relaxed in Der's grip, and he looked very much like a wet shirt hanging limply in her hands. His voice was almost a whisper. "I was the last of the four eggs to hatch, and half the size of my siblings. I was the runt."

"How bad is being the runt?" she asked.

"Runts are usually made outcasts by their siblings, even if the parents care for all of them, not always equally though," Jakkobb explained. "Although, there is absolutely no way you are the runt."

"That's what made the others drive me away. My older sister was the biggest – or so she thought until I discovered I could make myself bigger or smaller when I wanted. One day, my father and my mother left us – we were old enough by then to be mostly on our own. For awhile. That's when they drove me out. They didn't like that I could be bigger than them."

"So your brothers and sisters threw you out?" Der cradled the golden creature a little tighter.

Jakkobb frowned. "His parents are probably looking for him. And that's *dangerous*."

"I came to the human lands so no one would find me."

The knight tapped his fingers against his helmet. "That was wise thinking of you, because I don't think they will."

"Dad!" Thalon, who had loosely been paying attention to Goldie's story, suddenly hopped to his feet. There was nothing approaching in sight from the town. Thistle appeared out of the trees to the side, leading Kelin's horse. Strapped on the saddle were most of their supplies, including Jakkobb's saddle. Kelin, still holding Mora up by the shoulder marched over.

"Some of our things burned." Thistle handed the reins to Kelin, who took them in one hand.

Jakkobb untied his saddle with a long, calculating expression toward Daedle's Locke. "We have anywhere between a fortnight or a few hours before this war breaks, but it's going to happen."

Tom, appearing like the shadow of a fast moving cloud, began to pick through the saddlebags. "I don't have the time for this. We could use the dragon to hasten us." He looked over to where the tiny gold dragon burped a small bubble of swamp-smelling fire.

Jakkobb shook his head. "He can barely control his power."

"Chloe's not safe," Der said.

Tom glared darkly at her. "Don't mention her name, and thank you for pointing out the excessively obvious."

Kelin and Mora drifted closer. He held her up by her shoulders. She pressed one hand against her throat and tears leaked from her eyes. Kelin cleared his and threw a very acute glare at the vampire. "When Mora was captive, she overheard something about a girl."

Tom stepped closer, and Kelin put his body in between them. The vampire snarled, "What was said?"

Mora cried into her hands, smothering her sobs. Kelin barked, "She doesn't know! It's just that those devil worshipers mentioned something about a girl. That's all she told me."

"How do you know it's Chloe? You don't!"

"But we do. And we know where she is," Thalon said as he accepted the saddlebag his father handed down to him as if Mora, Kelin and Tom were playing an easy game of cards over tea. "We could keep her safe."

"Send word to that pesky physician too," Der added.

Thistle shook his head in silent refusal. His son gazed pitifully at him, and the chemman sighed noiselessly. Thalon grinned and punched the air in victory. "We'll go!"

Tom stuck out his hand. "Absolutely not!"

"You wanted my help, Tom, and this is it." Der stepped up in front of him.

He shoved his nose nearly into hers. "You will send a chemman to my ward?" Behind him, Thistle pulled Thalon back by the boy's shoulders; Kelin and Mora slinked off to the side to dry her tears; and Jakkobb stepped back, folded his arms, waiting.

She nodded. "I trust him."

"I don't!"

She jabbed a finger into his chest. "He may be the only chance she has when this war rolls



over her. Are you willing to risk her life?"

His mouth hung open, fangs and all. "But he's a chemman!"

"And you're a vampire!" She grabbed his hand, and in his shock, he didn't try to pull it away. "Tom! This may be her only chance of survival. They can protect her long enough for us to get back to her."

He slowly took her other hand, and finally his voice was calm. He didn't look at her face. "Derora, this was not my plan."

She half smiled. "And you're not in control of it either. This is why I don't truly plan for things, they never seem to last."

Beneath his heavily shaded hood, he closed his eyes. "I don't know. There are too many people involved, and I don't know them."

"I trust them and they've saved my life more than once. They will protect her."

He shook his head. "I don't know, Derora."

"Trust me, please."

Hesitantly, he opened his claret eyes.

"You know we can't make it in time," she pressed.

"Yes, we can—"

She shook her head. "No, we can't. I saw where we have to go on the map. We don't have enough time to get back to her. Tom, she's dying *right now*." He groaned. She squeezed his hand. "We'll help you, but you have to trust me."

He groaned again. His voice was a shadow of a whisper. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"Hmm." She tilted her head. "Then would you hold your eyes and ears closed for a moment? I'll poke you when we're done."

"What?" A small dose of panic darted across his face.

She smiled. "So Thistle and Thalon can get a head start. They already know where she is."

"What! No!"

Her grin only spread. "No? I don't think so. You kidnapped me, so this is your punishment: we're going to help you."

He tried to speak, but nothing came out. His frame sagged. "You win, Derora Saxen. But, if she's not alive when I arrive there will be hell to pay."

"Only hell? I've dealt with higher stakes." She winked.

Jakkobb coughed loudly into his hand and pulled Der back by the shoulder. Tom's and her hands fell away from each other, and they both gasped as they noticed. She felt her face heat up, and she didn't know why it was doing that. She was sure she was as red as a cherry.

The knight clapped his hands. "Then it's settled. They'll guard the girl, while we get whatever object can heal her. Keep in mind, we'll probably be returning in the middle of a war."

The vampire lifted his upper lip toward Der. "If this fails, the chemman's a dead man."

"Look at who's talking."

"I'm not joking. If this fails, once my oath to you is nullified, I will hunt you."

The knight-captain tapped his axe with his hand. "Then our war truly begins."

## Chapter Fifteen

### Truth Be Told

The world sang in opposite colors. The sky was pink, water was orange and grass was purple. Giant giggling multi-colored bugs flew around them, and left trails of exploding sparkles in their wake. Kelin danced with Mora to music only they could hear. There were so many things that his heart pushed to say, that he was so tempted to say... but he'd just met this girl, and she was so fragile.

*You've had your fun, now that's enough,* a melodious voice ordered. Several green, purple and pink glowing bugs fluttered around Spike's head. His silver and golden horn appeared and glowed as they swirled around it.

Jakkobb waved at the fairies. "Playful buggers." He held out his hand and a green-glowing person twirled across it. The fairy's wings were delicate and transparent, while her long green hair reached to her waist.

*Must we?* a collective voice asked. *We're having too much fun.*

"We have places to be, little ones," the knight said.

*Then go.*

"We'll go with them." The elf sighed. "Let them out of your spell."

*So be it. You have ruined our fun.*

"And you've ruined my efforts to move quickly."

*You know the girl has not been honest with you. She knows more than she says. Why do you let her continue?*

"Because it's fun. Now, be gone!"

The giggling lights vanished as if they'd never been there.

Kelin and Mora blinked as the world's colors stirred back into their rightful order and the laughing music dissolved. There were no signs of the tittering bugs.

Then they looked at each other, with their faces only a few inches apart.

Spike snickered.

Jakkobb smirked. "Come on, children, out of the fairy ring."

"Fairy ring?" Mora looked around wildly. She jumped away from Kelin, while her cheeks glowed warmly.

The knight nodded. "Yes, the one you're standing in." He nodded to the circle. Around them, the forest grew without quarter to clearings and open spaces, except for this one tiny ring on the knob of a small hill. A circle of fungi kept everything else from growing inside.

Jakkobb chuckled, "My advice, don't ever eat the mushrooms. Don't worry, fairy rings are far too common up here."

"We didn't, did we?" Kelin asked quickly. "Do anything stupid?"

"No." He grinned. "Believe me."

Spike rolled his eyes and turned down the hill. The others started to walk after him, and

hints of tiny laughter chased after them. Kelin and Mora were both as pink as some of the surrounding flowers.

Jakkobb said, "You've been missing for hours."

"No!" Kelin shot a look back up the hill. "It's only been a few minutes at most."

"Kelin, you know better than to doubt me."

"I do, but you can also be tricky! After all, you never told us that we were going to be captured in Darkreign. Kaleb told me that was your plan all along, and you didn't tell us." He paused. "Sir."

The captain blinked. "How can you construe 'you've been missing for hours' into something tricky?"

"Uh, well, I swear it's only been..." He looked up at the sun. "Oh."

"Fairies will do that to you."

"I don't remember any fairies," Mora protested. "And they're magical..."

"I'm not surprised."

"Fairies?" Tom's voice emerged from a tree. The hooded and gloved figure followed. "You should've left them. They would've been happy." Mora squeezed her body behind Kelin at the sight of the vampire.

"Until they starved to death. You know fairies often forget to feed their pets." Jakkobb frowned.

Tom shrugged and opened his hands wide. "They would've never noticed."

*I'm impressed. You're not trying to take your hostage and run while we're distracted, pin-tooth?* Spike stepped between Tom and the humans.

"Don't call me that." He glowered at the unicorn.

*The dragon's fond of it.* Goldie slept on the equine's back like a cat.

"I'm not."

"Where is Der anyway?" Kelin asked.

"She's safe."

"Safe from what?" Mora asked as she ducked behind Kelin.

"From fairies, in the very least," he snapped. "What? Do you think I'm stupid enough to try to run with a mortal in the company of a unicorn and a dragon? Especially once as stubborn as the sun is bright."

*We had hoped.*

Tom glared daggers at Spike. "As much as I loathe your company, I must admit that it might be useful. This isn't about me, after all."

Der meandered up behind them. "What's with all the funeral expressions?"

"I'm not sure," Jakkobb said. "The fairies mentioned dishonesty. Perhaps there is something we should discuss."

"Fairies?" Der repeated. "What fairies? Dishonesty?" She looked directly at Tom.

He pressed a hand against his chest and his expression morphed into one of injured surprise. "My goodness. How dare you accuse me."

Der inhaled, but Jakkobb was faster. "Yes, fairies. And," he let his gaze drift over to the

magician, "They mentioned dishonesty, about you, and not about Tom."

Mora's face paled and then blushed. She opened her mouth, but Tom rolled his eyes and waved a hand in front of the knight. "I could have told you that."

"What?" Kelin demanded.

Mora stammered, "That's-that's not true. You're the liar."

He cocked a grin. "Yes, I am, and that's how I know that you are a liar too. But you want to know something? I don't care." He pointed to his mouth. "Read my cold, dead lips." He pointed at Kelin. "You can lie to him all you want. I. Don't. Care."

Mora squeezed her eyes closed and balled her fists. "But it's about her! The girl of yours!"

All motion evaporated and the vampire stood as a statue. "What did you say?"

She pushed the words through frozen lips. "I don't know much, Kelin already told you all I knew. I heard it from the slavers—"

"You're lying again!" Suddenly, he was nearly nose to nose and his eyes glowed with the color of blood.

Kelin pulled her away from Tom and put his shoulder between. "Back off!"

The vampire tossed Kelin away as if tearing at a piece of paper. He advanced on Mora. Behind him, Jakkobb held up a hand in front of Spike. Seemingly negligently, they started to step away from each other in a very casual half circle, but a very perfect flanking maneuver.

Mora held up her hands as ice was beginning to form around her fingertips. Tom raised an eyebrow. "Do you honestly think you can match me? Just tell me what you know. Now."

She shoved up her hands and thousands of ice needles exploded from her moving tattoos. Tom twisted out of the way of a direct hit, but the spray was wide. Hundreds of ice darts punctured his shoulder and he crashed to the ground. He groaned and looked at the tiny spikes protruding from his chest.

Everyone else blinked in surprise.

Mora stared just as widely.

Tom bounced to his feet, with sharp, swift movements as if he hadn't been injured. He grinned, his amazingly white canines clashed against the black shadows cast by his hood. Spike and Jakkobb were twice as far as he was from Mora. Tom balled both of his fists in front of him so tightly that tiny drops of blood begin to drip from them and his grin spread. "My turn." A small gasp escaped Mora's lips.

And then Der hit him on the back of the head with a tree branch. A thunderous crack reverberated through the trees. Several nearby birds took off screeching from their perches. Half of the branch rebounded from his skull toward the sky and the other half stayed in Der's hands.

He grabbed his head and rolled over. "Der! What the hell? You promised not to hurt me!"

She raised the stub of the branch. "You broke that promise first when you kicked me in the chest." She smiled. "Now, can we talk about this like civilized folk or am I going to have to smash in your skull?"

"Yes, because beating an unarmed man with a length of wood is so very civilized." He glared, still holding his head with both hands. After a moment, he slouched against the ground.

“That was wood, you know, wood!”

“Would you rather have me use my Pallens sword?” She set her hands on her hips.

He pulled himself to his feet and paused for a very long look at Der before turning back to Mora. Kelin once again stood between. Tom, still eyeing Der, drawled, “Alright, Morana, what do you know?”

She trembled and leaned on Kelin. She couldn’t even look at the vampire. “Just that– it’s not much. I’m from Urael, but I’m not a spy or anything I swear. And, well, when I was there, I overheard the king’s wizard talking about a girl with a gift. That they needed this girl for some sort of plan. And after I heard your story – it’s got to be this girl. That’s all I know.”

He drifted closer. “And that’s called lying by omission,” he sneered. “What else do you know?”

Tears crowded the corners of her black eyes. “Nothing!”

“Look at me and say that,” he ordered softly. Behind him, Der raised the splintered remnants of the branch again.

Mora brought her eyes up to his level and before she could look away the vampire said, “Fall into my eyes. That’s right. Now, tell me everything you think you know about this girl.” This time, he dodged as Der brought the branch down.

Mora’s shoulders and back straightened. She stared blankly ahead. “There is a girl with an unusual ability. I don’t know what that is, but I know that the wizard that trained me wants her. I do not know why.”

Der frowned, lowering her improvised weapon. “You studied under a wizard in Urael?”

Mora stared ahead with unfocused eyes. “I wanted to learn magic. There were no schools, and I could not afford to travel. It was the only way.”

“Don’t answer him!” Kelin shook her shoulders. Her gaze didn’t move.

Jakkobb growled, “She has to.”

Spike snorted. *Although, it does seem that she may have information.*

“Shut up!” Tom snapped. “Mora, tell me.”

“I discovered that the wizard of Urael is a worshiper of Sennha.”

Der dropped the branch entirely and looked at Tom. “You know, you could’ve just said that and I would’ve started helping you earlier.”

“You’ve been helping me up until now?” he asked dryly. “I didn’t know that fact anyway.” He looked back at Mora. “Continue.”

She stood just as still but tears lined her cheeks. “I was afraid! I didn’t know what to do, so I pretended that I didn’t know.”

“You stayed and continued to study under him?” Jakkobb scowled. “That’s enough – even in the good courts on this continent – to get you a trip to the gallows.”

“I was too scared to leave! I just wanted it to stop!”

Kelin put a hand on her shoulder, but he didn’t pull her toward him.

Tom grabbed her chin. “*Why* does this wizard want my girl?”

“Don’t answer him,” Kelin barked. He grabbed her shoulders and starting shaking her. The girl didn’t even glance at him, less than a foot away.

*She has no resistance.* Spike stamped his foot.

“You can make her stop!”

Spike shook his head.

“I’m trying to listening over here,” Tom snapped. “Mora, go on.”

“I don’t know why he wants her,” she whispered. “He was just using me as a sort of magical pack mule. I did the dirty, cumbersome work. I didn’t do any of the, the evil things!”

“Did he know that you knew?” Tom asked.

“No. Not for awhile, but when he found out, he sent me to the slavers.”

“Huh.” Der’s forehead wrinkled. “Why didn’t he just kill you? It sounds suspicious to me.”

Tom smirked. “I see I am teaching you something, child.”

Spike shrugged by tossing up his head. *Why indeed.*

Even under Tom’s influence, her voice began to tremble. “Weren’t just slaves – worse fate.”

“What would the wizard want with a bunch of slaves?” The knight frowned. “I don’t want to know what kinds of experiments he might be perpetrating.”

Mora shook her head and gasped for air like she was drowning. “Not him. Sennha.”

Everyone’s hearts tensed for a beat.

“Sacrifices,” Der breathed.

Jakkobb cleared his throat. “Perhaps not, Der. You don’t think as they do. They love to lord over and torment their victims – and that means keeping them alive.”

The magician nodded. “The lands were becoming too stable. He needs people to lose control, and last winter when the king of Thealith routed... And I didn’t know the wizard was a follower! I didn’t know!”

Spike leveled his horn at her. *Still apocryphal, little one.*

“What?” she asked softly.

Jakkobb patted the unicorn’s shoulder. “He’s saying he doesn’t exactly trust your story,” he said stonily. “You’re leaving out some rather large sentences, Morana.”

“I didn’t know!” Outrage and fear bled across her face.

*You had your suspicions, though.* Spike bobbed his head. *You knew that something wasn’t right.*

“You knew? You knew? Why didn’t you tell us before?” Kelin dropped his arms to his side, letting them blow in the breeze. “I can’t believe this.”

“She can’t tell an untruth,” Tom growled. “However, her being here with what she knows is too convenient for my tastes.”

She started to cry, and clawed at her own face. “I – I didn’t know that I could trust you! I was scared!” She jerked her hand toward Der. “And she would’ve killed me!”

Der’s head jerked up. “What?”

“No, she wouldn’t,” Jakkobb interjected sternly, “Not if you were only a, ah, *misguided* apprentice to this wizard.”

Mora reached out for Kelin. Her dark eyes were wide. “I didn’t know! Please, I need you!”

He stared right back and started to raise one hand. “I– I don’t know what to say now.” He looked to Jakkobb and Spike.

“I’d prefer it if you shut up.” Tom snapped his fingers and Mora’s body jerked rigid again. “Discuss that later. Now, is that all you know?”

“Yes,” she answered through stiff lips.

He snapped his fingers again and turned away. She sagged. She reached out toward Kelin. He backed away. “Do I even know you?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m not one of them. Please!” She framed her face with her hands and bent at the knees.

*We’ll see about that.* Spike nudged her strongly in the back with his nose.

The knight raised his hand. “Alright, Morana, I’m arresting you, so you’ll at least have dragoon prisoners’ protection, which means that no one here is going to hurt you.” He cast a stern glance to everyone.

“What?” She jumped back. “You’re not a part of this kingdom! You can’t do this!”

He chuckled. “Oh, you’d be surprised at what authority the dragoon knights have. Basically, after the Centum Wars, if any dark deity, or even a black magician, is mentioned, we have the power to damn well do what we want. No, it’s not fair. Usually, we do nothing because they’re mostly false accusations. However, you see we have such authority because none of the small kingdoms had the resources or even *wanted* to deal with those things, especially after the Wars, so they handed that authority to us.”

She staggered back another step. “No! You could do whatever you want—”

He followed her. “Oh? You think I’m abusing my power? You don’t want to know what happens to a dishonorable knight. It’s a lot worse than what could happen to you. For the present, we need to know more about the wizard. He can very easily use this war to get to her,” Jakkobb mused. “And we have no way to warn Thistle. We need to go back.”

“No!” Tom snapped. “Wait, yes. Der and I will continue alone.”

“How far is the object that you seek?”

The vampire met his gaze evenly. “Not far. We’re nigh the Dead Forest. It’s there.”

Mora took another step toward Kelin. “Please.”

His chest seemed to fall inward and he took her hand. “We’ll talk.” He sighed.

Spike put his hoof in between the two. *Excuse me, but this is not the time nor the place for this.*

Kelin exhaled. “Good, because I have no idea what to say.” He looked to Mora. “I don’t think I know you as well as I thought I did.”

“I – I didn’t want you to know,” Mora quavered. “I’m so sorry.”

Spike pushed his nose against the girl’s shoulder. *Children, am I speaking to myself?*

“We’re all right here,” Der interjected. “We can walk ahead, or something.”

Mora inhaled deeply, and slowly let the air seep out of her lungs. “I– I just want you to know that I am not a bad person.”

Spike and Jakkobb exchange an impassive glance, Der eyed the treetops and only Kelin met her gaze. He looked about to say something, when a deep throated chuckle interrupted.

Tom pressed one hand over his mouth. Another chuckle slipped through his fingers. “Oh, yes you are. Not because you did anything, but rather because you didn’t. You could have

gone to the dragoons yourself. You could've told the temple of Ahtome."

"But I was afraid!" She pulled her arms across her chest. "How could you say such a thing?"

"Because I'm the only one who is saying it." He swept his arm wide. "They're just too polite."



## Chapter Sixteen

### The Dead Forest

Goldie stretched his wings from his perch on Spike's forelock. He smiled, as much as a dragon can smile, at Tom. "I have more pointy teeth than you."

The vampire slowed his crisp, silent footfalls. "Why, yes, yes you do." He paused. "You're not going to get big again, are you?"

The little creature shook its head. "No." He flapped his wings behind him. "I don't like it. Everything's too small." And, like a cat, he seemed to immediately lose interest and flipped his head away from Tom.

"So, the Dead Forest? A bunch of logs and dead trees?" Der asked, breaking the following absence of sound. No one had said much anyway, or at least, had cared to say anything. Kelin and Mora had whispered to each other for awhile, but even they'd fallen silent.

"It's a bit older than that. The myths say it's haunted, but," Tom pointed to his fangs, "You can't get much worse."

"I find things often do," Jakkobb said as he walked by them, "Especially after someone says something like that."

Der fell into step beside the knight. "What's in this Dead Forest, sir?"

"Ask your friend."

"I'm not her friend," the vampire snapped. "The monastery's there. Our destination, so very soon, we won't have to see each other again."

"Are we still in Thealith?" she asked.

Tom shook his head. "I didn't map this area, but we aren't. Daedle's Locke was close to the border – and by border, I mean the last logger's cabin because there is no true border here since there's no other kingdom to define it against – unlike the river." His upper lip curled.

"You don't know where we are, do you?" Kelin accused. Mora leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked.

He looked coldly over his shoulder. "I'd prefer if you would just go away." Beside him, Jakkobb tensed. Tom rolled his eyes. "I didn't try anything, don't worry."

"We haven't had a decent meal for a week and this journey has been nothing but uphill!" Mora burst. She lifted her skirt and her new boots were already worn and scratched.

*At least the mountains are no longer here, child.* Spike drifted by.

"Mountains?" Goldie echoed.

"What do you mean there used to be mountains here?" Der scanned the horizons with her hand over her eyes. "They're hard to miss."

"Even mountains aren't eternal, Der," Tom said quietly.

Jakkobb gestured to another large gray tower of stone through the trees, which looked like the rock had formed as part of a fountain. It was still a hundred feet tall. "We've been seeing those around."

“Only two.” Kelin eyed the rock with suspicion.

“They’re fairly spaced out. They have to be because they used to be volcanoes.”

“The mountains that explode, right?” Mora asked.

Jakkobb nodded. “Yes.”

“She knows something, amazing.” Tom didn’t bother to look at her reaction.

The knight pointed back to the rocks. “Those are all that are left of those volcanoes. The rest of the mountains have weathered away. They’re called volcanic necks.”

“Why are the necks left then, sir?” Der viewed the ancient neck through a frame between her hands.

“Well, it was the core of the volcano, and it’s a different type of rock which is much tougher stuff. It came up through the center of the mountain itself and intruded into the previous existing rock – and hell, actually made the mountain.” He glanced down at Der’s glazed expression. “The reason why it’s left, well, think of the outer rock being like cheap leather armor, and this rock, like durable plate mail. The rest of the stuff has worn away.”

“Oh, alright. Thank you, sir.”

Kelin nodded. “I wonder how much farther if this isn’t the Dead Forest already.”

*It’s not far.* Spike slowed to allow the others to catch up with him.

“Feels like too far,” Tom pulled a gloved hand away from his eyes. “Let’s just get there already. Perhaps it’ll be peaceful there, like a graveyard.”

“We’ll make camp at the base. It’s getting late, and supplies are plentiful around here, at least,” Jakkobb said.

The ground slowly started to level off its ascent, but not completely until the trees ebbed back away from the plain. Ahead of them, sections and pieces of trees lay scattered across the ground to the horizon. Der’s mouth fell open.

“The Dead Forest,” Tom whispered. “I told you those monks liked secluded places.”

She scrambled ahead to the first log, which was taller than her waist. The fading sun shone faintly on its glossy surface. She ran her hands over it. “It’s– it’s stone!” All the way to the horizon huge, broken stone logs lay dead in the dying sunlight.

“Wood turned into stone... that must have been powerful magic!” Mora gasped. “Why would someone do that?”

*It wasn’t magic, child, this is nature.* Spike bobbed his nose toward the long dead forest. *The wood was petrified.*

“Petrified?” Kelin repeated.

Jakkobb took a deep breath. “Alright, there used to be a forest here, and it was covered by the mud and ash from the nearby volcanoes – those necks we saw. Water and ash gradually replaced the buried wood, which made the stone, piece by piece. Eventually, the mud and ash eroded away like the mountains, leaving the stone remains of the forest.”

“Why do you know that?” Der asked with one eyebrow cocked.

“Sometimes, I wish I didn’t.” Jakkobb shrugged. “Old friend of mine, an earth warlock. Would never shut up about rocks. I had no choice but to learn.” He nodded at the horizon. “We’ll camp here tonight.”

They broke up to pitch camp. Goldie's eyes opened when Der pulled him off her shoulders. She smiled. "Now you wake up, when we're stopping for the night."

Jakkobb plucked the dragon from her hands. "He also needs to eat. I'll take him and find some water. Spike! You're watching the camp."

"I'll make the fire." Kelin bent down and started picking up wood. "Mora, would you help me gather firewood? And then, we'll make supper."

Der scanned the packs, with the realization that the only major chore left before pitching tents was to dig a small pit away from camp and water sources. She sighed.

"Derora." Tom appeared beside her and nodded his head toward the petrified forest. "Come with me."

Der glanced to Spike, who shrugged by hopping barely off his front hooves. So she shrugged in turn and followed the vampire through the stone tree segments.

When they were out of earshot, he straightened his shirt and sat cross legged. "Let me give you some advice."

"First, let me give you some advice, Tom. When most people sit, they don't do it in midair." He almost smiled. "This is about Mora's confession."

She took a seat on a stone log. "Why didn't you want me to say anything about it?"

"Because it doesn't matter. It isn't your problem."

"Yes, it is. They are my enemy, Tom."

"No, it isn't. Believe me, Derora, she's not one of them. She didn't lie about that. Regardless of that, you don't need to interfere like you always do."

"Oh, like beating some sense into you with a log because you were going to hurt a frightened girl?"

"I wasn't going to hurt her," he snapped, and then rubbed the back of his head. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did, and I'll do it again if I have to."

"The memory is painful enough, child. With wood! In front of everyone!"

"I thought you didn't care about that."

"I don't," he replied instantly through a face that was expressive as an empty room.

The warrior gave him a flat look. "Honestly, I don't like Mora. She didn't even have to chase me, she just came along. I suppose because of Kelin. I hope he's dealing with this more gracefully than what I'm feeling."

"What about Kelin?"

"What about him? Sure, I've seen that he's changed and it's obviously been good for him."

"I meant about he and Morana."

"Oh. That." Der shrugged. "Well, if I can ignore the whole Sennha thing – which I can't – I'm not jealous if that's what you mean. I've never felt that way about him. He's my best friend. I miss the time we haven't spent together in the past year, but our lives have changed."

He shook his head. "I didn't think you were, not much, anyway."

She gave him a look as dry as tinder. "What was your advice about Mora?"

He nodded. "Of course, I was getting to that. You're both extremely young. In a few years,

these arguments will seem childish and insignificant. My advice is not to argue with her the next time, and just let it go, walk away. Don't fight it for once in your life."

"Huh." She tapped her fingers on the petrified wood. "I thought you were going to try to trick me, but that's good advice. I'm not going to heed it, but it is good advice."

"Why would I need to trick you when the truth works even better?"

"True enough, but you tricked Goldie."

He lifted an eyebrow.

"When you said you were wrong to fight him. It sounded like an apology, but in truth, you were actually pointing out that it was a mistake in judgment."

"Oh, you caught that. I'm impressed."

She smiled. "Yeah, Jakkobb said something about his brain being bigger while he was, uh, bigger."

"And you just lost that impression."

"Oh well."

"You know though," he said. "I wouldn't have had to trick him if you hadn't found him in the first place."

She slouched. "Believe it or not, I don't try to be trouble."

"Eh." He shrugged and floated over the log. "I was the one who kidnapped you. I should have been prepared to handle whatever came of that. However, the worst I thought I was going to have to deal with was the dragoon knight. I'll admit they are formidable opponents in their own right, but I wasn't worried. But a unicorn *and* a dragon? I still almost don't believe it."

She frowned. "Strangely enough, that doesn't seem unusual to me."

"You're a strange girl." He dropped his feet onto the log and stood on it. He looked longingly at the eastern horizon. It was distinctively darker. In the opposite spectrum, the sunset looked like a rainbow colored mountain stream as the light flowed down over the clouds in its liquid form.

Kelin rubbed his hands over his face. "I've been thinking, and honestly really trying, but I still don't know if I can trust you."

Mora bit her lower lip and looked away from him. "Kelin, I'm so sorry." She lifted her hand in his direction, but quickly retracted it.

"Were you ever going to tell me this?"

She stared fixedly at the ground. "Yes. Someday, away from these kingdoms."

"Can I even trust that answer? I mean, you can say whatever you want, and I don't know what's truth or not." He caught the tremor in his voice before it passed through his lips. He bunched his fists at his side.

"I am not one of them! And I've paid my price for coming too close to them, believe me!"

"Have you? You're still alive, and that's more than I've encountered with them." He leveled his searing gaze at long dead stone log. Beyond that, the fire pinpointed their meager campsite. He'd had to drag her a long way to be out of earshot.

"Because they didn't have the time to kill me!" She reached out toward him, but pulled her

hand back again. "I could be executed for just knowing about them and I was too scared to tell anyone!"

"That's not how that goes. You actually have to be—"

"Yes, it is! Jakkobb even made me a dragoon prisoner! But I am not one of them!" She sagged. All of the strength it took to yell one more time seemed like a mile sprint uphill. It was suddenly too far away to reach. "But, I fear... I fear that I'm no longer a good person." She swallowed. "I never did anything wicked. I was just far too frightened to do anything. And now, both sides are willing to kill me for it. Even you, it seems."

"No, we won't." Kelin blinked at the comforting tone in his voice. "That's not who we are."

"Der would've." Mora kicked a loose piece of petrified wood. It clattered off into the darkness.

He shook his head. "You're wrong about that too."

"It's just that – I'm not strong like the rest of you are. I want to do what's right, but I was so very alone and confused, and I didn't *know*. I made a horrible mistake, and I wish that I never made it, but I can't undo it." She stared at the ground. She could feel every prick of the stones beneath her feet through the thin soles of her boots. The sharp needlelike sensations only increased the fight of her tears to escape. "You all think I'm guilty of crimes I never even came near. Even – especially you!"

"I do not!" he thundered. He shook his head. "It's just that I know that they've used spies before. The whole cult exists in deceit, and... and I was falling in love with you! I even thought about getting a cottage somewhere, like the one you had, building a small forge and maybe even raising a family. And now, I'm not sure if I can't even trust the words from your mouth!"

*"I am not one of them!"* Mora wiped her eyes. "I'm not. Please, forgive me."

"That's not my place to forgive."

"No, I've harmed you too."

Kelin looked at her and felt his will bend like grass. If it were anyone else... But not her. He realized that he could, and already had, forgiven her for the grief she'd given him. He reached out one hand. She took it and he pulled her toward him. "I'd be a bad person if I held you in judgment." He ran his other hand through his shaggy hair. "I just wish everything were different right now."

Der banged her forehead against her knees for a moment. "The others wish I hadn't promised you."

"I overheard." Tom sighed. "Der, please understand that what they say doesn't matter to me, at all. Many, many years ago, it would have, but no longer." He paused. "I used to be dreadfully angry at anyone alive, especially if they spoke out against me. I hated life, because they had it and I didn't anymore. But that was an old anger, and it has weathered away like these mountains here." He looked at the setting sun. "That took a long, long time."

She said nothing in reply; she wouldn't know what she could say that wouldn't sound like an ignorant, backward peasant.

He pulled his flute from a pocket and looked at the instrument. "Chloe adores the music. I think my parting gift to her will be a flute."

“Parting gift?”

“After this, I’m going to walk away. I’m not going to get involved with mortals again. Since that night, I’ve been getting drawn back into your world more and more, bit by bit. I’m even traveling with you now. Once this is over...” he petered out. “Then it’s over.”

She nodded. “That’s sad, but I think I understand.”

He offered half a smirk. “I’m surprised that you’re not arguing with me.” He twirled the flute in his fingers. “I almost wish I hadn’t gotten involved in the first place, almost.”

“You don’t want to be alone.” She said it as quickly as the thought came.

The flute froze. He shrugged and started spinning it again. “I’ve been alone.”

“You don’t want to be.”

He closed his bright eyes. “Der, I’m not going to threaten you because that doesn’t work, so I’m going to ask you to shut the hell up.”

“But sometimes things need to be talked about ‘cause they’re painful.”

“And other times things are best left unsaid.” He pointed the flute like an index finger. He glanced at it, then at her, and then rested it against his lips.

Der sat back to listen, she couldn’t help herself. His music was downright drowsy. She closed her eyes and relaxed as the mournful melody cooled the air around them. In her mind, she was taken where the song led.

“Shattered moonlight, silver light evaporating as the morning fog.” Her mouth formed the words, but she felt no air pass through.

Tom stopped playing. “You can hear the words?”

She shook herself free. “I lived with the elves last winter, of course I learned about the natural magic of music.”

“You’re barely part elven. How can you hear the words?”

“I don’t know. They’re so sad.”

“What did you expect from me?”

“Fair enough, I suppose. It’s so incredibly beautiful and painful at the same time.”

“Like me watching the sunset, beautiful and painful – and that’s a pain you know nothing about.”

“The shattered moonlight, I saw it.”

The flute disappeared back into his pocket. “Yes, the shattered silver moonlight – once again, beautiful and painful.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the moon’s not painful, it’s my sun actually.”

“But what do the moon and silver have to do with each other? Other than moonlight looks silverish.”

“An ancient legend says that silver originally came from the moon.”

Der narrowed her brow. “But you mine it in the ground. How could it come from the moon?”

Tom waved a finger at her. “It’s just a myth!”

“Alright!” She held up both hands, and then tilted her head to the side and sighed gustily.

“Snake!” She hopped onto the log and pulled her knees up to her chin.

Tom shot her a curious glance and picked up the small creature in one hand. “Der, it’s not even poisonous.” It was only as long as his forearm, and he let it play around his fingers.

She shrugged helplessly.

“This little fellow doesn’t hibernate either.”

She cocked her head. “It has fur! I’ve never seen the like. I mean, snakes don’t have fur!”

He smiled without his teeth. “Yes, there is much about this world you don’t know, Derora.”

“But I know they hibernate during the winter – it wouldn’t need fur.”

“No, this species is warm blooded, oddly enough.”

“I despise the little wretches, a poisonous one nearly killed me once.” She shivered. “I find it funny how much I don’t like them and that’s what Sennha has to use for his symbol.”

“The snakehead on each end of the body, yes.”

“Oh well, I haven’t come across a follower of his I couldn’t gut.”

Tom set the snake on the ground, and it slithered under one of the stone logs. “Did you know the Blackhound was Sennha’s dark champion? A paladin, even.”

She tapped her forehead. “You mentioned it before.” She shrugged. “Never knew it before you though.”

“Back in my day, *everyone* knew it.”

She shrugged again. “I can’t say I’ve ever given him much thought.”

“Look at what he did – this one man destroyed the paladin empire!”

“That was two thousand years ago, how does it affect me?”

“Your sword, Der.” He sighed loudly. “I keep forgetting you’re so very young.”

“How old are you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” He shook his head. “Here’s an example, the kingdoms on this continent, Solquin, suddenly appeared after Pallens fell as refugees fled Dosmar across the ocean. People still trace their heritage.”

“They do? Dosmar?”

He rubbed his forehead. “You’re the girl with a weapon of Pallens and you hardly know anything about it.”

She squirmed in her seat. “I’m listening though.”

“So you are,” he drawled. “Alright, Dosmar is the continent on which most of the Empire thrived. The word means splendid. Hence, you have so many kingdoms over here now, because people fled the broken empire and founded new lands here.”

“Oh. That is good to know.” She sat back, face lost in reflection. She looked back at him curiously for a long moment and he impassively held her stare. “This is away from the topic, but I just had another thought.”

Tom looked away. “Two in one night, incredible.”

“You’re a half-elf.”

He nearly slipped out of the air. His hand shot to his ear, and then he gave her the most bewildered expression. “Where did that come from?”

She frowned. “Then again, your ears are rounded.”

“Yes, I know. Why do you think I am half-elven?”

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's, well, you know history like an elf. You have an elvish ring. And, you look like you could have been – high cheekbones, angular features and the gods know you're handsome enough. That could mean nothing."

"Well, it does, but go on."

"It's the other things, like the way your music puts me in a kind of daze or trance or whatever, just like elvish song. Also, your advice to me sounded very much like what an elf might say, save Jakkobb of course." She tapped her chin. "But you wouldn't be a full elf and a vampire. A half-elf, however is human enough to persevere..."

He shook his head. "I have rounded ears, that's the definition of what was once human. I know history like an elf because I have been through it, too. I've picked up a few immortal habits." He sighed. "The foremost of those should have been, do not involve yourself in mortal affairs."

"You are, however, and because you are, there is something more you should tell me."

He arched an eyebrow. "Oh, and what's that?"

"What's in that monastery? Are you after a spellbook?"

He drifted on the air. "No, it's a magical object, a stone heart." He blinked. "How did you get me to tell you that?"

"I asked, you answered."

"Yes, but why did I answer? Also, how did you get me to save those mortals in the fire? How did you get me to agree to send the chemman and his son to my ward?" He leaned closer. "How did you get me to?"

She shrugged. "My friend Donley, back in our village, always said I had the talent for getting people to do what I want. He said it was a priceless gift for a leader."

"Yes, but the only thing you're leading is yourself, into trouble."

"I've always had a talent for that too."

He almost smiled. "I kidnapped you for your talents."

"For getting into trouble?"

He sighed. "Absolutely not. You have the potential to be something, but it's not yet developed – hell, you don't even know. That's why you were a good choice, or so I thought at the time. You have at least an ability, but you're nothing special yet."

She glanced down to her Pallens sword. "You just need me to get the heart in this monastery."

"Yes."

"What talents do I have?"

He winked. "You'll see, and I believe I am the *least* likely teacher for those."

"What, like magic? I am not a magic user, Tom."

He shook his head. "No, Der. It's not like that. You wouldn't even have the attention span to even use a magical object."

"Like the one we're after? What does this magical object do?"

"According to lore, the same thing Chloe can do, but it's more powerful. At least, right now." He tucked his feet under him, still levitating but pretending to sit. "Der, I'll say it like this, I've



known where this object is for three centuries and I haven't gone after it before now. I'm just going to use it and then put it back. If we break whatever wards or spells are over it, I'll hide it somewhere new."

"You're not tempted," she said doubtfully.

"I'm not stupid. I know how powerful this object is, and I don't want to be hunted for it. I'm powerful enough on my own."

"Alright... how much magic can it control or absorb or whatever it is that Chloe does?"

"A fair bit. Your magician would be easy to overpower, but the unicorn or the dragon – they'd still probably win, which is why I'm going to avoid them after we acquire it." He sucked on his lower lip. "I – I'm not very good at talking to people, as you may have noticed. At least, not when it comes to telling the truth. What I'm trying to say is, Der, that this thing is dangerous."

She shrugged. "We can handle danger."

"You've never encountered anything like this. In fact, I myself have never dealt with anything such as this. And I don't want to. It's something that is so ancient that I don't know how old it is. Those monks didn't know its history because *no one does*. Nevertheless, these men, who honestly had no idea what they had, dedicated their entire lives to hiding this thing."

"Why don't you ask the elves? They probably know something."

"I'd doubt very much that they'd answer me," he drawled.

"Well, I could." She squirmed against the grain of the ancient log. "So, it's powerful, then?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Of course it isn't. Why else would men who had no idea what the thing was guard it with their lives? Did you not comprehend anything I just said?"

"Alright!" She frowned. "If no one knows what this heart is or can do, then how do you know that this will heal Chloe?"

He slapped his forehead with his palm. "You're not listening. I said that I didn't know its history. There were some records about some ancient mages who, well, postulated what it could do. It can suck, absorb, *gather* all the energy in a small area and change it into whatever its bearer wants – no training, no skill. I assume that it's a bit of an exaggeration. However, that does sound amazingly similar to what I've observed Chloe do."

"And these mages, they used it?"

Tom shook his head. "Uh, no, they didn't." He grinned a little. "They were going to, but according to this story – and I got this story in the library in Tenmar–"

She thrust up her hand. "Wait! That's supposed to be well guarded because it's the only library worth anything, well, to humans on this continent. It's not as if they let people in."

"I'll let that one pass," he drawled, after a pause. "Anyway, they don't guard their upper story windows at night. Alright, so these mages never got the chance to use it because Amiery, messenger of the gods, appeared and demanded that they stop."

Der's face went solid. "Amiery. The god himself. Showed up in person."

"Look, it's just a story, and believe me, humans love to make up stories about their gods."

She whistled. "Tom, this plan of yours is beginning to smell like a week old cracked egg. I mean, I don't know the right words to express this twisting in my stomach. Gods don't show up

in person!”

“It’s just a story, Der. I know that campfire stories don’t frighten you, or even vampires, apparently.”

“So, if it’s just a story then why do you believe the part about what the heart can do?”

He scowled. “I trust the author – he was there and these mages were credible. The part regarding Amiery must have been simple embellishment to get more people to listen to the tale. Bards do this all the time. This is the same thing. Please, this is the only way to save her.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Yes, because it’s the same power. Since I believe that her illness is of a magical nature, I can just absorb that energy without interrupting the fragile balance that’s keeping her alive. I can just remove it instantly.”

Der’s mouth twisted. “Fine, but if any gods show up, I won’t help you anymore.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. However, this is a risk that I’m taking for her. When I return, I’ll have to be fast, and it will be painful for her, but I can numb the pain or at least make her forget about it.”

“Your hypnotic power. We always just used alcohol.”

“Der, she’s seven.”

She shrugged. “Does Chloe know what you are?”

Tom shook his head. “No. She does not.”

“She’ll never know her hero then.”

His eyes flashed brightly. “I’m not a hero, Der. That’s your calling.”

“Still, she won’t truly ever know the man that saved her. That doesn’t sadden you?”

“If it does, it doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it? The truth is important!”

“More important than her innocence?” His eyes flashed red this time.

“Yes! Tom, you’re not a terrible creature. You’re doing this to save her life. You’re not bad.”

He snapped up a hand. “Stop! I am a fanged, blood drinking, unholy creature of the night! That’s it! That’s all I am!”

Der shook her head firmly.

“You should loathe me, and if you were wiser, you would.”

“I don’t hate you for what you are. I don’t like you because you’re a bastard to me.”

“Perhaps I’m a bastard because of what I am.” He raised a warning finger. “Don’t get philosophical on me because I’m smarter than you.”

“Yes, but you’re the one who’s having a change of heart.” She grinned.

Tom deflated. He ran a hand over his face while opening and closing his mouth several times. “That was the worst joke I’ve heard in a *century*.”

She smiled and shrugged.

“And I’m not changing it, alright? I’m just using it and getting rid of it as quickly as I can.” He pulled his other glove off and his hood back. “Ah, sweet nighttime, finally.” He blinked. “I can see again.” He drifted backward through the air like a ghost.

“You still have better vision than I do during the day.”

“Then you should see what I can at night.” He gazed over the ancient petrified forest and rose higher into the air.

“What do you see?”

He barked a laugh. “We’re here! The monastery!”

“You can see it?”

“I think so.” He floated down in front of her and held out his hand. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll get the others.”

“If you must, but I’m going now.”

Der looked over her shoulder toward camp.

Tom picked her up when her back was turned. “I know you cannot stand not to be in the front ranks, especially for something like this.”

She gave up. He was coming to know her too well. She squinted as they rose in the darkness over the Dead Forest. “I don’t see anything.”

“Oh, but I do.”

## Chapter Seventeen

### A Sinister Sanctuary

The rap on the door was sharp and annoyed. The chilly early autumn rain bounced off the wooden walls of the cottage. Slowly, the door creaked open an inch. An old man's voice quavered, "Who – who are you?"

The tall, drenched figure jerked the door open and pushed his way inside. He pulled back his hood to reveal brown hair and a distinctly elven face. He stared down at the old man. "You're the grandfather with the dying girl?"

In his shock, Erastus nodded dumbly.

The elf glanced across the one roomed cottage to the straw pallet. He sighed in disgust. "I'll just heal her and be on my way."

"Who are you?"

"Since you must know, I am the elven king's royal physician. You may address me as Peyna or master physician."

"You're an elven surgeon?"

"Physician, please." The elf crossed the space in three strides and looked studiously down at the bed.

Erastus grabbed his chest. "What – what are you doing here?" His mouth framed the words 'royal physician' again. He leaned against the wall for support.

Peyna glanced impassively at the man. "I'll give you a potion to drink if you keep grabbing your chest like that. As for your query, I truly don't know either. Personally, I find it best to leave mortals to themselves. However, the elven king befriended some, and worse – a man called Thistle. Somehow – and don't ask me because I know not – they're involved with some stranger trying to save this girl's life. I think your stranger will be disappointed when he returns and finds he could've stayed here drinking ale with the rest of the farm hands whilst I do all the work."

The grandfather's knees tottered and he clutched his chest even tighter. "*He sent you?*"

"I do not know to whom you are referring." He pushed up his wet sleeves, grabbed the cleanest bowl from Erastus's table and filled it with water from the bucket beside the bed. He frowned intently at the prone girl and started to scrub his hands with soap from his own pack.

"The vampire!"

Peyna's dripping hands froze above the bowl. "The what?" His eyes narrowed. "I tell you that Derora Saxen is involved then, only that girl could cause so much trouble. My good friend Duke Farallon has had quite a few words to say about her."

"Who and Duke who?"

Peyna rolled of his eyes. "Of course you wouldn't know. Listen to me, I'm going to do what I can for this girl, and then you and I shall talk."

"You truly work for the elven king? Of Arborn?"

"Yes, that's the elven kingdom. Now, *I'm* sent out on these piddling errands that an

apprentice to the craft could do! To humans, no less!" A breath of disgust escaped his mouth again.

"The nuns of Ahtome could do nothing."

"I'm sure they just weren't praying hard enough."

"No, they sent their best healer, and she tried medicine. Chloe is the only thing dear to me in the world! I sent for our village healer too, and the only thing he could think to do was bleed her."

Peyna snorted. "Bleed her! Did you have the man's hands cut off?"

"What? No, lord. But I wasn't going to allow it."

"Good for you, because all that would do is hasten her demise. Now, please, step back and let me work."

The old man shook his head like it was pulled on a string from both sides. "I can't afford this, my lord elf."

The physician shrugged. "Then it will be wonderful for you to learn we elves are above your money. However, when we must deal with the younger races, we do use a distinct form of coin, and I can give you all you want of that because it means nothing to me." He finished washing his hands. "I can tell that the vampire has permission to be in your house, I will uninvite him. If only I could create a magical ward to keep Derora Saxen away too. Of course, I could in actuality, but the new king might then be upset with me. He has a soft spot for you mortals."

He placed a hand gently on the girl's forehead, and cleared his throat. "I am surprised. This is a magical ailment, and one much more suited to my abilities."

"You know what's wrong with her?" Erastus dared to smile.

The scowling physician nodded. "Yes. I've handled something similar before, but not in a human and not one so young, and not in one where this has gone on so long. I am surprised that she has not already perished."

The old man couldn't fight his smile. "Then, there's hope?"

He squeezed his lips together. "There may be."

"*He* said he'd never heard of it."

"Well, I'm assuming this vampire hasn't been a physician for millennia." Peyna swallowed his spit. He gusted another sigh of distaste. "Understand that we elves revere and adore life, and the undead hate it."

"But he's trying to save her life."

"Is he really? He's more likely using her as an excuse for his own gain. Why would an undead thing care about a mortal child?"

"I— I don't know, lord." Erastus clasped his hands and bowed his head.

"I didn't expect you to. In fact, the answer is there is no reason. He doesn't care." The physician's eyes caught a flicker of dark movement. "You!" He leveled a finger at nothing.

Erastus whirled, but there was nothing to be seen until a shadow stepped forward to reveal itself. A boy pushed back his dark hood to reveal beautiful orange eyes. The old man snatched his chest again. The boy smiled energetically at the grandfather. "Good evening! My name is

Thalon!" His hands rested casually on the hilts of his long knives. "I'm here to meet my new friend!"

Spike raised his head. *Something has their attention.*

Jakkobb patted his axe's handle. "We should find out what that is." He fell into his stride, not waiting for the others to follow.

*I believe it's whatever our undead companion was searching for. I heard something about a monastery.*

"In the Dead Forest?" Kelin jogged after the knight's long strides.

"The monks wanted to be secluded." Jakkobb didn't slow for the humans.

Goldie perked up between the unicorn's ears. "Oooh. What's that place?"

Their path through the fallen stone logs wound like the torturous meanders of a river. Soon, they stepped over the crumbled remains of a short gray wall that once separated the profane from the sacred space and into the grounds of the monastery.

Growth and vegetation saturated the ruins. It was the only place around where greenery grew amongst the ruins. Around them, the pale stone skeleton of the monastery glowed in the moonlight.

"Must be built over a water source," Jakkobb murmured below his breath. Der waved at them from the cloister garth.

The knight passed around a half standing wall and into what must have been a garden once. The only things still growing were tangled weeds. "What is he here for?"

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with." Tom unfolded himself from the shadows behind the party.

Der shrugged helplessly.

"Tell them nothing." He turned a shoulder and walked out of the cloister.

She sighed. "He wasn't expecting ruins. I don't know what I expected."

Jakkobb's eyes searched the overgrown rubble. "Usually buildings with strong magical wards or spells in them don't collapse. They become decrepit and old, but the building still stands." He bunched his jaw. "I want to know why he brought you here."

She held out her empty hands.

"No, no, no!" They heard from the other side of the wall. They watched him kick a square chunk of granite. Sharp shards leapt for freedom as it shattered. "It has to be here!"

"Amongst the ruins?" Der asked.

Spike bobbed his nose toward the ground. *There are only weak remnants of magic here. Nothing's left. Not even the blessing of holy ground is left.*

Goldie looked at the world between the unicorn's ears. "This place is *old*."

"No!" Tom covered his face with his hands. "This was the only way to save her. It has to be here, we must find it."

Der stepped through where a door once stood. "We haven't been here that long. We'll find it. We'll search the ruins."

Jakkobb shook his head. "Doubtful. Because it appears that someone else found whatever

we are here for.”

*It is logical*, Spike agreed. *They must have torn down these buildings in their search. Nature hasn't moved these stones.*

“But they'd need someone like her!” Tom thrust a finger toward Der.

“Well, you knew,” Der snapped back. “Maybe they did too. What do you need me for anyway?”

“To—” His mouth clicked closed and he glared at the rest of the party. “Well, apparently it doesn't matter anyway, *because it's gone!*” Color flushed through his pale features for the first time. He gripped and regripped his fists. “It was the only way to save her! This was all about her! It's poisoning me, but I don't care! I need to—”

He broke off in a deep throated grunt, and he raked his fingernails across a marble wall fragment; they left scars over the stone just like the marks claws leave on flesh. The grunt morphed into a growl, and he slid his nails across what had once been a thin pillar. The granite cylinder fell cockeyed against half a stone wall. He'd shredded it into dozens of pieces with one pass of his hand.

“It was supposed to be here! I came all this way! This is her *last chance!*” He flung his head against the high remnants of a wall. Cracks exploded out from the epicenter. Tom stepped back, wiped a hand across his forehead and just stared at the blood.

He sank first to his knees, and then just sat down on the ground and thrust his head in his hands. “It can't end this way. It can't.”

He didn't move. He didn't even breathe. A pool of stillness rippled out from him and surrounded the party.

“M-Maybe they missed it,” Mora quavered from behind Kelin. “Or they didn't know how to get it, so they just tore the buildings down.”

“I guess we could search.” Kelin shrugged.

“Of course, it would help if we knew what we were looking for,” Jakkobb snorted.

Der said, “It's a—”

Tom snapped his fingers. “Don't say it. I shouldn't have even told you.” He floated to his feet.

“Why not? It's gone anyway.”

He snatched her wrist and before anyone else could move, marched her away to the other side of a ruined wall. He glanced back at the knight and unicorn, and pulled Der farther away. He leaned in and hissed into her ear. “Because they'll make you leave without even trying. Tell me, have you ever heard of the legend of stone and bone?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Good. Leave it that way. You don't want to know.”

“Are you alright? Just a heartbeat ago you were—”

“I'm fine,” he pushed through gritted teeth.

“I don't believe you.”

He took both of her hands, but gently. “I need your help. This is a dangerous thing we're after, and I am afraid that the knight will decide that it's too dangerous. That it's better to just let

my girl die.”

Der whipped her head back and forth. “Then you don’t know Jakkobb.”

“I know his ilk,” Tom replied darkly. “He’ll propose some other method – like your physician – and ignore the fact that I’ve already tried everything else! There is no other way! Please, let’s search here. No one may have found it yet. Remember that you promised to help me.”

They spent the night picking over the bones of the monastery. They tore through stones and marched through the old chapels, libraries and dormitories. Nothing was left except the faint outlines and some of the walls, which met their end on Tom’s foot. Even the books had disintegrated centuries ago, leaving only piles of dust. The others passed through the rooms idly, eyes brushing over the ruins for anything seemingly unusual.

Kelin chuckled as Mora tied the knots on the elvish cord that they used to move debris. He’d taught them to her not an hour before. She had needed a quarter of an hour instruction before she understood them. His mouth parted slightly as he thought about how much he had taught her on their travels thus far, and yet, she was still so dependent on him. A smile forced itself on his face as he had to admit he rather liked it.

She often impressed him with her simple spells. Between her and the dragon, they hadn’t used a firestarter in a week, although the dragon’s flame had a tendency to turn the wood to ash instantly. They might be sans fire tonight, he mused. Of course, the thicket in the monastery was too green to burn, and the rest of the forest appeared to be stone.

Mora smiled warmly. “I wish I knew what we were after. I could try a locate spell, or even a spell to identify if there’s any magical seals or something here. I know the unicorn said he didn’t sense much, but I’d at least like to try.”

He nodded and smiled back. “That’d be wonderful, but we don’t want you to do much magic anyway. I know it has to tax your body.” He tied the elven cord onto the handle of another old cellar trapdoor.

He heaved on the cord and the stone slab gave way only to reveal a fairly intact wooden cover below. Mora grabbed the handle and pulled. The handle wrenched off the wood and into her hand as the rest of the door crumbled down into the darkness below.

She grinned. “This might be it. We might find the thing, right now. We could be the heroes!”

“And we don’t even know what we’re searching for.”

He stuck his upper body through the hole and came back with a small wooden chest.

“You’re right. This could be it.”

“Should we get the others?”

“Y– No.” He started to whisper, “If this is the thing, don’t you want to know what it is?”

“Of course.”

Kelin glanced over his shoulder. Tom was most conspicuously not there. The human wondered what the vampire might do to him if he had the object. Of course, he’d have to open the box anyway just to find out.

“Well, go on,” Mora prompted.

“Uh...” He thrust the chest at her. “Is there any magic or anything around this?”



She hummed to herself for a moment. "I don't think so."

He flipped open the latch to reveal some ancient spoons and forks, belt buckles, beads, and even a preserved pair of rope sandals. At least, they looked preserved until Kelin tried to touch them, and they collapsed into dust.

"Oh!"

"I just hope he wasn't after ancient footwear."

Kelin forced a grin. "Probably not. But there's something else in here." He lifted a string of beads, but as soon as he had it an inch from the ground, the string disintegrated and the eight beads bounded like children at play in every direction. He recovered one of the dark blue beads, dusted it, and held it up to the light.

"Do you think this is it?" Mora breathed.

Kelin rotated the bead into the moon in his dirty fingers. "Beautiful. Look at all that detail; the artisan must've carved this with a needle! I think it's Ahtome's. It certainly looks like the statute back in Malfax." He chuckled. "Feels like we were there years ago." He offered it to Mora.

"Here, look at it."

"Ahtome?" She didn't raise her hand to accept the bead. "Oh no, I'm too afraid I'll break it."

He grinned ruefully. "I already did, but I'm sure Ahtome understands it was an accident. Here, take it."

"No." She retreated a step. "There's still magic in that."

"Then it's good magic. There's nothing to fear here – except what perhaps Tom is seeking, but I don't think it's this. These monks must have been pleasant enough fellows, it's not like this place is an old temple to Sennha."

She forced a little laugh. "Of course not."

Kelin's face darkened. "Der and I just have poor luck with those soul eating ne'er-do-wells, too. We haven't yet met a worshiper of his that hasn't tried to kill us." He winked. "So far, we've come out alive and they haven't."

"What do you mean poor luck? You seem to have the opposite."

"Yes, you've seen what Der did in Hughling, and Tom too. Well, last autumn Der, another friend of ours who is an elf, and I killed two fell priests between the three of us. We heard that cult went crazy after their leaders' deaths, and that's why the king routed them."

"The leaders in Thealith, but not Urael. Your king has no jurisdiction there."

Kelin set the rosary beads reverently on the ground. "What do you mean not in Urael?" He sighed. "Of course the cult would thrive there too. Wait."

"I think—"

He held up a hand. "Let's think about this. The cult would be unified across the borders, and they'd want revenge on Thealith! They could have their fingers in this very war! Oh, it makes sense! That spy – Corran – mentioned a wizard, and those priests had wizardly powers!" His boots scraped the rock as he took off running. "Jakkobb! Captain!"

He found the knight-captain standing at the edge of the large ravine behind the monastery's refectory. The waist deep foliage made the steep drop a natural trap.

Kelin bolted his body to attention. "Sir!"

“What is it, lad?” Jakkobb remained eyeing the abrupt crack in the earth.

“I have a thought! Sennha’s cult wants revenge on Thealith. Corran said they had a wizard, I bet it’s a fell priest! Why else would a wizard be involved?”

The knight exhaled carefully and glanced down to him. “Yes, that sounds something the cult would attempt, but as you said at first, it’s just a thought. The kingdoms have enough reasons—excuses, pardon me, on their own.”

Kelin shifted his weight anxiously. “I know, I know, but it sounds right.”

“Yes, it does, but we couldn’t prove it. Even if it was true, and if we had evidence, we’d be too late. Look, I don’t want this war to happen any more than you, and I’d like it to be a conspiracy of Sennha’s and we could end it with destroying the cult entirely – but that’s not how life works.”

“Yes, sir.” He ducked his head.

“These kingdoms are willing enough on their own, with or without the cult.”

“But why, sir? They should know better.”

Jakkobb chuckled darkly. “You’ll often find that people don’t act as intelligently as they actually are.”

Mendelin’s star glowed overhead in the heavens. For as long as the story had been around, musicians had asked the prince’s star to grant them musical skill. In the back of her mind, Der wished she could play an instrument. Below it, she watched a large red star began to climb.

“You see how the demon star rises to the left of the prince’s star?” Tom’s voice was soft behind her. He spread out his cloak to sit upon.

“Yes.”

“It was a traditional belief in Pallens that bad omens and evil often approach from the left.”

“Why did they believe that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know; I wasn’t around in the Empire.”

She nodded. “No sign about the heart?”

He thrust his head back into his hands. “None. Perhaps it has already been claimed. You don’t know, but I destroyed any record I could find of it, three hundred years ago.”

Der’s eyes drifted over the ruins. “You know, it’s still pretty green here, and thick too. There must be a spring or something nearby.”

Tom shrugged. “And this helps us, how?”

“Well, if we’re going to be here, I at least need water.”

Suddenly, a child-like voice burst through the flora. “I found it! I found it!” Der and Tom looked around, but it was impossible to see the little dragon.

A golden blur streamed out from the brush as the chubby little dragon ran at the fastest hopping run his legs could carry him. He barreled into Der’s leg. Little shoots of flame blew from his mouth as he panted.

She inched away from the creature, leaning forward to stay out of the fire’s reach. “You found what, Goldie?”

He popped his shiny face up. “The monastery!”

Tom and Der exchanged a glance. "Excuse me, little one?" Tom blurted. "It's all right here." He waved his hand in a wide arc.

The dragon shook his head. "No. I found it." He waddled around to face the way he had come. "Through there. It's really scary!" He took off at a stumpy hop toward the thick foliage again.

Der shrugged and rose. "Well, we haven't looked outside the ruins yet." She followed the dragon, but couldn't squeeze through the small breaks in the brush. So, she shoved her way into the thicket, and grumbled in frustration when it was too solid to pass through. She drew her sword.

Tom almost smiled to himself at the sight of the girl using the Pallens sword as a machete.

Meanwhile, she muttered to herself, "I can't believe I'm using this sword for this." She hacked at the tangling vines and weeds. The sword sliced through them with a sigh. Halting for a moment, she ran her thumb along the edge, careful not to cut herself. It was as sharp as ever.

"Almost there!" the dragon chirped from somewhere ahead.

She brought her arm back and attacked the vegetation again.

"Whoa! Stop, stop, stop!"

Stepping forward, she nearly lost her balance as the ground beneath her foot suddenly sloped away. When she was sure of her footing, she peeked over the edge.

"Tom!" She jumped and waved her hands above her head. "To me!"

She knew he heard her, but he didn't look up. With his left hand, he split a stone fragment larger than his fist, and then slowly stood and started walking. His voice was cold. "What is it?"

"Um, the dragon was right. He found the monastery." The little dragon curled around her boots, staring down over the edge.

He sniffed as he neared them. "What do you mean? Its ruins are right over there."

She shook her head quickly. "No, it's here." She pushed aside the foliage.

His eyes widened and his mouth slid open. Below them, a thick pond motionlessly occupied the hollow between the hills. The monastery had long crumbled away, but its reflection remained whole.

In the water, a dominating black marble structure loomed as if it had just been built. Towering square pillars on either side of the forty-foot doors were decorated with battles and intertwining dragons. Blood red stained glass walls framed the pillars and the black doors.

Der licked her lips. "Uh, Tom? What kind of monks lived there?"

"I've always thought it was the good kind, but... I never expected this. You know, I rather like it."

She glared at him. "I don't."

He dropped his head. "We've been looking in the wrong place all along." He bunched a fist. "We're close. I can feel it."

"This scares me, Tom, and I don't frighten easily. First, it was gods telling wizards not to get involved, and then *you* say that this thing is too dangerous."

"I am aware."

She drummed her fingers on her leg. "How would we even get in?"

He shrugged and leaped over the edge. After a long, graceful fall, he slipped through the surface of the water with no splash. The ripples sank inward to the center of his entry point, and the baleful reflection of the monastery was hardly disturbed.

Behind her, she heard the rapid approach of Jakkobb and Kelin. Goldie tightened his grip around her ankle. She pointed down to the pond. "Look at what Goldie found, sir."

Jakkobb drew in his breath sharply. "Oh. Damn."

Tom finally bobbed to the surface, after too much time had passed for anyone trying to hold air in his lungs. He cursed darkly, and ripped off a swimming snake furiously biting his arm. He harshly lobbed the creature back into the water. "Drowned and poisoned, what next?"

"You didn't believe that was going to work?" Der called down.

He shook his head. "No, I thought there may have been a clue at the bottom of the pond. Only blasted snakes, and maybe a few leeches."

She opened her mouth to comment about fangs and bloodsuckers, but looked at his expression and bit her tongue. Goldie squeezed his talons protectively into her clothing as Tom floated up the incline.

"I think we should walk away," Kelin said softly. He gazed down, beneath the perfectly smooth surface of the pond at the black temple. "I know that sounds like something I would've said a year ago, but this new warrior doesn't believe anything good may come of this."

"Please, do." Tom drew himself level with them, but remained standing in the air. "I only need Der."

"We go where she does," Jakkobb said evenly.

"How could we get inside?" Kelin asked.

"I'd like to know how we are going to get out *before* we go in." The captain crossed his arms.

"I found something!" Mora, back inside the ruins, waved a thin, rectangular stone above her head. Tom snatched it out of her hand in the next second, while the others were just taking their first steps. He hissed and dropped the tablet. Spike narrowed his eyes over the vampire's shoulder.

"It has writing on it." Mora picked it back up and twisted it toward the bright moonlight. "I can't read it." She tilted it toward Kelin when he stepped beside her. "Is that elvish?"

He shook his head. "No, it's not. I can't make it out."

Spike stepped beside Der silently, and nudged the dragon with his nose. Goldie climbed into his forelock with his chubby legs kicking the whole way. The unicorn didn't seem to mind and started to back away slowly.

Der grabbed the stone tablet out of her hands. "What do you mean you can't read it? It reads, 'To clerics, beware, only those of worth may enter and break the seal.'"

"Very good." Jakkobb smiled grimly. "Except you forgot one thing."

"What's that?"

Jakkobb snatched the tablet. "You don't read any ancient languages."

Her mouth fell open. "But, I can read it clearly! You mean you can't?"

He held the stone away from him, looking askance at it. "No."

“It’s a miracle,” Mora said, astonished.

Tom held his forehead and bared his teeth. His entire body trembled against a force no one else felt. “Yes, I know, and it’s giving me a headache. Now, Der, did you read the whole thing?”

She shook her head. “There are two lines more.”

“Finish it.” The words shredded through his fangs.

“What is sealed is not crystal, but stone. Where one goes, the other will follow.” She looked up in confusion. “Well, that doesn’t make any sense—”

Der blinked and when she reopened her eyes, she felt suddenly very short as she found herself staring upward at the dark monastery. The ruins were gone. The tablet was gone. She saw Jakkobb, Mora, Kelin and Tom. She wiped her forehead; it was already sweating. Heavy air pressed down on their shoulders, and the heat clung to them like wet clothing.

Orange light drifted down from the sky. Slowly, as one, they looked up. Fire rolled lazily in the stormy clouds. They watched as the clouds twisted and churned in orange, yellow, red and their centers were white and green and blue. The clouds themselves looked more like black smoke than thunderheads. The sky was alight from horizon to horizon, with no break in the fiery heavens.

“Where are we?” Der yelled, shading her eyes upward.

“I don’t know!” Jakkobb hollered back, one arm shielding his face to the heat. The burning clouds began to spin above their heads. He slammed his visor down. “Run!” He cleared the first of the petrified logs. At the height of his jump, he saw the Dead Forest extending all around in every direction forever.

An arm of fire plummeted to the ground. They slipped against the blackened, sandy ground as they pumped their legs as hard as they could. Der buried her eyes in the smaller door to the side of the grand entrance to the monastery, and didn’t dare lose any steps checking over her shoulder at what was falling toward them.

The fireball slammed into the ground where they had been standing, and the explosion rocked them to the earth. Der and Jakkobb bounced back to their feet immediately. Kelin pulled Mora back on balance, and kept a hold of her hand. The captain pointed. “The monastery, go!”

He looked up to see another arcing fireball. Behind them, he could see the fires of the first attack dying out already – there was nothing to burn here.

Tom reached the door almost instantly, and looked back at the party and the sky. It writhed like a bag of snakes, and several giant tendrils were twisting out of that bag. It was beginning to rain fire. He spun and kicked the door, but it was resistant even to him.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Never Alone Again

Peyna leapt to his feet and ran to the door. He cursed heavily in his native tongue. He could hear the horses and the shouts in the forest, but most of all he felt the forest itself screaming. In these lands where humans had dug themselves in, the woodsong was muted, but he could still hear it. The physician pushed open the door, closed his eyes and listened. He also listened to the animals, and the birds screeching.

She wasn't cured, but with Peyna's constant attention she was finally awake and the fever quelled. The physician did his best, but he could only put the magic inside of her to sleep. Trying to remove it would kill her, he'd explained to Erastus, because it would require more magic introduced into her system to pull it out. Instead, he coached the girl and was trying to teach her to use it and rid herself of the infecting power. However, the child was too young. The physician knew he had only prolonged her death.

Chloe pulled the blanket up to her chin. "What's going on, Thalon?"

The boy, sitting cross-legged at the end of the bed, shook his head. "I don't know. Trouble." "Raiders!" Peyna snapped the door of the cottage shut loudly.

Erastus raised his head. "Oh, Amiery's staff, we're lost."

"No, we are not. The human race might be, but we, in this house, are not." He reopened the door and stepped outside. Turning to face the cottage, he waved his hand once over his head at the small building. It wavered in the air like a giant heat wave and then vanished completely. Peyna took a step forward and disappeared from sight.

He closed the door behind him. "I have cast a glamour over us, which is a spell that hides or distorts sight. We will not be seen." He sat down at the table. When he turned away, Thalon handed Chloe a knife from his boot.

She fingered the blade below the blanket. "We're safe then?"

"Yes," the elf answered.

Erastus slowly began to set the table for their meal as if nothing was wrong. His trembling hands betrayed him. Outside, he heard their whoops and yells drawing nigh the cabin. In fact, they seemed to be stopping at the door. A plate slipped from his fingers and the crash echoed like thunder.

The elf's eyes snapped wide and he hopped to his feet.

"Unless they have a wizard," Thalon said softly. "Like their spy said."

Peyna scowled. "Indeed they do, I feel his magic. Damn! Why? Why here?" His gaze slid over to the girl...

"We're not safe, are we?" Chloe gripped her knife tighter.

"I can fight." Thalon twirled his long knives in his hands and jumped off the bed.

The physician glared down at the child. "You're seven, lad." He stuffed the bar down across the door as if he didn't want to touch the wood.

The boy held up his blades for everyone to see. "Who else around here is going to help?"

Until my father gets back from the village.”

“Well, we certainly don’t need whatever information he’s gathered now.”

“What’s going on?” Erastus quavered.

“They’ve found us.” Peyna gripped his fists. “That wizard!” He grabbed handfuls of his hair. “Arggh! How does he know about her? What— why does he—” He caught his own tongue and slammed his lips shut.

Thalon shot around the physician as the door began to rattle. Angry grunts and voices levered the door from the outside. It shook in its frame as the raiders pushed it from the outside.

The boy slipped beside the entrance, knives at the ready. Peyna closed his eyes and chanted beneath his breath. Erastus’s hairs began to stand on end. He stumbled back away from the elf toward Chloe’s sickbed. The physician growled lowly. “I’ll deal with the wizard. Boy, keep them safe.”

“My father will come.”

“I almost hope he does not.”

The metal hinges squealed like injured pigs. With the tortured whine of wood, the door peeled away from the cottage, and its nails jumped free. Two men with swords immediately burst through the opening.

Thalon sliced his knife along the ankle of the nearest man. He screamed and swung his sword toward his attacker, but stuck it in the door frame well above the boy’s head.

Peyna didn’t move, even though the attackers were only a few feet away. More pushed them inside from behind.

“Dad! Where are you?” Thalon screamed as he rolled backward from the doorway.

Tom backed away from the stubborn door. The heat wrapped itself around his neck and body, but he didn’t sweat. Behind him, he heard the mad heartbeat of footsteps of the others as another torrent of flames came crashing down toward them. He glared profoundly at the door and charged.

He hit the door with his shoulder and felt the satisfying crunch of wood. He slammed his eyes shut in pain as a large splinter drove itself deeply into his shoulder. He staggered through the door and didn’t stop until he collided with a wall. With his other hand, he reached up and tore out the embedded wood and pressed his hand against the bloody wound until it began to close.

Jakkobb, with Der two steps behind, raced through the opening. The knight grabbed at the two significant pieces that remained of the door.

Der gasped as she looked up. The entire fiery sky screamed down for them. She could hear the rapid roar of the fireballs and felt their searing heat even from this distance. She held out her hand to Kelin and Mora. “Hurry! Don’t look back!” Above them, she stared at the rows of fireballs tumbling toward them.

“Almost – there!” Kelin flew across the threshold, literally dragging Mora behind him.

Jakkobb thrust the remains of the door back in its frame. He and Der braced their weight

against it. The sky reached the ground in a thunderous explosion. The red glass rattled in its cast iron frames and lit up gloriously like a thousand sunsets.

The knight and warrior were thrown back from the fragments of the door and the two pieces shattered even further, but no flames crossed into the monastery.

“Why was the sky attacking us? Why didn’t the glass break? We should be dead!” Mora rocked back and forth on the floor. Kelin put a silent arm around her shoulder.

Jakkobb exhaled. “Monastery must be magically protected. As for why that happened, whoever built this place didn’t want just anyone walking in, I suppose.”

“Where are we?” Mora asked.

“At the monastery, obviously. I wonder if Spike is watching us in the pond’s reflection.”

“We’re not at the ruins?”

He snorted. “Apparently not! Last I saw the Dead Forest didn’t go to every single horizon, and the sky was *blue!*”

Kelin fingered the walls and the spice of fear flavored his words. “Is this a realm like Darkreign?”

The captain shrugged. “Possibly. I don’t know. But getting out of here is likely to be just as hard, or worse.”

Der leaned against a wall and watched the sweat drip off her nose onto the black floor. She concentrated on the air swinging in and out of her lungs in ragged lumps. A cold hand teased the soaked and matted hair away from her eyes.

“Derora.” Tom pulled back his hand.

“I’ll be alright.” She pushed her weight against the wall. “Your shoulder, you’re hurt.”

He shrugged stiffly. “I’ll be fine.” With his un-bloodied hand, he helped her to stand away from the wall.

Mora hadn’t looked up. “Did we bring any water?”

Jakkobb laughed softly. “Ha.” He pulled himself away from the wall. “Alright, Tom, why *the hell* are we here? I want to know what we’re after.”

“An object to help me save Chloe’s life.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“You’ll have to live with it.”

“Um,” Der interjected, “We should try to find another stone tablet. Like the one that brought us here.”

The knight nodded. “That too, but the exit might not be the same as the way in.” He glared back at the vampire. “However, we’re not going to do anything about that until you tell us what you’re after.”

Tom smiled brightly with his teeth. “Never, elf.” Suddenly he grabbed Der around her waist and they vanished.

The captain swore violently. “You two, up! We’re going after them! Now!”

“Jakkobb! This—” Tom clamped a heavy hand over her yell.

“Don’t you try.” His fangs were bared. He shoved her in front of him. “Now, go.”



“Tom, we need their help!”

“Absolutely not.” He snatched her wrist and pulled her behind him down the corridor.

“We should at least try to find another tablet.”

“I’m not concerned with that yet.”

She sighed and furrowed her brow. “I read that tablet like I read the paper in the tavern. Why didn’t you tell me the others couldn’t read it?”

He chuckled darkly. “You were expecting me to?”

“No. I am asking for an explanation though.”

“I shouldn’t be the one to tell you.”

She smiled weakly. “There’s no one else around.”

His staccato footsteps slowed. “Alright then. I don’t know if this power is yours or you’re borrowing it from your sword, but you have the ability to read the holy language.”

“Holy language?”

“Yes. It’s a gift that only a few people possess or have the ability to learn, usually in convents, temples, or monasteries.” He gestured to the walls. “Only those naturally endowed by or later imbued with it can read or speak it. No one can just learn it; it has to be a gift. Personally, I don’t know if you can speak it now or merely read it, but I only need the latter.”

“I have a holy power?” She tapped her chest where the Dawn Sword rested below her shirt.

He shrugged. “Possibly, or it’s your sword’s. Then again, you can wield the sword in the first place.” He grinned that special vampire smile. “Like I said, I should not be the one to tell you this.”

“I’ll agree with that,” she replied nervously. “I don’t think I fully understand, though.”

“I knew I needed someone able to read this language, but I didn’t know what exactly for, my information was vague at best on this part of the journey. Although, now I believe I would have been better off kidnapping someone from Ahtome’s temple.”

She almost smiled. “Quite possibly.”

“If you weren’t the incarnation of trouble, you wouldn’t have been a bad choice. You didn’t know your power, so I could use that blindness. More importantly, you have the ability, but you’re nothing special yet. Say, if I had abducted an acolyte priestess or priest, they might already know some spells against me – if they found out what I was. I don’t know if my mind control would have worked on them or not, an acolyte probably. You, however, knew nothing. I will admit you can fight, and I wanted that because I knew there’d be at least some trouble. Nevertheless, you’re just an ordinary girl with an extraordinary sword.”

She frowned. “I’ll be more someday.”

“If you don’t get killed. Besides, you don’t even know what you want.” He started walking down the hall again. “We’ll have to hurry. Most monasteries are laid out to the same basic pattern of the holy circle of Carenth, and this part of the structure seems to resemble that. This is an important object, so it’ll most likely be in or near the abbot’s quarters.”

“Jakkobb might have the same idea.”

“We’ll have to beat him there then.”

“I wonder what the main temple hall looks like.”

“I don’t. Now, come on.”

She was disappointed to find he was right, again. The abbot’s quarters were easy to find. He pushed the door open and thrust his head in. “Hm. Nothing here.”

Der poked her head in the door. “You’re right.” Inside, there was a rolled up sleeping mat and a couple candle sconces.

Tom looked around. “Let’s try this door.” He nodded to a second door inside the room. He reached for the latch. “Damn!” He jerked his hand back.

“What is it?”

He bent his head down to the latch. “There’s something on this side, and if I can see – ah, a needle.”

“Poisoned?”

“Assuredly.” He grinned. “Good thing it was me instead of you.”

“How do we know the poison’s even still good?”

“Well, prick your finger and if you die, I’ll know it’s still effective.”

She glowered and kicked the door. The polished wood exploded open to her foot. Sleek gray walls and floors shone against the haunting orange light. In the back, yet another small door had been propped open. She pushed it wide and stepped inside.

There was no skylight in this room.

“I can’t see anything.” She thrust her hands into the enshrouding black.

“You’ll need this.” He struck a single match against his thumb, lit the tiny lamp and handed it over. It rested easily in her palm. She wondered if she was going to break the fragile thing. She gazed around the empty room.

The space could have been no larger than ten by ten feet, but it held at least a hundred thousand words. They haunted every inch, including the ceiling and the floor. She nearly pressed her nose against the wall, squinting in the tiny yellow light. “It’s in Palls. I picked up a few words last winter. I know *carmen* means song or poetry, but I can’t read this.”

Tom ran his hands over the walls. “I can.” He shuddered.

“You alright?”

“Oh, I’m fine. It’s just that I don’t like being in a room covered in the written language of the paladin empire.”

“Then anyone can learn Palls, unlike this other language.”

“Yes, now start looking.”

“Tom, I can’t read this.”

He tapped his fingers on the stone. “Try to look for a picture of a heart, or something. Just try to read it anyway, I think the word or words we’re looking for won’t be written in Palls, but in the holy language. So, if you can read anything...”

“Alright.” She bent the lamplight against the wall again. “This is still a horrible plan.”

He hinted at a grin. “Well, I won’t argue with you on that matter.”

“Right.” She bit her lip. “Were you serious about putting this object back after you’re done with it? It is an easy means of power.”

“Yes, Der, I am. I don’t want it.”

“You’re certain?”

“Absolutely. Unlike you, I prefer my dangers at a distance.”

She looked helplessly against the wall for a moment. “Honestly truly?”

“Keep reading and stop pestering me.”

Her hands drifted over the wall. She found another word she knew, *ferrum*, one of the words for sword. She smiled at that and moved the lamplight onward. Suddenly a word looked like it was written in Common. It had just come into focus against all the other words. Der ran a finger over the word. “Demon.”

Instantly, a small dark cloud burst out from around the word and the writing vanished. Der gasped, and started looking around for any gods. After all, according to Tom’s stories, this is when they would appear.

The floor trembled and the wall, as one whole unit, shrank back a foot. Except for one flat shelf with the word ‘demon’ carved on its front. Sitting just below the plane, a jade box sat inside the shelf.

Tom was already beside her and snatched at the box before the wall even stopped moving. He pried at it. There was no lock but it acted as if the hinges and lid were fused with the rest of the stone. “Damn thing!”

She pointed. “There’s words on the side!”

He held up the box. “No, it’s just a pattern carved in relief, some fat sheep dancing on their hind legs.”

“No. Trust me, there’s words there.”

He thrust the chest at her nose. “Read it, then.”

Her eyes scanned the words. “No! It says demon again, and you didn’t say anything about demons!”

“Please, Derora, this could be my little girl’s only chance.”

She bunched her fists, and looked at him as she repeated aloud, “Through mountains high and valleys deep, the heart of a demon therein forever beats.”

“Thank you.” With his fingertips, he lifted the jade lid. Cushioned in ancient red silk, a smooth, black rock in the shape of a heart silently waited. Bright red veins danced along the edges and through the stone object. Tom’s face leaned over the heart as he stared.

“It’s just a stone heart.” Der peered around him into the box. “Veins, like the seams that run through rock, and in the heart – get it?”

He blinked and snapped the lid shut. “Stop making jokes! This isn’t the right time.”

She held up her hands. “Sorry. If it’s any help, looking at it makes me queasy.”

“Well, don’t vomit on it. This is a talisman that is much, much older than both of us.” He reopened the box. “*Staryo’krish.*”

“What?”

“Its name. The monster’s heart, or demon’s, it’s the same word in this ancient language.”

“What language?”

He didn’t answer.

The stone box and silk collapsed into dust in his hands, leaving the heart in his palm. He

looked up at her and his eyes unfocused.

“Tom?”

He stared emptily at her. Then, mechanically, he turned his face to the stone heart. It started to beat in his hand. His eyes faded from emerald and filled with an even brighter red. His body tensed and started quivering. The heart beat faster.

Quietly, Der drew the Pallens sword. Tom paid her no heed. She lunged at the heart, trying to knock it from his hand, or even slice off his hand if it came to it.

The sword stabbed nothing but air. She never saw him move.

Fingernails like claws wrenched themselves down her arm. She staggered back, struggling to keep a grip on her sword with her bleeding arm. “Tom!”

There was no recognition in those red eyes. He snarled, and she suddenly knew what it was like to be prey. She brought the Pallens sword up, and the blade’s reflection amplified the meager lamplight.

Tom floated back away from the shine, one hand shielding his face. He looked back to the pounding stone in his hand and then back to her. Suddenly, his left hand shot up and tore at his own chest.

In the next bloody instant, Der saw him holding two hearts.

Something finally snapped inside. She whirled toward the door, bolted through the tiny rooms, skidded into the corridor and didn’t stop running.

“By the ages of the Empire, look at this place!” Kelin gaped at the dome of crystal. The fiery sky shone through the clear structure. It writhed across the sky like an ocean in a storm. He looked around the room. It was a chapel with pews and a huge stone altar. Ancient chalices of gold and silver, covered in spider webs, still awaited their offerings.

“This isn’t good,” Jakkobb muttered. “Let’s go. We’re supposed to be finding a stone tablet that only Der can read. Oh, and if it’s not too much trouble, Der too.”

Mora squinted. “I think that there’s some books on those shelves behind the altar.”

“Paper didn’t last at the other monastery,” Kelin said.

She stepped on the dais. “Yes, but it’s out of the weather here. It’s protected.”

The stone floor beneath them began to rumble and even creak like old wood. She spun, and then froze. “Um...”

“Protected, yes.” Cautiously, Jakkobb reached out his hand in her direction. “You should probably get off that thing.”

“Actually.” Mora’s voice had taken on a nervous lilt, “I don’t think we should move. At all.”

Jakkobb opened his mouth to say something sharp but his thought was cut short as a beastly rumble of a growl echoed around the stone walls. “Oh,” the knight said in a normal tone of voice, “Of course. We stepped inside the sacred chapel and up on the dais. Why can’t they ever think of something other than a killer monster?” Then he turned to face the new threat.

Kelin swallowed. “Because killer monsters *work*.”

The sheath fell off the knight’s axe like water, and Kelin was only a few steps away, drawing his sword. Mora grabbed Kelin’s shoulder from behind.

He stared at the thing. The guardian could have descended from a bizarre mix of a canine and an ox. It moved and snarled like a dog, but it was as large as an ox and obviously as strong. Two long horns protruded from its forehead. Muscles bunched and rippled as it crouched for an attack. Slimy saliva streamed from its exposed jaws to the floor.

Kelin grinned over his shoulder to Mora. "Since I might not get another chance... I'm just going to say it. I'm in love with you. I know that this isn't the right time or place, but I love you."

She gasped. "But—"

Jakkobb shouted, "You won't get the chance to say it again if you just stand there! Move!"

The canine-ox beast launched itself across the chapel in one leap, directly at their throats.

Der lost herself in the maliciously decorated corridors. Her eyes scraped over the walls. Had these monks focused on sins or just enjoyed scaring visitors? Why would *anyone* create such vulgar designs? She felt her stomach tighten at the sight of a huge snake eating the souls of the fallen.

She kept doggedly running. The skylights continuously ran overhead, providing her with that strange orange light. How big could a monastery be? It was supposed to be circular! Then again, it was a magical building, she remembered, so perhaps it could go on forever, and she was only leading herself further away from her friends.

The darkness and orange glow leached away signs of colors other than orange, black, or brown. Der shuddered as memories of Darkreign trickled down her spine. She could almost see it again. They had been lost in an enemy city, where at least the walls were devoid of mutilated decorations. Most everything had been plain and gray. She still got headaches remembering the days of nothing except bland gray. She chuckled nervously aloud. Somehow, that colorless underworld hadn't seemed this frightening.

Then again, she hadn't been alone in Darkreign.

She stopped and leaned against a frieze. After she found her breath again, she looked up at the picture. It portrayed a victim having his stomach removed by a masked man, and then being forced to eat it. She felt the vomit creeping up from her own stomach.

Alone. She felt absolutely enormous at the same time she felt insignificantly tiny. She failed to describe it any other way. Did Tom feel this all the time?

In the empty space, her acute breathing cut through the air like a saw. She glanced down at her sword and surprised herself to see a few specks of blood on it. But the blade had missed him entirely. Her eyes dragged upward to her arm. Oh, it was her own.

The only sound was her uneven breath and the pounding of her heart. She tore off the other sleeve of her shirt to tie up her sword arm. Mentally, she cursed. Closing her eyes, she pushed her back against the wall. A moment's rest, she told herself.

She needed to find her friends. Alright, how? Where were they? She had to avoid Tom, and didn't even know what condition he was in. Therefore, she told herself, assume the worst.

What if Tom found her friends first?

She sagged against the wall. If that happened, there was nothing she could do. She swallowed the thought, where it settled uneasily in her stomach.

After that, they would need to find the way out. Where did Mora find the tablet in the other

monastery? Would another tablet be in an equivalent location? This building didn't seem the same.

Her throat felt like it would crack from dryness. She tried to ignore the longing for water. Next, inventory. What tools did she carry? Her pendant, sword, dagger, swordbelt, shirt, trousers, boots, belt for her trousers and socks. Not much that would be of use. She also carried a belt pouch that contained a few gold coins, some elvish firestarters, a whetstone for her dagger and a thin but strong cord. Now, how to add all that up into an escape?

Der went for her sword before her next thought fully registered. Something was wrong. Maybe it was a change in temperature or texture of the shadows; she didn't know. All she could think was that something was different.

She pushed herself away from the wall, but left it at her back. The skin along her arms tingled. The Pallens sword came on guard before her, and the light that reflected from the blade was of a much purer shade than the orange fire.

She turned around, expecting to see Tom standing right behind her.

No one was there.

Moving around another corner, she flinched away from the walls. Life sized impressions of the tormented souls desperately clawed the insides of the walls.

Der held her stomach with one hand, checked behind her shoulder one last time and stepped forward. She brushed the flaking paint from a frozen image of a woman being torn apart by giant, spindly legged insects. Pale pieces of paint came off against her fingers. She began to feel guilty for sins she'd never committed.

She lowered her weapon. Everything was wrong here. Closing her eyes, she let out the breath she'd been holding. She leaned against the wall and listened to her heartbeat audibly dwindle. It was just panic. She hoped.

Find her friends. She must find her friends before Tom. Then again, for all she knew, he was collapsed dead in the chamber with the stone heart. Would she have to finish him if he wasn't slain? She knew enough to stab vampires through the heart with wood or a powerful enough magic object. Would her sword even puncture a stone heart?

She owed it to him to find out. Pushing herself from the wall, she turned to face down the way she had come.

Her footfalls were sharp against the graveyard silence. She tried to think about where to go, and decided back to the chamber with the heart. At least she could see if Tom was there, and since it was near the abbot's quarters, Jakkobb would probably be trying to go there too. She started to walk faster as she spun around the corner.

Tom was there.

It took her a full second to believe it.

He said nothing. He hardly looked like himself. His eyes glowed cherry red. All of his perfect details were gone. His hair was ragged and his face was sunken in on itself. He wore only half of his tailored shirt and it was bloody, the other half had been torn completely off. The white skin over his heart, however, was whole.

She pointed at his ears. "I knew it!" They rose upward and tapered like an elf's, but never came to a complete point, just like Thalon's. "You are a half-elf!"

He tilted his head, and stared as if he'd never seen her before. His hands were at his side, but away from himself in a very casual ready stance.

She took a half step back and glanced down at her Pallens sword. The sapphire twinkled strangely in the orange light. She swallowed a lump the size of her tongue. "Um, Tom? Tom, please."

He moved so fast she didn't even see a blur, and tackled her. The sword slipped from her shocked fingers. Her shoulder blades erupted in fiery pain as her back slammed against the unrelenting stone floor. She struggled for a second, but Tom had her completely pinned. Her right hand flexed, suddenly aware of the missing Pallens sword.

She swallowed again and forced herself to look upward. His face floated inches above hers. She pushed uselessly against him. "Tom, the heart's controlling you! Please listen! I don't think you lied to me about not wanting to keep the heart, but—"

He kissed her, hard. Der felt her lower lip split wide on his fangs, and she tasted blood in her mouth. He pulled back and licked his red lips and stared at her with hunger burning brightly. She licked her own lips, and tried her best to fight the explosive fear. She forced herself to stare directly at him. "Please!"

"Never alone again."

She blinked at his sudden voice; and she could feel the stale wind of his words. She shook her head wildly. "No! You're not alone! Chloe, think about Chloe!"

His face bunched up tightly in confusion for a second. The red began to leak into the whites of his eyes. Der bucked and kicked uselessly against him. He kissed her again, and kissed down her chin and onto her neck. She never even felt his fangs.

Her body surrendered of its own accord, and she erupted into mindless euphoria.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Fighting Back

More men rolled into the cabin. Their weight alone easily pushed Thalon back. He fought two men with a long knife in each hand. His blades sparked as they clashed with the swords over his head.

With a scream, he hurled both knives at his attackers. Then he dove sideways, scooping up a fallen shortsword. The boy yelped explosively as three more men squeezed into the cottage. He lost count of how many enemies had entered, what Erastus was doing and where Chloe was.

Peyna stood there amidst it all. No weapons touched him. Several swords tried and rebounded off a heavy layer of invisible energy. The elf's eyes remained shut.

Thalon's shortsword clashed against a raider's. He easily parried and dodged the man's attempts to crack his little skull open. He stretched his arms out as far as he could, but he just couldn't match the reach of the grown men. He retreated against the weight and force of the swords striking at him. The multiple swords trained at him forced him back another step. Behind him, he heard Chloe scream from her bed.

"No!" He backpedaled toward her. The swords seemed to evaporate as he outran them.

Over the girl, one of the attackers cut a chuckle on his remaining teeth. The girl stared mesmerized by the blade that the man held in front of him. She had the knife out, but couldn't do anything more than stare. The man grinned. "Yer coming with *us*—"

At that moment, Thalon dived for the man's leg – his sword on target and his aim perfect. But he was too far. He screamed and tried to push his hand out farther. Almost there...

The raider shrieked and spasmed. He sliced the blade wildly through the straw pallet. Hay sprayed everywhere. Chloe screamed.

Thalon whipped his head around to see Peyna with his arm flung in Chloe's direction. Slowly, the elf squeezed his fist closed. The man grabbed his chest above his heart, and collapsed in a heap, dead. Peyna withdrew his arm; he never opened his eyes.

"Chloe!" Thalon skidded to the edge of her bed.

She gripped the knife in a white hand. "There's too many! There's too many!"

He clambered onto the pallet and drove the sword home in a new assailant's thigh. He squealed, but the boy had already moved on to another fighter. Then, in the midst of the cacophony, Thalon heard a silence.

Thistle charged forward in a muted rush, his sword already biting into its target. The noise died around this black sword.

"Dad!" Thalon yelled cheerfully.

The chemman didn't acknowledge his son, but instead turned his weapon to a new opponent. The raiders scrambled away from him and the unnatural silence. They tried to escape through the door, but Thistle was there and didn't shrink away from the desperate rush of the remaining three. He fended off their weapons easily and killed each of them in turn.



“Dad!” The boy hopped off the bed. “What took you so long?”

Thistle placed his hand on his son’s head and nodded.

“Thalon!” Chloe squeaked, pulling her blanket up to her chin. “He has weird eyes too!”

Thalon waved his sword. “No, no! He’s a friend, he’s my dad!”

“Oh...” She slowly lowered the knife. She seemed to fully trust Thalon, and waved shyly at Thistle.

The chemman balked, but in his own subtle way, and only his eyes widened for a fraction of a moment. Erastus carefully pushed himself away from his rough hewn table. He looked green, and turned greener still when he stared at the bodies and blood. His hands quivered against the wood.

Peyna still waited motionlessly, and the air surrounding him was almost as hard as stone.

“It’s over?” the girl asked hopefully.

Thistle shook his head, nodding to the unmoving physician. He slid in front of the children.

A bird of prey screeched overhead. Then a sudden wind exploded into the cottage. The gust swept around the physician, whose eyes finally snapped open. Outside the door, a man in black and brown robes flourished a black staff. He looked to be perhaps forty years with strands of gray hair, but he moved with youth in his strides. Peyna met his wrathful gaze evenly.

The wizard pointed his staff. “Give me the girl.” An osprey flew down from the cabin’s roof and alighted on his shoulder.

“What girl?” the physician asked back. “Tis only myself and an old man here.”

The old magician cocked his head. “I had not expected a sylvan heir here. You must want to claim the girl too.” The bird flew from his shoulder and began to circle the cabin.

The elf frowned. “Or perhaps we wanted to keep her away from your paws. She is safe beyond our hidden borders.”

“You must have attempted to cure her illness – and not even the elves would know how to treat her condition because this power doesn’t appear in people.”

“We have much longer memories than you.” Peyna ground his teeth. “I recognize the dark power in you. Senna’s folk all stink the same.”

The wizard bowed again. “You know my lord.” He straightened. “I see you have already dispatched my men, and with only two of you, and one of you an old man. Do not play me for a fool. I know the girl is in there and still ill and I know there are more of you. Now, surrender or I will make you surrender.”

The physician glanced over to see Thistle obscuring any view of the children. He doubted the wizard could even see him in his line of sight. Erastus trembled behind the table still. “I prefer not to duel you at all, I am a healer.”

“Then I will be excited to have an elf in my hospitality.”

Peyna smiled ruthlessly, and his voice was as musical as always, but now filled with barbs that no human could match. “I have gathered power for spells for just such an event though, and I know you will not surrender and you are too arrogant to realize that any elf is above your power. Your power – I must correct myself, the power you sold your soul to borrow, is weak. I

do not envy your pain after your mortal death.” He took a calculated step toward the door. “Sennha has only minimal power in the world, and for what he’s given you, you are no true wizard!”

The magician thrust the butt of his staff into the ground, and small sparks of lightning shot up from it. “Do not insult my lord, for he is a god, and above all elves!” He pointed threateningly at the physician. “Soon the continent of Solquin shall kneel before his altar! The same as Pallens!”

“Pallens never knelt, she was beheaded.” He took another step. “And the Blackhound is dead and has been for centuries, curse his bones.”

“Do *not* tarnish his name!”

“Or what? His spirit will haunt me? Age claimed your *luckiest* warrior in the summer’s passing for an elf. You are nothing.” He stepped through the door. “As I will now prove to you.”

Thalon tugged on the back of his father’s shirt. “Corran – the spy – said Urael had a wizard!” Thistle quieted him with a discreet hand signal.

His son still leaned back smugly and winked to Chloe. “I figured it out! Ha! Sennha wants this war to happen. There can’t be too many wizards in this area; it has to be the same one.”

His father stamped his heel against the floorboards; the noise was soft and staccato, but Thalon pushed his hand against his mouth.

Peyna’s mouth twisted and he thrust forward his hand. The wizard staggered back and grabbed his chest. He doubled forward, wheezing and gasping, but he did not fall. After a moment, he started to laugh. “Did you think that you could make my heart explode?”

The elf didn’t wait for him to finish boasting, and attacked again. The human reeled and tottered drunkenly, but pulled himself back upright. He swung the staff toward the cottage, and a fire exploded all around them, and licked and began to devour the cottage.

Thalon grabbed Chloe and together they rolled off the bed onto the floor. He squeaked when he saw the blanket they had pulled with them was on fire. Chloe yanked the blanket from his hands and threw it away from them.

Her grandfather grabbed his chest. The powerful heat pushed him down to his knees. The walls of the cottage groaned under the weight of the flames.

Peyna turned his palm down and very deliberately closed his fist. The flames wavered and vanished.

The smoke seemed to sizzle as it rose from the dead fire.

The elf smiled through clenched teeth. “Did you think you’d find an elf lacking in magic and wits? Your tricks are worthless.” He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

Immediately, the magician howled and grabbed his back. He twirled around and threw himself to the ground, and his staff flew away from him. His next sound was of an old man in agony.

Peyna advanced out of the cottage. “How do you feel now that your lower spine is twisted like the snake god you so praise?” A vicious scowl chiseled his face. “Oh, you can defend against straight magic, but you have not had enough time to properly learn its intricacies. Now, yield to me and I will ease your pain.”

Thistle walked smoothly past the physician, his sword raised for the killing strike. "He will not submit."

Peyna watched dispassionately for a long moment. "So be it."

The wizard writhed in the grass like a serpent. He began to cast a rapid new spell beneath his breath.

The black blade came down to the wizard's head. Its aim was true, but it only sliced the soil. The man had disappeared. The air suddenly stunk terribly, and the stench made both men slap their hands over their noses and stagger away.

The beast cleared Kelin's head and its claws spread apart as they neared Mora. Kelin's sword and Jakkobb's axe buried themselves in the muscle bound flesh before it was halfway through its arc. Slices of meat fell away from the savagely barking guardian, and it took the axe along for the rest of its jump.

The captain moved faster; he let the axe go and yanked Mora to the side. The axe clattered to the ground on the other side of the beast.

It screamed. It was high pitched and bass at the same time. Jakkobb's ears felt as if they'd been stabbed with a rusty knife.

"Stay back, Mora!" Kelin yelled.

The magician started to mutter beneath her breath and cleared her hands free of her sleeves. Kelin stepped beside her with blood running off his sword. He also limped from a fresh cut on his calf. The monster's tongue lolled out of its muzzle and its horns glinted ferociously in the orange, flickering light beneath the crystal dome. It scrambled quickly back onto its four legs. Jakkobb laughed openly at it and grinned, holding his weaponless hand in front of him. The blood from its two cuts was already slowing.

Jakkobb marched forward while the guardian pawed the floor and roared. The knight didn't even hesitate and rammed his metal clad fist into its nose. The beast yelped aloud, more in surprise than pain, and its claws scarred the stone floor.

The captain didn't hesitate to do it again. Metal crunched when it collided with the guardian's teeth.

Kelin slipped around to the side, and whipped his sword into its flank. But it rebounded with barely a scratch. The guardian screamed and spun around. The beast's attention stolen, Jakkobb dove to fetch his axe.

Meanwhile, Mora's eyes burned and a small fire danced between her hands. She launched it past the two fighters directly at the guardian beast. It raised its head to meet the fiery attack, and the flames suddenly sputtered and dissipated between the horns.

"No magic attacks!" Jakkobb cleaved his axe into its side again. "It's made of magic!"

"What do I do?" Her tattooed hands still glowed in front of her.

"Get back!" He no sooner shouted those words than the guardian lowered its glowing horns at him. "Oh no..."

Fire streamed from each point. The knight rolled to the side, barely avoiding the searing bursts.

Mora still hovered near the edge of combat. “What do I do?”

“Stay back!” Kelin fought as near to her as he dared, constantly dodging the beast’s claws and teeth. He got one stroke in on the soft pads of its feet, and now it limped when its front left paw came down.

The guardian roared, and its saliva filled the air. Its muscles tightened and it sprang forward again. It not only cleared the height of Kelin’s head, but also twisted its way around his weapon. With one giant paw, it shoved Mora to the floor. The mighty jaws bent toward her.

“No!” Kelin hurled his sword. The weapon cartwheeled through the air and the hilt bounced off its eye. The beast didn’t flinch or even blink as the sword ricocheted off its cornea. Kelin was right behind the sword and caught it before it could fall. With all the power of a blacksmith combined with panic, he struck the blade down into its muzzle and through its teeth. The powerful jaws were only inches from her face, but now locked together. It growled and screamed through its closed jaws.

Jakkobb hopped up onto the back of the guardian. It squealed under his sudden weight. The beast bucked and rolled but the knight kept his balance. He smashed his heavy axe down between its shoulder blades.

The beast bawled and thrashed more than before, but the knight kept on its back by holding onto the embedded axe. The monster rolled onto the floor. Jakkobb pulled out his axe and slammed it down again and again. Bones shattered beneath the blows.

Slowly, it sank closer to the floor with each strike, and soon its tongue lay motionlessly out of its mouth. It exhaled one last time.

Meanwhile, Kelin pulled Mora away, keeping his body and sword between her and the guardian. He embraced her and pulled her to her feet at the same time. “Are you alright? Did it cut you?” His face was burned with worry.

“Why– why was that thing attacking us?” Mora put a shaky hand in Kelin’s.

He smiled toward her. “Um, I think it would attack anything.” He glanced around the chapel. “I hate this place.”

Jakkobb stepped off the back of the dead beast. “Yes, but it’s dead and no longer an obstacle. As of the moment, we must find Der!” He wiped his axe on the guardian’s fur. “I just hope there’s not more than one.”

Kelin froze with his foot in the air. “Um...”

“Let’s just find Der.”

As he turned, four more of the guardians appeared out of the air, seemingly spun into existence by the orange light through the crystal dome.

A sea of ecstasy encased her body. The water was warm, and she floated effortlessly on endless waves. Visions of the tiny tropical island she had spent all of two minutes on once lasted like hours. Her mind rolled around in the thrilling, ticklish ocean. She had never felt so relaxed, so warm, so weightless, and vaguely wondered why she had ever felt worry before. Nothing was wrong – could ever be wrong – here in the laughing ocean waves.

But the stubborn part of Derora Saxen fought back. Her fingers quested for the pommel of her sword, dragging themselves for miles across the stone. She felt like she was pushing her

hand through sand. She couldn't even feel the temperature of the floor.

Her first two fingers touched the sapphire, and a little awareness shot through her mind. Mostly, the realization of numbness everywhere, especially in her mind. She inched it toward her with her fingers until she could finally grasp the hilt.

Strength and will flowed into her arm from the sword even though it felt like the full weight of Jakkobb's axe. She lifted and nearly dropped it, but the sword seemed not to allow itself to fall. Against the skylight, she saw the reflections of gold and blue stainless lights along the crystal ceiling. In a dream, she heaved the sword at Tom with all the might she had mustered.

The sword dove into the back of his thigh and traveled downward until it finally wrenched free. The length of Tom's thigh flew free with it.

He threw his face up and an animal scream shook the walls. The agonized yell ripped through her ears. Tom grabbed at his leg. She gritted her teeth and forced the strength to raise the sword again; it was easier this time. She thrust.

The Pallens sword punched through his chest eagerly, but missed his heart in his thrashing. He screamed again and shot for the ceiling. He pressed against it as if he were lying on the floor. One hand covered the bleeding wound in his chest and the other pressed against the back of his thigh.

After a long moment, he rolled over with his back pressed against the skylight. His face betrayed the anguish throughout his body.

Der stared upward with her sword vaguely angled at him; its point shook wildly.

Slowly, his eyes drained back to the color of an emerald's reflection. He looked around frantically. His fingers shot into his mouth, and came out bloody.

"Oh no." He stared down again. "No, no, no!"

She swallowed, but kept the sword pointing at him. Her head felt like it was floating above her, and she felt the blood sliding down her neck. Against common sense, it was cold to her sense of touch.

Tom stared at her, and then stared at his trembling, bloody fingers. "I wouldn't... No. Never. Derora? What the hell is happening?"

She tightened her jaw, but couldn't speak. She focused on her sword. It took all the strength she had.

Finally, he pulled his hand away from his thigh and then stared back to the warrior and her bloody sword. Cautiously, he drifted down to the floor. Her unsteady sword point followed him.

He knelt before her on his uninjured leg. "Der, please, let me close those holes. I – I – I wouldn't – You're going to bleed to death."

"Ge' 'way!" The sword weighed down on her arm as if she were trying to hold up a boulder, but she kept it trained on him.

He pressed his shaking hands against the ground in an effort not to fall over. "I don't know what's going on, honestly. The last thing I remember is opening the box, but I can tell, um, part of what happened. I do know, however, that if you don't let me help you, you're going to die. And soon. Did you understand any of that?" He leaned closer.

Der shook her head. The action was more of a flinch, but her intention was clear.

He reached out and she swung the sword at him. It was slow and clumsy, but the blade was sharp. He leaned back out of range and held up his hands. “Der, listen to my voice.” He inched closer. “Derora, I have to help you. If you don’t lower your blade, I am going to force you.”

She didn’t lower the sword.

He disarmed her from the wrist before she could even react. At the same time, he pressed his lips against her neck over his bite.

He quivered against the explosion of taste and the terrible will to bite her again. The craving was too powerful a master. He felt every time her heart trembled, and that made the taste more vibrant than the best wine. This, here, *right here* was the nectar fountain of his existence. His entire being yelled to capitulate to that sweet glory. Their bodies arched together and... and...

He wouldn’t take it.

It was right here, just beyond his lips, and he wouldn’t have it. He hovered with his face over hers, baring his teeth against the tsunami of instinct and raw desire.

He eased a hand along the side of her face. “Der?”

She blinked a few times and flinched again when she looked at him. “Green. Eyes.”

“Yes, it’s me.” He lowered the hand to her arm. “I don’t know what’s happening.”

“...Safe?”

He dropped his face and looked everywhere but her. “Yes, you are. I didn’t drain enough that’d you die, and I’m not cut – at least, not in the traditional places, so I know you didn’t drink any of mine, and you’d have to do that. You’re safe.”

She finally exhaled.

He pressed a hand against the hole in his chest. She’d stabbed him! He almost couldn’t believe it. She’d stabbed him with—

Everything shut down. He grabbed his head as reality came into focus, and hollered aloud.

Der straightened against the wall, re-gripping the handle of her sword.

He pointed at the blade. “You ran me through on *that!* You stabbed with a weapon from *Pallens!* I should kill you!”

“Um... Serious?” She tightened the grip on her sword.

He stabbed his finger at the sword again. “You just tried to kill me!”

Her entire chest felt like it had caved in on itself. She gasped. “I – I had to! This ain’t wooden!”

He shook his head wildly. “That’s a *Pallens* sword, you don’t understand!”

“Understand what?”

“Take your hand off it! Please!” He watched it like it was a poisonous serpent.

“What’s—”

“Please!”

She stared at him like she’d never met him before. Slowly, she released her fingers.

He eased back against the wall. He felt the pain of his wounds – desperately not thinking about what caused them. The pain rolled along inside of him as hotly as molten metal. It was tolerable, incredibly outrageous, but tolerable. What was the worst thing that could happen to

him? He'd die from these?

Through thick lips, he finally said, "You're going to have to tell me what happened. Starting with how you were able to strike against me. I bit you, you should have been helpless."

She thought back to the euphoria and then summoned her voice. "That's not going to stop me. I was. I don't know – I truly don't, I just got my hand on my sword."

He winced at mention of the sword. "I told you that you were too stubborn. Where are we?"

She shrugged. "I have no idea. I just ran."

"And I chased. Predator and prey, except that the rabbit is not supposed to bite back."

"I am not prey!"

"All humans are." He rubbed a hand over his face. "Which is why I'm beginning to think that you aren't human." He offered a smile that didn't reach the corners of his mouth or his eyes.

"Neither are you."

He forced a sour chuckle, for appearances' sake. "You are the master of the obvious."

"Alright, neither *were* you."

"What do you mean?" He frowned.

"Half-elf."

His hand shot up to his ear and felt the mostly pointed shape. "Damn."

"Half-elven ears."

He slouched. "Yes, I still have some secrets from you though."

"Oh, like the one where you pretend you're happy to be alone?"

His frowned darkened. "I am. It took some time to get used to, but I am."

She shook her head. "You're still a liar, Tom. The only thing you said to me before you," she forced the word, "*Bit* me was 'never alone again.'"

He refused to look at her.

She leaned back against the wall. "You know that I'm sorry for you."

"Don't." His upper lip curled. "I don't want your pity! I should pity you."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. We're both people – very different people – but people."

"But," his lips moved weakly, "I'm undead. An abomination."

"I don't care. You still make your own decisions."

His eyes moved from her to the Pallens sword and then off into space. He smiled.

"What?" she asked.

He shook his head and pushed himself to his knees. "You would've made a horrible vampire."

She took a moment to turn the thought over. "Aye, probably."

"You're still bleeding." He looked away again. "I – your lips – was that me?"

She wiped her fingers across them, and felt the hot fresh blood. "Oh. Uh, yes."

"Um – well – they won't stop, you know."

"Oh. *Oh*."

He inched closer. She leaned away. "Um."

He didn't stop moving. She squeezed her eyes shut as he leaned forward. His lips were cold, but soft. After he smoothed his tongue over the punctures, they lingered for the space of a heartbeat.

Tom rested his back against the wall again. "How in the world did we end up here?"

She half smiled. "I have no idea."

"The last thing I remember..." He sat up sharply. "The heart! Where's the heart? Der, where?"

She stared at his chest, where his shirt had been shredded away.

He looked down. "No." His fingernails tore at his chest. "No!"

"Tom, stop!"

His head sprang up like an animal's, and he looked to the sword first.

She shook her head. "Don't. What will happen if you take it out? You ripped out your own heart. I saw that."

"But..." His pale face looked ready to crack. He bunched his fist in an effort to control something within. "This isn't what I intended, Der, I promise. None of this was supposed to happen. Do you know what this means?"

She shook her head. "Um, you'll have more power?"

"No— yes, but I never told you how dangerous this thing is!"

She licked her lips. "Well, you seem to be in control of it now."

"For now! How long will this last? I was just going to use it and then get rid of it!"

He jumped to his feet and immediately shifted all his weight on his uninjured leg in a grimace of pain. "Chloe! I was going to use it to save Chloe!"

"Oh, yes!"

He reached down and lifted her to stand. "We don't have much time, if any." He squeezed his eyes tightly in pain. He tried to take a step forward. "I can't walk! I should be healing by now!"

"At least you can fly."

"Yes, I know." He tapped his lips. "The exit must be around here somewhere." He closed his eyes. "I think I can feel it, like it's drawing me toward it, it's upstairs. Do you remember stairs?"

"How do you know this?"

He opened his palms. "I'm not sure, but I just suddenly know that this monastery was built for this heart. I know where everything is."

"Tom, this is dangerous."

He smiled sadly. "We'll worry about it later. For now, we need to get to Chloe."

He led them directly to a narrow twist of spiral stairs. Der was forced to lean against the walls to move in a continuously prolonged stumble, but she adamantly refused any help from him. They ascended to a blank stone wall. She narrowed her eyes and searched, but she could find no mysterious words written anywhere. Focusing on anything was a chore right now though.

He ran his fingers over the walls. "I can feel the reverence of fear."

When she placed her hand on the blank wall in an effort to rise, the stone yielded to her



touch and wavered. Color seeped in, like the cool waters of a laughing brook, and through it they saw the cloister garth of ruins, barely a step away.

She turned to go back down the stairs, but Tom shook his head. “We can’t wait for them. We’ll travel faster without. However, we will put a stick in the door so it won’t close and seal them inside.” She glared at him and he shrugged. “Well, it *might* work.”

She sighed. “You’re hardly in any condition to travel at all, you can’t even walk.”

“At least I’m already dead and don’t have to worry about that.” He grinned brightly while leaning against the wall.

She sank down against the wall and let her knees come to her chin. “We won’t make it before the war.”

“You? Being pessimistic and hesitant? I don’t believe it. Now, get up or we won’t make it there in time to save her life, let alone the war.”

She smiled ruefully. “I wasn’t finished. I want to stay.”

He shook his head firmly. “No, Der, I promised to take you back to Malfax and I can’t break my word— although we will go to Chloe first.”

She held up her hand. “Tom, let me finish, please! You can travel faster without me, and I won’t leave my friends trapped here. I’ll wait here for them. Go.”

“I promised you.”

“I know, and this war is about to crush your girl, so I’m releasing you from your oath.”

He blinked and tilted his head to the side. “Do you mean it?”

She nodded and rubbed her neck. “Honestly, I don’t want to be around you anyway.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t either.” He glanced down to his hands. “This is farewell then.”

“I think it is. I’ll remember you.” She forced a small smile.

He grinned. “I’m not sure I want that, I do exist in secrecy after all.”

“Go to her, Tom.” She looked longingly to the peaceful blue sky beyond the door.

He took her hand and kissed it. “Farewell, my little idiot.”

“Farewell.” Now, she found her smile came naturally and she tried to fight it.

He floated through the door in mimicry of walking, and with a swirl of his cloak, he vanished. Der felt a sudden surge of loneliness. Was it herself or some sort of empathic sympathy for him? Sighing, she closed her eyes.

After a long moment, she shied her way down the stairs, pressing her hands against the center spiral for support. At the base, she sat down on the last stair and waited. She silently counted everything that hurt, and found that it was easier to name things that didn’t.

She had no way of reckoning how long she sat there; her mind still was not clear. When she finally heard the footsteps of the others, she didn’t call out to them or rise to her feet when they came into view. She had no strength to even try.

Then she noticed that they were running. She pushed herself up the wall. “To me!”

“Der!” Kelin’s voice dripped with relief. “You’re – we have to go!”

Behind them, four huge beasts that looked similar to oxen, but with tongues lolling like dogs flew from around the corner. She tried to gasp, and felt faint for doing it.

“Where’s the exit, Der?” the captain roared.

She tried to raise her arm to point, but it barely shuffled toward the stairs. The knight didn't even stop running as he yanked her off the floor. Kelin and Mora dogged on his heels.

"Where is it? Where is it?" Mora yelled.

"There's just a wall here!" Jakkobb bellowed.

Behind them, the beasts tried to squeeze into the narrow stairs all at once, blocking each other from lunging. They fought each other for the chance to go first. One of them managed to climb on top of another and launched its ascent up the staircase.

"Jakkobb!" Mora screamed. The beast swiped its claws, tangling them in her skirt.

"Der!" Jakkobb thundered.

She pushed a foot out and the wall vanished. They tumbled forward.

A claw caught the edge of Kelin's shirt as he passed through the door frame. Not a claw's width after they were through, it turned back into part of the half-standing wall.

One giant paw was stuck partially through the stone. It flexed.

Collectively, they breathed out. Jakkobb set Der down on the ground, never looking away from the still-moving paw.

"I wonder if it's screaming on the other side."

Kelin gasped when he looked at his best friend. She flinched and forced down the urge to cover her neck. It wouldn't matter anyway, there was blood on the collar of her shirt, and she couldn't hide that. For a fleeting moment, she remembered Tom had purchased it for her, even if it had been only a bribe.

Jakkobb's axe was unsheathed in his hand. He brought it on guard and looked deeply into the shadows. The elf narrowed his eyes. "He bit you."

She nodded and heaved herself off the ground. Her voice was tired. "Yes, sir, but I'm alright." She patted the sword at her side. "With this blade, I was."

"Are you certain, Der?"

"Yes, sir."

"What happened?" Mora asked.

"Where is *he*?" Jakkobb demanded.

She opened her mouth to explain everything, but suddenly a memory interrupted and she thought about what he said about not needing himself justified. She shook her head. "Gone."

"That's it?" Mora said. "Just gone?"

She nodded.

"What do we do now?" Kelin asked.

"Now," the knight sucked his tongue, "Back to Thealith and the war, although I don't know what to do about that."

"How?" Der managed to croak. "How...get there in time?"

Kelin shrugged. "I have no idea."

"The river," Jakkobb said as he stared off into the distance. "It's not far from here. If it's cause of all this trouble, we can damn well put it to use for us."

## Chapter Twenty

### Unwelcome

“You were supposed to tell me when Thealith moved its army before it was too late!”

Corran, the Uraelian spy, ducked under the searing glare of the kingdom’s wizard. He tried to keep his gaze nailed to the floor, but the little bird bouncing around on the wizard’s head pulled at his attention. It was a fat brown and yellow thing, and its wings constantly flicked. The magician’s other pets, the osprey and the falcon watched the other bird with unassuaged hunger from their perches across the room.

Alcomm felt the ruby crowned kinglet dancing across his head. He slammed his staff across the wooden floor of the inn that he’d taken over as his current command. The tables and most of the chairs had been tossed outside; the floor had been swept; and now maps festooned the walls. But it still felt like a seedy tavern to him. It wasn’t proper at all.

“But, but there was a chemman!” Corran stuttered. He felt his stomach clench and he nearly doubled over.

The wizard snarled. “Don’t let our own lies deceive you. There are no chemmen. Those stories are just for the commoners.” Meanwhile, the kinglet chirped happily on his head. The birds of prey followed its every move intently. Of course, there had been that stranger in the cabin... and his master had explained to him in no uncertain terms that chemmen had existed. He shook his head. Impossible.

“No, lord, it was real! A dragoon knight and a chemman were working together!”

“Then it was someone pretending, fool! To scare you! I don’t care what tricks Thealith has planned!”

“I don’t think it was—”

“Of course it was! But it doesn’t matter because I don’t care about Thealith!” The kinglet chorused along with his outburst. “I never told you, of course, but my spies in the village of Hughling have disappeared, and I need to know. This isn’t about Urael, chemmen, dragoons, Thealith or the thrice damned river. This is all about a girl!”

Corran collapsed down to his knees and kept his head firmly facing the floor. His whole voice was a flinch. “I’m sorry, lord! I didn’t know!”

“We have been waiting for her for over fifteen hundred years! The astrologers said that the stars had to move across the night sky before there was a chance for one to be born. So, we waited, passing on the secret. The stars came to their new places and they sent the power down to earth when a child was born. The stars continued to drift across the heavens, but in those few hours, their light was intertwined and shone their power here.”

Corran shook his head. “I still don’t understand, lord!”

“Of course you don’t. But, know this, this child is deathly ill and I do not have time to waste capturing her. I must be there when she dies or I cannot capture that power. I made her ill – I knew that a child could not fathom, much less control, such ability. And this way, she could not escape. Like fruit, she would be ripe for the harvest.

"I did not expect her to have such protection, and went unprepared. They must know. The secret must have been divined or overheard somewhere, even though those astrologers were put to the sword centuries ago. And they want to protect her! That I don't understand."

"Uh, yes, lord," Corran croaked through his bewilderment.

"We are bequeathed with orders to take this girl's power." He ground the end of the staff against the wooden floor. "This time, we'll take the army."

"But— but, the king won't allow it," the spy managed to blurt out. "He said we must try to talk first!" His voice *felt* like vomit.

Alcomm spat. "It'll be too late for the king."

"She's dying, Erastus."

Peyna tucked the blanket under the sleeping girl's chin. The old man slouched further in his chair. Sorrow scarred his wizened features.

Thalon kicked Peyna in the back of the knee. "No! You're supposed to be the best! You're the *royal* physician!"

The elf staggered forward and threw out his hand. Thalon dodged the slap. Peyna growled, "There are some things that cannot be cured, boy!" He drew in a deep breath. "This isn't a disease or a cancer! It's *magic*, which means that it is not a total illness of the body! It affects her mind and soul too." He felt his ears heat up all the way to the tips. "I can't snap my fingers and pull it out of her. That requires exposure to more magic, and I can't do that without killing her. Do you understand? There are some things that are impossible to cure."

"No, she's my friend!" Thalon kicked the physician's kneecap on the same leg, and immediately ducked behind his father.

Peyna grabbed the front of his leg. "How dare you, boy!"

Thalon wagged his pinky finger over his father's knee; the elvish equivalent of sticking out his tongue. Thistle nonchalantly loosened his sword in its sheath.

The physician spat in his direction. "You don't know how I feel, child, losing someone that I tried to save." He spun his back to him and watched the last strains of the sunset through the open door. "She most likely will never see a sunrise again."

Thistle deftly slid some supplies into his sleek backpack. He looked up sharply. "Pack. We can't remain."

Peyna held his head. "Why?"

The chemman didn't bother with what he felt was an obvious answer.

"You're going to fight, Dad," Thalon said. "You always do." He sat next to Chloe on the bed, and held one of her hands. Her brown eyes bounced open.

Thistle finished and swung the pack onto his back. He looked at his son. "Don't follow me, this time."

"This time?" Erastus quavered.

Peyna snorted disgustedly. "Yes, last time the half breed—" He stopped suddenly as the point of Thistle's black sword pricked his throat. He never saw the weapon being drawn.

Thistle withdrew the weapon as silently as he'd almost attacked.

Thalon pulled Chloe off the bed. She leaned heavily against him to maintain her balance. The boy waved his knife. "We're coming with."

The chemman shook his head in no uncertain manner.

Erastus yelped, "What!"

Peyna jumped to his feet. "Absolutely not! You'll be giving that wizard what he wants!"

The boy nodded vigorously. "Yes! Look, we have to beat the wizard, and Chloe... could... use... her... power." He shrank under the mountain weight of father's stony glare.

Chloe stared at the floor, and whispered, "I want— I want to help my uncle." She hid her face behind Thalon's shoulder.

Peyna shook his head. "The last time she came into contact with magic, it nearly killed her, and you want to fight a trained magic user, who is also a follower of a dark deity? *Who is after her?*" He snorted and looked to Thistle. "He spends far too much time around Derora Saxen."

Thistle sighed and nodded. Silently and quickly, he took a seat on the single chair. He deliberately propped his foot against the table. "This is not your fight, children."

Thalon stamped his foot. "This isn't your fight either, Dad!"

A hush descended, like the echoes of silence after sudden thunder.

Peyna held up both hands and eyebrows. "Sage, lad, very sage."

Thistle closed his eyes for a long breath. "Do you want Chloe to have a safe home?"

"Yes," the boy replied, in the hesitant tones of someone who just felt the ground shift underfoot.

"Yes," Chloe repeated softly, behind him.

"Then, I must go and scout a path. Soldiers are thickening like flies." He rose like a ghost. He pointed to Peyna. "Keep them safe."

The elf looked as if to retort, but glanced at the grandfather, then to the children and finally just nodded.

Chloe doubled forward on the bed, coughing. Blood drops sprayed onto her blanket.

The raft bounced. Boats shouldn't bounce against the smooth flows of a winding river, but it did whenever a new current in the brown water pushed it. Unlike the elegant canoes they'd crafted in the Riverfall Mountains, this was merely green logs bonded together by winding a rope between them. The entire thing groaned and creaked.

Spike stood firmly in the exact center, tail firmly locked down, and he glared dead ahead, looking ready to bite the horizon. Beside him, Jakkobb stirred the river with his homely paddle. Goldie dozed on the unicorn's bare back, as usual. Kelin and Mora sat with the other paddle on the other side of the raft, while Der sat front and center.

She shaded her eyes. "Damn. Is it just me or is it really bright out here?"

Kelin quietly slipped his paddle out of the river and exchanged a glance with Mora. "Uh, Der, would you turn around and, I don't know, smile at us?"

After a moment, she didn't turn around. "Not funny, Kelin!"

"We're not laughing," Mora shot back.

Der, not turning around, snatched up her sheathed sword and waved it over her head. "Yes,

I am a vampire who is still wielding a sword from the paladin empire!" She threw the weapon back into her lap and thrust her chin in her hands.

Jakkobb cleared his throat. "Ah-hem. Well, that's someone that I wouldn't ever want to mess with."

"If there ever was anything like that, it'd be her," Mora added.

Spike snickered.

Kelin covered his mouth with his hand. Jakkobb snorted.

Even Der's face twisted between a scowl and a chuckle. She coughed.

Soon, snickers evolved into chuckles, which grew into a cloud of laughter.

Mora, wiping her face, smiled. "I needed that. I really needed that."

Spike's lips flapped as he exhaled. *Good, because it may be the last laugh we'll ever have.*

"That's so heartening, Spike," Der muttered, her smile fading.

Jakkobb sighed. "Der, you shouldn't even be coming with us. You're so weak from what I'm laughably calling blood loss."

She tightened her jaw. "Just a little tired, sir, that's all."

"Of course, and I'm the petite princess of Pallens."

"I never knew that about you, sir," she replied without cracking an expression.

Spike stamped his hoof against the raft. *Good disguise, uh, Camre? Cameroo? Caramel?* He stamped his hoof. *What was her name?*

"Carme," Kelin answered shortly. "Don't you ever study the history that you supposedly lived through?"

Spike just snorted.

"You know that?" Der asked, surprised.

Kelin nodded. "Yes, but I don't think this is the time for a history lesson." He dipped his paddle into the current. Mora placed her hand over his against the paddle.

"I don't want to go either." She pulled her trailing skirt from the stream. Its edges frayed and dirt smudged the lacework. Meanwhile, Jakkobb and Spike turned their faces toward the opposite bank.

Kelin pulled her against his shoulder. "Don't come with us. You don't want to face him."

She rested her weight against him. "You shouldn't go either."

He almost smiled. "I don't want to see how this kingdom may fall if we do nothing."

"We can run away! To Tenmar or Alscane or some distant city!"

"No, we can't, Mora!" He tightened his grip. "We've suffered together, and if they're going to do this, I have to be there with them." On the front of the raft, he saw Der nodding in agreement.

"No, you— we— all of us— don't have to!" she protested. "Please! You're going to die!"

He smiled and dipped his fingers into her thick, black hair. "Perhaps, but perhaps not. Der, Thistle, Jakkobb and I survived Darkreign together; and I would have never considered it possible. I also know that if we don't stop this now, the little girl will always be in peril. I couldn't live with that."

She went almost entirely limp against him. "I wish I had some of your strength."

"I know you do." He chuckled. "I think I know who you really are underneath that frightened girl. Stay out of sight and stay safe, please."

She pushed herself away and tossed her hair behind her shoulders. "I'm going with you."

"What? No!"

She squared herself. "I am. I'm the only magician here. I know that I can't match him, but I can most certainly keep his attention."

"But, Mora—"

"And don't you tell me about how dangerous it is. I want to go where you do. I love you."

"I love you too."

Jakkobb coughed into his hand. Kelin and Mora stiffened. The knight spoke as if he hadn't heard their conversation. "At least we don't have to worry about the vampire."

"He'd be useful now." Der shrugged.

"I can't believe you're saying that, after what he did to you."

"He won't come after us. He's got Chloe to save, and then he promised to leave the mortal world behind."

The knight grunted. "Good. Glad to hear it. Now, we've only got a wizard and a war to worry about."

Underneath them, the raft dragged them inexorably down the Dismal Horvath.

His wounds from the Pallens sword blazed like the sun. They still weren't healing, and Tom had no idea how long it had been. Time had been mere light and dark blurs. He had moved as fast as his body could without tearing itself apart.

His head swayed beneath his hood as he floated through the forest; it was finally looking vaguely familiar.

He continued to fly through the trees. He was close; he could smell it in the air. Before now, he half thought he was making that fact up, but smells were not as easily distorted as sights and sounds. He didn't bother to watch the last of the sunset through the trees. He paused to stare at the early stars, trying to figure his location. His hood dropped onto his shoulders.

He rested the butt of the iron rod on the forest floor. He sneered at the thought: *he* had to use a crutch to walk! He tried not to glance around in case any animals were snickering at him, and began to limp.

He was near faint when the small garden came into view. He jerked his head up, the cabin was there. He'd made it back!

"Chloe!"

He barely noticed the new door and kicked it in and jumped forward. But, as if he ran into a side of a window, he couldn't cross into the house.

Pain from the impact sprinted through his body. He staggered back, his emerald eyes wide in disbelief. Slowly, he reached out with an open palm. It pressed against an invisible, tangible wall across the cabin's threshold.

"I may have to allow the chemman inside, but I don't have to allow you."

Tom pulled his hair out of his eyes to see an elf standing a few feet opposite of him. In

reflex, he curled his upper lip. Beyond the elf, he saw Thistle, Erastus, and behind them on the bed were Thalon and his precious child. Thistle watched him insouciantly, and absently twirled a knife in one hand.

“Let me see her!” He lowered the iron rod at the elf. “I can still smell the sickness. I can heal her!”

The physician shook his head. “I think not, vampire. Why would you care? What’s in it for you?”

Tom growled and looked over his shoulder to Erastus, and his eyes burned red. “Old man, invite me in!”

Peyna lifted a hand. “Your mind bending will not work – I will not allow it.”

Erastus held his head and moaned.

Tom leaned on his staff to keep his balance as another tremor of anger coursed through him. He growled again and looked to the chemman. “You! Why do they let you in and not me? Why do they trust you instead?”

Thistle shrugged.

“No matter. Let me in! I have not harmed your friend! She is safe with the others!”

He shook his head. “Not my home.”

Tom fell to his knees at the door. “I built this house!” The thunder of his voice did not fade.

“But you do not live here,” Peyna shot back.

“No! You’re killing her!” He drove the iron metal staff into the ground, where it stuck. He sagged against it, almost surrendering to the weight of his wounds and the weight of the fact that he might fail. He’d come this far...

“I– I never trusted you.” Erastus trembled like a blade of grass in a thunderstorm. “I won’t let you in.”

“She’ll die without me, old man! She’s dying right now!” The red drained from Tom’s eyes and he stepped up to the barrier. “Let me in. Then I will leave and never return. I swear.” He watched the old weathered face lock in indecision. “Please. You will never see me again.”

The grandfather drew in a deep breath.

Peyna stuck his hand in the man’s face. “It’s a trick, you old fool.” The physician rounded on the vampire. “Ah, I understand.” He smirked. “You need her for some unholy contrivance. Her power is useful to you. Are you in league with the wizard?”

“No!” Tom lunged at the barrier again. He clawed at the invisible impasse, splitting his fingernails. His blood trailed down the air as if it was on a wall. Slowly, it slid down to the ground, supported by nothing.

He drew himself up and stepped back. An evil grin crawled across his features, and he smiled very pointedly at Peyna. “You’ve made an enemy this night. If she does not survive, neither shall you.”

Peyna’s expression rumbled. “Perhaps one of us will not. I may not enjoy their company, but I wouldn’t let a wandering dog suffer you.” He stepped up to the doorway.

Tom laughed. He kicked over his crutch and laughed. “You? You dare attack *me*? We can play for the girl.”



The elf didn't answer and raised his hands in front of him.

Tom lazily yawned, revealing *all* of his splendidly white teeth. "Just let me know when you're done, alright?"

The air in front of Peyna circled invisible like a tiny tornado and quickly flattened out into the shape of a disc. He threw it.

Tom watched it spin, as one might watch a distant cloud. He stepped to the side to let the disc pass. Too easy, he thought.

He never saw the second one. The hardened air was sharper than a knife, and level with his neck too. He tried to dodge, and suddenly remembered that he was still slowed by the Pallens sword wounds. The disc sliced his cheek. The vampire threw himself backward, and landed heavily on a pile of sticks.

The crunching wood brought on all his pains anew: the Pallens sword, his cheek, and now his back was bruised by the wood. He muttered darkly to himself. One hand clutched the wound on his chest.

He felt his heart beat. It began as a steady, walking drum. It was an absolutely alien sensation to him.

No, no, no, no! He couldn't lose control! Not here, not now! Just let him have ten more minutes! His emerald eyes widened at the images flickering across his mental vision. He could kill them all, he could wreck the village, he could tear their stomachs out and just take her from their dirty paws.

Please, not now! He had to stay in control!

He was vaguely aware of the elf stepping outside the house, and noticed the energy surging up around him, but it was distant compared to the sensation of a heartbeat.

He pulled himself to his knees. Peyna was almost ready to let fly again. Tom stared at the disc, as if it were going to happen to someone else. The heart beat faster. He flexed his fingers, at least he still could control those. He looked down at his own chest, trying to physically see the strange beat. Now, why had he gotten this dreadful thing? To heal Chloe. But, no, that wasn't all, to heal Chloe *because of its power*.

His eyes snapped back toward the physician.

Peyna hurled the disc toward him again. Immediately, he saw it split into two as it rushed toward him. Tom raised one hand.

The discs suddenly flamed along their sharpened edges, flying straight at him. He stared for half a second. "Oh." A burning sensation seized his entire corpse, and he just instinctively knew what to do.

Crouching slightly, he raised both hands and jumped. He caught both discs above his hands and they began to rotate over his palms. Inside his chest, the stone heart thumped triumphantly.

He sent them whizzing back at the physician, and charged in behind.

The word "how" framed itself on Peyna's mouth, and then he dived for the ground. Both discs scythed overhead, smashing through the walls, and out through the roof of the cabin. Splinters rained down inside.

Tom reached down for the physician's neck. He jerked the elf into the air, and growled.

“Now, you pompous, pointy-eared freak...”

Peyna scrawled a symbol in the air with one finger. Tom glanced down just in time to see the holy wreath of Carenth burst into white light.

A yelp twisted in the back of his throat and he dropped Peyna. The light *burned*.

He backed away. “Alright.” He dusted himself off, trying not to wince at any of his myriad of pains. “Fair enough. I should have expected that.”

Inside, Thalon pulled on the back of his father’s shirt. Thistle didn’t turn around. “Yes?”

“I want Tom to help Chloe. She’s my friend.”

The chemman didn’t look away from the combatants through the open door. “What are you going to do about that?”

The boy’s eyes darted around the house. “Um. Dad?”

Thistle pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s your decision. If it were mine, I’d let the winner deal with the girl.”

The boy stamped his foot. “Come on, Dad, that’s not right! You know Tom’s on our side.”

“No, we actually don’t know that. But, if you believe he is, make your own decision.”

Thalon balled his fists. “What if he hurts me?”

Finally, the father turned to his son. “He wants to help Chloe. You want to as well. Now, hurry before we have to explain to the king how we have absolutely *no idea* what happened to his physician.”

Without a word, he ran back to the sleeping girl and patted her cheek. “Wake up, wake up.”

She murmured under her breath.

“Chloe, come on.”

“...Uncle Tom?” Her brown eyes opened like a butterfly stretching its wings.

“No, Thalon. But, Tom’s here.” He slipped a thin but strong arm under her shoulders. “We just have to make it to the door, please.”

She leaned on him heavily and levered her legs over the edge of the pallet. She latched onto Thalon’s shoulders. “I’m dizzy.”

Outside, Peyna furiously scrawled various holy symbols and figures of eternal life in the air. The white lights hung around him like a fog. Carenth’s wreath, Zine’s sword and shield, Amiery’s Staff, Ahtome’s doves, the Dawn Sword and more created a wall much worse than the invisible threshold of the cottage. At least the door didn’t burn.

Tom slapped a hand over his eyes and stumbled even further back. His heart kept beating, but it was painful now. He remembered telling Der that true holy symbols were like getting too close to a bonfire and the intensity was too great. He would have to revise that, he thought, and mention that the bonfire would need to be a mile high.

The sheer power of it forced him away. His chalk white skin was so hot he thought it would start melting. He knew that he should retreat into the night, and even let the elf win, but would Chloe survive until he could return? He bit his lower lip and bunched a fist. He’d come so far!

Behind the white hot symbols, Peyna breathed out and his knees dipped in relief.

Tom sagged against the pain and the pulse of his heart. It was as disorienting as thunder. He fled back a few more steps and tried to think!

Der floated to the surface of his mind again. She'd said something... Well, she'd said too many things – most of which swam against the current of his reality – but one or two things actually had made sense. He put that down to the fact that she said so many things at least one of them was going to make sense eventually.

She'd said this wasn't about what he was or even him at all. This horrible adventure was about saving a dying girl's life!

And he'd be damned *again* before he'd let this elf stop him.

He just ran. He didn't think, he didn't plan, he just ran. The bonfire intensity of the wall of holy drawings blazed with the inferno of the sun. He closed his eyes and tried not to imagine what he was about to do. He dove into the wall of holy light and knew what it felt like to be in the heart of a star.

He never would have survived this. Why in the hell was he acting like that stupid teenage girl? He desperately pushed his way forward into what felt like swimming uphill in a flood. Correction, he thought, a flood of fire! The symbols charred his skin and sapped his strength, but he kept running.

And then he was through. The night air felt like a rush of cool mountain breeze. He tottered forward, never actually stopping.

Peyna stared open mouthed as he watched the approaching vampire.

Tom's foot connected with his chest, and the physician was hurled back against the side of the house. Smoke rose from parts of the vampire's skin and clothing. He raised his hands, and the light exploded around them like thousands of tiny novae. They sprinkled down to the earth and vanished.

Peyna bit back on the first true scream he wanted to utter in at least three thousand years. He gathered what was left of his strength and concentrated on his hand. A golden light began to encase it. He could make it sharper than a sword, rip out the vampire's heart and then he knew what to do. There was plenty of wood around here.

He lunged.

Tom snatched his wrist. With his other hand, he picked up the golden light as if it were a solid coin. He twirled it around on his fingertips, and tossed it away over his shoulder.

He smiled through his snarl. "You can't beat me. Now bring me the girl!"

Peyna groaned and hung his head. "Right." He hit Tom across the knee with an old board that had fallen off the cottage during the brief fire. The vampire tried to dodge, and wouldn't have had a problem if that leg hadn't been torn up by the Pallens sword. He went down to his other knee.

The elf rolled to the side and heaved himself through the doorway where he clattered onto the floor.

Tom stepped up directly in the door frame, he clawed at the invisible barrier, but not even the heart could overcome that ancient divine design. He bounced on the balls of his feet. "Who's next?"

Peyna clawed at his throat until he could muster enough air to yell. "Chemman! Help me!"

“Why?” Thistle’s voice was damnably cool. With one foot, he slammed the door on the vampire’s face.

Peyna screamed. He was incredulous, livid, helpless, frothing at the mouth, and he could not imagine curse words wrathful enough. So, he screamed.

Erastus collapsed to the floor with his hands over his ears. Thalon dropped Chloe, and huddled over her as if protecting her from a rain of arrows. Outside, Tom started laughing wildly, and he kicked rocks at the house. They rattled piercingly on the door and some embedded themselves deeply into the walls.

Thistle finally stood up. He drew the black sword. He slammed it down between Peyna’s fingers. The scream cut off even as the physician kept trying to work his mouth.

Silence radiated out from the chemman weapon. He smiled, his lips twisting in the unfamiliar motion. “Do you think I’m good enough to cut your tongue out of your mouth while you’re screaming? Squeal again, and you can find out how good of surgeons we both are.”

Peyna’s mouth dried as he absorbed the threat. “I shall tell the king about this, mark my words.”

“If you still have a tongue.” He pulled the sword free of the wood.

The physician rolled backward away from Thistle. “The king shall *know!* You threatened my life and I am a member of his court!”

The chemman shrugged. “I’m teaching Thalon not to tattle just because he lost a fight, but if an immortal adult hasn’t learned that...” He frowned.

He left Peyna wheezing, and reopened the door. Outside, Tom paced like a cat.

The vampire yelled through the walls, “Bring her out. Now!”

Thistle leaned against the door frame, and took a moment to savor the early stars. “I don’t trust you. You don’t trust me.”

“Ha.” Tom stopped pacing. He snarled, “I see Derora hasn’t enchanted you, at least. Now, bring me Chloe.”

The chemman shrugged. “Thalon, bring her here.”

He put a hand on his son’s shoulder and wouldn’t let him cross the threshold. Chloe stumbled out half a step on her own and Tom took up the fading girl in his arms.

Thistle raised an eyebrow at the sudden change in the vampire. He couldn’t imagine where Tom could put all that rage and viciousness away so quickly.

“Chloe?” Tom whispered, struggling to stand.

“Uncle!” she said happily, and then coughed up a small amount of blood.

“Oh, child, you’re still alive.” He took her into his arms for a long moment. When he turned his back, he didn’t even glance at Peyna or anyone else in cabin.

Thistle faced the other way and walked deeper inside. Thalon tugged the door closed.

Once the door was shut, and he was on the outside, he figured he had maybe five seconds. The boy took off sprinting after Chloe and Tom. “Gonna be in trouble, gonna be in trouble, gonna be in *big* trouble this time.”

Even with the severe limp, Tom moved quickly. Thalon was out of breath by the time he caught up. Tom frowned. “Whatever are you doing, lad?”

He panted, “Making sure you help her. And—” He paused to breathe, and the autumn air felt like knives in his lungs. “And you’d better or I’m gonna *slay* you.”

The vampire stopped and stared. He opened his mouth, closed it with a click, shook his head and started walking again.

He led them through the trees to a small starlit hollow. He tilted his head back, and his pale face glowed. “The stars, lad, are the light of healing.”

Thalon turned his small face up. “Um, sure.”

The vampire ignored him as he laid Chloe out onto the damp grass. She smiled up at him. “I knew you’d come.” Her body shivered feebly and she was slack against his hands. He felt the dull heat of fever through her damp skin.

Tom made himself smile without his teeth. He swept his fingertips down the side of her face. “Look into my eyes, my child.” Their emerald radiance was brighter than the stars. “You will feel no pain.”

She nodded dutifully, and it forced him to smile again. He wiped her hair from her forehead. “Go to sleep.” When she had, he closed his own eyes. Behind him, Thalon sat quietly beside a tree.

Tom placed one hand over his heart and his other over hers. The stone heart began drumming again in a smooth, gentle stride.

He felt his hand sink through her skin and he was aware of her lungs’ motion, her heartbeat, everything. He found the now dormant magic. It wasn’t in any one specific place; it was everywhere and through everything.

He pulled it toward his hand. The magic resisted him, and he felt as if he was trying to draw the marrow from her bones. His own chest began to heat under his other hand, but he still pulled at the mulish power.

The girl’s body wrenched into spasms. Tom grimaced but did not remove his hands. In her sleep, she cried and whimpered.

“This has to work,” he murmured. “It has to.”

Beneath his hand, he felt her fading, slipping downward like the last of the sunset. His heart beat faster in response. He felt helpless. Death hadn’t frightened him for a long time, but suddenly it was his greatest fear.

Then, he yelled, no words, but a truly wild holler. He felt the magic unwillingly tug toward his hand, and he gripped and pulled all the harder. His yell increased. Chloe’s body jerked more violently. She was coughing blood, he could smell it.

At last, he ripped his hands free and fell to the side. He brought his hand out in front of him with his palm and his fingers splayed. There was nothing to see, but he could feel it, alive and pulsing and restless. He extended his hand before him and watched himself holding nothing, but he could still feel it. Frantically, he slapped his hand at the ground and released.

Despite the autumn, a beautiful red rose grew. Tom realized that if he’d been holding his breath, he would have exhaled now. He sagged bonelessly against the dirt.

Thalon hopped to his feet and ran his small hands over Chloe’s face.

Tom rolled on his side. “How is she?”

“Alive.”

“She should be awake soon.” He pushed himself to his knees and crawled over. He leaned over her face, and pressed his forehead against hers. His girl.

Next, he folded his cloak and pushed it underneath her head as a pillow and draped the rest over her as a blanket. He rocked back on his heels and looked at Thalon.

The boy shrank under the ancient gaze. “What?”

Tom sighed and looked back at Chloe. “It’s been long since I’ve known fear such as this.” He laid a gentle hand against her brow. “Please, if you can hear me.”

She didn’t wake up, but her breath was strong and steady.

Thalon whispered, “She needs rest. We should take her home – she’ll be safe with Dad.”

The vampire ran a hand over her face. “I can’t go back there.” He waited before speaking again. “Can I trust you, Thalon?”

The boy nodded. “Der trusts you, Chloe trusts you.”

“For the son of a chemman... you must take after your mother.” He shook his head, and fought against another unwilling smile. “No matter. Give her the rose, and this.” From his pockets, he uncovered a small, black wooden flute. “She always blows too hard and cracks the notes, but she can learn.”

Thalon nodded once. “Is that all?”

He ran a quick hand over his forehead. “Farewell. Forever. I’m sorry that I won’t be there, but this – this – it has to end. I’m sorry.”

Thalon shook his head vigorously. “But– wait! That wizard is still out there!”

“I can’t. I’m done. I...” He balled his white fists. “I know that you and your friends will protect her. I know you will. If I don’t stop interfering now, I know I never will. I’ve already slid very far down the side of the mountain, and if I go any farther, I will fall off this cliff.”

“But–”

“It’s over, child. This is done.” The vampire rose to his feet, pressing a hand to the back of his thigh and hissed. “I think the damn wound’s getting worse.”

“What about Der?” the boy asked suddenly.

Tom’s eyes flinched, but his face remained as impassive as stone. “She’s alive, with the knight.”

“Make sure she’s alright, please.”

He looked away. “No.”

Thalon jumped to his feet. “Please! There’s the war coming, and the river’s only a few miles from here! You’re the only one who can!”

Tom shook his head again. “No. I said after my ward was healed that that would be the end of my games in the mortal world.”

“But– but, what if the wizard comes back?”

“Then you should leave before he does. War will be at your door before tomorrow’s end.”

Thalon burst, “But he’s after her!”

The vampire froze. “What?”

“That’s what he said! And then he attacked us! Please, you gotta help us.”

“I will bite—” Tom snapped his mouth closed. “No, I made a promise. This has to stop.” He backed up a step. “If I— it’ll be too late. No, I know that you and your father and the others can protect her. Get her back to the house and leave, right now.”

“Why can’t you help us?”

“Because... this is all a façade, for all of us. This isn’t the way the world works, and it will break one of us in the end. I can’t do that to her.” His gaze slid downward to the sleeping girl. He hung his head. “Just keep Chloe safe. Farewell.”

Without looking back, he melted into the darkness.

Thalon waited. He couldn’t do anything else. He certainly wasn’t going to leave the girl here alone while he tried to find his way back to the cottage. Uneasily, he looked around into the dark heart of the night. Darkness changes the world, and paths and even familiar trees were dangerously deceptive. He wrapped his arms around himself and waited.

He waited and waited, until finally the starlight drained from the sky and was taken over by the mute pre-dawn grayness before true sunlight. His orange chemmen eyes could see their best in this light.

Chloe coughed and he grabbed her hand.

“Where’s my uncle?”

“Gone. He gave you these.” He pushed the rose and flute into her hands. The boy waited a second. “You know he’s a vampire, right?”

Chloe pulled the flute up to her chin. “I knew that, Grandfather told me, but when’s he coming back? I— I just thought he would be here with me.”

## Chapter Twenty One

### Crossing the River

"This is the worst idea you've ever had! We're surrounded!" Peyna bumped his chin against the dirt in anger.

Thistle raised an eyebrow. Beside him, Erastus huddled against the ground, holding Chloe. Thalon had squeezed up right next to her. Through the trees ahead of them lay the river, shimmering like a thousand diamonds in the sun. But, between them and the river, marched Urael's army. Thealith's army dissolved any possibility of withdrawal back to the east.

Thistle watched a column through the trees. The sun glinted severely off their mail and weapons. A cloud of dirt and dust followed them. His meager vantage point was only a little hill, but it was enough to see the gathering storm over the river.

"We'll never make it inside Urael now, you know," Peyna huffed.

"I know."

"Why did I ever listen to your ridiculous plan? Oh, Urael is the last place that bastard will look for her. She is going to be exposed here! That bastard is only two hundred yards away!" He grabbed a fistful of dirt and heaved it in the general direction of the river.

Thistle sighed. "Then may I suggest that you shut up?"

Peyna hurled a fistful of dirt in Urael's general direction. "How dare you say that to me! I am the royal physician, the best physician in the world!"

Thistle's face remained nonplussed. "And yet, you couldn't help Chloe."

Peyna opened his mouth as if to scream, but only a small croak escaped. "You— you don't understand what was being done to her!"

"Perhaps not, but it was the vampire who truly did, and not you. Now, can you use another glamour to hide us again, here?"

The physician exhaled, and hunched his shoulders. "No, he saw through my last one with ease, and I haven't prepared for any type of magical combat. Besides, nearly all of my magic is in regard to healing."

"Too bad."

"I want my uncle." Chloe peeled her face away from the ground. Both men turned to her. She continued, "He could get us out of here."

"Yes, he would have been useful," Thistle murmured.

"So, Dad, how do we get out of here?" Thalon whispered.

"Not sure." The chemman shrugged. His orange eyes fell on Chloe, who stared right back at him with nothing but trust shining on her face.

He sighed, and spoke in elvish, "I wish we could use the girl."

"She'd die!" Peyna fired back. "That damned wizard is here, right here, and you're considering it!"

"No, I'm merely acknowledging a fact. Using her ability may be the only way out of this."



“She’ll perish. And now I expect you to counter with but the rest of us will survive, but damn it, man, I am not sacrificing a child!”

“I never said you’d have to,” the chemman responded softly.

“How could you even say that?”

“How could you even assume that I’d be so cruel in the first place?” He sighed. “I know what my brothers are, but I have proven that my loyalties are with my son. So, tell me, why would I harm his new friend? Why would I harm any child?”

“I– I...” Peyna sealed his lips closed. “I only...”

Thistle flashed a toothless smile. “Don’t worry, I have no idea what to do either.”

On either side of the Dismal Horvath, the armies moved to the commands of the trumpets. Urael’s army lined up in front of Thealith’s army, while the rest of their troops slowly negotiated the river crossing on large rafts. The water was wide and shallow for the most part and entangled in many smaller channels and sandbars.

Standing in the ranks, Sergeant Lynon of Thealith’s Royal Army from Malfax drew his sword as he watched the other army. His helmet was already heating up in this sun and the wind stung his cheeks through the open face.

He checked over his shoulder. His soldiers weren’t new to combat – there were brigands aplenty hidden beyond the unclaimed borders of the kingdom. This time, they were lucky enough to be near the back, but he knew they wouldn’t remain there for long.

Crossing the river was going to be difficult, especially with archers loosing arrows on both sides. He felt a stab of pity for those still crossing the water. He knew that Urael had been building fords by night – their scouts had mapped those carefully, in order to use them for themselves.

Lynon shifted his feet uneasily, and then tried to hide the action from the men behind him. He never heard the order to combat. He wasn’t at all sure if they should be fighting, not with the rumors about dragons and wizards flying around.

Too late now though, the battle was like a flood, once it started, it caught everyone in its path and it could not be stopped. The pounding of charging soldiers’ boots trembled beneath his own feet. Lynon raised his own sword, and the river valley flooded with heavy metal thunder.

The osprey circled overhead, and the ruby crowned kinglet bounced on Alcomm’s head. He laughed where he stood, soaking in the sights and sounds, even the vibrations under his feet. He smiled as thousands of men and horses collided in a clash of flesh and metal. The floodplain soon began to run with red with blood.

He savored the view as someone else might pause at the vista of a majestic waterfall. Overhead, the osprey squealed, diving down at a thicket of trees on a small hill.

At the top of the remaining dead leaves, the bird flapped its wings and shot back into the sky.

Alcomm grinned to himself. He twirled his staff and began to saunter through the swords and battle.

The wind suddenly stormed through the trees. Thistle cursed and slipped the black sword free of its sheath. "Keep them safe." And then he was gone.

"What's going on?" Chloe screamed above the abrupt wind.

"I don't know!" Thalon struggled to draw both of his long knives at once. "I don't know!"

"Is it *him*?" Erastus clutched Chloe tighter.

"No, worse," Peyna spat. He rose to his feet, shaking his hands.

"I am prepared this time, elf, are you?" the wizard sang.

Peyna spun in a complete circle. "Where are you?"

"You know, I never needed the girl alive. I just need to be here when she dies." He raised his free hand.

Chloe screamed. She pinned her hands against her ears and squirmed against the ground, shrieking. The physician thrust out his hand and drew up an arc of shimmering energy between the wizard and the girl.

Alcomm staggered back as if he'd been struck a blow. The kingly flew from his head, squealing. Peyna stepped in front of the children.

The wizard ground his teeth. "You will not stop me!"

"I will," whispered a voice behind his shoulder. Immediately, a sword slid through Alcomm's thick robes. He opened his mouth to bark a spell, and felt the air pass through his throat and over his tongue. Yet, he made no sound. He felt bile and panic rise up his throat next. He froze.

Thistle thrust deeper; he hadn't yet felt the kiss of the blade into the skin. He planted his feet and shoved the sword in as far as he could, but it seemed entangled in the robes as if it were knotted in strings.

Alcomm spun toward him, bringing the staff around like the wrath of the gods. Thistle ducked and shifted back as easily as a well-greased wheel.

The staff was still there. It shouldn't have been possible! There was no way the wizard could have followed him that quickly!

Crack!

The stave smashed into the chemman's head, and also, a transparent, yet visible wall of solid air pushed Thistle irresistibly backward. He finally slammed against the ground. The black sword rolled from his fingertips.

He didn't get back up.

"Dad!" Thalon screamed.

Peyna caught the boy by his ear as he jumped forward. "Stay here!"

"But, but—"

"Stay!"

Chloe pulled herself away from the ground and Erastus's grasp. She bunched her fists at her side. "I want to help."

"You'll die!" Erastus wobbled to stand upright.

Peyna growled, "Child, you can't, *you're* the one he wants to kill for some reason. He's the one who made you so ill."

Alcomm swept closer, entering beneath the trees. "Yes, come to me, child."

Chloe, with tears in her eyes, inhaled. "No!" Above her, the osprey flew away from the sound of her shout.

Peyna crossed both his hands behind his back, weaving his fingers in a pattern. Sparks trailed after his moving digits.

"I think not." Alcomm raised his free arm and his staff. Smoke erupted from Peyna's fingers and the sparks jolted him.

"I told you I was prepared this time!" He leveled his staff at the elf.

The physician's feet rose from the ground. He gasped and kicked out in reflex. Alcomm wiggled his staff and the elf flipped upside down.

"Damn you! Stop this!" Peyna reached for some exposed roots, but they bobbed just out of his grasp.

"So, tell me, can you heal this?" The wizard raised his staff and hand, and Peyna shot into the air as if exploding from a volcano. He smashed through branches and limbs while he flew skyward. At first, he shielded his face with his arms, but at the height of the trees, he was no longer moving. He crashed into a branch at the top of a tree, where his tunic and trousers caught in the branches and twigs. He still failed to move, and a few drops of blood fell back down to earth.

"Oh, no," Erastus moaned.

Thalon dropped a knife and snatched one of Chloe's hands. They gulped in unison. Together, they dragged their eyes forward. No one else stood between them and Alcomm.

"Leave my friends alone!" Chloe bunched her free fist. Beside her, Thalon raised his remaining knife, ready to throw.

Alcomm smiled. "Yes, yes. That's right, child."

Erastus dropped to his knees. "Please, please, my lord, please don't hurt her!"

"I can't make that promise, old man." He swung his staff in the grandfather's direction. "However, I could just kill you first if you don't wish to witness my glory." The end of the wooden stave began to glow red.

"Stop!" Chloe cried.

The tip of Alcomm's staff exploded. He jumped back. "How did you—" He narrowed his eyes. "You are not a match for me, little girl."

Thalon threw his knife. It stuck in mid-air. Alcomm pulled a blade as curved as a sickle from his robes, and stepped forward intently. The children stared upward.

And then, the entire world morphed into ash and flame.

Alcomm crossed his staff and sword, shielding his face. He dropped the curved blade, and the steel evaporated before it ever hit the ground. But the flame ricocheted off an invisible shield around the wizard.

"Dragon!" Chloe yelled, staring at the pinpoint stream of flame.

Thalon pointed. "Goldie!"

The incredibly massive dragon soared through the air, and his wingspan covered the entire battlefield. Panic shot through both armies faster than a hail of arrows. Swords slipped from hands as the soldiers stared at the magnificence above.

The osprey screamed as it circled the wall of flames. Goldie flicked one giant talon, and sent the bird tumbling uncontrollably through the air. With a swish of his majestic tail and hands, he swept the children and old man up into his palm...

And disappeared.

“No! Alcomm scrambled to his feet. “No!”

Erastus and the children suddenly dropped on the ugly raft, splashing water dangerously high over its edges. The small golden ball of dragon collapsed into Der’s hands, panting like an out of breath dog. He craned up his slender head on his long neck. “Did I get him?”

Jakkobb shaded his eyes. “I don’t know.”

Der pulled her cloak over the dragon as the raft bumped against the edge of a large sand and gravel deposit. His eyes closed and he continued to pant.

“Well, now what?” Kelin asked.

“How did he know?” Thalon asked, nodding at Goldie.

Der shrugged. “He just took off.”

“You must be Chloe.” Mora knelt in front the children. “Nice to finally meet you.”

The girl bobbed her head up and down. “Yes. Is the wizard dead?”

Spike shook his mane. *No, I can still feel him.* He looked sideways at the knight.

Most of the battlefield could not see them, and all eyes remained skyward, searching for the dragon. Then, one soldier saw his opening and struck at an enemy, who was still looking to the sky. He fell. His shield mate thrust at the original attacker, and then another soldier retaliated against him. And, like pebbles cascading into a rockslide, the war began anew.

Jakkobb spun toward Der, Kelin and Mora. “You stay here, and guard them!” He stabbed a finger at Erastus and the children.

“No, we’re coming with you!” The Pallens sword came alight in Der’s hand as she jumped off the raft.

“No, you’re not.”

“But—”

Jakkobb’s voice thundered louder than the roar of the battle. “Der! Take an order! Stay here and guard them!”

“Yes, sir.” She dropped the point of the blade and stepped backward onto the raft.

Spike stepped off the raft, his massive feet sinking in the loose sand. He snorted and pawed the ground like a bull. *This is what he is after, Derora, if he gets to her, then this whole adventure has been for naught.*

Jakkobb heaved himself up into the unicorn’s saddle. “Protect them!” Spike reared, and he and the knight dashed into the battle.

Scowling, Der turned around and pushed Goldie into Thalon’s hands. “Watch him.” The dragon squirmed feebly.

"I'm going too!" Mora pulled up her skirt and hopped off the raft.

"What?" Kelin and Der echoed.

"I'm going." She looked at them over her shoulder. "Jakkobb's not a magic user. He's going to need help."

"Me too." Kelin, drawing his sword, stepped beside her.

"Jakkobb said to stay here!" Der's foot hovered over the edge of the raft, but she pulled it back and watched the couple head off to war.

The knight grinned through his grimace. "Come on, Spike, we've been in worse situations before."

The rhythm of Spike's hooves almost beat to the drums of the soldiers. *Yes, and how did those situations end, pray?*

"I didn't want to be reminded of that right now." He glanced over to where the armies were slicing at each other's throats. The poor bastards, he thought. It wasn't their fault. They'd got orders. They didn't know who was playing this violin. And they're the ones who always got the worst of it all, right in the gut.

Lost in his own thoughts and watching the battle, he failed to look ahead. Blinding lightning obliterated the ground where the equine's hooves had just treaded.

"Shit! Spike, run!"

"I am losing my patience!" a voice sang over the clashes of battle.

Spike hopped sideways. His instinct saved them from their unseen nemesis. Lightning seared through the air, inches from Spike's nose. The energy crackled and sizzled, and he smelled some of his own fried hair. He dropped to two knees, and Jakkobb flew free from the saddle.

The knight rolled away, and the ground lit up with another bolt between the two of them.

Alcomm marched toward the knight. "What did you do? I know a dragoon when I see one, and you bring dragons! Where is she?"

Jakkobb raised the axe, and smaller bolt struck it from his hand. The knight coughed. He didn't want to believe it, but he knew how easily it could all end. Especially against a magic user without a plan...

The knight looked up to see the end of the staff glowing with the white hot brilliance of the stars. "Last chance!"

He shook his head.

"Very well!" He raised the staff. The lightning shot forth, arching toward Jakkobb's head.

It suddenly changed direction and shot off into the heavens.

"Stop!" Mora lowered her hands. Around her hands, a blue glow flashed brightly and then disappeared.

Alcomm blinked. He blinked again. He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well, well, well. Morana. What are you doing here? Not the scared little waif I knew not long ago. I see that you've spent too long in the company of heroes, dear girl."

Mora growled and tossed her hands free of her sleeves over her head. She stepped away

from Kelin. "I'll keep his attention. You get him if I don't." Red light flared between them and sweat broke on her forehead.

The magician leaned casually on his staff and grinned. "This will be quicker than you think, dear. You know you cannot match me."

"No, I just have to outthink you!" Fire swelled up between her hands. She launched it.

He caught it on his staff. "What was that, you—"

The magician whirled, barely avoiding a stream of fire. Mora raised her hands and another fireball grew.

The wizard raised his staff and hands in self defense. "Oh, no, no! How? Why?"

"Yes!" Mora breathed. "I— I got him!"

The sound of laughter cut across her triumphal shout. Alcomm smirked and murmured a single word beneath his breath.

Mora's eyes and mouth opened wide. The flare above her hands viciously bit into her skin. They glowed sickly red. The color flooded down her arms and onto her face. Smoke drifted up from the hem of her dress.

She opened her mouth to scream and flames soared upward from her throat. A crimson cloud erupted from her exposed skin and shot high into the air. It swelled overhead, showering red sparks, and casting an ugly shadow over the Dismal Horvath.

"Mora!" Kelin hollered as she collapsed. He dashed over to her, collapsing over her body. "Mora! Mora! No, oh gods, no!" Her body twitched and shook uncontrollably.

The wizard leaned on his staff, leering. "Fire magic, too dangerous, especially when you don't know how to protect it from being cast inside your own body."

Kelin stumbled down to his knees and dropped his sword. It had already proved its uselessness. He held her burning hand. "I don't care that you lied." Unchecked tears sizzled as they landed on her skin. He looked up at the wizard and waited for his turn.

Spike leapt over Kelin and Mora's body, his hooves kicking up dirt in the wizard's face. His alicorn flared into life.

A few feet away, Jakkobb roared as he picked up his axe.

Alcomm growled, "I don't have time for this. I need to harvest her now!"

He spun his stave in front of him, and in a stench of death, he vanished.

Around them, the battle was fast becoming an unorganized melee. Some troops from Urael still had to cross the river, and there was no good way for an army to cross the river, especially with archers on Thealith's side. There were no bridges. Both armies tried the few fords, and that led to desperate combat in the middle of the water. Heavy armor, loose gravel, and rushing water proved the mightier foe, and soldiers were washed away in some of the deeper areas. In other places, the braids of the river were shallow enough to cross, but easy enough to drown in armor if one put a foot down wrong.

Some parts of the battle were on one side, others across the river. In the mud, it was hard to tell one uniform from another. All hope of formation flowed away downstream.

An arm of lightning spat up sand on the riverbank as the bolt crashed into it. Der turned her back and did her best to shield the children. She tottered and tried to keep her balance against a wave of dizziness. She'd lost too much blood at the monastery. She froze as she heard footsteps crunching on sand behind her.

"Tsk, tsk."

Der whirled, but kept her sword low at her side. It was the wizard, who else could it be? And he was here to kill this innocent little girl. Tom's girl. Also, in some strange fashion, Der felt as if she was her girl too. She found herself wishing that Tom had lied about his promise to walk away. They both could use his aid right now.

She stuck her boot on the raft, and kicked it back out into the current. Slowly, Chloe, Erastus and Thalon spun back out into the river.

"Stop!" Alcomm thrust out his arm.

"I'll stop you!" Der shouted, lunging with her sword.

The wizard was only a few feet away. However, those few feet could have been a continent. She watched him raise his staff. She ran as fast as she could, but it seemed to take aeons for her feet to respond. She'd had no plan; she'd just hoped to be fast enough.

He pointed the crackling staff at her. Her mouth dried instantly as the lightning erupted like a vengeful dragon. She watched it coming to claim her. She held the Pallens sword in front of her and cringed behind it.

The electric bolt lanced the sword. She knew her entire body lifted off the ground, but didn't feel anything in that white, even blissful moment.

The lightning broke off and she smashed to the ground. Her hand still clung to the sword, but now that hand was glistening with sweat despite the fact that it felt as cold as ice. In fact, her entire body was. Der wasn't at all certain what exactly was going on, but she thought sluggishly, being prone on the ground wasn't good. She tried to push her knees underneath, but her legs moved in the wrong direction.

She tried again, but she couldn't quite get it to work right. She made it to her elbows.

She looked down at her sword, firmly cradled in her hand. The sword, she mused, it hadn't gotten past the sword. The lightning had stayed there, it *absorbed* the spell. She was sure the blade was shining more too.

Wobbling, she managed to stand. She tried to raise the sword, but her arm twitched and she only got it as far as her waist.

Distantly, she heard cries of surprise – she wasn't sure from whom. She couldn't distinguish any of them. They all sounded like a muted hum.

The magician retreated a single step. "What the hell is that thing?"

With her other hand clutching her wrist, Der was able to lift the sword. The sunlight flashed harshly against the sapphire. The blade positively glowed blue and gold.

The wizard stared. "Pallens!" He stumbled back another step. "Impossible!"

Derora barely heard any of it. She kept her narrow field of attention on her target and lurched another step toward him.

"There's no such thing as a Pallens weapon anymore!" the magician shrieked.

She reeled forward another foot.

Snarling, he pointed the staff at her again. "You'll meet the same fate as the Empire!" This time, the roaring head of a lion burst forth. It was a real lion, with thick fur, muscles and definitely teeth. But the rear half was only made of a blur of light rooted in the staff. It swiped at her with its paws.

She felt dragged forward by her weapon. Fairly clumsily, Der ducked to the side and ran at the wizard, vaguely remembering something she learned in her first fight. You fought your opponent, not his weapon. She would be a fool to fight the lion. She whacked the staff with her sword and the roaring creature vanished. Light sprang up from the sword's screeching contact with the stave. The wizard staggered back. She barely staggered forward.

She shifted her hands on the hilt as she tried to focus. The wizard began chanting. Der leapt forward, aiming the sword for his chest. He moved to block with the staff.

She dropped to her knees from the magically amplified blow.

The magician smirked. "Now..." The staff lowered at her, and she braced to roll when it was batted aside. The fireball shot up to the sky and the wizard tottered away.

Der smiled at the hooded figure in front of her. "Thanks, Thi— *Tom!*"

She stared. That was Tom in front of her, and she couldn't deny it.

The vampire looked down and grinned. "Can't stay out of trouble, can you?" He leaned most of his weight on a thick iron rod slightly taller than he was.

"What are you doing here? How did you get here? You said—"

He shook his head and looked back to the wizard.

The magician pointed the staff at him. "You'll die too!"

"How, exactly?" And then he smiled that special vampire smile.

"Ah!" He fumbled his robes. "I can handle you! But, you're helping her... Pallens! And you're undead!" His eyes raged with confusion.

Tom shrugged.

"It doesn't matter! I will destroy you both!"

Tom smirked. "Don't try to fight with death, I'll win." He winked one emerald eye, and it reopened blazing red. Suddenly, so was the other one.

"Sennha protects me!" The wizard flailed with the staff.

Tom advanced deliberately, and his iron staff stamped so hard into the ground that it left furrows. "Want to find out how much?"

The wizard swung, and Tom moved his iron rod lazily to intercept. The wooden shaft splintered. Lights and human screams spilled out from its pieces. The vampire hopped backward and out of the paths of the errant shards. The follower of Sennha screamed and fell backward.

He grabbed up a fallen sword that had somehow landed there. Probably from one of the soldiers passing through here before the battle, he mused.

Tom advanced another step as his opponent dragged himself to his feet. The once stately robes were speckled by damp sand. This time, the magic user held up his free hand and lightning screamed from his fingers at Tom.



The vampire chuckled and caught the bolt in his hand. He pointed back and the lightning fired at the magician, who gaped and barely dodged. "How can you—?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Tom's vicious grin remained fixed on his face. Inside his chest, he felt the stone heart drumming.

The wizard tried again with a fire spell. Halfway between the two of them it turned into a golden chalice and crashed harmlessly to the ground.

Tom leaned against his iron staff. "Um... that's not what I intended. I'm not used to this thing yet." He shrugged. "No matter." He advanced another step. "Would you like me to draw all of the magic out of you? Want to find out what that will do to your body?"

He took another step, eager as a puppy to play. He held out one hand, bracing for whatever spell was next when the wizard thrust with the sword.

The blade caught Tom's outstretched hand at the wrist, and tore it off. The appendage spun free.

The vampire yelped and clutched his dead end wrist. "My hand!"

The magician lunged again. It found no target as the vampire had suddenly vanished. Then, Tom set his feet down on the extended blade. He smiled at the wizard's expression as he balanced on the sword.

The world paused. The magician gawped, too in shock to move.

Grinning, Tom pulled the metal staff back and swung. The wizard's body folded around it and bones crunched against the iron. He flew across the river bank.

Tom lightly glided down to the ground. He limped over and tested the body with the butt of his staff.

The wizard tried to cough. He opened one dark eye. "Doesn't... matter. Can't stop this." He hacked. "My lord's will cannot be stopped."

Tom shrugged, raising the iron rod. "Sennha doesn't frighten me."

"Not— only... him." The wizard raised an arm over his face. "I was not the one who demanded the child. There is another behind me. We have been waiting for one such as this child."

"You know what? It's not *my* problem."

He thrust the rod back down.

Der limped up and rested her head against Tom's arm. She didn't even look at the corpse at his feet. "Thank you."

He snorted. "I told you—"

"I don't care. Thank you."

He sighed, and studied the stub of his wrist. "Here, help me. I need to tie a tourniquet around this thing."

"What? Why? You can't bleed to death."

"We can, in fact, if we don't heal in time. But, before that, the blood loss affects vampires differently. We get, ah, hungry. You should hurry."

"Oh." She looked around for some string, and settled for cutting free the late wizard's

bootlace.

“Hurry, Derora.”

“Right, right.” She quickly surveyed the corpse. “What’s this?” She grappled with the dead man’s finger, and pulled off a large gold ring. It had a wolf’s head, with jeweled eyes, on a snake’s body. The snake circled around the finger, until it turned into the wolf.

“Hurry, Der!”

“Um.” She espied Tom’s hand near on the sand and leaned over to pick it up. She pulled the beautiful platinum ring from the dead finger. She stared at it for a moment. He had been so protective of it. The picture of the castle cut into the gem looked hauntingly familiar, kind of like Moonrise Castle, but that was one of the few castles that she’d actually seen. She waved his severed hand toward him. “Do you want this back?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Believe me, I know where that has been.”

“Oh.” She brought it level with her own face. “So, I’ll just, uh, set it down then.”

“I’ll grow a new one in a week or two, and in a few hours, that will be nothing but ashes. But, for now, the tourniquet, please.” He held out his wrist that ended in a bloody stump. She even saw the arterial blood leaping from the wound.

“I didn’t know vampires actually bled like humans.”

“Yes, we do, now you’ve got to hurry. I’m already starting to feel— just hurry. Where the hell is my flask?” He groped at his belt.

She prised Tom’s ring from the dead finger and dropped it in her pocket as she shuffled over to help him. Quickly, she knotted the bootlace around his wrist.

“DERORA SAXEN!”

She flinched and whirled. Jakkobb marched toward her with his face almost as red as his armor. She looked around, and saw Spike flying low over the riverbank – low enough to look as though he was walking to the casual eye. He had his non-casual eyes trained toward the soldiers. Thalon, Chloe, Goldie and Erastus were perched on his back. The unicorn kept his distance.

“Where’s Thistle and Peyna?” she asked.

Jakkobb pointed silently to where Peyna still lay unconscious at the treetop. Thistle, on the other hand, was finally pulling himself to his feet. He limped over.

“We won,” she said simply.

“No.” Thistle nodded toward the soldiers. “It’s not over.”

The knight glared at the vampire. “Now, what the hell is he doing here?”

Der glanced over. “Pouting, sir.”

“What?”

“I do not pout, little girl.”

She pointed. “Yes, you are. Look at you!”

He ran his tongue over his fangs, and in a voice barely above a whisper, he hissed, “You will rue the night you met me.”

Der laughed in his face. She rested a hand on his shoulder for support. “No, *you’re* the one regretting meeting me. Line your stars up right, pointy!”

Tom batted her hand away. He tried to exclaim something, but no sound came out of his open mouth.

Thistle leaned back, watching the imaginary steam rise from Tom. "I wonder if a vampire can have an apoplexy."

Jakkobb growled. "I don't know. If his head pops off, I'm going to throw it at the both of them." He nodded to the armies and his face darkened even further. "Thistle, Der, you are honorary dragoon soldiers of Silver Dawn tonight." He paused, gazing at Tom.

The vampire shook his head. "I do not need you to insult me tonight as well, elf."

"Good, I wasn't going to. But, Der, Thistle, you are."

Thistle's face twisted, and he looked as if he'd just been told to wear someone else's dirty underwear.

Der raised her sword. "Um, exactly what does that mean, sir?"

"Whatever you do tonight, the order will back you up." He slid the visor on his helmet down. "Provided one of us gets back to tell the order."

"Kelin!" Thistle called softly, but his voice carried far enough.

The young man was crying as he pried himself free of the ground. He picked up his sword, and in a daze, walked over to them. It was his duty.

Once again, trumpets sounded, and now the soldiers of both sides fell back to reform their lines.

"Is it over?" Der cocked her head. "No, they're reforming lines. Oh, no, they're going to fight again. But— but, we stopped it! We killed the wizard and he was the one steering this whole disaster!"

The chemman shook his head. "This is beyond words now."

"Meaning what, Thistle?" She propped her weight on her sword by sticking its tip against the soft mud.

Jakkobb sighed. "People have died; no negotiations can satisfy this now. No unexplained miracles are going to hold this flood back for long." He caught her hopeless expression. "You knew it was a slim chance before this. I'm sorry, Der. We can't stop this now."

Her shoulders slouched. "I understand, sir."

She flinched as she heard the metallic beast roar as combat reared its head. It sounded distant, but the beast approached as its roar grew louder by the heartbeat.

Its roar suddenly became a background buzz to the absolute silence that stood between them and the soldiers now advancing upon them. Neither side was certain whose side they were on. Urael's troops edged closer, they had just killed their wizard after all, and the truth about his real allegiance hadn't gotten around. They moved cautiously though, in case Thealith decided to protect them.

Their mismatched weapons came on guard in a line. Tom held the iron crutch out as if it were a sword. Spike drifted over to their defensive line.

He leaned behind Der's shoulder. "I could fly the pair us to safety, but I already know your answer."

"Good. Now, can you answer this one? What the hell are we going to do?"

He sucked his tongue and finally shook his head. “No, I can’t.”

“Anyone?” Der asked loudly. “There’s hundreds of them.” She glanced hopefully at Thealith’s troops, but their sergeants were holding them where they were.

“Uncle!” Chloe cried, leaping off the unicorn’s incredibly high back. Tom immediately lifted her off the sand with one arm.

Spike pawed the ground as Thalon and Erastus dismounted. The unicorn snorted, *I could distract them.*

Goldie thrust his head out of the saddlebag. With his long neck, he swiveled around to get a full view. He buried himself back inside the saddlebag. “Oh no!”

Jakkobb groaned. “Sometimes, I hate being me. Spike, come here.” When the unicorn trotted forward, he plunged his hand into the saddlebag and dragged the dragon out. Goldie had rolled himself into a shivering ball. “Look at me, little one.”

“No! I don’t want to! It’s scary! I’m tired!”

“I know, I’m frightened too.” He turned the dragon around until he could see his eyes. “I need you to stop the battle. You can do it, just like you saved the children and the old man.”

Goldie tried to dig his talons into Jakkobb’s armor. “No! I’m too hungry now!”

“Just fly up there, and tell them to stop, please. You can do this.”

He squirmed desperately, claws scrabbling over the armor. “No! Nooo!”

“You can!” He hurled the dragon into the air with all his might. The chubby ball suddenly expanded and expanded until he took up the entire sky.

Der gawped and watched as the dragon filled the heavens. Gods above, she thought, some of his scales are larger than my parents’ house!

The magnificent dragon laughed as large as mountains and flamed. The fires of the gods ran forth from his mouth like a winding, relentless river. The sky became an orange furnace, and it was a long time before it faded back to blue. He focused his attention on the river, and the river became two worlds at once – one of fire and one of water. The water writhed and boiled against the flames on its surface, but the river continued to burn.

The armies below dropped their weapons, and as one, stared heavenward. The dragon was the horizon and beyond.

Sergeant Lyonon felt his knees give way without consulting him first. The sword slipped from his grasp. His eyes fell back to the ground with the battlefield around him. Many had already died, and many more were wounded. Some had washed downriver, and would never be found. Behind him, he heard some of his men drawing back their bows. He held up his hand to give the signal, even though he was sure a storm of arrows couldn’t puncture this dragon. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. In the tales he had grown up on, dragons had been evil, or at the very least, venal and avaricious. But the sight of the golden scales in the sunlight burned through those stories. He felt a tear slipping down his cheek.

In a voice as ancient as the sea, Goldie spoke, “Stop.”

Lyonon spun on his men. “Drop those bows!”

Behind him, he heard thunder, and the umbrella of shadow vanished from the ground. He closed his eyes and felt the memory become solid.

Der caught the little dragon in one hand. She still carried her sword in the other. He was unconscious before he even landed.

Spike hopped in front of her to hide her from view; he needn't have worried, all the troops were still staring at the sky.

She gently settled the dragon in the saddlebag. "They probably saw Jakkobb throw him." *Perhaps. But what he threw couldn't have possibly been that big.*

"Uncle!" Chloe gripped Tom's shoulders tighter. "Thank you, thank you! You saved me!"

He smiled against his will. "Not just me. I had some help." His face receded back into his usual frown. "I... Chloe, I'm going away again, and I won't be coming back this time."

"But—"

His emerald gaze slipped away from her face. "No, dear child. It's for the best. The physician, he's going to help you, take you somewhere else, along with your grandfather, and they're all going to protect you."

"I want you to protect me! You're my uncle!"

He brought his eyes back to her face. "No, child, I'm not your uncle. I never have been."

"Yes, you are!" She threw her arms around his neck. "I don't care about the vampire thing, honest! I love you!"

"I love you too," he whispered. He hugged her. "When you're older, I hope you'll understand. You'll be fine." He pushed her gently back toward Thalon. "You'll do fine."

Sobs escaped from her lips. "No, no, no, don't go! Please!"

"I'm so sorry. I have to." He stood up and gently walked her over to her grandfather. "Take care of her. You will never see me again." He turned his shoulder to the crying girl.

Tom dusted his hand against his trouser.

Jakkobb appeared not to have noticed anything close to him. His gaze was trained on the armies, standing there, awaiting new orders. "Goldie just bought us time. This is still beyond us."

"Still beyond us..." Der echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Men have died, Der, words can't satisfy this now. These kingdoms will fight."

"But the cost will only be worse!" Der kicked the dirt, and then, slowly, fixed her gaze on the vampire.

He gasped when he saw her expression. "No! No, no, no, absolutely *not*. It might expose me!"

"Your power— your hypnotic power! We need to stop this thing once and for all!"

"I'll be hunted for it!" He snapped his fingers, and the edge was back in his voice.

She placed her hands on her hips. "Well, I think it's worth the risk. Put your power to a good use for once."

"I told you," he snarled, leaning forward, "I'm *done* with the mortal world."

She raised an eyebrow. "Is that why you came back for us?"

"I didn't come back here for your friends, or even Chloe entirely! I knew that you could protect her!"

“Then why are you here?”

“You don’t know?” He gaped and slapped a hand over his face. “I don’t think I want to tell you then, *especially* since you want me to use my power. I could be hunted if I’m exposed. And you know with this— this thing now...” He petered out in the face of her growing, radiant smile. “What?” he asked, slowly leaning away from that smile.

“You’re obviously too scared to do this.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, ha, I’m a little too smart to fall for such a cute trick.”

The smile grew. “So, I’ll protect you.”

He froze. “What?” he said in a deadpan voice only a dead man could achieve.

Behind him, Jakkobb slapped a hand over where his mouth was underneath his helmet and goggled.

Der’s face suddenly became very stern and rigid. She gripped her sword and straightened her shoulders. “I will protect you, since you’re obviously too scared – perhaps even too weak – to handle this.”

“Too weak! Too weak! How can you protect me? I’m *better* than you are and you’re going to protect me?” His cloak swirled as he spun around. “Where are these generals?” He started to march off, and Der followed. He released a guttural growl. “What are you doing?”

“Protecting you!” She saluted, but couldn’t hide her grin, despite the angry vampire growling in her face.

As they left, Jakkobb hung there with his jaw drooping to the bottom of his helmet.

Spike stepped up beside him. *I used to think that it was getting hard to surprise us. Well, I was wrong.*

Thistle had gone over to Kelin, who was hunched over Mora. He had straightened her ruined body out into a restful position. Silent tears strolled down his face.

He didn’t look at his mentor. He gurgled and coughed and tried not to cry.

“I understand.”

Kelin nodded. “What do I do now?”

Thistle calmly folded his hands in front of him. “Bury her, and protect the living.”

“How can you say that? How the hell can you say that? To just forget her and move on?”

The chemman bowed his head as if in prayer. “Almost exactly a year ago, I found your campsite where my wife was slain. I was distraught, especially since there was no sign of my son either. At that site, I found a shallow grave among the bodies of the fallen cultists. So, I dug.”

“But why would you?” Kelin coughed out between sobs.

“The elves had buried my wife. She was one of their own. I dug because I had to know.” His voice betrayed no spark of sadness, but his orange eyes were focused on a different world.

“That wasn’t fair either! Laurel and you helped us – she – Mora – neither of them deserved to die!” He struggled against a sob. “She wasn’t perfect, but she didn’t deserve to die like this! I’m not perfect either, and neither are you! Why are we still alive?”

Thistle held up his hands.

He spat at his teacher's feet. "And you say to bury her, just like that. How can you be so callous?"

"It's how you're still alive," the chemman said. "When my wife was killed, I protected you."

Kelin stuttered and stared. He dropped his sword and began to sob again. "I'm sorry, Thistle, I'm sorry. I just – why couldn't things have turned out differently? Why did she have to try to be the hero? Not when Der and Jakkobb and you were here."

The chemman shook his head. "Stop. Protect the living. That means you must live with everything that has transpired. Don't wish."

Slowly, Kelin nodded. He squeezed her hand one last time. "Will you help me dig her grave?"

Tom stormed away from the high command of Thealith, with his crutch slamming against the ground out of sync with his feet.

Der jogged to keep up. "It's almost disgusting how easy that was – for you, anyway. With both generals. You just said 'no war' and that was it. Think of all the things—"

He stopped and turned so quickly she crashed into him. He threw the crutch to the ground and grabbed her ear with his remaining hand.

She twisted her head in an effort to lessen the pain. "Ow! Ow! Stop it!" She pawed uselessly at his wrist.

"I'm in danger, Derora, or is that not a significant consideration for you?" He dragged her toward an umbrella of shade beneath some trees on the riverside. "Using my power like that draws attention, maybe not from the humans, but many powers have eyes, and I've got to exist in secret if I want to survive!"

"Speaking of attention," she started to mumble, but looking around – even with her head tilted like an owl she saw how the milling soldiers seemed not to see them.

He spun her around and her back hit the trunk of a tree, hard. She immediately tried to step forward, but he stood right there, inches away. Meanwhile, trumpets began to sound a halt to battle for both sides. Der didn't even register them.

She stared at his grinning, fanged rictus. His hand squeezed her arm and he shoved it against the tree. "Do you have any suspicion *at all* about how crazy you make me?!"

"Me!"

"Yes! You!"

She could feel the cold air from his mouth on her face. "This was never about *me*, this was about Chloe!"

He squeezed her wrist tighter. "Yes, it was." The words seemed sharper on his fangs, and Der found herself constantly noticing those in the moment. "Until I met you." He finally let go of her wrist, and pressed his hand against the tree over her shoulder. "Then all my careful, delicate, *secret* plans fractured! Broken, irreparable. Don't you see that? Suddenly, it's more than my quest! These two godsdamn kingdoms suddenly aren't going to fight a war because of you! And *I'm* involved! In just over a month, you've destroyed my entire existence that I worked for centuries to build!"

She licked her lips. “That’s going too far—”

“I’m not the one who goes too far! And! And, I hate you. I didn’t think a mere mortal was deserving of my hatred, but I hate you!” His fingers dug bloody hollows into the tree. “My damned existence was quiescent and predictable, and then I met you.”

Der pressed her shoulders further into the wood. She glanced at his fingertips – he was digging into wood and not noticing. “Um, look, I can see you’re upset.”

“Upset!” He thrust his lack of hand in front of her eyes. “Upset!” With his remaining hand, he tore the front of his shirt open. On his chest, the Pallens sword’s wound was as vivid as the anger on his face. “This is upset!”

She reached out without thinking, and gently brushed her fingertips over the torn skin. “But I thought you healed, quick-like.”

He was shaking so much that he felt the heart begin to beat again. “I do! That’s what’s *upsetting*. I had to use a crutch! A crutch, me!”

“Well, I hope—”

He slammed her shoulder against the tree. “Don’t you dare be concerned about my health! Stop it! It’s *your* godsdamn fault! Pallens sword indeed!”

She opened her mouth, but didn’t even get a syllable out.

“And you’re just a little human! You’re nothing but a little mortal!” He ripped at his own hair, pulling a handful free and didn’t notice. “I can’t control you!”

He stepped back and stared as if this were the first time he’d ever seen her and he was watching her attempting to walk on water. “I can’t control you,” he repeated and took another step back. His face contorted, as if he were trying to understand something in a foreign language by sheer force of will.

He laughed, and immediately slapped a hand over his mouth. His eyes jerked around in confusion, and then he laughed again. He stumbled further away from her. “What the—” He interrupted himself with another burst of hilarity.

Attempting to squelch the guffaws, he pressed his hand over his mouth. Then he tripped and fell to the ground, and the laughter erupted. He looked up into the branches of the tree and the blue sky above, and laughed and laughed.

“Tom?” Der leaned over.

With his remaining hand, he reached up and yanked her down. She crashed onto the ground next to him with a yelp.

He pulled her face to his. Their noses brushed, and then he stopped.

As she watched, she saw the laughter pale in his eyes. He looked away, and pushed himself to his knees. “Farewell, Derora Saxen.”

“But...” She blinked. “You don’t have to go.”

He stood, straightening his torn shirt as best he could. “Yes, I do. I promised.”

She shook her head slowly. “No, you don’t. You’re a liar. Couldn’t you have lied about this promise?”

“No. I’m leaving the mortal world.” He sighed. “It was a mistake. One I don’t regret making, but one I will regret if I don’t go.” He bunched a fist. “I can’t lose control again. Farewell.”



He glanced over his shoulder before he vanished into the darkest shadows of the expanding evening. She staggered under the weight of those eyes like an emerald's reflection, and realized that she had never seen eyes so alive.

## Epilogue

“Do you think the truce will hold?” Der sat carefully in Jakkobb’s overlarge saddle. She had enough room, and space enough for the puppy sized dragon too. Goldie lay curled up and asleep with his tail across his nose. He had been asleep for days this time.

“I don’t know,” the knight replied, keeping pace with Spike. “I hope so. If they don’t redraw the border, it will happen someday, no matter what.”

She stuck out her tongue. “I don’t like politics.”

He chuckled. “Well, it’s a lot easier when you have your own army.”

She laughed a little. “Aye, I know, but here, with the rumors about Sennha...”

Jakkobb shrugged. “There’s a favorable chance. Besides, Sennha’s lot just tipped the scales, and we pushed them back – for now.”

*It’s like finding the poisonous snake in your cellar, nobody wants to be the one to pick it up and get rid of it, Spike said. I think both sides may pretend this whole event never happened.*

Der sighed. “That will make such a difference to the people who were killed.”

“No, it won’t. Sarcasm doesn’t flatter you, Der,” Jakkobb said. “But it will be different for the people who lived, and that’s quite a lot more since the war was diverted.”

“Diverted?” She cocked an eyebrow. “Like the river?”

Jakkobb put one hand against his forehead and squeezed his eyes shut. “That was bad.”

*Well, you’re certainly feeling better, Der.*

She nodded. “I suppose so. I’m more worried about Kelin than myself.”

*He’ll be alright, he just needs time.*

Jakkobb said, “He’s with Thistle and Thalon, they’ll take care of him.”

“I know, sir. But he’s my friend. Yes, we’ve grown apart, but well, I miss being there for him.”

“They’re going back to Arborn. Time seems to go faster there anyway.”

“What about Chloe? Are she and Erastus going too? Thalon could use a friend, and I think she could too.”

Spike shook his head. *Right, but we have to worry about the vampire with her around.*

Der shook her head. “No, we won’t. He promised to leave.” She dropped her gaze to the ground. “It hurt him too much, I think.”

“Well,” Jakkobb clapped his hands together brightly, “He’s gone. It doesn’t matter.” He caught Der’s tensed expression. “Don’t you even *dream* about trying to find him.”

“I know better, sir,” she answered steadily.

He frowned. “Good.” Then he shook his head. “He tried to turn you into a vampire! I can’t believe you don’t want to cut his head off.”

Der twisted in the saddle. “Well, he wasn’t in control of himself at the time. Besides, I have some questions...” She trailed off under the heat of his gaze. “I won’t try to find him.”

The unicorn snorted. *Do you promise?*

“Absolutely.” She held up her hands. “I promise.”

The knight and Spike exchanged glances. Jakkobb frowned. “That was too easy. We know

you better.”

“Oh, come on, sir! Finding a vampire who doesn’t want to be found has got to be damned impossible to do.”

Jakkobb frowned again, but kept walking. “Exactly.”

Der pulled the platinum ring from her pocket, and it was nearly blinding in the sunlight. “Do you think he’ll want it back?”

Spike stopped and craned his neck around and just glowered.

“How? No— *why* the hell did you do that?” Jakkobb demanded.

She shrugged, feeling her face heat up. “I don’t know.” She tried it on, but it only fit her index finger, and loosely. “Speaking of rings,” she said quickly in a rush to change the subject. “What about the one we found on the wizard? That one with the wolf’s head.” She’d wrapped that one in a bundle and thrust it to the bottom of the saddlebag. Even so, her hand had felt greasy.

Jakkobb glared for a moment longer, but resumed walking. “I don’t know. Maybe he just liked misshapen animals. Anyway, it doesn’t matter much. The man is dead.”

“I know, but, well, you know, it obviously meant something to him.”

“I don’t know. Look, we’ll ask the commander when we finally get to Silver Dawn’s Horizon if it’s still bothering you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m more interested in seeing what he may know about your sword though. By the gods, I thought you were dead with that lightning stunt.”

“So did I, sir.” She put Tom’s ring back into her pocket, and wished she could put the other out of her mind.

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