

Anathema  
Book 1 of the Trivallyn Saga

By Peyton Reynolds

Copyright 2011 Peyton Reynolds

Smashwords Edition

Discover other titles by Peyton Reynolds at <https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/peytonreynolds>

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. Although this is a free book, it remains the copyrighted property of the author, and may not be reproduced, copied and distributed for commercial or non-commercial purposes. If you enjoyed this book, please encourage your friends to download their own copy at Smashwords.com, where they can also discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

Table of Contents

[Map](#)  
[Prologue](#)  
[Chapter One](#)  
[Chapter Two](#)  
[Chapter Three](#)  
[Chapter Four](#)  
[Chapter Five](#)  
[Chapter Six](#)  
[Chapter Seven](#)  
[Chapter Eight](#)  
[Chapter Nine](#)  
[Chapter Ten](#)  
[Chapter Eleven](#)  
[Chapter Twelve](#)  
[Chapter Thirteen](#)  
[Chapter Fourteen](#)  
[Chapter Fifteen](#)  
[Chapter Sixteen](#)  
[Chapter Seventeen](#)  
[Chapter Eighteen](#)  
[Chapter Nineteen](#)  
[Chapter Twenty](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-One](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

## [Map of Trivallyn](#)



### [Prologue](#)

The haze of the border-mist dissipated slowly around him as he moved forward and Celdin the minstrel breathed a deep sigh of relief as the beautiful, but plague-ridden, lands of Gaal were left behind him. With the weariness he'd been fighting for days finally beginning to take hold, he paused in his step to give a long, much-anticipated look to his homelands, the wet and lush country of Dargis.

Not surprisingly, he'd entered into an area heavily forested. Massive, towering trees, mainly cedar and cypress, surrounded him after only a few steps from the border-mist, their green branches forming a high, leafy ceiling far above. The air was cool but humid, and heavy with the clean scents of the vegetation abounding here. It was raining, of course, and despite the shelter of the trees Celdin was soaked clear through to his skin within moments. It had been nearly a year now since the rains had ceased for more than

mere hours at a time in Dargis, or so he had heard, but he moved through the wetness gratefully as his small brown eyes scanned the undergrowth for signs of a path.

As was the typical wayward life of a minstrel, he'd been in the western country of Gaal for the past several months, in the country of Morvay before that, and word everywhere now cautioned any who traveled outside their homelands to beware. Unfortunately, Celdin knew first-hand that these rapidly spreading warnings were not mere tales. He had lost his traveling companions, a juggler and a word-weaver, only days ago to a rogue band looking for coin and food, and had barely managed to escape with his own life. The attack finally convinced him that he had little choice but to return home if he wished to continue breathing, despite his lack of professional success among his fellow Dargasians. When it came to the realm of entertainment, foreigners always proved the most interesting to behold.

He was familiar with many of the woods in Dargis, particularly those here in the southwest corner of the country for he'd spent much of his youth in these areas, so he had little trouble promptly locating a small, thin walking path that led the way through the trees and bushes. The path quickly proved nothing more than a strip of deep mud, his boots sinking in nearly up to the ankles with each step. Undisturbed, Celdin kept on, continuing to take deep breaths of relief at finding himself upon his home soil once again. He'd nearly come into contact with the plague in Gaal several times, and wholeheartedly felt that he'd used up all of his luck just making it back to Dargis alive and relatively unscathed.

In a haze of fatigue he pushed on beneath the ceaseless rains for what seemed hours, finally realizing that, if memory served, reaching a town before nightfall would be unlikely. He began casting an eye about for a place to spend the night, plodding onward as the cloud-filled sky above slowly began to darken into twilight.

At last he spotted a cave only a few paces off the path, and quickly discerned that it would provide adequate shelter so long as it was not home to a bear or similarly unpleasant creature. He was forced to bend his head and shoulders to enter, and he sniffed the air while doing so. No animal scent greeted his nostrils, nor could he see any signs of past meals or spoor upon the dark sand that made up the cave's floor. Satisfied, Celdin settled into the dry warmth.

Knowing he was as likely to grow a third arm as he was to find any dry timber, he relinquished fond thoughts of a fire and dug through his pack for some hard cheese. Like everything else, it proved wet, but was adequate enough sustenance to keep his hunger pains from growing too severe. Finishing his meager meal, he curled up in the back of the cave beneath his sodden cloak and closed his eyes. Traveling the past several days with very little rest, the deep comfort he felt at arriving home gave his exhaustion the free rein it needed to draw him quickly into slumber.

*Dig.*

The minstrel's eyes reopened suddenly, and he sat up and looked searchingly about the cave in the near-absolute darkness. Empty. Frowning slightly, and suspecting a simple trick of the winds, he lay back down and again closed his eyes.

*Dig.*

Springing up into a rigid sitting position, he again searched the darkness around him, fearing that the solitude of recent days mingled with the grief over his lost friends was perhaps driving him mad. But again, the cave appeared empty but for himself and his

few belongings. Exhaustion winning out over unease, he was readying himself to lie down a third time when the voice spoke again, a resounding command that seemed to speak within his very mind.

*Dig, Celdin.*

He had only a brief moment of paralyzing fear before being overcome by a sudden daze. Turning his gaze to the floor of the cave, the small man plunged his hands into the damp, cool sand and began pulling away at the topmost layers precisely where he'd lain his head to rest. In a very detached manner he wondered at his own actions.

The cave was silent, both inside and outside the minstrel's mind, as he continued to dig, until finally he sat back on his heels to take a rest, having no idea how much time may have passed since he'd begun. The hole he'd dug before him was now several feet both deep and wide, but he'd pulled nothing but sand and more sand from its depths. His fingers, he noted interestedly, were swollen and bloody from his efforts.

*Dig.*

He jumped, and felt himself begin to tremble. Nearly in a hysterical frenzy now, Celdin thrust his hands back into the hole he'd created and continued to tear away at the sand. Only moments later, he felt his fingers strike something. He increased his pace even more, then stopped and squinted down in wonder at what he'd unearthed. The darkness of the cave had now been pierced.

Emitting a faint, shimmering green glow was a shard of what appeared to be crystal, nearly as long as his forearm. Its radiance pulsated, strengthening and growing brighter with his every breath. Transfixed, he stared at his discovery, his mind strangely devoid of thought, before finally reaching a hand down to grasp it.

He cried out and dropped the shard quickly to cover his eyes as a great flash of blinding light exploded at his touch. He paused, listening to the absolute silence as he waited for his sight to return, his mind suddenly and abruptly released from the odd daze which had gripped it. Finally, his eyes cleared. Blinking furiously, he stumbled back on his heels in shock.

A few paces before Celdin stood a tall man, naked and shivering, his scraggly, tangled black hair hanging down into his face. In his hand he clutched the gleaming green shard, its light now an even beacon in the darkness.

The minstrel shot to his feet, barely noticing as his head bounced off the roof of the cave as he took a staggering step back. He watched as the man made a slight, unsteady move forward. Celdin tried to speak, but both his mind and body now felt strangely numb, and he managed only an unintelligible murmur.

The stranger looked up slowly at the sound, his hair falling away from his face to reveal glittering green eyes, eyes that stared at Celdin in heavy silence.

## *Chapter One*

The royal city of Vasos appeared ahead upon its hilltop in the gray sky like a welcoming embrace to the band of forty men moving through the light drizzle toward it. At their head rode Prince Kaymin Numont, heir to the city and commander of the small company returning from the neighboring country of Corrado. Spotting their approach, the city watchmen sounded the bugle and hastened to open the massive stone gateway,

allowing the prince to lead his men into the royal city without pause. Although sodden and weary from the journey, Kaymin kept his horse at a steady gait and pushed on toward the castle, knowing his father was likely waiting anxiously for word of both his safe return and the report he'd give concerning what had occurred in the desert country to the east.

The passers-by upon the cobbled city streets hastily cleared the way to make passage for the men, and it took only minutes for the band to enter into the castle grounds. Giving the soldiers leave to adjourn to their barracks, Kaymin halted his mount in the center of the courtyard, tossed his reins to the stable hand who had rushed out to meet him, and dismounted. Turning, he was unsurprised to see a tall, thin young man adorned in long white robes observing him silently while standing midway down the bridge which led into the castle.

"Good day, Jian," the prince called, wiping the rain from his eyes and nodding to the wizard as he started forward to meet him.

"It is good to see that fate has kept you well, my prince," Jian returned evenly. "Welcome home."

Kaymin forced a bland smile. He was entirely aware that his royal wizard was in fact furious with him, and no wonder, for Kaymin had ridden off on the mission without him. Come to think of it, he didn't think his father was going to be very pleased with him regarding the matter either.

"Thank you," he finally replied, hoping to sidestep around the issue for as long as possible. "I trust my parents are inside?"

They crossed the drawbridge together and entered into the cool, stone walls of the castle as Jian replied. "They are praying in Terek's Chapel," the wizard informed his prince, seeming to glide smoothly along the floor beside him.

Kaymin held back a sigh of frustration and continued on silently, the only sounds to be heard the heels of his boots as they clicked across the polished floors. Once they'd descended down into the underbelly of the castle, the prince pulled open the heavy wooden doors that led into the chapel and stepped inside, Jian trailing noiselessly along behind him.

The small house of worship was lit by hundreds of gleaming candles, giving a heavy, musky scent to the air which was nearly stifling. Kaymin walked up the aisle between the many glossed wooden benches to the front of the chapel, where his parents sat alone, silent and in prayer. Stopping, he whispered a few words of homage to his lost God, Terek, before sliding onto the bench next to his mother.

Her large brown eyes, so like his own, opened slowly as she turned to him. "Kaymin, you have returned!" she exclaimed, a smile lighting her features.

The prince noted the strained look that remained about her eyes and nodded toward the altar. "I can see by your face that the silence has not been broken." Although truly, did she still expect it to be so, after so long?

Queen Sikara Numont's smile faded slowly and she gazed down at her hands. "It is only a matter of time. We must continue to hold onto our faith."

Kaymin watched her for a moment as she seemed to shrink and be swallowed into her modest gown of blue silk. Nearly twenty years of silence from not only their own God, but from the other five who were worshipped in other parts of the world, was enough to test anyone's faith. Indeed, it sometimes seemed as though the members of the royal

house were nearly the only people left throughout all of Dargis who still believed their God would someday return to them. Although admittedly, some members of the house believed in this much more strongly than others.

“Yes, of course you are right, mother,” the prince finally replied, a perfunctory response. Never would he forsake his silent God, but factoring in recent events, he had grown extremely doubtful that Terek any longer had an ear tuned to the plights of His people.

King Gwilym Numont stood suddenly, looking past his wife. “Welcome home son. I trust you were met with success in your travels?”

Kaymin rose to face him and began backing into the aisle where his wizard waited. “Yes, father. We were able to track and reclaim the supplies that were stolen from our borders by the Corrado soldiers.”

“Any losses?” the king questioned, moving past his wife and into the aisle to join his son. The lines in his face appeared harsher in the shadowy light of the candles, and his expression was grim.

Kaymin paused, knowing full well where his next statement was going to lead them. “In the interest of self-preservation, we were forced to kill several of King Rivenor’s men.”

King Numont pursed his lips together in a frown. “So, blood has finally been shed. I fear where this will lead.”

Kaymin felt his temper rising. “Yes, blood was shed, but not frivolously or without necessity. This was hardly the first occurrence of our supplies being pillaged, and it was long past time we sent a clear message to King Rivenor that we will not stand by and continue to let it happen!”

“Indeed, son. But there is much to consider, such as why these supplies are being taken in the first place. Zane Rivenor is a young king, but in the three years since his crowning, he has never before shown us the slightest amount of hostility, and has complied with all the import and export laws that his father and I devised during our shared years of reign.”

“It would appear that he now believes himself to be above those laws,” Kaymin retorted angrily, “for I doubt that he can speak any justifiable cause to excuse his violations.”

“If only Terek would send to us a dream,” the queen interjected suddenly. She raised her head to look at them, her brown curls falling about her shoulders to frame her face.

King Numont’s features softened as he turned to her. “My heart, I’ve no doubt that He will provide to us His divine guidance when He deems we require it. But until then, we will simply have to do what we believe to be right.”

The queen nodded slightly and turned back to face the altar, her eyes closing as she resumed her praying.

Dreams, Kaymin knew, were visions sent to mortals from their God or Goddess, the deity’s way of communicating with His or Her followers. Kaymin himself had been but a child of eight when the Gods had suddenly gone silent, an event that had occurred directly upon the heels of the near-destruction of the country Pellarin, the lands belonging to the Goddess Adera. Prince Numont had never before experienced a dream, and neither had any other soul in the world these past twenty years.

The king’s worried gaze stayed trained upon his wife for another moment before he took a few steps up the aisle and gestured for Kaymin and Jian to follow. “I fear we are not the only ones facing these unfortunate difficulties,” he went on in a low tone.

“Reports have been coming in daily, mostly speaking of the countries Morvay and Wherry. They themselves appear to be on the brink of war.”

Jian shifted but remained silent for a long moment. As a wizard of the White Order, his homeland was the country of Wherry, its natives worshippers of Gauvin, the God of Good. Since being sent to Dargis many years ago, Kaymin knew that his wizard kept in contact with several of the other men in his order and had recently learned from them that his country of origin, though permanently held in a winter clime, was currently being overthrown by violent and damaging ice storms, storms that barraged the lands almost on a daily basis. The wizard cleared his throat and relayed this information to the king now.

“Yes, Jian, I have heard such tales myself. Add that to the floods we are experiencing here in Dargis, the earthquakes in Morvay, the rumors of plague in Gaal.” The king shook his head.

“And not a whisper from any of the six Gods?” Kaymin queried, frustrated.

“No. They are as silent now as they have been for this past score.” King Numont paused and glanced back at his wife. “I will escort your mother to her rooms now. She has been down here praying since dawn, and I fear she needs her rest. We will speak of this again later, Kaymin. Besides,” he continued with a tired grin, “I am sure you are most anxious to reunite with Avilla.” With a nod, he moved off to collect the queen, but then suddenly halted and turned back.

“Oh, and by the way, son,” he said pointedly, his tone now not unlike the one he used to pass a harsh sentence, “the next time you decide that you are above requiring the services of your royal wizard, I will be extremely tempted to see to it that you do not leave this castle again for a very long time.”

Kaymin and Jian left the chapel silently, the wizard following as the prince made his way up several staircases to his suite of rooms. Kaymin felt his cheeks flaming the entire way. It wasn't so much that he'd wanted to escape Jian's presence, for the respect and loyalty he felt for his wizard was in truth near to immeasurable; but Jian's protectiveness would have limited his involvement in what had happened, and Kaymin was growing tired of being under constant and restricted guard. He suspected that Jian realized this, and that it was the only reason the wizard wasn't attempting to further his guilt.

“Jian, do you think that the mass disappearance of the Gods is connected to what is happening in the world? The storms and earthquakes?” he asked as they rounded about a corridor.

The wizard nodded. “It would seem so, my prince, for who but they have the power to control such things?”

“But if so, then why *now*? They've been gone—silent—for years.”

“These problems have not developed overnight,” the wizard said. “However, if they continue, I suspect they will soon begin to destroy many of our resources, and if we are at war with each other as this happens, we will be unable to trade for our basic needs of survival. If these disasters continue to escalate, they may very well eventually destroy us all.”

Kaymin turned to him with a dry look as they entered into his sitting room. “You have such a delicate way of shoving a sword through the heart of the matter,” he commented.

Jian settled himself into a chair by the fireplace. “The time for denial and ignorance is past, my prince. We must open our eyes, not only to observe the problems of Dargis, but of the world. There are five other countries struggling just as we are, and all are facing

troubles potentially just as tragic.”

Kaymin removed his traveling cloak and the harness that held his sword in place upon his back before he threw himself down onto a soft velvet couch. “I don’t believe we have much choice but to concentrate on only our own problems for the time being. Due to the heavy rains, we’ve been increasingly losing crops, meaning that we not only have less to feed our people, but also less to sell and trade. Plus let’s not forget the thievery of King Rivenor.” He paused. “I find it difficult to justify focusing beyond these issues right now. We have to help ourselves, somehow, before we can consider the rest of the world.”

“Very well,” Jian nodded, his eyes narrowed.

Noting the implied disapproval, Kaymin frowned as a lock of damp blond hair fell over his forehead. “Jian, I realize that as my wizard your wisdom obviously exceeds my own, but tell me, if you can, how we could even attempt to confront the problems that are threatening the world as a whole?”

“That is what the five remaining monarchies should be discussing together,” the wizard replied shortly.

Kaymin sighed. “I see your point, truly I do. But such decisions are out of our hands, and if my father chooses to focus only upon the threats directly being made upon Dargis, than I will stand behind him unquestionably.”

The wizard paused briefly, and then stood. “And I you,” he said, moving to the door and nodding slightly before leaving the room. Kaymin sat for a moment in silent contemplation before he rose and summoned a servant to prepare his bath. A short while later, he rode out of the castle grounds feeling clean and refreshed.

The drizzle had by now grown into a heavy downpour, and as the prince quickly guided his horse along the cobbled city streets, he fought to recall the last time that rain had not fallen in Dargis. Months, it seemed, perhaps a year. The country’s climate had always been wet, but if the rain didn’t break soon, the only indigenous crop they would have left to feed their people with would be mushrooms. Their beef and mutton outfits were still strong, but the rains had drowned the potato and wheat crops, foods that had always gained them a large exporting revenue. Thankfully, the Dargasians continued to trade plenty of wood, mainly ash and cypress, to the other countries, and in return gained various grains and vegetables that they could no longer grow themselves. The amount of local crops that had been destroyed by the unrelenting rains was incalculable.

As he continued on, Kaymin observed that the once prosperous, bustling streets had become lethargic and subdued. The merchants packing up for the end of the day still held most of their wares, whether they be food items or otherwise, and all seemed to wear a dejected look. Everyone was being affected by the inclement weather and the once-cheerful city had grown depressed and infirm. Knowing he could do nothing to help the situation, the prince fought at the sudden feeling of helplessness that gripped him.

Finally Kaymin stopped and tethered his horse before a large stone house only a few streets over from the city’s main square. Wiping away the wetness that rolled down over his forehead, he skirted around the side of the building and began pulling himself up the slippery trellis. Pausing at the top, he looked through the rain-pelted window and smiled. Raising a hand, he rapped loudly upon the glass.

The woman within turned, startled, before stepping across her bedroom floor and throwing open the window. “You realize you’re free to use the front door, my love. We



are betrothed now,” she said, trying to keep her look stern as she stepped back and watched him climb into the room.

“I like to surprise you,” he replied with a grin before turning and kissing her deeply.

The smile finally won out over her generous red lips as she looked up into his eyes. “I’m relieved that you have returned safely.”

“I will always come back to you, Avilla,” he replied, embracing her and running his fingers over her long, waist-length blond hair.

She paused, enjoying the moment, before responding. “Were you able to recover the stolen supplies?”

“Yes, although not without bloodshed. My father fears the consequences of this.”

She pulled back and looked at him sharply. “Are you speaking of war?”

“We don’t know. We will do whatever we can to prevent it from coming to that, of course. No one, except perhaps King Rivenor, wants to go to battle.”

She took a step back, her gaze on the floor as she seemed to think, and hopefully not about the growing puddle he abruptly realized he was leaving on the carpet. “There have been rumors in the city,” she began.

“Of what, my love?”

“Merchants from the north have spoken of a proposed treaty between Morvay and Corrado. It would appear as though they are planning to link their strengths.”

Kaymin took this in silently. His father had not mentioned this latest rumor, therefore making it doubtful that the king had yet heard it himself. This, in turn, also made it unlikely that there was any truth behind it. He said as much to Avilla, but felt his stomach give a slow turn of unease just the same.

She nodded, but continued to look worried. “I fear there is more. The people are worried about the food supply, and I predict it won’t be long before there is an uprising in thievery. I think it would be wise that something be done about this sooner rather than later.” She looked at him clearly. “I fear a panic may overtake the city. Already I’ve heard some foreswearing Terek for abandoning us in our time of need.”

“Nothing can be done about that until He decides to speak,” Kaymin said.

Avilla’s green eyes flashed at him. “It has been twenty years, and I can understand how one could lose faith in the hope of His return, but to utterly forswear Him is something else entirely. He created us. What they are doing is a sacrilege.”

The prince stared at her for a moment. “You’re right,” he finally said. Avilla herself had been but a babe when the Gods had gone silent, but her own belief had never waned; although in a thoroughly practical sense, unlike that of Kaymin’s mother.

Kaymin caught another look in her eye, and knowing that she would not, he addressed it without pause. “I know that these last few months have been chaotic with all that’s been happening, and the future seems unclear. But we will marry, and soon.”

She held his gaze and nodded slowly.

He knew she was impatient for the commencement of their nuptials, but also that she would never say so to him, realizing that far too many problems were currently at hand and all of a greater importance than their wedding. It was but one of the numerous reasons that made him so sure she would make an excellent queen. He watched her for another moment, her beautiful face looking preoccupied with her thoughts as her green eyes again gazed fixedly down at the floor. He’d loved that face since the first moment he’d seen it, and was beyond certain that he always would.

“I love you,” he said.

She looked up and smiled softly, murmuring her reply into his ear while falling into his embrace. Finally she pulled back. “Now go. I know you are anxious to go to your father with all that I’ve told you.”

He was, but even so, some time passed before he actually swung himself back onto the windowsill. “Come to the castle for mid-meal tomorrow? My parents would love to see you.”

“Of course,” she nodded.

Kaymin smiled and then carefully climbed back down the slippery trellis. The rain was coming down even harder now, and a low roll of thunder sounded out from the east. It had grown dark while he’d been inside, and he used the lighted city lamps to see as he untied his horse’s slick, leather reins before mounting and starting back toward the castle.

The city was nearly deserted but for the guards and the beggars, who littered the streets and the shadowy alleyways respectively. He rode slowly, reflecting on the things Avilla had told him regarding the state of the local populace. A panic had to be avoided at all costs, certainly, but if the rain continued to downpour as it was, they would be hard-pressed to actually convince anyone that a solution was forthcoming.

Suddenly Kaymin pulled back hard on the reins, causing his horse to rear slightly as a man stepped unexpectedly into his path. The man was tall and thin, shrouded in a long black cloak complete with a deep cowl that held his face in shadow. He held his ground a few paces before Kaymin’s horse, the shadow of his face seeming to stare up at the prince.

Kaymin’s hand moved to his belt knife even as his face donned a light expression. “You should be more wary of your steps, good sir,” he said. “I fear I nearly ran you down.”

The man’s head rose slightly and the glint of his eyes shone through the darkness. “Prince Numont,” he breathed, his voice low and defined.

Kaymin’s grip on his knife tightened, but he did not move. “Yes, it is I,” he said. He had never before held any fear at riding the streets of the royal city alone, but perhaps the times were calling for an adjustment to his way of thinking. The thought angered him.

The strange man stepped closer. “It is of great importance that we speak immediately. I have information that I must share with you.”

Kaymin’s eyes narrowed. “Information concerning what? Corrado?”

“No.”

“If I may have the pleasure of your name, stranger?”

“Of course. But first, let us seek shelter so that we can speak in both comfort and warmth.”

Kaymin sighed with impatience. “I have no time for silly intrigues,” he said, preparing to move his horse around the man.

“Wait.” The stranger turned, flashes of his white face showing from within the heavy cowl of his cloak. “I assure you, this is no foolery. If you should choose not to hear my words now, you will only risk putting your people in even greater danger.”

The dramatic statement caused the prince to suspect that this mysterious stranger just might be Wherrite in nature, but the royal blood flowing through his veins forced him to hear the words with some semblance of seriousness, and they therefore gave him pause. Despite the oddity of the situation, he couldn’t quite force himself to blatantly ignore the

possibility of this man's claim holding some vague possibility of truth.

The stranger stood silently, waiting patiently for the prince to come to a decision.

Kaymin's deep brown eyes swept the street quickly before he pointed to a nearby alehouse, *The Winged Donkey*. "There," he said. He may not have been the most intelligent man to ever walk the streets of Vasos, but he certainly wasn't foolish enough to go off alone to a secluded area with this peculiar fellow.

The stranger nodded back at him once, and then began stepping lightly toward the alehouse.

## *Chapter Two*

Still wary, Kaymin dismounted and reluctantly followed the stranger across the puddle-riddled street. Stopping before *The Winged Donkey*, he tethered his horse and gave a final shake of his head for giving in to this nonsense. His hand stayed close to his belt knife as he stepped after the man.

The inside of the large tavern was dingy, lit by a few overhanging oil lamps and a fire in the hearth that was in desperate need of being stoked. The air was stale and unmoving about the dozen or so men who sat inside, and although all were eating or drinking together in small groups, only a low murmur of voices could be heard. It was an establishment Kaymin had patronized more than once before, but the once merry tavern, he observed, was now solemn and suspicious, yet another result of the circumstances that all Dargasians currently faced.

Swallowing down another flash of anger, the prince followed the stranger across the wooden floor, their boots sounding loudly in the quiet. He nodded once at the barkeep, a man who recognized him instantly, and then motioned for two mugs of ale to be brought over.

The stranger settled himself down at a table placed in a shadowy corner after shaking droplets of water from his cloak, and, once settled, reached up to withdraw his hood. His face, extremely pale and sharply defined, was one that would make any woman turn and stare, and his black hair, curling in the wetness of the rain, touched gently down upon his shoulders as if to softly caress them. Most dramatic, however, were the man's eyes. A deep, penetrating green, they appeared as sharp and clear as emeralds.

With an impatient look, Kaymin sat down across from him and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

The stranger ignored him as he brushed his longish hair aside with his fingertips, sitting back as the barkeep deposited two large tankards before them. When they were again alone, he finally turned his gaze onto the prince.

"Now tell me your name," Kaymin commanded. "As I spoke outside, I have no time for nonsense."

"More raiding and murdering to be planned?" the man returned disapprovingly.

Kaymin bit down on his fury. "Your name or I'm leaving," he snapped, making a move to rise even while wondering how this man had so quickly learned of his recent activities in the desert country.

Now the stranger looked amused. "My apologies, your highness, if I am keeping you from more important matters. It is my hope, however, that after speaking with me you

will realize that there *are* no matters more important than what I am about to tell you.” He paused only slightly, and then bluntly continued. “I regret to inform you that you have been directing all of your energies into precisely the wrong places.”

“All right,” Kaymin said, standing up. “I’ve heard enough of this obscure blather. I think you forget who it is you are speaking to.” He took only a single step before he was stopped short by the man’s voice.

“*Sit down.*”

The tone sent a shiver down Kaymin’s spine, and he hesitated before turning around. The stranger’s piercing eyes were focused on him unblinkingly, and his expression made it clear that he was not accustomed to being disobeyed.

Slowly, Kaymin moved to slide back into his seat, feeling suddenly light-headed and confused. His nerves jangled when he made eye contact with the man. “Who are you?” he demanded quietly. “A wizard?”

The stranger smiled dryly. “I am not a wizard.”

“An heir?” he tried again. The man’s age was hard to pinpoint, but if the prince had to guess he’d place him to be in his mid-twenties or so, younger than Kaymin himself. He was quite sure that the countries of Wherry and perhaps Morvay had princes around this man’s age, and that the stranger simply had to be one or the other; nothing else could account for his tone and demeanor. Strangely though, his speech did not carry the accent of either of those two countries. It did, in fact, sound strictly Dargasian.

“I am not an heir,” the man said, sitting back and causing his chair to creak slightly.

Kaymin was out of guesses, so he therefore sat silently, feeling as if he waited upon the front lines of an army about to charge.

The man blinked once, not looking away. “My name is Terek. I am your God.”

Kaymin simply stared for a long moment before hissing his reply. “You’re mad,” he spat.

The man looked at him.

Despite the obvious insanity of the claim, Kaymin’s heart began to pound, and his head felt more muddled than ever. “The God Terek deserted us nearly twenty years ago,” he managed to say.

The man sat forward quickly, shadows dancing across his suddenly eerie-looking face. “Not deserted,” he corrected intently. “Kept from.”

Kaymin’s belt knife was suddenly in his hand, the blade a gleam in the dull surroundings. “Then this should put no fear in your heart,” he said.

The man moved his glittering green eyes to look down at the blade, then back up to the prince.

Kaymin watched him closely, his own gaze sharp. “You look rather uncertain for an immortal being,” he observed darkly, bringing the knife a few inches closer to his companion.

The stranger shrugged. “It is unclear to me at this time what the outcome of such an action would be. But if your faith has waned so much, then strike me now, if that is your heart’s wish.”

Kaymin stared shrewdly at him for another long moment before bringing his arm down. He didn’t believe that this man could possibly be his lost God, of course, but nor could he bring himself to actually strike out at him either.

“All right,” he finally said, his eyes small and his tone making it clear that he was

determined to get to the bottom of this nonsense. “Let’s assume, for now, that I take your words as truth. Why are you here? And where have you been all these years?”

Again the man smiled that strange, eerie smile. “I know that you do not yet believe, but I will answer your questions.” He folded his arms before him on the table. “I am here because you are my Chosen.”

Kaymin raised an eyebrow. “Chosen for what?”

“Patience,” the man frowned. “I will come to that in time.”

“Fine. Then answer my second question,” Kaymin countered. “Why did the Gods abandon us?”

“We did not abandon you,” the man explained. “As I said before, we were kept from you.” Seeing the prince’s exasperated look, he sighed. “I will explain. How learned are you in the world’s history?”

Kaymin shrugged noncommittally, not wanting to give this possible madman anything else to further indulge his fantasies. He then noted with sudden alarm that the odd feeling in his head had now spread into his chest and arms, causing a strange tingling feeling.

“Very well,” the stranger nodded. “Then I will start at the beginning.

“This world, Trivallyn, was created by the God Kauric and the Goddess Lavallee, my parents. Early on in its creation, before even the mortals, they decided that they would give Trivallyn as a gift to their six children, and thus divided the world into six very diverse countries.”

Kaymin nodded impatiently. Any five-year-old knew as much.

“When they presented this world to us,” the stranger continued, “they stressed the importance of balance, that this was the most important factor in any successful world. The six of us therefore decided to divide ourselves to rule Good, Evil and Neutrality to protect that balance.” He glanced down at his mug of ale, but did not move to touch it. “My brother Gauvin, God of Good, took the icy lands of Wherry in the northwest and chose His monarchy.”

Despite his suspicion, Kaymin found himself growing interested in what this strange man was telling him, although he sharply reminded himself to keep alert. After all, what had been revealed so far was simple history and geography.

“Adera, Goddess of Good, was drawn to the country almost completely surrounded by the oceans, which She named Pellarin. My sister Charette, my co-ruler in Neutrality, took the desert lands in the east, naming Her country Corrado.”

Kaymin scowled at the mention of King Rivenor’s lands. “Desert rats,” he muttered.

The stranger raised a dark eyebrow of obvious disapproval before continuing. “My third sister, Yanoka, Goddess of Evil, took up the stony lands in the north, known as Morvay, and my brother Diamont, God of Evil, took the southwestern lands, the country Gaal.”

Kaymin nodded. “Leaving you—err, Terek, as the ruler of Dargis,” he added quickly.

The man ignored Kaymin’s slip. “Not the ruler,” he corrected. “I appointed my own monarchy for that, *Prince Numont*.”

Kaymin winced slightly. The man’s tone went beyond authoritative, and the prince still felt incredibly uneasy in his presence, which should not have been surprising as he was most likely in the company of one who was completely insane. “Go on,” he finally said.

The stranger shot him a dry look at the command, but continued. “After each God and Goddess chose a monarchy for His or Her country, the six kingdoms ruled Trivallyn with

relative ease. You learned to trade resources amongst yourselves, and with minor interference from us, the world functioned in a rhythm that kept it at peace for nearly a millennium.”

Again, Kaymin’s mouth seemed to work of its own accord. “Until you deserted us with not even a word of warning,” he shot out. Now what in the name of all the heavens was wrong with him? His head seemed to be growing more and more muddled.

The dark-haired man smiled slightly.

“That is, if you are who you claim,” Kaymin remonstrated quickly, feeling a blush creep over his face. He looked down into his untouched ale. The peculiar feeling was still spreading, affecting the rest of his body now, but it was a painless sensation, almost pleasant. And despite the oddity of the conversation, he suddenly realized that he’d never felt more relaxed.

“Of course,” the man said. “But as I have already stated, we did not, as you say, desert you.

“Although you mortals were ignorant to the fact, we very much liked to visit this world we created. Pleasures on the immortal plane are experienced . . . differently. It is nearly impossible to explain to one without perspective. In short, however, we would come to experience the world’s great beauty, its delicious foods and intoxicating scents, like that of a sweet ocean breeze. Even despite the risk.”

“The risk?” Kaymin repeated. “I fear I do not understand.”

“When we traveled to the mortal plane, here to Trivallyn, it was required that we become mortal ourselves to actually experience its pleasures. Of course, we could return to our own plane in an instant if danger threatened, so the risk was minimal, but because we were vulnerable at these times, our visits were always therefore kept secret, from our mortals, and even from each other.”

Kaymin nodded to show his understanding, but felt inward alarm starting to break through his relaxed state. He realized that he was getting swept into the story, and he fought to retain his logic.

The stranger seemed to note this, but went on. “Our parents, Kauric and Lavallee, true creators of this world, would also journey here from time to time. And it was during one of these visits that the unfortunate happened. My Mother had come to Pellarin, Adera’s lands, for She had a special love for the ocean; and there, She was struck down by a blade meant for another. It pierced Her mortal heart, and She died instantly, leaving Her no time to vanish from Trivallyn, resume Her immortal form, and thus save Herself from death.

“My Father, in a rage of grief, then hurled fire and rock down from the heavens, destroying much of Pellarin’s beautiful lands.”

Kaymin interrupted. “But it was said that Adera Herself did this, a sign of Her displeasure with Her followers.”

The stranger laughed softly. “Adera would never have done such damage to Her lands, or to Her people, for that matter. No, my Father was the one responsible, and He did not plan on stopping there. His intent was to destroy all of Trivallyn. So the six of us went to Him, begging that He not end this world we so loved, to try and explain that our Mother’s death had been but a tragic accident.”

Kaymin leaned forward, anxious for him to continue.

“After much debate, Kauric finally decided that if the mortals of this world deserved to

live, they would need to prove themselves worthy. He took each of us, His six children, and bound each of our essences into a separate shard of crystal, which were then scattered and hidden within our respective lands. Once a mortal who continues to worship us locates and lays their hands upon our shard we are released, but only in a denounced form. I am not able to ascend to the immortal plane.”

“How were you freed?” Kaymin asked. He had at last completely given in to the sensations of his body, and was now left with nothing but the voice of his instincts; this man—this God—spoke the truth. There remained not a doubt in his mind.

“A lucky circumstance,” Terek answered. “The important thing now is to locate the other five shards. I can hear my siblings whispering to me, crying for freedom.”

“And once you are all released?”

“With the release of each God those of us already freed will regain more and more of our lost power. Once we are all free . . . well, that will be discussed when and if the time comes. But have no doubt of the fact that without us, this world is soon to die.”

Kaymin’s eyes narrowed. “Then these past twenty years—”

“Have been my Father’s rule. The floods, the droughts, even these petty wars you are engaged in, are all His doing; His revenge before He destroys you all. We have watched from our crystal prisons, but have been unable to intervene, left to hear the cries for help from our people. Never forget, He does not want us to succeed, to be set free. He wishes death upon you all, the curse of His broken heart.”

“But now you’re free!” Kaymin exclaimed. “Now you can help us.”

“No,” He shook his head. “I am fixed upon this mortal plane, more still than a man, but far less than a God. Little help will come until we are all free, although even then it may not be enough to save you.”

“Then go free the others!”

“I cannot. My Father’s will is that the mortals free us, thus proving their loyalty to their creators, even after all these years of silence. I can lend aid, but I fear too much interference. It would be only too easy for Him grow angry and simply kill you all.”

Kaymin’s eyes narrowed. “Then tell me what I must do.”

Terek smiled slightly. “I have been watching you from my prison for many years.”

The prince bowed his head. “My God Terek,” he said softly, “how to amend for my earlier lack of faith?”

“By finding my brothers and sisters,” Terek answered firmly. “Of all of my followers, I have Chosen you.”

“A great honor, and one which I—”

“An honor, perhaps, but it will mark you. You will leave all safety behind when you depart, and all of your intentions must melt into one, a singular devotion and belief in the words that I speak to you now.”

“That they will,” Kaymin answered determinedly and without pause.

“Very well,” Terek nodded. “We must move quickly, for every day has my Father’s influences bringing you closer to killing one another on a truly massive scale.”

“But you need only to explain to the other monarchies why things are this way. They —”

“No,” Terek interrupted. “Unfortunately, they will not believe, as you did not.”

Realizing that he still gripped his belt knife, however lazily, Kaymin quickly slipped it back into its sheath with embarrassment. “But now I believe. Surely if you only

explained—”

The God cut him off with a wave. “You believe me only because you are one of mine, and more importantly because once all pretenses have been cleared away, you are able to listen when your heart speaks to you. That is but one of the many reasons why I have Chosen you.”

The prince swallowed thickly, overcome by a wave of mixed emotions. “What do you bid me to do?” he finally managed.

“You must leave immediately, at day’s first light. And you must bring your wizard. He was not sent to you by chance.”

Kaymin thought on that for a long moment. “He is Gauvin’s Chosen.”

“Yes. Trust that the wizard Jian . . . will be of immeasurable aid.”

“If Jian becoming my wizard was intentional, then the Gods do still hold some influence, even while held within their crystal prisons?”

The God looked at him, but remained silent.

Kaymin finally realized that he wasn’t going to get a response to his question, and so he went on, somewhat uncomfortably. “Where are Jian and I to journey to?”

“I bid you first to seek out the shard of my sister Yanoka. She speaks the loudest to me.”

“Then we travel to Morvay.”

“Yes.”

“And how are we to locate the shard?”

“The shard is located within a stone labyrinth constructed long ago by barbarians. It is commonly referred to as the Maze of Madness by the natives.”

Kaymin frowned. “Why such a name?”

“I am afraid that is all the help I can give you at this time, save for the fact that you will meet others along the way. Listen to your instincts to know if they belong.” The God rose and rearranged His cloak about His shoulders. “And do not tell anyone where you are going. Not your parents, not Avilla. No one. You will likely die if you do, and sooner rather than later.”

Kaymin nodded hesitantly. “But, my God, what do we do after claiming Yanoka’s shard? Where will we need to travel to next?”

Terek looked briefly amused. “Attain the shard first. I will return to guide you, if needs be. I will not lie to you, Kaymin. It is likely you may never again return home.”

The prince bowed his head in unconditioned acceptance, and when he raised it, Terek was gone.

### *Chapter Three*

When Gauvin, the God of Good, came with His siblings to the world, He chose for Himself the lands in the northwest, the country of Wherry. A place of icy beauty, Wherry was surrounded on all sides, save for the Maciac Ocean to the west, by towering, snow-capped mountains that held within them the year-round wintry clime.

Gauvin’s first creation in His new lands was that of the mortal animals, such as yaks, cattle, mammoths, wolves, rabbits, and fish. Then, for the God had a taste for all things magical, He created the immortal creatures, such as dragons, unicorns and griffins.



Next He fashioned into creation His mortal men and women, and appointed a human by the name of Juthas Mithwell to head His monarchy. Also, a lucky few men were born with the gift of magic, and to them was given the city of Crysmir, situated deep in the country's northeastern mountain ranges. The wizards and their familiars proved a highly respected but secretive lot, and only those known to carry the magical touch had ever been permitted to enter into Crysmir's boundaries, save for the king and his successors.

It was this first king, Juthas Mithwell, who appointed himself a royal wizard, and by doing so he began a custom that was to be followed by not only the successive kings of Wherry, but also by the rulers of the other five countries as well. Since only two Gods, Gauvin and His brother Diamont, chose to create these magical persons, it then became custom for the wizards and sorceresses from Wherry and Gaal to be sent to the other four countries to assist them with their royal needs. Quickly, this became the highest honor that a magic-user could hope to achieve, for only the most talented, learned and disciplined in their craft were sent to take up the respected duty of royal wizard or sorceress.

Since the silence of the Gods had begun, however, not a soul in either of the lands of Wherry or Gaal had been born with the magical gift. Jian, wizard of the White Order, had in fact been one of the last to have been born with the talent, and, at the age of twenty-five, he knew of only two wizards and three sorceresses younger than himself.

It was this Jian was pondering idly as he poured himself a mug of steaming tea and sat down at the desk in his private apartment within the castle of House Numont. According to his contacts back in Crysmir, primarily his old classmate and friend Mykola, the calculated number of wizards left upon all of Trivallyn was eighty-two, by far the lowest it had ever been since their creation. Jian could only assume that the numbers in Gaal in regards to their sorceresses were close to the same. Another generation or two, he figured, and there would be no more wizards or sorceresses left in the entire world.

*If, he mused dryly, we even survive that long.* It seemed a certainty that war would soon break out, although whether it was first to be between Dargis and Corrado or Wherry and Morvay was still anyone's guess. Pellarin, the once beautiful and peaceful country of the Goddess Adera, now reduced to less than half its size, was currently being overrun with cutthroats and pirates. An honest man would not dare set foot within its borders, for anarchy had ruled there since the day the royal line of Sumond had been thrown down by fire into the oceans below, the day the Gods had turned silent, seemingly forever.

Gaal, Diamont's country in the southwest, was the most diverse of the lands, and since it had little need to import supplies required for survival, Queen Jeptha Pavula, so far, seemed to be the last holder of a peaceful country. But stories were beginning to circulate, and it seemed that she too was beginning to put her hand in things as the rumors regarding the mysterious plague sweeping across her lands continued.

A sudden scratching broke into Jian's thoughts then, and the heavy stone door slid silently open at his will. His familiar, a large white and gray wolf named Ice, padded into the room and lay down at the wizard's feet, panting lightly. Jian murmured a greeting while leaning down to scratch the animal behind its pointed ears. Ice licked his hand affectionately in return before sleepily closing his eyes.

A wizard's or sorceress's familiar was both their greatest strength and their greatest weakness. The animal could not only lend needed strength and energy, but could act as

an eyes and ears for its magic-user as well. But the bond shared between them was a bond for life. If either the magic-user or the familiar were to die, both would expire. And so it was for this reason that the trapping or killing of any wolf, fox, or eagle in Wherry was strictly forbidden, punishable by death. To kill a wizard, especially now that they appeared to be a dying race, was one of the most horrific crimes imaginable. He'd heard that a similar law had been applied regarding the evil sorceresses of Gaal and their familiars, cats, ravens, and snakes.

Jian was about to send the door swinging shut again when the sound of frenzied steps running and slipping along the polished corridor floor came to his ears. Since Ice was not growling at the approach, Jian assumed that it was his prince who was responsible for the racket, the only person in the entire palace that the wolf tolerated besides his master. The wizard therefore left the door open and turned his face to the opening with an expectant look.

Moments later, Kaymin came to a skidding halt in the doorway. He looked surprised to find the door open, a rare occurrence, for the wizard highly valued his privacy. He peered in at Jian curiously.

The wizard nodded knowingly and beckoned him forward. "Do come in, my prince."

Kaymin stepped inside and quickly shut the door behind him, looking perturbed. "Jian, I hope you realize how very disturbing you are at times," he remarked, moving forward into the room.

Jian quickly noted the flushed look on the prince's face, the gleam in his eyes. "Is something amiss, my prince?"

Kaymin began to pace about the carpeted floor, his wet clothing dripping all about him. "I know that this is going to sound like some incredible imagining," he began. "But I have just spoken with my God!"

Jian nodded calmly from his seat. *The prince has gone mad.* "I see."

Kaymin stopped mid-stride and frowned at the wizard. "Will you please reserve judgment until I've explained? I've not lost my mind."

"Certainly," Jian said, getting to his feet and offering the prince his chair. "Have a seat and allow me to pour you some tea." He hoped that Kaymin was just drunk; it would prove much easier for him to cure than insanity.

"Fine, fine," Kaymin sighed, throwing himself down impatiently into the chair.

Jian poured the tea and handed it to his prince, attempting to get a whiff of his breath in the process. To his disappointment, he could detect the scent of neither ale nor wine. Motioning another chair over from the other side of the room, he sat across the table from Kaymin.

The prince ignored the tea and quickly began to explain his meeting with Terek.

At first, Jian was relieved to hear that Kaymin had in fact been in an alehouse, but as he continued to listen, he quickly grew alarmed at the strange tale. He stayed silent through the entire telling, although when Kaymin mentioned the fact that he was to accompany him to Morvay, and that Jian was in fact Gauvin's Chosen, a strange, relaxing and tingling sensation began to spread quickly throughout his body. Closing his eyes, Jian gave into the feeling immediately, and moments later, any doubts he'd carried had faded.

Kaymin was paused, watching his wizard in silence as he appeared to fall into an impromptu meditation. "Jian?" he finally asked uncertainly.

The wizard's eyes, which were the identical shade of ice blue as his familiar's, opened

and settled upon Kaymin. “I will be prepared to depart at dawn,” he said. What he didn’t say was that either his prince had not repeated his conversation with Terek verbatim, or the Neutral God had left much unsaid. The holes in Terek’s explanations were miles wide, and incredibly concerning.

Kaymin gave a strange smile, revealing both his relief and confusion over his wizard’s immediate acceptance.

“However,” Jian went on, “we will need to devise a story to tell your parents that will adequately explain our absence.”

Kaymin’s smile faded. “You are right, of course. Terek stressed that we tell no one the truth of our journey. But we cannot simply vanish.”

Jian got up from his seat and began to walk slowly about the room, his robes brushing lightly along the floor. “You must tell them something, or I will make a safe guess in saying that your disappearance will somehow be blamed on King Rivenor. War would certainly follow.”

Kaymin nodded. “I suspect you’re right, but I can think of no story I can give them that they would accept, not with so much uncertainty embracing Dargis right now. But Terek Himself has placed this quest upon me, and I must honor it, even if it means being branded a deserter.”

“Let’s not jump ahead and start getting ridiculous,” Jian said distractedly, his mind racing. He ignored the frown his prince shot him. “It must be something of a political nature,” the wizard murmured. “For nothing else would carry enough importance to get you away at a time such as this.”

Kaymin nodded, following the lines of his thinking. “Something that would be of aid to them in the present situation, perhaps.”

“Allies.” Jian was silent as he thought it out in his head. “All right,” he finally continued. “We shall tell them that, in light of recent events involving Corrado, we are traveling to my homelands of Wherry to entice an offer of alliance with King Judson Mithwell. That will explain why your presence is necessary. My king and his predecessors are infamous for their insistence on face-to-face negotiations.”

Kaymin nodded slowly. “Perhaps that will work. But an alliance with Wherry means making an enemy of Morvay. They may not wish to take so bold a step.”

“They would,” Jian proposed, “if it came to them that Morvay has linked with Corrado. More so, I have recently heard several rumors telling that such an occurrence is actually imminent.”

Kaymin eyed his wizard. “I have just been informed of those rumors myself. In fact, I was on my way to apprise my father of these tidings when Terek appeared.” He thought for a moment. “All right,” he finally agreed. “This may get us out of the country while still in good graces—but what shall happen when we are gone for months and don’t return? We’ve no idea how long this journey may last. And what if my parents plan to strike against Corrado and are depending on the help of Wherry? We will need to make an actual alliance with them, or we risk putting the people in great danger.”

The wizard nodded. “I understand your concerns, and I agree that the treaty will certainly need to be made. If we do it this way, there may still be war. But if we just disappear, war is a certainty. The vanishing of the only heir would not pass blamelessly.”

Kaymin sighed heavily. “You are right, of course. If only we could tell them the truth. I’m sure that they would understand and approve, and mother would be beside herself

with joy to learn that He has returned.”

“Your God spoke that to reveal our intentions is not an option.”

“Yes. We will do it your way, Jian. Let us go to them now.”

The wizard nodded and led the way from the room, leaving his familiar asleep on the floor.

They found Kaymin’s parents in their sitting room, and to Jian’s relief, the king’s own royal wizard, Rolin, was not present. The two wizards got along well enough, but it was never easy to lie successfully in front of a fellow user of magic, and Jian sent a silent prayer of thanks to Gauvin.

The king and queen of Dargis had never had any reason to doubt the word of their son, and therefore they suspected no deceit as he told them of the rumors that were “running rampant all over the city” regarding the linking of Corrado and Morvay. The prince embellished when necessary, stressing that he’d heard from countless sources that Corrado was offering this alliance so that they could come west and attack Dargis with more force. His offer to travel to Wherry and offer a similar alliance for the sake of their defense was met with approval, and the king and queen appeared to be impressed with his quick thinking.

“Jian and I will leave come daybreak,” Kaymin said.

The king nodded. “Take with you a small band, say fifty men.”

Kaymin paused and shot a quick look to Jian for help.

“Your majesty,” the wizard spoke up without the slightest pause, “given that time is of great importance, perhaps it would be more beneficial if the prince and I were to go alone. We shall be traveling through Gaal, so the danger should be minimal.” Of course, they would actually be going nowhere near to Gaal, at least, not yet.

King Numont frowned slightly. “Fifty men should not be much of a hindrance. We are not speaking of inexperienced riders, after all, but trained soldiers.”

“Indeed, your majesty,” Jian agreed smoothly. “However, if word were to reach Queen Pavula of Gaal that a band of soldiers from Dargis were riding into her country, she may think incorrectly of our purposes there. Besides, you know how word of mouth travels. Fifty men would soon become a hundred, and a hundred then five hundred.”

The king sighed. “You are, of course, correct Jian. The last thing we need is to make an enemy at our western border as well.” He looked over at the queen, who nodded her agreement. “Very well,” he said, nodding. “Have the stablemen ready your horses for dawn, and tell the kitchens to prepare some food for the journey.” He squinted his eyes, always a sign of worry. “Be careful, and be swift.”

Jian watched from the corner of his eye as Kaymin merely nodded, leveling his gaze on the floor to hide the guilt that shone in his eyes.

“May Terek go with you, son,” Sikara Numont said.

The prince exchanged an ironic glance with his wizard. “Thank you, mother,” he said.

After leaving his parents, Kaymin and Jian went back to their respective rooms to pack a few items of clothing and try to get a few hours of sleep before daybreak. The wizard found rest next to impossible, his mind far too crowded with the revelations of the day, but finally he managed to fall into a light slumber.

The door to his outer chamber being noisily thrown open awoke him abruptly just a short while later. Frowning, he sat up in his bed and magically began lighting several candles about the room as his prince strode into the bedchamber, dressed in his

nightclothes and looking frenzied.

Jian observed him expressionlessly. “Well?” he said, annoyed at Kaymin’s silence. “It is obvious from your look that something is amiss. Or did you have some other reason for disturbing my rest?”

Kaymin’s wide eyes never left his. “I dreamed, Jian. I dreamed!”

Jian paused. From the look of him, what his prince had been shown had not held good fortune. “Tell me what you saw,” the wizard said, finally rising and moving quickly to take a nearby chair.

Kaymin swallowed thickly, his eyes still wide with horror. “A battle, in the desert,” he began, his tone pained. “The sands running red with spilt blood. The banners of Numont and Rivenor flying above!”

Jian frowned again.

The prince began a distressed pacing. “Terek is the only God yet free,” he said, pounding back and forth across the floor. “It makes no sense that He would send such a sight to me. Or is it a warning, of what may come to pass if we do not succeed? Or of what may happen if we leave in the fashion that we plan?” He spun back on his wizard. “Tell me, Jian, that you can make some sense of this!”

The wizard realized he would not be getting any more sleep this night as he continued to take in his prince. “Although I cannot say for certain,” he replied after a long moment, “I feel that the answer to this likely lies in the fact that Terek is *not* the only God free.”

Kaymin stood rigidly, his expression confused before finally turning horrified. “You suspect the Father God is responsible?”

Jian suspected much more than that, but he would keep most of those thoughts to himself for the time being. “Yes,” he answered. Seeing Kaymin waver, the wizard gestured a chair over to his prince and watched him sink gratefully down upon it. “Now that Terek has been released, and has thus put us upon the path to begin repairing the damages Kauric has been inflicting, I think it only sensible to presume that the Father God will now work at stepping up His own plans and offenses.” He paused. “The dream was likely a simple attempt to rattle you.” *And my, did it not succeed splendidly?* he added to himself.

Kaymin stared at him, still horrorstruck. “But, if what you say is correct, what is to stop Him from sending dreams to others, those who will know no better than to take it as a sign from their true God?”

“I do not think we need to worry about that just yet,” Jian replied. “It is to the Father God’s advantage that most believe their Gods have abandoned them.” He paused. “But I think it would be wise to take Terek’s warnings very seriously. It is unknown what threats we may find lying in wait for us once we set out.” This was likely a towering understatement; the Father God had had twenty years to plan for this day—they themselves mere hours. But Jian saw no reason to voice this concern and worry his prince further.

Finally Kaymin gave a slow nod, his look becoming determined. “No more than an hour will see the dawn.”

Jian rose smoothly to his feet. “Then let us begin,” he said.

#### *Chapter Four*

Queen Jephtha Pavula stepped out onto her private terrace and watched silently as the near-full moon rose slowly above Gaal's royal city of Opelia. The slight, cool breeze ruffled her black dress as she stood motionless, her yellow, almost cat-like eyes taking in the sobriety of the far-below city streets. The eyes were the mark of every woman ever born to the Pavula line—but never before had a pair of them witnessed such a strange and disturbing time.

Jephtha turned slightly at a faint noise behind her, letting the moon illuminate her profile with its golden glow. Her smooth, white skin had just recently begun to show the signs of age, and streaks of silver now appeared in her long, wavy black tresses. A dark eyebrow quirked upward as she spoke.

“Good evening, Meron,” the queen said. Her voice, as always, was rich, husky, and even.

The royal sorceress moved forward onto the balcony and bowed her head briefly, making no sound in her silken black robes. “My queen.” Her face loomed in the shadows, a look in her eye rarely seen. “I do apologize for the intrusion.”

Jephtha turned back to look out over the city. “The tidings you bring are not of a pleasing nature,” she stated with certainty. She had been paired with Meron nearly thirty years ago, when she had been but a young heiress, and after such time together it rarely took either more than a glance to measure the thoughts or mood of the other.

“The guards have brought in another group.”

“How many?”

Meron hesitated. “Fifty or so. Mostly men, a few women.”

Jephtha's long, gold-lacquered fingernails tapped lightly on the stone barrier before her. Finally, she spoke. “Another public display?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes narrowed and hardened. “Then they shall receive the same punishment as those who were brought in before them.”

Meron nodded once. “As you wish.”

The queen turned suddenly and looked discerningly at the sorceress. “Do not presume my next words imply that I doubt myself, for I do not; I instead simply ask for your opinion. Do you think that, given our current situation, I am reacting too harshly?”

Meron was quick to answer. “No. The laws are specific, as they have always been. To speak out against His Holiness in any way is to be met with death. It should be no other way.”

Jephtha took this in silently, and with full and complete agreement. They were faced with a great adversity, true, but it was sheer weakness to turn on their God now, despite His seemingly endless silence. There was nothing that Jephtha detested more than weakness, be it of the mind or the soul, so much so that she refused to tolerate it in anyone around her. Gaal would be far better off without the infecting attitudes of those who'd been rooted out in the city for their public sacrilege. As it should be, they would die screaming.

The yellow eyes looked again at the sorceress. “Is there anything else, Meron?”

“Several shipments of sand from Corrado are late in arriving. It will delay the construction of the new temple.”

Jephtha herself had drawn up the design for the temple she wished built in homage to

Diamont, which when finished would consist mainly of colored glass. “Do you have any word on the reason for this delay?” she frowned, irritated by the news.

Meron nodded beneath her crown of shoulder-length red hair, its color the surefire mark of a sorceress. “Deliveries from Corrado are no longer being allowed to pass through Dargis, so they’ve been forced to go north through Morvay. It may be several more weeks before the sand arrives.”

The queen had heard through her many informants that Dargis and Corrado appeared to be approaching war, but this information had not concerned her until now. Indeed, she had enough of her own problems to consider. She had hoped that the temple would bring new hope and inspiration to those of Diamont’s followers who so desperately needed His help and guidance at this time, and to all of those whose faith was beginning to wane under the recent and dire circumstances Gaal faced. Personally, she required none of this, for her own belief and resolve in Diamont was unwavering. If the God was testing her, she would not allow herself to falter, and she fought to strengthen her confidence each and every day that an answer and reason for His silence would soon be found.

A sudden flapping of wings broke into the deep quiet and a large black raven swooped down to alight gently upon Meron’s right shoulder.

Jeptha turned to look at the bird. “Has he been continuing to scout?” she asked.

Meron raised a hand to stroke the bird’s glossy feathers even as her brown eyes glazed over and her face took on a momentary look of utter blankness. Finally she spoke, her expression clearing. “He has been to our northern borders.” She paused.

“And what has he seen?” Jeptha demanded impatiently.

“Bodies . . . more plague victims, being burnt. Nearly every town he passed showed some evidence of the sickness. And nothing of a cure.”

Jeptha’s lips hardened into a line. Almost every day more men and women came to the royal city, sent from their cities, towns, and villages to request their queen’s help in finding a cure to the fatal plague that was sweeping throughout all of Gaal. But there was nothing. The illness appeared to have no pattern, striking at random. Men, women, young, old, it seemed to make no difference. It was unknown if it was even contagious through breath or touch, or perhaps contracted through a plant or animal. They were at an utter loss, even though hundreds if not thousands of lives had already been lost to the sickness.

Meron looked away from the queen tactfully, even as her raven, Farek, nipped playfully at her ear. A knock sounded from within the suite’s rooms, and the sorceress moved away to answer it.

Jeptha waited, then took in the woman shrewdly when she reappeared.

Meron cleared her throat. “My queen, I fear the time has nearly come,” she said quietly.

Jeptha stared at her for a long moment before giving a sharp nod. “I will see to it. I would like you to get in contact with your fellow sorceresses, and find out how they are coming along with finding a cure.” She blinked once.

“Of course,” Meron replied, then quickly slipped away, Farek still perched atop her shoulder.

Once she was alone, the queen took a deep breath, and then moved inside to her suite of rooms. She opened the lid of the dark wooden chest that sat near to her bed and withdrew a long veil of black lace. As was custom, she pulled it slowly over her head,

and pinned it into her long, flowing hair.

Jeptha moved through the hallways of the castle only slightly more quickly than was her usual pace. She had known that the time left would be short, but now that the moment had finally come she felt almost as though she was moving through a daze, with nothing but her strength left to cling to. But it would be enough. She had always been the strong one; she always would be.

The queen turned down a corridor and paused at the sight of her two sons, Vanek and Zeidan, standing outside a set of closed doors. They had not yet spotted her, and she took the opportunity to observe them carefully. No one could ever accuse her of not loving her children, although her disappointment over not having a daughter to carry on the line had been greatly known to all at the times of their births. Thankfully, however, this calamity had been rectified when her firstborn, Vanek, had married and produced a daughter, his only child. The family line intact once again, Jeptha had been both placated and pleased.

Vanek had always been the closer of the two men to his father, and his face now held a look of intense grief. Truly, he'd barely left his father's side since the king had come down with the symptoms of the mysterious plague little more than a fortnight ago. He was most certainly his father's son, Jeptha decided as she eyed him; handsome, easy-to-please, and far too emotional. He was not going to have an easy time of making it through the night.

Jeptha switched her gaze to Zeidan, who, at the age of thirty-one, was two years younger than his brother. Common knowledge placed him to be her favorite, which was true. His features came more from her, the black hair and strong nose, but his eyes, like his father's, were a shiny black. His personality, however, was all his own. Generally very amiable, he was a man with an often wicked and riotous sense of humor—until one crossed him. Prince Zeidan Pavula was not an enemy one wanted to have. He believed in law, and he believed in justice, and he held no reservations at punishing those who infringed upon either. As jovial as he could sometimes be, when it came to holding true to his beliefs his attitude was completely no-nonsense, and his swift changes of mood often kept those who did not know him well at a safe distance. Actually, even those who did know him well stepped back if one of his notorious fits of rage took hold. Zeidan's rage was not something to be taken lightly.

Finally they heard her footsteps and looked up.

"Mother," Vanek said as she stopped before them. His eyes were bloodshot and grief-stricken. Zeidan was more in control of himself, appearing only slightly shaken.

Her own eyes were clear as she looked back at her sons. "Have you spoken your farewells?" she asked.

"We have," Zeidan replied with a slow nod. "And the clerics have been sent off. There was nothing further they could do."

Vanek's response to her question was a glare. "How can you be so cold at a time such as this, mother?" he spat, clearly out of control of his emotions, as was typical of him. "It is your husband who lies dying in that room!"

Jeptha stared back at him evenly, but said nothing. Too alike his father by far.

Vanek continued, his voice growing loud in the long corridor. "Will his death truly mean so little to you that you will look upon him with those eyes of stone as he passes from this world?"



Zeidan straightened and stepped in front of his brother. “That is plenty enough said,” he told him. The two tolerated each other, at best.

Jeptha shifted slightly so that she again held her eldest son’s eye. “Do not curse me for possessing a strength that you do not,” she began, her tone low enough to keep her words from carrying.

Vanek opened his mouth to reply but she continued, cutting him off.

“Mourn his loss for me if you can, my son, for I’ve not the time for it. Gaal slips further and further into chaos every day, and second only to the secret of Diamont’s silence, that is where my attentions and energies must be focused. It is my responsibility to do what I can to preserve this country in the face of whatever personal tragedy has befallen me. That is the position I have inherited, and that is what I will do.”

Vanek stared at her before slowly lowering his head and dropping his eyes to the floor.

Jeptha continued to eye him coldly, unable to completely stifle her anger. “It is of no wonder that Diamont chose women to lead His country—men simply do not have the stomach for it.” Zeidan shot her a dry look at this, which she ignored. “Now,” she said, again speaking to Vanek. “Where is your daughter?”

“She is inside. It was her desire to stay with him until you arrived.”

Jeptha nodded her approval. Thankfully, her granddaughter seemed to have inherited neither of her parents’ weaknesses; difficult as it was to believe, Vanek’s wife possessed even less emotional fortitude than Vanek himself. A trait not completely surprising to find in a Gaalene male, but one completely inexcusable in a female. Jeptha had little use for her daughter-in-law, Maedel.

The queen stepped between her sons without another word and entered into her husband’s suite of rooms, turning back briefly to close the door in their faces. She moved through the sitting room with a measured step and into the bedchamber that lay beyond. Her granddaughter and heir, Rana, sat next to the king’s massive canopied bed, gripping his frail and withered hand in her own. Looking up through the mass of apricot-colored curls framing her face, the petite, twelve-year-old girl smiled slightly, her yellow eyes sad but clear.

“Grandmother,” she greeted.

Jeptha moved so that she stood beside her while looking down at her husband. “Would you leave us, dear?” she asked, pulling back the veil to uncover her face.

“Of course,” Rana leaned over the bed and pressed her soft, pink lips to the king’s cheek before turning and doing the same to Jeptha.

The queen watched her leave before looking back to the bed. She sank slowly down beside the king and took up the hand Rana had been holding. His skin was pale and almost yellowish, and the smell of sweat hung thickly in the air, a result of the mad fever that had gripped him days ago. It was easy to see the flesh hanging loosely upon his once-robust form through the thin white sheet that covered him, and his eyes, looking sunken and bruised, remained closed, as they had been for the past several days.

Jeptha reached up her free hand and gently stroked the graying hair that fell over his forehead. “Nesseth,” she whispered, “would you leave me without a single word spoken?”

To her surprise, his lips twitched, although his eyes remained closed. His tongue moved to moisten his cracked and bleeding lips, and she waited patiently.

“Jeptha,” he croaked, and his eyes fought to open into two tiny slits.

"I'm here," she replied calmly. He peered up into her face, but she was unsure if he could actually see her. Most plague victims went blind long before Diamont called them home.

"Jeptha," he said again, a little stronger than before.

"Yes, my love?"

"I . . . have dreamed . . . ."

Her breath caught, but she forced herself to think clearly. He had been suffering from a severe fever for days, and had imagined many strange things in that time, things he had thought were real but were not. But nor was she so close-minded that she could completely dismiss his claim. Diamont had often appeared to the dying, before the God had seemingly lost His voice.

"What did you see?" she finally asked quietly.

His black eyes, now milky and dull, opened wider, and for some reason, the sight terrified her. She fought against the urge to pull back and instead forced herself to squeeze his hand reassuringly.

"It will be all right, Nesseseth," she said. "I will take care of it. Now, tell me what you saw in your dream."

He surprised her again by firmly returning the squeeze, and he then seemed to focus his eyes directly upon hers. He looked suddenly fearful. "I have seen the end," he moaned.

Jeptha kept her gaze trained on his even while feeling a cold shudder move through her. "The end of what, Nesseseth?" she demanded.

He blinked, trying to form words that would not come.

"Nesseseth?" She watched him as he struggled to go on, fighting for calm.

"He has shown it all to me, Jeptha. Plague is only the beginning. Next they will bring war to our doorstep. They will overtake us, and they will kill us all. Unless . . . unless we move against them first. It is our only chance for survival." He gasped for breath.

"Who?" Jeptha's eyes glinted dangerously in the shadows of the many lighted candles.

The king moaned and then winced as a spasm of pain seemed to shoot through his body.

"Nesseseth, you must answer me! Who is responsible for this? What has He shown to you?" Jeptha leaned over him as he tried again to continue. He could not die before he gave name to this threat. He could not!

His mouth opened and closed several times before he managed to answer. "Mithwell," he finally whispered. "Wherry." A final shudder of pain shook his body, and then he was still.

Jeptha sat back, fighting the tumult of emotions that threatened to release themselves. She forced herself to take several calming breaths, and then carefully folded Nesseseth's hands together upon his still chest.

*Judson Mithwell*, she thought. Could Wherry's king really be responsible for the plague of sickness they were experiencing? And to what end?

She sat for a long while on the edge of the bed, beside her husband's dead and wasted body, until she had figured the answer to both questions. *Could* he do it? Yes. Besides Gaal itself, King Mithwell ruled the only other country home to those who practiced magic, his White Order of wizards. She would have to have her sorceresses verify this, of course, but it now seemed obvious that a plague with no known origin might have indeed been magically created. It would also explain why no one not native to Gaal,

travelers and merchants included, had been reported to have caught or suffered from it. Which led her to the question of *why*.

The queen had received several reports telling that Wherry, the icy country to Gaal's north, was being ravaged by intense ice storms that were destroying much of its resources, including the animals they depended on for meat. Perhaps these storms were worse than even she knew, and Mithwell was looking for a new area to lead his people into. An area that had plenty of mountains, forests, lakes, and fertile lands.

Jeptha finally got to her feet and left the room. Her sons and granddaughter were waiting for her in the corridor, all wearing the same anxious expression. "He is gone," she said simply.

Immediately Vanek began to sob, and he slid down the wall to the floor, his hands rising quickly to cover his face.

Jeptha barely glanced at him before turning to Zeidan. Despite the fact that he was her second born, it was he who headed her royal guard. "My son, I am in need of one to lead our soldiers in the name of Diamont and the Royal House of Pavula."

Zeidan's black gaze turned from grief to calm in an instant, and he dropped to take knee before her. "Then you shall look no further, my queen," he said.

Jeptha nodded and gestured for him to rise. "Diamont has broken His silence, and, through your father, has given us the answer we have prayed for."

Zeidan blinked quickly, but his expression did not change. "Our enemy has been named?"

"Yes. You have much to do, and very little time in which to do it. Enlistment notices must be sent out at once."

He nodded. "And who is it that we shall ride against?"

"Wherry," Jeptha replied shortly. "We will march on them as quickly as we can manage it."

The prince pondered. "We will see at least two full moons before an adequate force can be raised and organized."

"I realize that," she replied coolly before looking down at Rana, who was watching the exchange with wide eyes. Jeptha considered briefly for a moment before speaking again; she had never before coddled or shielded her heir, and she decided that this was not the time to start. "Come dear," she said to Rana, starting down the corridor. "We must speak with the sorceresses to best plan on how we will handle matters in the meantime. We shall set out for Wyrren as soon as the arrangements for our transport can be made."

Wyrren, also known as the Black City, was home to the many magical women of Gaal, situated just on the outer fringes of the Servinian Mountains to the southwest. Jeptha knew those women waited there, ready and impatient to attack whatever nameless force was causing their country such harm and devastation. And the queen was now more than anxious to finally give to them that name.

## *Chapter Five*

With the royal city of Vasos now more than a fortnight behind them, Prince Numont and his wizard camped mere days from the misty border that would lead them into the stony, northern lands of Morvay. As he awoke that morning to the sound of yet another

thunderstorm, Kaymin admitted to himself that he was actually looking forward to crossing into the foreign terrain; he barely remembered what it felt like to be warm and dry.

The prince rolled over and stretched his stiff limbs before swinging his bleary gaze about the cave he and Jian had found for the previous night's shelter. He sat up quickly and cursed.

"Jian! Wake up!" he bellowed.

The wizard shifted before slitting open an eye. "Is there trouble, my prince?" he asked tonelessly.

Kaymin stood and began to pace about the cave, making shadows of the dim sunlight peeking through the opening. "Open your eyes and take a look about," he snapped.

"We've been robbed!"

Jian sat up slowly and peered about, expressionlessly noting the absence of their packs and provisions. "It would certainly appear so," he agreed.

Kaymin glared down at him. "I thought your wolf was supposed to be guarding us. The thieves could easily have slit our throats while we slept."

Jian stood and casually began to brush off his white robes. They appeared miraculously unwrinkled considering the wizard had slept in them. "Have the horses been taken as well?"

The prince, not having yet considered this, turned quickly and stuck his head briefly outside the mouth of the cave. "Yes," he reported furiously, again glancing about and noting with bewilderment that even the cloak he had been using as a pillow had been taken. Snarling, he watched as Jian stood silently for a brief moment, his eyes fixed and glazed; undoubtedly, the wizard called now to his familiar.

Kaymin always carried a small pouch of extra coins in his left boot, and as he reached for it, he was enraged to discover that it too had been stolen. "How could we have slept through this?" he bellowed. "Imagine the audacity of robbing a prince and his wizard! And in my very own country!" he added.

"The thieves must have failed to recognize you," Jian replied dryly, turning toward the mouth of the cave as his wolf appeared, the white fur around the animal's mouth stained red with the blood of a fresh kill.

Kaymin glared down at Ice. "I see his stomach takes precedence over our safety."

Jian ignored the comment, his eyes glazing briefly. The wolf dropped his head and sniffed at the floor of the cave before turning and sprinting off into the surrounding forest. "Shall we?" the wizard said, giving a sweeping gesture before turning to follow the animal.

Of course, the wolf could easily track those responsible, Kaymin realized. He sighed and stepped furiously from the cave. "We hardly have time for this," he snapped.

"Agreed, however we will not make it far without recovering our goods and our horses," Jian answered. "Ice was not away from us for long, so the culprits could not have gotten far."

"Good," Kaymin replied, "for I am very much looking forward to this . . . recovery."

Jian looked at him without expression, paying absolutely no mind to the cool rain already plastering his dark hair to his head, and said, "It may be wise for you to stifle your arrogance before we cross any borders. Otherwise, we'll likely encounter many unnecessary hindrances."

The prince stared back at him, wondering if his father's royal wizard ever spoke to him in such a manner. Probably—Rolin was even more forthcoming with his opinions than was Jian—but, like his own wizard, such words and tones would be reserved only for privacy. Kaymin felt quite confident that Jian would never have spoken in such a way had there been anyone else around to hear him. Reasonably confident, anyway.

“Well, since we *do* still remain in Dargis, I will continue to act as arrogantly as I please,” he finally responded. Not that he thought he was acting at all arrogant now. How could anyone not wish to recover their stolen property, and perhaps deliver some justice at the same time? Wishing to set an example for other thieves could hardly be called arrogant. Especially thieves who had the temerity to steal from their own prince. He suddenly noted Jian still eyeing him. “What are you waiting for?” he snapped.

Looking amused, Jian turned to the path, most assuredly sensing his familiar ahead. Kaymin wasn't entirely certain how the link between the man and animal worked, but he did know that Jian would be able to locate his wolf even if the two of them stood upon opposite coasts of the world.

Finally, the wizard spoke. “He has come to a village and is awaiting us nearby. He dares not go in alone, but the scent he follows enters there.”

Kaymin nodded as he followed along. “What is the name of this village?”

“I don't know. But I would be happy to offer an educated guess if that would please.”

“There are no signs of greeting?” the prince queried after giving a slight pause.

“There are.”

He waited, to no avail. “Then why do you not know?” he finally demanded.

“Because, my prince, wolves cannot read. Hard to believe, I know,” the wizard added.

Kaymin was confused. “I thought it was possible to use his eyes as your own.”

“I see *how* he sees, not necessarily *what* he sees,” Jian explained, sidestepping a low, leafy branch. “And letters mean absolutely nothing to wolves.”

They stepped out of the forest and onto a small dirt road that appeared nothing but a long tract of ankle-deep mud. “Which way?” Kaymin demanded. He'd decided to ask nothing further regarding magic-users and their familiars.

The wizard gestured to the west and they followed the road until they came to the outskirts of a large village. Ice, who'd been waiting nearby in some bushes, ran to join them.

“Harlow,” Kaymin read as they passed by the high wooden walls and entered into the village. Despite the downpour and the thick, muddy roads, he observed several peasants littering the streets as they slipped into various shops and taverns, seeing to their purchases or socializing. *Harlow*, he repeated to himself. He could not recall the name of the duke who governed these surrounding lands, and he felt badly for it.

Jian paused as Ice bent to reassure himself of the scent, and then again started off after the wolf.

Kaymin lagged behind, keeping a wary eye on any who came too near. Still in his own country, the danger should be minimal, but there always seemed to be some odd crazy about who had some personal issue with the monarchy and who kept alert for any chance to pay them back for whatever wrong they had supposedly been done. The sight of the wizard and his familiar, however, did much to discourage the drawing of any attention. Overtly, at least.

Finally Ice stopped before a small tavern that also boasted rooms for lodging and raised

a paw at the door, his big bushy tail high in the air. Jian pushed open the door and he and Kaymin followed the animal inside.

The barkeep, a skinny, older gentleman with a shock of white hair, glanced up from where he stood near to the door of the kitchen and frowned. "My apologies, good sirs, but we have a policy against animals. Either leave your dog outside, or take your business elsewhere."

Jian turned slowly to face the man, purposefully adjusting his long, sodden robes. Ice, taking his master's cue, sat obediently at the wizard's feet and stared unblinkingly toward the barkeep. Their gazes were identical, unwavering blue ice.

Kaymin hung back, seeing no need to interfere. Anyone who looked closely at him for more than a moment or two would possibly recognize his long-standing Numont features, but he would rather not reveal his identity if he didn't have to, at least not until he came face-to-face with the thieves.

The barkeep's eyes widened as he stared back at the wizard and a hush fell over the patrons who'd been enjoying their breakfasts.

"We will be brief," Jian said.

The man nodded quickly, continuing to eye the large wolf warily. Although Jian wore the robes of white, neither wizards nor sorceresses were often seen in these parts, and both were generally regarded with fear and distrust by the ignorant.

The wizard turned back to Ice and apparently bade him to continue his search. The wolf wandered through the tavern slowly, and finally headed into the back corner before sitting with finality before a table and swishing his tail. Jian and Kaymin stopped behind the animal and exchanged a bewildered glance. Sitting before them was a boy of about fourteen or fifteen, dirty and bedraggled and completely oblivious to their presence, so intent he was on stuffing his breakfast into his mouth.

Finally Jian cleared his throat.

The boy looked up, streaks of dirt across his cheeks, and paused in mid-chew. His gaze lowered to the wolf, then rose again to take in the wizard and the prince.

"He's wearing my cloak!" Kaymin exclaimed angrily with sudden recognition.

The boy made an abrupt move, attempting to bolt between the two of them to freedom, and was quick enough that he would have made it had it not been for Ice. The wolf's teeth sank into Kaymin's pilfered black cloak and he gave a loud snarl of warning.

"Sit down," the prince ordered.

The boy's expression still exhibited a disturbing indifference to the situation as he slid silently back onto his chair and again took up his meal.

Jian and Kaymin exchanged another puzzled look before taking seats on the other side of the table. "Do you recognize us?" Kaymin finally asked.

The boy nodded.

The prince was nearly incredulous. "Then you admit to being the one who stole our belongings earlier this morning?"

The boy lowered his grubby hand down to his plate, picked up a piece of bacon, and shoved it into his mouth. "Yes," he said.

Jian spoke up smoothly, likely sensing that his prince was about to lose his temper. "What is your name?" he said.

"Coedy." The boy shifted and leaned casually back in his chair, finally appearing to give them his complete attention. "Very well, you've caught me. Do you plan on killing

me or simply just questioning me to death?”

Jian blinked quickly; Kaymin knew that it was a rare person indeed who could surprise his wizard. “We are not going to kill you. We only wish to recover what you’ve taken from us,” Jian said.

Coedy’s dark eyes looked skeptical. “That may be difficult.”

Kaymin glowered, even while trying to see past the grime lining the boy’s face. He spoke in an unfamiliar accent, and his features did not appear to mark him a native of Dargis. “Surely you could not have sold everything so quickly?” he demanded.

“No,” the boy said, picking up a shiny red apple from his plate and biting into it. “Just the horses.”

The prince struggled to keep a handle on his fury, still trying to wrap his head around the fact that a mere boy had robbed them with such skill. “I’ll have the name of the man you sold them to. And whatever you were paid for them.”

The boy shrugged and tossed a large brown purse onto the table. “All the money that I took from you is in there as well. Well, except for what I used to pay for this meal.”

“What about our food and clothing?” Kaymin queried, quickly snatching up the purse and beginning to count the coins within.

“Stashed,” Coedy replied, licking the juices from the apple off his fingers. He cast them a sudden suspicious glance. “Are you really not intending to kill me?”

“Of course not,” Kaymin replied distractedly. Thief or not, Coedy was but a boy. Certainly giving him a good scare would be sufficient enough—although admittedly, doing so might prove more difficult than he’d first thought. The boy didn’t actually seem to understand the concept of danger.

Coedy then looked questioningly to Jian, eyeing his robes. “Why do you let your slave do so much of the talking?” he asked the wizard.

Kaymin abruptly felt the coins fall from his fingers as his head snapped up in shock. *Slave?*

After a brief pause, during which time he appeared to be at war with keeping a straight face, Jian spoke. “He is not my slave. Wizards do not keep slaves.”

Coedy looked from Jian to Kaymin’s flushed face and for the first time began to look slightly uneasy. “Oh. I just assumed . . .” he trailed off quickly under Kaymin’s glare.

The prince tossed the purse to the wizard after pocketing a few of the coins. “Jian, would you see to this?”

The wizard rose to his feet. “Of course.” He quickly disappeared from the tavern, Ice following closely behind. The patrons almost seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief at their exit.

Kaymin turned back to the boy. “You are a stranger to these lands, are you not? Where is your family?”

“My mother is dead.”

“And your father?”

“Elsewhere.”

Kaymin paused, wanting to shake the insolent attitude right out of the little thief.

“What land do you name as home?”

“Pellarin.”

That explained the unfamiliarity of his accent. Kaymin had never before traveled to Pellarin, nor could he ever recall encountering any natives of that country here in his

own. “What has brought you into Dargis? This is no time for a boy to be traveling about alone. These times present many dangers.”

Coedy glanced at him. “I am not as defenseless as I appear. And I simply wished to see some other parts of the world.”

“And to make your way by stealing from others?”

“Whatever gets me to the next sunrise,” he shrugged.

Kaymin sat back in thought. Most likely, the boy was an orphan, and if so it was of little wonder that he’d chosen to leave the chaotic and vicious streets of Pellarin. Despite himself, the prince began to feel sorry for him. “Is there nowhere else you can go?”

Coedy gave him a flat stare. “I can go wherever I please.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Kaymin snapped back before he could stop himself. “Do you have no other family to take you in?”

The boy laughed, looking genuinely amused. “Good sir,” he finally replied, “I appreciate your concern, but I am always where I want to be, and I am fully capable of taking care of myself.”

Mystified by the boy’s strange attitude, Kaymin reflected for a moment, and was about to respond when a huge, meaty arm suddenly streaked across the table and took hold of the boy’s throat.

“I told you it was only a matter of time before I caught you, thief!”

The prince turned and stood quickly to face a huge man wrapped in dark green woolens dripping with rain, a maniacal look in his eyes. The man pulled back, dragging Coedy by his neck out of his chair and across the table.

Kaymin abruptly reached back to pull free his sword, the one item the boy had not stolen from him. “Put him down,” he said, leveling his weapon.

The man grunted at him through his thick, bushy black beard. “This is of no concern to you, stranger. This boy has been stealing from my fruit cart for days, and one way or another, I will get what is mine!” He howled suddenly as a small dagger plunged into his forearm.

Coedy dropped to the floor, coughing, steel gleaming in both of his hands.

The fruit cart vendor roared and lunged at the boy, who deftly rolled across the floor before jumping to his feet and sprinting toward the door.

“Stop him!” the vendor cried. “Thief!”

Coedy had his hand on the door when one of the other patrons, a small man with a curiously bird-like face, reached out and grabbed him from behind.

“Hold him!” the vendor cried, rushing toward them.

Again steel flashed, and the man who held onto Coedy released him with a yelp to grab at his bleeding hand. The boy disappeared out the door.

Kaymin managed to step in front of the vendor, who looked as though he was more than ready to give chase. “Wait,” he said. After a moment, he replaced his sword, hoping this could be settled without violence. And since none had yet seemed to recognize him, he felt an odd urge to keep it that way.

The large man blinked at him in fury. “Remove yourself from my path, stranger. This is the last time I will warn you.”

Kaymin held up his hands diplomatically. “I will be happy to settle the boy’s debt to you if you will drop the pursuit.”

The vendor looked interested. “On one condition,” he finally replied.



“Yes?”

“The boy leaves town. Today. And I had better not catch sight of him in Harlow again.”

“Agreed,” Kaymin said. The vendor named a price, and he reached into his pocket to hand over a few of the coins he’d taken from the purse before giving it to Jian.

Without another word, Kaymin left the tavern and stepped back into the ceaseless rains. He glanced up and down the street, unsurprised to see no sign of the strange boy. He shook his head slightly and sighed.

Moments later, Jian rode up on his reclaimed horse, leading Kaymin’s, and he tossed the reins to his prince. “You didn’t kill him, did you?” the wizard asked, looking about.

“Of course not.” Kaymin frowned up at him. Jian possessed an odd sense of humor; after eight years, the prince still could not always tell when his wizard was serious or simply jesting. “But he’s vanished, and he’s in serious danger if he stays in this village. Can Ice continue to track him?”

“Certainly.”

Kaymin mounted his horse and turned to follow the wolf as it sped off down the muddy street.

“The boy—he’s coming with us,” Jian said. It was not a question.

“Yes,” Kaymin returned.

## *Chapter Six*

They reached the strip of dense fog that separated Dargis from the country of Morvay a few days later. Kaymin eased his horse to a stop in the middle of the muddy road and turned back to his wizard, squinting at him through the pouring rain. “I think it best you remove your robes now, Jian. If Wherry and Morvay are as close to war as rumor has it, you may not be safe so boldly proclaiming yourself as a wizard once we enter.”

Jian seemed to be withholding a sneer but he’d already dropped to the ground and was quickly removing his heavy and sodden white robes. Underneath, he wore simple brown trousers and a darkly colored shirt, tightly laced. Kaymin had been twenty when his wizard had been sent to him, and never in the past eight years could he remember seeing Jian donned in anything but his robes. The prince found the sight disturbing, but he said nothing, instead glancing back at their peculiar new companion.

Coedy sat quietly upon the young black stallion they had purchased for him, observing the two of them expressionlessly. When Kaymin and Jian had finally caught up to the young thief and explained their quest to him, the boy too had confessed to feeling that strange wave of tingling relaxation moving throughout his body, although he’d also expressed suspicion that it was caused by the wizard’s magicks. He’d told them flat-out that he thought they were both insane, however he also seemed to recognize his danger at staying in Harlow. Finally, he declared that he would accompany them for the simple reason that he presently had nothing better to do.

Kaymin could hardly blame the boy for his reaction; indeed, at only fifteen years old, Coedy had been born after the silence of the Gods had begun, and he appeared to care nothing about such matters. The prince did not doubt, however, that Adera, Goddess of Good, had led the boy to them. Terek had told him that others would come, and to listen

to his instincts for assurance that they belonged. The prince could not explain it, but felt only a deep-seated certainty. Interesting choice as it was, neither he nor Jian held any doubt that Coedy was Adera's Chosen.

Once Jian was back upon his horse, Kaymin moved forward into the mist and immediately felt the rain cease. The air grew heavy and dense as the fog closed around him completely, and he rode blindly for several paces before the mist cleared just as suddenly as it had embraced him. His horse stepped onto the hard, stony ground of Morvay with a snort.

The rise in temperature was immediate, now hot and dry, although not nearly as stifling as the deserts of Corrado. The dark, ash-colored ground stretched uninterrupted before them, without a tree or single blade of grass to be seen anywhere. The mid-afternoon sun shone brightly in the strange, topaz-colored sky, cloudless and without a hint of breeze.

Kaymin looked about him for several long moments. Having been born and raised in a country overflowing with foliage and vegetation, the barren lands surrounding him now were a shock to his senses, and he wondered how people could exist in such a place. Finally, he heard parchment ruffling behind him and he turned to see Jian unfolding one of their maps.

"If we keep traveling north we should come upon a road, which should then take us to a city by the name of Nir around nightfall." The wizard turned as Ice padded silently out of the border-mist and sniffed experimentally at the ground.

Kaymin nodded and started forward.

"With luck, we shall procure more information regarding this maze there," the wizard went on.

"And the native to lay hands on the shard once we have found it," Kaymin added with a frown. "Only a worshipper of Yanoka will have the power to free Her."

"I've no doubt that one will come," Jian replied, "so long as we're certain to keep ourselves open and alert to the situations at hand."

Kaymin continued to watch the scenery as they finally came to the road and began following it slightly west toward the city of Nir. The dry air took some getting used to, but the heat was a welcomed change, and he soon discarded the heavy black cloak he wore, stowing it into his saddlebag.

The absence of any animal life but for the occasional bird was also strange and disturbing, making the silence about them heavy and absolute but for the sound of their horses moving over the hard ground. Mines could be seen far in the distance to the north, but the road before and behind them remained deserted.

They continued to ride for several hours, the monotony of the landscape nearly mind-numbing, when Ice suddenly halted in his tracks and began letting loose piercing, shrill barks. Kaymin pulled instantly back on his reins and looked about for sudden danger, seeing nothing. "Jian?" he said, turning back to the wizard quickly.

Jian too was looking about hastily to heed the warning of his familiar, but the lands around them remained silent and unthreatening.

Coedy stopped beside them and looked about with mild interest, even as the wolf continued his frenzied barking, now beginning to run in furious circles about their horses. Suddenly, these animals too began to whinny and edge nervously from side to side, alarm alighting in their large eyes.

"Jian?" the prince said again, his voice growing more urgent.

The wizard's face slid into blankness even as his horse danced beneath him. It was only moments later that his eyes cleared. "Off of the horses!" he commanded.

Kaymin swung himself to the ground while clinging tightly to the reins. "What is it? An ambush?" The ground beneath them shook suddenly, a faint tremor sending a vibration through his body.

"Earthquake!" Jian shouted back calmly over the sound of the panicked animals. "Hold tightly to the horses. They will try to bolt."

The ground shook again, more violently than before, and Kaymin moved clumsily over to Coedy, who was barely managing to keep his horse under control. He reached out a hand to help the boy when a third tremor came. The ground itself rolled, and all three of them were knocked down, their horses screaming as they finally pulled free and tore off across the plain in terror. The ground continued to shake, with spidery cracks appearing in the road before them. And then all abruptly fell still.

Breathing heavily, Kaymin turned slowly and pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. He eyed the ground warily for several moments, but it remained stable. "Is everyone all right?" he asked, fearing damage done by the fleeing horses.

Jian was still sitting on the ground and wearing an intense look, his eyes closed in concentration, Ice by his side.

Coedy picked himself up slowly and brushed his hands together. "That was interesting."

Kaymin turned to look after the horses and was stunned to see them far off into the plain, but completely still, as if frozen.

"They're asleep," Jian said, quickly rising beside the prince.

Kaymin continued to observe the ground with extreme caution as he set out after his horse. It took nearly an hour before they were able to collect and calm their mounts enough to set out on the road again, and he was reflective as they resumed riding. "It appears that Morvay's problems are even worse than those being faced in Dargis," he admitted.

"The earthquakes are contributing to their larger problem of famine. Merchants and traders have grown fearful to travel here, and with good reason. Several whole cities have already been destroyed, and with them hundreds if not thousands of lives," Jian told him. "I do not envy the troubles being faced by King Almara."

"Surely they could not withstand an attack from Wherry as well," Kaymin observed. "It would be a slaughter."

"Do not be so quick to assume," Jian cut in. "Yanoka's followers have always possessed a fierceness and incredibly resilient nature. To survive here, it is of no surprise, really."

Kaymin nodded and fell into his own thoughts. Despite what his wizard said, he was fearful for the future of Morvay and its inhabitants. Being home to the order of White Wizards, Wherry would be a formidable country to do battle against, and he doubted Morvay could stand against it for long. The fact that he was actually journeying, at least in part, to make a pact with Wherry *against* Morvay caused a heavy stone of guilt to settle in his stomach, and caused his determination to uncover all of the shards as quickly as possible swell.

The sun was just starting to be swallowed into the horizon when they reached the small city of Nir. Before they entered, Kaymin donned a light, hooded gray cloak, and Jian

sent Ice off into the barren countryside to spend the night. Thankfully, there seemed to be an almost staggering number of stray dogs about now that they'd neared civilization, and hopefully any who looked quickly would think the wolf no different.

They were granted entrance at the city gates with minimal questioning, passing themselves off as journeying chroniclers and Coedy as their young pupil. After stabling their horses for the night, they entered a large, crowded tavern. Kaymin's instruction to Coedy was simply to "keep clear of trouble," and once inside the boy turned immediately toward the gaming tables where he was welcomed into a game of Bones.

Jian, still looking uncomfortable out of his robes, spent a few minutes in silent observation before making a subtle nod toward one of the louder tables. Together, he and Kaymin approached, securing the empty table next to a group of men sharing several pitchers of ale.

After each secured their own tankard of the same beverage—although it was doubtful Jian would do any more than merely glance at his—Kaymin shifted away slightly, still close enough to overhear, but not close enough to chance being drawn into the conversation. He felt no shame in admitting that when it came to subtle questioning, his wizard should be left alone to the task. Sipping his ale, Kaymin watched him from the corner of his eye.

True to his assumed guise of a chronicler, Jian took several scrolls of parchment from his satchel and pretended to be making notes. After another quick glance, Kaymin saw that the wizard actually *was* making notes, although he could not make out their content.

Finally Jian stirred. Likely he'd been keeping an ear tuned, waiting for the men to sound good and drunk. "Excuse me, good sirs," he spoke up, raising his voice over the noise of the tavern. Kaymin blinked quickly in shock. He'd had no idea at all that his wizard could affect a Dargasian accent so well.

A couple of the men looked over. This was a mining town, as many in Morvay were, and judging by their coughs and callused hands, these men were undoubtedly miners, most past their middle years.

"I am a chronicler of legends, and I wonder if I might ask you a few questions?" Jian slid closer to them, keeping his parchment in hand.

One of the men squinted at him discerningly, taking in his features. "Surely, stranger," he intoned with a slight edge. "But you'd best be telling us the name of your homelands first."

"Although my profession often takes me far abroad, I reside in Dargis." Jian waited as the man seemed to measure his words against his face. The biggest hint to give away that he wasn't really a Dargasian was his height; he stood at least two or three inches taller than any man in his prince's country, but he was presently sitting, and if any of these men had been alert enough to pay attention to his height before he'd sat down, Kaymin would eat his father's crown. Also, most Wherrite males wore beards, both for style and as a protection from the harsh, frigid weather of their country, but Jian's smooth, lean face was clean shaven. But his offered lie wasn't without its own dangers.

It was Kaymin's fear that, by this time, the linking of Morvay and Corrado had truly taken place, unbeknownst to them, and if so Jian had just openly named himself an enemy. But it had been the wizard's only choice. It was quite a stretch for Jian to try and pass himself off as a Dargasian, but there was absolutely no chance his features would allow him to claim Gaal, Pellarin or Corrado as his home.

Finally the man who was scrutinizing him so closely nodded. "I know of a legend or two," he said importantly, gesturing for the wizard to join them.

Without the slightest of glances at his prince, Jian moved to take a seat at their table and readied his ink jar and quill. "I am looking for information regarding the old stone structure of the barbarians," he told them, "the Maze of Madness."

Frowning, Kaymin performed a subtle shuffle along the bench lining his table until he could hear more clearly again.

The old man who had spoken the invitation to the wizard nodded thoughtfully. "Ah, yes," he said. "Constructed by the Goddess Herself as a test of mental valor."

"How so?" Jian questioned with interest, quill held ready. Thankfully, Wherrites and Dargasians favored the same hand.

Another of the men, his red-tinted eyes glossy with obvious inebriation, spoke up. "The barbarians of old believed that only the Goddess Herself had the power to deem them worthy of Her, and so prayed that She devise a way to weed out those who were undeserving. Her response was the creation of the maze," he slurred.

The first man again picked up the story. "Every barbarian from then on was sent into the maze when they reached manhood or womanhood, and several, the unworthy, were to return completely mad."

Jian scribbled some notes during the pause, quite likely for real. "So, what exactly is *inside* the maze?" he asked.

The first man continued. "Well, see, that's where the speculation begins. The barbarians never spoke of what actually went on inside the maze, except but to each other, and so it's largely just been left to theory," he told him.

"The barbarians died out centuries ago. Surely someone has entered the structure since then?" Jian questioned.

"Oh, of course," the second man replied while refilling his mug. "Hundreds of people, if the stories are true. But all have come back out insane, if they came out at all."

Jian stared at him wordlessly.

"It is said that, since the maze was created exclusively for the purposes of the barbarians, any who enter it not of their blood will instantly be struck mad by the Goddess's might."

Jian looked to be debating his next words, then asked, "Has anyone dared to enter it in the last twenty years?"

The two men exchanged a look before the first spoke. "Not to my knowledge," he said briskly, clearly offended by the question. Many remained touchy over the issue of their absent deities.

Jian nodded, and glanced surreptitiously over at Kaymin. Obviously they shared the same thought; if the structure was caught under some kind of enchantment powered by Yanoka, Goddess of Evil, it was possible, even likely, that the enchantment had vanished when She had become imprisoned. Unfortunately, however, they wouldn't know for certain until they actually entered the maze.

"So what are some of these speculations you spoke of? What is believed to be inside of the maze?" Jian further questioned.

"Monsters, beasts, poisons, you name it," the first man continued. "But the theory I've heard the most often is the most horrible; it is said that the Goddess can see true into your heart, and within it finds your worst fears. It is thought by many that entering the maze

brings these fears to life, and only those who can stand to face them will leave it unscathed.”

“Interesting,” Jian muttered, scribbling down a few more words.

Kaymin did his best to keep from staring over at his wizard and the men he spoke with. He had wondered why any place would carry a name such as the Maze of Madness. He now almost wished that he had not found the answer.

The prince rose and made his way toward the long, wooden bar at the head of the tavern, dropping onto one of the many stools lining it, his tankard in hand. In moments, and despite his best efforts to avoid it, he’d been drawn into conversation with a traveling merchant. What he learned from this man quickly had his blood boiling.

According to the merchant, a native of Morvay who’d decided it would be best to return home, it was being said that King Zane Rivenor of Corrado had intercepted and taken hold of all of the imports and exports being made over the land between Dargis and Pellarin, and that the soldiers of Dargis who had been ordered by King Numont to accompany the trades had either been slain or were now being held prisoner in Corrado. Although war had not yet been officially declared, it was clearly now a certainly and no longer a question.

As the merchant continued to ramble on about the great dangers of his profession, Kaymin seethed silently and fought the pounding urge that would have him turning back to Dargis immediately to be at his father’s side during this crisis. It was a brief struggle, however, as reason quickly broke through, reminding him that without the help of the lost Gods, Kauric would be free to lead the people of Trivallyn blindly into their own destruction. The prince had no choice but to carry on with the quest.

Turning away, Kaymin hoped that Jian had managed to glean something further that would be of help to them. Looking over, he saw that the wizard appeared to be readying himself to leave the table, and as Kaymin rose to meet him, a sudden shout rang out from the opposite end of the tavern.

“Cheat!”

A wooden chair sailed through the air and Kaymin turned just in time to see Coedy duck quickly to avoid being hit by it as it struck the floor and splintered into several pieces. Letting out an exasperated sigh, the prince strode quickly over to the boy and faced the group of men who were advancing on him.

“Is there a problem here?” he asked loudly.

“They think I cheated them,” Coedy spoke up calmly from behind him. “I suppose their egos can’t handle being bested by a fifteen year old.”

Three large men swaggered to a stop before Kaymin. “Give us the little swindler,” one of them growled. “And perhaps we will let you live.”

Kaymin noted Jian approaching and made a slight gesture for the wizard to remain where he was; there really was no telling what would happen if Jian’s identity as a Wherrite was revealed. Also, witnessing his wizard being forced into ravaging the entire tavern and everyone in it wasn’t something Kaymin particularly cared to see. He turned back to the men. “Do you have any proof of your claim?” he asked, wanting to throttle the boy himself for putting them into this situation.

One of the men snarled. “Just that he’s won nearly every game!”

“I’m skilled,” Coedy insisted.

The gamers’ rage grew and they advanced closer.

Furious himself, Kaymin saw no choice but to concede. “Return their losses,” he said to Coedy, hoping this would be enough to placate the gamblers. They certainly looked mad enough to kill. And besides that, they *were* worshippers of Evil.

“No,” the boy replied. “I didn’t cheat. I hardly had to, what with their incompetence for the game.”

“Return it!” Kaymin hissed. “There are more important things to consider than the winning of a few coins!”

“A few?” Coedy replied, looking offended. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a handful of bronze marks.

The prince momentarily fought to keep the impressed look from his face by forcing a scowl. “Do it. Now.”

Coedy heaved a sigh. “Very well.” He turned slightly, bringing his arm back before launching his hand into the air and sending the coins hurtling upward before falling to scatter all over the floor.

“Fool!” Kaymin shouted, grabbing the boy’s shoulder as two of the enraged gamers lunged at him in fury. Shoving him away just in time to avoid being tackled, Kaymin reached again for Coedy and pushed him from the tavern and out onto the street. As they ran, the prince tried to ignore the amused laughter that sounded out from his strange companion.

## *Chapter Seven*

The southeastern lands belonging to the Neutral Goddess Charette, the desert country of Corrado, consisted mainly of near-uninterrupted seas of white sand stretching over rolling hills and towering dunes. The plant life here was, unsurprisingly, minimal, although cacti and the purple rose of the desert continued to flourish as fruitfully as ever under each day’s rising of the red sun, its brilliant rays and scorching heat a constant danger to anyone unfamiliar with desert survival.

Corrado’s eastern border met with the Llasian Ocean, and this area held a slightly more temperate climate, maintaining soil that allowed some foods to be grown there. This region was also home to one of the country’s two lakes. The other, the larger of the two, resided at the core of the royal city of Xion in the northern section of the country. Touched by the hand of the Goddess Herself, these lakes were bottomless pools that were key to the very survival of Corrado’s inhabitants. But the Goddess had been silent now nearly twenty years, and in Her absence these lakes had slowly begun to recede, now leveled off at a dangerously low depth and becoming more and more shallow each day.

During the first several years of Charette’s silence, King Rixon Rivenor had devised several surreptitious ways to start conserving the water without needing to inform the public that their supply was slowly being drained away and not being replenished. And for nearly ten years he was able to keep this horrible secret known to only his royal staff and family. Eventually, however, and as he’d known would sooner or later happen, the receding water levels could no longer be kept hidden. The information got out.

A brief panic had swept throughout the land as the truth became known, subdued only by the king’s reassurances that water, like so many of their other supplies, could be imported if necessary. Although this was true, he failed to mention the time and cost it

would take to bring any significant amount of water into the country, and the many headaches of distribution which would follow. The Rivenor line had always held onto its fortune by the selling of its sand, needed for glass-making and weapon-molding, and its exquisite horse flesh, but these enterprises would not be enough to sustain them for long if they needed to start importing all of their water as well. Largely ignorant of this, the people's panic was for the most part quelled, although an uprising in organized prayer took hold, for need of the Goddess had never been greater. Of course, no answer had yet come from Her.

Just over three years ago, peace continued to reign in Corrado even as the problem of drought grew more and more alarming. King Rivenor and his queen, Sellan, a woman most beloved by all, were well trusted and respected by the entire populace, and in them the entire country's faith was put. But when the king failed to rise one morning, his heart having given out during the night, a depression was thrown over the land, a depression that only deepened when the queen wasted away, seemingly of a broken heart, just months later.

Their only child, Zane, was crowned king at just twenty-two years of age and quickly found himself thrust into the seat of crisis. He continued to follow his father's strategies which had kept Corrado functioning under the guise of normalcy for the past several years, but there was no denying what was becoming clearer every day. If the Goddess continued to keep up Her silence and lack of influence upon Her country, their resources would keep them alive for only another five years or so, at the outside.

Now, three years later and at the age of twenty-five, Zane found himself faced with an even more imminent problem: War. For whatever reason, known only to the people of Dargis, their prince, Kaymin Numont, had recently crossed into Corrado with a small band and killed several of Zane's soldiers. Outraged at this unprecedented and unprovoked attack, Zane had retaliated by confiscating a number of supply wagons that were both leaving and heading toward Dargis. If Numont was going to kill his soldiers, then Corrado's king would feel no ill will at stealing his supplies, and consequently save himself a little coin in the process.

Zane sat now in the dining hall within the clay palace of House Rivenor, his meal untouched before him. His royal sorceress, Reay, stood a few paces away, observing him carefully.

"Simply staring at the food will do your strength no good," she told him in her typically forthright manner. "You'll be of no use to anyone laying about sick in bed."

He swung his hazel gaze to her. "As much as I appreciate your council, Reay, I don't believe I requested it," he replied testily.

She smirked slightly and took a step forward, her black, tightly fitted silk robes brushing against the polished floor. "Even so," she said, "I'm sure you realize the foolishness of denying such simple wisdom."

He rolled his eyes. "You do so love to push me, don't you?"

She tilted her head, sending her long auburn hair falling across her shoulder, while raising a hand to her slender waist. "You know I care only for your well-being."

As always, he ignored the deeper insinuation in her words and turned back to his plate, forcing himself to take a bite of his food. After a moment he again threw down his fork. "Send for Quinxin," he ordered.

The sorceress nodded and moved to the doors to dispatch a servant. Apparently



realizing that Zane would not let himself be distracted, she turned back to him with a serious look, her black eyes glossy against the pale skin of her face which would not darken no matter how much time she spent in the desert sun. “Have you further considered Morvay’s offer of a treaty?” she asked, settling into a chair at the table.

“I have,” he answered slowly. “But I hesitate to accept before receiving a response from King Numont.”

Reay nodded, appearing oblivious to the feel of her familiar, a five-foot long rattlesnake named Macala, slithering slowly down her body to wrap itself tightly about her left arm. “It is possible that Dargis is in a state nearly as bad as our own. It is said that steady rains have been falling there for nearly a year, and that almost the entire country is flooded, ruining their crops.”

Zane fought to get passed the irony of their bordering country having a problem with *too much* water and he shook his head. “If that is the case, then I could gladly sympathize, but it still does not explain nor justify the killing of my soldiers. And to what purpose? Nothing was stolen or destroyed.”

“Seeing as Prince Numont himself was involved, there most assuredly was some sort of purpose to his actions.”

“Agreed. So why is it that my messages have gotten no response?”

Reay looked ready to reply when a thin, wiry man entered into the dining hall and bowed deeply. “My king,” he said.

“Quinxin,” Zane nodded in greeting. “What are the latest reports?”

Quinxin Saujani had been part of the royal staff for years, serving King Rixon Rivenor loyally before carrying on the position with his son. He held several duties, but chief among them was heading a small network of spies that served as Zane’s eyes and ears to the other parts of the world.

Quinxin rubbed his small, thin hands together anxiously and shifted his weight. “My lord, numerous reports have just recently come in, and I was in fact just on my way to you when I was summoned.”

Zane noted the dour look on the other man’s face. “I assume this news is not favorable. But first, tell me if any word has yet come from King Numont?”

“I fear not, my king,” Quinxin replied with a shake of his balding, oval-shaped head. “There has yet to be a response to any of the three missives that you have sent.”

Withholding a sigh, Zane made a gesture with his hand. “Go on.”

“Our scouts from Gaal have finally returned, and bring reports of a plague there that has killed thousands, including the queen’s own husband, King Nesseth Pavula.”

Zane nearly leapt to his feet. “They came into contact with this plague and yet returned here? Fools! They must be quarantined immediately! Surely we don’t have enough to contend with as it is,” he added sarcastically.

Quinxin took a step backward and held up his hands. “If I might add, my lord, that this plague appears to afflict only those who are native to Gaal and reside within its borders.”

Zane reseated himself with a frown and looked to his sorceress. “How is that possible? I have never heard of such an illness.”

Reay shrugged. “These are strange times. I will contact my Sisters in Wyrren to learn their thoughts on it,” she promised.

“I still think a quarantine is the safest route,” Zane continued. “I do not wish to take any unnecessary risks.”

“As you wish,” Quinxin nodded. “It would also appear that Queen Pavula is building herself an army. She has sent recruitment orders to every large city in Gaal.”

Zane stared at the spy silently for a moment, inwardly shocked. “Who is she planning to send them against?”

“I fear that we were unable to obtain that knowledge.”

The king found this unacceptable. “She is obviously planning to declare war, how could her adversary remain nameless?”

Quinxin shrugged helplessly. “I do apologize,” he said, apparently unable to come up with a better answer.

Zane frowned, annoyed. “Continue,” he said finally.

“Wherry continues to be barraged with storms of ice and hail, but we have gleaned no further knowledge regarding their hostility with Morvay, except for the common theory that the White Order of wizards are somehow responsible for the earthquakes Morvay is experiencing.”

The king shook his head. “Has the entire world gone mad?” He exchanged another look with Reay, whose expression was serious but piqued with interest. “Is there anything else?” he nearly snapped.

Quinxin paused, clearly wishing that he did not have to speak his next words. “It would appear that late last night, soldiers from Dargis slipped over our border and attacked a small village, leaving only one child alive to relay the message that this was retribution for the stealing of their supplies.”

Zane’s eyes widened in rage before he fell into a deep, considering silence. The situation had just slid completely out of his hands, and he now felt he had no choices left to him. “Take this dictation,” he said finally.

Quinxin scurried to procure writing materials, and then looked back to his king expectantly.

“To be addressed to King Gazziro Almara in the royal city of Rowe in Morvay,” he began evenly. “Firstly, I wish to express my gratitude for your consideration of Corrado at this time. I would further like to relay my own thoughts and concerns regarding Morvay and the recent injustices your country has suffered. I therefore readily accept your generous offer of alliance between our two great countries, and await any further suggestions you may have in the interest of preserving that which has been threatened.”

Quinxin held the scroll out to the king, who signed it quickly and then ordered that it be taken immediately to the stables and given to the swiftest of messengers. Quinxin bowed again, then backed from the room.

Finding themselves once again alone, Reay turned searching eyes upon the king. “I trust you realize all that this insinuates,” she said.

Zane turned hard eyes on her. “The men from your native lands may be foolish and weak, sorceress, but do not mistake me for one of them.”

Her eyes lowered briefly. “I did not mean to imply that you were either of those things, for I know that you are not. I am merely concerned.”

His tall form slumped slightly in the chair as he leaned back against its leather covering. “We are all concerned.” He stared at her thoughtfully. “Do you truly think I did wrong in accepting Morvay’s treaty?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly before she gave a typically candid answer. “Yes. You should have waited to learn who has drawn Queen Pavula’s wrath. In allying with

Morvay, you have made Wherry an enemy, and I need not remind you that Wherry is home to the White Order of wizards. If you have just unknowingly sided against Gaal as well, you will have all of its sorceresses to contend with too.”

With a sinking heart, Zane realized the truth of her words and distractedly ran a hand through his closely-cropped brown hair. “But I had no choice. After this latest attack, I fear that Dargis may soon be upon us in full force before much time has passed, and without the help of Morvay, it is possible that we could fall to them. And that I cannot risk.”

The sorceress made no reply, but instead stared down at the table in silence.

“Reay?” Zane finally said, recognizing her look of deep thought.

Her black eyes blinked. “It is the Gods that I think of,” she confessed quietly.

“That is of no surprise. Never have we needed their intervention as we do now.”

She pondered. “Do you think they are truly lost to us, vanished forever into the heavens?”

These words bordered on blasphemy, in any country now but Pellarin, but he answered her honestly. “No. There are too many strange goings-on. Who could be responsible but them? Or, perhaps, at least some of them? I just don’t think we have enough information to presume one way or another.”

She nodded. “It would not be unlike Diamont to punish those He considered unworthy by unleashing a plague upon them. But my God is one of Evil, and these disasters are happening even in the lands of Gauvin and Adera. I would easier believe that the Gods of Good would abandon their people before actively working to destroy them.”

Zane rubbed at his temples. “I fear we will never be granted an answer.”

“Then I suspect we will all die.”

He paused. “You’re probably right. Although if they all *have* truly left us, do you not find it difficult to admit that humankind cannot survive without their intervention? Are we really so weak?”

She thought for a long while. “Some are, perhaps.”

His brow furrowed in thought. “I can’t believe that. Surely we have been created with the strength to survive without them.”

She looked back skeptically. “Then why, in only twenty years, has each land come to the brink of battle? For it is not just this country suffering, but all. There is something wrong in the world, and it stretches to every corner. Could it not simply be the corruption and weaknesses of our own hearts that has led us to this?”

“We all have a choice, Reay. And I have to believe that people are stronger than that. Otherwise, what is the point? We cannot stop doing what we must just because the Gods are no longer here to look over our shoulders in judgment.”

She pondered. “Strength does not come from hope, but from belief. That is something that you may want to remember when and if war appears at our door.”

His gaze flicked at her again. “If war appears at our door, such thoughts and speculations will have no place in my mind. There will be only conclusion. At least as far as I’m concerned.”

Her expression made it obvious that she didn’t quite follow. “Perhaps you would care to elaborate on that?”

He slanted his eyes toward her, holding her gaze, but said nothing more on the matter.

## Chapter Eight

The Maze of Madness rose before them, a large structure of smooth, dark gray stone bathed in the glow of Morvay's red moon. Kaymin dismounted and stood staring at it for a long moment.

"I thought it would be bigger," he said finally.

Jian stepped up beside him. "It is a creation of magic. Do not let your eyes fool you."

Kaymin nodded absently. "I'm going in. Remain here with Coedy."

The wizard frowned severely. "I rather think not, my prince. I cannot permit you to enter alone."

Kaymin removed one of the satchels from his horse and slung it over his shoulder. He knew that if there was one thing his wizard would not deny or argue against, it was simple logic, and so the prince therefore formed his response accordingly. "There is no point in arguing with me, Jian. This is the most rational way to proceed, for if I should fail, at least you and the boy will be able to carry on. To risk all three of us would just be foolish. Besides, if madness does by chance result, you are capable of a far greater amount of damage than I." An insane wizard. Kaymin very nearly shuddered at the thought.

"I'd be happy to stand by and guard the horses if you both wish to enter," Coedy volunteered from behind them as he dismounted.

Kaymin turned and looked at him dryly. "As much as I appreciate the offer, I would prefer to return and find that the horses—and you—are actually still here," he replied.

Coedy grinned and moved to start unpacking his bedroll. "You know, you're a lot smarter than you look."

The prince stared at the boy, bit his tongue, and then turned back to the wizard. "I'm going."

Jian's eyes narrowed in quick thought. "Very well," he finally agreed. "But I am sending Ice in with you."

Kaymin paused, but then finally nodded. "All right." This way, danger to the wizard would still be present, but Kaymin doubted very much that Jian would let him enter without the familiar. It was the fairest compromise that he was going to get.

"I thought you needed a native of Morvay to locate the shard," Coedy said as he bent over the small fire he'd created.

"We need the native to free the Goddess," Kaymin replied. "No doubt one will come along soon after we have the shard in our possession."

Coedy nodded sharply, apparently finding this answer acceptable, before flopping down onto his bedroll. "Well, good luck," he said, closing his eyes.

Kaymin gazed at him humorlessly for a moment before stepping on toward the maze, pausing briefly to pick up a large branch. Where it had come from, he had no idea, for the land around them was as barren as the rest of the country they'd yet seen, but his mind was too focused upon the task at hand to give it much thought.

"I will be watching," Jian said, stepping back as his prince led his familiar into the heavy stone walls.

Although the glow of the near-full moon was bright, Kaymin paused after stepping into the maze and promptly lit the branch he carried. Raising his makeshift torch, he looked

about him curiously. Ahead lay three corridors, one to the left, one to the right, and one that ran straight ahead. He glanced behind him at the entranceway and was alarmed to see that the opening he'd just stepped through moments earlier had vanished, replaced now by a solid stone slab of wall.

He looked down at Ice. "So what do you think?" he asked, gesturing to the paths that lay before them.

The wolf gave a loud bark and wagged his tail.

"A lot of help you are." Kaymin did a quick check to make certain that all of his weapons would quickly be at hand if necessary, then started off to the right.

The corridor he chose looked no different from the entranceway; smooth, uninterrupted dark stone that ran unendingly along either side of him. The ground was barren and dry, just as it had been outside, and the surrounding silence had the feel of being deep and absolute.

It seemed he walked for hours before coming to another split in the passage, and again he was given the same three choices, which baffled him. Truly, another right turn should have put him back out of the maze, but it appeared as just another long, empty stretch of corridor. After much consideration, he kept to his path and continued on straight ahead.

As he walked, Kaymin reminded himself to keep alert. He and Jian had rehashed everything that the wizard had been able to learn about the magical structure many times since leaving the city of Nir, and although it was anyone's guess as to what the maze might decide to throw at him, the longer he moved through its passages the more convinced he became that Jian's theory was correct. The maze used the power of Yanoka to drive its inhabitants mad; but Yanoka was now imprisoned, and it seemed doubtful Her powers continued to enchant this structure of Her making. However, this did leave the question of the maze's unnatural size to ponder. Clearly, magic of some sort was the only explanation as far as that was concerned.

Kaymin continued to make every other turn to the right, keeping straight along at the other junctions. Finally, darkness began to fade and he felt fatigue creeping over him as the growing daylight began to sting at his weary eyes. Frustrated with his lack of success thus far, he relented to take a short rest and lay down upon the hard ground, trusting that Jian, through Ice, would guard him as he slept.

When he awoke, it was again dark, the red moon peaking in the sky. He looked about in confusion, sure that he'd slept no more than an hour or two. Getting to his feet, he glanced down at Ice, who sat passively beside him. Knowing he had no choice, he continued on down the stone corridor, snacking on some dried meat as he went. As the hours passed, he kept an eye on the position of the moon, disturbed to see that it did not change.

The passage of time soon became incalculable. Kaymin continued his strategy of making every other right turn, but he eventually found his mind turning to dark, panicked thoughts. What if he never found his way out? He could be doomed to spend the last of his days wandering this stone labyrinth while slowly starving to death. He hurriedly checked his waterskin, finding it nearly three-quarters full. Enough for a couple of days, more if he was careful.

But what did it matter, really? He would rot within these walls; he was becoming more and more certain of it with every step he took. And Ice would rot with him, which of course meant that Jian was doomed as well. He cursed himself for giving in to his wizard

and letting the familiar come along. Now there would be no one to carry on the quest, no one to bring hope back to the world. With his death, he would carry them all with him.

"Everyone dies," he muttered, slowing to a stop and sliding his back down the wall to slump dejectedly onto the ground. "I have failed and everyone dies." He sat for a long while, staring at nothing. He had let them all down, Terek, Avilla, his parents. There was really no point in continuing on—he had already failed.

Ice sat up suddenly beside him, his ears pointed forward and his head cocked.

"I should never have been trusted with this quest," Kaymin babbled. Surely a God should have known better than to send him on such a mission. And then suddenly a new thought crept up from the crevices of his mind, a thought that made his very blood boil with rage. Perhaps Terek, or whoever he was, had fooled him; not a God, but an imposter! An imposter sent by King Rivenor to get him away from his homelands before attacking!

Kaymin growled in fury, then nodded knowingly to the wolf as Ice did the same.

"That's right, boy," he said as the animal rose to his feet and began barking. "We'll kill them all! All of those desert rats!" he shouted, chasing after the wolf as the animal raced down the passage.

Sword upraised and in hand, Kaymin ran blindly down one corridor, then another, yelling encouragement to the animal. Finally he skidded to a halt and peered down in the darkness. What in the name of Terek's Honor had he done with his torch?

Ice had stopped, and was sniffing hesitantly at a thin, pretty young woman with long, wavy dark hair. She wore a tightly fitted white blouse and dark blue leggings, both wrinkled and covered with streaks of dirt. She stared down at the wolf with a glazed expression, a dried smear of blood on her forehead.

"Have you seen him?" Kaymin demanded, wondering why she was just standing there.

Her gaze rose slowly and she blinked at him in confusion. "Seen who?"

"King Rivenor!" he exclaimed in exasperation. "We're following his trail. We can't be far behind him now."

She tilted her head at him, and her eyes, a clear blue, widened. "I haven't seen him," she said. "But I can't stay here for long. The colors will be coming back for me."

Kaymin frowned at her, then looked down at Ice, who was now seated contentedly before the woman. "She's clearly mad," the prince told the wolf.

"Mad," she repeated with a resigned nod. "They all fear I will soon go mad."

"Lady, you do appear rather insane. But fear not, I will not leave you alone with your dementia." Kaymin straightened importantly, his sword properly pointed downward before him. "I am a gentleman, and therefore offer my protection."

"But can you protect me from the colors?" she insisted.

Kaymin shook his head and again looked sadly down at Ice. "The mad always see the colors," he explained to him. Actually, that wasn't entirely true. Only some of the mad saw the colors—the incurable ones.

Ice barked in reply, then got to his feet and padded farther down the passageway, pausing to look back and make sure that he was being followed.

Kaymin set a fast pace as he moved out after the animal. "I would not normally engage in bloodshed in front of a woman," he explained to her as she kept pace beside him. "But seeing as you're already insane, I do not fear the corruption of your sensibilities."

She nodded absently. "I appreciate that."

“Besides,” Kaymin went on, “we’re all going to die anyway.”

“Truly?” she said, then paused. “Have you ever seen a purple rose?”

He bellowed in fury. “The purple rose of Corrado! You *are* in league with him!” He turned suddenly, grabbing her and pushing her up against the stone wall. He raised his sword menacingly and pointed it at her throat. “Tell me where he is,” he demanded.

Again she appeared confused. “Who?”

“Don’t play games with me, lady. I am on a mission of revenge.”

“Revenge . . .” she trailed off. “Is that really why you’re here?”

Kaymin too paused briefly, his mind reaching out for something that seemed to lie just beyond his reach. “I believe so,” he finally replied, lowering the sword in his confusion. “Isn’t that why you’re here?”

She looked down. “I can’t exactly recall.”

Kaymin stepped back and looked around him importantly, hands on his hips. “Well, we appear to be within a dungeon of some sort. All of this horrible dark stone. Do you remember being captured?”

“No,” she shook her head.

Kaymin shrugged. “No matter.” He acknowledged the sound of Ice barking, beckoning them forward. “Let’s continue.”

The woman nodded and stepped down the passageway beside him. “That’s a nice wolf you have there,” she told him.

“Thank you,” Kaymin replied. “But I don’t think he’s mine.”

They moved on after Ice, the prince shouting encouragement to the animal at each turn they took, his sword still held upraised and ready for battle. “I think we’re getting close,” he finally said.

The young woman glanced over at him as they walked, again looking thoroughly confused. “Close to what?”

“King Rivenor and his army!” Kaymin reminded her sharply. “We have to head them off before they have the chance to invade! We will kill them all!”

“Maybe we already did,” she replied. “I saw a number of skeletons before the colors started chasing me.”

Kaymin pondered briefly. “Well, we couldn’t have gotten them all,” he finally replied, “or why else would we still be here?”

She nodded her agreement slowly. “Yes, I see your point. It’s a good thing you seem to enjoy killing so much. If everyone’s going to die, we likely have a lot of work left to do.”

The prince turned his head sharply, looking down at her as though she were talking nonsense, which she was. “Why do you think there’s no one here?” he spat, gesturing about them with his sword. “Everyone’s already gone! I’ve failed.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He nodded, acknowledging her sympathy wordlessly.

They continued on in silence, following the large wolf up and down seemingly random corridors that appeared identical in every way. Kaymin continued to grip his sword, but as the hours passed, he began to feel more and more dejected, until finally he dropped his arm to drag the blade mindlessly along behind him.

“I don’t think time exists anymore,” she said finally, eyeing the still moon. “I suppose that’s your fault too.”

“Yes,” he nodded shamefully.

Moments later they followed Ice around a sharp bend and then came to a sudden halt. Dark walls faced them on three sides, almost forming a small room.

“Dead end,” Kaymin observed flatly, readying himself to turn away.

“Wait!” The woman walked forward slowly into the shadowy corner and crouched down. “There’s something here,” she said.

“Of course there is,” Kaymin patronized, rolling his eyes at Ice, who stood looking at him expectantly.

“I have seen this before!” she exclaimed.

Kaymin sighed impatiently before stepping up behind her. On the ground at her feet lay a flawless, long red shard of crystal. As they watched, it began to pulsate. His eyes narrowed in thought as the sight of it seemed to trigger a memory that yet fought to remain elusive.

The woman reached for it slowly.

“No!” he exclaimed. “I don’t think we’re supposed to touch it.”

She brought her hands back quickly. “Then what shall we do with it?”

He thought. “Nothing. I say we leave it.”

She rose back to her feet with a shrug. “All right.”

Ice growled and moved to block their path.

“Onward!” Kaymin shouted to him, pointing. “I’m fairly sure there’s something in this place I need to find, and I can’t do it by simply standing around here.”

The wolf barked angrily and retreated into the shadows. Kaymin looked apologetically at the young woman as they stepped back into the passageway. “He’s the strangest of animals,” he started to explain.

“That’s all right,” she cut in. “When we get hungry we can eat him.”

This suggestion struck Kaymin as horribly wrong, but he wasn’t quite sure why and so said nothing. They’d gone only a few more steps before Ice ran back in front of them, the red crystal shard held tightly in his teeth. Its glow was brighter now, the pulsing increased.

Opening his mouth to curse the animal, Kaymin watched as the wolf jumped and whipped his head about, releasing the shard. It sailed through the air in a high arc toward the young woman, and as she reflexively raised her hands to catch it, a brilliant flash of light suddenly blinded them all.

Kaymin blinked rapidly, but it was still several moments before his eyes cleared enough for him to see. Ice was at his side, tongue hanging out in what looked like a smile, and the woman stood across from him, rubbing at her eyes.

Abrupt horror then gripped him with a thought. “I’ve seen the colors,” he blurted. “I’ll soon be as mad as you!”

“No,” the young woman said. “That was not the colors.”

Kaymin breathed deeply in relief as movement on the ground suddenly caught his eye. Another woman, this one curiously naked, with shoulder-length red hair and a strange expression on her face, looked back up at him.

Hurriedly he removed his gray cloak and held it out to her before offering his hand. She took it and stood shakily, her brown eyes sweeping over her surroundings as she wrapped the cloak about herself.

The young woman raised her head slowly and looked over, her eyes still blinking. Her



gaze paused on the stranger, her stare turning suddenly thoughtful. "You're not here with King Rivenor, are you?" she asked. "Because if you are, we'll have to kill you."

The red-haired woman frowned slightly, then glanced over at Kaymin. "I fear I could not disenchant the maze while locked within the shard," she explained.

Kaymin was disappointed. "I see you are as mad as she. No worries, however, for I shall be glad to offer you the same protection," he offered, straightening.

The red-headed woman quirked an eyebrow at him before briefly closing her eyes.

Kaymin felt a strange wave pass through him then, and a moment later, everything became clear. His eyes widened as he took in the Goddess before him, and he glanced quickly over to the young woman, who was busy dropping to her knees and pressing her forehead into the ground in a grand show of obeisance. He turned back to Yanoka, Goddess of Evil, but She had already vanished.

He stood silently for a long moment, stunned and recalling his earlier behavior with overwhelming embarrassment.

The young woman finally stood up, a mystified look on her face. "It was the Goddess," she breathed reverently.

"Yes. We have freed Her." He bent and collected the red shard that lay discarded on the ground, as well as his cloak.

"Freed?"

"The Gods have all been imprisoned into these shards," he explained briefly. "As Yanoka's worshipper, you freed Her when you touched it."

She stared at him a moment, her eyes hard with shock. "How did you discover this? Tell me what more you know!"

He sighed tiredly and took a seat on the ground, gesturing for her to join him, before recounting the tale of his meeting with Terek and his journey thus far.

"It would appear," he finally concluded, "that you have been Chosen by Yanoka."

"Clearly," she replied.

## [Chapter Nine](#)

"By the way," she went on, "my name is Cheyne."

Commoners never introduced themselves by their full names, but even a Morvian peasant would recognize his. Kaymin therefore briefly considered the idea of keeping his identity secret, but then decided that he should have no need to do anything of the sort while amongst any of his fellow Chosen. "Kaymin Numont," he told her.

She gave him a long look of consideration before smiling slowly. "The Dargasian prince. How interesting." She paused to scrutinize him further. "The features of your ancestors have not been lost on you; your line has carried the same look for centuries."

He shrugged, shifting into a more comfortable position. "As far as this quest is concerned, my station makes little difference or impact. The importance of what we are doing far exceeds any rank or significance that my name may carry."

She looked amused. "You said that you have already met up with both Gauvin's and Adera's Chosen? Tell me then, are they as . . . *insignificant* as yourself?"

Kaymin did not care for her tone, or her words. "Gauvin's Chosen is my royal wizard, Jian, and Adera's a mere boy by the name of Coedy."

Her eyes glittered in the bright moonlight. “A wizard, you say? I am most anxious to make his acquaintance.”

“Have you heard nothing I’ve said?” Kaymin spat. “Traveling through this country I too have heard the theories telling that the wizards are thought to be the cause of these earthquakes. But, as I have just explained to you in some detail, it is Kauric, the Father God, who is actually responsible. He is responsible for everything!”

Cheyne sat back and regarded him coolly. “And how are you so sure that it is not Kauric’s influence that is causing the wizards to do this?”

He paused and thought that through before shooting her a hard look. “Even if that *were* the case, what would it matter? Once we locate all the shards, it will bring and end to it.”

“Of course it would matter,” she replied matter-of-factly. “Finding all the shards could take months, years. Taking care of the wizards would be a much more immediate solution.” Her gaze slipped to Kaymin’s right and leveled upon Ice. “That is no ordinary wolf,” she said.

Ice sensed the threat and emitted a low, warning growl.

“Try it and he’ll rip you to pieces,” Kaymin told her warningly. “And I will make no move to stop him.” Woman or not, she was threatening his wizard. He would do no differently than what he’d claimed.

She smiled with amusement and turned her gaze away. “I fear you speak in contradictions, your highness.”

“How so?” he snapped.

“You just spent the past several hours proclaiming your desire to kill King Zane Rivenor of Corrado, who, as you probably do not yet know, has just officially linked his country with Morvay.” She paused. “But, in the vein of your earlier words, everything that has happened has been Kauric’s doing. And yet, curiously enough, your desire to kill King Rivenor has not waned in the least. Interesting.”

Kaymin felt the blood rising to his cheeks. “What I said was influenced by the magic of the maze. Surely you must realize that I was suffering from insanity at the time those words were spoken.”

She shrugged. “So you say. But I would see no shame in admitting that you still wished to kill him, or at the very least see him dead. I’ve heard the rumors concerning your country and his.”

He stared at her. “You are a fool,” he said.

She laughed at him. “I am a fool for not being a hypocrite? My country has an enemy that is causing damage to its lands. I’m sure you would claim the same for your country. It is so wrong to wish to destroy that threat?”

“But the threat is a lie.”

“Perhaps,” she nodded. “But the earthquakes and famine in these lands are not. And all threats must be eliminated if survival is to be expected. I do not see the wrong in admitting this.”

“And if I were to adhere to that manner of thinking,” Kaymin told her, “I would have killed you the moment you revealed that Morvay has linked with Corrado.”

She blinked in surprise, then laughed. “So there is a spine in there somewhere. I was beginning to wonder.” She continued to chortle.

“I find it disturbing that you find a death threat so amusing.” Watching her, Kaymin reminded himself that she was in fact a worshipper of Evil. He sighed. “Look, for the

sake of traveling together, we're going to have to come to some sort of peace. We are now four, and will be six before this ends. We cannot spend our time bickering amongst ourselves." He wondered if she was even listening to him; she certainly didn't appear to be, still snickering as she was. "You must remember, it is for the sake of Trivallyn itself that we do this."

Finally her mirth seemed to fade. "Very well, Prince Numont. There shall be no killing of the other Chosen by my hand."

He knew his expression was humorless as he looked back at her, as he found it difficult to trust the word of someone so odd, and so Evil.

"Oh, fine," she continued, taking in his reaction. "I swear it on the Goddess's name. Is that well enough for you?"

He nodded wordlessly, his head still reeling from the strange conversation. He reached into his satchel and pulled out some bread and cheese, then offered some to the strange young woman. She nodded her thanks and began chewing hungrily on the food.

Kaymin watched her for a moment, debating on whether he could continue to handle speaking with her and hearing more of her twisted logic. Finally, he decided that he should at least make an effort, although a change in the subject matter was definitely in order.

"So, what manner of circumstance brought you into the maze?" he asked, really quite curious.

She swallowed a mouthful of bread before answering. "I'm a seer."

He was surprised, but suddenly all of her talk about the colors made sense to him. Seers were those gifted to receive waking dreams, or visions, from the Gods, and although these people were extremely rare, they could be born unto any of the six countries. Cheyne was the first he'd ever met, and despite her earlier harshness, he suddenly couldn't stop himself from feeling a sharp pang of sympathy for her. Seers, although highly sought-after and typically given much privilege, usually went mad before reaching the age of thirty. It was said that near the end, they would see the colors, and, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly, would be utterly consumed by them, dragged into the curse of their madness. It was no wonder that it had been this fear, obviously and with great reason her deepest, that had manifested into reality within the maze.

"Stop looking at me like that!" Cheyne suddenly snapped at him. "I do not want your pity, or anyone else's."

"Sorry," Kaymin muttered. Then he paused, confused. "Are you saying that Yanoka sent you a vision to enter into the maze?"

"Several, yes. I kept seeing that shard, and myself laying hands upon it."

"But I heard it said that seers lost their visions when the Gods went silent. Indeed, no one has confessed to dreaming since they were imprisoned."

She shrugged, looking indifferent. "You said it yourself. I am the Goddess's Chosen." She turned back to her food.

He opened his mouth to reply, for this still made little sense to him, but she looked back up at him squarely, her eyes saying all they needed to. Apparently, this subject was *not* to her liking.

Finally she continued on in a different tone. "I suppose I should thank you for coming along as you did, for I likely would have wandered within these walls until my death if you hadn't." She seemed to consider. "Then again, you tell me our meeting was

arranged by the Gods, so I guess you wouldn't really be deserving of that thanks."

Kaymin laughed despite himself. What else could he do?

They slept then, both exhausted after their foray into insanity. The sun was just beginning to brighten the disenchanted sky overhead when they awoke several hours later to the sound of Ice barking heatedly.

"What's wrong with the wolf?" Cheyne asked, climbing groggily to her feet.

Alarmed, Kaymin quickly came to his senses and spun about, bending to examine the animal. Ice's right forepaw was spotted with blood, and he was favoring it heavily as he leapt anxiously about the corridor. The prince cursed furiously. "Jian's been injured. We must find our way out of this maze immediately." Quickly, he ripped a piece of cloth from his sleeve and wrapped it around Ice's paw.

Cheyne nodded and moved to lead the way. "Now that the enchantment has been lifted, it should not be so difficult."

Kaymin followed as she made each left turn they came to, his mind fraught with worry. He knew that Jian could more than handle himself, but if his identity as a wizard had been discovered, they would need to get out of Morvay as quickly as possible. He sighed with frustration at realizing that their next destination still remained unknown to them. Terek had promised to return and guide them, but until He did, they would have little choice but to simply wait.

"Your wizard wasn't foolish enough to be walking about in his robes, was he?" she asked, breaking the silence between them.

"Of course not," Kaymin snapped back. "But tell me, what would become of him if he was somehow overpowered?"

She did not hesitate. "Royal decree would have him brought to King Almara in the royal city of Rowe, but, truth be told, he would never make it that far."

Not alive, she meant. Kaymin swallowed thickly, although he was slightly placated at the sight of the now-calm wolf. The bandage he'd fashioned seemed to be helping as Ice continued on with only a slight limp.

It was another hour before they made the final turn and found themselves released abruptly from the stone walls surrounding them. Ice gave an excited bark and raced to the side of his wizard, who was sitting calmly beside the dying embers of a campfire, a red-stained bandage wrapped tightly about his wrist. It was obvious he'd been anticipating their arrival.

Kaymin let out a sigh of relief, and then scanned the area quickly. The bodies of four men were scattered about on the hard ground, all clearly dead. Coedy, it appeared, was busy searching them for loot.

"What happened?" the prince demanded, stopping beside the wizard. He did not see Cheyne storm up behind him.

"You have killed my people!" she yelled at Jian, fury turning her eyes to azure fire.

The wizard took her in silently for a moment. "I'm afraid it is a habit of mine to kill those who attack me for no reason, yes," he finally replied coolly.

"No reason?" she spat back wildly. "You are a wizard! You should not dare be on these lands!"

Kaymin took a step back, rather interested to see how Jian would handle her. He had never before seen his wizard unhinged, and doubted that now would prove an exception.

"There is no way they could have discerned that I am a wizard. And my purposes here

far exceed any daring that it may call for,” he told her.

“Then truly you do not realize your danger,” she returned coldly, stepping closer.

Jian’s lips quirked. “Surely you would not be so foolish as to threaten me,” he remarked with a slight note of challenge in his voice.

She gave an arrogant toss of her head. “I suppose justice can wear the face of foolishness . . . although I would not dismiss me so easily if I were you.”

Jian gave an impatient sigh and made a gesture with his left arm. Cheyne’s body went instantly rigid as she was rendered immobile, and her eyes screamed the fury that her frozen mouth could not.

Kaymin stared at her in fascinated horror for a moment before turning back to his wizard. “You’re really not helping matters,” he said.

“Who is this woman?” Jian walked around her slowly in a subtly taunting manner as she continued to glare at him. “Strangely, my link with Ice failed as soon as he stepped into the maze, and it did not return until just now when he exited it.”

Kaymin looked at him. “I think I can explain that.” Clearly, Yanoka’s enchantment over the maze had somehow disrupted the link shared between wizard and familiar. “As for her identity,” he went on with a nod at Cheyne, “can you not figure?”

“Hm. I believe our journey has just taken an interesting turn.” The wizard deliberately turned his back on her. “She has freed Yanoka then?”

“Yes . . .” Kaymin paused, his eyes straying back to the immobile woman. “How long are you going to leave her like that?”

Jian ignored the question as Coedy suddenly joined them, his pockets bulging.

“So, did the maze drive you insane?” the boy asked, squinting up at the prince with interest.

“Yes,” Kaymin replied, “but it was only temporary. Now, will one of you tell me what happened here?”

Jian’s face slid into confusion. “We don’t exactly know ourselves. I awoke to the feel of an arrow imbedding itself into my arm, and I admit that my reaction may have been a bit hasty.” He looked briefly out at the bodies.

Kaymin frowned. Jian was never hasty. “So you’ve no idea who they were or what they wanted?”

“I’m making a guess at saying they wanted us dead,” Jian replied. “But as to why, I cannot imagine. I have done nothing to betray myself as a wizard.”

“Until now,” Kaymin said grimly.

Coedy moved to gaze curiously at Cheyne. “Who’s she?”

Kaymin turned. “This is Yanoka’s Chosen. Her name is Cheyne.”

“Is *she* insane?”

“I suppose that’s debatable,” Kaymin replied, then instantly wished he could take it back. Saying such things about a seer was beyond tactless. “Release her,” he ordered Jian.

The wizard did so, and they all watched as she instantly regained her ability to move and stumbled slightly.

She glared at Jian furiously, her hands balling into fists at her sides. “How dare you do such a thing to me?”

“I could have killed you,” he pointed out.

Kaymin knew full well that Jian was in no danger of losing his temper. Cheyne, on the

other hand, seemed as explosive as a Pellarin volcano, and he quickly moved so that he was between them. "Enough," he said to her. "Remember why we're here."

Jian looked unconcerned and reseated himself by the remains of the fire.

To Kaymin's surprise, Cheyne too backed off. "Well, now that we're all calm, allow me to make the introductions. Cheyne, this is my wizard Jian, and this is Coedy."

For the first time her gaze took in the boy, although she discarded him quickly. Coedy's look to her was much more appraising.

Kaymin continued. "Jian, Coedy, as I said before, this is Cheyne. She is a seer, and was led into the maze by visions sent to her by Yanoka."

Jian's look changed significantly at this revelation and his head whipped about to take her in. "How old are you?" he fired at her quickly.

She looked suspicious, but answered. "Nineteen. Why?"

"And you have received visions your entire life?"

Now she was clearly uncomfortable. "Yes."

The wizard was just as clearly puzzled. "With the knowledge I have gained over the time of the Gods' silence, this does not seem possible."

"I would not lie over such a thing," she spat back defensively.

"No, I did not mean to imply that," he said, thoughtful. "It just seems that you would have provided the sole proof of the Gods' existence over the past two decades, and yet I have heard nothing of it. Surely this news would have lightened the spirits of many the world over."

She looked away for a moment. "My family wished for my ability to remain hidden."

Jian looked baffled. "Why?"

"I . . . It's complicated. I would rather not speak of it."

"Of course," the wizard nodded, although he continued to eye her thoughtfully. "A seer," he murmured quietly to his prince. "Most curious."

Before he could make any sort of reply, Kaymin's eyes slid past his wizard. He dropped to the ground instantly. Approaching them, seemingly out of nowhere, was Terek.

"Rise, Kaymin," the God said, stopping before them. He looked briefly to take in Cheyne and Coedy, who were both eyeing Him with fascination, while Jian moved to stand before the God after giving a low bow.

Kaymin rose unsteadily to his feet. "My God, we have found the shard of Yanoka, and have freed Her."

"Yes," Terek replied with a nod. "My sister and I have spoken."

"Where must we travel to next?" Kaymin inquired. He then exhaled with deep relief upon hearing the answer.

*Wherry.* Now, he could make the treaty with King Judson Mithwell, and hopefully alleviate some of the guilt he felt at lying to his parents over his whereabouts, guilt that had doubled since hearing Cheyne's revelation that Corrado's alliance with Morvay had indeed become official. He then found himself suddenly wondering how she'd known this, and made a mental note to ask her.

Jian addressed the God evenly. "Where in Wherry is the shard located?"

Terek turned His green gaze onto the wizard. "Gauvin's shard is held within the magical city of Crysmir, a place I trust you are most familiar with, wizard."

"Yes, of course." Jian frowned, looking thoughtful. "Is there any other information

you can give us that would make locating the shard easier? Crysmir may be a small city, but it is a city nonetheless.”

“I fear not.” Terek turned slightly and gazed across the barren countryside. “But I must also bring to you a serious warning. The attack on you this morning was no idle coincidence.”

They all waited silently for Him to continue, although Cheyne was obviously fighting with herself not to comment.

“Since my release, I have been observing much in this world.” He paused, then began again. “There are some who are weak, and easily corrupted, and it matters not which lands they call home, for they have been found in all. They know of you, and will do whatever they can to prevent you from succeeding.”

“But why?” Kaymin demanded, bewildered. “If they know the true intent of our purpose, how could they possibly desire our failure?”

Jian’s eyes gleamed. “Think of the dream you experienced before we left Dargis,” he said to his prince. “The Father God is watching.”

Terek nodded at the wizard. “He is doing much more than merely watching. He has found those who would be loyal to Him, and as I’ve said, He has found them in all of the lands. What He has promised them in return for their service I cannot begin to fathom, but He has their loyalty and they will carry out whatever He bids them to do. I would assume,” He continued, “that their corruption has played a large factor in the recent rivalries between your countries.”

“What names can you give us?” Cheyne demanded, cutting in with sudden vehemence. “These heathens must be found and destroyed immediately!”

Terek turned to her slowly. “I can give you none. But do not doubt that they know each of yours. Once the identity of the Chosen is known to you, it will, through Kauric, be known to them as well.” He turned back to Kaymin. “Now, if I may have the shard?”

“Oh, of course.” The prince hurried to take it from his satchel and promptly handed it over. “If my God would allow a question?”

“Certainly.”

Kaymin looked thoughtful. “I do not understand why Kauric has sent these men after us. For surely, could He not just strike us dead where we now stand?”

“It is a game to Him and nothing else,” Terek replied. “It is something to keep Him amused.”

“Then what shall happen if He should begin to lose?” As always, Jian spoke the question others least wanted to hear. “What guarantees have we that He will not simply kill us all, whether it is from a sense of being threatened, or from something as simple as sheer boredom?”

“There are no guarantees,” Terek said succinctly. “But with each God you release, those of us already freed will grow stronger. I fear to say more, but do not completely despair in our powers of influence and intervention. Do not believe you are alone in this.”

Horrified, Kaymin looked to his wizard. What he saw on Jian’s face, however, did nothing to appease him; the wizard’s look was now darkly calculating, clearly drawing conclusions from Terek’s words far beyond Kaymin’s own understanding.

The prince turned back to his God in time to see Him nod, and then abruptly vanish.

## Chapter Ten

Avilla was always pleasantly surprised by the warm and open greetings bestowed upon her by the king and queen of Dargis when she attended them at the royal castle. With her father being a pottery-maker and her mother a seamstress, Avilla was but a peasant, and had therefore been astounded by the joyous and accepting manner in which the royal house had reacted to the news of her engagement to the only heir. Since then, her feelings toward the king and queen had grown from respect and reverence to ones of love, an emotion they both openly reciprocated.

Even in the wake of Kaymin's absence, she was often invited to the castle to lunch or dine with the king and queen, as were her parents, although today the invite had been for her alone. As she sat now in the immense dining hall filled with servants hurrying to lay out the mid-day meal, she silently studied the royal pair with a worried eye. Noting the presence of the king's wizard, Rolin, as he swept into the room, she quickly concluded that she had not been summoned to engage in idle small talk this day.

Once the food had all been laid out, the king quickly dismissed the servants. Avilla picked slowly at her food, waiting for the silence to be broken. Kaymin's father had never been one for preamble, and she did not have to wait long.

"Avilla, dear, we wish to hear your thoughts and observations concerning the state of the city," he requested.

She set down her fork and met his eyes. "Most talk centers on the rains, and what they are doing to our crops. It is speculated that soon we will not be able to feed ourselves."

King Numont nodded, not looking surprised. "Do you think that a panic is near?"

"Yes. The rumors concerning Corrado's alliance with Morvay have only added to the fear, and the streets have grown hostile, especially toward anyone who is not native." She longed to ask if the rumors held any truth, but did not dare. She was, of course, not yet officially of the royal house.

As the king seemed to ponder her words, Avilla's gaze slid over to the wizard Rolin, a person whose presence she had always found more than a little intimidating. The man simply looked formidable, and would do so even if he did not wear the white robes of his order. Easily the tallest man she had ever seen, he had wide shoulders and a thick but trim frame that gave one the impression that running into him would be the equivalent of hitting a stone wall. His age appeared around sixty, his hair a stunning glory of radiant silver that hung nearly to his waist, his eyes a sharp light brown. Surely, much of the king's confidence came from having such an impressive weapon at his side.

Finally the king spoke again. "Avilla, I trust that whatever is said in this room shall remain here."

She quickly concealed her surprise. "Of course, your majesty."

"I presume you have heard the rumors stating that Corrado has intercepted several of our incoming and outgoing supplies."

"I have," she nodded.

"This is in fact true. Although no official word has yet come regarding Corrado's alliance with Morvay, we believe this occurrence is indeed imminent, and we will therefore soon be readying our armies."

The flattery she'd just a moment ago been feeling to be included in such an important



conversation instantly washed away as the king's words sank in. "Then it has come to war," she said tonelessly.

King Numont nodded. "I'm afraid so," he said. "However, we will do what we can to delay until word from Kaymin has arrived. He should certainly have reached Wherry by now, and likely its royal city as well."

Avilla felt a sharp pang of worry at Kaymin's name, and saw the same concern in the queen's dark eyes as they exchanged a glance. Although Kaymin's absence was being kept a well-guarded secret for safety reasons, it seemed doubtful that he would be able to keep his identity unknown throughout his travels, and this was no time for an heir to be found in a country not his own.

The king noted the anxious look of the women before addressing Avilla again. "Has he sent any word to you since setting out?"

Avilla paused, her mind straying to the strange postscript that Kaymin had added to the note he'd written to her before departing. It had been no coincidence that he'd ordered it delivered a few hours after dawn, enough time to see him safely out of the city before it reached her. In the note, he'd simply explained that he was leaving with his wizard to seek out a treaty with King Mithwell in Wherry, being very bland and vague with his wording. But the postscript . . . that is what had sent a flutter of worry into her heart. *There is no need for worry, my love, whatever word you may receive. Know that what I do is to help us all, and that I will always come back for you,* he'd written.

She could not explain these words, and had relayed them to no one, but each night she continued to ponder at their meaning. Truly, they would have panicked her a great deal more if Jian had not gone with Kaymin, as she knew the wizard would not let his prince do anything reckless, no matter the reason or whatever the stakes. With Kaymin's well-being a priority to them both, she and the wizard got along well.

"No," Avilla finally responded to the king's question. "I have heard nothing from him since his departure."

Queen Numont reached across the table and clasped Avilla's hand in her own. "Don't worry, dear. I have been praying day and night to Terek that He watch over Kaymin. And I am sure that He has granted him His protection."

Avilla suspected that these words were spoken to comfort the queen herself just as much as they were to comfort her, but she did not mind. She prayed daily also, but could not deny that it was done half-heartedly. Surely if the God was truly listening, He would have shown some proof by now. He would not permit them to go into this war. He would not let them starve from lack of food.

"Of course," she finally replied to the queen, forcing a small smile.

The doors to the dining hall suddenly burst open, startling everyone but the unflappable royal wizard. Avilla recognized the man standing there as Colvin Laros, the captain of the king's royal guard, and the expression on his face sent a bolt of fear through her.

"Your majesty, please forgive the intrusion," the captain said, turning and closing the doors behind him. "But I fear I have news of a most dire nature."

"Of course, Colvin," the king said, gesturing calmly for the man to come forward even as his eyes glittered dangerously.

The captain stepped nearer, taking sudden note of Avilla. He paused and shot a questioning look to the king.

"Speak freely," King Numont ordered, waving his hand impatiently.

Captain Laros bowed. “Word has just come. Two small border towns have been pillaged and destroyed. No survivors were found, however several witnesses report to have seen a band of soldiers riding away from the towns early this morning.”

“Soldiers?” the king repeated in fury. “Dare I guess—*Corrado* soldiers?”

“I’m afraid so, your majesty,” the captain nodded.

His fist slammed down onto the table, causing both Avilla and Queen Numont to jump. It was no mystery from where Kaymin had inherited his temper. “So he is not only stealing our supplies, but killing our people as well,” the king raged, shooting to his feet and beginning to pace. “Well, no more! I will not risk the lives of more innocents.”

Avilla worked to keep the horror from her face but suspected that her attempts failed. She exchanged another look with the queen, who looked on the verge of tears herself.

Rolin cleared his throat as he stood, then spoke out in his deep, almost hypnotic voice. “My king, you must not act hastily. The decision to wait for word from your son is a wise one.”

The king turned furiously. “And to lose how many more lives in the interim?”

Rolin nodded as if to accept the king’s point, but he remained a pillar of reason. “To risk attack from both our eastern and northern borders without aid would surely lose even more lives, and quite possibly risk the very kingdom itself. I would suggest,” he went on, turning slightly to take in Captain Laros, “a further increase in soldiers to patrol our borders.”

“As you know, the borders are already heavily guarded,” the captain replied.

“Obviously not heavily enough,” Rolin said.

“Granted,” the captain nodded. “However, to increase the number, men will need to be pulled from the cities, opening the door to the risk of increased thievery and violence.”

“No,” the king broke in grimly. “The wizard is correct. Thievery from within is undeniably more favorable than murder from beyond. Have it done.”

Captain Laros nodded, then turned away to go carry out the order.

The king continued to look at his wizard. “I fear this will placate no one for long.”

“Agreed. But there remains little choice until we have word that the alliance with Wherry has been made.”

The queen stood suddenly, her hands wringing nervously before her. “I must pray,” she said, her eyes wide.

Avilla saw exasperation flash briefly across the king’s face before he nodded resignedly. “Of course, my heart. Go, if that is your wish.”

Queen Numont turned to Avilla, her look both inviting and expectant.

“If I may have the honor, I would very much like to accompany you,” Avilla said, although in truth, praying was the last thing that she wished to be doing at this moment.

The queen smiled. “Certainly, my dear. I would be most grateful for the company.”

Despite the warm feelings that she held for the woman, Avilla couldn’t help but to think rather negatively upon the queen’s present behavior. For even though Avilla herself was trying desperately to keep faith in the hope that their God would in fact return to them, she doubted very much that any amount of praying would bring this about, and that they should instead be focusing on the more pressing issue of war. She said nothing, however, as she walked with the queen down to Terek’s Chapel and as they took seats together on a small wooden pew. In the silence, she lost all track of time, and though she tried to focus on praying, she found herself completely unable to do so.

Hours passed before the queen finally moved, her face a delicate mask of both sadness and hope. "If you will excuse me now, Avilla. I am suddenly feeling quite tired."

Avilla nodded and fell into a slight curtsy, her body stiff from hours of sitting in the same position. Relieved, she watched as the queen departed, and then made her way out of the castle to the carriage that would bring her home, a small stone structure only a few blocks from the merchant district of Vasos. Grateful to find the house empty, she went straight to her bedroom on the second floor and collapsed onto her bed, where she again replayed the events of the afternoon over in her mind. It was impossible to believe war would soon be at their doorstep, but there could be no more hopeful denials. The king himself had proclaimed that it was now only a matter of time.

The long hours in the God's chapel proved draining, and soon she drifted off into an uneasy slumber.

The sounds on the street outside made by the passersby had long since faded to silence when Avilla finally awoke, her eyelids snapping open in the absolute darkness of her room. The deepening shadows of night had darkened to blackness, and the great white moon had risen in the sky, three-quarters full.

She lay, unmoving and confused, for a few short moments before shooting to her feet and hastening to light the nearest oil lamp. Oblivious to her ruffled dress and hair, she raced outside, saddled her father's horse, and bolted through the nearly deserted streets toward the castle.

The soldiers outside the massive portcullis recognized her as she rode up, quickly becoming alarmed at her expression and frenzied pace.

"My lady, are you well? Are you being pursued?" one of the soldiers asked, drawing free his sword.

She dismounted quickly, her damp, long blond hair making a wild fan through the air as she did so. "No. But I must speak with the king and queen immediately!"

The soldiers exchanged uncertain looks before one of them finally nodded and escorted her across the bridge and into the castle. Neither spoke as they made their way down the long, cool hallways, the lit braziers illuminating their path every few steps. Finally the soldier stopped outside the royal apartment, but paused and looked back at her before raising his hand to knock.

She nodded impatiently at him, her mind still in a frenzied daze. Betrothed to the heir or not, few would be bold enough to disturb their majesties at such an hour, but this could not wait until morning.

The soldier knocked loudly upon the heavy wooden door, and then visibly fought off a wince.

To their surprise, it was but a few moments before the door was pulled open by the king himself, swathed in a silky robe. His eyes were alert, making it clear that despite the late hour, he had not been resting. His gaze moved from the soldier to Avilla's disheveled appearance.

"Your majesty, I beg forgiveness for disturbing you at this hour, but I have important words for yourself and the queen," Avilla said hurriedly in response to his questioning look.

"Of course." He dismissed the soldier with a nod, then gestured Avilla inside to wait in the sitting room while he roused his wife.

She paced tensely as she waited, fighting to wade through the jumble of her thoughts.

Queen Numont stepped quickly through the doors while tying a robe about her night clothes, her eyes wide with alarm as she looked upon the young woman. “My dear, what has happened?”

Avilla took a breath. “My queen, I have dreamed!” she exclaimed.

Instantly the queen’s eyes filled with tears as a look of rapt joy spread over her face. “He has broken the silence!” she cried. “I knew that if we only held to our faith, He would return to guide us!”

King Numont looked shocked, smiling slightly as his wife clasped his hands in triumph. “Tell us, what has He shown to you?” he demanded, always one to get right to the point.

Avilla nearly shook with her relief and excitement. “I have seen Kaymin and Jian. They are safely in Wherry, and have made the treaty with King Mithwell!”

The queen cried out in her happiness and hurried forward to embrace Avilla, the tears now streaming down her pale cheeks. “Did I not tell you Gwilym?” she exclaimed, speaking over Avilla’s shoulder at her husband. “We kept belief alive, and He has returned and given us the very information that we have so been longing to hear!”

Relief was evident upon the king’s face, although it was clear that he was thinking more on the implications of what the God had shown to his future daughter-in-law rather than on the return of the God Himself. Finally he cleared his throat. “Truly glorious news, Avilla, and you acted rightly in coming to us immediately. But now you must excuse me, for this sheds new light on our situation, and I must speak with my wizard with all haste.”

“Of course, your majesty,” Avilla nodded, still smiling as she watched him go.

The queen finally pulled back, her face lit with radiant joy. “There is no more need to worry, Avilla,” she breathed. “Terek will take care of us now.”

### *Chapter Eleven*

Kaymin led the four assembled Chosen into the large Morvanian city of Sime, the last mark of civilization before they would reach the Morvay-Wherry border. He dismounted, then glanced behind him to observe Cheyne speaking quietly to Coedy from within the depths of her hooded cape. Jian was subtly scanning the busy marketplace.

“Speak to no one, and stay together,” Kaymin said with a meaningful look at Coedy. “Jian and I will handle getting the supplies.”

The boy stepped up before him. “Certainly. If I may borrow your cloak?”

The prince gazed down at him suspiciously. “Are you known here?” he asked, removing the gray cloak from his saddlebag and handing it over. He’d gotten the impression that Coedy hadn’t traveled through Morvay before, but one could rarely be certain of anything regarding the boy.

Coedy donned the proffered garment quickly and gave a slight shrug for a reply.

Kaymin sighed and moved away with Jian through the crowded streets, both of them baking in the late afternoon sunshine. Cheyne and Coedy trailed lazily along behind, Cheyne leading the horse they’d been sharing by the reins, and both appearing perfectly at ease with the stifling temperature. Kaymin and Jian paused at several booths that sold clothing, but soon discovered that they would find nothing heavy enough to be suitable for travel in Wherry’s frigid climate. Finally they settled on the warmest cloths they could find, hoping that it would be enough to sustain them until they reached the nearest

town or city to Wherry's mountainous border.

"Where's Coedy?" Kaymin demanded suddenly, turning and finding only Cheyne behind him.

She shrugged, glancing at him quickly before again lowering her head. Apparently she too wished to remain unidentified in this city. And by now he knew enough not to bother even asking her why—it seemed a game to her to avoid giving a straight answer. Furious, Kaymin finished paying for the clothing and led them on to collect some outrageously expensive food items. He kept a watchful eye on the passing crowds, but saw no sign of the boy. "Is he *trying* to get himself killed?" he muttered angrily to Jian. "He knows the dangers that surround us."

The wizard finished storing some of their new supplies into his saddlebags. "You try to cage a hawk, my prince, and forget that the hawk has talons."

Kaymin frowned. "Perhaps, but he *is* still just a boy. A boy that, like it or not, we are now responsible for."

Cheyne moved up beside them. "You worry too much," she told Kaymin. "Why don't you focus on something more productive, such as procuring for me my own horse? I believe our young friend is enjoying my close company somewhat more than I would like."

Kaymin shrugged. "I wouldn't be too concerned by it. He *is* fifteen, and simply lacking in options."

Jian snorted, although whether this was because he was amused by the conversation or just impatient to be on their way remained unknown.

"In any case," Cheyne went on, clearly trying to disguise her annoyance, "I would much appreciate not having to deal with it. *I want my own horse.*"

The prince raised his eyebrows. "I've never met a commoner with such an attitude," he commented mildly.

She glared in return. "Then you've not known many commoners from Morvay."

Jian glanced quickly about, looking to see that their raised voices had not drawn any attention. "Just get her the horse," he said.

"Fine." Kaymin made a few inquiries, and a short while later he handed a set of reins over to Cheyne.

She eyed the horse, a tall brown gelding, discerningly. "I suppose he'll do," she said.

The prince then did his best to ignore her by turning away, and again scanning the street. Their business now concluded, he wanted very much to leave, but Coedy was still nowhere to be seen. "Where is that fool boy?" he snapped, feeling his patience run thin.

"If you're referring to me, I'm right behind you."

Kaymin spun quickly and glowered. "Where have you been? I told you to stay with us."

Coedy merely squinted up at him.

"I hope you haven't gotten into any trouble," Kaymin went on, turning to mount his horse.

"No trouble," Coedy replied. He paused briefly as he wordlessly noted Cheyne's new mount, then silently took the reins of his own horse from her and pulled himself up.

They followed as Kaymin led them back through the city and out onto the road, heading due west. They'd remained close to the southern border since leaving the Maze of Madness, and the route had proven safe enough, taking them through very few towns and

past only a minimum of other travelers.

Ice ran into sight as Sime fell away behind them, taking up his usual post of loping alongside Jian's horse.

Suddenly Kaymin heard the telltale sound of metal being unsheathed behind him, and he turned quickly to see Cheyne holding up a short sword, seemingly with inspection. "Where did you get that?" he demanded.

She lowered it and slid it back into its sheath. "You really are thick, aren't you?" she said by way of an answer.

He looked to Coedy, who was busy removing the gray cloak from about him, before glaring back at Cheyne. "Did he steal that for you?"

"Yes," she replied, looking annoyed with his questions. "I lost all of my weapons and coin in the maze. You can't expect me to go wandering about in another country unarmed, can you?" She frowned at him in what he considered a rather insulting manner.

Kaymin shot an incredulous look at Jian before slowing his horse to drop back beside her. "First of all," he started, "I hardly favor the idea of you having a weapon at all, *particularly* while in another country. And secondly, I don't appreciate you further corrupting the boy for your own selfish purposes."

"I would hardly consider the desire to defend my life selfish," she retorted, "for I can scarcely believe that you and your wizard would offer me much in the way of protection if the need arose."

Coedy chose that moment to casually toss the cloak back to Kaymin. "Thanks," he said.

The prince caught it distractedly before again addressing Cheyne. "Don't be ridiculous," he snapped at her. "There are no alliances or enemies among us. I would like to think that we are above such things. We are the only ones who know the truth, and—"

"Not the only ones," Jian broke in, looking ahead and bringing his horse to a sudden stop.

Kaymin paused and followed the wizard's gaze. He could barely make out on the horizon the foggy strip that was the border into Wherry. More clearly, however, was a band of about thirty men suddenly riding toward them, weapons out and raised.

On the ground, Ice growled, the fur on his back rising threateningly.

"Those are not Morvanian soldiers," Cheyne said, eyes straight ahead.

"Then it leaves little doubt that they are Kauric's men," Jian confirmed with a nod, stepping gracefully down from his horse.

"You two stay back," Kaymin said to Cheyne and Coedy as he moved to join the wizard.

"I think not," Cheyne replied. She slid down from her horse and swung her new short sword expertly while giving the prince a pointed look. "It appears as though my newly acquired weapon just might be coming in handy already."

With no time to argue, Kaymin didn't reply and instead pulled free his own sword, hidden beneath his saddle-pack; the Dargasian craftsmanship of the weapon would not have gone unnoticed in Sime. "Jian," he said.

The wizard breathed deeply and closed his eyes, lines of deep concentration quickly lining his face. The prince raised his eyes to the men bearing down on them, now close enough for him to read their expressions. "Jian," he said again, more urgently. Like

most Wherrites, his wizard had a deep love for the dramatic.

Jian opened his eyes as a large ball of energy formed before him, white and pulsing. His hands rose to surround it, and he moved rapidly to direct the force, shooting it down onto the road twenty or so paces before them.

Soil and gravel flew as the ground itself ruptured. Caught in the explosion of earth, several enemy horses screamed as they fell, either throwing their riders or crushing them beneath their weight as they pitched forward. Dust filled the air, and Kaymin coughed as he squinted to see through it. Several of the men, though now mostly on foot, still raced to meet them. “Don’t kill them all,” he said, readying himself. “I have a few questions I’d like answered.”

Jian nodded, his hands still sparking with energy.

The men broke through the dust. Kaymin moved quickly to engage the first, his heavy, two-handed sword quickly cutting through the attacker. Jian moved forward with him, his hands alive with sparks of white lightning or balls of energy that shot out at any who came too near. The prince could not help but observe the men as he fought. Their clothing varied from shabbily dressed peasants to those of noble standing, showing that Kauric was not at all discriminating in those whom He allowed to follow Him.

Kaymin parried quickly, barely avoiding a wildly accurate blow aimed at his face. He shifted to regain his balance, preparing for a returning slash, when his opponent suddenly dropped his sword to clutch at the small blade of steel sticking from his neck.

*Coedy*, the prince realized, pivoting quickly to find another attacker. But his hands quickly relaxed around his sword; already things appeared under control. Jian had just finished off the last of the enemy still on horseback, and numerous other bodies littered the ground, most either singed or sporting thin blades in their throats. One man had had the misfortune of being pulled down by Ice, and now had a gaping wound in his neck and a deep spill of blood pooling in a widening arc all around him.

Coedy stepped up beside Kaymin, and together they watched as Cheyne thrust her short sword into the belly of the man before her. Unnerved, Kaymin turned away. He’d never seen a woman fight before, and the sight of it simply did not sit well with him.

“Are there any left alive?” he called out to Jian.

The wizard paused and leaned down over one of the fallen attackers. “Yes. I merely stunned this one.”

Kaymin hurried over, dropping his bloodied sword, and roughly pulled the man to his knees.

The attacker grunted in pain, and his body twitched with spasms as he raised hard and glaring eyes to Kaymin and Jian. His clothing was rumpled but unbloodied, the finery of a nobleman.

“We know in whose name you attack us,” Jian began coolly, ever the picture of unruffled calm. “How does He communicate with you?”

The man said nothing, but continued to glare.

Cheyne moved up behind the man and stood facing his back. “You will have to torture him if you’re expecting to gain any information,” she said. “And we Morvansians are not a people who are broken easily.” She raised her sword and stepped closer to the hostage, digging the edge of the blade into his back.

Kaymin looked uncertainly at Jian before nodding slightly to her. He was very uncomfortable with the idea of torture—in Dargis, only few crimes were considered

appalling enough to warrant it—but he felt they had little choice.

Smiling slightly, Cheyne applied pressure and dragged the steel down the man's back, watching with obvious pleasure as blood quickly spread over his shirt. "Answer the wizard's question," she demanded. Obviously, such an insignificant wound was meant to announce that she was simply only readying herself to truly begin.

The man did not call out, did not even grimace. He said nothing.

She reached out for his wrist to hold it steady, meeting no resistance from the captive, and, swinging her sword with ease into a high arc, she cut off the two outside fingers of his left hand.

Kaymin frowned and gestured for Coedy to step away, not surprised at all when the boy ignored him completely and continued watching impassively.

Next Cheyne severed the entire hand, and then the man finally cried out.

"Answer the wizard!" she said again.

To her obvious fury, he managed a slight chuckle. "I never knew you had it in you to be so brutal," he gasped. "Although I suppose it shouldn't come as much of a surprise, considering."

Her lips tightened and she struck him on the back of his head with her fist.

"You know this man?" Kaymin asked her, startled.

"Unfortunately," she said. "At least well enough to know that he is both a pervert and a fool." She brought the sword down again, severing his other hand. "You know I won't let you live," she said, leaning close to his ear even as he screamed again. "But the wizard can keep you alive for a very long time."

The man sputtered, his face white and filled with torment. "He speaks to our general, in dreams," he mumbled, sweat drenching his forehead.

"What is your general's name?" Cheyne followed quickly.

"One you will never hear from my lips," he managed. He went on before she could strike him again. "But know this; soon we shall be legion. And then, there will be nowhere on Trivallyn you can hide from us." He moved his head awkwardly, even as his lifeblood continued to pour from his wrists, and looked up at the prince. "We have already brought about the invasion of your country." He laughed as Kaymin's eyes widened. "The fighting has begun, and I would not look to lay any bets upon your homelands, your highness."

Without pause or thought, Kaymin reached beneath his shirt and drew the small hatchet at his belt, a weapon carried by many men of his country. With a flick of his wrist, he threw it straight into the man's chest.

Cheyne watched as the attacker fell over, dead. "I wanted to kill him!" she burst out with a furious glare at the prince.

Jian shot her a warning look.

"Do you think he lied, Jian?" Kaymin asked, his wide brown eyes staring down at the body before him.

"It is likely. Failing in his mission to kill us, he may have simply been attempting to rile us up as a last effort." He eyed the bloody heap on the ground. "And now we know how loyal Kauric's followers truly are."

Kaymin was silent for another long moment. "All right, search the bodies," he ordered. "Hopefully we will find something useful."

Cheyne moved away, still grumbling angrily to herself. Coedy, as expected, threw



himself into the task with the most zeal, although even he found nothing of value but for a few coins.

Kaymin finally gave up and sat back with frustration. “I must get word to my parents that there are traitors in their midst.”

Jian paused beside him. “Is that not outside the rules? You said yourself that Terek has forbid us to speak of this to anyone.”

“I do not need to tell them any details, or that it has anything at all to do with the Gods,” Kaymin retorted. “But I cannot let this pass without at least warning them. Especially if he spoke the truth.” He gestured to the bloodied corpse of the man Cheyne had tortured.

“I understand,” the wizard nodded. “We can hire a messenger at the first city we come across.”

The prince leaned over and pulled free the hatchet still deeply embedded in the dead man’s chest. “Do you not feel the impossibility of this task?” he then asked quietly, so that Cheyne and Coedy would not overhear. “We will be but six people—how can we possibly think to win this?”

Jian pondered quietly for a moment, his lean features pensive. “For whatever reason, we have been Chosen to try, and so that is what we will do. As your God Himself proclaimed, there are no guarantees.”

Kaymin nodded and got to his feet. “We should still be able to reach Wherry before nightfall. Let’s continue on.”

## *Chapter Twelve*

Jian stepped out of the border-mist and into the icy winds of his homeland with a sigh of contentment on his lips. It had been eight long years since he’d last beheld his native country, and, despite the unfavorable events which had led to his departure, he had missed it greatly.

Ice tumbled through the boundary and recognized his home instantly, giving a joyous bark as he leapt giddily into the deep, white snow. Despite the freezing temperatures, both Jian and Kaymin had agreed that, in the interest of safety, it would be best to cross into Wherry before bedding down for the night. Morvay had proven its dangers, and the wizard was not at all unhappy to bid the country a hasty farewell. Clearly, the same could be said for his familiar.

Waiting for the others to emerge, the wizard turned, his eyes squinting into the sharp wind as he allowed himself a long, appreciative look at his native lands. They’d crossed over into the Noventian Mountain ranges, towering caps of snowy majesty that rose both glorious and threatening to the north, west, and south. Unsurprisingly, thick snow fell from the darkened night sky, intermingled with small pellets of ice that stung at his exposed skin. The air was cold, sharp and clean, and the wizard breathed it in greedily, suddenly overwhelmed by how much he had missed it. Eight years had been far too long to be away.

A surprised shriek startled him out of his euphoria then, and he looked back to see Cheyne staring about her in horror, her arms wrapped about her shivering form. “It’s freezing,” she chattered.

Jian, not yet cold in the slightest, removed one of his cloaks and tossed it to her silently. He grimly suspected that she was going to do nothing but complain over the temperature until they had released Gauvin and were granted leave to depart Wherry. Given her heritage—and attitude—he felt forebodingly confident in this expectation.

She wrapped his cloak about herself hurriedly while keeping her alarmed eyes focused upon the towering mountains all around them. “I can hardly believe civilization actually exists here. Even the Evil Gods do not punish their own by making them live under such conditions!” Her eyes suddenly widened even more as she caught sight of her breath streaming out in a fog before her. “Why am I smoking?” she demanded, sounding panicked.

Jian, amused by her reaction to his native country, smiled with indulgence. “Your body is warmer than the air, as is the breath you exhale, which is why it becomes visible to your eyes.”

She looked horrified and began trying to pick the flakes of snow out of her long, wavy brown hair. “Nonsense,” she muttered.

Kaymin and Coedy came through the border-mist together, both leading their mounts by the reins. The prince stared around him wonderingly for a long moment before nodding to his wizard. “It is truly beautiful,” he told him.

“Beautiful?” Cheyne repeated, teeth chattering audibly. “Are you forgetting that we have to somehow pass *over* those monstrous heaps of snow?” She continued to eye the mountains with utter dread. They were a structure found often enough within her own lands of Morvay, but those there were hardly more than rounded hills in comparison to what lay about them now.

“There are trails through the mountain passes,” Jian said calmly.

“My feet hurt!” she went on, her face pale within her numerous cloaks. “Except for my toes, which I can no longer feel at all!”

“You must move about. It will help to keep you warm,” the wizard told her, holding back a resigned sigh. “We shall get you some warmer clothing as soon as we reach a town.” He looked to see how Coedy, a native of the hot and humid lands of Pellarin, was faring. The boy had clutched his cloak more tightly about him but appeared to be coping well enough, his typical nonchalant expression firmly in place over his features.

Kaymin eyed the night sky, his cheeks already reddened from the wind and ice, giving him a ruddy look. “I think it best that we find shelter quickly.”

Jian turned and mounted his horse. “Ice has already found a cave that should be suitable. It is not far.” He watched as the others followed suit, and as Cheyne gave a last, forlorn look back at the misty border. He half-expected her to bolt back through it, and he held his magic ready to prevent her from doing so if she tried, but she surprised him by obligingly turning her horse to follow after them. Actually, the sole surety he felt with her was her commitment to their task—and so far, it was proving to be enough.

The cave Ice led them to was a gaping hole in the side of a nearby mountain, and it turned out to be more than adequate in size as it was large enough for even the horses to enter. Cheyne nearly fell off her mount in her haste to start a fire, and then sat nearly on top of it once she had it roaring into a hearty blaze. She peered out from within her hood with a miserable glare.

After gathering enough firewood to see them through the night, they ate a quick meal before stretching out before the fire, swathed in blankets and cloaks. Jian watched as the

others drifted off to sleep, one by one. Not feeling at all tired himself, he finally moved to the mouth of the cave and stood, staring out at the night. Snow and ice still swirled down in the heavy winds, and the dark clouds above were thick and gray, obscuring most of the sky. They parted occasionally to show the half-full blue moon, its faint glow alighting on the crystallized branches of the numerous pine trees surrounding the cave. He stood silently for a long while, just watching the nature around him, until his thoughts inevitably slid into darkness. There was much he'd concluded the past few days that he had opted to not yet share with Kaymin, for fear of his prince's reactions.

For one, the words spoken by the man they'd tortured concerning Dargis and Corrado proved extremely vexing to the wizard. Despite his claim at the time, Jian had instantly suspected the claims of battle to be true for the simple reason that it would be too easy to prove them otherwise. If war between the two countries had indeed begun, word would surely be on everyone's lips before long, no matter which country they resided in. Which led him to his next conclusion.

Cheyne claimed that her knowledge of Corrado's alliance with Morvay had come to her in a vision, which troubled him for different reasons, but if she was in fact correct, it meant that Dargis was under attack from not only Corrado, but would likely soon be from Morvay as well. With his own adversary otherwise occupied, it would now be uncertain if King Judson Mithwell of Wherry would find any reason at all to link with Dargis, something that King Numont would assuredly be counting on. Truly, Jian was baffled as to why Kaymin's father would even have engaged in the fighting before receiving word that this alliance had been made, but finally he was left with the conclusion that the king simply must have had no other choice, possibly needing to defend from a full attack by Corrado. But without Wherry's help, Dargis would not last long against the might of both Corrado and Morvay.

The wizard paused in his thinking and looked back into the cave, his gaze settling briefly upon Cheyne, who appeared as but a lump under her numerous blankets. A seer of the current times—it should have been an impossibility.

He turned back to face the night, troubled. He had pondered over this greatly since leaving the Maze of Madness in Morvay, and was fairly horrified by the only logical explanation that he could come up with to at least partially explain her ability. The Father God, Kauric, must be responsible for sending her the visions, although why He would do so the wizard could not yet begin to fathom. But this could not explain everything, such as why these visions had led Cheyne into the maze to find Yanoka's shard in the first place. But if Yanoka really was the one sending the visions, why had She not sent Cheyne there years earlier to free Her?

None of it made any sense, and until he could get a definite answer, hopefully from the Gods themselves, he would speak of it to no one, especially Cheyne. She already appeared extremely unstable, not to mention incredibly defensive when it came to talk of her visions, and he saw no reason to further distress her. Besides, he would have to discover more of the content of her visions before he could be sure about anything.

The wizard spent a brief moment locating Ice, who was a short distance to the north and on the hunt after a large deer, before turning back into the cave. He threw several more large branches onto the fire before settling down and falling into an uneasy sleep.

His eyes opened groggily a short while later and he looked about blearily, unsure of what had awakened him. He grew suddenly alert. "What are you doing?" he hissed.

Cheyne looked up innocently from worming her way into his blanket while dragging her own along with her. “Trying to get warm,” she replied, flopping down next to him and pulling the blankets around them like a shroud.

Jian stared at her, completely off balance, and shot a quick look over at Kaymin and Coedy, who both looked to be sleeping soundly. “I don’t think . . . .”

She frowned at him. “Oh, relax. I’m only here for your body heat, and seeing as you’re the native here, I’m guessing that you have the most of it.” Seeing his obvious unease, she grinned teasingly. “Unless, of course, I’m making you uncomfortable.”

As she pressed closer against him, he could feel the iciness of her flesh. “All right, you can stay. But to sleep only.” Still muddled, he had no idea what sort of expression was on his face; and the rumors he’d heard concerning the certain talents of Morvian women definitely wasn’t helping matters.

She gave a mock sigh, but smiled. “If you insist. But it’s hardly gentlemanly of you to just let me freeze while there’s such a convenient alternative.”

“*Cheyne.*” Morvian or not, she couldn’t possibly be serious. Likely she was readying herself to stick a knife in his ribs if he so much as looked tempted.

She laughed softly. “All right. Sleep only.”

He relaxed slightly, hoping his bewilderment was well concealed, as she buried her face into his chest and closed her eyes. Finally it occurred to him that this could be just the opportunity he’d been waiting for. “Might I ask you something?” he spoke up quietly.

“So long as you don’t move,” came her muffled reply. “You’re incredibly warm. Amazing, really.”

“I’m glad to see you’ve found a use for me. Will you tell me about your visions?” He heard her sigh against him before she turned slowly onto her back to meet his gaze.

“What about them?”

“What sorts of things have you seen?”

Her blue eyes turned hard. “I know why you ask me this. I’ve been thinking on it since we spoke to Terek at the maze, when you mentioned that Kauric is sending dreams to people. You think the Father God is sending my visions too, don’t you?”

He spoke carefully. “I think it’s a possibility, which is why I need to know the things you have seen.” This was not the discussion that he’d wanted to have with her, but apparently he had underestimated her in the fact that she would figure this out on her own—leaving him little choice now but to fully address his concerns.

“You’re wrong,” she said sharply. “For why would Kauric have sent me into the maze? He certainly didn’t want Yanoka freed.”

Her defensiveness caused him to choose his next words with even more caution. “I don’t have an answer to that, and I agree that it seems highly unlikely that He would have had any reason to do so. But please, tell me some of your other visions.”

She paused, eyeing him indecisively for a moment. “As I’ve told you, I was shown the official treaty of Morvay and Corrado,” she began haltingly.

“How were you shown this? What exactly did you see?”

“I saw the message of acceptance bearing King Rivenor’s signature.”

“Only that?”

“Yes.”

“Can you relay it back to me?”

“Of course. Anything that I see in a vision is forever fixed in my memory.”

Jian actually knew quite a lot about seers, this fact included. Indeed, so far everything she'd revealed matched what he already knew of her kind. "Then, if you would?"

She spoke as though reading from a piece of parchment before her; even her eyes moved back and forth, an eerie sight to behold. "Firstly, I wish to express my gratitude for your consideration of Corrado at this time. I would further like to relay my own thoughts and concerns regarding Morvay and the recent injustices your country has suffered. I therefore readily accept your generous offer of alliance between our two great countries, and await any further suggestions you may have in the interest of preserving that which has been threatened." She finished and looked back at the wizard. "It is then signed, rather messily I might add, by King Zane Rivenor of Corrado."

Jian replayed the words over in his head, trying to figure their validity. As far as he could discern, the message could just as easily be Kauric's as it could be King Rivenor's. There was no way to be certain.

"So, what do you think?" The fleeting flash of vulnerability in her eyes surprised him.

"Tell me more," he said, not wanting to offer his opinion just yet.

She frowned at him, looking more worried than annoyed. "When I was twelve I had a vision of my brother getting thrown from a horse and striking his head on a rock, killing him. Thankfully I was shown this in time to prevent it from coming to pass." She thought. "More recently I have seen the coming of the earthquakes, but never in time to give enough warning to evacuate the cities that were destroyed." She was clearly uncomfortable to be relaying these things, making it obvious that speaking about her visions was not something that she did often, although whether that was the result of a lack of encouragement over the years, or more simply her own choice not to do so, remained a mystery.

"Do you require anything further?" she asked, again beginning to sound snappish.

He shook his head, distracted. "Considering what you have told me, I do not believe that Kauric is responsible for your visions." Relief shone in her eyes, and he smiled slightly, wishing his blunt nature wouldn't force him to continue. "But it still seems unlikely that Yanoka was able to send them while She was imprisoned. It is something that we will have to ask Her, if we are given the opportunity to do so," he finished.

Cheyne stared at him before nodding slowly. "Or perhaps we are not meant to know," she said.

He opened his mouth to respond, then decided against it. Faced with impending insanity, it was doubtful that she would care much at all about certain particulars, and he could hardly blame her. It would not be unlike knowing the day that you were to die; certainly not an easy thing to live with.

"Tell me more of your family," he said, hoping to distract her from her suddenly somber mood, and really rather curious to gain some hint as to her background.

"Why?" she responded sharply.

The wizard blinked at her flaring defenses. Was no subject safe with her? His curiosity, however, got the better of him, and he decided to push her on it. "I was merely curious. You mentioned that you have a brother?"

Her blue gaze narrowed at him. "Yes, and a mother and father. What of it?"

Against the warning his instincts were giving him, he made a last effort. "It is only that we know so little about you." He stopped abruptly at her sudden and very obvious ploy at distraction. "Cheyne, your hand."

She ignored the last. “You can hardly claim to know much about Coedy either, but I fail to see you pestering *him* about it.”

“Please stop doing that. And Coedy is not a seer.”

“I thought we weren’t talking about that anymore.”

“Then go to sleep. Please.”

“I am becoming quite unconvinced that that’s what you truly want.”

“All right, you’ve distracted me. You win. Now please, go to sleep.”

Although his temptation was rather obvious to them both, he saw no benefit—besides the obvious, of course—in taking her up on her offer. And that was if she was even serious, a question that was highly debatable and one that could still possibly get him knifed. But besides that, something was forcing him to acknowledge the feeling that she belonged to someone, and whoever that man was, it was not him. “I’m certain,” he finally managed.

She laughed quietly at his obvious discomfort and shifted to huddle back into his chest, falling asleep in moments.

Jian, however, found very little rest that night.

### *Chapter Thirteen*

“The wizards traveling from Crysmir have arrived, your majesty.”

King Judson Mithwell looked up from his breakfast plate. “Show them to the receiving room,” he ordered, “and summon Caddigan and Captain Lyndon there as well.”

The servant bowed and left the dining room silently.

King Mithwell quickly finished his breakfast, enjoying the peace and quiet while he still could, before turning to his son, Jostin. At twenty-three, and born fifth in the line of his eight children, Jostin was the sole male, and therefore the king’s hesitant but only choice for an heir.

“The wizards have proven clueless as to the origins of the ice storms, but perhaps they have discovered something regarding these sudden avalanches,” Judson said, getting to his feet and smoothing his long, white and blue cloaks about him. Seven towns and villages had already been destroyed in barely more than a month, and if the wizards had no answer to give him, he would have no choice but to evacuate all the mountainous regions of Wherry which housed civilization. Which was more than half of the country’s population.

Jostin pushed away his plate, his sapphire blue eyes flashing. “I trust that Crysmir itself has been able to defend against them,” he said, following as his father left the room and started down the long corridor.

“Of course,” Judson replied. “The Crystal City appears to be the primary target for the majority of the avalanches. This cannot be coincidence.” The king stopped outside the doors of the receiving room and entered, pleased to note that everyone had already assembled. He made his way to the long, polished blue-veined white marble table and took his seat at its head. “Welcome,” he said with a nod. “You may be seated.”

Jostin took the seat to the king’s right, and Judson’s aged and royal wizard, Caddigan, to his left. The captain of Wherry’s royal guard, Broda Lyndon, sat next to the prince.

The three wizards from Crysmir bowed slowly to the king before taking their seats.

“Many thanks to his majesty for seeing us so quickly,” the man in the center said, his plain, sallow face still tainted a bright red from the intensity of the outside cold. “I am called Loewen, and this is Grady and Clail,” he introduced.

The king nodded, his eyes flicking curiously to Clail for a brief moment before he gestured at a servant to bring them refreshments. “What have you learned of these avalanches?” he questioned, getting straight to the point. The events of late had reduced his patience to almost nothing, and his frustration over their lack of information had caused him to become edgy and ill-tempered. He sipped at his non-watered, heated wine.

The wizard Grady stood slightly to answer, his large, meaty face worried beneath his long black beard and mustache. “We at Crysmir have discovered a mystical energy that precedes the coming of the avalanches,” he reported.

Judson exchanged a grim look with his royal wizard, Caddigan. This had been one of the many possibilities they had discussed, although by far the least favorable. “It is the sorceresses of Gaal, then, who are responsible?” he asked for confirmation.

“Yes, your majesty.” Grady bowed again before reseating himself.

“If you know the cause of these avalanches, why can you not prevent them?” Judson demanded, his mind racing furiously. A magical war? Unthinkable.

“We have been able to thwart the attacks made on Crysmir itself because we knew to expect them,” Loewen answered. “We can not possibly make barriers for each and every city. I’m afraid that our only way to protect every city, town and village would be to . . . pursue the source.”

“But why are the sorceresses doing this?” Jostin snarled, looking as though he too was reeling from the implications of the wizard’s words. “What is it that they want from us?”

“We do not know,” Grady said.

“I would wish to advise the king at this time,” Caddigan then interjected quickly, “to make contact with Queen Jephtha Pavula. Perhaps we can sort this out reasonably. I fear that the results of a battle between Wherry and Gaal would be devastating.”

King Mithwell nodded. “I agree, Caddigan. I will send word to her as soon as we finish here. Certainly there has been some sort of misunderstanding.” Without explanation, all recent shipments from Gaal had failed to arrive, and at first he’d assumed this had something to do with the deadly plague reported to be ravaging the natives there, even though he’d yet to receive any word of explanation from Queen Pavula. Gaal provided more than half of Wherry’s imported food supplies.

“Misunderstanding?” the prince repeated incredulously. “Father, hundreds if not thousands of our people have been lost to these avalanches. Surely we cannot just let this go on unpunished!”

Judson turned to regard his son. “And so you would wish to invite even more bloodshed, without first learning all of the facts?” He frowned. “War is to be a last resort, not a reckless, vengeful action, my son. Justice will be met, but not by moving blindly.”

Jostin looked away furiously, his eyes sparking at the chastisement.

The king turned to his captain. “Have you any further word on the rumors of war between Dargis and Corrado?”

Captain Lyndon nodded. “The rumors have been confirmed. The fighting has begun in the border cities, and it appears as though Morvay will soon be moving to attack Dargis

as well.”

Judson pursed his lips together pensively. It seemed the rumors ferreted out by his spies in Morvay were correct; the stony country had linked with Corrado.

“Better them than us,” Jostin then muttered, again drawing his father’s angry eye.

“Is it so easy for you to wish harm on others?” the king demanded harshly. “Clearly King Numont will not be able to hold off the might of both Corrado *and* Morvay. Left alone, he will surely lose his kingdom.” A part of him could scarce believe the words passing through his own lips. With the exception of Pellarin, and in the days prior to Adera’s Rage of course, every country had known civil war at one time or another; but for the countries themselves to actually cross weapons—it was a horror rarely even imagined. They all depended on their trades far too much for it to have ever been considered. Until now.

“And where do you think Morvay and Corrado will turn to next, father?” Jostin returned, obviously struggling for calm. “There has been talk of Morvay attacking us for some time, and now that they’ve linked with Corrado, it leaves little doubt that they will next turn their sights upon us once they have finished with Dargis!”

The king’s eyes narrowed. “Then what would you suggest?” he asked coldly.

“Attack Morvay once they’ve sent their forces off to aid Corrado. All of their might will be directed elsewhere, and King Almara would never expect such a bold move from us.”

Judson stared silently at his son. He knew his expression was unreadable, but his mind thundered at these words. His son was surely correct in one regard—no one would ever suspect the Wherrites of such a sly action.

Caddigan cleared his throat, tactfully drawing everyone’s eye. “Despite the harshness of his words, your majesty, I fear the prince has a point. If Corrado and Morvay are left to take over Dargis, they likely *will* turn on us next. And with the uncertainty regarding Gaal at this time, we could then find ourselves in a war against all three countries.” He paused, giving his bulbous nose a pensive scratch. “I do not need to tell you that we would not last long against such an onslaught, even with the power of Crysmir behind us.”

“No, you most certainly do not,” Judson replied quietly. He looked at the visiting wizards. “As the representatives of Crysmir, what would you advise?”

The three wizards exchanged several looks and brief whispers before Clail, the youngest of the three by far, finally rose to reply. “Your majesty, we speak for both the Wizard’s Panel and all of Crysmir when we say that we are ready and willing to carry out any actions that you deem necessary. However, it would be our collective advice to agree with the words of the prince. Once Morvay has been eliminated as a threat, we need only to worry about Gaal, and only if and when it becomes necessary for us to do so.”

The king considered silently for a long while. Conquering an unarmed Morvay should not be difficult, particularly with the might of Crysmir added to his royal army. It could be done peacefully, with a minimum of bloodshed. It was a logical, reasonable course of action, which would likely prove Wherry’s best chance for survival; it also was a horrifying concept, but one the king found himself leaning toward taking. There was no other real choice.

“Very well,” Judson finally replied heavily, turning to his captain. “Once word has



been confirmed that Morvay's forces have moved into Dargis, we shall march against them."

Captain Lyndon nodded.

"The royal city of Rowe will be the initial target. Once that has been taken, the rest should fall quickly," Judson continued. He looked back at the wizards. "Ensure Crysmir is prepared," he said.

Grady rose and bowed deeply. "We will send for a dragon to return to the Crystal City immediately."

"Good," Judson nodded. "I will send further instructions as the time draws nearer." He dismissed them with a wave. The three wizards bowed and exited through the set of heavy doors. Judson watched them go silently, making no move to rise. Of all the wizards in Crysmir, it was interesting to note that the young man, Clail, had been among the Panel's three representatives. Only the presence of the wizard Jian would have surprised him more, but *that* one was in Dargis, carrying out his royal duties. And for certain he would not dare show his face anywhere near to the palace of House Mithwell. The king glanced over at his son, seeing that Jostin too was watching the wizards' departure interestedly. Clail's was a name the prince had every reason to recognize as well, although the two had never before met.

Judson then gave himself a quick mental shake. There were certainly more pressing matters to think on at this moment than the unpleasant business of the past. He turned to the captain of his royal guard. "It is my wish that Rowe be taken as peacefully as possible," he said.

Broda Lyndon considered, then looked to the wizard Caddigan. "It is a long march across Morvay to its royal city. Can your kind cloak our movements?"

The royal wizard nodded slowly. "It will take great strength and great numbers, but yes. It can be done."

If the Wherrite army failed to show themselves until they actually reached Morvay's royal city, King Almara would have no warning to offer any kind of defense, including readying the city for a siege, not that that would do him much good when standing against magic-users. Surrendering was not in the Morvanian nature, but this would give them little choice, the Wherrite king decided. Of course, this still left the question of what to do with Rowe once it was in his control.

"Father, I wish to lead," Jostin said suddenly.

Judson considered. His son had every right to request this position, and their plans held only minimal danger; the Morvansians would be all but defenseless, their royal army sent off to aid Corrado, and with those remaining completely sightless to the threat bearing down on them from the west. However, if accident or miscalculation did result in his son's death, Wherry itself would be left without an heir. His three eldest daughters were all married but, oddly, none had yet produced a single male child—or female either, for that matter—and the king himself, now in his sixty-eighth year, doubted he would be producing any more either. Leaving Wherry without an heir would make everyone nervous. But he supposed certain measures could be taken.

"Very well, Jostin," he finally replied with a tight nod. "You may lead the royal army into Morvay." His son was far too hot-tempered, a rare trait in any Wherrite, but the captain would be along to harness him. It was a trait Judson hoped very much that his son would grow out of. "You may leave us, now," he continued.

The prince's look of triumph faded quickly at the dismissal, but he could do nothing but rise, bow his respect, and leave the room, although he did slam the door loudly behind him on his way out.

The king took the last swallow of his wine, which was no longer warm. "I would feel much more secure in this decision," he began slowly, delicately setting down his empty, silver-worked goblet, "if another Mithwell heir was to be produced." He gaze flickered to his captain, who lowered his eyes. The king had bestowed upon Broda Lyndon the princess of his choice, his second-born, Antanya, and had made no secret of his displeasure at their continuing childlessness. Of the three matches he had made thus far, he determined that a child of Broda and Antanya would show the most promise; a child that would undoubtedly follow in Broda's footsteps and one day take over his duties as captain, if Jostin did not fall to sickness or injury. For then, the child would instead become king.

The captain now looked to be choosing his response very carefully, which was wise, for any claims of supposed infertility—either his or Antanya's—could be dangerous. This was a country known for its generous population, and infertility was indeed a rare—and reviled—affliction among the Wherrites.

Judson waited until Broda finally opened his mouth before speaking up and cutting the captain off. "I fear that, under these newly-developed circumstances, we have little choice left but to do what we must. For the sake of all of Wherry." He looked then to his wizard, who stared back at him for a long moment before giving a slow nod.

"I will need four days to gather what I need and brew it as required," Caddigan said, his voice sounding just slightly more raspy than usual.

The king turned his eyes back to his captain, looking for any signs of objection; as expected, however, he saw none.

"Though of course," Caddigan suddenly added, "there is no guarantee that the child will be male."

This was unfortunate, but the risk would have to be taken. And it would not be the only risk. The potion his wizard was to brew, after being secretly administered into Antanya's food or drink, would leave almost no doubt of conception. But it would also be her only child; pregnancies brought about by this method often caused death to the mother during the birthing, and if she did happen to survive, she would be rendered barren. The wizards could not explain why it worked in this manner, with very few even admitting to knowledge of this potion. But Caddigan would do as he was asked; as Judson's royal wizard, he was sworn to obey any command given by his king, and no doubt he saw that it was also in the best interests of Wherry for him to do so. A thousand prayers to the silent Gauvin that Antanya would survive the birth, but they were out of time and the chance had to be taken.

The wizard pushed his aged body up from his seat. "With your permission, my king, I shall withdraw and begin seeing to . . . your request."

Judson nodded once and waited for the wizard to depart. After, he turned back to his captain, still searching for signs of weakness and finding none. The king was well aware of the fact that sending his only son off under the protection of the man who could well be expecting to father the next Mithwell heir presented its own dangers, but he trusted to Broda's loyalty. He gave the man a firm nod.

Yes, most certainly well worth the risk.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Kaymin felt slight relief as he watched the messenger he'd hired ride out of the small Wherrite village of Sirot, headed for the royal city of Vasos in Dargis, his home. The prince had had a terrible time locating someone who had been willing to ride into what was now confirmed as a country engaged in battle, and the named price for doing so had been outrageous. But Kaymin had paid the requested fare, reasoning that although he may be too late to do anything to prevent the invasion by Corrado, at least he could warn his parents of the traitors in their lands.

The prince pulled his thick black cloak more tightly around him and moved through the frigid wind and icy pellets of hail that gusted down at him as he made his way toward the inn where the rest of his companions waited. The streets were black with the absence of the blue moon's light, and he felt numb from his head to his feet as he shuffled forward into the full force of the driving winds. When he finally stepped through the inn's doorway, he paused briefly to appreciate the warmth that rolled over him before moving farther into the large common room.

"It is done," he said, removing his cloak and shaking the wetness from it before dropping down onto the vacant seat next to Jian. The chair was old, its wood starting to splinter with age, and it creaked loudly as he settled his weight upon it.

The wizard nodded, swallowing a bite of his dinner. "Did you tell of our location?"

"I relayed that we are currently in Wherry, but made no mention on the status of the treaty," Kaymin replied, pained. "Although I'm sure they must assume that we've met with King Mithwell by now. How many more days until we reach Dorcey?"

"It had better not be many," Cheyne grumbled from the other side of the table, still wrapped tightly within her numerous cloaks despite her close proximity to the fire.

Jian glanced at her. "Three or four, depending on the conditions. Although another avalanche like the one we nearly encountered firsthand this morning could very possibly delay us for quite some time."

She frowned. "I truly don't think that I can handle much more of this climate. How far from Dorcey is it to Crysmir, Jian?"

The wizard glanced about to make sure no one was within earshot, but, even after seeing no one suspicious, he still looked hesitant to answer the question, obviously fearing an explosive response. Which was exactly what he would receive, Kaymin knew. Crysmir was nearly as far from Dorcey as possible without stepping outside the country. He wasn't overly fond of the cold here himself, but Cheyne did nothing but complain about it day and night. Even Coedy seemed to be growing exasperated with her.

"Regarding Crysmir, Jian," the prince spoke up, saving his wizard from having to respond, "have you any idea of where to look for the shard once we arrive there?"

"No, but I have a few thoughts on where to begin gaining clues." The wizard paused. "There is another problem, however. Besides members of the Mithwell royal line, admittance into Crysmir is disallowed to anyone but wizards."

"But you're all men!" Cheyne burst out disbelievingly. "It must be a very . . . lonely place."

Kaymin watched with interest as Jian shifted slightly. It had been rather surprising

when the prince had awoken on their first morning in Wherry to find Cheyne slumbering in the wizard's arms, but despite Jian's denials that anything interesting had happened, the prince still wondered.

"Crysmir is a city devoted entirely to the learning of magic," Jian explained slowly. "It is for this reason that no . . . distractions . . . are permitted within it."

"So what you're saying is that all wizards are expected to be celibate?" Cheyne went on, her eyes wide with incredulity.

"No," Jian said, clearly not enjoying the topic. "Wizards are of course free to marry, although few do; they simply cannot live within Crysmir's walls with their wives if they do choose to enter into that holy union. Naturally, they are instead permitted to visit Crysmir and continue their training as often as they please."

"So, how do you propose to get the rest of us inside then?" Kaymin cut in, noting that Cheyne was readying herself to ask yet another question. His initial impression of her had not altered much; she was, by far, the oddest woman he had ever met, and he could only attribute so much of the cause to her being Morvanian.

Jian looked grateful for the interruption. "It is impossible to think that any of you will be able to enter with me. Permission would never be granted, and sneaking in would be an impossibility due to the vast variety of magical barriers surrounding the city itself." For some reason, he then slanted a brief but thoughtful look at Cheyne.

"I don't favor the idea of you going in after the shard alone. Not with Kauric's followers liable to be lurking about," Kaymin protested in a firm tone.

"Even they will not be able to pass through the barriers. I should be safe enough inside the city," the wizard pointed out logically.

Kaymin relented and ordered himself some food which he devoured hungrily, particularly enjoying the cold-water salmon, a popular and famed product of Wherry. In fact, it seemed that the fish, caught from the Maciac Ocean off the western coast, was rapidly becoming the only means of food that was not suffering from the harsh weather, and the prince realized that he would likely be sick of it long before they left Wherry.

Cheyne yawned audibly as she got to her feet, bidding them goodnight before disappearing up the stairs to her small, private room on the second floor. Kaymin, Jian and Coedy followed shortly after, making their way to the room they would share, which consisted of two small wooden beds, a makeshift cot for Coedy, and not much else.

It was hours later when a frenzied knocking suddenly ripped Kaymin violently out of sleep, and he sat up groggily while trying to recover his senses. Reaching clumsily in the dark, he managed to light the small candle that sat on the table beside his bed, and then he looked about blearily. He made out the form of Jian, already on his feet, moving quickly toward the door.

"Wake up and let me in!" Cheyne demanded as she continued to pound on the door from the outside corridor, likely waking everyone in the entire inn.

Jian quickly pulled open the door. "What is it?" he hissed, after taking an obvious moment to discern that she did not appear to be injured or in any immediate danger.

"Surely you're not cold again," he went on dryly in a lower tone.

Kaymin bit back his amusement as he stood up, hastily pulling on his leggings. Coedy, he noted disbelievingly, still appeared to be sleeping, a strangely peaceful look on his face.

Cheyne swept into the room wearing an odd look, and then waited until Jian had closed

the door behind her before speaking. "I just had a vision," she announced.

The wizard frowned. "A dream?"

"No, a vision," she corrected impatiently. "I am a seer, therefore I see things when I am awake."

"What were you doing awake at this hour?"

She dropped herself down onto the only chair in the room. "I wasn't awake. I woke up, and then had the vision," she explained.

"So, you awoke knowing that you were about to receive a vision?" the wizard pressed.

"I don't know when I'm about to have a vision. They simply happen."

Kaymin fought for patience, his mind still far too much asleep to cope with their bantering. "Enough, already. What did you see?" He looked to Cheyne, his eyes still blinking in the shadows.

"A warning."

"Of what?" Kaymin persisted, fighting off a yawn.

Her look turned thoughtful. "I saw us at camp, still somewhere in the mountains. It was night, and we were asleep." She paused. "A man arrives to kill us."

"How cowardly to attack us while we're sleeping!" Kaymin exclaimed, aghast.

Jian frowned slightly at him before turning back to Cheyne. "I assume the man is a follower of Kauric."

She shrugged. "That would seem likely, but my visions don't come with explanations."

Jian nodded. "How ridiculous to send a lone man when we have already bested an entire band."

"Well, that's where it gets interesting," Cheyne went on, hesitation lighting her gaze as she looked back at him.

"How so?" Jian frowned.

She continued to look uncertain.

"Well?" he urged.

"The man I saw was a wizard."

Jian's eyes widened with instant fury. "Absurd!" he nearly shouted.

Kaymin blinked in surprise. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd heard Jian raise his voice, and never had he seen the wizard lose his temper.

"It is what I saw," Cheyne returned defensively.

"No, I do not doubt you," Jian said, seeming to calm slightly as he paced about the floor. "It is just unimaginable to me. Gauvin Himself chooses those He wishes to become wizards, and it is very disturbing to learn that one has been turned."

"Terek did say that Kauric has found followers in all the lands," Kaymin pointed out.

"I realize that," Jian threw back sharply. "But of all the natives of Wherry, it has been the wizards who have worked the hardest to keep faith alive in the hope that Gauvin will one day return and speak once more." He stopped and looked at the prince. "It would not be unlike you suddenly finding out that one of your parents or Avilla was following the Father God."

Kaymin glared at him, his own anger flaring. "Watch yourself, wizard. Your words border on treason."

"Do not be a fool, my prince," Jian hissed in reply. "I merely gave you a comparison. It is of your own concern of how you choose to take it."

"Who's Avilla?" Cheyne piped up, either oblivious to the sudden tension or simply

undisturbed by it.

“The woman I am betrothed to,” Kaymin answered, allowing himself to be distracted even though he could feel his face still flushed with anger.

“Oh, how nice,” Cheyne told him with a nod. “Congratulations.”

“What else can you tell me about this man you saw . . . this wizard?” Jian questioned, giving his silent agreement to Kaymin with a look that they let the moment pass.

“Well, I saw him only briefly,” she explained, “but long enough to discern that he was quite large, far past plump, and that he wore a long black beard and mustache. Middle-aged.”

Jian’s eyes narrowed. “Grady,” he seethed.

Cheyne looked impressed, and gave the wizard an inquiring glance.

“Our numbers have been dwindling at a fairly dramatic pace over the past two decades, obviously the result of Gauvin’s inability to create more magical persons from within His crystal prison,” he explained. “There is no doubt; Grady is most certainly the man you saw.”

“All right,” she nodded, “so what do you know of this man?”

“Not much,” the wizard admitted. “I took only very few lessons from him.” His eyes narrowed in thought. “Although I do seem to remember him often being in close company with another wizard, a man by the name of Loewen. Actually, the two were nearly inseparable.”

“Well, what do you expect when you have an entire city that doesn’t allow women to enter?” Cheyne remarked matter-of-factly. “It’s hardly surprising, if you ask me.”

Jian shook his head at her, his expression exasperated. “I simply meant that perhaps they are working together, both under the influence of Kauric. If one has been turned, it would not be so radical to assume that they both have.”

“Oh. Perhaps. However, I only saw the one wizard in my vision.”

“Well, if they *are* both working for Kauric,” Kaymin threw in, “would it not be sensible to assume that the other may stay in Crysmir, in case this . . . Grady . . . fails?” He rose questioning eyebrows at the wizard. “Perhaps you will not be so safe in the Crystal City after all.”

Cheyne nodded her agreement. “Indeed, it would hardly surprise me to discover that *all* of the wizards are working for the Father God.” She ignored Jian’s sudden glare and continued. “And it would certainly explain why we’re experiencing so many earthquakes in Morvay. Surely they could not be the work of but one or two wizards!”

There was an ugly silence.

“You should not think to make such accusations against my people,” Jian then warned, still looking at her furiously.

“I’m not accusing, I’m speculating,” she told him petulantly. “You must admit, what I say makes sense.”

He continued to glower down at her, saying nothing.

Kaymin watched with relief as she finally seemed to realize that she was pushing the wizard toward a place where no one wanted to see him go. She shifted on the chair and looked away, apparently opting to say nothing further rather than apologize.

The prince cleared his throat. “How powerful is this wizard who is coming after us?” he queried, hoping for further distraction.

Jian turned to him. “Not to worry over that,” he replied tonelessly. “Now that the

element of surprise has been taken away, I believe that it will be quite easy for me to dispatch him.”

Kaymin nodded, attempting to disguise his surprise. Jian was often cocky about his intelligence, but never when he spoke of his magic. But then, Kaymin’s own reaction when he’d learned from Kauric’s follower that Dargis and Corrado had begun battling hadn’t been like himself, either. And perhaps this could also explain Cheyne’s accusing words over the earthquakes in Morvay; in the face of all these tensions, it was no wonder they were all acting snappish and out of character. But if they continued to allow this to happen, he realized, they may as well just give up right now.

The prince took a few steps forward, his look taking in both Jian and Cheyne. “I think we have all been losing our focus,” he started, barely aware that his voice had slid into an official tone. “It is understandable that this has happened, of course, since we each bear a deep loyalty to our homelands, and wouldn’t be here if we did not.” He paused slightly. “But what we must keep foremost in our minds is that if we let these urges overtake us, and we continue to quarrel amongst ourselves, then there will be nothing left for us to be loyal to.

“Furthermore,” he continued, ensuring that he still had their full attention, “I think it best that from this time forward we cease thinking of ourselves as natives of our different homelands, but rather as natives of Trivallyn, for it is the world as a whole that we are striving to preserve.”

Cheyne leaned back in her chair and regarded him steadily for a long moment. “You know, I think you shall make a fine king one day,” she told him.

Kaymin blinked at the unexpected compliment—nearly anything but a threat or an insult was unexpected from her—but he acknowledged her words with an appreciative nod. “So you therefore cast your agreement?”

“I see the logic in what you say,” she replied with a slight smile, which was about as close as she ever came to giving a straight answer.

“Jian?”

The wizard exhaled a deep breath. “You are correct, of course. As difficult as it will be to ignore the plights of our homelands, we have been brought together for a different purpose. Our aims are not to worry or strategize or accuse. We have been selected by the Gods to do their will, and it is a disgrace to us all that we have allowed our thoughts to stray from the path that they wish for us to follow.”

Cheyne shot the wizard a disgruntled look. “You sure have an interesting way of turning a revelation into mind-numbing guilt.”

Kaymin frowned at her.

“However,” she continued quickly, “I would agree. This burden is ours alone to carry, and it is one understood only by the four people in this room. And so we shall continue on together until every last one of us is dead!” she exclaimed with a determined nod.

“That’s not really what I had in mind,” Kaymin muttered. At the very least she had enthusiasm to spare.

She laughed. “Even if the world *does* survive, you don’t really expect all of us to live through this, do you?”

“Perhaps we should attempt keeping our thinking on a more positive level,” Jian suggested humorlessly.

“Great speech,” Coedy said suddenly, causing his small cot to creak alarmingly as he

sat up and looked at Kaymin. “However it does leave in its wake a question.”

“Yes?” the prince asked, wondering how long the boy had actually been awake.

“If these battles are no longer our concern, are we still to travel to Dorcey so that you may seek out the treaty with King Mithwell?”

Kaymin paused. “I gave my word that I would do so, so yes,” he finally nodded steadily. “But it shall be the last political maneuvering to be attempted on my part. No matter the cost, we must hold true to our task, and nothing but. It is the Gods’ will.” He stopped, exchanging a long, silent look with Jian.

The boy had certainly raised an interesting point, no matter the answer he’d given in response. But he had pledged to his father, to his king, that the treaty with Wherry would be sought. He could not fail to do this—not when Dargis was right now battling against the forces of King Rivenor. Besides, he failed to see how making such a treaty would help the Father God’s cause at all. Dargis could very well fall without it, which would only be to Kauric’s benefit. He at least had to try; it was an effort to preserve, not destroy.

He also knew he was making excuses for himself.

Finally Kaymin looked away from his wizard, unable to ignore the disapproval he saw in the other man’s eyes. Clearly, Jian thought he should rather be taking his own advice.

### *Chapter Fifteen*

“This is it,” Cheyne declared two days later, jumping down from her horse and landing gracefully in the deep snow. “This is the place where we camped in my vision.”

“Good,” Jian said with a sharp nod. “Tomorrow morning should see our arrival into Dorcey, and I much prefer to have this little encounter behind us before then.”

“Have you a plan?” Kaymin asked, quickly tethering his horse and moving to collect some branches for a fire.

“Of course,” the wizard replied. He quickly surveyed the small clearing which was almost completely enclosed by the surrounding trees, giving some shelter from the elements.

“So what shall you have us do?” Kaymin asked leadingly when Jian failed to elaborate.

“Just stay out of my way.” With a wave of the wizard’s hand, the pile of wood at the prince’s feet sparked to life.

“All right, then,” Kaymin responded shortly, turning and digging some rations out of his leather gamebag. If Jian didn’t think he needed any help then Kaymin was not about to argue, but he still felt a trifle annoyed at the exclusion, and he decided that he’d bring the matter up again later. But first, he needed to attend to the issue of his rumbling stomach.

The sky was already beginning to darken when the prince threw some dried rations into the pot he’d settled over the fire, and he listened to it sizzle as he added water and spices.

“What is this slop?” Cheyne demanded a short while later, taking the bowl Kaymin handed her and staring down at it in disgust, her nose twitching.

“Just eat it. We’ll be able to refresh our supplies tomorrow when we reach Dorcey,” Kaymin told her, chewing around the tough mammoth hide which served as the main ingredient in the stew he’d prepared.



“I think I’ll pass,” she said, setting the bowl down upon the snowy ground.

“Suit yourself,” the prince shrugged, taking the bowl and pouring her untouched stew back into the pot. It really was disgusting, but even so he found the vile concoction much preferable to hunger pains. He turned to observe Coedy, who had already finished his portion and was now busy sharpening a few of his many throwing knives.

“There’s more if you’d like,” Kaymin offered him, gesturing toward the pot.

“No thanks,” Coedy replied without looking up. “I think taking any more in would prevent me from keeping it down.”

“Let me give you some advice,” Cheyne said to Kaymin seriously. “I realize that a lot of women find it absolutely delightful, but don’t ever cook for your betrothed, at least not until after you’ve actually wedded her. I’ve left men for far less than the preparation of a bad meal.”

“Very funny,” Kaymin snapped. “Jian?” he called, gesturing toward the bubbling contents of the pot and trying to ignore the putrid smell it emitted.

The wizard glanced over before waving away the offer and turning back to his spell components.

Cheyne nodded approvingly at the wizard’s decision before she looked to Coedy, watching him for a long moment. “I’ve always had the desire to master the throwing of steel,” she said. “Can you teach me?”

He looked up in surprise. “Of course.” He stopped and placed one of his knives into her outstretched hand.

Instinctively she moved to grip it as one would a dagger.

“No, like this,” Coedy told her, demonstrating with another knife that appeared suddenly in his hand. He placed the blade flat against his open palm, the slimmer, lighter end pointed toward his wrist, with his thumb lightly holding it in place.

Cheyne positioned hers the same way and then shot to her feet, her eyes scanning the small clearing. “Now, what can I throw it at?” she murmured, drawing her arm back wildly in preparation.

Kaymin choked on his stew as he tried to sound a warning to Jian, who was turned away and still obliviously immersed in his components.

Coedy stood quickly and gently pulled Cheyne’s arm back down. “It would probably be best to wait until there is sufficient light to practice in,” he cautioned. “It’s much easier to hit a target when one can actually see it.”

“I suppose,” she agreed, handing the slim blade back to him. “I’m tired anyway. Jian!” she called, dropping back onto her sleeping roll.

The wizard looked over distractedly. “Yes?”

“Does your plan involve letting me sleep, or must I wait until after you’ve killed the infidel?”

He waved a hand at her. “By all means, rest. You will be in no danger.”

Kaymin watched her as she nodded without question and crawled into her roll, her eyes closing quickly. The prince was both surprised and impressed; she would never have proved so accepting even a moon ago. The trust among them (but for between Kaymin and his wizard, of course) was still somewhat shallow, but it was undoubtedly deepening by the day.

Seeing that Coedy had turned to resume sharpening his knives, Kaymin got up and stepped over to Jian, his stomach churning unhappily from the stew. “Are you certain

that you can handle this alone?" he asked quietly, unable to stifle his worry.

The wizard's face flashed in and out of the shadows. "But of course." He finished adding an odd-smelling white powder to a small cloth bag before pulling the drawstring closed and shaking it briefly.

"Then how about you tell me exactly what you're planning to do?" the prince persisted.

"Certainly." Jian pocketed the bag into his robes and turned to give Kaymin his full attention. "When Grady approaches, he will see that we are all seemingly asleep, completely oblivious to his presence. However, unbeknownst to him, I have already put into place a magical shield that will be strong enough to deflect his initial, and what he assuredly will presume, fatal attack."

Kaymin nodded.

"In the moments of his surprise, I will be free to use this," Jian patted his robes where he'd placed the cloth bag.

Kaymin eyed him warily. "What is its affect?"

"Now, my prince," the wizard frowned at him, "I would so hate to spoil the surprise."

"What about Ice?"

"I have sent him away. If all goes well, I won't be in need of him, and I would rather not add to my vulnerability by having him nearby."

Kaymin paused. "What if it had not been for Cheyne's vision?"

Jian shrugged. "If Grady had managed to sneak upon us without Ice's detection, he would surely have succeeded in his goal."

"But if Ice *had* alerted you?" he pressed, interested. According to his father's royal wizard, Rolin, Jian was incredibly strong in his power. Every royal magic-user, wizard and sorceress alike, needed great strength to attain this station, but apparently Jian was even stronger than usual in this comparison. Kaymin had never asked his wizard about it directly, but he couldn't help himself from trying to glean some sort of confirmation now.

Jian cocked an eyebrow. "It would have been an interesting battle, I suppose. Although not a lengthy one."

Kaymin frowned. "You're no better than Cheyne with your twisted answers."

Jian glanced at him and grinned faintly.

The prince shifted and grew quiet for a moment. "I've come to realize that I've acted rather selfishly in our years together," he admitted. "I've only recently wondered about the life you led before you were sent to me." He was not even sure what made him consider this now, perhaps simply the fact that they now stood upon Jian's native lands. But his statement was all too true, and he felt ashamed of himself because of it.

The wizard shrugged dismissively. "You were never given any reason to ponder it. It matters not." He turned to walk back toward the fire and began laying out his bedroll. "Take some rest, my prince."

Kaymin looked at him doubtfully, but threw some more wood onto the fire before obligingly crawling into his blankets. He closed his eyes, surprised as he felt himself drift quickly into a light doze. He held the crisp and cold air responsible for his fatigue; it seemed to drain away one's energy much faster than the warmer climes.

As the hours passed, he tried to concentrate on the sounds of the night around him to keep himself from falling too deeply into sleep; the sound of the winds hitting the thick branches of the surrounding trees, the crackling of the fire, the lone cry of an overhead eagle.

Brilliance flared suddenly above his closed eyes, and he shot upward instantly, ripping back his blankets as the light began fading to dimness in a thin dome around their camp. He blinked rapidly, trying to focus and barely making out Jian's tall form dashing forward. Leaping to his feet, the prince looked ahead, taking in the figure of a large man standing just outside the perimeter of the magical shield, a look of surprise on his round, bearded face.

Cheyne and Coedy were just getting to their feet beside him when Jian threw his pouch in a grand arc to land at the invading wizard's feet. It passed through the shield effortlessly, and the magical barrier faded quickly from sight. Smoke erupted from the ground where the bag landed, and the terrified yell from the enemy wizard sounded loudly throughout the clearing before it was hauntingly echoed from some nearby trees by the screech of an eagle.

Kaymin watched as Jian stepped determinedly into the smoke, then as his wizard waited patiently for it to clear. Exchanging looks with Cheyne and Coedy, the prince moved forward with them as they came to stand behind Jian.

As the last of the white smoke dissipated, Kaymin's eyes widened in horror as his gaze fell upon the bearded wizard, Grady. Thick ice had formed around his entire figure, completely encasing him in an immobilizing prison as his widened eyes stared out at them, his face, quite literally, a frozen mask of shock and agony.

"Is he dead?" Cheyne asked, leaning forward and poking at the ice covering the wizard's face.

"No," Jian said, slowly flexing both his hands. He stepped forward, rising them to either side of Grady's head.

"Well, can he see us?" She directed an obscene gesture at the frozen man.

"Yes." Water started to drip from around Grady's head as Jian's hands began to emit a startling heat. "And might I say, that gesture was most unladylike."

"Not where I come from. What are you doing?"

Jian shifted his hands to the ice covering Grady's face. "Melting the ice about his head. I have a few questions I'd like answered."

"I see. You're still going to kill him though, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Kaymin watched as more and more of the icy barrier around the trapped wizard's head melted away, the water running down the length of his frozen body in streams.

Finally Jian stepped back and stared coldly at Grady, who began pulling in sharp, shallow breaths.

"Can't . . . breathe," he gasped, his face bloodlessly pale.

"That is because your body is turning to ice," Jian told him. "You will be dead soon."

Grady's eyes widened even more and his face swept into a frenzied panic.

"There's no point in trying to move," Jian went on tonelessly. "Surely you are familiar with the spell. I thought it fitting, as one of the very few that I learned from you."

"What do you want?" Grady rasped, his eyes darting about in terror.

"You have disgraced the White Order with your corruption," Jian glared. "And what I want is for you to die."

Kaymin watched his wizard warily. Because he knew him so well, he realized that Jian's calm was extremely close to shattering, something that he was quite sure he did not want to witness. He had always been leery of Jian's temper, even though he had never

actually seen it erupt. This was something he could not explain, not even to himself.

“We can accomplish this several ways,” Jian went on.

Grady tried to shake his head, his movement stalled by the ice still enshrouding him from the neck down. “I don’t understand,” he said, eyeing Jian with assumed innocence.

“Do you dare stand before me and deny your iniquities?” Jian shouted, startling everyone.

Grady stared at him in silent horror, his lips moving soundlessly.

Jian’s eyes narrowed even more. “How did you know of our location?” he demanded.

Grady’s entire head seemed to vibrate, either from fear or from the freezing of his body, as he mumbled inaudibly.

“I will kill you much more quickly if you do not try my patience,” Jian told him.

The large wizard met Jian’s eyes. “A dream!” he exclaimed. “He communicates with me using dreams!”

Cheyne made a noise of disgust. “How easily the coward submits,” she muttered with a shake of her head.

Jian ignored her. “Good. Is Loewen in league with him as well?”

Grady blinked in surprise. “Loewen . . . yes.”

“I assume he awaits me in Crysmir,” the young wizard nodded. “Are there any others?”

“No, no others,” Grady babbled quickly.

The frozen man’s eyes were taking on a dangerous luster, and Kaymin figured that the wizard did not have much longer to live. Indeed, his body within the ice had become difficult to discern as it continued to grow into one with its prison.

Jian glowered at Grady discerningly. “I don’t believe you,” he said softly.

“It’s true!” Grady mumbled, his lips blue. “You are correct about Crysmir, he is waiting there for you in case I should fail.” He laughed madly, his voice sounding raw and shallow. “He warned me about you!”

Jian frowned briefly before his face cleared. “Then you should have paid stricter heed.”

Grady coughed, blood beginning to spew from between his lips. “Kill me now, if you must,” he rasped. “Please!”

Jian stepped forward as if to comply but stopped not a pace from Grady. Face hard, eyes expressionless, he simply stared at the older wizard.

“Please,” Grady begged. “Have I not . . . answered your questions?”

“Perhaps. But you have neither ethics nor honor. So I will show you none.”

Kaymin turned away as the wizard began to convulse, his head jerking violently against the ice which held it and as blood from his lips flew onto the white snow. The prince glanced at Cheyne, who was not watching Grady but Jian, as Gauvin’s Chosen continued to calmly observe the big wizard’s gruesome death.

“I think that perhaps Jian was born to the wrong country,” Cheyne finally commented, sounding thoughtful.

Finally the trapped wizard’s gasping breaths fell silent. Giving into his morbid curiosity, Kaymin looked over, instantly wishing he hadn’t. What he saw was a thick, solid pillar of ice with Grady’s bloated, white head atop it, blood and drool still oozing silently from his mouth. His lifeless eyes stared blankly, fixed and glazed in a look of absolute horror and torment. Jian remained standing before the dead wizard, his own expression unchanged.

“Well, that was interesting,” Cheyne said, covering a yawn with her hand. “I can’t say

I've ever before seen the like. Good work." She nodded approvingly to Jian before turning back to her sleeping roll.

The wizard took a step back from the corpse. "I can only hope that killing Loewen once I reach Crysmir will be half as satisfying."

Kaymin looked sharply at him, but said nothing. He himself had suggested that they do away with their native connections, but he never would have expected to see such an expression of the face of his own wizard, or hear such words fall from his mouth.

### *Chapter Sixteen*

After presenting themselves to the palace guards in the royal city of Dorcey the next day, Kaymin and Jian were brought inside the castle of House Mithwell and left in a vast, white marble chamber to await the king and his advisors.

Kaymin sat down upon a large bench lining one of the walls, his gaze flickering nervously about the immense room. Servants had left a tray of warm beverages, but neither he nor his wizard had made any move toward them. "I fear to ponder the consequences if he refuses to unite with Dargis," the prince fretted quietly, feeling his brows draw together with worry. Now that he was finally here, his confidence regarding the issue had waned dramatically.

Jian stood before him, actually looking slightly nervous himself, which was most definitely unusual for the wizard. "There's no sense working yourself into a jumble of nerves; we will hear King Mithwell's thoughts on the matter soon enough."

Kaymin eyed him coldly. "Hardly the words of comfort I longed to hear."

The wizard donned a fixed expression and stepped away.

"I hope that Cheyne and Coedy will be safe enough inside the city," the prince went on, rambling in his nervousness. "Actually, I was quite surprised that Cheyne did not wish to join us."

Jian nodded. "Surprised yes, but it is likely for the best. Explaining her presence would have been almost as difficult as trying to deter her from coming along had she actually wanted to."

Kaymin was about to respond when the grand doors at the end of the room opened suddenly. He stood quickly, observing the small entourage which entered.

The man who walked in front was quite obviously King Judson Mithwell, a silver crown set with sapphires settled upon his white-haired head. His face was lined with age, and his blue eyes remained focused on his guests as he steadily moved toward them. The young man beside him, although somewhat shorter and rounder, resembled the king greatly, and was most certainly his son and heir, Jostin Mithwell. Just behind them came an aged wizard and a man adorned in a white tunic worn over soldierly gear.

Kaymin nodded deeply to show his respect as, beside him, Jian bowed to his king.

"Prince Numont," King Mithwell said, returning the nod. "It is with great surprise that I welcome you into my kingdom. Please, let us sit." He gestured to the long, blue-veined white marble table in the center of the room. Kaymin had actually found this meeting place surprising, but Jian had explained. The king would speak with him in his receiving room rather than in his audience chamber for one reason and one reason only—as fellow royalty, Kaymin would not be made to stand beneath King Mithwell and seem made to

beg favor, no matter his purpose for being present. The only other persons who were awarded this courtesy were the White Wizards, a lot highly respected by even their king.

Once everyone had been seated, Kaymin looked back to King Mithwell. "I thank you for seeing us so promptly," he said, then gestured to his right. "Allow me to introduce my royal wizard, Jian."

"Yes, of course," the king nodded after a slight pause, and while wearing an expression that looked strangely controlled. "Jian and I are acquainted, actually." He turned to introduce the others. "This is my son Prince Jostin, my wizard Caddigan, and the captain of my royal guard, Broda Lyndon."

Kaymin greeted them all in the proper courtly fashion, even while silently noting an odd look of intense hostility pass between Jian and Wherry's stocky prince. *I must really make a point of asking Jian about his past*, Kaymin thought distractedly, belatedly noting that King Mithwell was now looking at him expectantly.

Quickly, he cleared his throat. "Your majesty, I assume you have heard of the troubles that have besieged my homelands of Dargis," he began.

"Yes, of course," King Mithwell nodded, his face serious. "Please accept my sympathies on the matter."

"Thank you. It is for this reason that I have requested an audience with you." He paused. "It has come to our attention that you also have recently been experiencing similar problems with the country of Morvay. I come as emissary for my father, King Gwilym Numont of the city of Vasos, to propose to you a treaty between Wherry and Dargis." He sat back, hoping his nervousness did not show.

Jostin Mithwell snorted loudly. "Dargis is already engaged in battle," he scoffed. "I would think that the time to request our assistance is past."

"Silence!" the king snapped at him. "It should be quite obvious that Prince Numont began his travels here long before the fighting actually began."

The Wherrite prince looked down, his face flushed with anger.

"An interesting proposal," the king went on, nodding to Kaymin. "Although I am not certain that it would be in Wherry's best interests to accept it."

Kaymin ignored the knot that twisted suddenly in his stomach. "Your majesty, it is not only concern for my own country that is an issue. Once Corrado and Morvay take Dargis, which will surely happen without your aid, it seems most likely that they will next plan on coming west to Wherry. I would hate to see your country in the position that mine is now in," he finished, his eyes steady. This was true, but he had something else in his favor—of all the five outlying countries, Dargis's warmest relationship was with Wherry, and had been for as far back as the histories told it. Surely Judson Mithwell would not wish to dishonor that fact.

"We shall hardly need your assistance to prevent that from happening," the king's son then blurted out with a sneer. "With Morvay occupied at invading your country, it will be quite a simple matter for us to handle them."

"Jostin! Another inappropriate word and I will send you from this room!" the king snarled furiously. He looked almost apologetically back at his guests.

Kaymin exchanged a surprised glance with Jian, wishing for a few moments in which they could confer alone. Apparently Wherry had already made its strategy, a cowardly one, in his opinion. He thought rapidly for a way to sway King Mithwell's plans, concluding quickly that the circumstances left him little choice if he hoped to garner any

help for his homelands.

“It would be rather unfortunate if this information were to reach the ears of King Almara of Morvay,” he said quietly, seeing Jian’s slight but startled shift beside him.

A long silence followed in which King Mithwell stared at him shrewdly. Jostin glared at Kaymin outright, likely realizing the depth of his error in the words he’d spoken only a moment before. How he could have been foolish enough to even say them was another mystery—but the Wherrite prince had been looking unhinged since the moment he’d laid eyes upon Jian.

It took everything Kaymin had not to fidget as the silence thickened, and finally he decided to break it. “I do not ask for armies,” he said, “and I do not wish to disturb your plans to invade Morvay, if that is the decision you have come to.”

“Then what exactly is it that you do want?” the king returned, his eyes small.

“Assistance,” Kaymin replied sincerely. “Surely you could spare a small team of wizards. They alone could turn the battle in Dargis’s favor.”

King Mithwell exchanged a long look with his royal wizard, Caddigan. “Perhaps,” he drawled slowly, before turning back to Kaymin. “Although the wizards do have other matters to occupy them at this time.”

“Such as?” Kaymin asked boldly, his threat of blackmail still hanging heavily in the air.

The king rose from his seat and began a slow pace about the table. “I trust you have heard talk of the avalanches that have been occurring here in Wherry recently?”

“Of course. In fact, we only just escaped one ourselves.”

“These avalanches,” the king went on, “have been centered primarily around the city of Crysmir, although the wizards residing there have thankfully been able to deflect much of the damage. We have only just recently discovered their cause.” He paused dramatically. “It would appear that Queen Jephtha Pavula of Gaal has ordered this attack by her sorceresses, although her reasons for doing so remain unclear to us.”

Kaymin exchanged another look with Jian, one of deep foreboding.

“So you see, Prince Numont,” King Mithwell continued, his tone growing harsh, “yours is not the only country with troubles of a dire nature. Have you any idea at all the likely outcome of a magical war between Wherry and Gaal?”

Kaymin swallowed quickly, his mind moving into rapid and dark assumption. “Are you absolutely certain that these avalanches are the work of Gaal’s sorceresses? There are disasters of nature happening all across Trivallyn, and certainly they cannot all be the cause of magic. In fact, Morvay blames its earthquakes on the doing of your wizards, and I can only presume the falsity of that claim.” His tone lingered with question.

“Of course we have had nothing to do with the earthquakes!” the king snapped, stopping at the head of the table and glowering down at Kaymin.

“Then how can you be so certain that Gaal is responsible for the avalanches?”

“The wizards of Crysmir have discerned this through magical means,” Caddigan spoke up, his tone even. “It leaves no room for doubt. The sorceresses of Gaal have a certain feel of energy about themselves and their magic, as do the wizards of the White Order.”

Kaymin glanced at Jian, who nodded once briefly in confirmation. He then hid a frown. He had at first assumed, of course, that the avalanches were the further work of Kauric, but the fact that Gaal actually appeared responsible threw him. “Why?” he finally blurted.

“As I’ve said, we do not yet know,” King Mithwell answered. “Although we will

obviously do everything we can to prevent Wherry and Gaal from coming to battle.” He turned slightly. “So you see, Prince Numont, why I hesitate to release any of my wizards from Wherry, for they may very well provide our sole protection from the sorceresses of Gaal.”

Kaymin nodded in agreement. “But if Dargis should fall, you will then run the risk of standing against the might of Gaal, Morvay and Corrado combined. Even if you successfully capture Morvay, many of its invading soldiers will be routed from Dargis to Corrado for safety, and it would be unwise to assume that they will not return seeking vengeance.” He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes glittering. “Tell me, your majesty. Do you believe that Wherry can stand against such forces alone?”

The king met and held his stare. “All right, Numont,” he said quietly. “You have made your point.”

“So we have an agreement?” Kaymin pressed.

“Let us not get ahead of ourselves,” the king cautioned warningly. “There is still much left in shadow.”

“Very well,” Kaymin said. “Then if you would, tell me of your further concerns.”

King Mithwell pursed his lips together under his long, white mustaches and sank back down into his seat. “Hypothetically speaking,” he started, his look calculating, “let’s say I agree to send fifteen wizards to Dargis.”

“All right,” Kaymin nodded.

“Shortly thereafter, I would send a large cavalry into Morvay, to the royal city of Rowe.”

“With the majority of its troops headed toward Dargis, it should not be difficult to overtake the city,” Kaymin presumed.

“Indeed.” King Mithwell paused. “Once Morvay has fallen under our control, its refugees, as you have already stated, will assuredly turn to Corrado for aid and shelter. And I wish to have no more concern over them. If a battle with Gaal must be fought, I cannot afford to split my forces and energies.”

Kaymin’s brow furrowed slightly. “So what you are saying is, that after you have taken Morvay, you expect Dargis to contend with both the natives who’ve escaped to Corrado, as well as Corrado’s own armies.”

“Correct,” Mithwell nodded. “Once Morvay falls under my control, my only concern will be Gaal. To deal with them, I can afford no interference from the east.”

“That is both understandable and acceptable,” Kaymin nodded. “On one condition.”

The king raised his eyebrows. “Which is?”

“The fifteen wizards you send to Dargis, stay in Dargis. We could not defend from Corrado’s full army and Morvay’s partial army otherwise.”

“Have you not been listening?” Jostin burst out, obviously just waiting for the opportunity to verbally engage himself. “To do battle with Gaal, we will need every wizard of the White Order that we have! As it is, Gaal retains a higher number of sorceresses than we do wizards!”

“We will not be able to hold the borders without them,” Kaymin snapped back with a glare. “If you wish for Dargis to hold the east from attacking you, you must be willing to sacrifice for it.”

“And what exactly shall you be sacrificing?” Jostin sneered.

“The lives of my people who will die so that your war with Gaal will not be



interrupted,” Kaymin returned coldly.

King Mithwell held up his hands for silence. “Enough,” he said, clearly out of patience. “Prince Numont is correct. The wizards will need to remain in Dargis until the battle with Gaal is over.”

Jian cleared his throat quietly.

“No,” Kaymin said, catching quickly onto his wizard’s warning. “They will stay in Dargis until the battle with Corrado is over. I will not have my people abandoned in the event that Wherry’s political situation is suddenly unpolluted.”

Mithwell narrowed his eyes then finally nodded. “Agreed,” he said.

Kaymin paused, a thunderous wave of relief suddenly flooding through him. Somehow, he had pulled it off. Dargis would receive the help it so desperately needed, although the price for it was much higher than he had hoped for. “I trust, then, that you will be sending the fifteen wizards immediately?”

“As soon as I can send the order to Crysmir,” the king nodded.

Jian shifted a signal again.

“Actually,” the prince said quickly, “I am gladly willing to carry the message there myself. Surely Jian and I can offer details to Dargis’s situation that would be most helpful to the wizards who will travel there.”

“If you wish,” Mithwell said suspiciously. “But I’m sure you are aware of the fact that only your wizard will be granted entry into the Crystal City. I presume you will travel there by dragon?”

Kaymin looked blankly at Jian.

“Yes, your majesty,” the wizard answered, his eyes on the king.

Mithwell nodded. “Will you be requiring Caddigan’s assistance for the enchanting?”

“I am most grateful for the offer,” Jian replied, “but it is not necessary.”

“All right.” He moved to summon a scribe, who hurriedly took down his official order that would send fifteen wizards of the White Order into Dargis.

Kaymin accepted the completed scroll and nodded in departure to the king. “Much fortune to you, your majesty.” Because he had resorted to blackmail to gain what aid he had, Kaymin knew that an offer to stay the night in the palace, as would have been customary, was not about to be offered.

“And to you,” Mithwell returned, a little stiffly.

Kaymin and Jian were silent as a set of guards escorted them back through the vast corridors, finally leaving them just outside the snowy gates.

Following Jian, Kaymin turned down a busy street, at last letting himself breathe easily. He tried to speak, but the wind whipped away his words and stung his face bitterly. He gave up and concentrated on moving ahead through the icy gusts, finally following Jian into a small tavern where they were to reunite with Cheyne and Coedy. He spotted his companions quickly and hurried over to them, grateful that they were seated near to a large, blazing hearth.

“I assume matters went favorably,” Cheyne observed, taking in the prince’s expression.

“They did,” he smiled at her in return.

“I don’t think “favorably” would be the word I’d choose,” Jian muttered, removing his outer layer of robes.

“What do you mean?” Kaymin frowned at him. “I think the meeting should most certainly be deemed a success, especially considering King Mithwell’s own plans.”

“Do you sincerely not realize,” Jian said slowly, his tone low as he came to stand before the prince, “that you have just single-handedly maneuvered nearly all of Trivallyn into battle?”

Kaymin stared back at the wizard blankly.

“Think on it,” Jian challenged. “With the possible exception of those who dwell in Pellarin, the words spoken in that room are likely going to affect nearly every soul in the world.”

“What did you do?” Cheyne frowned, turning quickly to look back up at the prince.

Kaymin blinked slowly. “I did what was necessary to protect Dargis,” he said, his own eyes taking on a look of unease.

“Something which I thought we’d agreed upon was no longer a priority of ours,” Jian reminded him with blatant disapproval.

Kaymin felt his defenses flare. “Tell me then, Jian, what else should I have done? What else *could* I have done?”

The wizard gave a silent stare. “Since you chose to enter into the meeting in the first place, I have no answer for you.”

Cheyne was nearly falling out of her seat with curiosity. “Will one of you please tell me what happened?” Coedy, sitting to her left, also looked surprisingly interested.

Making certain to keep his voice low, Kaymin quickly explained what had transpired during their audience with King Mithwell, even while pondering over his wizard’s warning stare. Finally, Jian turned away to ignore them all and stood before the fire, silent and alone.

Once he had finished, Kaymin frowned in confusion at Cheyne’s outraged expression.

“So what you have done,” she said furiously, “is agree to comply with the invasion of my country, all for the sake of yours.”

Kaymin held his hands up defensively, finally realizing his error and Jian’s unspoken warning. “Cheyne, that’s not exactly how things happened. They were already planning to march on Morvay before I even said a word.”

“How convenient for you!” she yelled, her temper clearly lost.

Jian turned quickly. “Lower your voice,” he commanded.

She glared her fury at him before turning and grabbing her new, fur-lined cloak and heading for the door.

“Where are you going?” Kaymin demanded, shooting to his feet to follow her.

Jian held up his hand. “Let her go.” He turned his head to watch as she disappeared outside, her long dark hair streaming out behind her. “She will return after she has calmed down.”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Kaymin muttered, utterly ashamed of himself. “I didn’t realize what my words would mean to her.”

“Obviously,” Jian agreed.

Kaymin rubbed a hand over his forehead. “It’s still dangerous. She shouldn’t be out there alone.” Guilt settled within him as the implications of his actions fully sank in, clouding his thoughts and making him feel ill. Jian was right. The words spoken in that room were likely going to affect nearly every person on Trivallyn.

Jian looked to Coedy. “Go,” he said. “Don’t let her see you.”

The boy nodded once, grabbed his cloak, and left the tavern.

“What else should I have done, Jian?” Kaymin asked again, his distress continuing to

rise. "I am not but a simple native of my country, lacking in duty and obligation. I am its *prince*. What else could I have been expected to do under the circumstances?"

"You did what you deemed right at the time," Jian told him, his tone now somewhat sympathetic. "What your royal upbringing demanded."

"It was I who spoke the words that we must leave our old alliances behind," Kaymin went on wildly, "but I fear that I may not have the strength to follow them. If today was a test, then I have surely failed most horribly. I am not fit to lead this party, Jian. I am too fearful of where I may lead us to."

After a long while, the wizard nodded thoughtfully.

### *Chapter Seventeen*

Stepping out of her small, private tent, Reay paused and raised her hands to her hips as she looked slowly and searchingly about the large camp. Hastily erected tents and cooking fires encompassed her on all sides, soldiers in full battle gear walking silently about the perimeter, their curved, unsheathed swords in their hands. The disorganized appearance of the camp was deceptive, as anyone who attempted getting too near to it would quickly discover.

The silver moon above was bright, not full but nearing so, and its light rolled over the chilly desert sand which held still in the breezeless night. The sorceress finally gave movement, stepping over to a small fire where a man sat alone. "If I may?" she asked, already dropping neatly to sit.

"Of course," King Rivenor gestured, not turning his eyes from the flames.

She glanced at him, silently marking his tone, and decided that he was most definitely still angry with her. And while she would never allow it to show, this bothered her greatly.

She had been seventeen when the Triad, the three sorceresses who headed the Black Order, had selected her to fulfill Corrado's request to send a sorceress to the desert country's young prince. A top distinction among her kind, Reay had been both proud and honored to step into the duty, although she'd been unable to completely stifle her hidden reluctance; she would, after all, be leaving her country to take up residence in a place which held to laws and beliefs utterly foreign to her. Also, she worried over losing the daily companionship of her fellow Sisters, and feared that her magic would suffer without the strict regimen of training that her order insisted upon. But of course, disobeying the wishes of the Triad was simply not done, nor was dishonoring Corrado's request for the most capable Sister available to accommodate them. Reay was that Sister, in consideration to both her age and her skill, and so she had taken ship to the desert country with full intentions of embracing her fate to the very best of her ability.

After arriving in Corrado, she astonished herself by adapting quickly and smoothly to the lifestyle practiced by its natives, a surprise since Gaalenes weren't exactly known for their adaptability. With the royal family's complete cooperation and encouragement, she continued to worship Diamont, the deity of Gaal, as did the king's own royal sorceress, Maev, who'd been stationed in Corrado for more than forty years by the time of Reay's arrival. The laws of the desert were strange and took some getting used to, as did its people, but it was not long before she had wholeheartedly accepted the fact that, although

a part of her would always long for Gaal, Corrado was now her home.

Admittedly, Zane himself was a strong force in this acceptance. Of course, it was an inevitability the world over that any royal recipient would come to grow close to his or her wizard or sorceress, and vice versa, in regards to matters both political and personal in nature. Reay, however, had long ago given in to the fact that her feelings for her king had ventured far past friendship, respect, and loyalty.

At first arriving in Corrado she had found Zane likable enough, although, a couple years her junior, still very much a boy. His most distinguishing trait had been his willfulness, something that had not changed, but as she'd watched him over the years she took note of the other changes that had shaped him into the man he had become. Once reckless and given to an almost dangerous sense of adventure, his attitudes had matured into a calm and seemingly fearless outlook on whatever circumstances he happened to be facing—attitudes that were now proving imperative for keeping the calm of his people. The Cors were not a panicky sort, but with the problems of both drought and war upon them, a little panic certainly would not have been unexpected. So far, however, the country seemed to be holding to a steady determination.

She cast him another glance as they continued to sit silently before the small fire, studying his profile. There remained little sign of the gangly youth he had been when she'd first come to Corrado; indeed, it hardly seemed fair that a man should possess not only the power brought from being a king, but the face and form that he did as well. Far more than enough to make a woman feel completely defenseless—an opinion she knew was widely shared. Women, both peasants and nobles alike, were constantly attempting to catch his eye and good favor, although despite his share of discreet conquests, he'd had yet to show serious interest in anyone. He was aware of Reay's own feelings for him, of course. She had let drop enough subtle hints that he would have been a fool not to pick up on them, but never once had he given her any sign of acknowledgement, never a word to give her the slightest clue as to his feelings toward her. But she could wait, and she had let him know this as well in her own veiled way. Never would she push him, and clearly he had more important matters to consider at this time; such as, for example, the reason for his current irritation.

Naturally he had insisted on leading his army across the desert and onto Dargasian soil, to engage his men in the initial attack on several border towns belonging to King Numont. To the great shock of the Cors, however, the defending country had been readily prepared to meet them, waiting as they'd crossed through the misty border, where hundreds of both Corrado and Dargasian soldiers had died during that first, savage battle. Now, the fighting continued, but Corrado had managed to drive King Numont's men back several hours ride into the forested and sodden country. To Zane's intense annoyance, both Reay and his captain, Shalton Falzon, had then refused to let him remain in Dargis, the reason why he was now camped back in his own homelands, within clear view of the border and in a foul mood.

"Sulkiness is not a trait becoming of a man, particularly one who wears the mantle of king," Reay said finally, her tone matter-of-fact. Knowing that no one was near enough to overhear her words, she went on. "You know as well as I that it would have been absurd for you to continue risking yourself so foolishly. If you were to be struck down in battle your people would be left leaderless, and since you have yet to produce an heir, it would see the end of your entire line as well. I don't understand how you could even

consider taking such a risk.” Not only was Zane an only child, but both his parents had been as well. He was the only Rivenor left alive, and no matter the casualness of his people, if he were to die, a raging civil war would undoubtedly ensue, the perfect opportunity for Dargis to step in and slaughter them all. Not that she would be alive to see it, or even care if she was. His death would be hers, as had been proved throughout history with only few exceptions; typically, royal sorceresses and wizards survived their charge’s death by no more than a few days. It was not a bond of the magical sort—it was instead strictly emotional.

Zane turned to address her words. “First of all,” he started, his tone flat, “I am not sulky, but frustrated. And of course I have considered the logic of what you say. It is the only reason I agreed to return to Corrado.”

“Agreed?” she repeated, using his own usual tool of sarcasm. “You may not have put up too much outward resistance, but I know you better than that, and so does your captain. You came ridiculously close to making us use excessive means to deter you.”

He blinked slowly at her, his face expressionless, but she ignored the warning and went on. “Captain Falzon and I agreed that you were leaving us little choice. Thankfully, however, you came to your senses before it became necessary for us to put forth any such effort.”

He stared at her for another long moment. “You hold yourself in too high a regard, sorceress. I am still the king, Reay, and if I had made the decision to remain with my soldiers, and lead them as I rightfully should be, there is little you—or anyone else—could have done about it.”

Despite his obvious underestimation of both her will and her determination to keep him safe, she saw no need to argue over it further, as he was currently where she wanted him. “Once the royal city of Vasos has been taken, it will be considerably safer for you to re-enter Dargis and oversee everything personally.” She shifted slightly as Macala, her familiar, slithered from around her waist and moved over the sand to lie mere inches from the blaze of the fire. The snake’s tongue flickered in and out, seeking the scent of prey.

“Vasos will not be taken until Morvay arrives to aid us,” he replied shortly.

“It would appear that you are already by far dominating the Dargasians without Morvay’s help,” she pointed out, shifting closer to the fire herself to help drive away the nightly desert chill. The daytime heat and nighttime cold of the desert had been one of the most difficult adjustments for her—Gaal’s own temperature seemed a harmony of the two, sometimes growing cold enough to see light snow at the tail end of the year, and sometimes becoming warm enough to make one perspire simply by walking the streets. It had made the abruptness of Corrado’s shifting clime unsettling for the first year or so.

“Yes,” Zane nodded, “but the royal city is something else entirely. Every man, woman and child will take up arms against us before surrendering their king and queen, and I don’t wish to take any more lives than necessary. Once the Morvans arrive, we shall have enough force to subdue Vasos without excessive bloodshed. Ours *or* theirs.”

“Of course,” Reay said. “Because the last thing one wants in the middle of a war is bloodshed.”

“If I must spare Dargasian lives to prevent a greater loss to my own men, then that is what I will do,” Zane snapped back. “We’re not barbarians, after all.” He eyed her, most likely recalling that she was a worshipper of Evil; it was a fact that seemed to disturb him from time to time.

But because of his considering look, she pursed her lips together and decided to keep from making her next comment, although he erroneously appeared to take this as a disapproval of his own words.

“Tell me then, Reay,” he challenged, “how would Gaal be facing this conflict?”

She looked at him calmly. “I could only presume, for like all of Trivallyn’s countries, Gaal has never before faced battle with another land.”

“Then presume.”

“All right,” she nodded, sitting back slightly. “I would hardly think that lives would be an issue so long as the objective was met. Even the lowliest Gaalene peasant would likely agree to that.”

“To an extent, perhaps,” he scoffed. “But I would think that the risk of mass casualties would give pause if it could in any way be avoided.”

She shrugged. “To attempt anything half-heartedly is hardly an attempt at all.”

“I dare anyone,” he gazed at her, his hazel eyes flat, “to claim that I am engaging in this half-heartedly.”

“An absurd claim it would of course be,” she agreed smoothly. “But you let your worries and emotions overcome your objective. In the time it may take for Morvay’s soldiers to reach us, King Numont could possibly come up with another defense of Vasos, or send for reinforcements himself. Waiting could be a dire mistake.”

“But there is no guarantee that Vasos can be taken without Morvay’s aid. I think it is much safer to wait for the certainty.”

“Perhaps you are right,” she conceded, “but you asked me how Gaal would likely handle this, and that I have answered. They would attack with every one of their resources, and not relent until they had either defeated their enemy, or until each and every native had died in the attempt to do so.”

Zane stared at her for a long moment. “Truly, I do not envy whichever country has drawn Queen Pavula’s wrath.”

“Indeed. Although I suspect it shall not be long before we learn the answer to that. She is a decisive woman.”

“I only pray that it is not Morvay,” Zane muttered.

“Have you yet received word on when to expect them? The Morvanian soldiers, I mean.”

“The latest reports would have them reaching Dargis’s northern border in half a fortnight at the earliest. It is doubtful we will have even pushed Numont’s men back into Vasos by then, so their timing should be perfect.” He paused for a long while. “I thought surely that if anything would provoke a sign from the Gods, it would be this.”

“Perhaps they are so disgusted with our behavior that they have chosen to leave us to the fate of our own making,” she reasoned. “One could hardly blame them, recent events considered.”

Zane snorted his disagreement. “Right,” he said.

She blinked quickly, startled, before she could stop herself. Despite their ten years together, he still surprised her far too often.

“A curse on all the Gods, Charette included,” he suddenly snarled. “The blame for this war is entirely upon them, for surely we would not have come to it if they had not gone silent and allowed these disasters occurring all over the world!”

The sorceress stared at him, her black eyes disguising her shock with much effort.

“Perhaps this is a test,” she offered, nearly at a loss for words.

“If that is the case, then good riddance to them all. I cannot speak for the other countries, but Charette was never given any reason to doubt the loyalty of Her people, and if Her reward has been for us to suffer through drought and war, then perhaps we shall be better off without Her.”

The sorceress glanced about quickly. “You may want to consider lowering your voice, my king, for I doubt hearing you speak such words will do much to inspire your soldiers. You may have lost faith in Her, but the hope of Her return is all that some of these men cling to as they ride into battle.”

“Then they are fools,” he returned, although in a much lower tone. “It is time we faced the truth. With their silence the Gods have spoken volumes, and if they have forgotten us, then I see no reason why we should continue to worship a memory.”

“I never realized you were the bearer of so cynical a heart,” she said quietly, looking past him to the numerous soldiers littering the camp. Thankfully, none had ventured too near; the impact of the king’s words had they been overheard would have been . . . unfortunate, to say the least.

“I’m not being cynical, I’m being practical,” he insisted. “If my people wish to continue worshipping Charette, then I will not in any way attempt to deter them, but I am not about to waste any more of my time doing so. It is simply a decision every individual will have to come to on their own, and I have come to mine.”

She stared at him again, still completely thrown off balance by his words. “But do you not fear the repercussions of this if your Goddess *does* in fact return?”

“Reay, I think you are misunderstanding me,” he told her, looking at her seriously. “I did not really mean that I wish for Charette and the other Gods to remain silent. In fact, I would be much relieved to be proven wrong, if for no other reason than to learn some sort of explanation for their absence. However, I have to focus and work with what is actually tangible. I cannot afford to consider anything right now that is not fact.”

“I understand,” she said after a long pause. “Although it is my hope that, if they do return, your God is plenty more merciful than mine.” She nearly shuddered at considering how Diamont would reward such words if spoken by one of His own.

Zane shrugged, appearing unconcerned. “I have made the choice of putting my people before my Goddess; it is as simple as that. If She wishes to punish me for doing so, then I will gladly face whatever repercussions She deems valid. But that does not change my view on the matters before me now.”

The sorceress watched distractedly as Macala slithered away suddenly into the dark night, her tail rattling loudly in the quiet. “Have you heard what the Dargasian prisoners have been saying?”

Zane stifled a yawn, suddenly looking bored. “Yes. They claim that a dream came to a member of their royal house, and that their God, Terek, has approved of the battle.”

“I assume from your tone that you think this to be a lie,” she frowned, looking over at him. Few would pass off any sort of claim that offered proof to the return of the Gods.

“Well, I certainly don’t believe it to be truth,” he scoffed. “More likely it is a story concocted by King Numont to inspire his armies. Although it doesn’t seem to be doing him much good, does it?”

“I suppose not,” Reay muttered. She was still very much disturbed by not only her king’s strange new attitude, but with the fact that she had not seen it coming.

Unacceptable.

“Dawn is not far off,” he said tiredly, getting suddenly to his feet. “I’m going to try to get some sleep.”

“Easy rest, my king.”

She watched him as he retreated slowly to his tent. Her own mind was now firing thoughts much too quickly to allow the time for any rest herself. Unlike Zane, she was not able to pass off the claims of the Dargasian prisoners so easily, and she was even unsure of what to hope for. Clearly the thought that one of the Gods had finally broken the silence should be cause for great celebration. However, if this were true, why had only Terek spoken out, and to what reason would He encourage this war?

Zane was probably correct; likely it was nothing more than a gambit created by King Numont to rally his people against Corrado. But then again, what kind of man, king or not, would have the courage to speak false words in his God’s name, even for such a cause as war? Truly, the mere thought was blasphemous to the point of being unthinkable. But was it easier to believe that the God Terek had actually returned?

Reay was still pondering this, hours later, when the red sun began to rise slowly in the western horizon. The only conclusion she’d come to was the one that now boasted her clear understanding of Zane’s decision not to waste any more of his time dwelling on mere possibilities and assumptions.

Of course, he had known that she would do it for him.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

Spotting the gleaming city of Crysmir far below, Jian sharpened his will and sent the white dragon beneath him spiraling into a lazy descent. The wizard could feel the power of his enchantment spell beginning to wane, but he was fairly certain that his control over the massive beast would hold until they reached the ground—although he *was* beginning to suspect that they might just have to make a run for it once they did. No dragon appreciated being used in this manner, and this beast was proving to be no exception.

The wizard squinted into the sharp wind as he watched the snowy mountain peaks surrounding Crysmir glide closer, until finally he spotted a large clearing several miles distant. He directed the dragon toward it. The creature screamed its fury but turned as commanded, its glimmering, massive wings stretching back as its feet reached out and smoothly grasped the ground, causing only a slight disruption to its passengers. Jian then attempted to make the dragon lower one of its wings to aid their dismount, but the beast roared in protest, its head rolling angrily at the end of its long neck. No doubt it felt as clearly as he did how close its freedom was.

“Everyone off!” Jian called, his voice calm. Not sparing the time to ensure his companions followed his directive, he rolled to his right, plummeting many feet into the deep snow. Seeing the others landing beside him, he got to his feet and backed up quickly, his eyes on the dragon. The enchantment was nearly all frayed away now, but he clung to it stubbornly, hoping he still had enough power left to distract the beast. He really should’ve stopped earlier to strengthen the enchantment. Doing so while in flight was possible, but risky—for if the wizard was to lose control while airborne, it would be but a simple thing for the dragon to either dump him from its back, or eat him.



The dragon roared again, a stream of smoke shooting from its mouth as the enchantment finally broke, but the beast did not turn to them. Instead, and with a last, angry cry, it unfurled its wings and rose back into the sky, leaving a huge, deep depression in the thick snow.

Kaymin was watching as the dragon disappeared quickly into the clouds above. “I think it wanted to attack us!” he exclaimed wonderingly. He had never before beheld a dragon, and his initial reaction had been an interesting mixture of terror and awe. Apparently this reaction was continuing to hold firm.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jian said, brushing the snow from his white velvet cloak. “I told you when we departed that the enchantment spell would remove any threat the beast presented.”

“Wonderful, now I’m all wet,” Cheyne grumbled, brushing snow from her leggings. “We finally spend a day here when it isn’t snowing, and you have us all roll about in it instead. I hate this country.”

“Then be grateful that we did not have to make this journey on horseback,” Jian replied, eyeing her sourly. “It would have taken us weeks to arrive here rather than mere hours.” Cheyne was not at all happy with him. After realizing that quick travel by dragon was possible—and *she* certainly had not shown any sign of the hesitation displayed by both Kaymin and Coedy at the dragon’s first appearance—she had assumed that Jian had not summoned one of the beasts earlier just to torture her. His explanations telling that the journey between the Noventian Mountain ranges and Dorcey had crossed far too much civilization to have made it possible—they would’ve had to go days out of their way to find a lawfully permissible landing site to call the dragon down—might as well have not even been spoken.

She returned his look now with a glare and said, “Or perhaps we could have been here days and days ago.” Turning to survey the lands, her tone changed abruptly as she went on. “But I agree with his highness. That dragon definitely wanted to eat us.”

The wizard turned away from her wordlessly and stepped over to Kaymin. “Find a suitable place nearby where you and the others can camp. If I leave now, I should be able to reach Crysmir before nightfall.”

His prince was clearly not impressed. “I still don’t approve of the idea of you going in there alone,” he frowned. “You won’t even have Ice with you.” Ice, of course, had not been able to journey with them on dragonback, and so was hurrying across Wherry on foot to meet them.

“There is no other way,” Jian replied. “None of you would be permitted inside Crysmir’s walls. Besides, I know now to beware of Loewen. He will not catch me by surprise.” He paused, giving Cheyne a quick glance, but said nothing more. The fact that only wizards and the male members of the Mithwell royal line were admitted into Crysmir was not precisely true. In the days before the Gods’ silence, when their kind was still known, seers too had been granted entrance to the magical city. But in any case, he was very much determined to handle matters on his own—and besides, even if Cheyne did agree to admit to what she was, it was doubtful she would be believed, at least not without causing a great stir. And attention was the last thing Jian wanted.

Kaymin sighed, a familiar sign that he was relenting. “All right,” he finally said. “How many days do you figure you’ll need to locate the shard?”

Jian shouldered his pack. “If I have not returned or sent a message in three days,

assume the worst and carry on however necessary.”

Kaymin nodded slowly, looking as though he wanted to protest further.

The wizard returned the nod firmly and started away into the mountain ranges before his prince could put forth another fruitless argument. Entering into Crysmir to locate Gauvin’s shard was unavoidable, and he was the only one of them who could do it. No point in arguing against such a fact.

Although it had been eight years since he had last walked these paths, Jian remembered them well and followed the twisting trails with no fear of disorientation. Drawing closer to his destination throughout the day, a feeling of excitement began to creep over him. While content with his life by his prince’s side in Dargis, he had often longed to return to Crysmir with all of its beauty and wonders, despite the unfortunate manner of his leaving. Besides, if he’d had the temerity to put himself in the presence of King Mithwell and his heir, confronting his Brothers again should not be too difficult. Hopefully, most of their tempers had cooled toward him after so long. Then again, many had considered him a disgrace to the White Order, and it was questionable whether opinions so harsh would change no matter how many years had passed. He would find out soon enough.

As with all wizards, he had been sent to the Crystal City as a young boy, and for this reason, he would always consider Crysmir to be his true home. Besides the events preceding his departure to Dargis, Crysmir held only good memories, save one, of his lessons and dedication to his one true passion, his magic. His gift had been strong from early on, causing him to excel in his studies and progress much more quickly than the majority of his classmates, most of them coming to respect him quickly and without envy. There had, however, of course been an exception, a young wizard of the same age as Jian named Clail.

Jian forced his thoughts from that path instantly, almost out of reflex, even while fiercely hoping that he would be able to avoid encountering his old rival during his stay in Crysmir. With luck, Clail wouldn’t even be in the Crystal City, although Jian knew from his contacts that the man continued to reside there.

With the muscles in his legs aching from trudging along at such a quick pace through the thick snow, Jian was relieved when he finally rounded out of the final turn of the mountain pass and beheld Crysmir rising majestically before him. A myriad of towers and spires of crystal, constructed by the hand of Gauvin Himself, the city glowed with the reflected rays of the setting sun, an unchanged picture of stunning glory. Several eagles could be seen circling the sky above, familiars on the hunt.

Unable to contain an eager smile, Jian continued forward, passing effortlessly across the magical barriers and through the immense doorways that led him into a vast, high-ceilinged entranceway. He proceeded down the corridor and into the great hall, where the roof rose into a soaring, transparent dome far above.

Jian paused in the middle of the floor and merely looked about him blissfully. Rising from the polished floor beside him was an immense, sparkling fountain of white marble, a crafted dragon at its center. The water that poured from the creature’s great maw fell below into a large pool, the water shimmering like diamonds. At each rounded corner of the hall was a winding staircase leading up to the second level, where numerous wizards could be seen walking about, alone or in small groups.

After several more moments, Jian forced his mind back into focus and shifted his pack onto his other shoulder. There was no need to register his visit with the officials; his

presence had been noted and recorded the moment he'd passed through the magical barriers, and therefore he was free to make his first order of business locating the wizard Loewen, preferably before Loewen discovered that Jian had arrived in Crysmir. And thankfully, there was a registry office which carried the sole purpose of locating any particular wizard at any particular time amid the housing, teaching, and office assignments.

Jian headed quickly up the nearest set of stairs, returning a few warm greetings and ignoring a few cold ones, before heading down a long hallway and entering into the registry office. He was still breathing heavily from his long trek through the snow as he stepped forward to face the wizard on duty.

"Jian!" Mykola exclaimed excitedly from behind the long white marble counter. "Why did you not send word to me that you were planning to visit?"

Jian returned his friend's smile, privately relieved to find his old classmate on duty. Actually, Mykola was much more than just a former classmate; in addition to being one of Jian's remaining contacts in Crysmir, he was in fact the one man Jian would trust implicitly until the very day he died—although the reason for this was not something he cared to be reminded of.

Fighting off a stab of guilt, Jian quickly pondered on how he could best use Mykola's presence here to his advantage. "I will not be staying long," he replied, subtly looking about to make sure no other wizards were present in the office. "I've just come to gather a bit of research."

Mykola nodded, his long pale hair moving about his shoulders. "On your way to the library, then? Surely you've not been gone so long that you've forgotten the way!" he laughed good-naturedly.

"No, no," Jian grinned slightly. "Actually, I was hoping to locate Loewen. I require his assistance with my . . . project." He had always shown much interest in the history of magic, of both the White and Black Orders, and Loewen, thankfully, was an infamous researcher. He was therefore confident that nothing said so far would be considered at all suspicious.

Mykola's eyebrows still rose slightly but he said nothing as he looked over the magical charting system hidden from Jian's sight behind the counter. "Loewen, Loewen," he muttered to himself. "Ah, here we are. He is currently in talks with the Panel, but I can give you his housing number if you like."

"Please," Jian said. "And his office, if you would."

Mykola glanced back at the chart and read off the requested information.

"Many thanks," Jian said. "Now if I could ask of you one more favor?"

"Of course," Mykola said, his expression interested.

Jian paused. His friend's presence here was indeed a blessing. For as sure as he was of the fact that Mykola could be trusted with anything he had a mind to say, his purpose here was to be kept secret on the orders of the Gods themselves, and he would not be so bold as to compromise this directive in the slightest. But with Mykola being who he was, Jian felt he had been dealt a very lucky turn indeed.

He cleared his throat quickly and stared the other wizard in the eye. "I would appreciate it if you were to keep the knowledge of my presence here to yourself, for the time being. Just if you should happen to cross Loewen's path before I do." He didn't give a reason for this, and hoped fervently that Mykola would not ask for one. He was

also well aware of the fact that any wizard who'd seen him as he'd made his way from the great hall to the registry office could easily give word of his arrival to Loewen, but he had no choice but to leave that possible circumstance to chance.

Mykola, he noted, was now staring back at him strangely.

"Of course," the other wizard told him. "Although you realize, Loewen's been expecting you for days."

Jian's ice blue gaze narrowed slightly. "Has he, now?"

"Yes. He's come into the office several times over the past few days, inquiring if you'd yet arrived. This is why I wasn't very surprised to see you when you walked in."

Jian forced a smile, but again thought quickly on how far to push this. He certainly didn't wish to get his friend into any trouble, if he could avoid it. But Gauvin must be freed, and he would do what he must. He eyed his old friend with disguised calculation.

Mykola had always possessed an incredibly trusting nature, but even he was starting to look suspicious now. "You know, Loewen has been seen in the company of Clail quite often of late," he said. "Clail and Grady both."

"I had some private instruction with Grady," Jian replied with a smooth nod. "I was hoping to have a chance to speak with him as well." Inwardly, his heart had begun to pound furiously. If Clail was involved with the two, chances were he'd been turned to the Father God as well. Jian then harshly reminded himself not to let his hatred for the man draw any definite conclusions. And he certainly hoped he was wrong—facing off with Clail again was not something that he desired to do, whatever the reasons.

"I'm afraid I can't help you there," Mykola broke in apologetically. His brow had smoothed again, but the suspicious gleam still faintly shadowed his amber-colored eyes. "Grady is on a sojourn somewhere in the southern ranges."

Jian forced a frown. "How unfortunate. When is he due back?"

Mykola shrugged. "He has become quite a wanderer during the past several months, leaving often on meditative trarriances to various places in Wherry. The length of his absences always varies."

"I see." Jian pondered this, wondering how much damage Grady had managed to inflict before he had killed him back in the Noventian Mountains. "Well, I should go settle in," he then said leadingly.

"Oh, of course," Mykola exclaimed, shaking his head at himself. He checked his chart again and named a room that was vacant for Jian to use during his stay. "I was sure to house you nowhere near to Clail," he remarked with just a slight hint of warning in his voice.

"Again, accept my thanks," Jian replied, ignoring the last and wondering if he should again risk pushing Mykola on the subject of keeping his arrival a secret from Loewen.

"He will not hear of your presence here from me," Mykola then said suddenly in a low tone before looking back up and flashing a smile. "Perhaps if you have time later, we can meet and catch up."

"Certainly," Jian agreed, regretting the fact that he wouldn't be able to take his friend up on the offer. He nodded his appreciation and then turned from the room, heading for the north tower.

Until recently, and still unbeknownst to most of the White Order, there was no reason for any distrust or malevolence to be harbored by any of the wizards toward each other, and therefore locking one's door, magically or otherwise, remained unheard of within the

walls of Crysmir. Stopping outside the door leading into Loewen's private housing, Jian hoped that the older wizard had not risked drawing any attention to himself by now breaking this tradition. But, figuring that the door may very well still be enchanted in some other way, Jian did a quick spell to test this, finding no magical energy about the room whatsoever. Looking down the corridor to make sure he was still alone, he stepped into the room, moving cautiously. And so he should—if both Loewen *and* Clail were waiting to keep him from collecting Gauvin's shard, he was in for some serious trouble. He would not survive if forced to battle both of them together.

Loewen's room looked no different from any of the others Jian had seen during his years at Crysmir. A narrow, wood-framed bed, an armoire to hang one's robes, a desk and small nightstand. Most Wherrites loved ostentation; wizards rarely held to those same tastes. Jian walked further into the room, his eyes searching. A few spellbooks littered the nightstand, but after flipping through them quickly, he saw nothing, suspicious or otherwise, tucked within their pages.

The wizard sighed in frustration. He'd been hoping to find some clue to help him locate the shard, and he debated slipping down to Loewen's office and searching that as well. Finally, however, he decided that it would be safest to just stay where he was. The fewer men who saw him, the better the chance that Loewen would remain ignorant of the fact that he was already in Crysmir, something that was imperative if he hoped to catch the other wizard off his guard. Uncharacteristically impatient, he removed his outer cloaks and sat down rigidly upon the bed to wait.

Shadows crossed the room as the sky outside deepened into night, and soon the room itself faded into almost complete darkness. Jian did not stir. It was hours before the door finally opened, letting in a long, slanting shaft of light from the corridor. Loewen stepped inside, glancing up a moment too late. The older wizard flew across the room and smashed brutally into the far wall, choking on his exclamation of surprise.

Slamming the door shut with his will while simultaneously creating a white energy ball of light to see by, Jian leapt to the fallen and stunned wizard and roughly pulled a struggling white fox from the voluminous satchel slung about Loewen's form. The animal froze as Jian's hands moved around its neck.

Loewen's eyes widened in fear and he pushed himself back against the wall, blood from the back of his head leaving a violent stain on the cream-colored rug. His long, grayish hair hung about him shaggily, giving him a wild and uncontrolled look.

"Try anything and you'll be dead before the fox hits the floor," Jian promised with a downward glare. "Do you doubt me?"

Loewen stared and shook his head, perspiration beginning to stand out prominently on his brow.

"Now," Jian began, pacing slightly, his hands still tightly gripped about the familiar's white-furred neck. "I know you are in league with Grady, and that you take your orders from the Father God. I also know," he went on flippantly, "that Grady is dead, as he was killed by my own hand in the Noventian Mountains." He paused to take in Loewen's reaction, of which there was none, before concluding that the older wizard must have already been made aware of Grady's demise.

Jian continued. "You know I am here for the shard, and I know that you know where it is," he bluffed. "Take me to it. Now."

"Very well," Loewen replied shakily, his eyes upon his familiar. Using his arms, he

pushed himself back and slid upward against the wall, still looking dazed.

Despite his relief, Jian could not help feeling just slightly disgusted. At least they'd had to torture the Morvanian noble before *he'd* given up any information. "All right," he said coldly, turning toward the door and gesturing for Loewen to go before him, "Here's how we will do this. Give me your satchel. Stay before me, and do not make any sudden moves. If anyone approaches us, be polite, but do not linger. Do not forget what I carry in my hands." He tossed a handkerchief at the wizard. "And wipe up the back of your head. You're getting blood everywhere."

He needed to ask after Clail; he was afraid to ask after Clail. But Loewen had obviously been surprised to see him, so even if Clail *was* involved in this, he would not know of Jian's presence here yet, either. Best if he could just get his hands on the shard first. Then he would deal with whatever answer came to him regarding his old rival.

### *Chapter Nineteen*

Although the hour was late, the corridors of the wizards' city were well lit, shimmering in the light of the blue moon high above, the torches resting in braziers every few paces providing both warmth and illumination to aid the paths of any late-night roamers. Jian was silent as he followed Loewen out of the room and along several hallways before they began descending one of the stairwells leading down into the great hall. They passed a lone wizard here; Gacek was moving up while they down, but the man merely glanced at them briefly without breaking his stride. The glance had not been friendly—he was one who did not hold Jian in a very high regard. Loewen said nothing, and continued to lead the way downward.

While crossing the foyer of the great hall they met one other, Teron, the city's youngest resident and the last wizard to have been born prior to Gauvin's imprisonment. At twenty-one, his potential nearly matched Jian's, and, like Mykola, he was also a former classmate and friend. His large, blue-green eyes widened in surprise as Loewen and Jian drew near to him.

"Jian?" he said, his brow furrowed slightly as he came to a halt.

Jian paused. He had barely recognized the other man himself, for when last they'd seen each other, he'd been but seventeen and Teron four years younger than that. "It is I, Teron," he finally replied. Loewen had come to a stop in front of him, making an effective shield to hide the familiar that Jian had stuffed into the satchel now slung about his body. His hand continued to grip the fox's neck tightly. For certain, Loewen wouldn't want to attract attention any more than Jian did; indeed, he'd lifted the hood of his robes of his own accord to hide the stain of blood in his hair. Secrecy secured them both in this task.

Teron's face had now broken into a grin, although one that appeared somewhat confused. It was not unheard of for a royal wizard to return to Crysmir for a brief visit, but undoubtedly the young man found it curious as to why Jian would be doing so at this time. Dargis's problems with Corrado were by now widely known.

"Allow me to offer my welcome," Teron finally said, "although yours is not a face I expected to see here in Crysmir, considering present worldly hardships." Polite, but blunt; it seemed the young man's attitudes had changed little over these past years.

“I have come on royal business,” Jian told him. This was true, in part, as all would know once he met with the Panel and delivered King Mithwell’s orders.

Teron nodded in understanding, but his gaze flickered curiously to Loewen, who still stood paused between the two. Taking in Teron’s gaze, Jian silently cursed the typical nosiness of his race.

“I had a mind to do some quick research while I was here, and Loewen, being an expert on the subject of my interest, has graciously offered to assist me,” Jian said. Thankfully, his and Loewen’s position did not belie the possibility that they were in fact heading for the library. And the late hour was of little concern—many wizards kept strange hours, particularly when caught up in their studies and projects. Besides, this would mesh nicely with what he’d told Mykola.

Teron nodded again, his brown hair lightly brushing his shoulders. He seemed satisfied enough with Jian’s answers, but the young wizard paused slightly before responding. “It would seem that many of us are becoming insomniacs of late,” he finally said in a bland tone while meeting Jian’s eyes. “I myself have just come from the library, and left many of our Brothers still immersed in work there. Willet, Mauri, Clail, and Vance to name a few.”

Jian stared back at him expressionlessly. At any other time, Teron’s well-intentioned warning might have annoyed him, although a part of him would still have appreciated it. His old friend was simply trying to look out for him, after all. But what Teron had just done, in truth, was pay Jian a much bigger service than he could ever have imagined. For if Clail was right now in the city’s spacious library, he was obviously unaware of Jian’s own presence in Crysmir, a fact that brought Jian much relief whether Clail was in league with Loewen and Grady or not. Plus, this gave him reasonable proof that he had no need to worry over a possible ambush. Unfortunately, however, he could not see Loewen’s face to observe whether the older wizard had shown any reaction to Teron’s words or mention of Clail.

Jian nodded firmly at his friend. “A busy night indeed, here in Crysmir. Perhaps tomorrow we will both have the time to catch each other up properly.”

Teron returned the nod and continued on his way, and Jian gave Loewen a slight nudge to do the same. The encounter had been ridiculously lucky, and, whether it had been coincidence or not, Jian now moved along after his captive much more confidently.

Crossing the rest of the great hall took several minutes, and neither man spoke until after they’d passed into the western section of the city’s ground level. Jian began to grow suspicious as the other wizard brought him closer and closer to the wing of Crysmir devoted to the offices of the Wizard’s Panel. Eyes small, he hissed a low warning. The offices belonging to the members of the Panel, unlike the rest of the rooms in Crysmir, *were* magically secured, and any spell triggered against them would set off thunderous alarms. Perhaps it would not be unlikely to think that Loewen planned on doing just that in hopes of escaping in the assured melee that would follow.

“Oh do relax, I am taking you to the shard, as you demanded,” Loewen growled back at his warning, his fear seemingly forgotten.

Jian’s face darkened at the tone, and he shifted his hand over the trembling fox before snapping back one of its front paws. Loewen cried out and stopped suddenly as his wrist gave an audible crack. He pitched over to the side, falling against the wall.

“Be quiet,” Jian ordered, kicking him sharply in the back of his legs to get him moving

again. He glanced about quickly, seeing no one.

Loewen gasped against his pain and continued on at a quick shuffle. "You fool," he hissed furiously. "Do you not realize that to go against the Father God will lead you only to your own doom? The world we know has already begun its death throws. Its illness knows no cure."

"It is not my future, or Trivallyn's, that you should be concerned with at the moment," Jian replied. "Or must I break your other wrist as well before you realize that?"

Loewen stopped before a closed door, his tone changing abruptly. "I try merely to help you. You would do well to realize now rather than later that the only hope you have for survival lies in the embrace of Kauric. The six of you alone cannot hope to fight Him."

Jian ignored this and frowned slightly at the closed door. "I know this room," he said. "It is where the Panel keeps the enchanted artifacts."

"Yes," Loewen nodded, reaching out with his good hand and pushing the door open.

Jian followed him inside, his eyes alert. The room was as he remembered it. Simple, white shelves lined the high walls, displaying objects that were both rare and mundane. Taking care not to touch anything, he moved slowly down the wall, taking in each artifact, observing everything from quills to swords to crockery.

"Don't waste your time," Loewen told him, still standing near to the door, now closed behind him, and hunching slightly over his broken wrist. Sweat was beaded upon his thin forehead. "The shard is not amongst these things, nor anywhere in this room."

Jian spun on him angrily, even while working to keep his thoughts clear. "Then why have you brought me here?"

Loewen wore a pointed look as he brushed past Jian, his uninjured hand reaching into one of the pouches hanging from his belted waist. With his face falling into a familiar look of concentration, one that foretold spellcasting, he withdrew silvery powder and threw it at the naked expanse of the far wall.

With his grip on the fox tightening even more, Jian took a step back and watched warily as the wall shimmered, and then as its center fell back and revealed a large, smooth archway that led down into utter blackness.

Loewen looked back at him. "The shard lies through there," he said.

Still suspicious, Jian nodded slowly. It was of course only sensible to think that the shard would be in a hidden location, and although he did not trust Loewen, he had little choice but to continue to follow him. "Very well," he said. "Light the way."

Loewen did as directed by creating a small, white ball of light that hung near to his shoulder before he stepped through the magical doorway his spell had revealed, moving slowly into the blackness.

Jian followed after him, still holding steadily to the trembling, injured fox. A wide set of white stone steps appeared before him, leading downward. He stepped carefully, peering through the darkness to his right and left and seeing nothing but unending blackness to either side of him. Their footsteps and breathing echoed quietly, impressing upon him that a deep, immense vastness surrounded them.

Jian lost all sense of time as they descended, and he focused on nothing but the wizard ahead of him as they moved deeper and deeper into the strange passageway. Finally, he realized that the blackness around them was breaking slowly, until at last he was able to see well enough without the aid of Loewen's light ball. The staircase made a wide, rounding turn, and a sudden, nearly blinding light shone up from beneath them. Jian



pushed past Loewen as the steps came to an end and he simply gazed about him, blinking quickly.

The room he stood in was immense and of a white brilliance that stung his eyes. Numerous pillars rose to the ceiling stories above, and he pivoted slightly on the shiny floor, the expansive emptiness of the place disconcerting him. The room, for all its size, was completely devoid of all decoration or ornamentation but for a small, three-legged glass stand at its center. Lying simply upon it was a long shard of brilliant crystal.

Jian turned sharply back to Loewen, who remained standing at the bottom of the stairs and who was now watching him closely. Jian's instincts prickled a sharp warning. "Bring it to me," he ordered.

Loewen's eyes narrowed. "My touch will not release Him. If you wish Gauvin freed, you will have to do it yourself."

"I realize that," Jian snapped, "knowing you for the foul heathen that you are. But I would have you bring it to me just the same."

The older wizard paused, his eyes darting from Jian to the shard and back again.

"It has been magicked, has it not?" Jian nodded knowingly. "Your willingness to bring me here has betrayed you."

"I would hardly call it willingness," Loewen returned fiercely, his eyes looking meaningfully to his familiar.

"What kind of spell has been put upon the shard?" Jian went on, ignoring his words.

"I do not know."

"You're lying," Jian spat.

"I'm not."

"Then who cast it?"

Loewen paused, and shot a worried look down at the fox in Jian's hands. "Grady," he finally replied. "Once the Neutral God, Terek, was released, Kauric bid that the shard be further protected in case the entranceway was discovered."

Jian wondered what would have occurred had Kauric instructed His minions to destroy the shard rather than magick it—and why He hadn't. Very likely the shards were indestructible. "And you've no idea as to what spell Grady used on the shard?" he went on.

"No. He came down here alone to perform the casting. The Father God's directives were always given to Grady. Until you killed him, of course."

"These directives are given through dreams?"

"Yes."

Jian still suspected a lie in his words. "Well, you are about to put an end to the mystery." He nodded toward the shard. "Bring it to me," he said again.

Loewen eyed him warily, then gave his familiar another glance, obviously weighing his chances for survival if he refused. Finally his face hardened with resolve. "Kill me if you must, but I will help you no further."

"Very well," Jian replied, striding forward. He halted before the small glass stand and, moving swiftly, he clutched the fox fiercely in his right hand before bringing the animal down to press firmly against the shard. Instantly, Loewen began to scream behind him, and Jian turned quickly to regard him, holding tightly to the struggling fox to keep it in place.

Loewen was shaking violently, already collapsed onto the floor. The skin on his hands

and face seemed to roll, then bubble, and the wizard tore at his flesh with his fingernails in agony, leaving bloody gashes over his cheeks and forehead as he screamed.

Jian turned away and looked back down at the familiar, which was still struggling violently against him, also now a bloody mess of fur and skin. One of its eyes suddenly sank back into its skull, spewing liquid, and Jian realized that behind him, Loewen had just clawed out one of his own eyes in his torment.

Feeling a wave of nausea roll through him, he released the fox and backed off several steps, Loewen's tortured cries still ringing in his ears. The fox shuddered, its legs kicking spastically as it rolled and pitched off the side of the stand's surface. It lay on the floor motionlessly, the faint path of its breath barely discernable upon its small body.

Jian again looked back at the other wizard, who appeared alive but unconscious. Loewen had fallen silent, his face and arms completely covered in blood, a violent shock amidst the whiteness and seeming purity of the room. Breathing heavily, Jian brushed a sleeve across his forehead and turned back to the shard lying innocently upon the glass. Unconsciously, he began to circle it slowly, watching as it began to pulse with a white light. It should now be safe for him to touch, but he had no way of knowing for certain. The enchantment it had been imbued with would have left behind a residue of energy, and because of that he would not be able to discern magically if it held any further spells within it.

He stopped his pacing and stared down at the shard, focusing all of his energies into creating a magical shield about himself. It may not fully protect him, but, seeing as how Grady's power had been far inferior to his own, it would at the very least soften any blow that was triggered. With his shield, it was extremely unlikely that he would die. Forcing himself into shallow, steady breaths, he reached out and gripped the shard in his hand.

The world before him exploded in flame and light, and he felt himself suddenly flying backward even as searing agony erupted throughout his entire body. He did not feel himself land, but found himself looking dazedly up from the floor, his vision hazy. He tried to move, but his body screamed in torment and darkness closed in behind his eyes.

When he awoke, pain was the only thing that registered into his barely conscious mind, and he battled against the flood of anguish to force his eyelids open. They felt oddly thick and swollen but he fought to keep them from again closing, finally managing to focus on the white ceiling high above. He kept still, needing all of his will to keep aware as wave after wave of burning agony roiled over his burnt skin.

The sound of raspy laughter finally drifted to his ears, although it took him a while to realize what this noise was. Keeping his breathing even, he shifted his head and rolled his eyes across the floor, even this slight movement causing him to cry out.

Loewen was lying on his side and gazing at him with his remaining eye through the bloody mask of what his face had become, a mad grin playing about his lips. "It would seem," he whispered hoarsely, "that you are not so formidable after all."

Jian managed his own deranged smile and felt his lips crack and begin to bleed. "I am not done yet, old man," he choked out with a laugh. "I believe I may yet have the strength left to finish you."

Loewen joined in with another cackle of his own. "Perhaps. But it will see the end of you as well. As it is, the air is thick with the smell of your flesh."

Jian shifted and turned his eyes down to take in his blistered arm. He blinked repeatedly, trying to clear his vision, and the shard swam slowly into focus, still clutched

in his raw and blackened hand. “It matters not,” he mumbled aloud to Loewen. “I live, and I still grasp the shard. I have done my duty.”

Loewen chortled. “You have killed yourself. *That* was not your duty.” He paused and gave way to a violent coughing fit, thick, milky liquid bubbling out from between his lips.

Jian felt blood running down his own throat and he coughed as well, quickly seeing black spots dance in front of his eyes. “I can accept that perhaps this is as far as I was meant to go. It only matters that I have freed Him.”

Loewen made a strange garbled and amused sound. “Can you really be so ignorant as to your own purpose? You were meant to lead them, you fool.” He giggled. “You may have freed Gauvin with your death, but you have damned your fellow Chosen. For lead them you will—straight to their doom!”

Jian blinked, his tortured mind attempting to make some sense out of Loewen’s words. “I have freed Him,” he finally repeated, although it sounded as babble even to his own ears. When no response came, he again slid his gaze across the floor. Loewen appeared to have lost consciousness again, the only evidence that he still lived the faint, rattling sound of his breath.

Jian stared back up at the ceiling, finally beginning to note that the unbearable pain in his body was starting to numb and fade. His mind grew foggier and his thoughts drifted. Only the living knew physical pain; it was therefore doubtful that he had more than a few moments left.

Feeling sudden alarm at this thought, he stubbornly forced himself to move, and searing bolts of agony shot out through his burnt limbs before the darkness reached out and pulled him into it once again.

## *Chapter Twenty*

The typhoons which had been barraging Pellarin’s coasts intermittently for the past several months had now entered into their third straight night of pause. The green, tepid waters of the Derdarian Ocean were uncharacteristically calm, dark and silent under the light of the pale moon. The wharves of the coastal port city of Cimbron, now the largest and busiest in the country, brimmed over with ships belonging to both pirates and fisherman, the intents of most if not all of these men questionable. The night was alive with the sounds of their raucous brawling and drinking, men littering the docks with ale mugs in hand and weapons of all kinds clearly displayed about their persons, their presence threat enough to keep any who did not belong from coming too near.

One of the largest ships, the *Wind Ranger*, sat silent within its slip, darkened and seemingly lost to the ruckus happening around it. If one looked carefully enough, however, shadowy figures could be seen standing sentry, quiet and unmoving, all about its deck.

The captain of the ship, pirate Tynon Mondy, lay below decks in his private cabin, listening to the sound of the waves gently lapping at the vessel’s hull. The woman who lay beside him sat up suddenly and pushed a hand through her tangled golden curls, carelessly letting the thin sheet that covered her fall from her body.

“I thought this was to be a celebration,” she complained, reaching across him and

bringing a goblet of wine to her lips. “But to judge from your look, one would presume you’ve just lost fortunes at the gaming tables.”

He shifted his deep brown eyes to take her in, his lips forming a slanted grin. “Perhaps your thoughts on celebrating differ from mine.”

She took another slow sip of her wine before setting it back down onto the small table beside the bed. “They seemed to be of a similar enough nature earlier this evening. And I do so prefer it when we celebrate together.”

Tynon laughed, reaching for his own beverage, a bottle of rum. He took a moment to drink from it generously. “Loza, if we do any more celebrating together tonight, I fear I may never be able to do so again.”

She smiled, running her fingers down his sun-browned chest. “Tell me your thoughts, Ty. Why, on this night of any, must you be dour?”

His face kept an easy expression as he regarded her. No man could deny her beauty; long, curling golden hair, eyes as green as the sea itself, and lips red and vibrant upon her delicate, oval face. Yes, a face as fair as a Goddess she had, the perfect mask for a nature as deadly as any man’s, not to mention a cunning that far exceeded most. She had shared his bed for nearly half a year now, and although his new position in Pellarin was in part due to her, he had never been so foolish as to let himself fully trust her.

“I am simply pondering on what form of retaliation will soon be aimed at me,” he finally answered mildly. “Thakker Cozad is not a man to take defeat lightly.”

Her feathery eyebrows flickered briefly. “Perhaps not, but word has already spread to every corner of the country. Even he would not be so bold as to try and remove you now.” She paused and smiled again. “Pellarin is yours. The entire underworld knows it, and the underworld *is* Pellarin. It would be folly to slacken in your diligence, of course, but to relax and enjoy what all your planning and waiting has finally brought to you, at least for one night, should not be too much to ask.”

“I suppose twenty years of work should grant me one night of peace and rest,” he seemingly agreed.

Nearly a score had passed since the skies above had opened and thrown down fire, destroying much of the lands and population, including the royal city of Quinelle and the entire royal line of House Sumond. The sudden and inexplicable assault had lasted for days, leading to the complete and bitter renunciation of Pellarin’s Goddess, Adera, by thousands, many who fled to safer lands both during and after the onslaught. For those who survived and decided to stay in Pellarin despite the damaged lands and the possibility of another mysterious attack, they quickly found themselves dropped brutally into the eye of chaos itself.

With no monarchy left alive to lead them, and no one left to enforce the country’s laws, it was only days before crime overtook the larger cities that remained, beginning a precedent that was quickly to be followed throughout the rest of the country. Looting and rioting ran rampant over the streets and through the towns, many of which were subsequently burnt to the ground after all its valuables had been routed out. Seamen returned to find their lands and homes either pillaged or destroyed, their king and his heirs dead, and the streets lawless and alive with an intense fury aimed at their Goddess, so much so that anyone foolish enough to still claim loyalty to Her was slaughtered on the spot, regardless of age or sex.

In the months that followed, once-secret underground organizations stepped forward

and flourished, all seated deeply in corruption and greed, and battles raged for years as each strove for dominance over the remains of the country. Gaming and whorehouses soon became the country's largest enterprises, making the men who owned them powerful and dangerous to oppose. As many discovered, it eventually became suicidal to simply walk down a street without a visible sign of one's affiliation.

The battles between the organizations raged on, although every time someone came near to dominance over them all, he was quickly dispatched, leading only to more bloodshed as his allies sought revenge. In the last few years, however, one man had slowly emerged from the background, a man who had been all but unknown to the underworld lords, and after years of scheming and plotting, of forging and breaking alliances, and of masterminding a subtle yet massive undertaking that had finally turned the underground on its head, the new voice of Pellarin, pirate Tynon Mondy, had finally emerged.

Having a subtle hand in more affairs than even Loza was aware of, Tynon was determined to organize and drop a rein over the chaos of Pellarin, as he had already begun to do over the city of Cimbron, his home and base of operations. Crime ruled, and it would of course continue to do so, but if some sort of structure was not established any fool could see that the country would soon collapse in upon itself, feeding on its own corruptions until what little remained of it was completely destroyed.

The pirates had been the first to fall under Tynon's command, although he'd had to kill several other captains to accomplish this. Next were the fisherman, who had always relied on their associations with the pirates for protection from any other marauders, and they fell with much relief under the new rule, finally gaining confidence that their wares would not be pillaged, although also thoroughly disappointed that they could no longer steal from one another. Once this was seen to, it became time to signal the hundreds of men he had placed in numerous gaming establishments and whorehouses across the country, and during the course of a single night, they pulled off a great overthrowing of each establishment, suddenly gaining Tynon the attention of each of the frontrunners and their various associations. This had been expected, and within days all the spies and hired assassins he had maneuvered into position years ago created another dramatic display of dominance as each took out their respective targets, men they had successfully managed to get close to. There was only one man Tynon had not been able to get anyone near; only one left with enough power to cause him serious worry.

Thakker Cozad, a character whose nefarious ways had been notorious long before Pellarin had been ravaged from the skies, had his fingers in nearly every organization in the country, in every city, town and village that remained, and had always been clever enough to keep many of his loyalists' identities secret. It was for these reasons that Cozad had been the last and most formidable obstacle standing in Tynon's way, and although the man was far too protected and careful for a customary assassination, Tynon had, after several years and with Loza's aid, managed to foil several of his operations and sully his name with far too many of his affiliates for him to be considered a serious frontrunner for leadership any longer. Now, with much of his resources stolen away, Cozad no longer wielded the power he once did, but Tynon knew that the man had enough connections left to keep him from going down quietly. And the pirate held no delusions that revenge upon him was being plotted, and that he had not fully won the role for leadership just yet.

In his lavish and richly decorated cabin beneath the expansive deck of the *Wind Ranger*, Loza sighed quietly, a clear sign of her exasperation with him. He glanced down at her again and rose a hand to finger one of her long curls. “Don’t be upset, my dear,” he told her, smiling faintly. “You have been at my side long enough to know that I am not a man who is distracted easily. Not for long, anyway,” he added, his grin widening.

She refused to return his playful look, and instead assumed a pout. It was a sight distracting enough to have been the very last to meet the eyes of many men; she knew her weapons, and she used them well. “It pains me to know that you think of me as nothing more than a distraction,” she returned.

She was certainly a lot more than that. In the months she’d been at his side, she’d personally removed almost a dozen men who’d opposed him, and had brought him explicit information that had saved his life more than once. He should very well owe her his very existence—and perhaps he did. But then again, perhaps he had merely been set up to witness her supposed loyalty. Because of the world Tynon Mondy lived in, he could not be certain either way.

“Very well,” he finally responded. “Would you settle instead for being an indulgence?”

She looked up at him through dark lashes and gave another soft sigh. “I suppose I shall have to be content with that. Although I am not a woman accustomed to merely settling.”

He let his eyes pass over her uncovered form admiringly—she was exquisite, in nearly every way. “Well, perhaps I will have the luxury of seeing to your needs more thoroughly once my business with Cozad is completed.”

“You worry for nothing,” she frowned slightly. “You will hear of any plans long before he comes near to launching them. You do still have spies within his empire, do you not?”

“You know that I do,” Tynon replied. He turned slightly to light a nub of candle on his bedside table, giving her the opportunity to reach for a weapon. He himself had successfully cleared away the competition. All Cozad needed to do now was rid himself of Tynon, and then Pellarin would fall to him easily; and Tynon would never have been able to declare himself this quickly without Loza’s aid.

“Then he cannot touch you. No one can,” she went on.

He moved back, his expression unchanged. If she had shifted in the slightest he hadn’t felt it, but then, he knew full well how masterful her talents were. “I would not be so arrogant as to claim no one,” he returned easily, taking another drink from his bottle. “In fact, I would hardly think anyone is completely untouchable. Certainly, even within monarchies the odd regicide has been found.”

She leaned back on her side, her head resting on her hand as she listened thoughtfully.

“That’s the drawback to carrying power,” Tynon went on, setting down his bottle, “there is always someone smarter and hungrier for it than you are.”

Loza made a sudden move, but halted just as suddenly, her hand still inches from his chest. Her eyes were wide, shocked, as she looked down slowly at the small blade protruding from her own chest, staring at it dully as it jerked spastically with every beat of her heart. The stiletto fell from her hand and dropped soundlessly onto the bed beside her.

“As your employer would do well to remember,” Tynon finished. He stood and pulled on his pants, watching as she expelled her last breaths. Normally, he loathed having to kill a woman, but in this instance he felt nothing but mild disappointment as he left the

room.

As always, several members of his crew stood about in the corridor which kept his cabin, and he gestured slightly to them as he emerged. "I'm afraid Loza's met with something of an accident. Have the slaves attend to the mess." He took a couple of steps before turning back. "But be sure to take the head first. I have plans for it." His men gave him expressionless nods as he started off again and slowly made his way up onto the deck.

Unlike Loza, whom he'd remained uncertain about right up until the moment she'd attempted to kill him, Tynon was aware of three others that Cozad had placed within his ranks. Two of them he would kill come morning, and the last he would send back to Cozad, complete with a silent message in hand; a scalp of long, golden tresses.

He crossed the deck silently in his bare feet, stopping at the bow and looking out over the calm waters. The bit of shoreline he could actually make out in the darkness was rocky and damaged, much like the docks that were constantly in repair due to the wild typhoons that continued to besiege them every few days or so. Before the typhoons had begun, several months ago now, what remained of the beautiful, tropical lands had flourished under the continued influence of the salty sea air and the balmy, humid temperatures. The dense jungles in the northeastern corner were nearly bursting with their vibrancy, and the country's much-coveted bounties, such as its production of sugar and various fruits, were almost over-flowing in their abundance.

The fishermen that remained in Pellarin also prospered—when they weren't being raided by pirates, although of late that was no longer a concern—and had much less competition than they did twenty years ago, making it a lucrative business for any who had the nerve to risk being overcome by marauders. Since the typhoons had started, however, men feared to travel far on their ships, and most stayed near to shore and stayed out only during the daylight hours, resulting in the sudden decline of what had always been, until the recent uprising in houses of ill-repute, Pellarin's largest industry.

In the days before Adera's Rage, as the destructive incident had consequently been tagged by the surviving populace, the fishermen's trade about the royal city of Quinelle had eventually become horribly over-crowded, as more and more men sought to gain their income from the ocean's bounty. Indeed, it would not be uncommon to look out from the shores and see a myriad of boats, both large and small, riddling the coastline as far as the eye could see. This, naturally, had led to fierce competition between the fishermen, until it was nearly impossible to sell one's catch and still retain a decent profit.

It was this influx in competition that had forced Malleck Mondy, a six-generation fisherman, into deeper waters. Borrowing what he needed from his wife's uncle, a wealthy nobleman of moderate importance, he'd sold off his mid-sized vessel and purchased a large ship, already named the *Wind Ranger*. He repaired the minor damages that had brought him the ship at an excellent price, expanded his crew, and began his new enterprise as a deep sea fisherman.

Deep in the ocean's depths, Malleck was able to catch the more rare species of fish which couldn't be found near the shores, and he soon became known for his abilities to capture whales, sharks, and squid, the latter being a personal favorite of King Sumond's. Malleck's renown grew, and his family flourished, although he regretted the long voyages that kept him from his wife and children. When his eldest son, Tynon, turned ten, Malleck began taking him along on his sea excursions, and, following the traditions

of his ancestors, began teaching him everything he knew about the trade as training for the day when Tynon would take over the ship.

It was during one of these journeys, when Tynon was but a boy of fifteen, when the sky opened and turned crimson above them. Pulled into a violent maelstrom, it was attributed as much to luck as it was to Malleck's thirty years of sailing experience that eventually saw their release from the murderous eddy, although nearly half the crew died in the attempts to pull the ship free, thrown overboard to drown in the violent waters below.

It took weeks for the damaged *Wind Ranger* to sail home, under a sky still stained the color of blood, and solely because the coastline they sailed to was no longer there. Broken earth ringed the land that was suddenly shore, and it was then known to them that Quinelle, their home and royal city, was gone, thrown down into the depths of the Derdarian Ocean.

They anchored close to the shore, for the water here was deep and caused the *Wind Ranger* no further threat, and rowed the last stretch in the longboats. The city they came to was Cimbron, a place that had once been almost the central point of the country. Fires blazed on roofs and smoke poured from broken windows, creating a black fog throughout the air, and people, men, women, and children alike, roamed the streets with any weapon they could put their hand to, both proper and makeshift.

Malleck and his men toured the streets, dazed and uncomprehending, although it didn't take them long to determine that staying in Cimbron would only prove their foolishness. They returned to their ship, reaching it just before nightfall, and made plans to sail north come morning. Their delay became their downfall.

That night, as they slept below, they were set upon by a vicious band looking for booty and slaves. Disheartened and already numb from the violence they'd witnessed on land, Malleck's crew quickly fell under the might and numbers of the invaders.

As the ship's captain, Malleck was dispatched quickly with a blade through his chest. Two of his crewmen, good, loyal men by the names of Stewin and Amsey, managed to break away, dragging a screaming Tynon with them. They alone escaped, plummeting into the warm ocean waters below and swimming all night before finally finding safe harbor.

Those two crewmen remained with him, as loyal to Tynon as they had been to his father, and in time they helped him to reclaim the *Wind Ranger*, which was restored as a ship for piracy. Together, they recruited and killed men, plotted to overthrow and deceive criminals, and did whatever else was necessary to get Tynon that much closer to fulfilling his ambitions.

And now, still the pirate's most trusted advisors, those two men stood below decks in the *Wind Ranger*, removing the pretty blond head of a woman who had stepped into their game and lost.

### [Chapter Twenty-One](#)

Jian drifted back to consciousness slowly and faintly. A thin, white fog appeared and eventually began to cleave its way through the blackness surrounding him. He stared at it, this strange mist, without thought, trying only to better see the white cloud that seemed so ready to reach out and enshroud him. Everything looked blurry, and he tried to blink,



hoping for his eyes to clear. He sought to move his limbs but was quick to discover that not only could he not move, but that he could not even feel his body at all. Strange.

The mist expanded to encompass him, and as it did so, everything suddenly became very bright. He blinked, or at least thought he did—he still could not properly feel himself—and he looked about with a sudden, sharp clarity as his gaze swam dizzily into focus.

All around him was the shimmering fog, although he realized now that he could see through it and into the vast white room beyond. Oddly enough though, he appeared to be hovering near to the ceiling. He looked back down into the room, feeling that he should know it, but his memory, like the rest of his mind, remained blank and empty.

He then took note of a man standing at his side, sharing the space of the mist with him. The man simply stared at Jian, a look of profound calm in his eyes. “This is not how events were meant to happen,” he said, his voice deep and smooth.

Jian frowned, again unsure if he actually physically accomplished this, but the thought of looking down to see if his body was actually still there seemed somehow silly. Pondering idly if he would be able to speak, he gazed back at the stranger, and wondered if they were acquaintances. Longish blond hair crowned the man’s head, his blue eyes and strong jaw marking his most prominent features, with a simple white robe swathed about his body to complete the look. Jian thought he felt a twinge of familiarity, but could not quite grasp it, nor did he try to.

“You will know me, but not by my countenance,” the blond man said. “All of your memories will soon return to you, if you choose to let them.”

Jian was confused, for he could not remember speaking.

“You need not speak aloud for me to hear you,” the man stated evenly.

The wizard accepted this thoughtlessly and looked away to again gaze into the room below him. *This place seems . . . familiar, somehow.*

The man nodded solemnly. “The knowledge is there if you truly wish to discover it.” He moved his arm slowly and pointed downward, his eyes never leaving Jian’s face.

Jian followed the man’s gesture slowly, an inexplicable shiver of uncertainty coming alive in his mind. He paused slightly, acknowledging this hesitation, but then decided to ignore the feeling and continued to slide his vision into the corner of the room. Two bodies littered the floor there, both garbed in white and hideously gored. Neither was identifiable, although perhaps that was simply due to the blankness of his memory. But he did feel quite certain that one of the men still lived. Arms and face torn and bloody, and a gaping socket where his right eye should have been, the man lying near to the stairs, somehow, still clung to life.

The other man, tall and lean by the look of him, could only be described as a gruesome and hideous mess. His robes were nearly all burnt away, revealing almost all of the charred and blackened flesh that covered him in patches from his face to his feet. Clearly this man had known torment, but now had mercifully been called home.

Jian turned back to the stranger blankly. *A pity*, he said.

The man nodded once, his eyes glinting. “Look again.”

Jian nodded and gave in to the pull of his eyes as they once more sought out the sight of the burnt body far below. He was aware suddenly of a realization that lingered just beyond the reaches of his mind, and for the first time since he had awakened in this strange place, he coherently ordered his thoughts to clear.

He stared with a sudden and calm knowing at the blackened corpse for a long moment before turning back to the man beside him. *Have I failed you, my God, or was I simply meant to go no further?*

“Neither statement holds truth,” Gauvin replied, His eyes still somber. “This world is not yet ready to have you leave it.”

*But if you are here, I must have been successful in freeing you, and I cannot regret that.*

“Yes, I am free of the shard which held me,” Gauvin nodded. “But the hand of my siblings and I is now much shorted. I say again, Jian; your death was not meant to have happened here and now.”

Jian pondered. *There are plenty of other wizards who are as loyal to you as I am. Can you not just choose another to take up my place amongst the others?*

“I’m afraid it does not work that way, my son. I chose you for many reasons, not the least of them spoken by the wizard Loewen.”

*Kaymin has led us this far, he can reclaim the position if he must.*

Gauvin shook His head slowly. “Terek’s Chosen has an important purpose among you, but it was never to lead. He understands that now.” The God paused briefly. “Only you possess what will be required to keep them on the correct path during the events to come.”

Jian frowned. *You give them far too little credit, Great One. They understand what needs to be done, and they carry with them the strength to do it. They know what is at stake.*

“They have not yet even begun to be tested,” Gauvin replied calmly, “and it is both expected and inevitable that at times they will fail. My Father will leave little room for error, and we fear that the absence of your influence will send them into directions unrecoverable.” The God stopped, his eyes narrowing slightly as He continued to stare at the wizard. “To lead was your purpose, and in this, you were to have faced tasks that cannot be taken up by any other.”

Jian bowed his head dejectedly. *Then I truly have failed you.*

“You gave your life to release me. No matter what choices are made from here, you must never believe that you have failed me. Not even we can foresee all that is to come, Jian, and we must deal with these unexpected turns as best we can.”

*But I am dead. I can help you no further.*

“Perhaps not,” Gauvin said, His lips pursing together briefly. “That will be left entirely up to you.”

Jian began to feel light-headed as he formed his reply. *I do not understand.*

“I know. But the reason that I have come to you now is to make you an offer.”

If he’d had a physical body, Jian would have nodded absently. As interesting as he was finding his God’s words, he was quickly becoming aware of new, pleasant sensations all about him, and a peace was settling over his mind that sought to claim him totally. What were these words of battles and destiny, and what did they matter now? Here was a place of no pain, no trickery or deception. Surely one’s death should not be something to be mourned, but celebrated!

Gauvin sighed suddenly. “I can see that death’s seductive grasp has already begun to claim you, so I will speak quickly. You must try to listen and consider what I am saying, Jian.”

*I am listening, Great One.* Jian did his best to focus on the God’s words, pushing these

new thoughts and sensations to the back of his mind with great effort.

“Although even we cannot turn mortals to immortals, those of us now free do carry enough power between us to grant each of our Chosen one intervention upon death, at which time you may decide if you wish to return to the world and your duties within it.”

Jian struggled for comprehension. *Are you saying that you wish to send me back?*

Gauvin’s response was grave. “I cannot stop you from ascending from the mortal plane, if that is your choice. But yes, I can return you to your human body, and heal you as though your injury never occurred.”

*I shall do whatever it is that you desire of me,* Jian responded. His mind was growing foggy, those wondrous sensations again trying to overpower him.

“I cannot make this decision for you,” Gauvin told him. “Now, make your choice and speak it.”

Never had Jian encountered such a conflict, and it was this more than anything that sharpened his mind back into a vague sense of reasoning. Trivallyn was dying, and he knew well enough his God’s wishes; he could not possibly refuse to try. But to willingly let himself leave this peacefulness . . . this calm . . . he did not know if he had the strength to truly wish it so.

Knowing he was losing control of himself, Jian tried to focus his mind once again, but his thoughts resisted. Alarmed, he managed to grasp onto the last, slim thread of logic that still existed within his reach, and he shouted out his command with all of his remaining will.

*Send me back.*

The world wavered, dropped from beneath him, and then for a long while, there was nothing.

Darkness again.

Consciousness finally crashed down upon him in a staggering and sudden wave of complete and total clarity; he remembered everything. Jian’s eyelids sprang open, the white light of the immense room nearly blinding him. He lay for a moment, unmoving, before finally shifting experimentally. No pain.

He sat up and looked at his body, raising his hands to inspect them. His flesh, which had been so horribly burned and blackened, was intact, the smooth pale color it had always been. His robes too were again whole and unsoiled, and he carefully placed the crystal shard, which was still grasped tightly in his right hand, into one of the pouches hanging from about his waist.

A faint noise echoed down from the stairwell, and as he rose quickly, an unexplainable and overwhelming feeling of exhilaration began to flow throughout his entire body. Never could he recall ever feeling so focused, so energized, so powerful. The sounds from the steps grew louder, but were still some ways off.

While he waited, Jian moved over to Loewen’s mangled and broken body. Amazingly, the wizard continued to breathe, taking in each shallow breath slowly and evenly, expelling them with a disgusting, liquefied sound that came from deep within his lungs. Peering down at him, Jian doubted the other wizard had much longer to live.

The sudden silence alerted him, and he turned expectantly to face the staircase, anxious to confront this unknown visitor who was now obviously proceeding with much more caution. Either Grady and Loewen had not acted alone in their sacrilege, or chance had caused some other wizard to stumble upon the opening to this chamber. The last was

unlikely, but certainly not impossible—the study of Crysmir’s enchanted artifacts was of interest to many who dwelt here. But his instincts told him otherwise, and he would not be so foolish as to ignore them.

Jian felt his face slide into a stony mask. His eyes settled upon the staircase directly before him, his body tensing for a fight. He did not pause to see who approached, but instead with perfect timing launched a sudden and deadly force of power at the unknown figure as soon as it rounded the turn in the stairs and became visible. A split instant after, he threw up a shield around himself, completely undetectable to the naked eye.

To Jian’s amazement, his force slammed into a shield just as powerful as his own and dissipated quickly into nothingness. Prior to leaving Crysmir to take up his royal duties in Dargis, *none* here had possessed the power to equal him.

Surprised laughter rang throughout the air. “Why Jian, are you still alive? Although truly, I must admit,” continued the young wizard as he stepped abruptly into view, “I was rather hoping you would be.”

“Clail,” Jian confirmed, unsurprised as he took in the other man. He could deny it no longer, now, and knew himself to be a fool for having done so earlier. *Thrice met. Each other’s death.* Yes, he should never have doubted it. “I should have known I would find you at the heart of this corruption, Clail,” he said.

Clail continued down the remaining steps before pausing. “This has little to do with corruption, my old friend. I believe the word you were looking for is *survival*. Well, that and *amusement*. I have found gullibility in the most unexpected places of late, and entirely to my advantage. It has made carrying out my tasks almost frighteningly simple.” He grinned.

Jian’s gaze dropped briefly to take in the bloodied handkerchief Clail gripped loosely in his hand.

Clail followed his eyes. “Ah, yes,” he went on flippantly, holding the handkerchief aloft. “A little warning Loewen left for me back in his room. It was quite easy to piece together your whereabouts after that.” His smile widened.

Jian nodded. “I was careless. But you are too late.”

Clail raised a black eyebrow as his gaze swept the floor at his feet and continued on over the dying, blood-covered wizard upon it. “No great loss,” he shrugged.

“Agreed,” Jian said. “But, as usual, you misunderstand.” He reached into his pouch and slowly withdrew the long, gleaming shard. “As I said, your arrival is too late. I imagine the Father God is going to be most displeased with you.”

Clail’s smile melted away as he looked down at the shard, then quickly over to the glass table which had held it. “But, my enchantments—!” he sputtered.

Jian stared at him wordlessly and without expression. Of course, the spells had not been placed by Grady, but by Clail, which explained why the last had carried enough force to blast through his shield and injure him so badly. And it had been Clail who had given Grady the warning before sending him out after the Chosen into the Noventian Mountains, not Loewen.

“I see how you got past the first spell,” Clail gestured wildly at Loewen, “but I nearly killed myself placing the second, and it left no room for self-protection, not even with your strength. It is not possible that you could have survived it!” he glared, gray eyes afire.

“Believe me, I am no spirit,” Jian said. “As you are soon to discover.”

Clail spun on him furiously. “You mean to threaten me? Perhaps you fail to realize what I have become during your absence.”

“You mean besides an apostate and disgrace to the White Order?”

Clail’s eyes blazed hotter. “I am not the boy you remember from our studies here together,” he warned, pushing back the sleeves of his robes. “Do not think that I haven’t used the time to my advantage.”

“I’ve heard plenty of what you’ve been doing,” Jian scoffed. “And I think you are the one who is making assumptions. I may no longer reside in Crysmir, but that does not mean that I have lost touch with its goings-on. Nor would it imply that I have been slacking in my own lessons.”

“I do not know by what luck you have survived my enchantments,” Clail glowered, taking a few steps closer. “But it will help you no longer. Truly, I have awaited this moment for far too long.”

Jian matched his look, but fought to keep a rein on his temper. “You fool. You know the outcome of this as surely as I. We will do this, but not this day.” To his surprise, Clail paused and his face gave a brief flash of uncertainty, but the look passed as swiftly as it had come. But then, Clail did not know that they had now already killed each other once.

“This day suits me well enough,” Clail finally replied, dropping his shield and launching his attack.

Jian had no choice but to do the same with his own shield—for he could not retaliate with his own power if he did not—and quickly let himself fall into a defensive position to allow him time to gauge Clail’s refined powers. As he deflected each shot aimed at him, he was shocked to discover that his old rival had indeed come a long way in the past several years, even though Mykola had reported as much. They were a near perfect match in strengths, now; a strange twist to reality, and one that Jian had trouble accepting. Throughout all their training, Clail had always fallen second to him.

His concentration slipped slightly at this determination, causing him to make a sloppy deflection and resulting in his scorched sleeve. Furiously, he ordered himself to focus, with a harsh reminder that Gauvin would not be making any subsequent offers if he foolishly allowed himself to be killed again.

“I must admit, Jian,” Clail paused suddenly in his assault, “I am impressed. I didn’t realize that being a prince’s lapdog would allow you so much leisure time as to keep up with your training.”

“How could you?” Jian returned vengefully, his fury getting the better of him. “As I seem to recall, you were deemed far too unbalanced to have been given such a position.”

Clail howled in rage and let fly another ball of power. Jian pivoted, easily side-stepping the wild shot which slammed into the pillar behind him and blew it to pieces, before finally letting loose his own energy ball. In his fury, Clail sent his own retaliation to meet it, and the two forces met and clashed together in the air between them, exploding and sending both wizards flying.

Dazed and bruised, Jian quickly pushed himself back to his feet and scanned for Clail. The other wizard lay clear across the room, on his stomach and with blood leaking from a nasty gash on his forehead. Jian watched him for a moment, at war with himself. Despite his every intention to keep his head, he was in this now, and his every desire screamed for him to stay and finish the fight. However, doing so would, without a doubt,

result in either his or Clail's death, perhaps both their deaths. The seer's words had not been clear, and were murkier now than ever since they each had already died by the other's hand.

Jian forced his thoughts back to logic; it was doubtful Gauvin had brought him back from the dead for the sole purpose of killing his childhood adversary. Clutching at his pouch to ensure that the shard was still safely tucked within it, he bolted for the staircase. Clail's sudden exclamation of surprise sounded out to him as he raced up the steps, followed by an echoing, enraged scream.

"Coward!" Clail howled from below. "Are you so afraid to face me, Jian? Could it be that you have seen your death in my eyes?"

Hearing Clail begin to pursue him up the steps, Jian forced himself to block out any further taunts the other wizard made, racing blindly up through the darkness and almost slipping twice over his long robes. Finally the light glowing from the opening in the wall above loomed into view. Knowing that Clail was not far behind him now, Jian pushed himself into a final burst of speed. He did not know the spell required to close the magical doorway, but he was ready to improvise. As he stumbled through the opening, a wall of ice several feet thick formed across the opening, blocking out all sight and sound from beyond. It would not hold Clail for much time, but it should keep him trapped long enough for Jian to get himself safely away from Crysmir.

Knowing he could allow himself no time to rest, Jian hurried from the room and into the corridor beyond.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

Jian was nearly to the front doors that would take him out of Crysmir before he remembered King Mithwell's missive. Cursing under his breath, he stopped suddenly on the polished floor of the great hall, and for the first time since leaving the artifacts room, he looked clearly about him.

Mid-morning sunlight poured in through the clear, domed ceiling far above; apparently he'd been in that strange, secret underground chamber the entire night, and many wizards were currently about, some actually nodding a quick and polite greeting to him as they moved past. More men could be seen littering the four great staircases, and walking the levels above.

Quickly, Jian looked down to inspect himself, suddenly fearful of what signs may have been left from his battle with Clail. To his surprise, only his singed sleeve appeared amiss, although he was suddenly aware of feeling immensely sore and suspected he was covered in bruises beneath his robes. But it was to his relief that he found no visible reason to keep him from going to the Panel straight away; indeed, the sooner he left Crysmir the better. He was uncertain of what Clail might do once he managed to free himself, but he did hold several dire suspicions on the matter.

Turning, he started back down the corridor from which he'd come, finally entering into a large, ostentatious office lined with bookshelves. A middle-aged wizard, whom he recognized as Horice, sat behind a large desk in the center of the room, obviously trying to give the impression that he was intensely busy.

Jian stepped up before him. "I request an audience with the Panel immediately," he

said. Exhaustion was beginning to settle in, and he had neither the time nor the patience to indulge in the usual reverent and time-consuming processes that were necessary for meeting with the heads of the city.

Horice, obviously recognizing Jian, blinked in surprise, then assumed a haughty and condescending expression before replying. “The Panel is extremely busy, and you should be well aware of the fact that you cannot simply stroll in here and request an audience with them any time you please.” He looked down his long nose at something on the desk. “Now, if you would care to make an appointment, I believe I can fit you in to see them in approximately—”

Silently, Jian cut him off by holding up the small scroll he carried, the king’s official stamp clearly molded into the wax seal.

The wizard blinked again, and then got quickly to his feet. “If you would give me a moment.” Jian paced about impatiently once he was left alone, but Horice returned only minutes later.

“The Wizard’s Panel will now see you,” he said dramatically, holding open the door that joined this office to the next. Jian strode through the doorway quickly and into the room he remembered only too well. Long, white and empty save for a simple table in its center, the three Panel members sat facing him, their looks identical and expressionless.

Jian nodded courteously and blandly spoke his thanks for being seen so quickly, likely convincing no one that he actually meant it, as he did not. Not even the Panel would dare delay a message from Wherry’s king, no matter their dislike for its bearer. “I bring a missive of incredible importance from King Mithwell,” he went on, laying it down upon the table before them. “It is his instruction that fifteen of our order be selected and sent to Dargis, to aid King Gwilym Numont in his battle with Corrado.” Speaking this was unnecessary, but it gave him the opportunity to let them know that he was already aware of the contents of the official order he carried.

The Panel’s eldest member, a wizened and ancient man by the name of Schwan, stared at him with unblinking surprise before snatching up the scroll and breaking open the seal. Unfurling the parchment, he read its contents silently, then passed it along to his co-chairs, Temsey and Pacecca.

Schwan then turned a cold eye upon Jian. “It interests me to know what you were doing in Dorcey to receive such a task from our great king.”

After the events of the past night, Jian found the look and tone somewhat less than intimidating. “I took up travel to the royal city with my prince, his highness Kaymin Numont, to seek out a treaty between Wherry and Dargis. Following King Mithwell’s agreement to this proposal, I volunteered to bring the missive here to Crysmir myself. Now that I have done so, I will be departing immediately.”

Pacecca looked on him with an exaggerated expression of surprise. “You met with the king yourself then? How very . . . bold of you to put yourself in his presence after that debacle you caused regarding Prince Jostin all those years ago.”

Jian tensed. The placating look from Temsey was all that kept him from exploding. “Actually,” he replied, “it would have been rather petty if the king had chosen to dwell on such an incident while in the face of our present circumstances. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Temsey, the youngest and sole member of the Panel who fully understood what exactly had occurred between Jian, Clail, and Prince Mithwell eight years ago, subtly hid a smile behind the sleeve of his robes before clearing his throat. “We thank you for your

troubles, Jian,” he said. “And do not feel the need to rush off, know that you are welcome to stay in Crysmir for as long as you wish.”

Jian nodded respectfully to him. “I would be most pleased to do so, but unfortunately, there are other duties that I must attend to.”

“Of course,” Pacecca nodded firmly, exchanging a look with Schwan. “We could hardly expect him to stay when he assuredly has many more important matters to deal with in Dargis.” With a last, caustic glare, he dismissed Jian with a quick wave.

Relieved, Jian left without another word and hurried back through the outer office and into the hallway. From what he’d observed of their expressions, it was clear the Panel had not been gladdened to receive the order that would send fifteen of their number to Dargis, but it would be done. Jian was only thankful that they’d not kept him longer, likely because they’d wanted to rant over the order in private. Normally, he felt sure that Schwan and Pacecca would have continued to goad him until he completely lost his temper and gave them reason to punish him, or until Temsey had spoken up in his defense, thus giving the two senior members reason to turn on Temsey as well. A nasty business for certain, but he had neither the time nor the reason to dwell on it further.

Hoping the cold air would invigorate him, Jian stepped eagerly out of the front doors and breathed deeply, the sudden wind stinging and sharp against his skin. Too late, he realized that he’d left his warm cloaks somewhere inside Crysmir, most likely in Loewen’s room while he’d been awaiting the other wizard’s arrival.

Opting not to chance going back and running into Clail, he plunged ahead into the mountain passes, soon becoming numb and weary with cold and exhaustion. Although the sun continued to shine down brightly, the falling snow grew thicker, and, likely due to his increasing fatigue, Jian was suddenly intensely paranoid that he would take the wrong path and end up trudging through the snow lost for hours or even days.

He finally paused, taking a moment to clear the shadows from his mind, and opened his mental link to Ice. Almost instantly, he discerned the large wolf’s whereabouts, still days away and to the south. The animal was resting in a small cave, as wolves preferred to travel by night, warm and with a full stomach. Slowly, and with as much ease as his weary concentration would allow, Jian began draining Ice’s heated energy into himself. Taking only what he felt he needed to continue, he broke off the link and continued on, suddenly feeling delightfully renewed and focused.

The sun peaked at mid-day and began its lazy descent in the sky, losing some of its brightness to the gray clouds that continued to thicken around it. Jian continued on through the mountain’s icy passes, his borrowed energy eventually draining away as his body strove to fight off the bitterly cold air. He was tempted to open the link again, but feared draining too much from Ice and leaving his familiar with little strength to defend himself if the need arose. No Wherrite would dare try to harm any wolf they chanced to encounter, but other native beasts were not so discerning.

Finally, only a few hours before dusk, he suddenly smelled the intoxicating scent of a cooking fire, making his mouth water and giving him the last bit of extra strength he needed. Moments later, the fire came into view at the mouth of a large cave, accompanied by the welcomed sight of his prince repositioning a large spit, upon which hung a skinned and gloriously plump mountain goat. His lungs too breathless and icy to call out, Jian continued his approach in silence, his stomach rumbling ravenously.

Finally Kaymin noticed him and shot to his feet with alarm. Springing forward, he



helped the wizard forward until Jian finally collapsed before the fire.

“Jian, you’re nearly frozen to death! What became of your cloaks?”

The wizard held up his hands weakly. “Rest and food, first,” he insisted.

Kaymin nodded slowly and moved to throw more of the wood he’d collected onto the fire, his expression making it obvious that he was forcibly keeping himself from asking a hundred more questions concerning his wizard’s health and bedraggled appearance.

“What is the meaning of all this yelling?” Cheyne demanded grumpily, suddenly appearing at the cave’s opening. Her look fell to Jian and her eyes narrowed as she gave him a quick inspection. “You look terrible. Did you at least get the shard?”

Kaymin glared at her.

Jian shifted slowly and eased Gauvin’s shard out of his pouch. “Your doubting tone offends me,” he managed, weakly tossing the shard up to Kaymin.

The prince caught it deftly. “Go and fetch him some blankets,” he ordered.

Cheyne disappeared back into the cave wordlessly, returning only moments later with Coedy. They both carried several blankets and cloaks and promptly handed them to the wizard. Jian shrouded himself in the thick cloths and tuned out the chatter around him, including Cheyne’s repeated questioning and Kaymin’s fruitless attempts to get her to be quiet. Finally the mountain goat was finished cooking, and Jian felt the strength returning to his body as he hungrily devoured a huge portion of it.

At last he sat back, full and nearing warm, although still bone-tired. He would get through his narrative, he decided, and then sleep for two days. Before he could begin, however, a long, thin shadow fell suddenly across the ground, and he glanced up to find the others all staring past him.

Looking back over his shoulder, he saw the Neutral God, Terek, approaching. The God stopped before them and settled Himself onto the ground, appearing oblivious to the cold and snowy surroundings. Kaymin, of course, had hurriedly sprung to his feet and dropped to take knee, but Terek waved off the gesture and motioned for the prince to sit back down.

“Gauvin’s shard,” Kaymin offered, carefully holding it out to his God.

Terek, garbed again in black trousers and cape and a dark green shirt, took the shard carefully and tucked it into His belt. He turned seriously to Jian. “Have you yet told them of what befell you in the chamber beneath the Crystal City?”

“No. Gauvin is free. That is all that is important.”

Terek looked slightly amused. “I would think that you would now know differently.”

Jian shifted uncomfortably under the God’s gaze, taking in the curious looks of his companions. He had debated with himself all throughout his journey back to them on whether or not he should tell them of the one immortal death the Gods had decided to grant each of them, fearful that the consequences might very well lead to unnecessary recklessness. Terek, it seemed, had decided to take the decision out of his hands.

His strength all but defeated, Jian finally met the looks of the others and spoke out most of his story, leaving out only the details surrounding his past with Clail, and the words spoken by Gauvin foretelling their predicted failures. Kaymin, horrified to learn that his wizard had in fact died, was struck speechless and sat staring blankly at Jian.

Cheyne, on the other hand, spoke up the moment the wizard had finished speaking.

“So, let me get this straight,” she said, turning to Terek with a lighted gleam in her eye.

“I could right now throw myself off of one of these cliffs,” she gestured around her, “and

I wouldn't die?"

Terek pursed His lips together and regarded her worriedly. "Of course you would die," He finally replied, ignoring the pointed look that Jian had the nerve to shoot Him. "We are not giving you the power of immortality. Such would be impossible. However, Yanoka would appear before you fell completely into death's realm and offer you the chance to return to Trivallyn."

"I can think of some places where having everyone think me dead would be most beneficial," Coedy spoke up, looking thoughtful.

Cheyne nodded to him before looking back at Terek. "So, I would still have to endure the pain of my body slamming into the ground?" she queried.

The God appeared extremely disturbed now. "Yes . . . but do understand that this is not a gift to be taken idly, and with any hope it will remain an unnecessary service for the rest of you."

She nodded quickly, obviously only listening with half an ear.

Kaymin turned his own disturbed look from her onto his God. "Trust that the gift will be used only wisely, and in the neediest of circumstances."

Terek nodded, clearly relieved that His follower, at least, appeared to be showing some sense.

Kaymin continued. "Which land is it that we need make our way to next, my God?"

Terek's serene mask fell back into place. "Pellarin," He said.

Jian noted a fleeting reaction pass over Coedy's features, one which made it clear that the boy was not thrilled at the prospect of returning to his homelands.

"Adera's shard," Terek went on, "has been left to fall among the remains of Her once royal city. It is there you will find it."

Confused looks stole over all of their faces, but Coedy was the first to speak. "The royal city of Quinelle was destroyed twenty years ago. And there *are* no remains," he said.

"Of course there are," the God corrected. "They may not be readily visible to the eye, but do not assume that they are not there."

"Upon the ocean's floor?" Coedy realized, looking bewildered.

Terek nodded firmly.

Jian himself was perplexed. "With all due respect," he began slowly, "how are we expected to retrieve something that lies beneath such a massive depth of water?"

"You will find a way," Terek said simply, preparing to stand.

Noting his God's imminent departure, Kaymin hurriedly fired his next words. "I have a request, if you would," he said.

Terek continued to rise, but He paused and looked back at the prince.

Kaymin was silent a moment, obviously uncomfortable to be asking this under the eyes of his companions. "I was hoping you could tell us news of our homelands, and of the other parts of the world that we do not yet have knowledge of. I can't help but feel that we are walking about blindly without this information, and I fear the consequences of any error we may make because of it."

The God stared at him wordlessly for some time before finally replying. "This blindness you speak of is necessary, as you will discover in time. The sight you *do* possess is what's important now, and it is what you must not let yourselves become distracted from."

The prince nodded with disappointment, watching silently as the God stepped away and quickly disappeared upon the winding mountain trail.

“Pellarin,” Cheyne nodded after a moment. “If the tales I’ve heard told of it are true, I expect we’re in for some serious excitement.”

To everyone’s immense surprise, Coedy threw her a particularly harsh look. “You obviously don’t know what you speak of,” he snapped, which only seemed to intrigue her more.

“So, it really is as dangerous as the rumors claim?” she persisted.

“It is,” he confirmed. “None of you has any idea what we will be stepping into.”

“Not to worry,” Cheyne shrugged. “Jian’s the only one of us who can actually die now.”

The wizard exchanged a weary and exasperated look with Kaymin. “I will speak with her after I’ve had some rest,” he muttered quietly, “and try to make her understand.”

Kaymin nodded. “You should have plenty of time to do so—it will take us months to reach Pellarin’s coasts.”

“It need not to,” Jian replied, sitting back thoughtfully and idly watching the sun sink behind the peak of the mountains.

The prince frowned. “And why not?”

“We can make the journey on dragonback.”

“I thought dragons could not leave the confines of Wherry?”

“They can, although they strongly dislike doing so. I will need to stop and strengthen the enchantment spell every few hours, depending on the particular beast’s nature, but this way it will take us only days to travel there rather than months.”

Kaymin nodded. “Excellent.” He paused and glanced back toward Cheyne and Coedy, who were now apparently trying to discern which of them could come up with the most dramatic and creative death. “What do you actually know of Pellarin?” he asked quietly.

“I would imagine no more than the same stories and rumors that you yourself have heard. I’m afraid we are going to have to trust to the boy’s cautions and advice.”

Kaymin shot another apprehensive glance at the youngest member of their party. “No doubt we will soon have even more reason to be grateful for those immortal deaths,” he remarked.

### *Chapter Twenty-Three*

Prince Roan Almara, heir to the royal city of Rowe in the country of Morvay, carefully maneuvered his mount to slowly circle the outer fringes of the amassed crowd. Peasants and noblemen alike were flocking by the hundreds to the city’s large square, and forming a mob which looked to be on the very brink of turning from hostile to downright violent. The king’s soldiers patrolled the crowd, trying in vain to gain some control over those gathered, but they were clearly making little progress and would likely soon have to resort to violence themselves. In fact, it seemed the presence of the soldiers was only causing those here to grow more and more incensed.

Overhearing the report brought to his father earlier that morning regarding the recent goings-on in the city square, Roan had managed to slip away from his royal sorceress, Caley—not an easy task—and ride out into the streets of Rowe in a hooded and flowing

cloak. His parents would be furious with him for not taking an escort along as they'd ordered him to do every time he now left the castle grounds, but the challenge had simply proved too tempting. Still in the wake of his sister's mysterious disappearance, the king and queen certainly had cause for concern, although the prince still thought them to be ridiculously paranoid; after all, attempts weren't made all *that* often on the lives of the royal family.

Sudden raucous yelling and cheering erupted into a deafening roar, drawing Roan's attention to the inner circle of the mob. Unlike the majority of the people gathered here, he was on horseback and therefore retained a vantage-point that gave him no trouble in discerning the reason for the sudden uproar.

Nailed to long wooden posts hastily being stood up in the center of the cobbled square were the effigies of three wizards, their straw bodies covered over with flowing white sheets. Roan held back a grimace as a flaming torch was held to ignite the first figure, his very thoughts nearly becoming drowned out by the wild cheering that followed.

The latest earthquake had occurred only yesterday, and only half a days ride from Rowe itself. The royal city had trembled for hours afterward, apparently causing a renewed and hysterical anger from its people. Obviously, the common theory on the streets still placed the blame for these earthquakes upon the wizards to the west, and even though the king's own assumptions did not differ from this, his majesty had been quick to point out that there was simply no proof to support the claim. In other words, King Almara wasn't stupid enough to incite a battle with the White Wizards until he and his advisors came up with some sort of strategy that would tip the scales in the Morvansians' favor.

Watching the crowd, Roan decided he wouldn't be surprised if they turned on the castle itself next. With no explanation or ending in sight to these earthquakes, occurrences that had already taken the lives of hundreds, it was clear that the Morvansians had grown tired of waiting for their monarchy to act. The other two effigies were now lit, and all three blazed wildly.

A sudden, indignant caterwauling rose then over the shouts of the people, and the prince looked about him in surprise before his eye caught on the source of the sound. He gave a quick grin. A small gray cat stared down at him from the nearby roof of a weaver's shop, its yellow eyes fixed upon him angrily.

Backing his horse from the ever-growing mob, Roan paused beside the shop and patted the front of his saddle. "All right, Pooku, you win," he chuckled, catching the animal as it leapt gracefully from the roof. His identity still hidden within his hooded cloak, the prince turned back toward the castle at a slow canter.

Obviously, his sorceress was coming to know him far too well. Upon discovering his absence, she must have correctly assumed that he'd gone to see for himself what was causing such a stir with the populace, and had then sent her familiar to subtly collect him before the king discovered that his only heir was not where he was supposed to be.

As expected, the sorceress was waiting for him outside the stables, looking furious.

"Why must you insist on this foolish recklessness?" she demanded as he stopped his horse beside her.

He grinned, amused by her theatrics; it was a rare sight. "What recklessness?" he scoffed lightly as Pooku jumped to the ground, the cat giving a last angry growl at having been used for such a lowly task.

Caley glowered up at him. "Your parents have enough to contend with without

worrying over your whereabouts and whatever trouble you're likely getting yourself into."

"What trouble?" he said, dismounting smoothly. "I'm fully capable of riding into the city myself. I've been doing it since I was ten, and, behold, I'm still alive."

She waited as a stable hand came forward to collect and lead away his horse before continuing. "There are concerns now that were not present before, as I should have no reason to point out to you."

"Yes, yes," he acknowledged flippantly with a quick nod as they began making their way across the grounds. Glancing at her, he observed that he only seemed to be infuriating her further, which was far from his intent. Tanned cheeks flushed with rage, her green eyes blazed heatedly at him as they walked.

"Don't be angry with me, Caley," he said suddenly. "You know it was not my wish to cause anyone worry."

She raised a pale eyebrow at him, its color the same shade as her long, reddish-blond hair, before giving a relenting sigh. "I do know that," she replied finally. "I only wish you would start stepping into your duties with at least a partial eye toward your responsibilities. As much as you'd like it to, your childhood cannot last forever. You're eighteen now, far past the time you should be indulging in these careless whims of yours."

He glanced at her again, knowing the look in his gray eyes was uncharacteristically serious and belying the sudden smile he flashed at her. "If you're waiting for me to turn into a typical, boring old patrician who has no thoughts outside of his inherited duties, I'm afraid you're wasting your time. Being the heir does not mean being chained into monotony and dullness for the rest of my days. And if it does, then I will simply change the rules."

She pressed her small, pink lips together with obvious exasperation. "Unfortunately, I have neither the patience nor the time to have this discussion with you yet again, my prince," she replied bitterly. "The reason I sent Pooku into the city to find you is that your father is requesting your presence immediately."

Roan winced slightly. "So my absence was noted, then?"

She threw him another disgusted look. "Only by myself. Once again, I managed to cover for you, telling him that you were simply out upon the grounds exercising your horse and that I would collect you immediately."

He smiled at her. "You are truly the most wonderful sorceress one could ever hope to have in their service."

"I know," she replied flatly as they stepped into the castle.

"So, if he isn't aware of my little adventure, what *does* my father wish to speak to me about?"

Caley shook her head slightly. "I don't know, but from his countenance I can only presume that the nature of the news is not good."

Roan shrugged—he had never been one to worry needlessly—and they continued on in silence until they reached his father's immense office, the room where all the closed family meetings were held.

"Where have you been?" King Gazziro Almara snapped angrily as they slipped into the room.

Roan moved over to the long, dark stone table in the room's center and threw himself

into his usual seat. “I’d ridden into the eastern field, and it took Caley some time to locate me.”

The king threw up his hands in exasperation. “There’s always an excuse with you, isn’t there, son?” he growled, pacing about the table.

Roan raised his eyebrows and shrugged lightly as Caley settled gracefully into the seat next to him. He turned his gaze onto his mother, who was looking as regal and emotionless as usual in her chair at the far end of the table. Dark hair pulled back tightly, her blue gaze cold, she met his eyes briefly but said nothing.

At the far end of the room, near to the windows and the long, heavy drapes that covered them, stood Iannis, the king’s royal sorceress. She glowered at Roan disapprovingly, her eyes like brown stones staring from her pale face. Her bright red hair was pulled back into a tight braid, making a clear path for her familiar atop her left shoulder, a large female raven named Leith.

Roan crossed his eyes at the sorceress, something he’d done to annoy her since he’d been a child and knew she detested. More than once she had threatened to fix it so that his eyes forever stayed locked in that position, but so far she’d not yet had the nerve to follow through with her threat.

The last person in the room was Jakkod Sarba, the captain of Rowe’s royal guard. Sitting silently next to the queen, he caught Roan’s exchange with the sorceress and gave the prince a small, quick grin. Iannis was not well liked.

Finally the king stopped pacing and withdrew a thin scroll from his ample waistband. “The queen and I have just received a letter,” he began importantly.

Accustomed to his father’s typical, long-winded dramatics, Roan stretched back in his seat. “Congratulations,” he muttered, resigning himself to yet another dull political meeting.

Gazzino glared down at him. “You try my patience, boy. Now be silent and listen, for this is in regard to something you may actually care about.”

Roan shifted, ignoring Caley’s warning look, and obediently focused on his father.

“The queen and I have received a letter,” the king repeated slowly, making sure he had everyone’s attention, “scribed by our daughter’s hand.”

Roan sprang up in his seat, suddenly alert. “Truly? Is she all right? Where is she? Does she say wh—”

“Silence!” the king roared, slamming his hands down onto the table and crushing the scroll in the process.

Roan glared at his father, holding his tongue with much effort. His older sister Racheindra, or Cheyne as she was called by those she was close to, had vanished from the castle itself months ago, leaving no note or clue to explain her disappearance. This was the first word they’d received to give any hint that she was even still alive.

When her absence had first been discovered, the king and queen had suspected a kidnapping, although when no ransom had been demanded they’d concluded that she had likely just wandered off, perhaps now lost to the impending madness that had shadowed every day of her existence. Roan had been outraged at them for this assumption, furious that they would not send searchers out after her for fear of a scandal. Cheyne’s disappearance, and the fact that she was a seer, remained closely guarded secrets that were known only to the six people in this room.

Roan and Caley seemed the only ones to be terribly worried over the princess’s

prolonged absence, and they feared she may have met with an accident or foul play. Neither believed in the possibility favored by the king and queen; Cheyne had years left before insanity would claim her, and truly she had seemed entirely in her right mind in the days preceding her disappearance.

Now, word had finally come from her, and there his father stood, seeming remote and unaffected by the news that his daughter still lived. Roan wasn't sure if he was more angry or incredulous at the reaction.

The king strode to the head of the table and seated himself, clearly enjoying his son's impatience. Finally he spoke. "Apparently your sister shares in your adventuring spirit, Roan, for she claims to be in Wherry, where she has collected important information and discovered a dire plot being hatched against us."

"Wherry?" the prince repeated, feeling his jaw drop. He could scarce believe that even Cheyne would be so bold as to have gone there—although evidently she had. He shot an alarmed look at Caley and saw the same surprised concern in her eyes.

"Yes," Gazziro went on. "And although she does not discuss how she managed to garner this information, she insists that Wherry is planning to strike against us now in mere days, a week or two at most, for they are privy to the fact that we've sent so many of our men away to aid King Rivenor in his battle with Dargis."

"Impossible," Captain Sarba insisted over his obvious shock. "If that were the case, the Wherrites would already be on our lands, and not a single report has come in claiming that they have been spotted."

"An army of wizards holds much power. There are ways for them to cloak their movements," Iannis said.

"No doubt they will come for us here in the royal city first," the queen, Brewin, spoke up matter-of-factly, looking to the captain. "What are our options for defense?"

Captain Sarba took a moment to find his voice, clearly still digesting Iannis's comment. "We must recall our forces immediately." He paused, looking dazed. "But even if our armies *do* manage to return in time, I fear for our chances at standing against the White Wizards."

Brewin frowned at him slightly. "Your cowardly attitude disturbs me," she said quietly.

The captain's face flushed and he looked helplessly up at Iannis, who continued to stand near to the windows. She appeared thoughtful, but obviously was not yet ready to offer her own opinions on the matter as she remained silent.

Distracted by the relief at learning of his sister's safety, Roan finally focused on what was being said around him. "So you plan on ignoring the treaty you forged with King Rivenor? He is already engaged in battle, and likely counting on our assistance."

"As astounded as I am to learn that you've actually been paying at least a slight amount of attention to what has been transpiring of late, Roan, we have little choice." The king frowned through his thick, brown beard. "It is unfortunate, certainly, but I fear it cannot be avoided. Captain Sarba is correct; we will need all of our own resources if we hope to have a chance at keeping the Wherrites at bay."

"That may not be wise," Roan went on distractedly, his mind racing. He suddenly looked up sharply. "If we *do* fall to Wherry's forces—" he paused as his mother made a quiet noise of indignation in her throat—"Corrado may be the only place left open for us to take refuge in."

Brewin glared across the table at her son. “My head will be on a pike at the gates before I will surrender this castle,” she declared, dark eyebrows raised in disgust as she turned her head to take in each person seated around her. “Although apparently it is in vain to presume the same loyalties from the rest of you.”

The king opened his mouth to speak, then quickly closed it again, giving way to a long, uncomfortable pause.

Finally the queen got to her feet, looked with distaste at them all, and then gazed down at her husband. “Make whatever plans you feel you need to, Gazziro,” she said, “but I will sit here and listen to this talk of fleeing like cowards no longer.” With a last, biting glare, she swept from the room, the long folds of her red gown trailing after her.

Another long silence followed her departure, and Roan met Caley’s gaze, rolling his eyes at his mother’s unsurprising behavior.

Finally Iannis stepped forward, and when she spoke she looked only at the king. “I believe I may have a suggestion regarding the defense of the city,” she said.

Unease prickled over Roan as he watched the royal sorceress, standing straight and calm in her black robes, a venomous spark seeping into her gaze.

The king sat back, focusing onto his sorceress interestedly. “I’m listening,” he said.

#### *Chapter Twenty-Four*

As he silently directed the small dragon to fly lower, Jian peered curiously down at the strange and foreign lands below him. The red sky, a permanent mark of the horrors that had befallen Pellarin a score ago, cast an odd, crimson glow over the cities and towns, many of which appeared deserted, some others actually aflame.

The wizard leaned back and spoke loudly over his shoulder against the rush of the wind. “Where would you suggest we land?”

Coedy’s reply was immediate. “Cimbron. It is a coastal city slightly northeast of here.”

Jian nodded, his sharp eyes barely making out the shoreline far in the distance. “Is there any place where we can set down without drawing much notice?”

“On a dragon?” Coedy scoffed. “Unlikely.” He paused. “Actually, there are some jungles outside of the city, but they may not provide enough room for a landing.”

“Not to worry over that,” Jian muttered distractedly, still scanning the ground below and deciding that he could make a clearing himself if he needed to. It was not long before he spotted the jungles the boy had spoken of, and he relayed his wishes to the dragon, being sure to add that this was to be the last service he would require of her.

The dragon, an uncommonly gentle female, shifted smoothly and without pause into her descent, circling the lush and vibrant foliage several times before zeroing in on her selected area; it would be a tight landing, but a possible one. She finally touched down gracefully, and then obediently settled her wings to help them dismount.

Jian gave the dragon one last appreciative pat before sliding to the ground, still wondering over the luck that had drawn such a docile beast to answer his call back in Wherry. Stepping back and making sure the others were clear, he gently released his enchantment.

The dragon blinked her large, dark eyes at him once, then extended her wings and rose



smoothly back into the sky, giving a loud cry that seemed a farewell.

He watched her for a moment, almost reluctant to see her go, before turning back to the others. Both Cheyne and Kaymin were looking about them in awe, Cheyne quickly demanding of the prince that he climb one of the numerous trees and pick her some of the delicious-looking fruit that hung enticingly from their numerous branches. Coconuts, bananas, and several other vibrantly-colored fruits that Jian could not even identify dangled from the trees at their every turn, making the air around them sweetly intoxicating.

The wizard had never before seen the like of such surroundings either, and it was several moments before he shifted his gaze to Coedy, who was standing some distance away and looking silently to the south.

Being mindful of his steps through the almost rampant undergrowth, Jian moved to stand beside him. "If there is anything I need to know, now would be the time to tell me," he said, studying the boy's serious expression. So far, Coedy had said little of his homelands besides his initial warning.

Coedy glanced over at him. "Power is everything here, so the sight of your robes alone will do much to deter the common criminals. But you must prepare yourself to take lives, for I guarantee you that sooner or later the need for it will arise, and sooner is the more likely. *Do not hesitate.*"

Jian nodded, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Mostly we will need to watch out for Cheyne," Coedy continued. "Cimbron is not a place where women are normally seen walking about freely. If they are not owned, it only means that they work for themselves, and those who do are just as dangerous as the men here."

A sudden hoot of laughter from Cheyne sounded out behind them, and Jian turned distractedly in time to see Kaymin picking himself up off the ground; apparently, he'd just fallen from the tree he'd been climbing.

"Are you injured, my prince?" the wizard called out tonelessly.

Kaymin rubbed a hand over his elbow with a slight frown. "I'm all right," he returned with a dismissive wave.

The wizard turned back. "Is there anywhere that you know of where we can go and rest safely for the night? We still need time to come up with some sort of idea or strategy that will gain us Adera's shard." He was actually quite furious with himself for not having thought of anything even remotely feasible yet.

Coedy looked reflective. "I've been thinking about that, and yes, there is a place where we can go, and a man there who will likely be able to help us in gaining the shard—while remaining unaware of its true purpose, of course." He paused, obviously wanting to say more.

"Go on," Jian urged with a nod.

The boy shifted slightly. "There are many who know me in Cimbron," he started slowly, "and I fear I will endanger you all if you are seen in my presence."

"A disguise, then," Jian said, stifling his curiosity. In some ways, Coedy was even more mysterious than Cheyne was in regards to his past.

"Preferably something that would mark me as a foreigner," Coedy nodded.

Jian thought. "Are Pellies much learned in the current state of magic?"

"Our interests tend to focus on only the things which we must deal with every day,"

Coedy answered. "So I would have to say no, magic is not commonly discussed in these parts."

"So it would then be probable to assume that the natives here are ignorant of the fact that there are currently no wizards under the age of twenty?"

The boy paused, then slowly nodded. "I believe that would be a safe assumption."

"Then not to worry." The wizard removed his pack and withdrew his extra set of robes. "You shall be my young apprentice, although I suppose we'll need to concoct some sort of story as to why we are here."

Coedy took the proffered robes and donned them quickly, pulling the hood up around his head. "That won't be necessary. No one will care *why* we are here, only that we *are* here."

Jian nodded again, keeping his concern carefully hidden. If the implications he was pulling from Coedy's words were accurate, they were about to enter into a snake pit with only their wits and his powers to protect them. It seemed the rumors that circulated throughout Trivallyn regarding Pellarin's current state of affairs were not at all exaggerated.

"And we must be sure to keep Kaymin's identity unknown at all costs," Coedy further instructed. "They will swarm like sharks if they learn a royal heir is here, smelling the ransom as if it were blood."

"Can we reach this safe haven by nightfall?" Jian questioned, casting a worried glance back at his prince, who was now successfully seated in the tree and dropping handfuls of fruit down to Cheyne.

Coedy eyed the sun. "Perhaps. We should leave immediately."

"All right, you two," Jian called, turning back to Kaymin and Cheyne. "We have no time for dawdling. Let's move."

Cheyne pouted, dragging her feet as she stepped over to him. "I don't see why we can't just camp here tonight. We were upon the dragon for days, and none of us has gotten much sleep since we left Wherry."

Coedy looked at her. "Trust me, you do not want to be in this jungle after nightfall."

She eyed him curiously, noting the robes he wore. "A disguise, I see," she said with a nod of approval before turning back to Jian with a weary sigh. "Very well, then, let's continue on. I'm too tired to argue. But if I die from exhaustion and waste my death, I'll never forgive you," she glared.

The wizard muttered inaudibly and looked back at Coedy. "Is there anywhere nearby where we can acquire some horses?"

The boy snorted. "I very much doubt that you'll find a horse anywhere in these lands, except perhaps for the ones bringing supplies in from the other countries."

Jian frowned. "You appeared quite comfortable riding one. If they cannot be found here, where did you learn?"

"I've been away for nearly a year. I have learned many things in that time."

Jian exchanged a quick glance with Cheyne, who surprised him greatly by making neither a comment nor an inquiry. Her seldom-used but insightful tact intrigued him, making him sometimes wonder if he hadn't completely misread her. She still had secrets, of that he was sure, but he saw no reason to let himself worry over it; she was a fellow Chosen, after all, one of the few people he should be able to let himself trust completely. Besides, he had much more important things to concern himself with, like how in the

name of Gauvin's Wisdom they were going to manage to lay hands upon Adera's shard while it rested on the ocean's floor.

Pulled from his thoughts, Jian watched as Kaymin ambled over to join them, half a banana in his hand, the other half in his mouth. The wizard accepted the prince's silent offer and took a piece of the fruit for himself, peeling it slowly as they set off into the jungle.

It was several hours before the trees and undergrowth grew sparse and then finally ceased altogether. Coedy then directed them to a hard-packed dirt road, which they followed for several more hours, passing only a few men, all afoot, along the way. Each native eyed them shrewdly, but kept their distance after prolonged glances at Jian's and Coedy's robes.

Finally Cimbron rose before them, causing each of them, even Coedy, to stop and stare at what lay before them.

The once beautifully constructed and painted walls surrounding the city were now mangled and covered over with obscene drawings and writings, their obvious purpose being to offend as many people as possible. The gate, hanging on broken and rusted hinges, was littered with scorch marks and looked as though it had been slammed several times with a battering ram.

Cheyne snickered with amusement as she looked over some of the words and phrases that were written on the wall. "Welcome home," she remarked dryly to Coedy.

"You must remember not to say such things!" he frowned at her, pointedly adjusting the much too-large robes he wore.

Her lips moved into a slow, amused smile. "As you please. Shall we then?" she gestured, moving to step forward through the gates.

"Wait," Coedy stopped her. He glanced back at the wizard. "Walk with Jian."

She glanced curiously from him to the wizard, finally shrugging. "Certainly. Well come along Jian, I do believe it was you who insisted that we have no time for dawdling."

Holding back his irritation, Jian moved up beside her and tried to mentally prepare himself for anything as they stepped through the gates.

The first thing to assault them was the smell, a thick and engulfing fog of refuse and human waste, and as hard as he tried, Jian couldn't hold back a grimace of revulsion. Attempting to distract himself, he looked about at the buildings making up both sides of the street, surprised to see that most actually appeared relatively clean and well-maintained. As Coedy had predicted, only men walked the streets, mostly in small groups of three or four, all carrying blunt and intimidating weapons and looking as though they had the skills to use them.

"I'd like to stop somewhere and have a decent meal," Cheyne spoke up, looking completely undisturbed by their surroundings. "If I eat one more piece of fruit I'm going to throw up."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Jian told her. "You'll just have to wait until we arrive at wherever it is that we're going." He looked back at Coedy questioningly.

"Just keep to this street," Coedy replied, his head down within the hood of his robes. "We'll eventually come to a wharf, which is our destination."

"I don't see why we can't just make a brief stop along the way," Cheyne complained. She swept her blue gaze along the street. "There, that place looks acceptable," she

exclaimed, pointing to a large, three-story wooden building with a rendering of a wild boar's head on its front door.

"You don't want to go in there," Coedy warned her in a low tone.

"And why not?" she snapped, turning to glare briefly at him.

"Because it's a whorehouse."

"Oh."

Jian was careful to keep them near to the center of the roadway and away from the many shadowy alleyways that he saw, although as the sky started to slowly darken, the city began to come alive as more and more armed men appeared to litter the streets. Avoiding close proximity to the dangerous locals was becoming increasingly difficult.

The road turned sharply, bringing the still-distant shoreline into view, and hitting them with a relieving, delicious gust of warm, salty sea air. Breathing in deeply, Jian felt his nausea pass and wondered how Cheyne could have been thinking about food back in the midst of that horrific smell.

Beside him, she stopped suddenly, her instinct for danger apparently much sharper than his. He glanced up quickly, seeing three darkly-dressed men strolling forward, men who were obviously planning on exchanging words with them. At least, he hoped it was just words.

"Don't wait, Jian," Coedy hissed hurriedly from behind him. "Remember—*do not hesitate.*"

"But they haven't even—" he cut himself off as one of the men pulled free his dirty sword and rose it up before him while continuing to advance. Jian held up his hands, releasing the same spell he'd used on Cheyne at their first meeting.

The man with the sword froze suddenly, his weapon still held aloft, and his two cohorts paused and looked at him in surprise before turning apprehensively back to the wizard.

"No worries stranger," the shorter of the two men said, holding up his hands in a gesture of amity. His accent was much thicker than Coedy's, his voice deep and rumbling. "We only wished to extend our greetings. It's not often a wizard wanders into these parts, much less a pair of them."

Jian looked at him coldly. "I appreciate your hospitality. Now we really must be on our way."

"Of course," the man continued, smiling slightly. "But if it is work you are looking for, we know of plenty of people who would pay heavily for the use of your . . . talents."

"Thank you," the wizard replied blandly, "but my talents have already been solicited."

The two men exchanged angry looks, obviously unsure of what to do and wondering if they should dare to press him further.

"Fair enough," the same man finally said, backing off a step and glancing at his still-immobilized companion. He turned an appraising glance on Cheyne. "Would you be interested in selling your whore, then? The men around here will pay almost double to lay their hands on a foreign woman, especially one as young as pretty as this one."

Jian winced in foreboding even before Cheyne's booted foot shot out and caught the man squarely between his legs, and as he fell to his knees, clutching himself and cursing, she drew her hidden short sword and drove it straight into his chest.

"Did you hear what he called me?" she yelled incredulously, her eyes flashing furiously to Jian as she pulled free her bloodied weapon.

The wizard, however, was busy watching the second man, who was staring

disbelievingly down at his dead companion before looking back to Cheyne. Snarling, the man withdrew a long, thin blade from his boot and stepped forward.

Shoving Cheyne out of his path and into Kaymin, Jian released a quick energy ball. It slammed into the man's stomach, sending him flying backward to land smoking and dead on the ground several paces away.

The third man, still unable to move, continued to watch with wide eyes.

"Time to leave," Coedy spoke up hurriedly.

Jian eyed the men around them. Most had paused to witness the spectacle, but now seemed to be closing in.

*"BRAWL!"*

Even before the faceless, thunderous voice echoed away, the street erupted into a flurry of flying fists and raised weapons, hundreds of men seeming to swarm in from every direction to engage in the impromptu fray.

"Keep heading toward the docks!" Coedy yelled. "Run!"

Jian grabbed Cheyne's arm and began pulling her through the crowd.

"This is madness! I've never seen anything like it!" she called to him as they tried to weave their way clear of the fighting.

"You just started a riot Cheyne, I thought you'd be pleased," he answered, forced to remove several men from their path. Risking a quick glance back, he saw Kaymin and Coedy still close behind, weapons out.

"He thought me a whore! What else should I have done?"

"You should have let me handle it." He ducked the fist swinging toward his face.

The street finally opened before them and the wharf loomed ahead invitingly, even while several men ran from its docks to join the brawl currently in progress.

Kaymin stopped behind the others, panting heavily. "Interesting place," he commented, looking flushed. "Does this sort of thing happen often?"

Coedy nodded. "At least once a day."

Kaymin gaped at him.

"It used to be a lot worse," the boy offered, shrugging slightly.

"You actually grew up in this city?" The prince looked horrified.

"It was an interesting childhood," Coedy said.

"All right," Jian broke in, still alert for any signs of danger as the sounds of the ongoing fray, now behind them, continued. "Where to now? I think the sooner we get off these streets the better." He took a moment to now release the man he'd left immobile in the midst of the fighting.

Coedy turned and scanned the crowded docks. Apparently finding what he was looking for, he quickly stripped off Jian's robes and tossed them back to the wizard. "Follow me," he said.

Jian caught the robes and hurriedly crammed them into his pack. "But what of your disguise?" he queried, hurrying along beside the boy.

"No longer necessary. We have no reason to fear anyone here."

Thoroughly confused, Jian kept pace silently as they stepped onto the wooden planks and moved past countless slips housing vessels both large and small. The ocean's waves crashed turbulently against the break wall, sending up spray that felt both warm and refreshing on his skin. He noted several men stopping to stare at them as they passed, but none spoke or made the slightest of movements toward them.

Finally Coedy stopped before a long, wide wooden plank that led up to a massive ship with the name *Wind Ranger* painted on its side.

Jian eyed the ship discerningly, his lip curling. "Pirates," he murmured darkly under his breath.

"Yes."

Shocked, he watched as Coedy started up the plank, then shot a worried glance back at Kaymin.

"You're the one who said we'd have to trust him," the prince reminded the wizard with a shrug.

Jian turned back and stepped after the boy. A huge man dressed in black had started down from the ship to accost them, metal gleaming through the deepening darkness to show the many weapons he had hanging about his person.

Unsure of what he was expected to do, if anything, Jian watched tensely as the man stopped in front of Coedy, and then, to his further amazement, greeted the boy with a surprised and happy exclamation.

"Tell Ty to get on deck!" the man called up to the others onboard the ship. He stopped, his grin fading quickly as he observed Jian and the others stopping behind Coedy.

"Are you in some sort of trouble, boy?" he asked, moving rapidly to withdraw two of the knives at his waist.

"No, Stewin, they're friends," Coedy explained, turning his gaze upward to look at the ship.

Stewin continued to stare distrustfully at Jian, taking in his robes, but finally he turned and gestured for them all to follow as he led the rest of the way up the plank. "We've all been worried since you stopped sending letters," he continued to Coedy as they ascended. "It's been months since your last note arrived, from Dargis, wasn't it?"

"I've been busy," Coedy returned, sounding distracted.

They reached the top of the plank and, one-by-one, climbed onto the deck of the ship. Jian looked about him warily. He could see at least twenty large crewmen loitering about, most of them coming nearer to welcome Coedy. The boy greeted them all by name, and Jian exchanged another uneasy glance with Kaymin as they continued to stand silently against the rail.

Cheyne, however, could apparently hold her tongue no longer, and she moved to stand next to their young traveling companion with her hands on her hips. "You're a *pirate*?" she exploded at him.

Several of the surrounding men laughed at her words, and she rewarded them all with a flat, unimpressed stare. If she was at all intimidated by the situation, it was well hidden.

"Not I, exactly," Coedy explained, gesturing behind her.

She turned, Jian and Kaymin doing the same to follow her gaze, and watched as a man finished climbing up from a passageway that led from the hull. The resemblance was startling.

"Meet the captain of the ship," Coedy went on, "Tynon Mondy. Hello father."

The man gave a brief smile as he took in his son, but his eyes showed no expression whatsoever. "Welcome home," he said.

### *Chapter Twenty-Five*

The ship's captain continued forward, his gaze moving briefly from Coedy to take in the strangers on board his ship. "You travel with interesting company, son," he observed, his tone easy despite his slightly narrowed eyes. He regarded Jian. "Although I guess this explains the report I received over a dragon being spotted. Too bad . . . I thought the messenger mad and had him walk the plank."

"No worries, father," Coedy replied, appearing completely unruffled. "They care nothing for Pellarin's internal wars. That is not why we're here."

Tynon shrugged, his guise still casual. "A shame. I could certainly have put the company of a wizard to good use."

"I'm sure," Coedy returned dryly, turning to take in his companions. "This is Jian, Kaymin, and Cheyne," he gestured slightly to each with the introduction.

Jian watched as the pirate took in each of them slowly, his eyes completely unreadable.

"We've been traveling for many days with little food or rest," Coedy went on with an immense yawn.

"A feast then," Tynon nodded, "in honor of your return. I'll have the slaves begin the preparations immediately. Meet me below decks . . . I'm really very anxious to hear all that you've been up to since your departure." He exchanged another look with his son before disappearing back the way he had come.

Coedy stepped back and exhaled deeply. "So, how angry *is* he that I've come home?" he asked the large man at his side, Stewin.

Stewin shook his head slowly, a frown on his lips. "Of course he's glad you're here. He just worries, that's all. A lot has happened since you left."

Coedy's eyebrows rose. "Do you mean to tell me that all of his planning has finally paid off?" His tone seemed doubtful.

"Your father knew what he was doing by sending you away. It would have been much too dangerous for you here, especially considering recent events. But it should not take long for him to instill further order in Cimbron. You will be able to return home for good soon enough."

The boy looked surprised. "So . . .?"

Stewin grinned down at him. "Yes, Coedy, your father is now holding the position he's sought for so long. A fact that makes it miraculous you survived walking here from the city gates, even with a wizard in your company. Your father's enemies know you all too well."

"I was disguised."

"Ah, of course." He looked down affectionately.

"We did have something to do with the riot though," the boy admitted guilelessly.

Stewin shrugged. "It was the third one today. Now, shall we see about getting you and your friends below decks? I suspect that Amsey will be very anxious to learn of your return as well."

Coedy nodded and gestured for the others to follow him and Stewin. "Leave your packs," he instructed. "The slaves will see to them."

Cheyne wedged herself close to Coedy as they started down the ladder. "So, what is this position of your father's that you spoke of?" she asked curiously, taking hold of the rung.

For once, Jian was grateful for her bluntness and he listened carefully for the response

as he stepped down after her.

“Crime lord and ruler of Pellarin’s underground,” Coedy replied as he waited for them in the large passageway below.

Jian’s foot missed a rung and his boot came down heavily on Cheyne’s fingers.

“Watch where you’re going!” she screeched, continuing to curse him violently until she was down and off the ladder, completely ignoring his apologies.

Stewin looked amused at her language. “She, at least, should have no problems fitting in around here. Where do you hail from, doll?”

She smiled sweetly at him. “Morvay.”

“I figured,” he nodded with a smile. “We’ve have some experience with Morvanian craftsmen. A very . . . spirited people, you are.”

“Yes,” Cheyne nodded her agreement, while tapping her foot impatiently as Jian and Kaymin finally stepped down into the passageway. “Would you two hurry up?” she snapped. “I don’t know if I’ll still be able to hold a fork with these swelling fingers, but I’d at least like to get off my feet.”

“Sorry,” Jian muttered, falling in step behind her. He glanced over at Kaymin, and it was clear from the prince’s face that he too had overheard Coedy’s words. A criminal to rule all criminals? This Tynon Mondy must be a very dangerous man indeed.

Stewin finally led them into a lighted room, the long wooden table at its center already busily being set by several slaves. “Have a seat, and I’ll return shortly with the captain.”

Cheyne dropped herself into the nearest chair and sighed heavily. “Finally, we can relax,” she said, leaning back and closing her eyes.

Jian barely refrained from gaping openly at her. Was she truly so unconcerned with their surroundings? Baffled, he tensely pulled out a seat for himself and sat carefully, shooting a hard but silent glance at Coedy.

The boy was watching him. “I know your worries,” he said, “but you have no reason to fear anyone while onboard this ship. In fact, this is likely the only safe place for us in all of Pellarin.”

Jian nodded slowly, but he was nowhere near placated. “Perhaps so, but a little warning would have been appreciated.”

“If I had told you the truth of it, would you have come?” Coedy parried, his dark eyes sharp.

Jian acknowledged the point with a soft sigh. “You cannot tell him why we are here,” he warned.

“I know that,” Coedy returned with a frown. He settled back into his chair, falling silent.

The numerous slaves, both men and women, continued to bustle in and out of the room, laying out place settings, hot loaves of bread, platters of fruit slices, and wooden bowls filled with an unfamiliar but delicious-smelling soup.

Tynon swept in just as the slaves finished placing the food, in the company of Stewin and another man who Jian could only assume was the aforementioned Amsey. As they took their seats, and as Amsey bestowed upon Coedy a warm greeting, the wizard took the opportunity to further scrutinize the ship’s captain.

Looking to be in his early to mid-thirties, Tynon was the older likeness of Coedy in nearly every way. Both had the same thick, dark hair, although Tynon’s was longer and tied back into a tail by way of a leather cord, the same deep brown eyes, bronzy



complexion and rounded nose. The pirate's experiences had marked him, however. Several scars showed prominently on his arms and hands, and another, looking far fresher than the others, ran length-wise down the side of his neck. Several small, thick golden rings hung from Tynon's ears, an ornamentation Jian had never before seen on a man.

With a sudden and foreboding concern, the wizard then abruptly realized that he was not the only one eyeing their new host with interest. Cheyne, now looking quite alert, was making no effort to disguise her appreciation as she ran her eyes slowly over the pirate's well-muscled form as he took his seat at the head of the table. In vain, Jian attempted to catch her gaze to frown his disapproval, not that he suspected it would have deterred her in the slightest, but her attention remained fixed upon the pirate.

Tynon reached for his spoon and motioned for everyone to begin eating. "So, son," he said, swallowing a mouthful of the creamy soup, "tell me what you have seen in your travels, and why you've come home so unexpectedly—and with such an unusual band of companions."

Jian did his best to remain casual as he bit into a slice of mango fruit, but it was obvious that the pirate was still very wary of their presence. And no wonder; one would assume that being the reigning crime lord of the country would warrant a little paranoia.

Coedy paused in gulping down his soup. "Well, I spent the first several months I was away in Corrado," he said, unable to keep himself from shooting a quick glance over at Kaymin while he made this revelation.

The prince stopped with his spoon halfway to his mouth and eyed the boy with surprise until Jian subtly lobbed a kick at him beneath the table. Assuming a nonchalance that undoubtedly fooled no one, Kaymin quickly returned to his food.

Jian watched the captain of the ship from the corner of his eye—obviously this would be a man who missed nothing.

Tynon, however, seemed not to notice the exchange and kept his easy expression turned on his son.

"After awhile I grew bored, so I moved on into Morvay, and then back down to Dargis, which is where I met up with Kaymin and Jian," Coedy went on, stopping to shove a large piece of bread into his mouth.

Tynon's gaze moved to take in the prince and the wizard, his expression indecipherable. "I see," he finally said.

Coedy continued on as the slaves reappeared to clear away the empty soup bowls and bring in the next course of some exotic-looking fish. "And then we three traveled together into Morvay, where we met up with Cheyne."

Tynon finally focused on her. "A Morvanian woman, then? I've not had the pleasure of visiting your country, but the tales I've heard of your kind are nearly reason enough to make me wish I had."

"They're all true," she admitted with a shameless smile.

Tynon smirked. "Now," he went on, turning back to the rest of the table, "I'm guessing that next you went on to Wherry, which is where you obtained the dragon that flew you here." His tone was now rather disbelieving.

"That's right," Coedy nodded, clearly focusing more on his food than on the conversation.

Tynon sat back, his fish still untouched before him, nodding slowly. "And I presume there's a reason for all this country-hopping that you've all been doing?"

Not trusting any of the others, even Kaymin, to answer this, Jian cleared his throat pointedly before addressing the question. “We have all been commissioned for our various talents to locate some misplaced artifacts that have been scattered about the world’s countries,” he answered smoothly. He had no doubt that the pirate would know a lie as soon as he heard one, and so he’d therefore kept his response both as vague and as truthful as possible.

“Artifacts?” Tynon repeated, suddenly looking interested. “Such as treasure?” He glanced approvingly at his son.

“Treasure yes, but only in a sentimental sense,” Jian answered. “These items mean a great deal to their rightful owners, and we have been made very generous offers to locate these belongings for them.”

“And who exactly are these people you are working for?” Tynon asked, his expression again completely unreadable.

Jian looked at him silently for a moment. “Being a man of business yourself, I’m sure you can understand why it would be unethical for us to divulge such information.”

“Not especially,” Tynon laughed. “I *am* a pirate, after all.”

Jian purposefully turned to his plate and began cutting into his fish, his expression fixed.

“It’s nice to learn that you’re at least putting your talents to good use,” Tynon went on to Coedy. “I feared you’d be living on the streets and stealing from fruit vendors.” He laughed again.

Coedy smiled blandly back at his father, the tips of his ears turning slightly pink.

Cheyne drank generously of the wine placed before her. “Yes, we’ve all been very impressed with Coedy’s skills,” she said, “although it’s interesting to finally learn that, given his young age, he’s likely but a pale version of the original.”

Jian closed his eyes and shook his head wearily. *Has she no shame at all?* He straightened and glanced over at Kaymin, who was blushing furiously and looking down into his plate, and then at Coedy, who was frowning.

Tynon, however, appeared to think nothing of the comment. “Oh, he’ll best me soon enough,” he nodded with conviction and obvious pride. “Already he’s a much better thief than I ever was, and it won’t be long before he’ll be superior at throwing steel as well.”

The ship rocked violently then as the waves outside continued to grow in force, and Kaymin sat back from the table, which was apparently nailed down to the floor, looking suddenly green.

“It seems as though another typhoon is brewing,” Tynon predicted. “Not to worry, the ship will hold. She’s certainly been through enough of these storms lately to have been tested.”

“Typhoons?” Jian returned with sudden interest, absently removing some pinkish powder from one of his pouches and sprinkling it into Kaymin’s goblet. “Drink that,” he told the prince, “it will help to settle your stomach.”

Tynon observed this exchange silently before replying. “Yes. They started several months ago, coming and going every few days or so.”

“Interesting,” Jian muttered. This made the circle of natural disasters complete; Dargis’s floods, Corrado’s drought, Gaal’s plague, Wherry’s ice storms, Morvay’s earthquakes, and finally, Pellarin’s typhoons. The Father God was certainly keeping

Himself busy of late.

Once everyone had finished with their meal, the servants reappeared with sugared fruit for dessert, more wine, and several bottles of rum for Tynon, Stewin and Amsey, none of whom bothered with a goblet.

The captain of the ship ignored his plate of dessert, opting instead to stick strictly with his beverage. “How long do you plan on staying in Pellarin?” he asked.

“Only as long as it will take for us to locate what we’ve come for,” Jian replied, again trying to keep his words as simple as possible.

Tynon nodded. “And will you be departing with them as well, son?”

“Yes. I will return home to stay when the job is finished,” Coedy said.

The pirate nodded again. “So what help do you need from me?” This directed at the wizard.

Jian looked up sharply, surprised by the man’s intuitiveness, and thoroughly impressed by it despite its insinuations. He glanced at Coedy, who nodded with assurance to him, before he answered. “We know the location of what we seek. We do not, however, have any idea as to how we might go about attaining it.”

“Intriguing,” Tynon remarked. “Do go on.”

“It lies upon the ocean floor,” Jian revealed, glancing at Kaymin, whose skin had returned to its natural shade.

The pirate leaned his elbows onto the table and brought his fingertips together. “Perplexing indeed,” he said, exchanging a look with Stewin. “And you know the precise location of what it is you seek?”

“Yes,” Jian replied shortly, making it clear that he was not about to disclose that location here and now under any circumstances.

Tynon was silent a long while as he appeared to ponder. “I will think on it,” he finally said. “From the sounds of the waves, you won’t be going anywhere for several days at least, anyway. I’m sure I can come up with something in that time. In fact, I think I may already have an idea worth trying out.”

Jian nodded. “We would all appreciate any aid that you can offer.”

Tynon returned the nod, taking in everyone’s empty plates. “Now, if you’d be so kind as to go with Stewin and Amsey, they will take you to your cabins. I’m sure you could all use a good night’s rest.”

“Among other things,” Cheyne murmured suggestively as she rose to her feet.

The pirate’s eyes flickered to her briefly in amusement before he looked again to the wizard. “Jian, is it?” he said.

Jian nodded.

“If you would stay behind for just a moment?”

Kaymin paused halfway through the doorway and looked back at his wizard worriedly. Jian nodded sharply for him to go, and after another moment’s hesitation, the prince did so, still looking somewhat distressed.

Amsey closed the door behind him, leaving Jian and Tynon alone together in the room. His eyes alertly upon the pirate, the wizard settled back into his seat and assumed a fixed expression.

Tynon smiled back at him darkly. “I’m going to be blunt,” he began, his look suddenly deadly serious. “My son appears to trust you, so to a point I will award you the same courtesy. Obviously, there is more to your story than what you’ve told me—”

“I told you why we are here,” Jian cut him off, his own eyes cold. “My words held no lie.”

“I wasn’t implying they had,” Tynon glared back. “I just can’t seem to figure why a prince and his wizard would be caught up in such a thing.”

Jian paused, his expression turning dangerous out of sheer reflex—whether the pirate had meant the words to be a threat against his prince or not, the wizard was taking them as such. He was also furious at knowing that he’d clearly not been as careful as he’d thought.

Tynon took in his reaction while leaning back with an unworried air. “I have no interest in seeking gain from your prince’s presence here,” he said. “In fact, I have no interest, save for some product trading, in anything that deals outside of this country. Besides, Coedy obviously knows the ins and outs of whatever reason it is that truly brought you here, and I trust his judgment. It is for him, and him alone, that I have agreed to help you.” He paused.

“However, my businesses here,” he finally went on, “are somewhat precarious, and I cannot afford to have any unnecessary . . . complications.”

“Understandable,” Jian acknowledged. “However, I can honestly say that we have about as much concern for your businesses as you do for the outside world.”

“Splendid,” the pirate nodded. He gave another slight pause. “There is one last matter I feel I need to address.” Tynon’s eyes came to rest steadily back upon the wizard.

“And that is?” Jian pressed.

“The concern I have for my son. Again, I do not claim to know whatever business it is you are all involved in, but I do hope you are keeping in mind that he is still but a boy. Plenty more capable than most, I’ll grant you, but a boy nonetheless.”

Jian waited silently for Tynon to come to his point.

“And since,” the pirate cautioned slowly, “I will be allowing him to depart in your custody, I will be holding you and those you travel with completely responsible if anything unfortunate should happen to him.”

Jian raised an unimpressed brow. “That rather sounds like a threat.”

“Oh, it is most certainly a threat,” Tynon affirmed with a nod. “Titles have never much impressed me—wizard, prince,” he shrugged, obviously not in the least bit intimidated by the power that these labels usually carried. “If anything happens to my son, I will find each one of you and personally rip out your entrails, including those of your pretty young Morvanian.”

“We cannot leave the boy behind,” Jian finally replied, after a long pause which allowed him time to gather his startled wits. “I am afraid his talents are still very much in demand.”

“That is not what I was implying you do,” Tynon denied, his tone once again conversational. “In fact, this little adventure of yours is likely doing him a world of good, giving him a lot of experience that he would not be able to gain by staying here in Pellarin. What I am stressing,” the pirate went on, “is that you should be just as concerned as I am over whether he will get the opportunity to put these new experiences to future use.”

“Of course,” Jian said, realizing that there was really nothing else he could say. And he certainly needed no more convincing of the fact that Tynon Mondy was not an enemy he wished to have.

The pirate nodded then, putting an end to the conversation. Jian held his eye for another long moment, and then returned the gesture as he rose silently to leave the room.

### *Chapter Twenty-Six*

Queen Jeptha Pavula's private place of solitude was a small, windowless room situated deep inside the castle walls. What made it so private was that its only entrance was a secret door hidden behind the massive mirror in her bedchamber. Outside of her immediate family and her sorceress Meron, few people knew the room existed, and fewer still knew of its actual location, just a handful of high-ranking soldiers who'd needed to be informed for safety purposes.

The hidden chamber's only decoration besides the tall, leather-covered chair was a black wooden desk, which was presently strewn over with various scrolls and reports. Jeptha ignored them all as she sat silent and alone in the light of a single candle. On the few occasions that her late husband, Nesseseth, had accompanied her to this secret room, he had every time confessed to feeling unnerved, as if he'd been buried alive inside the castle walls. The queen, however, cherished the silence and absolute lack of distraction. She needed the seclusion to think, and her mind slowly pondered now as she sat in the flickering darkness.

Along with nearly fifty of Gaal's sorceresses, the country's forces, led by her son Zeidan, should now have crossed beyond Wherry's southern border. She waited only for confirmation of this.

After commanding the sorceresses of Wyrren, the Black City, to assail the icy country with avalanches, Jeptha had expected King Mithwell to discern their cause and send word, warning, or threat to her immediately. But as the weeks passed and she received nothing but silence from Wherry and its king, she finally gave in to her rage and dispatched her army, despite the fact that her sorceresses could not confirm that Gaal's mysterious plague was indeed the work of the White Wizards to their north. It would have been wiser had Mithwell made any sort of reply, even a threatening one; for nothing enraged Jeptha more than being ignored, as if she were beneath his dignity, and her fury toward him had increased tenfold at this seemingly deliberate lack of action.

Due to the thick stone walls surrounding her, Jeptha heard no warning prior to the door sliding suddenly back into the room, and her eyebrows rose with surprise. Only Rana, her heir, or Meron, her royal sorceress, would dare disturb her here, and only for a reason of great importance.

Jeptha sat back and watched calmly as the sorceress slipped silently into the room, the raven on her shoulder moving about excitedly.

"My apologies, my queen," Meron murmured, closing the door behind her smoothly.

Jeptha said nothing but made a slight gesture for the woman to come closer.

"As you can see, Farek has returned from the north." Meron raised her hand and the familiar leapt onto it smoothly.

"So there is confirmation that the army has crossed Wherry's borders?" Jeptha asked, her eyes sharp.

"Yes," the sorceress replied slowly. "Although it would appear as though something very strange is happening within the country."

Jeptha frowned in question.

“Our army is heading for the royal city of Dorcey, as planned,” Meron started over, “and has met with little contention so far.”

Jeptha nodded.

“However, after observing this, I bid Farek to continue flying further north, and what we saw there was very interesting indeed. House Mithwell seemed to carry a peculiar feel to it, and I strongly felt the urge to investigate further, despite the danger. According to the talk upon the royal city’s streets,” she went on quickly, noting Jeptha’s growing impatience, “nearly the entire royal guard, along with a large number of Crysmir’s wizards, has been deployed. They are even now marching east into Morvay.”

Jeptha was rarely surprised, but she straightened with shock at this. This news had definitely been worth the risk her sorceress had taken to learn of it. “We are moving to attack a near-defenseless country?”

“It would appear so,” Meron nodded. “With most of Crysmir’s wizards away, Wherry should fall to us with little trouble.”

The queen couldn’t contain a short laugh. “Well, perhaps once we’ve taken them we will come to Morvay’s aid. They *are* fellow worshippers of Evil, after all.”

Meron made no comment, knowing full well that Jeptha cared nothing for Morvay’s problems, or any other country’s, for that matter; the queen’s only desire, besides putting an end to this mysterious plague in Gaal, was to inflict as much pain and torment upon King Judson Mithwell as possible.

Startling both the queen and her sorceress, the chamber door suddenly flew open, flooding the small room with light that flowed into the corridor from Jeptha’s bedchamber beyond. The queen shot to her feet, blinking rapidly and trying to glare at the man before her. “Explain this intrusion, soldier!” she snapped.

The man’s ragged breaths cut violently into the room’s quiet. “My queen, the castle is being invaded!” he exclaimed wildly.

Jeptha stared at him, her yellow eyes adjusting quickly and taking in his disheveled appearance. Obviously caught off his guard, he wore only his chain mail shirt and gauntlets by way of armor, his only weapon the blood-streaked mace in his hand.

Jeptha exchanged an alarmed look with Meron. “Who?” she demanded. “Give me details!”

The soldier fought to catch his breath. “They stormed the front gates—we do not yet know who or why for they carry with them no banner—and have entered the palace. They are slaying any who oppose them, and taking prisoner those who submit.”

“How many?” Jeptha asked quietly. Unheard of; never in Gaal’s history had the castle gates been breached, even though attempts had been plenty, even during her reign. Civil wars were far from abnormal in Gaal.

The soldier paused. “A tentative count from the southern battle tower puts their numbers nearing two thousand.”

Jeptha nearly faltered, though only Meron knew her well enough to fully recognize the depth of her distress.

“With most of our forces away infiltrating Wherry, it is unlikely that we will be able to hold them off,” he went on, knowing her appreciation for bluntness. “But we will fight until our last man, my queen,” he finished with a slight bow.

“Where is Rana?” Jeptha demanded suddenly, a slight edge of panic finally finding its

way into her voice.

The man lowered his gaze. "We have been unable to locate the princess. Both she and your son are missing."

"Find her!" Jeptha ordered, ready to storm from the room and take up the search herself.

Both Meron and the soldier moved slightly to block her path.

"I must advise that you stay here," the sorceress insisted, narrowing her eyes at the queen.

The soldier nodded his agreement. "The royal Sister is correct. This room is for the most part unknown, and you should remain safe here."

Jeptha nodded, knowing that they were right. "Find my heir," she charged him, "and bring her here."

The soldier bowed again. "My queen," he said before hefting his weapon and turning back to the door, closing it securely behind him.

Meron moved quickly to throw the long steel latch across the door.

"Meron," Jeptha said quietly, sinking back down onto her chair, "we cannot hope to hold the castle with our depleted forces."

The sorceress lit another candle in the darkness. "I know."

There was a long pause. "I am not afraid to die."

"I know that too, my queen."

Jeptha looked up. "But they will not take me easily, or without repercussion."

Meron eyed her interestedly. "If they discover us here, I promise you they will not leave this room alive."

Jeptha's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "But neither will we. And that is not the way I wish for this to end." She turned her gaze onto the other woman. "I have one last request of you Meron, and I do not wish to hear any dissension over it. We have no time for argument."

The sorceress met her look squarely.

"You alone have the only possible hope of escaping this castle, and it is my command that you try. If you happen to locate Rana along the way, do not hesitate to use any means necessary to take her with you, but you must reach Wyrren. You will be safe there amongst your Sisters, and those of you who remain here in Gaal can get word to Zeidan in Wherry of what has befallen us."

Meron was clearly at war with her emotions over this directive, knowing that she would be leaving her queen to face her death alone, and tears finally came to shimmer brightly in her eyes. She lowered her head in a last show of respect. "May Diamont protect you, my queen," she said quietly.

Jeptha nodded firmly. "And you. Now go."

The queen watched with steely eyes as Meron unlatched the door, her raven still perched upon her hand, and then slipped quickly through the opening without looking back.

Getting up to again bar the entranceway, Jeptha felt a sharp pain, one just as deep as when she had watched her husband die, and she leaned her head down to rest it against the door as her emotions threatened to overtake her. Meron was, at least as much as Nesseth had been, a part of her.

Suddenly furious with herself, Jeptha pushed away from the door and stormed back

over to her desk. Becoming emotional was the last thing that would aid her right now, when it was likely that she would need her wits about her more than ever. They would kill her, of course, whoever these invaders were, but she made a solemn vow to herself that, before they ended her life, she would do whatever was necessary to learn of Rana's fate. Her heir was the only concern, and the only hope, left to her.

After only a few moments, the very walls of the castle shook around her, presumably Meron's work, and she began to pray to Diamont for the safety of both the sorceress and Rana. If they both somehow managed to escape, preferably together, her death would be avenged, and the Pavula line would continue on.

She then suddenly recalled the soldier mentioning that her firstborn son Vanek, Rana's father, was also missing, and she hoped fervently that he'd had enough sense to get his daughter out of the castle before the invaders had broken through the gates. Being a practical woman, however, she had little faith in this. Meron was the young heir's only real hope, and the odds of the sorceress actually locating her while trying to escape alive were minimal at best. Realistically, it was doubtful that Meron would even make it out; a lone sorceress, powerful as she was, could not hope to best two thousand men.

The walls shook again, even more violently than before, giving Jephtha hope until she considered further. Knowing Meron as she did, it was likely to presume that if the sorceress figured she could not make a safe getaway, she would bring the entire castle down with her. Jephtha nodded approval at this conclusion, despite her ongoing worries over Rana's whereabouts.

Continuing to sit with outward calm at her desk, Jephtha turned her thoughts to the mysterious invaders, partly just to keep the fear from her mind. She wanted to believe it to be the work of another country, of course, but who, and why?

Wherry, which would make the most sense, was apparently marching east toward a battle with Morvay, and it was known now throughout the world that Dargis and Corrado were busy battling each other. This left only Pellarin, which made little sense to Jephtha, knowing what she did of that country and its inhabitants. Besides, any invading forces would have been long spotted before this assault.

It left only one possibility, and it sent a chill through her as she realized it. The people of Gaal, her people, must be the ones responsible, perhaps furious with her refusal to denounce Diamont and feeling threatened by the severe punishments she'd been inflicting upon those who were caught doing so.

Fighting off a sudden and completely uncharacteristic urge to scream, Jephtha glared upward. "Is this how I am rewarded for my faith?" she yelled, her eyes wild. "You shall stand back and watch as those who have forsaken you destroy me?"

But that too seemed to make little sense. If Diamont truly had sent Nesseseth's dream to warn them of their enemies in Wherry, how could He be allowing this to happen now? Had He fallen into silence again, or was this just yet another part of some bizarre yet divine plan?

Jephtha fought to regain control of herself. "I trust in you, Diamont," she said steadily to the empty room, regretting the harsh words she'd just directed at Him. "If this is your design for me, then I accept it willingly." Sitting straight-backed in her seat, she closed her eyes, and began to pray again for the safety of Meron and Rana.

It was hours before sound finally roused her from this position. She turned slowly toward the door, watching as someone on the other side attempted to push it open. The



steel latch held, but the door jerked violently on its hinges.

Jeptha got to her feet slowly, smoothed her darkly colored dress around her and stepped over to the door, surprised that she had been located here so quickly. A part of her had feared that she would be left in this tiny, cell-like room, undiscovered, until she starved to death. Knowing the intruders would likely only find a way in soon anyway, and gripped with a cold courage that gave her no desire to prolong her fate, she raised her arm to the door. She would be with Diamont soon.

She released the bar and stepped back calmly. Light flooded her eyes, momentarily blinding her, and she waited patiently for her sight to clear, hearing the clinking sounds of metal and smelling its distinctive, heavy odor as several people moved into the room.

The first person that swam into her focus was Rana, and she felt relief flow over her as her granddaughter ran into her arms. The girl was crying through her expression of shock and horror, and was mumbling incoherently in a quiet and toneless voice. The horrors she had witnessed shone clearly in her eyes.

With her arms folded protectively around her heir, Jeptha looked up slowly and felt a numbing shock seep into her every limb. Only Rana's presence kept her from actually screaming her rage.

Vanek, her firstborn and often-thought overly sensitive son, smiled back at her with an obvious and deadly hatred. Armed men stood loyally to each side of him, and more could be seen pressed into the passageway leading from her bedchamber.

They stared silently at each other for a long moment, mother and son, before Jeptha finally uttered a single word. "Why?" she demanded, pleased that her voice sounded steady despite her shock.

Vanek's look turned to one of disdain. "Oh, mother, would it be possible for you to be any more blind?"

Staring back at him hatefully, her mind raced as she sought to find the meaning of his words.

Seeing through to her confusion, he laughed. "You've been so wrapped up in your lost God that you've failed to see the new power that is taking over—the only power. How truly oblivious you've been."

She gazed at him as though he were a lowly peasant. "And *you* are this power?" she said, her tone dripping with scorn.

"Don't be a fool," he snapped, "although I suppose you can hardly help it."

She glowered, barely able to keep herself from physically attacking him.

"The one I serve has more power than you could ever comprehend, and it is in His name that I take this castle."

"Speak it then, if you are so bold," she returned, her eyes gleaming.

He scoffed at her. "Save your threats mother, for you've nothing left to threaten me with. I take this castle, and this city of Opelia, in Kauric's name, Kauric whom I will serve until my last breath."

*The Father God?* Jeptha was completely bewildered by this and tried desperately not to show it. She looked down at Rana, who was still mumbling quietly, and for the first time she noted the beginnings of a large, purplish bruise covering the girl's left cheek. Her fury soaring anew, Jeptha looked back to her son.

"And your plans for Rana and I?" she asked coldly.

Vanek flashed another smile at her. "Oh, I am going to kill you, mother; you and Rana

both. Have no doubts about that. But not until the timing of it will be to my best advantage.”

“Please explain,” she pressed him steadily.

He laughed. “I won’t deny your bravery, although I guarantee it will not help you now.” He leaned toward her. “Your people,” he went on, sounding disgusted, “appear to, for whatever reason, hold a ridiculously deep amount of loyalty for you. I’m thinking the act of torturing and killing you in front of them might make it clear as to who it is they should truly be worshipping.”

Jeptha felt a sense of pride shoot through her, aimed at the Gaalenes she ruled, even despite his revealed intentions. She stared back at her son silently.

He met and held her gaze, his eyes teeming with his hatred for her, something she had never suspected, nor ever even considered in the slightest.

“You’re right,” she said. “I have been blind.”

He sneered, looking ready to respond, when a sudden disturbance in the passageway distracted him.

To Jeptha’s further shock and rage, she watched as two black-robed sorceresses stepped up gracefully to pause beside her son, and it was then she realized that her comprehension of this treason was monumentally lacking. It was difficult enough to believe that he’d actually found two thousand men to follow his twisted and mutinous vision, but sorceresses as well? She thought of Meron, her blood suddenly running cold. Perhaps the explosions that had rocked the castle had not been the work of *her* sorceress after all.

“Well?” Vanek snapped at the two Sisters impatiently.

They exchanged a long, hesitant look. “I’m afraid she’s escaped,” one of them finally said.

His eyes blazed in fury. “Unacceptable!” he fumed, before stopping suddenly. “I thought there were three of you pursuing her?”

The other Sister spoke up flatly. “There were, yes.”

Vanek looked ready to explode as he turned and caught Jeptha smirking.

“Blind perhaps,” she goaded, “but a fair amount more fortunate it would seem.”

“Be quiet!” he bellowed, his face flushing with anger. He spun back on the sorceresses. “Find her!” he screamed. “She cannot be allowed to reach Wyrren!” He looked back into Jeptha’s smug face. “She will not save you,” he promised darkly. “Even if she does make it to the Black City, you’ll be dead long before she arrives there.”

“That is not the thought I find so amusing,” Jeptha told him. “I’m actually rather looking forward to sitting at Diamont’s side and watching the vengeance that will soon be exacted upon you for this.”

He stared at her, actually looking a trifle uncertain, before his expression hardened and he finally turned away.

### *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

Daybreak spread slowly over Dargis and its royal city of Vasos, the constant gray clouds hanging thick and low as they unleashed yet another violent downpour. King Gwilym Numont, who hadn’t bothered even attempting to sleep for the past several days and nights, stood with weary exhaustion in a seldom-used room in one of the castle’s

towers, a room that gave him a clear view of the empty city streets below. It was here his royal wizard, Rolin, found him as the sky lightened lazily into day.

“My king,” Rolin said to announce his presence.

Gwilym turned from the window and took note of his wizard. He nodded once to show that the disturbance was welcome.

“I must advise you not to stand so near the window,” Rolin intoned, pausing in the center of the room and standing motionlessly. “It is possible that they managed to get a few men into the city prior to laying the siege.”

The king turned and leaned back against the wall so that he faced into the room, aware of his wizard’s critical eye taking in his appearance. His blond hair and beard were scraggly and unkempt, he knew, and his clothes fell about him sloppily. “Have any such invaders yet been found?”

“No. And there have been no other changes. They continue to hold.”

Gwilym sighed loudly, frustrated. Eleven days ago, Corrado’s soldiers had successfully overthrown his defenses and set up camp around the walls of Vasos. Unexpectedly, however, they had as yet made no move to try and take the city. It was ridiculous to consider that they hoped to wait them out—Vasos could last within itself for months if need be—and their unknown intent and sudden lack of action was driving the king mad.

Rolin noted his king’s look, perceiving his thoughts exactly. “I’ve just come from speaking with Captain Laros,” he went on, his deep voice echoing off the stone walls. “And we have come up with a theory that may explain the behavior of the Cors.” He paused.

The king glared at him. “And being the ruler of this country, I was not thought to be included in this meeting?” he returned coldly.

Gwilym had never in all their decades together seen Rolin intimidated, and this instance proved to be no exception. “We did not wish to barrage you with mere possibilities,” the wizard responded smoothly, his light brown eyes calm and unperturbed.

“Then what is this theory you speak of?” the king growled, his fatigue making him snappish.

“We figure they are waiting for something,” Rolin said.

Gwilym’s eyes narrowed. “That is obvious.”

“Yes, but we believe that *what* they are waiting for is reinforcements, and most likely from Morvay, considering the rumors of their alliance.”

The king’s eyes widened as he thought it through quickly and he then began to pace furiously about the room. “Then they do not mean to simply take the city—they wish to slaughter us all!”

“I think it would be wise for us to begin planning for that possibility,” Rolin nodded. “Where is the queen?”

The king stopped and threw a wry look at the wizard. “When I left her she was praying in the God’s chapel—*again*. Although she may be convinced of the validity of Avilla’s dream, I am now not quite sure what *I* think of it. It is hard to believe that Terek, if He truly has returned, would have allowed this to happen.” He frowned severely before going on. “And what *of* Avilla’s dream? If what she saw was indeed the truth, Wherry’s forces should have been here some time ago to lend their aid.” He stopped again and shook his head. “My only solace lies in the fact that Kaymin is not here with us, though why he’s still not sent word over whether the treaty with King Mithwell has actually been

made is far beyond troubling.”

They had finally received word from the prince mere days before the besieging of Vasos, but instead of telling of his whereabouts and giving a status on the proposed treaty, it had instead been a short note of warning, claiming knowledge of unknown traitors that were apparently already in the royal city. Neither the king nor his wizard had known what to make of the note, and in light of their more pressing concerns they'd both pushed it to the backs of their minds. Their relief at knowing that Kaymin was still alive, or at least had been not long ago, had remained their dominant feeling in regards to the letter rather than the actual words he had written.

Queen Sikara Numont, surprisingly, had shown little reaction to Kaymin's note, saying only that she'd already known that her son was well, for Terek had spoken and told her so during several of her meditative states of prayer. The king had passed this off, inwardly fearing that his wife was beginning to lose her mind, and regretting the fact that he simply did not have the time right now to give this the attention that it apparently required.

Looking back at Rolin, King Numont then finally realized exactly what his wizard had come to tell him. If what they now suspected was correct, and Corrado merely waited for Morvay's forces to join with them before they attacked, then there was nothing left for them to do. Locked within the city, there would be no escape from Vasos. The towns and villages surrounding them had already been conquered by the Corrado soldiers and would not be able to bring to them any aid, and although the royal city's population was teeming, it held mostly women, children and all of the elderly who had been sent to the city for safety when the fighting had begun. The king held no illusions that in their present state, there was no chance they'd be able to stand against the might of both Corrado's and Morvay's armies.

Rolin had come to tell him, in his own strange, subtle way, that they were all going to die. With luck, the women, children, and elderly would be spared, but any hope for the royal family and its court was simply nonexistent.

“What do you suggest, my king?” Rolin asked, his massive voice now subdued.

Gwilym stared back at him wordlessly for a long while, his mind still working over the implications of what he'd been told. Finally opening his mouth to respond, he was cut off as the door to the room opened suddenly, revealing his wife and his captain, Colvin Laros.

Abruptly startled from his thoughts, the king took them in quickly, their conflicting expressions confusing him. The queen looked calm and was neatly dressed, her long, waist-length brown hair curled and hanging about her gown of green satin. Her eyes were leveled on his almost pointedly, her eyebrows raised just slightly to give her a look of superiority. Captain Laros, however, appeared highly excited, his gaze shining with an astonished glow.

The king looked from one to the other several times. “What's happened?” he demanded finally, completely agitated by their silence. “Have the Cors broken past the city gates?”

Sikara stepped forward regally. “No. As I have repeatedly attempted to explain to you, my husband, Terek has assured me that help would come.”

The king opened his mouth to respond bitterly until she held up her hand sharply to cut him off. He stopped, shocked by his wife's odd, domineering behavior.

“And now,” she went on, the expression in her eyes unchanged, “it has.”

Obviously waiting until he was certain that the queen had finished speaking, the captain spoke up excitedly. “Several white dragons have been spotted from the watchtowers, headed this way. It seems as though the prince’s attempts at gaining Wherry’s alliance were successful.”

Gwilym blinked quickly in surprise, shooting a sudden and relieved look to Rolin. Turning, he moved back to the tower window and peered out at the sky; and there, he could see five large dragons soaring clear and low, with each carrying several figures. The king watched speechlessly as the massive creatures began circling the city, obviously planning to land in the square itself.

“Colvin, gather the guards,” Gwilym ordered, overcome with a sudden rush of exhilaration. “We ride to the city square immediately!” He swept determinedly from the room, ignoring the pious look on his wife’s face as he passed by her.

Rolin and Captain Laros struggled to keep pace with him as he moved along the corridor, his determined stride a much-welcomed feeling after his recent bout of inaction.

“I would caution against this,” Rolin said, his robes fanning out about him as they began to descend a wide, spiraling stone staircase.

“So noted,” Gwilym replied shortly, moving on without pause.

The wizard pursed his lips together but said nothing more. If the Numont line carried one consistency besides its eerily similar facial features, it was without a doubt the hardheaded stubbornness that the king knew full well he was displaying now. Muttering his displeasure quietly under his breath, Rolin obeyed the king’s next command by throwing up a magical shield around them both.

Captain Laros raced away to assemble a guard, and Gwilym and Rolin stepped outside to mount the horses brought to them before moving forward to the portcullis where they were to await their escort.

An eagle’s cry suddenly rent the air, and Rolin gazed upward and watched as his familiar circled down slowly to alight upon his forearm. “Fifteen wizards,” he murmured, his gaze blank.

“What did Chantha see of the Corrado soldiers?” the king interrupted, glancing at the large bird, an intelligence in her eyes disturbing to see in any animal. Deploying her to gain information of their enemy was safe for one reason and one reason only—if ever a Cor had picked up a bow, the world had yet to learn of it.

The wizard paused. “They are looking uneasy at sight of the dragons, but are holding their ground,” he replied, his face clearing.

Gwilym nodded, looking back with impatience as Captain Laros rode up behind them, leading a guard of two hundred head. The men swarmed to surround the king and the wizard, and Gwilym shouted for the portcullis to be raised.

Since the siege of Vasos had begun, people were seen only sparsely in its streets, although at night many would make their way to one of the several churches in the city, while others would lay gifts of homage before the castle gates, obviously trying to convey their trust in the king and his advisors.

Now, however, the streets were suddenly thronging, with wild and ecstatic shouts ringing out and creating a loud buzz over the city. The excitement pitched even higher as the king rode out over the drawbridge leaving the castle, and cheering assailed him from all sides. He glanced briefly at the people as he rode past, the rain making it difficult to

see clearly. Many women stared up at him, clutching small children and with tears of relief flowing from their eyes, until finally he forced himself to look away, painfully aware of how close they'd all come to falling under Corrado's deadly blades.

Even though the populace moved quickly out of their path, the heavy rain proved a hindrance, and it took some time before they came upon the city's massive, cobbled square. As they approached, the grounded dragons took back to the skies with riotous screams as they were released, and the king dismounted to move toward the group of wizards now awaiting him.

Gwilym waited as each wizard introduced himself, though their names and faces quickly blurred together, his mind distracted by the excitement and frenzied battle-lust rising within him. Finally he nodded. "My deepest thanks to you all and to the entire royal House of Mithwell," he began. "May Gauvin's grace fall upon you all."

These words were acknowledged by the wizards with nods of approval.

"Now," the king went on, oblivious to the rain that continued to pelt down on them, "as you can all see, you have arrived at our most solemn hour. We believe that Corrado's forces are waiting only to be joined by Morvay's army before they begin their attack upon the city."

One of the wizards, a middle-aged man with a hooked, hawk-like nose, frowned slightly. "We did not see any such army approaching," he said.

Gwilym paused, exchanging a look with Rolin before he shrugged. "That does seem odd," he agreed. "However, the facts remain unchanged; we are in our eleventh day of siege, and, despite whatever it is that Corrado is waiting for, we can now, with your help, turn this battle."

Noting his king's exuberance, Rolin leaned into him and spoke quietly. "Remember, these men have been traveling for some time with little rest. It is unlikely that they will have the strength to step directly into a fight."

"Of course," Gwilym agreed, nodding quickly.

Almost as though he had overheard them, a young, black-haired wizard stepped forward and nodded respectfully to the king. "We are most anxious to aid you in your plight, your majesty. If I might make a suggestion?"

"Of course . . . err—" the king broke off as he struggled to recall the wizard's name.

"Clail," the young man supplied helpfully before going on. "We shall need only a day or so of rest to regain our strength. I therefore propose we make our attack at dusk tonight. Certainly we wouldn't want this situation to last any longer than necessary."

"No, we most assuredly do not," Gwilym enthused, nodding his complete agreement. "A night battle. . . yes, I rather like the thought of that. And I'm sure letting the Corrado soldiers stew and worry all day over what we might be up to will not aid them in their performance tonight." He looked to Captain Laros, who nodded, for agreement, and then to Rolin.

The royal wizard also nodded slowly. "We can make our plans while the wizards are resting," he finally said with a sharp look back at Clail. "Clail, did you say was your name? I have heard tales of your skills. It is truly to our good fortune that you are here."

Clail lowered his head respectfully to accept the compliment. "I was one of the first to volunteer," he murmured. "After all, Dargis and Wherry have always held a close relationship."

The king scrutinized the young man, glancing again at Rolin. "He is quite powerful, is

he?"

"Yes," Rolin replied, "it is said that he is second only to Jian himself."

The young wizard's passive expression remained, but his gray eyes suddenly looked strange. "Yes, Jian and I know each other quite well. We took most of our training together," he said.

Gwilym nodded, pleased. "Jian means much to us here in the royal house," he said. "We receive any friend of his with great honor."

Clail paused, then nodded. "I am much looking forward to seeing him again," he said, casting an obvious eye about.

"I'm afraid your reunion will not be happening here and now," the king told him regretfully. "Although I am rather surprised to see that he and my son did not return with you from Wherry on dragonback."

"Oh, they have not yet returned?" Clail said with obvious disappointment, his eyebrows raised. "How strange." With another respectful nod, he stepped back into the midst of his companions.

The king turned back to Rolin, worried. "It *is* strange," he confirmed, lowering his tone. "What reason could Kaymin have for not returning with the wizards?"

Rolin did not appear to share in his concern. "It is likely that Jian has recommended to the prince that he stay clear of Dargis for now."

Gwilym frowned briefly before catching on. "Ah, yes. It would be best for him to wait and be certain that the danger here has passed. No sense would come from risking the entire Numont line unnecessarily."

Rolin nodded, somehow still managing to look dignified despite his dripping robes and his long silver hair hanging about his face in thick, wet clumps.

"It does not explain why he did not at least send to me a message, however," the king went on, running his eye along the line of wizards before him. "Are you acquainted with many of these Brothers, Rolin?"

The big man nodded. "Most, yes. I believe us to be in good hands."

Gwilym nodded again, his gaze pausing on the young black-haired wizard whose name he'd already forgotten. "Odd fellow," he commented off-handedly.

### *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

Iannis's suggestion regarding the defense of the royal city of Rowe had been sheer madness, at least as far as Prince Roan Almara was concerned. However, and unsurprisingly, his father had approved the idea with little debate before putting it to the populace, who in turn had responded with unanimous enthusiasm. And now that the day of the confrontation had at last come, Roan was fairly confident that every soul in Rowe would be dead by the time the sun set that evening.

Wherry's army had come marching into sight at mid-day, the first time they had actually been spotted anywhere in Morvay, and with a sum of approximately fifty wizards at its head to surround the two men who rode side-by-side at their center. Following his sorceress's plan, King Almara had ordered that Rowe's western gates be opened, and the entire royal court now stood before them, waiting for Wherry's army to move closer before they began their own approach to meet them.

The citizens of the city, women and children included, stood amassed behind their court silently, seemingly calm and keeping to the same expectant position that they'd already held for hours.

Roan couldn't stop himself from glancing back at them several times in wonder. Although Morvansians were most well known throughout the world for their ferociousness and apparent lack of fear, even he'd been surprised by the willingness and downright excitement the city dwellers had expressed over this suicidal plan hatched by Iannis. His race would never be accused of cowardice, of that he was quite certain.

Roan drummed his fingers against his saddle impatiently as they waited. He'd attempted to draw Caley into conversation earlier just to pass the time, but his father had glared them both into silence. He shot another bored look to his sorceress now, but she appeared not to see, lost in her own thoughts. She had spoken little when the king had expressed his approval of this idea, but later, in private, she'd ranted to her prince for hours over his father's "reckless stupidity." Roan had done nothing but stare at her in wonder as she'd carried on—Gaalene women, particularly Sisters, simply did not act in that manner.

Finally the king deemed Wherry's army to be near enough to the city, his decision made clear to all by a loud and characteristic grunt, and he nudged his heels into his horse. On his left rode Iannis, her face pale and stony, and to his other side, his captain, Jakkod Sarba. The queen came behind them, alone, followed finally by Roan and Caley.

Seeing them approach, the two men riding in the midst of the wizards appeared to confer briefly before calling a halt to their army, and they stared with surprised interest as King Almara stopped his horse only paces from them.

Roan watched as his father dismounted and stepped boldly up before the men and their wizards, the king's sorceress and captain also stepping down from their mounts to keep to his sides.

"I am King Gazziro Almara, and I demand to know the meaning of this intrusion onto my lands," he opened brazenly.

Roan felt his stomach drop at his father's tone. This was madness; any fool would agree that they should have run when they'd had the chance. Well, any fool not Morvanian, apparently. Heaving a sigh, he looked back to the exchange with a foreboding dread.

The two men from Wherry also dismounted and stepped forward.

Roan was surprised to observe how young one of them looked, no more than a few years older than himself, and he further figured that the arrogance gleaming in the young man's blue eyes marked him most assuredly as royalty. All Wherrites were reported to be arrogant, of course, but this one oozed it with his every movement.

"King Almara," the young, stocky blond man said with a nod, "I am Jostin Mithwell, prince and heir to the city of Dorcey in Wherry." The man at his side, obviously his captain, remained silent.

Since he still sat behind his father, Roan could not see the king's returning expression, but felt he could very well imagine it. He held back wince.

"I don't recall asking who you were," Gazziro snapped. "I believe I demanded to know what business you have in bringing your army onto my lands."

Wherry's prince took a step back in fury, obviously embarrassed to have been spoken to in such a fashion in front of his men. "We have come to take your city," he returned



venomously. "Prepare to defend yourselves."

The king's demeanor changed suddenly, and he held up his hands, sounding thoughtful. "And on what grounds will you be attempting this?" he asked reasonably.

Prince Mithwell glared. "Self defense," he replied coldly. "We are privy to your future plots with Corrado."

Roan frowned, shooting a questioning look to Caley while wondering what exactly this idiot was talking about. His sorceress shrugged slightly in reply.

King Almara paused, perhaps also confused, but he responded in the same, almost friendly tone. "I'm not quite certain as to your meaning," he said, actually sounding a little mystified, "but plainly anyone can see that you are entirely set upon this path you've claimed."

Obviously feeling that he again held the upper hand in the conversation, Prince Mithwell nodded condescendingly.

"We will not attempt to resist you, but only with your agreement on the sole condition that you will not harm my people," Gazziro said, his words a shock even to those who had been expecting them. "Most of my army is away, and I could not possibly hope to stand against you at this time."

Jostin Mithwell stared silently for a moment, clearly wondering if he had heard correctly. "You're surrendering?" he blurted finally.

The king nodded solemnly. "We shall surrender so long as you vow to do no harm to the city dwellers," he repeated. "I would rather my people die with courage in a hopeless battle than be kept alive as prisoners to be brutalized," he went on with a heartfelt intensity that should have been a fair enough warning for any fool to pick up on.

Prince Mithwell nodded distractedly, still obviously reeling from King Almara's strange offer. "A moment to confer with my captain," he muttered, turning away rudely.

"Of course." Gazziro and his entourage stepped back.

Roan watched, feeling quite certain he knew the words that Prince Mithwell exchanged with his captain. Morvay's reputation was one that implied surrendering would never present itself as an option—but the king's honest words regarding his absent army would likely keep them from suspecting any trickery. What they likely were *not* taking into consideration was the fact that apparently nearly every soul in Rowe was insane and more than just a little suicidal.

Actually, it was almost humorous, in a strange sort of way; the true act of suicide was a completely foreign concept to the Morvansians. Throughout the entire history of the country, there was not a single account of any man or woman having purposefully ended their own life, for such thoughts simply did not appear in the Morvanian mind. To die in battle, however, even against ridiculously outrageous odds . . . well, now that was another matter entirely.

Finally it was the captain of Wherry's army who stepped back to the king. "We accept the terms of your surrender," he said officially. "For we also do not wish for any unnecessary bloodshed, and, as worshippers of Gauvin, we would be grateful to settle this matter as peacefully as possible."

Gazziro nodded, although Roan would have sworn to the goddess Yanoka Herself that his father was fighting to hold off a contemptuous snort at these words. Gauvin might be a promoter of peace, but Yanoka was the ruler of chaos.

"Now," the captain went on, "we shall escort you back into the city, where you can

address your people yourself, and let them know that they have no reason to fear our presence so long as they remain calm.”

“I appreciate your consideration,” Gazziro returned, nodding.

“However,” the captain went on hurriedly before the king could turn away, “we must insist on taking your sorceresses into our custody now.” Apparently this man wasn’t a complete dunce.

Gazziro paused only slightly. “If you must,” he said, mounting his horse.

Roan watched worriedly as Caley and Iannis were directed into the crowd of wizards. Although this possibility had been considered, it now only seemed to re-enforce to him the fact that they were all fools to think they might actually pull this off. Of course, in the minds of most, if not all, of his fellow Morvanians, death was much more preferable to surrender or flight. He briefly wondered if there was something wrong with him for thinking otherwise.

The ride back into Rowe was solemnly silent, save for the odd curse that came from the Wherrites over the heat, and the populace, still gathered just inside the gates, stared motionlessly at their approach.

“The city’s square should do well enough for my delivery,” King Almara spoke up.

Wherry’s captain nodded. “Very well. Proceed.”

Gazziro, with Prince Mithwell at his side and several wizards flanking them both, continued to lead them farther into the city, making sure Wherry’s entire army of thousands had followed them inside. The city folk walked with them, all wearing assumed expressions of concern and fear. Apparently fair acting abilities were another common trait held by his people, Roan observed.

When they reached the square, the captain let King Almara move forward by himself to address his people. Gazziro turned his horse to face the crowd, looking out at them silently for a long moment. Despite being known for his long-winded and often pompous speeches, Roan suspected that his father would not take the opportunity to drone on today.

“People of Rowe,” Gazziro readily called out, his voice the only sound in the unnatural quiet. “You see before you the grand might of Wherry, cavalry and White Wizards alike.”

The feel of the air about them was incredibly hostile, and it was a true wonder the Wherrites didn’t pick up on it. Roan shifted nervously, trying to find Caley in the mass of white robes and failing. His hand tensed, sliding subtly into the sleeve of his shirt, and he rested his fingers lightly upon the handle of the knife stashed there; not his weapon of choice, but if he managed to live longer than a few minutes, that fact would soon be rectified. He suddenly noted his mother looking at him, and was chilled to see the expectant look in her eyes.

The king went on. “After causing incalculable damage to our lands over these past months, they have now come to claim this city and its people.”

Roan saw Prince Mithwell frown and look quickly to his captain.

“And it is my command,” Gazziro continued, his voice rising to a frenzy, “to kill! Kill them all!” he bellowed at the top of his voice.

Chaos erupted in the square and the king pitched to the side, falling from his horse as a lance sank deeply into his shoulder, let fly from the hand of Wherry’s tall captain. Gazziro’s own captain, Jakkod Sarba, sprang forward to defend his fallen king, short

sword in hand.

Knowing that the city gates were right now being closed and bolted, trapping both Wherry's army and all the inhabitants of the city in Rowe's streets, Roan quickly pulled free his blade and rolled off his horse. Something exploded to his right, most assuredly the work of the wizards, and he took advantage of the surprise and panic to quickly thrust his knife into the side of the nearest Wherrite soldier. Grabbing the dying man's sword, he pushed his way into the surrounding crowd.

The citizens were alive with battle-lust, pulling out their hidden weapons and ferociously attacking Wherry's army, wizards and soldiers alike. Wherry's forces, completely caught off guard, took a few moments to realize what had happened before they too pulled their weapons and engaged.

Almost in a daze, Roan pushed his way through the mob until he came to the edge of the square. Throwing his pilfered sword to a woman whose own weapon was deeply imbedded and apparently fixed in the leg bone of a shrieking Wherrite, he scrambled up the thin rope ladder he'd hung earlier that morning and pulled himself onto the roof of a large shop overlooking the square.

The bow and extensive supply of arrows lay just as he'd left them, and he fell into position while quickly nocking an arrow. He turned back toward the center of the square, taking aim, but was unable to keep himself from pausing briefly to take in the gruesome scene.

Already the cobblestones were awash with blood, bodies of the wounded and the dead lying everywhere. The populace, heavily outnumbered and without the aid of armor—the wearing of such would have been just slightly suspicious, even to the likes of Wherrites—were dropping quickly under Wherry's might, although most seemed to be taking at least some of the invaders down with them.

Roan's eyes scanned over the battle repeatedly, searching for any sign of his parents or his sorceress. Finally he spotted Iannis instead, caught up in a battle with three of Wherry's wizards and apparently holding her own. Of Caley, however, there was no sign.

The king no longer remained where he had fallen and he too seemed to have disappeared, although Roan could suddenly see his mother clearly, swinging her short sword with expertise and causing several of Wherry's knights to fall dead at her feet. It looked as though many of them were hesitant to strike at a woman, an error that proved to be their last.

More explosions sounded out, followed by screams from the freshly wounded and creating a thin, smoky haze over the combatants. Roan squinted, blinking the sweat from his eyes, and finally released. He did not stop to see if he hit the wizard he had aimed at; he never missed. He continued to fire his arrows in quick succession until his hand and forearm burned, both cramping and stiff, before pausing to again take in the scene below him.

The people of Rowe continued to fight with a deadly and relentless fury, but what they had known all along was quickly becoming more and more obvious. They simply did not have the numbers to carry on much longer. Roan guessed that in less than an hour all of the Morvianians gathered here would be dead. Unfortunately, the king had had only days to send for reserves from the nearby towns and cities, and the numbers brought in had not been enough to carry any serious hope, not when they faced magic.

He saw then that his mother still lived, although she was wounded in several places and undoubtedly would not last much longer; the Wherrites seemed to have finally realized the result of underestimating a Morvian woman who held a weapon in her hands. Iannis, who from Roan's point of view appeared to have killed all three of the wizards with whom she'd been battling, also looked as though she was nearing the end of her reserves.

Of Caley, there was still no sight.

Setting another arrow into place, Roan shot into the soldiers nearing his mother. He longed to go to her, but she had given him strict instructions not to do so under any circumstances, even going so far as to threaten to kill him herself if he attempted it. She'd made it more than clear that she was determined to go out on her own terms, with courage and with dignity.

He turned with sudden alarm as a slight thud sounded from behind him, and then exhaled with staggering relief. Pooku, Caley's familiar, raced across the roof toward him and nudged against his leg affectionately.

"I'm glad to see you too, Pooku," Roan said quietly, scratching the cat's chin. If Pooku was well, then so was Caley. He checked over the familiar quickly, unable to find even the smallest of wounds upon his furry body. Pooku meowed loudly, then moved to the edge of the roof where the ladder was hung, his tail swishing. Roan shouldered his bow and a full quiver, cradled the animal in one arm, and lowered them both quickly and carefully to the ground.

Iannis saw him at once and began limping toward him, her face ragged with exhaustion. Her eyes dropped briefly to take in the cat and, oddly, a quick flash of irritation seemed to cross her face, so fast he wasn't even sure he had really seen it. "The king . . . is at the eastern gates," she rasped.

Roan, hastily and regrettably dropping Pooku, quickly fired upon a Wherrite soldier who had stepped up threateningly behind the sorceress.

She seemed not to notice. "Others have already gathered there."

Roan's eyes widened in surprise. "They will leave the city?"

Iannis sighed wearily. "Yes. Your father is wounded, although I am unsure of how badly, for I have instructed Leith to stay far above the battle. You must come, if for no other reason than to keep your family line intact."

Roan glanced quickly across the square at his mother, unconsciously catching Pooku as the cat leapt back into his arms.

Iannis clutched his shoulder and turned him away. "She has chosen her fate. For once, boy, make the wise decision and respect her wishes."

He glared at her and shook off her hold. "Is Caley with my father?"

"Yes. She has been gathering up all the city's children that she could find and has brought them to the gates." She began to move away, taking a route that led through a deserted alleyway. She did not turn back to see if he followed.

He looked once more to his mother, seeing a circle of men beginning to close in on her. Then he shut his eyes and turned away to follow after the sorceress.

Echoes of the battle rolled hauntingly throughout the deserted streets around them. Spurred on by this, it took little time to reach the eastern gates of the city. Several hundred people milled before them, mostly women and children, though only few showed signs of injury. Undoubtedly the Wherrites had made the same mistake with the

children as they had with the women.

Caley stood a short distance away from the rest, quickly applying a dressing to the king's shoulder wound. Captain Sarba stood nearby, keeping an alert eye on their surroundings.

"Move away," Iannis snapped at the younger sorceress, waving her aside. "I can take care of my own charge."

Caley gave a disgruntled frown but stepped back and turned her attention onto Roan. "Are you injured?"

He shook his head at her distractedly while handing over her familiar, his focus quickly leaping back to the king. "Father, do you really intend to flee?"

Gazziro looked up from beneath his disheveled dark hair, his expression defeated. "We have all fought bravely, and have dented their army significantly. But we cannot hope to win this. I do not see this as fleeing, son," he went on, "rather than as a chance to regroup and settle this with forces much better matched."

Roan glared at him. "If you had come to this conclusion earlier, thousands of Rowe's people would still be alive!"

"The people were in full favor of this Roan, you know that as well as I. It was what they wanted."

Furious, Roan turned away and stared down at the ground. That logic reeked of Iannis—although it was evidently sufficient enough to ease any guilt felt by the king over so many pointless deaths. "So where would you have us go now, then?" he spat, raising his eyes back to his father.

The king looked away tiredly. "To remain in Morvay would be folly, certainly. We shall head southeast, picking up as many as we can from the towns and cities that we pass through. With any luck, we should also encounter our returning army, for they should be only days distant from returning, now."

Roan shook his head in understanding. "We're going to Corrado," he concluded, disbelieving. "That is, if King Rivenor will still have us after we pulled our promised aid from him."

"I will explain to him our circumstances. Surely he will understand."

"Perhaps," Roan returned harshly, "though I hope you're not counting on it. Also," he went on, vexed, "what makes you think that the Wherrites will not pursue us?"

"By the time they realize that we have gone, we should have enough of a head start for it not to matter."

Roan stared back at his father silently. Yes, those left behind in Rowe to die would certainly provide distraction enough to get this party clear of the city. "You planned this from the beginning, didn't you, you and your sorceress?" he accused quietly, throwing a look of contempt at Iannis. "It was always your intent to leave."

The king straightened, his eyes alighting quickly with anger. "My position is one that dictates I am to rule these people—not die amongst them," he replied in a steady but low tone. "Rowe was but one city, and my people are still many. It would have done them no favor if I had died here today."

Roan continued to stare at his father. "And what of mother?" he finally managed.

"She knew of my plans. She chose her own way."

Thoroughly sickened, the prince shook his head and turned away.

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

The red sun blazed in the mid-morning sky, its searing heat blistering down upon the large camp stationed only a short distance from the misty Corrado-Dargis border. Absently tying a white scarf about his head to keep the sweat from his eyes, Corrado's king watched as his captain, Shalton Falzon, spotted him from across the camp and began striding toward him. Captain Falzon, like Zane himself, should have been across the border and leading the siege on the Dargasian royal city of Vasos. Zane ground his teeth together and waited for the man to approach.

"Several of the prisoners attempted to escape again last night, your majesty," the captain reported. "They grew extremely violent at their recapture, and we had little choice but to kill them."

Zane stared absently at the nearby border and sipped briefly from the small mug in his hand while nodding.

"It seems that they've picked up on our talk and have become aware of the siege we've laid against their royal city, and it is obvious that they are quite determined to return home and aid their king."

"Understandable," Zane returned evenly.

Captain Falzon paused and eyed him. "There are still no reports regarding Morvay's approach. They have yet to be spotted by any of our scouts."

The king tossed away his empty mug with a quick flick of his wrist. "I think it's safe to assume that they are not coming."

The captain nodded his agreement slowly. "Perhaps it would be wise for us to start going over our options then, in light of this conclusion," he suggested carefully.

The king looked away for a moment, his hazel gaze taking in the camp around him. "All right," he finally replied. "Find Reay and meet me in my tent. We will have this out."

The captain nodded and hurried away.

Zane stood for another moment, watching the men around him going on about their respective tasks. Brave men who would follow him loyally straight to their deaths if he made the wrong decision. Shaking his head, he walked back to his tent slowly, its shelter providing only a small reprieve from the heat. Reay and the captain arrived just moments later, and he gestured for them to sit at the small table set up next to his cot.

"All right," he began, seating himself, "tell me what we already know." He'd figured this would be the easiest way to start luring their thoughts to where he wished them to go.

The sorceress paused a moment before replying, considering him. "Well, it is clear that, even without Morvay's aid, we've had little trouble overpowering the Dargasian defenses," she pointed out.

Zane silently noted her hesitant tone; perhaps he had been a little short with her lately. The knowledge that thousands of his men were across the border, fighting and dying, while he sat here twiddling his thumbs brought him to a level of rage he hadn't known existed. He could harness it for the most part, but knew he'd let it slip occasionally, and Reay's almost constant presence had made her a convenient target.

"Yes," the captain nodded quickly, "but taking Vasos will be something else all together. I'm not saying that it cannot be done, of course," he went on, "but the casualty

rate on both sides will undoubtedly be high. Very high.”

They exchanged a look and waited for Zane to speak.

“The whole point of this battle was to defend ourselves,” he started, “something we’ve already shown that we are fully capable of doing. A slaughter was never my intent, and I regret the lives already wasted.”

Reay stared at him discerningly, a hint of disbelief coming into her eyes. “Surely you cannot be suggesting a retreat?”

“No,” Zane said slowly, then paused to carefully consider his words. They were likely now expecting him to announce that he’d decided to ignore their cautions and was intending to ride straight away for Vasos. They were not exactly wrong in this. “That would only lead to a retaliation from Dargis, perhaps after they’d garnered themselves an ally since they obviously cannot overtake us without one.” He watched as the two of them exchanged another glance, clearly both wondering where he was going with this.

“So, you wish to go ahead with the attack on Vasos, even without Morvay’s reinforcements?” Captain Falzon finally asked leadingly.

He sat back and regarded them both seriously. “This battle,” he started, “may be our most pressing issue at hand, but it is still not what’s drawing my heaviest worries.”

Reay nodded with quick understanding. “If we take Vasos, we will control the entire country, and our concerns over Corrado’s drought will no longer have grounds. Dargis can easily supply enough water for its own people as well as all those here.”

“Yes,” Zane agreed, “but to take it by force is not my first wish.”

The sorceress was clearly exasperated with him by now and trying desperately to hold her tongue. As blunt as she often was with her opinions in private, he knew she would never say or do anything that could be misconstrued as disrespect while in the presence of others. “Then what do you propose?” she said finally.

“I intend to speak with King Numont, face-to-face, and attempt to resolve this without further bloodshed.”

“Preposterous!” she exploded.

Zane frowned at her.

“An interesting but reckless thought, my king,” the captain disapproved quickly. “I’m afraid the risk to you would simply be too high.”

Zane went on as if neither had spoken. “It is my hope that in exchange for calling back my armies, King Numont will agree to supply us with water, something that he obviously has more of than he knows what to do with.”

Reay looked to be in a valiant struggle to keep her words and tone duteous. “Even if the Dargasian king *does* agree to those terms, it may not be wise to trust his words. It would be but a simple thing for him to renege on his promise once your troops depart from his lands.”

“It would,” Zane agreed, “although he would be forced to consider the several hundred soldiers that I will continue to hold here as my prisoners.”

His sorceress paused, eyeing him with a mixture of respect and annoyance. “I see you’ve thought this out well,” she remarked, her voice flat. “But I hold to my agreement with Captain Falzon; you cannot possibly think to ride into Vasos yourself.”

“King Numont will feel more comfortable at a meeting in his own city, and will be much more likely to agree to my proposal.” He watched as they exchanged another frustrated glance, and he wondered if they actually believed they’d be successful in

detering him from this.

He looked to his captain. "I wish to leave at dawn tomorrow. Make certain all the preparations are seen to."

The man paused at this obvious dismissal, plainly wishing to voice further objections.

"You are trying my patience," Zane snapped at him. "Now leave me."

Captain Falzon stood, his expression stony. "My king," he nodded, before retreating from the tent.

Zane turned in his seat, putting his booted feet up on the now-vacant chair next to him before turning to his sorceress with a look of resigned expectation. This was not going to be pleasant and he'd just as soon get it over with. "All right, Reay, say what you feel you must," he invited, even while mentally preparing himself for the blast that she was surely about to give him.

Her black eyes glared across the table and she instantly grew animated with her anger. "Is it not enough that you are insisting on this foolhardy plan, but you must now mock my concerns for you as well?"

How was it that women always knew a way to make a man feel guilty, no matter the circumstances? He started to reply but she cut him off.

"And do you forget that it is not only my duty to protect you, but my sole purpose, and that you will make it nearly impossible for me to do so with this reckless scheme of yours?" Her eyes blazed now, and she was nearly trembling with her fury. "To do this is to mark yourself as nothing but an arrogant fool!"

He had never before seen her so angry with him and he fought to retain his own reason, something that proved uncharacteristically difficult. He was also mildly stunned; although she'd certainly implied it many times over the years, she'd never before had the nerve to name him a fool outright, never mind an arrogant one.

"It is not a reckless scheme," he finally said. "I have thought it out, and fully believe it to be the most likely chance we have at preserving our lives, not just in the immediate future, but in the weeks and months to come." He continued to stare at her, suddenly horrified and completely disconcerted by the fact that she appeared near tears, a state he had never witnessed her anywhere near to before. Few believed Gaalene women even capable of crying.

"And if you are wrong?" she yelled, on her feet now so she could glower down at him. Her face was flushed, marking stains of crimson across her pale cheeks. "Have you at all considered the shambles you will leave of your kingdom if you should be struck down, especially at a time such as this?" she raged. "We have had this conversation before, or do you now merely find it convenient to disregard that fact?"

Zane winced, wondering if half the camp was loitering outside his tent, listening to him getting screamed at by his sorceress. "Reay, calm down. I truly have confidence enough in this plan to make the risk worthwhile," he replied, hoping she would take his low tone as a hint. "Besides, you shall be at my side, and I have never worried for my safety when you are near."

She stopped to look at him, and with a sudden, belated concern, he found himself wondering if she had taken more from his statement than he'd intended. He was aware of her feelings for him, of course, as he was not blind, deaf, and dumb. But the plain truth was, although he loved her dearly, he simply did not return her romantic sentiments and felt quite certain that he never would. She did belong to him, but not in that way; this



was a feeling he did not understand, but one he adhered to strictly. He would lay no hand upon this woman.

He finally looked away as she continued to stare at him. Never knowing what to do in these situations, he reacted as he always did and attempted to appear completely oblivious. Obviously, the situation would have to be addressed at some point, though he was forced to once again acknowledge his childish side which suggested that if he only ignore the problem long enough, it may just go away on its own.

*Not likely*, he thought, swinging his gaze back to her with what he hoped was a completely blank expression on his face. He was beginning to wear it so often now that it was a wonder she didn't think him a complete and outright idiot. Then again, she had, just minutes ago, called him a fool.

Unable to stop himself from looking away again, he quickly vowed that he would do something about this just as soon as these troubles with Dargis were over. The last thing he wanted to do was to hurt her in any way, or to put any sort of strain on their relationship, but he was really quite partial to the thought of marrying someday, and it had been difficult enough to keep his lovers a secret from her.

Finally Reay seemed to realize that he was not about to say anything more on whatever matter it was she thought they were now discussing.

"So there is nothing else that I can say to deter you from taking this action?" Clearly disgusted with him, although he wasn't exactly certain for which reason, her eyes gazed back at him stonily.

He shook his head silently, feeling a sudden guilt for having upset her, but fearful that he would only get himself in deeper if he attempted to repair the damage.

"Very well. You do realize, I trust, that besides the possibility of your untimely death, there can be only two outcomes to this . . . proposal . . . of yours?"

Zane nodded. "Either King Numont will see this as an opportunity to best protect his people and accept my offer, or he will give his armies the order to attack straight away."

"Which will result in our having to fight the battle that you are trying so desperately to avoid, and without the upper hand that we now hold."

Now that they were back on the topic of war, he found himself completely out of patience with her. "I understand that full well, Reay," he glared, "but I've made my decision, and I refuse to listen to another word on the matter." He turned away in a cold dismissal but continued to watch her from the corner of his eye.

She looked at him for a moment, her face hard and mask-like, before stepping back and almost colliding with Captain Falzon, who was nearly tripping over himself in his haste to re-enter the tent.

Wanting nothing more than to be left alone, Zane cursed the man violently, demanding to know why he'd come into his tent without invitation.

"My apologies, your majesty," Shalton gasped, obviously out of breath.

Zane observed him with a frown. "Well, what is the reason for all this excitement?"

The captain stepped closer, his face pale and his eyes dreadfully serious. "One of our men has just ridden in from Vasos," he began. "Dragons flew into the city days ago, carrying wizards from Wherry, and they attacked with Numont's army that night. Losses to our own were . . . significant."

Zane's eyes widened slightly but he felt his expression sliding into blankness again; somehow, this look had become a favored sort of personal defense.

“With the wizards aiding them, I’m afraid our men had no choice but to flee or risk complete annihilation. The army of Dargis is pursuing.” He stepped back silently, keeping his eyes upon the king.

Zane stared down at the table unseeingly. “How many wizards?” he asked tonelessly, internally fighting back the daze of shock that had risen inside him.

“The man was unsure, as he only just escaped the battle himself before being sent to warn us. He estimated between ten and twenty.”

The king nodded, suddenly furious with himself. He should have listened to Reay right from the start, when she’d told him that waiting for Morvay’s aid was unnecessary, that they would do best to just attack straight away. And now, in the interest of trying to save as many lives as possible—Cors and Dargasians alike—he’d likely just lost as many souls as he would have anyway, while gaining absolutely nothing for his caution.

Of course, most of the blame fell to Morvay, and Zane vowed a silent, murderous revenge on all Morvanians as he sat motionlessly at the table.

“What do you suggest?” he finally asked of the two wearily.

“We must get you back to Xion immediately,” the captain insisted. “And I think it would not be in vain to ready the city for siege once we arrive there. Although it is uncertain if it will hold at having to stand against wizards.”

Zane looked at Reay.

She nodded slowly to him, agreeing that this was the best course of action. “Ten to twenty wizards,” she said. “We may be able to hold them from entering the city. With careful planning.” Her tone did not sound especially hopeful.

“Very well,” Zane assented, “but first select ten of the Dargasian prisoners.”

“To what purpose, my king?” the captain frowned.

“Put their heads on pikes and leave them in plain sight of the border. And another ten for each day of travel back to Xion.”

### *Chapter Thirty*

A prisoner in the dungeons of his own palace, King Judson Mithwell rolled over on the soiled and freezing floor as he awoke, barely able to stop himself from crying out. Torches from the corridor provided the only light, causing flickering shadows to dance across the empty walls of his cell.

He moaned as he pushed himself to his knees, rocking back and forth dizzily until his sight cleared. How many days and nights had he spent down here? Impossible to tell. Time had stretched into an unending night filled with solitude, darkness, and torture.

One of his arms was broken, he was quite certain, and whip lashes covered most of his legs and back, injuries that had forced him to remove his outer clothing for the pain of the material rubbing against his broken skin. He was given cold gruel once a day, or at least what he assumed was once a day, for he had no way of actually calculating the time between meals. He was also quite well aware as to why his captors had not yet killed him; they wanted information, information that he both wouldn’t and couldn’t give.

When Gaal’s army had been spotted, crossing into Wherry and only days away from the royal city of Dorcey, the king had at once realized the undeniable hopelessness he faced. Forty of Crysmir’s wizards had been sent east to Morvay along with nearly all of

Wherry's cavalry. Thirty-three of those wizards still lived, and they remained in Rowe, attempting to throw some rein of control over the country, which was now rioting violently over the attack of its royal city. King Mithwell had been greatly agitated to learn that several members of the royal court had escaped the city during the battle, including King Almara himself. Morvay's queen, Brewin Almara, was the only royal member to have been taken by Wherry's forces, although she was badly injured and not expected to live. That had been the last report he'd received before the Gaalenes had swept into Dorcey and decimated its meager defenses.

As promised to Prince Kaymin Numont, fifteen of Crysmir's wizards were now in Dargis, aiding the natives there in their battle with the desert-dwellers of Corrado. No reports had come in to tell of their progress before House Mithwell had fallen, but Judson was now much more concerned over their well-being than he had been when he'd initially signed the order. The ferocity of Morvay's populace had stunned him, and although they were worshippers of Neutrality rather than Evil, he now feared a similar brutality from the Cors.

Twelve of Crysmir's wizards were either unavailable for duty, such as Rolin who served as King Gwilym Numont's royal wizard in Dargis, or were lost to whereabouts unknown, such as Grady, who had last been seen here in Dorcey months ago. Including King Mithwell's own wizard, Caddigan, this had left only thirteen of their number in all of Wherry when Gaal's army had been spotted entering their lands.

Horrified, Judson had immediately dispatched Caddigan to travel on dragonback to Crysmir, and from there had the royal wizard send off two others of his kind, one to Morvay and the other to Dargis, to call back his army and his wizards. Of course, Judson had known they would never return in time.

The remaining eleven wizards, including the three aged yet powerful Panel members, took up their posts inside of House Mithwell, ready to bravely face the sorceresses of Gaal who outnumbered them nearly five-to-one.

The battle had not lasted long. King Mithwell wasn't even sure if any who had fought for Dorcey still lived, or, for that matter, what had become of the civilians. This included his seven daughters who had, only at the last minute, agreed to flee the city. The dungeons around him were silent, echoing only the movements that he himself made and causing him to fear the worst for his children and his people.

The king shuffled to a corner, hunching into himself as he shook from the cold. Even if they had been kind enough to supply him with a blanket, which they hadn't been, he would have been hesitant to draw it across his lashed skin. He lifted a wrinkled hand to feel the tender places on his face, finding many of them swollen into large, bruised lumps, and, swelled to nearly twice its size, he could barely manage to see anything past the puffy flesh about his left eye.

Since he had no way to measure the passage of time, the king had absolutely no way of estimating how much longer it may be before his armies returned, and only prayed that he would be able to survive until then. His bones were old, brittle, and with a fair degree of certainty he determined that one or two more beatings would likely see the end of him.

Sudden horror then gripped Judson as the faint echo of approaching footsteps reached his ears. It would be *him* again.

Battling against his fear, the king forced himself to stand and face the bars of his cell. Clearing his face of all signs of the pain he felt throughout his body, he stood straight-

backed and seemingly calm. Kill him they may, but he was determined that they would not see him broken.

Merry whistling mingled with the sounds of the steps growing near, a jaunty, nameless, up-beat tune that Judson had heard several times before. Finally the man stopped in front of the king's cell, and, holding his torch aloft, peered inside with interest before a grin broke out over his face.

"I am happy to see you still live, your majesty," the man said, sounding most pleased. "We're holding a betting pool, and you've just earned me three silver pieces."

"Prince Pavula," Judson nodded, almost as though he was welcoming the man to his court for a friendly visit. With great inward relief, he noted that the prince seemed not to be carrying any of his usual instruments of torture, although his mace hung at his side. The king then watched with sudden alarm as a frown slid across the prince's face; truly, this man's mood could change in less than a blink of an eye, more often than not becoming fiercely violent.

Gaal's prince unlocked the door of the cell and stepped inside, still wearing a sour look as he set his torch into an empty sconce. "I think we've gotten to know each other well enough by now that we can dispose of these titles," he remarked, giving a dismissive wave and walking closer to the king. "I'd like you to feel free to call me by my given name, Zeidan."

Judson nodded slowly, his experience with the man still making him wary. He'd gleaned enough by now, however, to realize that it would be in his best interests to play along, at least for the time being. "Certainly," he replied. "And I would be most pleased if you would do the same."

Zeidan smiled, his black eyes gleaming in the darkness. "Let us sit, shall we?" He repositioned his mace and promptly dropped into a cross-legged position upon the frosty floor, his easy expression watching as the king attempted to do the same without showing any signs of his pain.

Feeling quite proud of himself for accomplishing this, Judson looked back to the prince with a steady gaze.

Zeidan continued to watch him for several more silent moments, signs of a faint grin on his lips. "You realize, Judson, that I hate to keep having this same discussion with you over and over again. I am a patient man, but even I have my limits."

"Take comfort in the knowledge that I am likely enjoying our . . . *discussions* far less than you are," the king returned, unable to completely keep the dryness from his tone. To his relief, the other man simply grinned slightly at this. After numerous sessions now, Judson felt he was slowly learning how to phrase his responses without drawing the prince's sudden wrath. At their first encounter, he'd lasted only moments before being beaten savagely.

Zeidan nodded now, his look considering. "I do, however, have a feeling that this time will be different, that we will both come away with the feeling that we've accomplished something to the benefit of our respective interests."

The king watched him suspiciously, wondering what new twist was about to be thrown his way. "Sounds intriguing," he finally replied.

"Doesn't it, though?" Zeidan smiled brightly and reached into the small satchel at his side. Again taking up his whistling, he began pulling forth several locks of straight, shining, silvery blond hair, each tied separately with a ribbon of colored silk. He then

proceeded to lie out each of them onto the floor between the two men.

Judson felt his stomach tighten into a knot as he stared down at the seven bundles of hair before him.

“Now,” Zeidan went on, rubbing his hands together with obvious anticipation, “I trust that I do not need to explain these items to you?”

The king shook his head slowly.

“Of course not,” Zeidan chastised himself. “For what kind of father would that make you?” He shook his head briefly. “Now, let me explain the rules.”

“Please do,” Judson replied tonelessly, still staring down at what lay on the floor between them.

“I’ve noted with some concern that we’ve been having much trouble with our communication, and I figured this may help us to remedy the issue.” He moved to pick up the first lock of hair before him and ran it idly between his fingers. “Funny,” he mused, glancing down at it, “how each of them chose a different color for her favorite.”

The king took in the yellow ribbon tied around the bundle of hair the prince now held. Those colors were not, in fact, favorites exactly, but ones that signified the numbering of their births—and so identified his seven daughters to him now with all surety. The yellow represented his second-born, Antanya. The woman who could very well be carrying the next Mithwell heir, if Jostin should happen to fall in Morvay, which still seemed possible despite the capture of Rowe.

Zeidan continued cheerfully. “I am now going to ask you a question. If you lie, or do not answer to my satisfaction, my next visit will bring with me not only this lovely lock of hair, but the entire head it was once attached to.”

Judson’s lips pursed together in fury, but he nodded to show he understood. Admitting that Antanya might be pregnant would certainly garner no leniency from this man. In fact, he suspected it would do just the opposite.

“Excellent.” Zeidan twirled the hair in his hand. “Let us begin, then. Where are the wizards of Crysmir?”

The king had been asked this question several times before, and had always responded with silence. Now, of course, he had no choice but to answer, and to do so truthfully, for he had no idea as to what information Gaal’s prince might already have found out. Zeidan could very well be using this first question as a simple way of discerning the king’s honesty.

“Forty were sent to Morvay with nearly all of my ground forces to conquer Rowe, the royal city under King Almara’s reign.”

The prince looked surprised. “Good,” he said, laying down the piece of hair and picking up the next. Its ribbon was pink.

*Erkily.* One of his sole set of twins, the youngest of his children.

“Why did you send your forces into Morvay?”

“Their accusations held us responsible for the earthquakes that have been destroying much of their lands. Taking into consideration their recent alliance with Corrado, we feared they would come west collectively and attack us.”

The prince snorted with laughter. “So you sought to foil them first, before they had the chance to do so? Interesting.” He picked up the next silken tress, showing a bright orange ribbon.

*Gallina.* Married to an earl, she and her husband had descended to Dorcey in all haste

the moment they'd learned that the Gaalenes had appeared in Wherry. He wondered if she yet knew that her husband had died in the attack.

"Was Rowe taken?"

"Yes, although the king and his children escaped capture."

Zeidan sat back slightly, his look pondering as he set down the lock of hair and picked up the next, its ribbon a vibrant blue.

*Jinia.* Twin to Erkily, and, privately, his favorite.

Gaal's prince continued. "You said forty wizards were sent to Morvay. We found only eleven here. Where are the others?"

"In Dargis, helping them to stand against the attack Corrado launched against them. A few others are on royal duty and some are simply lost to destinations unknown."

Zeidan nodded, laying Jinia's long tress back onto the floor. "We're doing quite well so far, wouldn't you agree?" he asked, looking up with a twisted grin.

Judson could not force himself to reply. So far, four of his daughters would keep their heads, if this man's word could be trusted at all. Of course, all seven could already be dead as far as he knew. He had little hope, dealing with these worshippers of Evil.

"All right," Zeidan continued, picking up the next, red-ribboned lock of hair.

*Isenor.* Now, this daughter loved power, and had never forgiven her father—or her sister, Antanya—for not being chosen to wed the captain of Wherry's royal guard, Broda Lyndon. For whatever reason, she had proved incapable of understanding that the choice had actually been Broda's. She amused herself now in ways her father could not approve of, but she did so discreetly, so he therefore did not interfere.

"Are you and your order of White Wizards actually responsible for the earthquakes Morvay has accused you of creating?"

"Of course not!" Judson snapped furiously.

Zeidan's eyebrows rose dramatically. "Let's not get excited, now; I was merely asking."

"My apologies," the king murmured, watching the prince pick up the next piece of hair, tied in the middle with purple silk.

*Neiva.* Now, this one especially pained him. A perfect daughter, and princess, but for her one denial, a denial he had never forgiven her for. One that seemed so ridiculous now.

"If you and yours are not in fact responsible, how would you best explain these occurrences?" Zeidan went on.

Judson paused. Now how in the name of Gauvin's Wisdom was he to answer this one? "In all honesty, I do not know."

Zeidan slowly narrowed his eyes.

"Although I suspect," the king hurried on, "that it likely has to do with the mysterious ice storms occurring here in Wherry, and perhaps the floods in Dargis. These disasters seem to have no origins." He emphatically reminded himself not to bring up any mention of the plague in Gaal.

The prince seemed to consider a long time, and Judson breathed a silent sigh of relief as the other man finally placed the lock of hair he held with the others before picking up the final one. Green ribbon.

*Ianza.* His eldest, and one who had just recently returned to the palace in mourning after an avalanche left her a widow.

Zeidan looked back to the king slowly, his eyes lost to all humor, his expression flat. “Why did you unleash plague upon the people of Gaal?”

Judson swallowed thickly before looking Prince Pavula squarely in the eye. “Wherry is not to blame in regards to this plague you speak of. I knew nothing of it but for rumor until your words at our first . . . meeting.” He watched the other man warily. During each of their past sessions, it was usually talk of Gaal’s mysterious plague and the hundreds if not thousands of people it had already destroyed that proved to be the trigger to unleashing Zeidan’s explosive temper.

His eyes like glass, the prince stared back into the king’s face.

Judson reeled backward, his right eye exploding with pain from the sudden punch he hadn’t even seen coming. He rolled, hoping to protect himself from further blows that never came.

After several long moments of silence, he finally lowered his unbroken arm from over his head and turned back to the prince, his cheek resting against the cold stone floor.

Zeidan stared down at him expressionlessly, Ianza’s hair still clutched in his hand. “It’s interesting, Judson,” he said tonelessly, “but I think I might actually be starting to believe you.” He glanced down at the long blond tress. “Although I just may kill her anyway.” Giving another grin, he turned and left the cell, deftly removing his torch from the sconce on the wall as he passed.

Incoherently shouting his rage after the prince, Judson dragged himself across the floor, his injured arm screaming out in pain that he ignored. He reached out and clutched at the six remaining locks of hair, pulling them close to him as he wept.

### Chapter Thirty-One

“I don’t understand why you’ve been so worried,” Cheyne said as she joined Jian on the deck of the *Wind Ranger*. “It wouldn’t have mattered if he had died.”

The wizard turned to her with a quick frown. “Please keep your voice down,” he hissed, casting an eye about at the nearby crewmen who were busy guiding the ship through the warm waters below. “It is enough that they know our names and purpose here, we need not give them any more information.”

Cheyne turned away, looking indifferent, and stared down as the large ship cut through the ocean waves.

The wizard regarded her. “Well, it matters not now. The prince is clear of danger and has almost recovered his full strength.”

“I still say we should have just let him die so that he could have returned that much more quickly with renewed health. It would have saved us a lot of time, and the clerics a lot of effort.”

Jian pursed his lips together. “I don’t believe succumbing to common illness was what the Gods had in mind when they granted to us this gift. Kaymin’s death may very well be needed at another time and place.”

Only days after they had arrived in Pellarin, Kaymin had come down with a serious malady that had kept him bedridden for nearly the entire past two months. Jian, needless to say, had been fraught with worry the entire time. They owed much to the ship’s captain, Tynon Mondy, for he’d brought in numerous clerics to stay with the prince night

and day throughout his fever and relentless vomiting, their presence likely the only reason that he'd finally pulled out of it at all.

"Besides," Jian went on in a murmur, "it would appear as though you've rather enjoyed our prolonged stay here."

Cheyne smiled slowly. "It's had its pleasing moments," she agreed.

The wizard narrowed his eyes at her slightly before looking away. Her activities below decks with the ship's captain were not lost on anyone, and though the encounters seemed to be of only a casual nature to them both, he couldn't help but be concerned with the eventual outcome. Although finding himself utterly incapable of explaining it, the wizard simply felt that the situation between them was *wrong* in some way.

"Tynon spoke that we should be coming upon the area where Quinelle fell by mid-afternoon, although he still did not tell of how he proposes to help us gain the shard," Jian went on finally, deciding to change the subject. "Has he shared his thoughts on it with you?"

Cheyne shook her head. "I don't think he's much in the way of sharing his thoughts with anyone," she said.

Jian fell back into silence, mindlessly watching the green waters below cut smoothly around the great ship. In the weeks he and his companions had spent aboard the *Wind Ranger*, he'd grown comfortable enough with the crewmen that he no longer felt any fear for the lives of his party, and, incidentally, he'd even managed to form a few friendly acquaintances. The captain of the ship, however, continued to trouble him. Although he no longer felt any imminent danger from Tynon either, the pirate's manner proved to be so completely unreadable that it couldn't help but disturb him. Never had Jian's perceptions failed him so completely before.

"I've been thinking on the matter too, though," Cheyne went on suddenly, drawing his attention back to her. "And the answer seems simple enough."

Jian looked on her with interest. He himself still had yet to come up with any ideas on how to reach Adera's shard, and he was more than irritated with himself because of it; for if it was something the Gods expected of them, then it simply *must* be possible. Somehow.

"All we need to do to release Her is have a native touch the shard. Coedy can swim down to it, letting himself drown in the process." She caught his look. "And don't stand there and tell me it would be a waste of his death, for who could ask for a more noble cause to die for than to save their God? *You* did it, after all."

The wizard paused, pondering over which path he should address first. "I'm afraid that will not work for two reasons," he said finally, mindlessly adjusting his flapping robes.

She rose her eyebrows at him impatiently.

"First of all," he continued, "Tynon has told us that the waters over Quinelle are several hundred feet deep. It would be not only unlikely but downright impossible for Coedy—or anyone—to reach such a depth with a single breath, even if the pressure of the water was not an issue. He would certainly drown long before he actually reached the shard."

She gazed at him through half-closed lids. "You *are* a wizard, aren't you? Is there no aid you could lend to this?"

"And secondly," he went on, ignoring her tone, "even if by some magical means I was able to keep him alive long enough for him to lay hands on the shard, which is doubtful, I can only assume that he, like I, would be resurrected in the same location in which he'd



died. And again, there is no way he could cover the distance back to the surface with only the air in his lungs.”

She grudgingly nodded and glanced up at him as he paused. He was carefully thinking on his next words, for it might not be beyond the realm of possibility that she may just go for his throat at this, fellow Chosen or not.

His hesitation lasted several more moments before he finally continued on to voice his further observation. “Cheyne, I find your obsession with death very concerning.” He paused as she glared at him, and worked to soften his tone; careful handling was always wisest when dealing with her. “I realize that you have to deal with a knowledge the rest of us cannot hope to understand, but this reckless attitude you possess will do nothing to aid you, nor the tasks that you set out to accomplish.” He suddenly wondered at his own daring for saying this to her, and suspected that no one else ever had.

Her tone was hard as she answered him, but her expression was oddly thoughtful. “I know you say this only to help me Jian, but you will never know the weight under which I walk. I do not seek pity, nor do I feel the need to lament the fact of my reality—I cope in my own way, and I do not dwell in an unhealthy denial. It is the method I choose to deal with it. And that is who I am.”

Her candid response shocked him, but he hid this easily, taking even more care as he spoke again. “I believe I understand, or as well as can be expected. But I speak these words because I would not wish to see you miss out on the experiences that are still within your reach if you would only let yourself be open to them.” She was not yet even twenty; nearly a good ten years likely remained to her, and although it was indeed a grim fortune, it would be a shame for her to lose those ten years by throwing them away unnecessarily.

“We all die, Jian,” she returned to him seriously. “The world is dying now. Do not mistake my recklessness for anything but what it is—effort. And perhaps my attitudes are not what makes me integral to this group, but I *was* Chosen, and I will fulfill whatever need gave my Goddess reason to put me here. Or at the very least, I shall die trying.”

He regarded her speechlessly. If not for the fact that he was actually staring down at her, he would not even believe this to be the same woman he’d traveled with these past several months.

She grinned slightly at his expression, but in a way he’d never seen before. “It is a gift, Jian, the most wonderful gift Yanoka could have given me. For who would prefer to face madness over death?”

The wizard took an unconscious step backward as the full realization of her words hit him. This quest, this task that had been thrust upon them, *was* her absolution; she would fulfill whatever purpose she had among the Chosen, but clearly she had no intentions of seeing herself alive from the final result. She fought for the future of Trivallyn’s people—not her own. And it was enough for her.

With a last look at him she turned and walked away. He watched her go silently. As adamant as she was over not wanting his sympathy, she had it. But she was also correct. The world itself was dying, and this could be the only priority. In simpler times, he would have begun searching for some sort of remedy, for regular insanity could usually be cured by a powerful enough magic-user. Seers, though, for whatever reason, had proven immune to this technique, leaving their predicaments completely hopeless. But

the times were not simple and, as unfortunate as it was, Jian knew that he could spare no thoughts or effort on this now. He did vow, however, that if and when the lost Gods did manage to reclaim Trivallyn, he would most certainly make a point of looking into it. And of making sure that Cheyne would still be around to benefit from his efforts.

He began a slow pace about the ship, nodding briefly to the pirates that he had come to know as he passed by them. It was interesting—in the midst of these men, these killers and thieves, he and his fellow Chosen were likely safer than they would be anywhere else in the world. In all the weeks they had been here, they'd heard not a whisper of Kauric's worshippers, men who had been charged to kill them and thus end the world's only hope for survival. Of course, they would exist here in Pellarin as much as in any of the other five countries, as Terek Himself had claimed, but apparently even they were not so foolish as to attempt crossing Tynon Mondy.

The yellow sun hit its peak in the red sky and started its gradual descent as the hour fell into mid-day. The day was cloudless and humid, but the ocean breezes kept it from becoming stifling, and the wizard found that he'd grown very fond of the salty sea air around him. He paused near the prow and stood silently, inhaling the scent.

"You seem quite content here, friend wizard. Are you sure that I cannot tempt you to stay and become a part of my crew?"

Jian turned, a small upward quirk on his lips. Tynon was striding across the deck to meet him, dressed entirely in black from the skull rag tied upon his head right on down to his boots.

"The offer is much appreciated, but I'm afraid duty carries me in another direction," the wizard returned.

"Ah, well," Tynon said, stopping before him, "rest assured that when such duty has been met, my offer will still stand." He peered out at the waters briefly before shouting orders to his men.

"Are we nearing Quinelle's grave?" Jian questioned, watching with interest as the crewmen on board scurried to slow the ship's progress.

"Yes. I have sent word for your companions to join us on deck." Tynon waited until the *Wind Ranger* had lost much of its speed before giving the command to drop anchor. "We should now be over the heart of her remains." Saying this seemed to affect him not at all, though Jian supposed that twenty years was an exceptionally long time to mourn, even for one's own monarchy and royal city.

The wizard glanced behind him and saw his fellow Chosen crossing the deck toward them, being led by the older pirate Amsey. Cheyne once again wore her typical unconcerned and flippant expression, Kaymin was looking tired but altogether much healthier than he had in past days, and Coedy appeared as unreadable as his father usually did. All three of them, however, carried at least a glint of curiosity in their eyes.

As anxious as he was to be on with things, and although he'd spoken with him only hours before, Jian could not help but to quickly inquire after his prince's health.

"I'm fine, Jian, truly," Kaymin told him. "Another day or so will see me returned to perfect health."

The wizard nodded slowly, seeing no lingering signs of the illness, besides fatigue, in his prince. "Very well," he said finally, turning back to Tynon. "Perhaps now you would care to enlighten us as to how we can safely reach the ocean's floor."

"You can't," Tynon responded promptly, leaning back casually against the rail. "That

would be impossible.”

Jian frowned slightly, suspicion rising rapidly within him. “Surely you did not bring us all the way out here just to tell us that it cannot be done,” he intoned darkly.

Tynon grinned and squinted back at him. “Tell me, wizard,” he said, “have you much faith in legends?”

Jian paused in confusion and glanced over at his companions. A new gleam had lit in Coedy’s eye and a small grin started about his lips, but Cheyne and Kaymin appeared just as perplexed as Jian himself. Well, Kaymin did, anyway; Cheyne appeared to be taking measure of the fit of Tynon’s garments.

Tynon straightened suddenly and reached into the large black pouch that hung between several throwing knives encircling his waist. What he pulled from it was a long, thin line of rope that ran through several dozen shiny, polished gold coins. “If you would follow me?” the pirate said, turning quickly away.

More bewildered than ever, Jian stepped after him to one of the longboats, and watched as the ship’s captain smoothly leapt into it. Coedy, obviously having realized what his father was up to, quickly joined Tynon in the boat.

The pirate looked back at the others patiently, still holding the oddity he’d pulled from his pouch. “We need to be nearer the water’s surface. Get in.”

Cheyne climbed into the boat after giving a shrug, and Jian and Kaymin followed after her slowly.

“Lower us!” Tynon commanded, settling himself down into the nose of the craft.

As several pirates began lowering them to the moderately calm, green waters below, Jian did his best to appear unconcerned despite his obvious confusion. He still felt no threat from Tynon, but knew he’d feel much better about the situation if only the pirate would offer an explanation of some sort. There were few things Jian detested more than being uninformed.

Finally their small craft, a boat that could easily have carried twenty men, hovered only inches from the water’s surface, and Tynon shouted for its release. They fell into the water with a loud slap and began to drift calmly atop the slight waves.

Wrapping one end of the strange, coin-riddled rope about his hand, Tynon tossed the length of it into the water beside him. “This will likely go faster if we’re moving around some,” he said, “and are away from the shadow of the ship.”

Jian frowned from the other end of the boat but gestured slightly to the numerous sets of oars, which suddenly fell into place and began a slow, steady rowing. He watched as Tynon briefly eyed the sun.

The captain of the *Wind Ranger* finally turned back to them. “As I said onboard,” he began, “to think there would be a way for any of you to safely reach Quinelle’s remains is utterly ridiculous. There are, however, such creatures that can.”

Kaymin nodded, looking interested and not at all concerned. This made sense; if not for Tynon, Kaymin would in all likelihood have died of his illness—a well enough reason for the pirate to have gained the prince’s lifelong trust. “I have heard stories of the sea beasts that populate these waters,” Kaymin said. “Serpents the size of dragons, leviathans with deadly force and intentions.”

“Yes,” the pirate nodded, “there are many strange and wondrous creatures below us that are rarely ever seen by the human eye. But not all are to be feared.”

“Have you battled many?” Cheyne asked, looking over the side of the boat with

renewed interest.

“My crew and I did once have a tangle with a giant squid,” Tynon nodded. “The beast was nearly the size of the *Wind Ranger* itself, but we managed to fend it off. It was wounded badly, but I doubt we managed to give it any fatal injuries; creatures such as those are nearly impossible to kill.” He moved his hand back and forth slightly, causing the trail of coin-rope to do the same under the water.

Jian could contain himself no longer. “What *are* you doing?” he burst out with a wild gesture, instantly regretting his loss of dignity.

Tynon laughed quietly. “I was getting to that. You know,” he went on, looking curious, “from what I’ve heard told of your race, you really do not seem a typical Wherrite.”

“And why is that?” Jian replied shortly, offended.

“Both rumor and history marks you as a patient and peace-loving people, honoring harmony above all things save your God. You, my friend, seem somewhat lacking in those traits.”

“Perhaps at one time I would have better fitted your mold of assumption, but if one cannot adapt in the paths of adversity, they will not make it far in this life,” Jian replied coldly. “And you are hardly the embodiment of a typical Pellie, either.”

“Actually I am,” Tynon corrected. “This is not the country that it was twenty years ago. And Pellies are the last race to preach to about adaptation.”

Jian conceded the point with a slight nod. “Perhaps so,” he said. “However, I suspect that soon it will not be so easy to define someone, regardless of where their native lands might lie.”

Tynon opened his mouth to reply when his hand gripping the coin-rope dipped suddenly, and he turned quickly to lean over the water. “Stop the oars,” he said.

Jian did so abruptly.

“Come, now,” Tynon muttered, pulling the coins along the surface of the water. “I know you’re down there.”

Jian exchanged an alarmed look with Kaymin before they both moved to join Tynon at the edge of the boat.

“Don’t lean so far over,” the pirate advised calmly as the craft gave a sudden lurch, “unless you wish for us all to get wet.”

They moved back slightly, but the wizard kept his eyes riveted upon the water. Just what was Tynon attempting to draw up to them? Several spells instantly jumped to the forefront of his mind.

A shadow appeared just under the surface of the water, growing larger as it neared them.

“No loud noises,” Tynon cautioned. “She’s coming.”

*She?*

The first thing to appear from the water was a small, feminine white hand, and it groped for the coins on the rope. Tynon quickly countered by pulling the rope up and out of her reach, and Jian was struck nearly speechless as a young woman, or what he first assumed was a young woman, surfaced beside the boat.

She stared at them silently with large dark eyes. Brown hair fell around her pale, narrow face and bare shoulders, parting to show her small, slightly pointed ears. Her beauty was mythic.

“A siren,” Kaymin breathed. “I thought them only a fable.”

Tynon moved to hold the rope of golden coins in front of her. “Sirens love gold, and gems of any kind,” he explained quietly. “They will do anything to gain them.”

Jian watched in wonder as the creature’s eyes stayed riveted upon the coins held aloft before her.

“Jian, come closer, but slowly,” Tynon instructed.

The wizard did so carefully, glancing back to make sure the others kept the weight in the boat evenly distributed before he leaned over the side next to the pirate. “You can control her?” he asked.

“Not so much control as bribe,” Tynon replied, still holding up the rope. “What I need you to do is make a clear picture in your mind, as vivid as you can make it, of whatever it is that you seek within Quinelle’s remains.”

The wizard did so, all the while studying the creature before him. He supposed the disbelief centered about her very existence was equal to that of the unicorns and griffins of his own country. Most Wherrites spent their entire lives without ever catching sight of either.

Finally the siren took her gaze from the coins and stared directly into his eyes for several long moments, and Jian focused on a clear mental image of a crystal shard, yellow, as that had been House Sumond’s official color. Both Yanoka’s and Gauvin’s shards, being red and white respectively, had adhered to this logic, so he felt safe enough in the assumption. He held to the image in his mind for several minutes.

At last the creature turned, suddenly diving back beneath the surface and splashing them all with the slap of her green fins as they hit the water.

Tynon turned back and reseated himself in the boat. “May as well make yourselves comfortable,” he advised, stretching out. “For now we wait.”

### *Chapter Thirty-Two*

Jian idly tuned out the voices of his companions as he again slid his gaze out across the calm ocean waters surrounding their boat. Hours had passed since the siren had disappeared below the surface, and the red sky above was just beginning to darken into the deepening crimson of oncoming twilight.

As Tynon had gone on to explain after the siren’s departure, what he and Jian had done was make an arrangement with her. Telepathic and speechless creatures by nature, she had been given the image of what they sought from Jian’s mind, and was promised the string of gold coins if she retrieved it for them from the ocean’s floor.

“Sailors have sought the aid of sirens for centuries,” Tynon had continued. “They’ve recovered treasure, relics from sunken ships, and even the bodies of those who have drowned so as to give their families the opportunity to give them a proper death ceremony.”

Kaymin looked at him curiously. “I was under the impression that a burial at sea *was* the method for handling your dead here in Pellarin.”

“Usually just for the nobility,” Tynon replied, looking amused. “Although I can’t say I think much of the custom. Apparently, few ever considered what fish will eat, and what we, in turn, often consume ourselves.”

The prince suddenly looked green.

“Dumping the bodies far offshore is generally safe enough,” Tynon went on, “but most noble houses had their underwater graveyards as near to their lands as possible. Not that it much matters now,” he shrugged. “But to return to the matter of sirens. I have personally garnered their services on occasion myself, all in the interest of recovering sunken spoils, but I’ve been met with only moderate success in these instances. Sirens,” the pirate explained, “have a very short attention span, and are easily distracted.”

Cheyne frowned and shifted restlessly. “So we could well be sitting here for hours and hours and she may never even return?”

“That is certainly a risk, but your only option, I’m afraid, at least so far as I can see. We could easily be here for days,” Tynon told her.

The wizard had settled back to wait patiently, untroubled by this. Terek, Yanoka and Gauvin were free, and although not yet restored to all their Godly powers, it did not seem so unreasonable that they would lend some subtle aid to this task. The wizard was also somewhat relieved to know that it would be the siren’s touch that would release the Goddess Adera; he’d not wanted to risk Coedy doing it anywhere near to his father’s observant eye. Terek had never claimed that the one to release the God must be human, after all, only that they retain faith in their deity, and Jian therefore saw no reason why the touch of the siren, so long as she still held onto belief in Adera, would not be successful in freeing Her.

“I don’t understand,” Cheyne said now, sprawled lazily across the bottom of the boat. “If sirens can’t speak, why do they have mouths?”

“I imagine they’d look odd without them,” Kaymin replied, his brown eyes looking speculative. “Plus, how else would they eat?”

“They don’t speak, but they sing,” Coedy cut in, snacking on some sliced pineapple that he’d taken from his pocket.

“That makes no sense,” Cheyne told him, snagging a slice for herself.

“They don’t sing words, it’s more like . . . notes, I guess. Or perhaps it is in a language known only to themselves,” he explained.

“Oh,” she nodded, “yes, Morvay is home to a tribe that speaks only in a private tongue. The *My’rianessee*, they fancy themselves, although of course only they know what that’s supposed to mean. Not that it matters, as they’re heathens who are hunted down and killed like dogs.”

Kaymin looked at her sharply. “And what crimes are they guilty of?”

“They’re plains dwellers who indulge in pagan worships,” she answered sharply.

“They pray only to the spirits, and offer nothing to Yanoka.”

“I don’t understand how you could possibly know that,” Kaymin snapped, “if they speak in a language known only to themselves.”

Cheyne stopped, then glared stonily at the prince in silence.

Tynon chuckled softly but wisely kept his mouth shut.

Jian turned away as Cheyne struggled to come up with some sort of response and found himself looking down into the dark, staring eyes of the siren. Again, just her head and the tops of her shoulders rested above the surface of the water, and she seemed completely motionless as she gazed back at him.

“Hush,” Jian hissed suddenly at the others, moving slowly to lean over the side of the boat. Silence fell behind him, and he glanced back at Tynon. “I think she’s waiting for

the coins,” he said.

Tynon eased himself down beside Jian. “I have learned through experience that it would be unwise to give her the prize first, as doing so would likely leave us with nothing.” He raised his arm and dangled the golden string in front of her. “Does she have what you seek?”

Jian peered beneath the water but could see nothing. “I don’t know.”

The pirate shifted even farther over the side of the craft and dangled the coins closer to the siren’s face. Her eyes lit up as she reached for them eagerly, even while bringing up her other arm and offering the yellow crystal shard clutched in her palm to Jian.

The wizard grasped the shard as Tynon released his hold on the coins, and, as quickly as she had come, the siren was gone, the rope of golden coins held tightly in her small fist.

Jian sat back in the boat and inspected the shard carefully. But for the color, it was completely identical to the others, leaving no doubt to the fact that it was indeed Adera’s shard. Shoving it quickly into his robes, he met Tynon’s glance.

“You have what you have come for?” the pirate asked.

“Yes,” Jian replied evenly, setting the oars back to rowing toward the ship. “And a great thanks to you for your assistance.” If the man was going to ask questions, now would be the time, and he mentally braced himself for the confrontation.

Tynon, however, simply nodded.

Once back aboard the *Wind Ranger*, Jian ordered Kaymin to return to his bed and rest, for they would assuredly soon be setting out again and the prince would need his strength. He also had another reason for this directive, but did not speak it.

“So, where will your adventuring take you next?” Tynon asked casually as he helped secure the longboat back in place upon the deck.

Jian paused. “South,” he finally replied cryptically before walking away. As both remaining shards, those of Diamont and Charette, lay in this direction, he had not lied. His suspicion that it would be unwise to do so to Tynon had not waned.

After another lavish dinner of seafood and fruit, the wizard rounded up Cheyne and Coedy and ushered them into Kaymin’s private cabin, making sure the door was securely closed behind them.

The prince looked up from his bed, only halfway through his own meal as the fish on his plate remained suspiciously untouched, and shot an uncharacteristically bitter look at his wizard. “This is ridiculous, Jian. I was fully capable of making my way to the dinner table.” The waves had begun to pick up, and the ship gave a sudden lurch, sending a buttered roll flying off the tray the prince was eating from.

Cheyne watched the roll, frowned, then kicked it across the floor before dropping down onto the only chair in the small room, looking bored.

“My apologies, my prince, but I needed an excuse that would allow us to collectively visit with you in private. If He stands true to form, Terek will soon be coming to us, and I thought to simplify matters by putting us all alone together. I very much doubt that He would wish to appear in front of others.”

“A prudent thought, young wizard, for I most certainly would not have.”

Startled, they all turned quickly and took in Terek lounging casually with His back against the closed door, an approving expression on His face as He took them all in.

Kaymin hastened to move his dinner tray and get to his feet.

“Stay where you are, Kaymin,” the God said with an impatient wave as He stepped toward them into the room. “I fear that events have taken several serious turns of late and I do not have long to speak with you, but there is much that I must say, so listen carefully.”

Cheyne shifted slightly in the chair to give the God her full attention, and Coedy sat himself down attentively on the end of Kaymin’s bed. Jian stayed where he was, instantly alert.

Terek paused and gave each of them a long look before starting. “First, may I have the shard?”

“Of course.” Jian pulled it from his robes and promptly handed it over.

Terek took it and moved to grip it in both hands. “Since you have been here in Pellarin, disaster has fallen, in one form or another, on all the lands. I am afraid,” He went on, his green eyes nearly aglow with His intensity, “that my Father’s control is growing, and that we are in short supply of the one thing that we are in most need of.”

“Time,” Jian said.

The God nodded.

“I fear that our delay here could not be helped,” the wizard told Him. “For as you most assuredly know, my prince was very ill.”

Terek paused and merely looked back at him for a long moment in silence. “Yes, I was most certainly aware of the circumstances,” He finally replied, causing Jian to stifle a suspicious frown. The God went on. “Despite the time spent here in Pellarin, you have been prompt in gaining the shards of Yanoka, Gauvin, and Adera, but the two that remain will see an end to this ease.”

*Ease?* In addition to Jian’s own death, Kaymin and Cheyne had both already gone insane, however temporarily, not to mention the numerous attacks made on them by Kauric’s followers. Jian bit back several questions and waited for Terek to continue, but Cheyne spoke first.

“I doubt any here expect this to carry on simply,” she said, her tone reverent before growing slightly pointed. “Although we can only hope for the same conclusion to be drawn by Diamont’s and Charette’s Chosen, once we finally encounter them.”

Jian quickly shot her a reproving look. Much of the conversation between them all these past couple months had centered around the two final remaining Chosen, and the wizard was expecting difficulties when each finally did appear. The four of them already gathered, for all their differences, had grown into a very comfortable companionship, and he’d gleaned from their comments that both Cheyne and his prince seemed to be of the opinion that they could conclude this quest without the help of any others; even the need for a loyal worshipper to lay hands upon the shard offered little problem, as the release of Adera had just proven. In fact, both Kaymin and Cheyne seemed almost . . . *affronted* that neither of the two remaining Chosen had yet appeared, as though these absent two were shirking their duty to their Gods. Jian had attempted to explain that Diamont’s and Charette’s Chosen would undoubtedly reveal themselves once there was need, and that it was likely the Gods’ own doing that they had not yet done so. Neither Kaymin nor Cheyne had shown much care for those words, however. The wizard remained uncertain of Coedy’s opinion on the matter.

Terek now looked down at the young woman, his expression . . . interesting. To think He had not picked up on her insinuation was foolish. Then, He gave Cheyne an



unnerving smile that even Jian found chilling.

“In any event,” the God finally said, releasing her from His gaze and ignoring her brief shudder, “I speak these words to prepare you. That which you rely on will soon depart. But you must stay true to your path.” He turned His head slightly and His gaze bored into Jian.

The wizard returned this look with the slightest of nods. His own God had warned of this as well, a warning Terek was obviously now reinforcing; keeping the others focused upon their task was Jian’s responsibility—and knowing how much determination each of them carried toward seeing the final two Gods released, the wizard could only wonder at what horrors would soon have the power to distract them.

Looking satisfied, Terek gave a curt nod.

“We shall not falter in our steps,” Kaymin said steadily, his own resolve clearly not shaken at all by the foreboding words. But then, he was not privy to Gauvin’s warnings. “Tell us only where we next need go, my God,” he continued.

Terek paused again before going on. “Charette’s shard lies to the south, within the Alari Desert, and Diamont’s in Gaal’s Servinian Mountains. Both are guarded, as you will soon learn, and in ways that are radically different but equally lethal.”

Kaymin frowned slightly. “And which do you wish for us to pursue first?”

“In the interest of expediency,” Terek answered, “setting out for Charette’s shard would next be advisable. *The voice of instinct will act as guide there.* Now, let haste be upon you.” He stepped back, gazing at them, and then vanished.

A thick and heavy silence hung in the room for several long moments after the God’s departure.

“That didn’t sound especially inspiring, did it?” Cheyne said finally.

“The voice of instinct will act as guide there?” Kaymin repeated with a puzzled frown.

“For certain our paths are about to darken,” Jian replied somberly. Best they all realized this now; perhaps it would help to ease his own task, however slightly.

“Yes, I think we’ve all gleaned as much,” Cheyne retorted sarcastically.

“It doesn’t matter,” Kaymin cut in, “we will do what needs to be done.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, my prince, as our duty now carries us into the desert,” Jian reminded him. Kaymin would never have made a fuss in front of his God, but the wizard expected harsh words now.

And Kaymin did indeed fight off a visible scowl at this, but, quite surprisingly, he said nothing.

“Corrado, then,” Coedy nodded. “We are not far from its borders by sea. I will ask my father to take us there.”

Jian nodded. “An excellent idea,” he agreed. The idea of traveling through Pellarin on foot did not appeal to him.

Cheyne spoke up. “I know we’re not supposed to be dwelling on this, but everyone’s thinking about it anyway so I’m just going to say it: What do you think these disasters Terek spoke of are? He said that each land has been affected, but we only know of the battle between Corrado and Dargis.”

Kaymin shot her a glare, which of course she ignored.

“Likely more war, probably incited by those who follow Kauric,” Jian assumed. “I’m sure we’re soon to learn more once we leave Pellarin. Oddly, this country has become somewhat of a sanctuary from the horrors the rest of Trivallyn is facing.”

“That *is* rather ironic,” Coedy agreed, “although I’m sure the Father God’s followers are as thick here as anywhere else. It would not be hard to find those who could be easily corrupted in these parts.”

“Indeed,” the wizard agreed. “But I believe we are safe enough onboard your father’s ship.” He looked away, pointedly ignoring the I-told-you so-look the boy gave him. “Why don’t you go and make the arrangements with him?” he continued.

Coedy nodded as he stood up. “Certainly,” he said.

“We will need to fashion some sort of disguise for me,” Kaymin said as the boy left the room. “I cannot afford to be discovered entering into Corrado.”

“Agreed,” Jian nodded, looking thoughtful. This was quite worrying. With any hope, the Alari Desert was near to the sea, and Tynon could deposit them close to it. The less ground they actually had to cover in Corrado the better.

“The Cors are at war with Dargis, so it’s unlikely they’ll be paying much attention at all to their borders with Pellarin,” Cheyne pointed out to them with a frown. “Besides, from what I’ve learned from Tynon, he has a very open trade with Corrado, and so therefore —”

“Cheyne,” Kaymin cut in, his tone striving for diplomacy, “I think it best you let Jian and I decide how to proceed in this matter. There would be repercussions to my discovery that you likely couldn’t even begin to imagine.”

She looked at him without expression for a very long moment before smiling slowly. “I see, your highness,” she nodded. “Thank you for taking the time to explain this to someone so below your station. Your benevolence is greatly appreciated. Please accept my humblest apologies for being so dense while in your exalted presence.”

Kaymin stared at her.

Jian quickly spoke up. “She does make a good point, though. It is unlikely King Rivenor will be keeping much of a watch on his northern borders.” He paused. “It would help to know where the fighting is currently taking place, in Corrado or in Dargis. And we will need to get our hands on a map of Corrado and learn the exact location of this Alari Desert.”

“I’m sure Ty has a map, and I’m certain that he could easily find out where the battle is presently happening. He may not have much care for the outside world, but information still spreads and he does appear quite knowledgeable despite his lack of interest,” Cheyne offered.

“Good,” Jian nodded. “We shall make a point to ask him as soon as we are done here.”

“Which is now, for me at least,” Cheyne said, getting to her feet. “I’ll fill you in on any answers I receive in the morning.” With a sly smile, she swept from the room.

Kaymin looked after her with a frown. “I don’t understand—why does she do it? Or is this common behavior for a Morvanian woman?”

Jian paused, not sure if he had any right to voice his conclusions regarding this matter. “It could very well be,” he finally answered blandly. This was none of his business, nor was it his prince’s. But Kaymin, evidently, was not about to let the matter drop.

“It’s just odd—a woman her age should at the very least be betrothed. She’s likely going to create quite a reputation for herself—” he stopped short at his wizard’s look. “What?”

Jian paused slightly. “She’s destined to go mad, my prince. It is very unlikely that a husband and family are in her future, and she knows it. Likely, she would see no reason

at all to care about her *reputation*.”

Looking abashed with his sudden understanding, Kaymin nodded slowly. “Is there nothing you can do?”

Jian withheld a heavy sigh. “If given the opportunity, the most I can vow is to try.”

### *Chapter Thirty-Three*

It took only a couple of weeks of sailing for the *Wind Ranger* to reach Corrado’s northern border, although almost as much time was spent idling in Pellarin ports waiting for the latest typhoons to die out. Strangely, none of the maps they’d yet found showed any sign at all of the Alari Desert, so Jian was therefore forced to ask Tynon to deposit them near to the border, where he would hopefully put a quick end to this mystery by questioning the natives. Not wanting to place Kaymin anywhere near to Corrado civilization unless absolutely necessary, Tynon adhered to Jian’s further request of anchoring a fair distance from the coast before directing his passengers into one of the longboats to row to shore.

Moments after they struck the deserted and barren shoreline, Cheyne stepped out of the boat and looked about her with mild interest. Sand stretched out before them as far as the eye could see, interrupted only by the occasional cactus plant. The air was stiflingly hot and dry, even this close to the water, and she breathed it in rapturously. “Almost like home,” she said.

Kaymin stopped beside her. “It’s only mid-morning, and we’re next to the ocean. Believe me, this is nothing next to the full, inland heat of day.”

“How would you know?” she asked, eyeing him interestedly.

“I was here once, briefly,” he muttered.

“And were you being a naughty prince?”

“I was doing, or so I thought at the time, my duty.”

She shook her head and moved a few steps away, looking out at the desert with her hands on her hips. “You Dargasians—everything need always concern duty and honor.”

He gave her a hard look. “I find that preferable to belonging instead to a people known for their ruthlessness.”

“Ruthlessness *and* courage,” she corrected, turning back toward the shore.

Jian turned away from their exchange and waited while Coedy said his farewells to his father and the two older pirates who had rowed to shore with them, Stewin and Amsey. Stepping forward, he then offered his hand to Tynon, saying, “Once again, please accept our thanks for your aid. The appreciation goes far deeper than you could imagine.”

Tynon shook his hand, nodding. “No thanks are necessary, and I wish you much further success.” His tone took on a slight edge. “However, it would be very unwise for you to dismiss the conversation we had on the night of your arrival in Cimbron.”

Jian paused, then nodded slowly. “Of course.” These words should not have surprised him; although he now considered the pirate a friend, and was reasonably certain that this feeling was mutual, Tynon’s first concern was, and always would be, his son.

“Thanks for the help, Ty. It’s been fun,” Cheyne threw in as she turned away and began walking into the seemingly endless stretch of sand. “Let’s get moving, boys,” she tossed back over her shoulder, “time doesn’t pause for sentimentality.”

Tynon looked after her with a grin. “An odd young woman, isn’t she?” he murmured, sounding amused.

“Yes. But she is correct. My thanks again.” Jian nodded once more, then turned to follow.

Hours later, they were under the full heat of mid-day and had encountered nothing but more and more sand.

“Just a question,” Cheyne spoke up, breaking a long silence, “but one of you *does* know where we’re going, right? Our water won’t last long in this heat, and what little of it we have would be boiling in our skins already if Jian was not cooling it. I can only assume that we’re heading toward some hint of human activity?”

“What are you worried about, Cheyne? I thought you were quite anxious to make use of your death.” Kaymin looked at her dryly.

“I have been checking the map regularly,” Jian told her, feeling incredibly uncomfortable in this heat. He now understood the reason why Gaal always supplied Corrado with their royal magic-users while his own order supplied Dargis’s; sending a Wherrite to dwell in these lands would simply be cruel. “As long as we continue in a southwesterly direction, we should reach a town by nightfall.” And once there, they would hopefully learn the location of this mysterious Alari Desert. Then, they would return to the endless sands to camp for the night—for he would not risk lodgings at an inn, where Kaymin’s telling features might be glimpsed and recognized, however unlikely that seemed. The wizard was determined to take as little chance as possible with his prince’s safety.

“All right,” Cheyne nodded, pulling her long hair away from her neck, “but how do you know we’re still going southwest? We’ve seen nothing but sand since coming ashore, and with the clouds obscuring the sun, we could be moving in any direction by now!”

“We’re going the right way,” Coedy suddenly confirmed.

Jian looked at him in surprise.

“I spent several months here after I left home, I told you,” the boy reminded him.

Kaymin turned to him. “What did you do while here?”

Coedy shrugged. “Just drifted from place to place, mostly.”

“Are the rumors of drought true?” Jian asked interestedly. He didn’t see why they would not be, after all they’d learned, but he preferred having as much confirmation as possible.

“Yes, although the citizens didn’t appear too distraught over it. The Cors have an incredible amount of faith in their king.”

A scoffing noise came from Kaymin, but Jian’s hard, silent gaze cut off the comment he was about to follow it with.

“I hope you all realize that this would be a wonderful opportunity for Kauric’s men to ambush us,” Cheyne commented then as they continued on over the sand. “Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. If they come at us in a large enough number, we’re done for.”

Jian had long ago realized this as well, but had hoped, evidently in vain, that the issue wouldn’t need to be addressed. Apparently not willing to risk crossing Tynon and the protective force of his crew, it would not be unlikely to think that Kauric’s followers were now extremely anxious to get their hands upon the band they sought, now that they were once again alone. “We’ll pick up some horses at the first town we come to,” he said. “At least then we will have the option of running if needs be.”

“That will hardly do us any good if they’re waiting for us beyond the next dune,” she pressed. “Even your magic won’t save us if enough of them come.”

“Cheyne,” Jian said, “please be quiet.”

To his surprise she did fall silent, but the damage had been done. Tenseness lingered in the air about them now, and they all grew incredibly alert to the slight sounds around them, each of them turning back often to look behind. They had all become too accustomed to the safe haven Pellarin had presented, Jian knew; the Father God wanted them dead, and He certainly wouldn’t hesitate to pass up any opportunity to see this task accomplished.

Jian wiped at his forehead as they trudged on, trying to keep his edginess and paranoia at bay. He had abandoned his robes that so obviously marked him as a member of the White Order, of course, but he continued to swelter beneath the conventional garments he now wore. Kaymin appeared to be laboring with the heat as well, he saw after a quick glance, but Cheyne and Coedy, so far, seemed only mildly affected by it.

Finally giving in to the fact that keeping his thoughts from the idea of a possible attack was futile, Jian took a moment to check Ice’s location. The big wolf had entered into Corrado nearly a week ago, and was now heading east to meet them, only a day or two away. Jian was relieved to learn his familiar was so close, for the wolf had been forced to sneak into towns by night to find water, and the wizard was fearful that the beast would be discovered and possibly hunted down. Wolves were very adaptable to both the extreme cold and the extreme heat, and Ice was dealing well with the desert temperatures, but it was imperative that the animal find enough water to drink to keep himself, and his wizard, in good health.

It was hours before the red sun began to drop into the eastern horizon, causing an almost instant cool to sweep over the land. Jian found himself sighing with inward relief. He hoped that their stay in the desert would be quick and without incident, for although he would never admit it, the heat was trying him far more than he’d anticipated.

A sudden exclamation sounded out then from Cheyne, and she pointed ahead to a hazy outline in the darkening distance. “That must be the town you spoke of, Jian,” she said. “And not a moment too soon—it’s growing quite chilly out here.”

Obviously, he had not yet informed her that they would not, in fact, be staying in this town—or any other—for the night. “I think it best that you don your cloak now, my prince,” the wizard advised. “I will remain with you in the outskirts, while Cheyne and Coedy proceed onward and, hopefully, find an answer to the location of this Alari Desert, as well as secure us some horses.”

Kaymin nodded and began pulling his long, hooded gray cloak from his pack. Cheyne looked at the wizard, for certain now understanding his intentions, and, to his immense surprise, said nothing. In fact, she even gave him a slight, curt nod. He blinked back at her; oh, but she was a puzzle, that one.

Despite their weariness, they all seemed to step lighter as they zeroed in on the small town, its torch lights flickering invitingly at them. It boasted no walls, and looked to house approximately a thousand or so souls. They’d only covered about half the distance when Coedy halted suddenly and turned back.

“What is it?” Cheyne hissed at him impatiently. She’d been walking along behind him, and had nearly plowed right into him after his sudden stop.

“Shh,” he told her. His dark eyes narrowed and scanned the darkness. “Oh.”

Jian spun to take in what appeared to be a band of riders, their number looking to be about twenty or so, heading toward them at a gallop and carrying several torches to light their path. He glanced back and forth between them and the town ahead, thinking that at the very least it would provide cover. "We'll never make it if they spot us, though I don't think they yet have. If we attempt to hide ourselves in the darkness they may not see us at all."

Cheyne frowned at him. "There doesn't seem to be too many of them. We fought off more when we were attacked in Morvay. I don't want to hide or run."

Jian nodded at her thoughtfully. Killing was not something he enjoyed, but the fewer of Kauric's men who lived, the safer all of Trivallyn would be. "If we're lucky, they will not take note of us until they are nearly upon us." They had not dared to light any torches of their own, and for this very reason.

Kaymin turned to him. "I assume that means you have a plan."

"Of course," Jian nodded. "Everyone move back." Once everyone was clear, he held his hands aloft over the sand, and it instantly began to shudder, sending the grains sifting into rippling waves. Soon, a large area had sunk several feet into the ground.

"This should dispatch the riders in the head easily enough," the wizard said, moving back from the large hole he'd created. "Everyone get low until the first have fallen."

This was not as reckless as it may have seemed; swords were the only weapons favored by the Cors, and even if only one or two fell to his trench, he could likely finish off the remainder of them himself before they got anywhere near to the other Chosen. Besides, slight risk was now acceptable, if necessary, for only Jian himself had reason to fear death.

Weapons drawn, they all laid low, on their bellies in the sand. Not taking his eyes from those bearing down on them, Jian was confident that Kauric's followers had not yet seen them.

The band approached quickly, the low murmur of their voices sounding out over the rattling of their horses' movement. Jian attempted a quick count as they grew near, seeing he'd only slightly underestimated the number of the group. Too late, he took note of the men's garb.

The horse in the lead stepped forward and fell, screaming and thrashing, into the hole, its rider sent flying through the air. The next rider could not stop his mount in time and flew over its head as it too pitched into the sand trap, shrieking.

With horror, Jian watched as his companions leapt up from the ground and rushed at the band, their weapons raised with deadly intent.

"No!" Jian shouted. "They are not who we thought!"

Too late.

Coedy was already releasing his small daggers of deadly steel, and Kaymin had dragged one of the riders from his horse and was engaging him in a sword fight. Cheyne was quickly dispatching the two men who had fallen from their horses.

Jian thought quickly. Obviously, his companions would not last long without his aid, but he was hesitant to add to the bloodshed. Bringing his hands together, a great, blinding ball of white light appeared several feet above him in the sky, where it hung for just a moment before exploding.

"I'm blind!" one of the men from the band screamed.

"What is this trickery?" cried another.

“Silence!” Jian bellowed, his voice amplified by his magic. He spoke quickly, knowing that he had only moments before everyone’s sight returned.

“Soldiers of Corrado,” he began loudly, “we have mistaken you for others. This attack was not meant for you.”

Cheyne’s surprised curse was loud enough to be heard by all.

“A wizard!” one of the men followed quickly in a low growl.

Jian knew the others’ sight must be quickly returning. “We do not wish to fight you,” he continued. “I’m sure this can be talked out reasonably.”

“Do not dare speak to us of reason, wizard,” one of the faceless men snarled in the darkness. “We have lost too many to your kind to be interested in anything you might have to say.”

Jian paused while taking in those words, even as his eyes made a quick sweep of the scene. Several of the torches were now on the ground, but many of the men still clutched others, giving more than enough light to reveal the grim reality of the situation.

Three soldiers lay dead as a result of Coedy’s proficient aim, and the two who had fallen from their horses lay headlessly in the shadows. Cheyne and Coedy still lingered on the outer fringes of the group of soldiers, but Kaymin was directly in the center of the fray, surrounded on all sides by drawn, curved blades.

The wizard thought furiously, enraged at himself for his carelessness. How could he have been so foolish as to lead an attack before he’d confirmed the identity of the band? Although lost to their paranoia since Cheyne’s comment regarding an ambush, it had been sheer stupidity to assume that it was Kauric’s worshippers who had come behind them rather than one of a thousand other possibilities—such as an innocent band of soldiers likely out doing a simple patrol and who’d been completely oblivious to their presence. It simply was not like him to have done something so foolish!

But he had no choice but to deal with his folly now.

Jian did not entirely understand the comment made regarding “his kind” and could only assume it held some reference to the fifteen wizards of his order who’d been sent to assist Dargis, but it made clear that there would be no peaceful way out of this, even if not for the five bodies littering the ground. This left very few options.

“Release my companions,” he said calmly, “or I’m afraid I will be forced to kill you all.”

One of the soldiers peered down at him from atop his horse, then dismounted and stepped over to the wizard. “Try it,” he said simply and with a note of challenge.

Jian paused, glancing back at his prince. Although Cheyne and Coedy were sufficiently clear, he knew there was no way that he could possibly get Kaymin away from the circle of soldiers surrounding him without risking the prince serious harm as well. Shielding Kaymin with his magic was not an option either; at least two of the Corrado soldiers were touching the prince, voiding the option.

“Let the woman and the boy go,” Jian said finally. At least if he and Kaymin were taken or killed, Cheyne and Coedy could carry on with the quest. He caught a sudden, hard glance from his prince then, and it took him a moment to realize what Kaymin was trying to tell him.

Of course. He could kill him if he must; the prince would return, thanks to the Gods’ intervention.

The soldier before him spoke up caustically. “True, we would normally never do harm

to a woman, but she has killed two of our men. And as far as the boy is concerned, if he is old enough to kill, he is old enough to shoulder the consequences.”

Jian glanced again at Kaymin, still unsure despite the urging in the prince’s eyes that made it clear he was issuing a strict order. The wizard began gathering his concentration to comply, but quickly faltered. *I can’t do it*, he thought frantically. *It has been my duty to protect him for too long, I cannot willingly kill him.*

Also, Jian was more than hesitant to bring any further damage down upon the soldiers—for they were not worshippers of Kauric, after all, but just innocent men who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He could hardly justify killing them over the simple reason that they just happened to be in his way. He returned Kaymin’s look helplessly.

An exasperated sigh then cut into the deep silence, and Jian let his eyes follow the sound of it. Cheyne was striding toward the soldier who’d spoken, the man obviously in charge of the squadron, her entire demeanor and countenance changing as she did so. “That is enough,” she said.

Jian felt his eyes widen as he watched her stare calmly up at the soldier before her.

She went on in the same steady tone. “We are truly sorry for the lives that have been lost here tonight, but as the wizard has explained, we mistook you for others,” she stated. “It was a tragic error made on our part, and we will make amends for it however possible, but we are involved in a matter of some urgency and do not have the time to thoroughly deal with this situation right now. I must insist that you release these men.”

Jian exchanged a startled look with Kaymin, wondering if his own expression was even half as bewildered as the prince’s was. Just what did Cheyne think she was doing?

The men around them chuckled at her words, but she ignored them and kept her gaze upon the soldier before her. He stared back at her with amused indulgence. “And on whose authority, my lady, do you make this request?” The title was an obvious mockery, and hardly surprising; her garments were, to say the least, not exactly boastful of a high station.

“It wasn’t a request,” she said, “it was an order. And I speak on the authority of my father, King Gazziro Almara of Rowe, who, as I’m sure you are aware, has signed a treaty of alliance with your king.”

Silence dropped over the entire party at her words, and Jian felt himself gaping at her for several moments before he was able to gain control over his features. Although he found himself rapidly recalling the clues leading up to this revelation now, he was forced to admit that he hadn’t had the slightest idea that she was in fact Morvay’s princess. Furious and confused as to why she’d kept such a thing from them, he also saw her logic in revealing this here and now; and hopefully, it would prove to be the sole cause that would lead them from this situation intact.

Strangely, though, the face of the soldier before her had become a hard and stony mask. “You are truly a brave woman to speak such words to us,” he said.

For the first time, Cheyne looked slightly uncertain, but the look passed quickly over her features. “Release them!” she repeated.

The soldier ignored her. “A wizard and Morvay’s princess,” he said. “I think we are about to make our king a very happy man.”

Cheyne shot an alarmed look to Jian, but he was just as confused as she was. The loathing aimed at himself was understandable—but Morvay was Corrado’s own ally, and



any fool would know that treating its princess this way would be nothing short of war mongering. Even if the soldiers didn't believe her claim, it was doubtful they would take such a chance until proof could be found either way.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded furiously. "I could have your head for refusing me!"

"A very happy man indeed," one of the soldiers surrounding Kaymin said then. He lifted his torch higher, fully illuminating the prince's face which, until now, had remained shadowed inside his hood. "These features are centuries old, and ones I have little difficulty recognizing." He paused viciously. "Prince Numont, your presence here brings with it many implications."

No choice now.

Jian reached for his magic, but a sudden pain exploded at the side of his head. The sand was suddenly hurtling forward to meet him, but blackness took him first.

###

### Connect With Me Online:

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/209713222446276/>