

Rojuun

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This book is dedicated to my wonderful family, who will be delighted to spend any money I might make off of it. Thank you for putting up with me.

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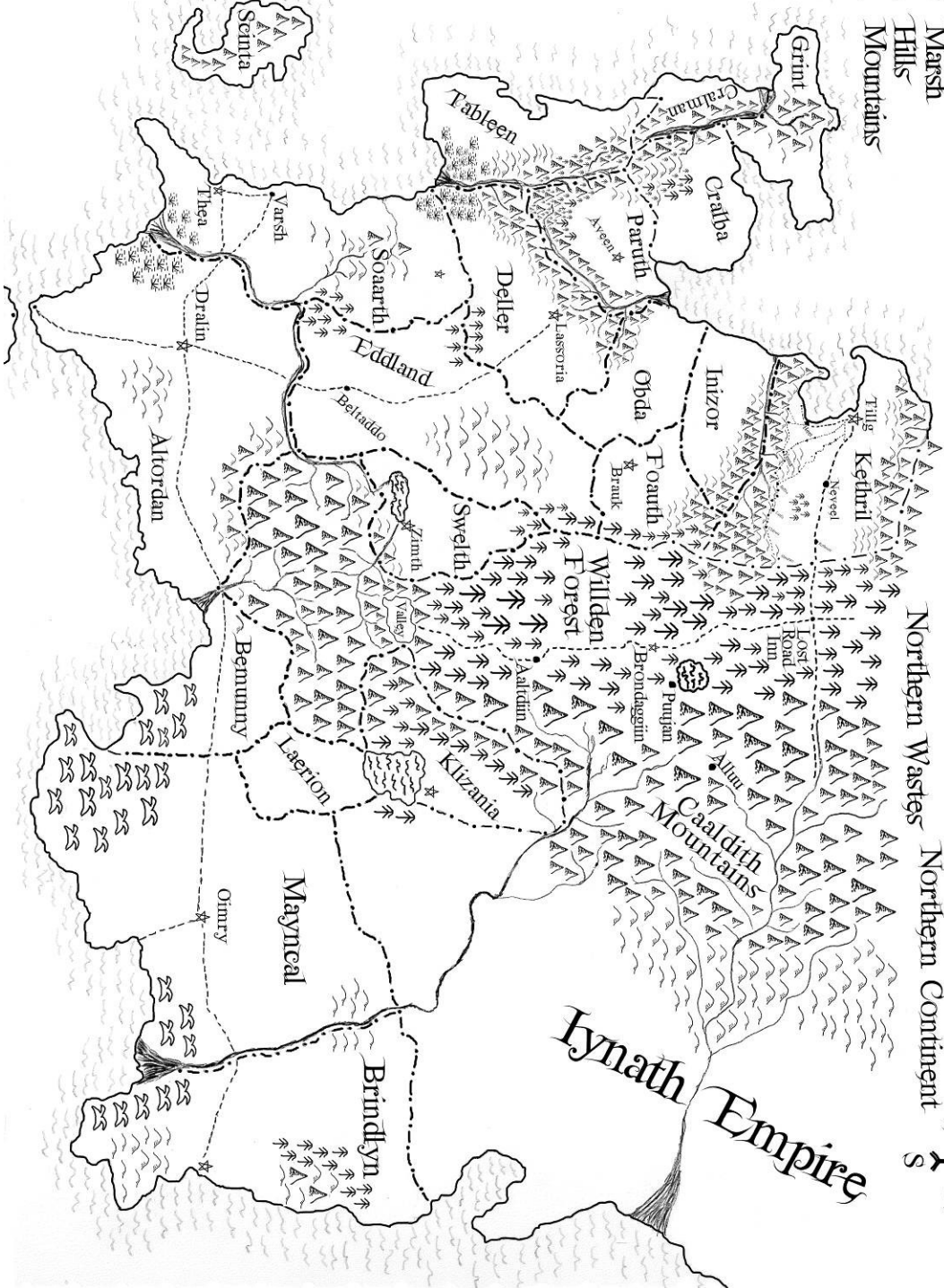
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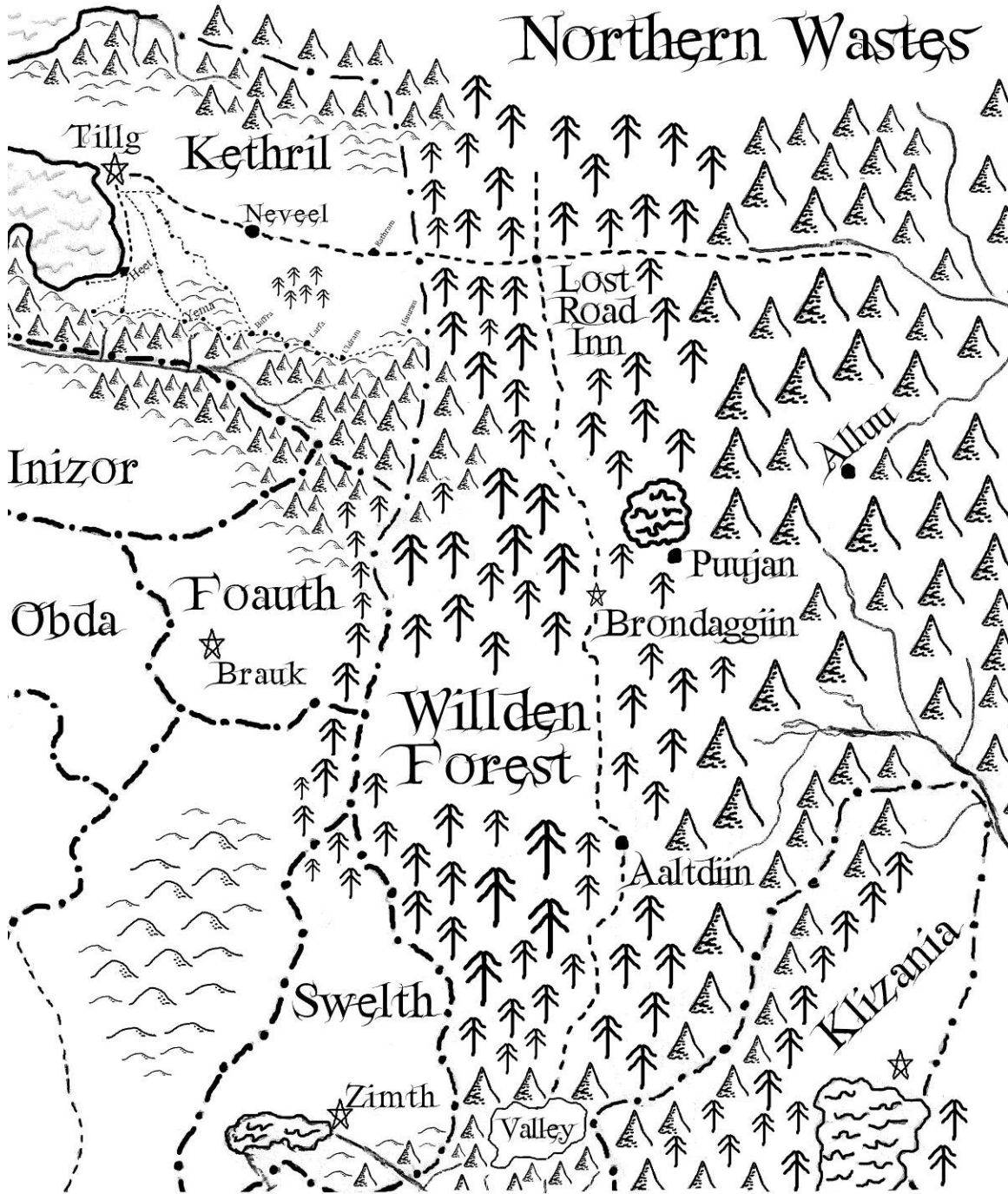
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- ↑ Forest
- ⌘ Jungle
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Ryallion
 Northern Continent





[Chapter 1](#)

Tathan was a tall man of twenty-nine years with short, curly black hair framing a face tanned by travel. His hand was on the hilt of a thin, slightly curved sword sheathed at his waist and his intense grey eyes studied the peaceful valley where he had been raised. Throughout his journeys, he always remembered the sights and scents of this

valley. Tathan closed his eyes and felt the breeze caress his cheek as it had in his childhood. It brought the sounds of bees finding the first blossoms of the year. Other insects buzzed through the valley hoping the birds would be too busy singing their songs to feast upon them.

The sun had risen just an hour ago. Tathan knew it would take a full day and night's travel to make it to the eastern side of the valley where he used to live, so he adjusted his travel pack on his shoulders and continued on. There was no path or road, his parent's house being the only dwelling in the valley. Snowcapped mountains surrounded wild grasses, which were dotted with groves of trees and crossed by small streams. The sky was deep blue with wisps of clouds that would likely become afternoon thunderstorms. It was early spring and flowers were beginning to bloom, mingling their scents with that of fresh grass.

Few people had come through to visit when he was growing up. It was a safe, remote place free of the wars, thievery, politics and various ills of civilization that prevailed throughout the rest of the world. The only religion Tathan had grown up with was a simple spirituality and knowledge of the ways of nature. Just being back in this valley was almost enough to bring a smile to his face, but he hadn't smiled in quite a while.

Tathan jumped at a noise from his right. He drew his sword and moved low to the ground in the direction he thought the sound had come from. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Then he scrutinized the small mountain trail behind him for danger. The breeze ruffled his hair as he scanned the rest of the valley and the sun glistened off a small, opal tipped piercing in his eyebrow and the golden earrings that hung from his ears. An unseen danger whispered on that breeze. Tathan stayed in a defensive position for a few moments before sheathing his sword. He must remember not to be so jumpy when he returned home.

Tathan loped across the valley at a good pace. He wore dark leather clothing over his thin frame and moved much like a panther gliding over the grass. Some had underestimated his strength in the past for he was not built as a brawler, his true abilities being speed and stealth. Hours passed before he slowed to a walk.

It was good to be able to run again. A person could not run through city streets without attracting stares. The mountain pass he had just come through was not made for running either, being too steep. Tathan reached into his pack to grab sustenance as he looked around once more. Sheep roamed freely to the north of him, staying together to protect themselves from the occasional predator. Tathan remembered having to round them up for wool and meat when he was younger. It was a simpler life then.

The rest of the day passed without incident. Flowers were in bloom while bees and insects went merrily about their business. It amused Tathan to think of insects as merry, but it was the way of things here. The thought of camping for the night crossed his mind, but he had been traveling for months and his sleep had been disturbed by dark dreams.

As the sun began to touch the western mountains, Tathan stopped to rest for a bit and cook a warm meal of rabbit he had caught along the way. It took a few minutes to set a fire pit and gather some sticks from a grove of trees nearby and water from a small stream. The clouds hadn't delivered upon their promise of afternoon rain, so the wood was dry. A gesture and a word sent a swirl of flame from his fingertips to light the campfire. Tathan prepared the rabbit then warmed roots he had dug out of the ground

earlier. It was a good meal. He leaned against his travel pack to relax for a bit while eating.

Tathan suddenly rolled to the left. His sword slashed through the air, then again, and once more. Tathan jumped aside, looking for the next person to fight. There was no one, no one at all. In the dim light of the moons and the lingering coals of the campfire, Tathan saw that the only thing he had wounded was thin air. He was certain the air would recover. After a quick search of the area, he extinguished the fire, grabbed his travel pack and continued on toward home.

The world of Ryallon was vast. Many scholars believed it would take a lifetime to go from one end to the other, and some said it couldn't be done in a lifetime. Two moons lit the night sky for him to travel by. Siahray, the closest, was blue and green. It was three quarters full in the southern sky. Piohray was small and far from the world. Red and orange colors swirled around the surface, though it was hard to tell unless one stared at it awhile. It was half full near the eastern horizon. Together, they cast a lavender tint over the surroundings that made it easy to travel by.

Shortly after midnight, Tathan thought he saw a dragon cross the sky in front of Siahray. A few minutes later he saw a burst of brilliant white to the north. The thought of dragons playing in the sky pleased him.

It was morning when Tathan saw the smoke of a fireplace rising in the distance. He would make it in time for breakfast and his stomach growled in anticipation. Before long, he was close enough to smell cooking food. The sun peeked over the mountains ahead as he approached the house, an old place built by his great, great, a few more greats, great grandfather or something. It was made of grey stone with a thatched roof and faced the southern mountains. He had been told as a child that the stone was bound by magic, making it strong. Two other houses had been built when the family expanded at some point in the past. They stood empty now, used only for storage. Only Tathan, his parents and his older sister, Mariah, had lived there in his youth. The large barn behind the house was stone as well. A brook he had played in as a child babbled nearby. On the other side of the brook were the woods where he used to explore.

The sun's amber light had just reached the chimney of the house when Tathan stopped, taking in the scene before him. The thing he remembered most about his childhood was wanting to leave. Every chance he got, Tathan would run off to explore the woods, climbing up trees to hide from his parents so that he wouldn't have to do chores or go to bed. He explored further with every year he aged, going beyond the woods to the base of the mountains, trying to find roads out of the valley. At first his father beat him for running off, but eventually gave up when he realized that his son would just run farther and hide better the next time.

"Mother! Mother!" A young woman had just come around from the back of the house and spotted him, breaking his reverie. She ran to the front porch and, with a glance over her shoulder, dashed inside. Tathan stared at the door for a moment. There hadn't been anyone younger living here when he was growing up. His sister would be much older now. It had been fourteen years since last he was home.

A tall, attractive woman of middle age walked out, wiping her hands on an apron that protected her yellow dress from stains. "Hello, traveler! We don't get many people visiting in this valley," she said in a strong and cheerful voice. Her black hair was

beginning to go grey, the same color as her eyes, and the same color as Tathan's eyes.
"Traveler? Are you well? Do you need aid?"

Tathan shook his head to clear it. "Hmm? Yes. I'm alright. Pardon me, but I don't recognize you."

The woman paused and looked closely at Tathan. "I don't recognize you either. Should I?" The young woman who had rushed inside came back out to stand next to her mother.

"I was raised here. My name is Tathan."

Realization dawned on her face. "Tathan? . . . I know that name. You're Ellin's son, left some fourteen years ago. Welcome home nephew. My name is Sherrie and this is my daughter, Liselle. Will you join us for breakfast?"

"Yes, thank you. Are my mother and father home, and Mariah, my sister?" Tathan saw the two women look at each other in silence. He knew immediately that something had happened to his family.

"Your mother is here, but. . ." She continued after a brief pause. "Your father left his body to the ground some ten years ago. His body gave out," she explained. "Seven years ago, your sister Mariah felt pain in her side for some days before she also died. I am so very sorry." There were tears in the eyes of both women as they looked at him sympathetically. Tathan felt tears in his own eyes as well.

Sherrie came forward with arms outstretched to share his grief. Tathan jumped back, his sword instantly drawn and aimed at the woman. There was fear in his aunt's eyes as she gaped at the dark blade. She dashed back to her daughter. Tathan bit his lip to hold back his tears. His body had moved instinctively as it always did these days. Too many people rushed at him in hostility. He put back his sword as quickly as he could, shamed by his reaction.

"I'm so sorry. . . I didn't mean. . . Please, forgive me." Tathan stood there, tears flowing down his eyes as the loss registered. It was terrible to think that he would never see them again. He closed his eyes, remembering them in his mind. He could still see them smiling at him. Though he had known it would be a possibility, the knowledge they were gone brought great pain to his heart. A deep breath brought Tathan back to present time once more. He wiped his eyes and refocused on his aunt and cousin only to see two men moving up to them. One had a pitchfork and the other wielded a thick piece of wood.

The man with the pitchfork moved forward. His voice was gruff. "Here now, stranger we won't be asking for trouble nor will we be expecting any."

Sherrie stopped him with an arm in front of his chest. "He's family, Scott. He's also fast with that sword and I wouldn't like to see you bleed, Husband."

Scott turned to Sherrie, giving her a dark look for doubting his ability to protect her. "Well now, family then?" Scott looked at Tathan more closely, then at Sherrie, then Liselle. "He has the same eyes as you. I'll believe he's family."

"My mother is here you said? And is she well? . . ." Tathan trailed off, ignoring what Scott believed.

Sherrie responded quickly. "Oh yes. She's inside! Ellin!" she hollered back toward the house. "Ellin, you must come out. Tathan has returned home to us." Tathan wanted to move closer, but could not bring himself to do so. He just stood there waiting. A

moment later his mother came out. She was much older than when he left, which was to be expected he supposed.

“Tathan? Tathan, is that you?” she asked in a high-toned voice. There was a resemblance to Sherrie and he could see the women were definitely sisters. His mother’s hair had gone completely grey though. “Tathan? Is it really you?” She moved close to him. “Your eyes, they are the same, but . . . haunted.”

“Hello, Mother. I’m so sorry about father and Mariah.” Sobs broke from his throat. Ellin came in and held her son in a strong embrace. After a few moments, they separated. Tathan dried his eyes with his sleeves while his mother dried hers on her apron. “I’m sorry mother. I’m sorry I wasn’t here. I’m sorry I . . .” Tathan trailed off.

She patted his shoulder and looked him in the eye. “Tathan, my son. Don’t worry yourself over what has gone before. They thought well of you. They missed you, but we all knew you were a traveling spirit. How are you, Son?” Ellin reached up to run fingers through his hair. “You’re different, Tathan. Your eyes. . . What have they seen? Why are they so haunted my son?” It was as though she wanted to ask a hundred questions without giving him time to answer any of them.

“I . . .” Tathan didn’t know what to tell her about his time away. So much had happened to him. “So . . . this is my Aunt Sherrie and Cousin Liselle?” he deflected lamely.

His mother stared at him for a moment and then turned to make introductions. “Yes, and this is Scott, Sherrie’s husband. Laremy is Scott’s brother. They arrived after your father’s death.” Scott and Laremy came over to shake Tathan’s hand. They were both strong men with blond hair and blue eyes. Laremy looked to be the older brother. Tathan shook their hands and nodded to them each in greeting.

Tathan turned to his mother, taking in her grey hair and the wrinkles aging her face. “Aunt Sherrie mentioned breakfast? I’ve traveled a ways without a good meal.”

Ellin smiled at her son. “But of course, Tathan. Come inside. Sit with us and tell us of your journeys.”

As they walked inside, Tathan looked around to see that everything was still as he remembered. Well-used rugs were scattered over the stone floor of the large living room. Chairs and a few small tables were spread around, most directed toward the fireplace, which held a warm morning fire. The ceiling was made of wood braced by thick beams stained dark brown. Old tapestries hung on stone walls, made by grandparents and great grandparents. The quality was as fine as any owned by nobles whose houses he had wandered through while they slept. This was where the family had gathered since the house had been built.

“Come to the dining room, Tathan. The food is ready.” His mother gestured to the room on the left where they ate all of their meals. Aromas of cooking meat, eggs and fresh bread filled the house. He went through the opening and into the large dining room. The wooden floor, which had seen generations of feet, was swept and clean. More tapestries lined the walls in here as well. Tathan ran his fingers down the large wood table, wondering how many meals had been set upon it over the generations.

His Aunt Sherrie gestured to a chair on the near side of the table. “Won’t you sit here?” He took the offered seat as the other men sat down in their places. The women brought the food in wooden dishes and then sat down as well, his mother taking the seat to his right. There were places where he had eaten amazing meals in his travels, but

nothing ever seemed as good as home. Every bite was savored and he closed his eyes here and there, smiling at the flavors that burst through his mouth.

“I’d guess you like the food by the smile on your face, Cousin,” Liselle said in a melodious voice. She had long, black, wavy hair and was wearing a dark blue dress suitable for doing chores in. Her eyes were grey, much like his, but gentler. Tathan found his gaze drawn to a flower in her hair. It was bluish-purple in color and he got the distinct impression it was watching him as much as everyone else was.

Liselle was a pretty young woman, the kind who would find an unpleasant life in many of the cities Tathan had traveled through. The thought made him look back down to the food on his plate. He missed the worried looks his family exchanged.

“You worry me, son. I’ve said it twice and I say it again. You look haunted.” His mother’s face was filled with concern. “Tathan, what happened in your time away?”

It was a difficult question to answer. “Well. . .” Tathan sighed. “I . . . don’t know. A lot of things have happened. I’ve seen . . . things.” He looked around the room for a way to escape the conversation. There was nothing of help. “The world isn’t peaceful like it is here. Please, Mother, what matters is that I’m here.”

Ellin smiled sadly at her son. “Of course, my dear Tathan. You’re here and that truly is what matters.” She smiled and reached for his hand, taking hold of it with her own calloused hands. “It’s so good to see you. I’ve worried so much since you left.” Tathan returned both her smile and her grip.

“How long are you here, Tathan? For good or just visiting?” Laremy asked in a deep voice, which was warm and welcoming.

“I don’t know honestly. I didn’t even realize I was coming home until I saw the trail through the mountains. There it was, and I was traveling on it.” Tathan gave them a wry smile. He had been escaping from troubles in the south and hadn’t realized he was near the trail until coming to a small village at the base of the mountains.

Scott nodded toward the sword on Tathan’s hip. “You seem to know how to wield that thing. I probably wouldn’t be much of a challenge for you with my pitchfork, would I?”

“I’m sorry, Scott, but no. I . . . am dangerous when a sword is in my hand,” Tathan said. He didn’t want to hurt anyone, especially not his family. “You may have noticed that I . . .” He found himself pausing a lot. He didn’t like talking about himself. “I’ll be very careful not to hurt you. I promise.” Instead of reassuring his family, his words made their eyes widen in worry. Tears of sadness flowed down his mother’s cheeks again. “Here now, mother. Don’t cry for me. I’m alright, really,” he said.

Ellin fanned herself with her hand, controlling her tears. “Oh I know, dear. I just worry. I can see you’ve grown, but I also see that peace eludes you.”

Tathan gave a short laugh. “True, but I found the adventure I wanted.” He took her hands into his and held them to his forehead. “I love you, mother.”

Ellin sobbed into her son’s shoulder for a few moments. Sherrie and Liselle dabbed at tears that formed in their eyes at the emotional moment.

After finishing breakfast, they moved to the living room and talked for a bit about life in the valley. The weather was an important subject. Winter had been mild and spring had started strong, giving the men hope for good crops and gardens. Hunting and gathering supplemented small crops of vegetables and grains. The sheep that roamed were used for food as well. Life was good, if simple.

Tathan avoided talking about his travels when asked, preferring to listen to his family. He felt his eyes beginning to droop before long.

“Laremy and I were going hunting for deer today. We should get going if we want to be back before nightfall. Would you like to go with us, Tathan?” Scott asked as he pulled a bow and quiver off of the wall. Laremy grabbed his as well.

“No. . . Thank you. I haven’t had sleep in a couple of days, so I wouldn’t be much use to you.” Tathan did feel tired, but it was a relaxed tired. It was good to feel warm and safe for the first time in what seemed like an eternity.

“Liselle, get your cousin set up in the east bedroom. He’ll be comfortable there, I’m sure,” Sherrie said.

“Yes, mother,” Liselle responded and then turned to Tathan. “You probably know the way, but I’ll show you anyway.” She beamed a smile at him.

“Thank you. I’m really tired, so there’s a good chance I’d get lost,” he jested. Tathan knew every inch of the house, but he was road weary. It was nice to have someone show him the way.

Once in the room, she turned down the covers and closed the shutters. Liselle looked to be a couple of inches shorter than his six feet of height. “There, it should be nice and dark for you to sleep.” Her voice was like a soft stream running through the forest. “I’d love to hear about the places you visited. They must be wonderful.” Her eyes lit up and she clapped her hands in excitement.

“They’re exciting . . . but not always wonderful. The idea of seeing them may sound fun now, but were you to visit those places . . .” his words trailed off ominously. Shaking himself of the dark thoughts, he continued, “I’m sorry. It’s not good for me to scare you.”

She chuckled. “It’s alright. My father and uncle try to scare me all the time. I want to see the world. I know it’s dangerous, but I don’t care.” Determination showed in her eyes.

“I see,” he responded quietly. “That’s understandable. I felt the same way after leaving and would probably do the same thing again.” Tathan ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. “This is home, but it’s not exciting. There’s no adventure.”

“Then you think I should be allowed to explore the world?” Liselle looked hopeful at the thought of an ally.

“No. It’s a bad place and most people die.” Tathan realized that was an overly harsh view of the world, but it was how he had come to feel.

“Oh.” Her face was crestfallen. “Of course. Well, I should get to chores now. Mother will be wanting my help.”

Tathan placed a gentle hand on her upper arm. “If you wish to explore the world, then you can always go. There comes a point where your life is yours to live even though it may hurt others.”

“Really?” Liselle bit her lower lip in thought. “I don’t know what to do. Mother wants to take me to Rothton to find a husband.” She rolled her eyes in exasperation.

“That’s where my mother is from, which means Aunt Sherrie is from there too, right?” he asked.

“Yes. But I don’t want to get married. I want to explore the world, have adventures and find a handsome prince!” Liselle twirled with her arms in the air.

“I understand. That’s exactly how I felt when I left . . . well, minus the part about the handsome prince.” He grinned at her.

“Oh, but you would make such a lovely bride for a handsome prince,” she said with a laugh. Her laughter was bright and innocent. Then she sat down on the bed with a wistful sigh. “I really don’t want to go to Rothton to find a husband. What am I to do, Tathan?” she asked.

Why was she asking him? “I’m not sure what would be best,” he shrugged. “It seems like women are always supposed to get married, men too I suppose. My parents wanted me to go to Rothton to find a wife. Father was upset when I refused.”

“I didn’t know that,” she responded.

He nodded, “He didn’t hold on to his anger. Father realized I was going to leave. He sat with me and told me what little he knew of the world. Then he let me know that he loved me.”

“That’s really nice, but I don’t think my father will be quite so understanding.” She stood. “Well, I need to do my chores. Get some rest. I’ll wake you when dinner is ready.” She turned and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Tathan sat on the bed a little longer. After a bit, he went to the window and opened the shutters to look outside. It was a beautiful day. Birds were singing their lovely songs in the trees. Flowers were in bloom and their fragrance filled the air. There were a lot more flowers than he ever remembered seeing. Tathan took a deep breath then exhaled, letting some of the tension flow from his body. It was so nice to relax for the first time in ages.

He stayed at the window for a time before going to bed. The covers were soft and smelled of spring air. Tathan drew his sword and lay it down next to him as usual, but couldn’t sleep. Getting up, he sheathed his sword and leaned it against the nightstand. A moment later, he was resting peacefully.

[Chapter 2](#)

“Tathan . . . Tathan . . .” He heard the voice and wondered who was calling him. “Tathan, wake up. Breakfast is ready.”

He mumbled something before pulling the covers back up over his head. The bed was too warm to leave.

“Tathan, please wake up.” The covers were pulled down. He sat up abruptly, wondering where he was. A young woman stood beside the bed, watching him while caressing a violet flower in her hair. Soft morning light shone through the open shutters.

In a panic, he realized that his sword wasn’t next to him. He searched frantically for it in the sheets before seeing it against the nightstand. Tathan grabbed it and held it in his lap, running his fingers along the hilt and crossbar.

“Are you alright, Cousin?” There was worry in her eyes as she stared at him.

He remembered where he was. The young woman was Liselle and he was home in the valley. Tathan had slept on the road for so long that he had forgotten how marvelous a soft, warm bed could be. “Yeah. I’m alright.” He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

“Did you say breakfast?”

“Yes. We tried to get you for dinner last night, but you wouldn’t wake up. Aunt Ellin said to let you sleep.” Liselle looked nervously at the sword. “She said that if you

didn't wake up for breakfast, she was going to dump a bucket of water over your head. She'll do it too."

"She will. She did it more than once when I was growing up," he admitted with a grin.

Liselle chuckled and relaxed a bit. "Yeah. She's done that to me a couple of times too. I make it a point to wake up before her now."

"That's probably a good idea. I never succeeded. I liked sleep too much when I was younger," Tathan said. He stood up and looked at his sword. For a moment, he considered leaving it against the nightstand, but attached it to his belt instead. He shouldn't need it here, but it had become a part of him.

"Do you need to carry that?" Liselle asked, pointing at it with obvious distaste. "You're safe here."

Tathan ran his fingers along the steel wrapped hilt once more. The sword was black as night from tip to pommel. The sheath was also made of the same dark metal. What couldn't be seen with a normal eye were the runes that traveled the length the blade.

"Yes. I must carry it always," Tathan replied cryptically. His voice was deeper than normal as he spoke. "I . . . found it . . . in a dark place. It has magic and they want it . . ." he trailed off, still caressing the hilt.

There was something chilling about his voice, which caused Liselle to shiver and hug herself. She took a few steps back toward the door. Tathan saw the movement and looked up. When he saw the look on his cousin's face, he shook his head to clear the dark thoughts. "I'm so sorry, Cousin. Something's been chasing me for this sword . . ." He stopped. That was a lot more information than he had intended to share.

Tathan took a deep breath and stepped toward Liselle, who took another step back, bumping into the door jamb behind her. It was obvious that she was scared of him and he didn't blame her. "I'm sorry I scared you." That was all he could think to say.

Liselle took a deep breath of her own before moving forward. She gave him a quick hug. "Hurry before breakfast gets cold." With that, she was headed out of the room and down the stairs.

It must have taken a lot of courage for her to do that. He didn't follow her right away, instead going to the window. The sun had risen above the eastern mountains and begun warming the cool air. Birds sang their early morning songs. That had always irritated him as a child. What right did they have to be so happy in the morning while he wanted to sleep? Now, however, the sound brought a half-smile to his face. It didn't last long, but it tried.

Tathan looked down at the flowers. They were staring at him. It was the only way he could describe it. There were definitely more flowers around the house than when he was a child and he could have sworn they were watching him suspiciously. He shook the feeling off and headed downstairs.

The aroma of cooking food swirled around his head, dragging him into the dining room where breakfast and family awaited him. Everyone else had already filled their plates and begun eating. "There you are, Tathan. I thought for certain that I was going to have to get a bucket of water from the stream," his mother said with a gentle smile.

He grinned and sat down next to her, immediately filling his plate with food. Mealtimes were always casual. They didn't pray to gods, neither real nor made up deities, like many people in the cities he had visited. Instead, everyone took a share of

food and ate until full. Anything leftover was eaten later in the day, saved for the next, or fed to the animals.

Liselle gave him a tentative smile, which he tried in vain to return. He realized that it had been a long time since he had consciously smiled and had forgotten how. Liselle giggled at the face he made. "What in the world are you doing to your face, Cousin?" she asked.

Tathan sighed. "I'm trying to smile. It doesn't seem to be going well, does it? It's been too long since I've been home."

His mother put a kind hand on his shoulder. "Stay with us and learn how to smile again."

The thought of living out his life in the serene valley with its quiet solitude horrified him. It would be too . . . boring. He liked traveling to new cities where life was dangerous. Tathan had been at the edge of death more times than he could count. His heart needed to race in exhilaration whenever possible. "I'm sorry, Mother. I just can't do that," he told her guiltily.

She looked down at her plate in an attempt to hide her disappointment. Tathan saw it and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close in comfort. She held him, knowing instinctively that this would be the last time her son would visit.

"Surely you're not leaving right away. Won't you stay a few days at least?" Laremy asked from across the table. There was a fork full of food in his hand, waiting to be eaten.

Tathan nodded as he let his mother go. "Yes, definitely. I thought I'd stay a few weeks or perhaps a month. I'm willing to help with a few of the chores, but I'd like to spend some time exploring the valley a bit. After that, I'll probably travel to Rothton to the east and decide where to go from there."

"I've told them how you do chores, Son. I think they'd rather you explore the valley," Ellin said wryly. They all laughed at that, even Tathan. It was true. Tathan had never liked doing chores much, sneaking away whenever possible to go exploring and leaving things undone around the house. He often wondered if his father had been happy to see him, and the frustration he caused, leave the house.

"In any case, you're welcome to stay as long as you like," Scott told him from the head of the table where Tathan's father used to sit. It was odd to see someone else there. "You're family and this will always be your home."

"When you go to Rothton, I'd like to go with you," Liselle said. The room became instantly silent. There were frowns on everyone's faces, while Liselle held her head up in a defiant pose. Tathan's senses screamed danger.

The answer was easy anyway. "I travel alone, Liselle. The world is dangerous and trying to protect you would be difficult at best." Tathan heard collective sighs of relief from around the table. He didn't bother to mention to them that his decision had nothing to do with their feelings. He really *did* travel alone.

Liselle set her jaw in anger and stared at her food for a minute. Then she threw her napkin on it and ran out of the room. Sherrie stood to follow her daughter, but sat back down when Scott shook his head at her. "It's best to let her get over her anger. You know that."

She glared at him. "Yes, but I'm the one stuck doing her chores, Husband." Scott sighed and turned his food with his fork. Sherrie relented and went back to eating.

Tathan knew how Liselle felt. The difference was that he had left by the age of fifteen and Liselle was already seventeen. If it had been him that stormed off from the table at her age, he never would have come back.

A few minutes later, Liselle walked back in and sat down. As she began eating quietly, Scott and Sherrie exchanged surprised glances.

When they were done with breakfast, Sherrie said, "Ellin, go with your son and sit in the living room awhile. Liselle and I will take care of the chores." Ellin nodded gratefully while Liselle glared at her mother. Tathan and Ellin went to the living room and sat next to each other on an ancient couch that had been recovered numerous times over the years. It was still comfortable.

Tathan didn't know what to talk about. "How are you, Mother? You seem to be doing well."

"I *am* well, Son. The question is, how are you?" she asked with an arched eyebrow. "You don't look well. You look skinny and haunted."

Tathan sighed. Being mysterious was part of his personality and mothers never seemed to respect that sort of thing. "I'm fine, Mother."

"Do you expect me to believe that?" she asked.

"No," he said with a chuckle.

Her mouth twitched in a half grin. "Come now. Tell me of your life, Tathan. What grand adventures have you had these fourteen years? That's what you set out for, isn't it? Adventure?" There was a challenge in her voice. Ellin had never wanted Tathan to leave. She didn't think it was responsible of him. There had been complications when he was born and she was unable to have any further children. She didn't think it fair of him to leave when he should have gotten married and inherited the homestead.

"Yes, I wanted adventure and I found more than I ever imagined." It hadn't always been the sort of adventure one dreamed of, with dragons, maidens, knights and treasure. Most of it was much darker, with dark alleys, knives, and a primal struggle for life at the lowest levels. "It's been hard a lot of times, but I would do it again, though I know it upsets you." The look he gave her was a sad one. He didn't like to make his mother unhappy, but couldn't see making his own life miserable just to please her. That didn't make him feel any less guilty though.

She sighed deeply. "You were going to go off to explore the world no matter what anyone said. Your father understood that, but it took me a while. I'm still upset with you." Tears welled in her eyes, but she smiled lovingly at him nonetheless.

He wrapped her back up in his arms and held her. They sat there like that awhile, letting closeness ease the passing of time. She eventually patted his arm and sat back. He wiped her tears and kissed her forehead respectfully. "I'm sorry I upset you, Mother."

"I know," she said. "I'm not upset anymore. You were going to go off to see the world no matter how anyone felt about it. Tell me about the world, Son. What's it like?"

Tathan considered for a moment. There were things he wouldn't tell her, but many of the sights that he had seen were marvelous. So he began with that. "Well, the most amazing thing is Dralin at night. There are so many lights in the city that you can see the glow from miles away."

"You can really see the lights from miles away?" she asked in wonderment. "Go on. Tell me more," she encouraged. At that moment, the men walked back in from whatever chores they had been taking care of and sat down in nearby chairs. Sherrie walked in

from the dining room with drinks for Tathan and his mother, saw the men who wanted to listen to the stories as well and called for Liselle to come join. It was amazing how fast Liselle came into the room and sat down with an eager look on her face.

They listened in fascination as Tathan spoke. The world was an extraordinary place with adventure to be had no matter where a person turned. Cities were filled with fascinating people who built fascinating things. He told them about the vast oceans to the west. Tathan had seen vistas that left his jaw hanging open in awe.

Next, Tathan told them of places he had heard about, but not yet visited. There were tales of deserts to the east and fantastic cities made of silver. Other oceans existed in the south with exotic cultures. His family listened intently the whole time. They were fascinated and asked for details about things that interested them.

A few hours later, it was time for lunch. Tathan yawned and stretched as Sherrie and Liselle brought the food in. He continued to tell about other adventures, but by the time lunch was done, he was rubbing his eyes, wishing he could go to bed. His mother shooed him off to get sleep, telling him that they would listen to more stories over the next few weeks.

Upon reaching the room, Tathan took his sword off and leaned it up against the nightstand once more. He stretched out under the covers and fell into slumber. For the first time in over a year, there was an easy smile upon his face.

Chapter 3

“Tathan, wake up! Come quick!” Liselle was shaking him awake. There was a worried tone to her voice.

He shook the sleep out of his head as he sat up. “What is it?”

Her eyes were filled with concern. “Father and Laremy saw a group of men on horseback coming this way.”

Tathan grabbed his sword by the sheath and headed toward the open door. “What do they look like?”

She answered as they walked. “Father said they look dangerous. They have tattoos, spears and dark skin.”

“That’s not good. They sound like tribal warriors and there shouldn’t be warriors here.” He picked up his pace and leaped down the last few stairs. With a few bounds, he was through the main door of the house.

Ellin and Sherrie were standing on the front porch as Tathan passed them by. Liselle joined them. Scott had his pitchfork, waiting for the warriors to meet him while Laremy stood with his bow a short distance behind. Tathan moved to the left of Scott, loosening his sword in the sheath. Instincts told him this was not going to go well.

The sun was just over the mountaintops in the west, turning the bottoms of spent thunderheads in the sky a reddish hue. He could see that it must have rained while he slept. The grass was damp and the air smelled wonderful in contrast to the danger in front of them. As Tathan studied the riders, he grabbed an item hidden in a secret pocket of his tunic.

The dark-skinned warriors came from the road to Rothton, southeast of the dwelling. Their hair was in topknots with long braids running behind, indicating they were of desert

tribes. Tattoos covered their faces and necks and Tathan knew the markings would continue underneath the furs the men wore.

He took a quick survey of the weapons. They had swords with a deeper curve than his. Each also had a riding bow at his side, but their primary weapons were spears decorated with feathers and bones.

What bothered him most was the looks on their faces. They were the faces of predators, men who killed and liked it.

The warriors stopped a hundred paces in front of Scott, but they seemed more interested in the women on the front porch. Scott held a hand up in greeting to the warriors. "Hello! It's rare that we have visitors here."

The lead warrior glanced at the man at his left who shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. Tathan knew they didn't understand the language Scott spoke, nor did they care to learn. The leader motioned the men to spread out to either side. The warriors did so, spears ready to throw.

"Get back to the house now!" Tathan yelled at Scott and the others. "They're at a disadvantage indoors." Tathan hated fighting men on horseback.

Scott turned to look at him, about to say something. A spear split his chest all the way through to his back, knocking him down. Screams came from the porch at the sight of quick, brutal death. Laremy stood with his bow loosely in hand, stunned at the sudden violence.

Tathan opened his hand to expose the object he had pulled from his pocket. It was a round ball with runes over its surface. He spoke a word of power which made the runes glow deep purple. Then he tossed the device into the air toward the warriors, guiding its path with his hand. When it was in the right place, he spoke another word of command. Purple light sprayed in a fan toward the riders. Many of them turned away from the light. They were the lucky ones.

He sidestepped a spear one of the warriors had thrown at him. Tathan looked at the riders to see how many would be taken by the device. The leader had closed his eyes and shielded his face quickly. In addition, he had turned his horse to save it from the effect. He was not the only one. Many of them had done the same thing.

Those who had not turned away were dead. Light seared through their eyes and ripped the soul out of the bodies of those who gazed into it. Half of the horses and their riders went down in instant death, victims of the dark and evil spell. Tathan had hoped for all or most of them. Half was not enough. He counted about fifteen still living. The good news was that they would be dazed by the spell even if they had survived it. They would also be cautious from that point.

"Scott!" Tathan turned to see Sherrie desperately running toward her husband's body, screaming his name. Tears of shock and horror were streaming down her cheeks.

Tathan yelled to Laremy, "Get them inside, now!" pointing to the other women who had just begun to follow Sherrie.

Sherrie fell to her knees beside her husband, sobbing. Tathan ran to get her to safety, but just before he arrived, one of the riders jumped down to grab her. When she tried to push him away, he thrust his spear into her chest, knocking her down over Scott's body.

Tathan threw one of the daggers he kept on his belt. It hit the rider in the neck causing the man to fall to the ground, clutching the wound.

His Aunt reached out as Tathan rushed to her. He saw the shock in her eyes and blood beginning to run out of her open mouth. Looking at the wound, he knew it was fatal. By that time, the leader of the warriors was riding hard at him, casting his spear in Tathan's direction. There was nothing he could do for his aunt.

Tathan leapt straight up, and the leader's spear flew underneath him. He drew and lashed out with his sword all in one fluid motion, swinging at the leader, only to discover the warrior's reflexes were almost as impressive as his own. Tathan's sword cut through the air above the warrior leader who ducked to the side.

Two more riders were on either side of him with spears aimed at his heart, but Tathan's feet only touched the ground long enough to spring into another leap. He somersaulted into the air, sword whirling. The warrior on the right dropped his spear and grabbed at the gash in his right arm. The other fell off his horse in two pieces, first his head, then body.

When his feet touched ground again, Tathan looked toward the house for Laremy and the women. His mother was shoving Liselle inside while Laremy covered them with his bow. Tathan was impressed when the closest warrior went down with an arrow to the neck. The leader of the warriors looked from Laremy to Tathan as though trying to decide which to kill first.

The sense of danger that caused Tathan to roll to the side was real. He couldn't see the warrior's shocked face as the thrown spear found empty air where Tathan's back had once been.

The riders were fast and dangerous and they were focusing on him now. He had no time to get to the house to help Laremy protect the women. Tathan *hated* fighting riders. He leapt into the air, grabbed the arm of a warrior who looked surprised, and thrust his blade down into the man's shoulder. He leaped from the falling rider to the next warrior. This time, his foot hit the rump of the horse and his blade slashed across the rider's neck as Tathan twirled off toward the next. Six more warriors were dead by the time his feet touched ground again.

The next one was on foot and ran at him only to trip in a group of flowers. Tathan did a double take. It looked as though the flowers had intentionally tripped the warrior. As the man got up, Tathan ran him through. He could have sworn the flowers looked on in approval.

There was one more with his sword drawn, staring at Tathan with awe and some fear in his eyes. Looking back toward the house, Tathan saw that another warrior lay on the ground dying from one of Laremy's arrows. The leader's horse was at the porch and the door had been blown aside by some sort of spell.

Tathan ran toward the house. The leader was much more dangerous than the rider staring at him. Plus his mother and cousin were in there and he didn't know if Laremy could hold him off. A scream from inside indicated that his fears were justified.

An instant later, Tathan dashed through the doorway with sword ready. Laremy's lifeless body on the ground was the first thing he saw. The next thing he saw was his mother at the bottom of the stairs, protecting Liselle. She had just paid the ultimate sacrifice as the warrior leader's spear was run through her body.

Throughout the entire battle, Tathan had made no noise other than the howling of his blade cutting through air as it drank the blood of the warriors. The battle cry that

unexpectedly emitted from his throat was fierce and full of anguish as he hurtled toward the leader.

Curved blades clashed as the warrior leader released his grip on the spear and drew his sword to meet Tathan. He was fast, strong, and extremely good with the weapon. They slashed and parried time and again. Then Tathan's advantage began to show. Tathan liked fighting in tight spaces, with walls, and objects to use as shields and weapons. The warriors preferred fighting while riding horses.

Tathan jumped atop a chair, balancing as the warrior leader lunged. Kicking back, he launched the chair at the warrior leader, causing him to lose his balance. Then Tathan sprung to the wall nearby, ran halfway up, did a somersault and cut deeply into the man's shoulder as he came down. The warrior leader fell to his knees and Tathan swung with both hands and all of his strength, removing the tattooed head in a powerful blow.

He stood there staring at the body which had yet to fall, when he heard a noise at the door. The last rider was there staring at him in awe. Upon seeing Tathan turn around, the warrior ran back out of the door.

Tathan chased him outside, only to see the hindquarters of the warrior's horse galloping into the distance. He thought of jumping on the leader's horse and following the man, but Tathan was not a skilled horseman and knew he wouldn't be able to catch the warrior. He also realized that Liselle was still inside.

She was sitting on the stairs looking at the bodies of Ellin and Laremy in terror. Sobs racked her body as she tried to cope with what had just happened. Her entire family was dead except for a cousin she hadn't met until the previous morning. The sunset outside leaked through the windows and open door, tinting everything red. Liselle looked at her cousin to see blood covering him and his sword. Then she screamed because it was the only thing she could think to do.

Tathan jumped at the scream and looked around, expecting danger. He realized how he must look and how horrible the scene was. Dashing into the dining room, he found a towel and some water. He wiped his blade down with the towel first then slid it into the sheath on his belt. He didn't remember attaching the sheath, but his instincts were such that he didn't have to think when it came to such things. Then he took some water and splashed his face, getting as much blood off as he could. He wiped his face and hands off with another towel and went back to the stairs where Liselle was alternately sobbing and screaming.

"Here now. Look at me, Liselle," he said as he took her face into his hands. "Look at me now and get your senses back."

She looked at him and screamed again. There was only terror in her eyes.

He hated to do it, but knew it was the only way. He slapped her cheek hard to get her to come out of her panic.

Liselle gasped and stared at him, then threw her arms around his shoulders as she fell into a whimpering cry.

"Come on." He led her up the stairs to the room where he had rested. Once there, Tathan held her by the shoulders as she tried to compose herself the best she could.

Sudden anger turned Liselle's lips into a snarl. Tathan stepped aside, wondering what had caused such a transformation. It was the rider he had slashed in the arm, but had not dealt a death blow to. With a scream, Liselle put her hands forward, fingers spread.

Blue vines of magic shot forth from her fingertips toward the man. The warrior shrieked as they ripped him to shreds. And then his body fell to the ground in gruesome pieces.

Tathan caught Liselle as she fainted.

Chapter 4

Liselle sat up in the cot where she lay. Looking around, she realized that she was in the barn. It was dark except for a torch on one of the pillars. Her breathing became rapid and shallow as she remembered the events of the evening. Her family couldn't be dead, they just couldn't. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she began to sob.

She cried for a good long time, hoping her father and mother would come through the door, but knowing they wouldn't. After a while, the tears subsided and she wiped her face the best she could. She wondered if Tathan had brought her to the barn.

Tathan. Her cousin had shown up the morning before, followed by warriors the next night. She wondered for a moment if he had brought them or if he was even her cousin. But Aunt Ellin had known him as her son. Plus, he had killed all the warriors . . . all except the one who had come into the room. That one she had killed with magic. Liselle wondered briefly if Tathan had noticed the magic, but realized he had been right there. It was something she had never told her parents about. They didn't like magic. Liselle didn't understand how it worked or why she had the ability to perform it, but it felt good when she used it . . . usually. She had never killed a man with it before.

Fresh sobbing began and she hunched over, rocking back and forth. Her heart tightened as she realized that she was responsible for a man's death. It was a little while until she recovered somewhat and stood to look around the barn. There was no sign of Tathan or anyone else. She was afraid to go outside, but knew she must.

Liselle opened the door a crack to peer out. The back of the house was visible. Torches and candles were lit in the kitchen and living room windows as well as upstairs. She could tell from the glow that torches were lit in front of the house as well.

The flowers around the house opened and turned to her. Liselle told them to go back to sleep. They ignored the command.

Stars covered most of the sky. A few clouds were in the way, but it didn't look like it was going to rain anymore. The air was fresh except for one smell. It was a terrible stench similar to dead animals, but different and terrifying.

She walked toward the kitchen door at the back of the house, pausing every few steps to strengthen her resolve. Upon reaching the door, she turned the knob and entered cautiously. There was a pot with fresh stew in the fire pit. Liselle went over to it, stomach rumbling in hunger at the aroma. The kitchen was warm and welcoming. However, there was something very wrong. She could feel the absence of her mother and Aunt Ellin. The tears started to flow again.

"Enough!" she chastised herself aloud. The sound of her own voice startled Liselle and she froze to see if anything happened. The room was calm with only the bubbling of the stew and the occasional pop of an ember in the fire breaking the silence. Liselle wondered where her cousin could be.

Slowly, she moved to the entryway of the dining room. Dishes were still set on the table for dinner, which the family had never eaten. She continued even more slowly to the entryway of the main room.

The bodies were gone, but the blood was not. Liselle took a deep breath to get control of her emotions. She shook her hands vigorously trying to get out the bad feelings welling up. Once again, her cousin was nowhere to be seen. She debated whether to check for him upstairs or outside.

“Tathan?” she asked tentatively at the bottom of the stairs. “Hello? . . .” There was no answer. Surely, he would have heard if he was upstairs. She moved to the front door, doing her best not to step in any of the bloodstains.

She opened the door and poked her head outside, ready to slam it shut again should anything jump out of the dark. It appeared as though there might be dark stains in the grass, but Liselle ignored them. Stepping out, she was able to see torches attached to each of the four posts of the porch. The yard was lit with nine more torches on wooden torch stands, which must have been found in one of the other houses.

Liselle could see four of the warrior’s horses tethered to a railing. A dark shiver ran down her spine. Tathan had killed the leader of the warriors and she had seen him fight the others, but had just assumed they were all slain. One man couldn’t possibly kill thirty or so riders all by himself. Her wide eyes scanned for the warriors she was now certain must be out there.

A sound came from beyond the torches. Someone was coming. Liselle looked around and realized she was in the middle of the torchlight, having come off the porch onto the path in front of the house. She dashed to her left as quietly as she could toward the brook, hiding behind a bush a short distance away. The flowers there opened with concern for her and did their best to keep her shielded though they didn’t have enough height.

After a moment, she saw Tathan coming toward the house with a shovel in his hand and his head bowed heavily. In a moment of clarity, Liselle realized that he had lost his family too. “Tathan,” she called out to him. He startled, holding the shovel in his right hand like a sword. She rose from behind the bush so he could see her. The look on his face when he realized there was a shovel in his hand instead of a sword made her giggle involuntarily in spite of the horrors of the day.

“Liselle! How did you get over there?” He looked toward the barn behind the house, then to the bush, puzzled. They walked toward each other, meeting beside one of the torch stands in the yard.

“I woke up and went looking for you. When I saw the horses I thought the riders had killed you and were still here,” she explained. “Where were you and where? . . .” She trailed off, afraid to ask about their family.

“I was taking care of the bodies. The warriors are off in the distance to be burned. I’ve buried . . .” he also trailed off.

Liselle nodded in understanding, barely managing to keep from falling back into grief. “What do you need me to do to help?” she asked weakly.

It was not the reaction he expected. “Well,” he started. “I’m about to burn the bodies of the warriors. I want to get it done before more come into the valley.”

“More?! What do you mean more?” She looked to the south, expecting to see riders galloping toward them already.

He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Peace, Cousin. They'll not be here this night." He pointed toward where he had taken the bodies. "Those were scouts. They lead the way and find places for their armies to rest and supply. This valley will be an excellent place for supplies and secluded training."

"Army? What army are you talking about?" She was confused and wrapped her arms around herself. There were no armies here. It was a peaceful place. "Did you bring this army? Are they following you Tathan?" she asked.

"Me?" he asked in bewilderment. "Why would an army follow me? Liselle . . . listen, I . . ." He sighed and put a comforting arm around her shoulder. "I didn't bring the army. I've been chased by people before, but never an entire army!"

"You arrived and then the warriors showed up and killed everyone. They all died, Tathan." Tears streamed down her face again. She didn't want to cry anymore, but couldn't help it.

Tears began rolling down his cheeks too. "I came from the west, through a pass which couldn't handle an army. I have . . . my own things I'm running from, but no army."

Liselle looked at the tears on his face and wiped away her own. "I'm sorry. I know they didn't follow you, but . . . I'm just so frightened and confused. . ." she trailed off.

Tathan took his cousin by the shoulders and looked into her sad eyes. "I understand. You're right to be frightened. What happened tonight is terrible and it'll be difficult to overcome. Many people wouldn't be able to."

She stared at him for a moment. "Really?" she asked incredulously. "That's . . . that's not at all comforting . . ."

"I know and I'm sorry. But I just can't tell you that everything will be alright. I visited many lands in my travels and sometimes things aren't good. There are countless evils and injustices in the world." He sighed deeply. "I wish it were different."

"Then . . . what do we do now? Do we have no hope Tathan?" she asked. "Do we just give into the evils and injustices you speak of?" Despair touched her soul. If the rest of the world were as terrible as today . . . The flowers closed their petals at the thought. Liselle wouldn't allow it, though she had no idea what to do . . .

He shrugged in embarrassment. "Well . . . I don't think we can solve all the problems of the world. I've never really tried to solve . . . any of them really."

"Really? You don't try to solve them?" She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "You tell me everything is terrible, I'm going to suffer, the world has problems and . . . what? We should all just lie down and die?" Her hands moved to her hips. "How do you keep going? Why bother living at all?" she demanded.

A sob came out of his body. "I . . . I don't . . . know." He held his arms out to his sides and stared at her helplessly.

That wasn't the answer she expected. When Tathan arrived at the house, he had seemed so confident and worldly, but now looked so helpless. Liselle reached out, drew her cousin into a hug, and let him cry on her shoulder. He needed her right now as much as she needed him.

Once Tathan was able to regain his poise, Liselle stepped back and collected her thoughts. "Alright, I've burned bodies of sheep with father and Uncle Laremy when sickness went through the flocks. Doing it to people scares me, but I'm ready."

The determination in her bearing impressed him. "Alright. I was just coming back to check on you and the stew. I think we should get the fire going right away before . . ."

"Before what?" she asked.

"Before I lose my nerve. I don't want to do this." He looked back toward where the bodies were.

"Oh . . . Why are we burning them? Aren't people supposed to be buried?" She thought for a moment, puzzled. "Why do we bury people when they die? I know that's what we're supposed to do, but I don't know why."

Tathan shrugged again. "It's different throughout the world. Some cultures put the bodies on a small boat and cast it out to sea. That's hard to do when you don't have an ocean nearby though."

"I've never been to the ocean," she said wistfully. Then she grew somber, realizing the reality of their situation once more. "I suppose I'll have the chance . . ."

He looked at her in concern. "Yes, well . . . We may at that. Some cultures and religions say it's best to bury the body to return to the earth. Others say it's best to burn the body to free the soul to the heavens. I don't know which is best."

"And the warriors? What do they believe?" she asked.

"They believe in releasing their souls to the heavens through fire." He saw her frown and start to protest. "Listen," he said, stopping her before she could speak her mind. "I *always* handle the bodies of the dead as they would have wished. I don't like to offend the gods regardless of what their followers may do to me."

She stared at him, unconvinced. She wanted the riders to be destroyed and suffer even more at this point, but she said nothing and glared at him instead.

Another deep sigh escaped his body. "Well, shall we?"

"Very well." They walked toward the bodies. As they came closer, Liselle could see the pile. There were two torches on either side of it and Tathan had added a fair amount of wood to the pile.

"I set them in an area where there were no flowers," Tathan said. "It seemed important, but I don't know why."

"Thank you," Liselle told him with a gentle touch on his arm.

When he moved to light the pyre, she stopped him. He looked at her in puzzlement. Liselle stared at the pile of wood and bodies said, "Let me do this please."

"Yes, of course. Just let me know if you need help," he said.

Liselle breathed evenly as she focused. Her fingers stretched in front of her and she crouched to brace herself while gathering in energy to create the fire.

Tathan took several steps back.

The magic gathered around her and she focused it into the fire she wanted. It was heavy and she used her mind and body to keep it controlled. Blue fire grew into a ball in front of her and she made it bigger than she had ever done before. When she couldn't build it anymore, she thrust it toward the pile.

The force of the spell dragged Liselle forward a few yards, lifted off her feet and then slammed her back to the ground. She fell to her hands and knees, still watching the spell to control it.

The fireball hit in a blazing blue explosion, sending bodies and wood into the air. Bright flames licked the bodies, engulfing all of them whether they flew a hundred paces or stayed where they were. Tathan flung his arm over his eyes. Liselle gazed in awe. A

large, but simple fire was all she had wanted. The fireball was something she had never seen before.

Fire encased bodies became stars as her vision darkened. Then she lost consciousness.

Chapter 5

Liselle woke up in the barn once more. As she sat up, the world tilted and rolled. She groaned and put her head in her hands. After a moment, she could focus enough to look around. There was light coming in from around the barn doors, indicating daytime. She took a deep breath and rose to her feet. It took a moment, but she steadied herself and walked to the door.

The sun was like a hammer hitting her head as she peered outside. Closing her eyes, she leaned against the edge of the doorframe until a shadow crossed over. The afternoon thunderstorms were gathering and a cloud had just covered the sun.

Liselle staggered toward the house, still squinting. Flowers turned toward her as she walked, concerned for her well-being. There were no sounds in the house as she moved to the dining room to find Tathan resting his head on crossed arms. Food was on the table around him.

At first, Liselle went for the food, eager to fill her belly, but she paused to look closer at Tathan. “Tathan? . . .”

His head shot up as he looked around, bleary eyed. “Huh?” he asked before focusing on Liselle. “Oh, you’re awake. You’ll be starving.” He dished up a plate for her with twice as much food as she would normally take, but it felt as though she could gobble all of it and more.

Tathan explained as she ate. “Casting a spell takes energy from around you, but it also takes energy from *you*. You need food and sleep to recover that energy. “That was an extremely powerful spell you cast, so eat as much as you can.”

“Phmmrfl!” she asked, her mouth full.

“What?” His face twisted in confusion as he tried to interpret what she said.

Food spit out everywhere as she burst into laughter at the odd look on his face. She laughed and choked as she tried to swallow, which only made her laugh harder. In a moment, he was laughing right along with her. It released some stress and agony at the loss they had experienced.

After a few minutes, the laughter subsided and Liselle took a drink of cider. “You said the spell was powerful?”

His eyebrows raised in surprise. “You don’t know? Magical fire with the ability to destroy, like the one you cast, is the domain of wizards in high towers,” he explained. Tathan considered his cousin for a moment. “I’ve never known anyone so young to cast a spell that strong. How did you learn it?”

“Umm . . . I don’t know?” she said with a shrug. Liselle *didn’t* know how she had done it and no one had ever seen her perform magic. She hadn’t felt comfortable letting her parents know.

“Did anyone teach you how to do it?” he asked intently.

“No.” A thought came to her. “Hey! You cast a spell that looked powerful. It was when those riders started attacking, right when they killed fa . . .” Tears streamed down her face again. The horrifying image of her father dying was one she had shut out.

Tathan grabbed her hands. Wiping the tears away, she squeezed her cousin’s hand and composed herself. “What was the spell you cast?”

“It wasn’t a spell,” he replied, getting up and walking to the window. “I found an item in a wizard’s tower one time, called a rune ball. They are powerful, rare and expensive.” He took a deep breath and moved back to the table. “I’ve been saving it for a time when I would need it. I needed it last night.”

“You found it?” she asked, frowning.

Tathan stared at her in guilty silence for a moment. “Well . . .”

“You stole it? . . . Tathan!”

“Not . . . exactly” he said.

Arms crossed, she glared at him from across the table.

“The wizard was already dead and he didn’t need it anymore. So it wasn’t stealing,” he said, satisfied with his own explanation.

“Really . . .” she said, suspicious. “And how did the wizard die?”

The look on his face was even guiltier. “Well . . . He sort of died from a sword through his heart . . .” Tathan looked anywhere but at her.

“Was it your sword that went through his heart?” she accused.

With a sigh, he confessed, “Yes. He had been trying to have me killed for a while, so I killed him instead.”

“Why was he trying to kill you?” she asked.

He glared at her. “You ask way too many questions, Cousin.”

She didn’t respond other than to raise her eyebrows.

Tathan ran a hand over his face. “Fine. He was trying to have me killed because I stole a few things from him.”

Her mouth opened in indignant shock as she tried to find something to say.

“Here’s the thing Liselle, I’m not a great person. I’m a rogue, a thief and a killer. I’m not a bad guy though.” Tathan waited for a response other than Liselle’s horrified stare. He finally stuttered, “I . . . I don’t know how to explain it.”

With a stony gaze, she said, “Try.” When he didn’t come up with anything she added, “You came here and killed thirty warriors. You used a magical object to destroy half of them, and then jumped around killing the rest all the while moving faster than anyone I’ve ever seen.” She spoke thoughtfully. “You tell me of how terrible the world is and how bad you are . . . I want to trust you because you’re my cousin and the only family I have, but can I? Can I trust you Tathan?”

Without pause, he answered, “Yes. No matter what else I’ve done in my life, I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

Liselle chewed on a piece of bread as they sat in silence considering each other’s words. After a bit, she asked, “So what do we do now, Tathan? Where do we go from here?”

“I take it you don’t want to stay?” he asked.

Tears welled in her eyes as she shook her head no. He nodded in response. “I didn’t think you would, and it wouldn’t be safe anyway. Those were scouts and one got away. More will come in a few days.”

Alarm filled her. “More? . . . Who are they? Why did they attack our house? I don’t understand Tathan!” The last came out as a plaintive shout.

“I know, I know. Peace, Cousin. I’ll explain.” Tathan took her hand back to squeeze it. When she was calm again, he continued, “They’re from the Empire of Iynath. Emperor Kravka has a goal of conquering the world.

“I heard of Iynath the last time we were in Rothton. It was years ago. The townsfolk were talking about the Empire taking over the world. I didn’t think the talk was serious.” Trepidation crossed her features. “Rothton . . .” Liselle trailed off.

Tathan finished the sentence for her. “. . . Has most likely been conquered. Their warriors don’t normally kill everyone like they tried here. The emperor wants people to continue to work in order to provide for his armies. I understand he’s brilliant. He’s also violent and terrible, but brilliant nonetheless.”

“So do we go to Rothton or somewhere else? You said you came from the west, right?” she asked.

Tathan picked apart a piece of bread. “We don’t want to go to Rothton or beyond. They’re running war in that direction and we would not fare well. Plus the scout will have made a report and they’ll be looking for us.”

“Alright, not Rothton, but did you come from the west or not?” she asked again.

“I *did* come from the west, but it wouldn’t be wise to go that way. There are . . . people who don’t like me,” he said. “It’s not pleasant in that direction either, for reasons I won’t get into.”

“So we can’t go to Rothton or to the west. There isn’t any other way to leave the valley unless we want to climb over mountain ranges, which I do *not* want to do.”

“We could take the road to the north.” Tathan tossed one of the pieces of bread into his mouth.

Liselle frowned. “There’s no road to the north.”

He gave a sly smile. “Well . . . It’s hard to find. The road is ancient from what little I know. It goes through the mountains to the Willden Forest. I think that’s the only way we can go if you don’t want to hike over mountain ranges.”

Her eyes narrowed as she leaned forward in her chair. “The Willden Forest is haunted and has countless other dangers. We stand a better chance of living if we go through Rothton or to the west.” Liselle sank into her chair, hugging herself. “I’m scared, Tathan. I wanted to explore the world, but it sounds like every path ends in death, not adventure.”

He tried to comfort her. “It’s true that death will be looking for us and it *will* be difficult to avoid in spite of our best efforts.”

Liselle stared at him. “That makes me feel worse, Cousin.”

Tathan squeezed her hand again. “It’s best you be prepared for death, that way when you don’t die, it’ll be a nice surprise.”

“Oh . . . wow . . . yeah. Don’t ever take up a job inspiring troops or anyone else, Tathan. You’re terrible at it,” she said, rolling her eyes. “So we’re going to die no matter what we do, is that what you’re saying?”

“No . . . Not like that.” He struggled with how to make his point. “If you’re afraid of death, it paralyzes you, seeking you out,” he explained. “Know it’s possible, do your best to live, and you stand a chance,” he finished.

Liselle stood. “You have a very dark mind, Cousin. I will expect to survive and leave it at that.” She grabbed some meat and cheese, stuffed them in between two slices of the bread, and then walked outside, ignoring the bloodstains still on the wall of the main room.

Tathan followed. “I’ve packed some clothes for myself and food for us both. I kept four of the horses,” he said, pointing at them, “figuring we can ride two and use two for packhorses, though the warriors would kill us for using their warhorses in such a manner.”

“Wouldn’t the warriors kill us anyway?” she asked.

“Exactly my point,” he grinned. “I didn’t pack anything of yours, but I’d suggest traveling light and ready for rough terrain.”

“We’re really going to do this aren’t we, Tathan?” She looked at him, steeling herself for the hard road ahead.

“Yes, Cousin. We really are,” he said giving her a hug for strength.

Chapter 6

The next morning, they stood looking down at the gravestones of their parents and Laremy. A chill breeze brushed the air and the sky was cloudy, a perfect day for standing in front of graves. Tathan knelt to place a wooden figurine upon the grave of his sister Mariah. It was something he had carved in his travels.

The graveyard had all of their ancestors in it dating back at least twenty generations, probably more. Tathan had traveled a fair amount of the world and had never seen a single family with such a graveyard. Nor had he seen one with such powerful enchantments on it. It was consecrated against evil, animals left it alone and it grew larger to accommodate new family members.

“Were the holes already dug when you brought them here, Tathan?” Liselle asked.

The question surprised him. “How did you know?”

Liselle pointed at the grave of Tathan’s father. “When your father died, and later your sister, the holes were already here. Uncle Laremy remarked at how extraordinary it was. Headstones came up after they were buried too.”

“Yeah . . . That too.” He shook his head in amazement. “I drew my sword thinking it was zombies the first time.” He chuckled at his foolishness. “This place, the house, this graveyard, all of it is magical. I’m sad to leave it.”

“As am I, but I feel a need to leave now. Everything is packed and I want to be done with it. I don’t want to be sad here anymore.” She looked at him, eager to get away.

“You want to be sad somewhere else then?” he asked jokingly. Tathan felt terrible when the tears welled up in her eyes. She was going to be miserable for a while no matter where they were, but she was trying to be brave and get on with life. “I’m sorry,” he apologized. “Yes, let’s go now. The horses are ready.” He led her to them.

Earlier that morning they had released the livestock and chickens kept in the barn. Tathan would have locked the doors to the house had there been any, but there was no need for such things where thievery did not exist.

Liselle had never ridden a horse. Tathan showed her how to mount and give it basic commands with the reins and knees. The horse glared at him, but was too well trained to

cause problems. They rode two and led the others, which carried supplies. They would forage and hunt to supplement their provisions.

The flowers drooped in sorrow as they watched Liselle ride away. She turned back to them and waved as more tears ran down her cheeks. She would miss them the most.

The cousins followed the brook north until it turned off to the eastern mountains. There had been very little speech between the two as they grew accustomed to the horses. It was healing to travel in silence.

At midday, they stopped for lunch. After eating, Tathan looked at Liselle's garb. She was well prepared for the road with woolen leggings and a green tunic she had made. They were sturdier than most clothing found in shops throughout the countries he had traveled. There was also a wool lined, hooded leather jacket, which would keep her warm and protect her from rain and snow. Though it was overcast, the weather was warm enough that she kept the jacket off. A bow made by her uncle was tied to the saddle along with a quiver of arrows.

Liselle undid the ponytail in her dark, curly hair and sat down on a fallen log to braid it. She took the flower pin out of her hair. Tathan hadn't realized that it had long green strands with leaves. As Liselle re-braided, she wove the strands back into her hair, making them disappear again. The purple petals of the flower usually sat above her left ear, though he remembered it being in different places on occasion.

Tathan was worried for her. Much of the world was dangerous for young women, especially attractive ones like his cousin. Liselle was taller than most women were and had a pretty face, which would be noticed by men. Long lashes highlighted pearl grey eyes that originally seemed ready to challenge the world, but had been filled with a sad tentativeness since leaving home. As Tathan moved to check the horses, he decided that anyone who took an evil interest in her would die quickly. Tathan would not risk his cousin's safety.

As she sat braiding her hair, Liselle studied Tathan's garb, not realizing he had just done the same with her. It was dark and foreign to her eyes. The leather jacket he wore was pure black with runes down the front opening. It had no other markings or even seams. It was the jacket he had worn when fighting off the riders, yet there wasn't a drop of blood on it or even a stain.

The leggings were dark brown, made of a material she didn't recognize. Thin bands at the ankles kept them tightly wrapped. The tunic was black with brown leather sewn throughout in a way that was alien to her eyes. His black leather shoes fit his feet tightly. In fact, all of his clothing was tight. She realized he made no noise whenever he moved.

Other than that, he was tall with short, black, curly hair. His face was handsome, she supposed, or could be if he would smile occasionally. She wondered what had caused him to be so dark and jumpy.

"Tathan," she called to him. "The way you fought was unlike anything I've ever seen. Where did you learn that?"

"That's a long story, Cousin."

"I'd like to hear it. You can tell me as we ride." She finished the braid and moved toward her horse.

He helped her onto hers and then got on his own. "Alright, I'll tell you as much as I can." Once they were moving, he began. "After leaving home, I traveled west along a small trail down the mountains. While walking, I would swing a stick thinking I was some great hero." Tathan grinned wryly. "I didn't know anything of the world or how rough it was. In the first big town I came to, a group of thugs ambushed me and left me for dead in an alley. My mighty stick was useless in a fight. It lay broken next to me."

"That's terrible!" Liselle exclaimed in astonishment. "Well, obviously you didn't die. What happened then?"

"I was found by monks who took me to their monastery and healed me," he said. "I stayed with them for a year. They taught me basic self-defense and meditation, which I discovered to be a very useful tool."

Liselle shifted on the saddle to get comfortable. "So you stayed with the monks for a year. Why did you leave the monastery?"

"They wanted me to join them and become a monk." His face twisted in displeasure. "I was not going to become a monk. I didn't mind working for them while they taught me, but I didn't want to join."

"Ahh, so where did you go then?" she asked.

"I traveled to a city in the Kingdom of Swelth. It astounded me at the time, though I know now that it was small." He smiled in remembrance at his naiveté. "From there I traveled to different cities and countries. It was amazing."

"That doesn't explain where you learned the sword," she pointed out.

Tathan sighed and chewed on his lower lip while deciding what to tell her. "I picked up the basics when I was a caravan guard for a while. I had a natural talent for it."

"A caravan guard? How long did you do that?" Liselle seemed fascinated.

"For a while, but one caravan I was helping to guard was attacked. Everyone died except me. I killed a few of the attackers and the rest ran off when another caravan came along," he said with a dark look upon his face.

"Oh. It was good that the other caravan came along, yes?"

He shook his head. "It was a rival company. Their guards captured me and said they would take me to the next town to accuse me of betraying the caravan and then I'd be put to death." His jaw was set in anger at the memory.

Liselle looked at him with a worried expression. "I'm so sorry, Tathan. How did you survive that?"

"A guard I had worked with taught me how to pick locks on shackles and I was able to get away in the darkness that night." He chuckled mischievously. "I traveled to the capital city of Lasseria in the Kingdom of Deller, where I was caught trying to steal some food. While running away from guards, something hit me as I was passing an alley."

"You certainly have a knack for getting into trouble, Cousin," she said in amazement.

He grinned. "Yes. Anyway, my theft and escape had been noticed by a thief's guild. They were the ones who knocked me out. They took me into their guildhall and told me to join them. So I did."

"Tathan! You're a thief?!" she asked in disbelief. "Why would you join them?"

“Well . . . It was either I join them, or they would kill me for stealing in their territory. I decided it would be more enjoyable to live,” he said with a sad smile toward her.

Liselle considered his words. It sounded as though many things had gone wrong for him. Yet he rode next to her, still alive. His story made her think the life of an adventurer might not be quite so wonderful. “So . . . You really are a thief, Cousin?” She studied his eyes to gauge the truth of his response.

He didn’t answer right away. It was clear that he didn’t want to answer at all. He pulled his horse to a stop. “Yes. Like I said earlier; I’m a thief, a rogue and even a killer.”

She stopped her horse and frowned. “What am I supposed to do with that, Cousin?”

“Do with it? What do you mean, ‘do with it’?” Tathan was frustrated. He hadn’t wanted to talk about it. “You asked me questions. I answered them. If you don’t want to know, don’t ask!” Then he galloped away.

Liselle stared at him in shock as he rode off. Then the tears welled up once more. “No!” she yelled, not wanting to cry again. It was ineffective and the sobs racked her body as she sat on her horse, not knowing what to do.

It took a while for the tears to subside. When they did, she looked around. Tathan was nowhere to be seen. Clouds were thickening in the sky. The smell of rain soon to come was sharp. “How could he just leave me here?!” she yelled in outrage. Thunder rumbled in the distance, echoing her anger.

She gripped the reins and moved forward, slowly at first, then into a gallop. The horse she rode was small, but strong and the packhorse followed easily. Liselle leaned forward instinctively and the horses ran even faster. It felt good to ride hard with air rushing past her face and her braid thumping up and down on her back.

She slowed after a while. Her anger had subsided and she just wanted to find Tathan. Looking at the ground, she saw the hoof prints he had left. She followed the tracks, putting her jacket on and lifting the hood up over her head when it began to rain.

Tathan was waiting underneath a large stone overhang at the side of a hill. Liselle guided her horses into the large area before dismounting. He had even put a rabbit on a spit over a small fire.

Liselle listened to the rain coming down harder. Lightning brightened the sky momentarily. A few moments later, thunder rolled down from the mountains. Gusts whipped loose strands of hair about her face. She breathed in deeply as Tathan finished with the horses.

“This is a nice place to camp,” she said. There would be a great deal more to say, but it was a start.

“I found it when I was younger. It was fun to explore the valley.” He paused for a moment then said, “I’m sorry I left you. You have every right to be mad.”

“That’s good, because I *am* mad. You left me out there by myself.” The ride had given her time to calm down and handle the conversation maturely.

He stared at the fire. “I wanted to give you the opportunity to leave in a different direction should you not want to travel with a killer.”

“Don’t be condescending, Tathan! I *want* to travel with you.” She threw her arms up in exasperation. “What I *don*’t want is for you to be a killer!”

He moved his gaze to her. The expression in his eyes was solemn. “You saw how I fought those warriors. I learned to fight like that in the guild and other places. There were a few guilds in the city and they were always fighting. The one I was in was destroyed by a rival guild.”

Liselle put her hands on her hips. “You seem to get into a lot of trouble, Cousin.”

“I know, right?” he agreed with another mischievous chuckle. “I escaped the city and went to another, Dralin in the country of Altordan. It’s a crazy place of magic and wizards.” Tathan motioned for her to sit as he continued. “In Dralin, I took a few small jobs before working for a wizard as his bodyguard. Eventually I left and rambled wherever my feet took me,” he finished with a smile.

“It sounds as though you’ve had an amazing, but dangerous life, Cousin.” Liselle looked out at the rain coming down as he offered her a plate of rabbit with roots and bread. “You said you were a killer. Does that mean you kill people for fun? Do you enjoy it?” she asked.

He looked at her in shock. “Enjoy it? . . .”

“Yes. Do you kill because you like killing?” she asked.

“I . . . No. No, no, no,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t enjoy it, but I’m good at it. I do what I feel is needed.” Tathan looked at her intently. “I promise you that I do not kill for fun. I don’t *like* killing.”

“Do you like thieving?” she asked, curious. Lightning struck nearby, illuminating the camp in eerie light. She felt a drop of rain splatter into their shelter and hit the side of her face.

“I . . . well, yes.” His fingers fidgeted with his plate. “It’s challenging and fun.”

“You are odd, Cousin, but you’ve been honest with me about everything. I just don’t understand you,” she said.

“You’re my family, Liselle. The only family I have left,” he told her. “I’m being brutally honest with you, even though I know you may hate me and leave. I would rather you hate me now than find out later and hate me then.” He hung his head in dejection.

She came over and hugged him. “I don’t hate you, Cousin. We need each other right now and I’ll figure out how to deal with the rest.”

He returned the hug and they held onto each other for strength. It rained for the rest of the evening and into the night. The occasional lightning and distant thunder was oddly comforting.

Chapter 7

“Aaaggghhhh!” Tathan woke with a scream, sword swinging through the air as he jumped out of his sleeping bag. He landed on his toes, looking for danger.

Liselle jerked awake. Her sleeping roll was wrapped around her and she struggled to get out. When she did, Tathan was standing there looking sheepish. “There’s no danger Cousin. It was just a nightmare.”

“Oh. Well I’m awake now and dawn is showing. We may as well grab some food and head out.” She shot a sideways glance at him, wondering if the nightmare was about

the attack. She had woken up with a nightmare too, just without the screaming and sword waving.

Breakfast was quick and simple. As the sun rose, they mounted the horses to continue their journey in silence. Liselle had never been this far north in the valley and spent a good deal of time looking at the scenery. The rugged eastern mountains were closer, still capped with snow. Liselle loved spring. It was striking how green the grass and trees were. Brilliantly colored flowers opened and bloomed as the day went on. She smiled happily and pointed them out to Tathan.

“Hmm? Flowers? Yes. They are very nice. It’s like a rainbow barfed all over the grass,” he said. She stared at him slack-jawed as he went back to riding, lost in thought.

With a shake of her head and a chuckle at his careless disregard for beauty, she continued to look around. Green forests covered the east and west slopes up to the frost line. The mountains were lower in the north toward the Willden Forest.

They reached the edge of the forest in the middle of the afternoon, just as thunderclouds were beginning to gather. Thunderstorms every single afternoon became tedious after a while. When Tathan put on a hooded cloak to protect him from the rain, she slipped into her jacket and put its hood over her head. They turned east at the tree line and Tathan began to search intently for his path.

It was well hidden. Had someone been looking at the trees straight ahead, or traveling to the west, they would have missed it. The path opened to the side with underbrush covering the entrance. They carefully made their way through. From there, it curved to the north, going deeper and deeper into the forest.

Tall trees bordered the path, but never grew directly on it. Drizzle pattered the leaves of plants and wildflowers covering the ground along with old fallen tree trunks and moss covered rocks. The smell of moist wood was strong. A deer watched them ride by, completely unafraid. Squirrels, rabbits and various other small woodland creatures darted everywhere. Birds of all types flitted from branch to branch singing a myriad of songs.

“This is about as far as I was ever brave enough to venture,” Tathan said. “It’s an awe-inspiring forest and a little intimidating too.”

“If this is the farthest you’ve ever been, how do you know where the path goes, or that it goes anywhere?” she asked suspiciously.

“Well, I *don’t* know.” he said sheepishly. “I always had the feeling it went somewhere. It’s an instinct I suppose.”

“So we’re traveling on a path through a dangerous, possibly haunted, forest because you *think* it goes somewhere.”

He looked up the path ahead. “I know it goes somewhere. That’s not enough for most people, but I have a good feeling about this.”

Liselle rubbed her face with both hands. It wasn’t much to go on, but she didn’t have any better ideas. “Alright. It doesn’t look like we have anywhere else to go, so we’ll find out one way or another.”

He nodded his head and continued. “I don’t think it’s haunted if that’s any consolation. It’s just a big, scary forest with standard violent beasts like dragons, bears and that sort of thing. I doubt there are many ghosts.”

Liselle rolled her eyes. “Oh, that makes me feel much better. Thanks, Cousin.”

“No problem, any time, I’m here for you.” Tathan grinned when she playfully glared at him.

A pleasant clearing with a stream running through it made a nice camp for the night. Tathan took care of the horses while Liselle gathered wood to set up a fire pit. Once everything was set, she sat down on a small log and debated whether to light the damp wood with flint and tinder, or use her magic. Tathan hadn’t said much about the spells she had cast yet, so she wasn’t sure how he felt about it.

Tathan came over, made a gesture with his hand and spoke a word. Red flames swirled from his fingertips to ignite the wood. Liselle’s jaw dropped in amazement. After that, he just went back to setting up the rest of the camp as though he had done nothing out of the ordinary.

“Tathan . . .”

He turned to look at her, wondering at the tone of her voice. “Yes, Cousin?”

She stood and gestured toward the fire. “You didn’t tell me that you could do magic. And so casually too! Where did you learn it?”

“I picked it up along the way.” He took a tripod with a pot and set them over the campfire. Then he poured water in and began adding roots and vegetables. “Magic is very useful. Most people can learn a trick or two, but few have any talent.”

“I can light a fire, but it’s always blue,” she said.

“Always blue? Blue, purple, green and other colors are all magical fires and more difficult to create than regular fire.” A puzzled look crossed his face. “How did you first learn to cast a spell? I’m curious.”

The fact that Tathan knew about magic excited Liselle. “It was after I became a young woman. I could feel something in me.”

Tathan nodded. “The mind and body of a child aren’t capable of handling the forces of magic. It comes with maturity. It grows stronger as a person ages. When they get older, it begins to decline.”

“Really?! That’s why I can do more and more.” Liselle walked around and gestured as she talked. “My first time, I was trying to light a fire in the wilderness when an idea appeared in my mind. A small blue flame appeared at the tip of my fingers and moved toward the wood.” She turned to face Tathan, eyebrows furrowed. “I didn’t understand it. The next thing I knew, there was a blue fire in the pit I had made.” She bit down on her lower lip as she remembered the moment with some embarrassment. “Luckily, I could see in my mind how to extinguish it and did so before anyone found out. I was afraid someone would notice even though I was alone.”

“You said that you could see how to do it in your mind? You never had anyone tell you how?” Tathan added the meat of a large bird to the pot. He had snuck up on it and captured it with his bare hands earlier in the day.

The stew smelled wonderful, causing Liselle’s stomach to rumble in response. “It was just there. When I want to do something, I can picture what I want, and then it forms in my mind.” She sat back down on the log. “Some things are easier than others and then there are things I just can’t do or imagine no matter how hard I try.”

Tathan sat down on his bedroll near the fire. “The way I was taught is that when a person does magic, they have to focus the spell in their mind, make the necessary gestures and speak a word or phrase . . .” He looked to see how Liselle would respond to that.

Shaking her head, she said, “No. Sometimes I say a word that comes to my mind, but you don’t *have* to speak a word or gesture, though you could move your hand around to make the spell react in different ways.” She held her hand up and moved it around in front of her.

“That’s amazing,” he responded. “I’ve never even heard of such a thing before. Everyone I’ve known who could do magic, or at least the ones who could do it well, has told me that you need a gesture and a keyword to cast a spell.”

“Well, I suppose a keyword would be a good way to lock a spell . . .” she replied in thought.

“Lock a spell?” he queried.

Liselle continued moving her hand around, mesmerizing herself with it. “Yes. You could lock a spell with a keyword, so it couldn’t be cast unless someone knew that word. A gesture would make it even more secure.”

“You mean no one could ever use the spell again without the gesture and keyword.”

“Well . . .” The hand stopped moving as she considered. “That’s not really it. Someone could cast the spell, but it would be theirs, not the same one that the person who locked it did.”

“Huh?” There was a confused look on his face.

“I don’t know how to explain it, Cousin.” Liselle concentrated on the concept for a moment and then shrugged. “Nope . . . I just don’t know how to describe it.” She went back to moving her hand around in front of her eyes. “I just know you don’t *have* to say words or make gestures.”

Tathan leaned back on his elbow to look at stars forming in the darkening sky. He considered her words for a few moments before looking back at her. She was still moving her hand around in front of her face, which amused him. “You just know these things, Cousin? No one taught you?”

Liselle sat still for a moment before turning to him. “I don’t know how I know, Tathan. I just know. No one has ever taught me or told me.” Liselle nibbled on her lower lip. “Watch. . .”

Slowly her hand began to move again. Liselle leaned her head and focused on the motion. She let out a wordless breath. A small breeze ruffled her hair.

Tathan gaped as the flame grew in her hand. He watched her move it back and forth, making it dance around her fingers. Then she stood and began walking in the clearing, still making it move with her gestures.

He got up and followed. “But you’re using gestures . . .”

“Hmmm?” She was paying attention to the flame. “Oh, gestures. I’m just experimenting with them. I can make the flame move around with them.” She turned and smiled to Tathan, the flame still moving in her hand. “Thank you for letting me know about that.”

“Yeah, sure,” he said.

The flame stood still in the palm of her hand as she concentrated on it. She made it rise above their heads. Then, without making another gesture, she guided it down toward the grass in the clearing. Just as it reached the tips of the grasses, she put out both hands and quickly made gestures.

Tathan had seen many things in his life, magical and otherwise, but nothing like what happened next.

Grasses underneath the flame reached up to wrap around it. The flame brightened then began transforming. Liselle continued to move her hands as though weaving threads. Tathan watched the magical breezes that accompanied all spells gently caress her cheek and cause strands of her hair to blow forward at the sides of her face. The flame turned into a flower before his eyes and the grasses transformed into a plant with leaves to sustain it.

“Ha! The gestures help!” Liselle clapped her hands close to her chest, jumping up and down a couple of times. She laughed and pounced on him in a great big hug.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

He absentmindedly caught her, still staring at the flower she had just created. The petals looked like small, blue flames. Tathan moved over to it as she watched him, bemused. The middle of the flower was white and the leaves of the plant were thin and grass-like.

“I like plants a lot and they listen to me sometimes, especially the flowers,” Liselle explained. “I have a way with them. They make me feel good. I’ve never combined fire and plants and I don’t know how I did it there, but it . . . it feels good.” She smiled and shrugged her shoulders as he watched her, saying nothing. “You don’t hate me now do you Tathan?” she asked, worried.

“What? . . . Hate? No. No, no, no, no, no.” Moving to Liselle, he put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. “I don’t hate you at all. I’ve never seen anyone use magic as easily as you just did, nor have I seen anyone create a life with it, even life as simple as a flower.”

Liselle stepped back, angry. “Simple? Simple?!”

He stared at her, nonplussed. “Umm . . .”

“Flowers aren’t simple! They are beautiful, wonderful and vitally important to the entire world!” She crossed her arms, glaring at him defiantly. “Flowers are not simple!”

That was not the response he had expected. “Umm . . . I’m sorry,” he apologized lamely.

“Fine,” she said, biting the word. “Let’s eat and then get some rest.”

“Uhh, alright,” he agreed. They ate the stew he had prepared then went to sleep in their bedrolls after cleaning up. She didn’t say another word to him the rest of the night.

Chapter 8

Birds were cheerfully singing the next morning as the cousins awoke. Liselle came over to Tathan. “I’m sorry, Cousin. I didn’t mean to get mad at you. I get a little tired when I do magic and I *really* like flowers.”

“No . . . that’s fine. I’m not upset. I’ll take the feelings of flowers into consideration . . .” he trailed off, trying to contain a grin.

She lowered her eyebrows. “It’s fine if you laugh at me this time, but I want you to remember something.”

Tathan was suddenly nervous. “Oh?”

She leaned forward until they were face to face and said in a quiet, threatening tone, "The flowers like me back."

A part of him wanted to burst into laughter, but something in her voice made him realize the warning was serious, even a little sinister. He looked around the clearing and the flowers were all open. He could swear they were glaring at him. With a gulp, he responded, "A . . . Alright. I'll remember that."

She smiled and hugged him again. He looked over her shoulder at the flowers. They had gone back to the business of being flowers. When Liselle released him, he got the horses ready while she made breakfast. Tathan was *very* careful not to step on any flowers.

Over the next few days, the forest path turned into an ancient road leading them out of the valley into mountains. Evergreen pines mixed with hardier varieties of trees and lighter underbrush. Often, there would be a stream or river next to the road.

The scenery was some of the most beautiful Tathan had ever seen in his travels. He and Liselle would stop to look at lakes surrounded by snowcapped peaks. Wildlife teemed everywhere they turned. They saw dangerous creatures such as bears, carnivorous fairies, cougars and others. One time, a wyvern, which was a dragon-like reptilian creature with leathery wings and five barbed tails, eyed them hungrily. Tathan stood in front of Liselle with his sword drawn, but the creature turned away, looking for something not on the road.

It rained most afternoons and even snowed one day, but they were able to find decent enough shelter when it got bad. During their travels, Tathan taught Liselle what he knew about magic. It only took a week for her to learn all the various spells he had picked up from wizards and tricksters in his travels. Not only did she learn them, but she improved on most. He didn't know a large number of spells, or anything particularly powerful, but it had taken him a lot longer than a week to figure them out.

Nine days after entering the forest, the road led to a bridge over a deep canyon. It looked to be about five hundred feet long and wide enough for two wagons to cross. They stopped the horses and dismounted. Intricate stonework figures held up the waist-high side rail.

"Who do you think built this bridge Tathan?" Liselle asked. "It seems very solid."

Tathan squatted to look closer at the figures at the side. "It's also ancient and I have no idea who built it. There must be preservation spells on it for it to be in such good condition . . . Ahh, yes. There are runes at the base of each figure." He pointed as she looked over his shoulder.

"Oh, that's neat," she said. "I don't understand the runes. They don't make sense to me, even though you told me the theory behind them the other night." She looked closer at the figures. "They're worn, but you can still see the basic form of their faces. It looks like they were wearing nice clothing."

“Really?” he said, turning toward her. “Really? We find a bridge that was made centuries ago and you notice the clothing on the figures holding up the rail?” he asked in amazement. “Yegods. That’s just ridiculous.” He stood and walked to the middle of the bridge, leaning over the railing. Liselle stuck her tongue out at his back. She went to the other railing and peered over the edge.

A fast-flowing river cut through the bottom of the sheer canyon. The forest around them was quiet in the warm afternoon, making it possible to hear the sound of water traveling over rocks.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it Cousin?” Liselle had come up behind him again. When he turned to look at her, she was smiling.

“Yes. I think this bridge is at least hundreds of years old if not thousands,” Tathan said.

“Thousands of years? Wow, that’s amazing. Even with magic, I can’t believe it’s lasted that long.”

Tathan was thoughtful. “It *is* unusual. The road is enchanted. We’ve faced no danger on it.”

Liselle looked at the road on both sides of the bridge. “I never considered it, but we have been safe. I wonder where it leads to.”

“I’m not sure, but we’ll definitely find out,” he said, smiling.

For two more days, they traveled along the forested road. He told her about some of his travels while she told him about her life in the valley. She also told him of her parents, crying a few times from the sorrow of losing them. The conversations began a healing process for both.

Their first glimpse of the city was when they came around a bend in the road one morning. The roofs of the buildings could be seen near the top of the next pass. They paused and readied their weapons. Liselle strung her bow and readied the quiver of arrows her Uncle Laremy had made. She could think about him without crying by that point, though her heart still ached.

Tathan loosened his sword in its scabbard. He realized it was the first time he had readied it since entering the forest. The thought caused him to pause. For some reason, he wasn’t jumping at imaginary dangers. Perhaps the enchantments on the road had something to do with it.

As they rode up, it became obvious that the city was abandoned. The forest encroached upon the edges, but something seemed to be preventing nature from taking over completely. Birds and small wildlife scurried about. Forest scents gave way to dusty cobblestone. The horses plodded through the long abandoned streets as their riders looked back and forth at the decayed buildings.

“Do you think the bridge was built by whoever lived in this city, Tathan?” Liselle’s voice was filled with awe as she looked at the ruins.

He nodded. “Definitely. The stonework is the same and it looks to be as old as the bridge. It’s extraordinary that there’s any cobble left.”

“But the bridge was still in good condition. These buildings are all crumbling and collapsing,” she said, gesturing at a building with only two walls remaining. The rest was rubble.

“The bridge had runes protecting it from wear and tear. These buildings were very well made to have withstood for so long, but wouldn’t have been magically protected,” he explained.

“Why not?” she asked.

“It takes a lot to cast runes to protect a structure,” he said. “They have to be inscribed, then the spells cast and then all of the runes tuned to each other. There’s probably a border of runes that keep the forest from finishing off the city.”

“I see. Would it be more important for a bridge to last longer than a city?” Liselle asked.

Tathan looked down a side road. “Yes. A bridge doesn’t have people cleaning and taking care of it all the time. Plus it’s harder to cope with a broken bridge than a broken building.”

“Wow. I never even considered that.” She looked around some more. “I wish I could meet the people who lived here. Should we explore?” she suggested hopefully.

“Sure, we can do that,” he agreed. “But we must be careful when entering buildings. Wild animals may have moved in. We can set up camp in that building over there.” He pointed out a moderate-sized building. It had a dome with a few holes, but looked largely intact.

“That looks good to me,” she agreed.

The large doorway had probably held double doors at one time, but there was no trace of them now. Inside, it was dusty and empty with no furniture to give any clue as to what the building had been used for. They set up the horses in the near corner and put their camp in the back where the walls and domed ceiling were still intact. It would protect them from weather should they wish to stay for any length of time.

After taking care of the horses and camp, Liselle asked, “Shall we explore now?”

A gravelly, tenor voice came from the doorway. “Oh yes, I do love exploring!” Tathan and Liselle spun in alarm.

In the doorway was a thin man. His hair was metallic purple and his skin was cream-color, tinged with more purple. The leggings and vest he wore were matching purple with gold filigree. His feet were bare as was his chest underneath the unclasped vest.

It was immediately clear that he was not human. His eyes were liquid-silver with no pupils or irises. He had a wide grin with sharp, intimidating teeth.

But out of all that was odd about this creature, the fact that he was hopping from one foot to the other in a funny sort of dance was the strangest. It was a happy dance. He would hop twice on one foot, then twice on the other foot, and then he would do a spin, moving his shoulders up and down in time with some unheard music.

Tathan had his sword out and was standing in front of Liselle to protect her. “Who and *what* are you, Stranger?”

“Me? I am . . . Vevin!” he exclaimed, still doing his happy dance. “Yes! Vevin is my name. Vevin is a good name, no?” he asked hopefully.

While Tathan stood there staring in disbelief, Liselle moved out from behind him and gave the newcomer a big smile. “Vevin is an excellent name. I like it.” She casually waved her hand in her cousin’s direction as Tathan crouched, ready to attack. “Don’t mind Tathan. He’s a bit jumpy and we didn’t expect to find anyone way out here in the middle of the forest.”

“Yay! I like you.” Vevin waved at Tathan. “Hi Tathan!” Still doing his dance, he spoke to Liselle, “You’re nice. And pretty! I didn’t expect anyone out here either!” Vevin added foot slides to his dance.

“Thank you, Vevin,” Liselle said. “You seem like a very happy person.”

Vevin leaned forward with an intense look. “No! I’m not happy at all. He stole my home and hurt me bad!” Vevin turned his head and showed them a long, deep gash along the left side of his face from the bottom of his chin to the top of his head. It looked as though it was beginning to heal, but it was a very serious wound.

“Oh, Vevin. Who did that to you?” Liselle moved forward with a hand raised to touch it. It made Tathan nervous.

Vevin shrank back. “Him! He’s bad and he stole my home and I can’t say his name or he might find me and kill me!” The dance changed to a frightened shuffle. Vevin hunched his shoulders together and began moving back and forth like a snake.

Liselle made calming gestures. “It’s alright, Vevin. We won’t say his name. He’s very bad if he did that to you and stole your home.”

“Yes! Very bad!” Vevin went back to doing the original happy dance. A wide, toothsome smile filled his face, marred by the wound. “Do we get to go explore now?”

Liselle could tell that there was something off about this person. She wondered if perhaps the wound on the side of his head had damaged his mind. “Yes, Vevin. We can go explore now.” She turned to her cousin. “Can’t we Tathan?”

Tathan said nothing, just continued to crouch with his sword at the ready.

Liselle walked to Vevin. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll follow. Let’s go explore.” She linked her arm in Vevin’s elbow.

Vevin went eagerly with Liselle, occasionally doing a little hop or dance. “Let’s investigate the building with the cave first! Maybe I can use that as my new home!” Vevin pointed at a building to the east, the largest structure standing.

It was three floors tall, with remains of a domed roof. The cream-colored, stone walls of the upper floor were collapsing. “That looks like a good place to start,” Liselle agreed. It was early afternoon, giving them a fair amount of time to explore.

Tathan followed them, studying the stranger. His black blade seemed to suck light out of the air. It made Liselle shiver. Turning back to Vevin, she asked, “You said you were looking for a new home?”

“Oh yes! I need a new home. He took my old home, so I need a new home,” Vevin said.

Liselle liked his voice. It resonated through her bones. His scent was earthy, with a hint of lightning. “Wouldn’t you rather have a home where there were more people, Vevin?”

“No. I like quiet places. I need someplace to keep treasure,” he explained.

“Treasure?” Liselle asked.

“He took my treasure too. I didn’t have much, but he took it.” Vevin’s dance moved back to the darker shuffle. “He took everything and hurt me. I need a new home.”

“Alright, so we need to get you a new home. That way you have someplace to put your treasure,” she summed it up. “Are you going to get it back from the person who took it from you?”

Vevin shrank and the liquid-silver of his eyes rippled in what Liselle guessed was fear. “No! He’s not a person. He’s dangerous and I’m not going to try to get my treasure back.” Abruptly, he went back to the happy dance as the cousins stared at him. “I’m going to get new treasure as soon as I find a home to put it in.” Vevin was avoiding the subject of whatever hurt him.

“Well, that sounds like an excellent plan.” Liselle began walking toward the building again as Vevin did his little dance. When he saw her walking, he took a single leap to her side, bigger than any normal person could have made. Liselle looked back at Tathan to see that his eyes were wide once more.

A moment later, they reached the ruin. Its architecture was that of a church. Remains of statues lining the walls had the trappings of priestly orders. Crumbling remnants of fountains lined either side of the walkway to the main doors. It must have been a magnificent sight to behold once upon a time.

Vevin peered into the dark beyond the large doorway. “Oh, it’s nice in there! I like it a lot. I can see there are rooms and even caves underneath. We should definitely explore them!”

“Rooms and caves underneath?” Liselle couldn’t see much beyond the doorway.

“Oh yes. There’s dormant magic down there and some sort of being. It should be interesting,” he said, smiling as he headed into the building.

“Some sort of being?” she asked. When he didn’t respond, she followed him into the building.

[Chapter 9](#)

Tathan watched them walk into the building. In all his travels, he had never seen anything like Vevin. Vevin’s leap to Liselle was further than Tathan had ever seen anyone jump. Whatever the creature was, it was not human. Liselle seemed to trust it, but she was naïve. It could be leading them into a trap.

The way the creature acted was odd too. It kept dancing while talking about someone who had hurt it before stealing its home and treasure. The wound on the side of its face looked severe. Tathan had seen lesser wounds that had killed people. All of it added up to trouble in Tathan’s eyes.

The worst part was that he had a sneaking suspicion he wouldn’t be able to overcome the creature should it become violent. Vevin was more dangerous than almost anything Tathan had come across, though he couldn’t tell exactly how.

He followed them into the vacant building, ducking along the wall after entering the doorway. A small blue flame appeared from Liselle’s hand. She lifted it into the air and let it float above them as they looked around the room. Tathan sighed. Announcing they were there by tossing a light up in the air was not the way he did things. He continued moving along the walls, ready to flank anything that might attack.

It was a large room with chambers on the sides. Cracks lined the ceiling and walls. A fallen altar, broken into five pieces, stood at the end of the rubble-strewn aisle. The remains of a fallen statue rested behind the altar. Two crumbling fountains, similar to the ones outside, were on either side of the aisle. At one time, it would have been beautiful.

“Which way should we go?” Liselle asked Vevin. They had their arms linked and the creature was looking at her with that sharp grin.

“Oh my! Which way indeed? This is so much fun. Let’s find a way down!” Vevin pointed to large stairs on either side of the room. The staircase on the left was caved in. However, the stairs on the right side still looked to be intact.

Liselle began walking to those. “Alright, down it is. Let’s see what we can find.”

“Oh yes. I hope we find the caves underneath!” Vevin said with another hop. “We need to remember to look for someplace to put treasure too.”

“We’ll definitely look for someplace to put treasure.” Liselle agreed.

“Oh wonderful! You are my favorite person ever!” Vevin stopped for a moment. “I’ve never met a person before. You’re my first person ever! Yay!”

Liselle laughed, “Yay! That’s wonderful. You’re my favorite . . .” she trailed off, hoping he would finish the sentence. He just stared at her with a toothy smile. “. . . Vevin. You’re my favorite Vevin,” she finished.

He added a skip to the dance. “Oh, that’s so wonderful. I always wanted to be someone’s favorite Vevin!”

Tathan shook his head at the exchange. There was something seriously wrong with the creature. He continued to scan the room looking for danger as he followed them to the stairs. “Let me go down first.”

Liselle’s ghostly flame illuminated the landing as Tathan entered the gloom below. He knew appearances didn’t always matter when exploring, but it truly felt abandoned.

The level below had hallways and rooms, which appeared as though they might be quarters for the long-gone priests. Tathan used a gesture and a word to light his own yellow flame.

Vevin looked at Tathan’s flame as he came downstairs. “Why do you light flames? Are you cold?”

“We need them to see by, not for warmth,” Liselle said.

“Oh! You can’t see in the dark? How extraordinary.” Vevin flicked his hand into the air and tossed a purple flame to go with the blue and yellow. “There you are. That should help.” Liselle had cast her blue flame easier than Tathan had ever seen anyone cast a flame spell, but the ease with which Vevin had casually flicked his purple flame made Liselle’s casting seem labored.

“That’s wonderful, Vevin! Thank you.” Liselle gave him a hug, which made him very happy.

Tathan moved through the hallways, peering into each doorway. Liselle and Vevin exchanged glances, shrugging at his behavior. Tathan saw the exchange and didn’t care. He had stayed alive this long for a reason.

They came to a large room that might have functioned as a dining room. The remains of a barren kitchen nearby lent credence to the belief. A large spider the height of Tathan’s knees skittered away at their flames. Tathan looked around to make sure there wasn’t a nest.

“There’s nothing interesting here. Let’s go further down,” Vevin said. Tathan turned to look at him and discovered the creature was doing another dance. Vevin hopped on one foot twice while his other leg was stretched to the side. Then he hopped on the other foot, while stretching the original leg out to the side. Then he would do a shuffle each way. The entire time, Vevin had a wide grin on his face.

“I don’t trust you, Vevin, if that’s even your name. I think you’re leading us into a trap,” Tathan said.

Vevin stopped dancing. With a hurt look, the creature hung his head.

“Tathan!” Liselle scolded. “I know you jump at shadows, but I’m telling you that he’s not leading us into a trap!”

“How do you know that, Cousin? You’ve never been out of the Valley,” Tathan accused. “People will trick you, betray you and lead you into traps all the time!”

Tathan crouched with sword ready in his hand and teeth bared. He saw them both step back with fear in their eyes. Vevin’s eyes rippled as they had when talking about the monster that had hurt him.

It wasn’t Tathan’s intention to frighten his cousin and he was surprised at what seemed like genuine fear from the creature. “How can you be so sure, Liselle?”

There were tears welling in her eyes. “I don’t know how, Cousin, but I know.” Taking a deep breath to gain control of her emotions, she wiped her eyes. “I don’t know what terrible things have happened to you. Perhaps someday you’ll tell me of your travels, but you can’t keep pointing your sword at me.” She stepped forward and pushed his sword aside with fingertips. Then she reached out and wrapped her arms around his shoulders in a hug.

He stood there in shock for a moment. When she continued to hold onto him, he broke down and began to cry on her shoulder. He didn’t even know why he was crying. It could have been the death of his family, or the stress of his journeys and all of the times he had been afraid in his past.

After a minute, they separated. “I’m sorry, Cousin.” Tathan wiped his eyes with a sleeve. He looked at the creature. “I don’t trust you, Vevin, but I’ll give you a fair chance. Agreed?”

“Of course Tathan! I don’t know why you don’t trust me, but I promise I won’t betray you,” the creature reassured him with a sharp-toothed smile.

Tathan nodded. “Let’s go explore the lower levels.”

The next level appeared to be empty storage rooms. They ignored them, going down to the level below. It looked to be a cave that had been used as more storage. There were smaller caves off to the sides, but they led nowhere.

Liselle turned to Vevin. “There doesn’t seem to be anything further down. Are you sure there was magic and some sort of creature down here?”

He pointed at the eastern wall. “Oh yes! We just need to go through the hallway to the stairs.”

She looked in that direction. “What hallway? I don’t see anything.”

“The one behind the wall. It leads to a lower level,” Vevin said matter-of-factly.

“Oh. You can see through walls?” Liselle asked.

“Of course! Can’t you?” Vevin seemed surprised that anyone couldn’t.

Tathan rolled his eyes and walked over to the secret door he discovered in his searching. It bothered him that the creature knew exactly where to go next. Tathan’s

instincts were yelling at him to get away, but for some reason he couldn't understand, those same instincts were telling him that trusting his cousin was more important even if she might be wrong.

"There's a secret door here," he explained to them. "It's well concealed but basic. He pulled a torch bracket and watched as a section of stone began moving away from the wall. "See? There it is."

Then the stone stuck. Tathan sighed. "Centuries-old secret doors don't always work of course." He walked over to the door and tried to move it enough to be able to get through. It wouldn't budge at all. "I don't know how we're going to get through."

Vevin placed his hands at the edge of the stone. He used his leg to leverage against the wall, pushing just as Tathan began to say, "It's jammed . . ."

The stone moved the rest of the way with a loud scraping sound. Vevin turned to them, pleased with himself. "If you use a little leverage, you can pry things open."

"Uh huh," Tathan agreed dubiously. He walked past Vevin into the secret entrance. Moving that stone had taken more than leverage. Upon entering the hallway, Tathan felt a warm, moist draft coming from nearby stairs. "There's a warm draft coming from below and it's humid."

"Oh that's wonderful!" Vevin exclaimed. "I like warm and humid."

"Good for you," Tathan responded dryly. "Let's take a look then."

The dark stairway went down more than a hundred steps. There was moisture and lime deposits on the rock walls and stairs. He turned back to caution the others to be careful. When he did so, he noticed that Vevin's silver eyes were glowing in the dim light of the flames. It was an eerie sight, which unnerved Tathan a little more. "Uhh . . . watch your footing. It's slick."

At the bottom of the stairs was a small chamber with arched steel doors set in the west wall. Whatever was on the other side would be just underneath the storage rooms they had come from. Tathan studied the doors. Moisture had caused them to become rust covered. In a few places, rust had created holes. The door handles were covered with rust as well.

"Are they locked, Tathan?" Liselle asked.

He crouched down in front of the locks, looking for any sign of a trap. By the amount of rust on the doors, even if there were a trap it wouldn't be functional. He reached out and tried to open them, but they wouldn't budge.

"It looks like they are. The locks inside are most likely rusted as well. It doesn't look good," he admitted.

"I could give it a try . . ." Vevin offered.

"No, let me take care of this. I've dealt with rusty locks before," Tathan said, pulling a leather toolkit out of his vest. He unrolled it on the ground in front of the door. There were a number of small metal devices in it. Then he pulled a small flask out of another pocket. "Oil," he explained as he dipped two of the metal devices into it. He worked the oil-covered tools into one of the locks. A moment later, there was a click and tumble within the door.

"Well, I had to use a little more force than usual, but it was much easier than I expected," Tathan said, putting the metal devices back.

"Oh my! I will have to remember not to let you near my treasure, Tathan!" Vevin said.

Tathan chuckled as he rolled up his toolkit to put it and the oil back in his vest. He braced his feet and took hold of the handle. The door budged, but rusted hinges let out a tortured cry.

“Ahh, I’ll make sure the hinges to my treasure are rusty so that I hear you coming,” Vevin chuckled, winking at Tathan in return. Liselle giggled at the exchange.

Tathan glared playfully at them, but inside he was seething at such a stupid mistake. He pulled the oil back out and put a little bit on the hinges. They still made a lot more noise than he wanted, but it wasn’t quite as tortured.

Tathan extinguished his flame to avoid giving away his position, the other two would be enough. The wall was rough and damp as he moved inside. From ahead, Tathan could hear running water like that of a stream. He waited in silence for a moment. There was no feeling of danger, so he motioned the others inside. “I can’t see far into the cave,” he whispered.

“There isn’t any danger in this cave. It’s the cave below it which has something in it,” Vevin whispered back. “It looks like there’s just an altar and a stream here.” His eyes were glowing brightly now that it was almost completely dark. At some point, he had extinguished his flame as well. Liselle’s blue flame was the last.

“You *can* see in the dark then?” Tathan asked.

“Of course! Can’t you?” Vevin didn’t even try to whisper that time.

Tathan sighed. “No. I can’t see in the dark.”

“Oh! Here, let me help.” Vevin’s purple flame appeared again, splitting into twenty that settled along the ceiling of the cave. They illuminated everything with an eerie purple light. “There you are!” Vevin did a little dance.

Tathan sighed and looked around. It was a natural cave, but eight stone buttresses braced the ceiling to keep the building above from falling. The air was thick with moisture and he could smell the moss growing on the walls. A stream ran along the southwestern side, disappearing into the floor. In the middle of the cave was the altar Vevin had mentioned.

“Oh! I do like it!” This time Vevin jumped into the air and did a few somersaults interspersed with the dancing. “I could make this home if it has a bigger entrance.” Then he stopped. “We need to see what’s below us first. Shall we?” he asked them hopefully.

Liselle walked toward him. “You *want* to live in a cave, Vevin?”

“Oh yes! It’s a wonderful cave,” he exclaimed. “It’s warm and humid and there’s a stream running through it too. We just need a big entrance and it will be perfect.”

Tathan walked toward the altar. “Why do you need a big entrance Vevin?”

“Well, you always need a big entrance if you’re going to live in a cave.” Vevin rolled his eyes, making a wave run around the liquid-silver.

Tathan sighed again. There was something on the altar. He examined the base for traps or hidden danger. Then he stepped on the moss covered step leading up to it and discovered bones.

“A skeleton?” Liselle asked, coming up behind him. “I’ve never seen one before. Is it dangerous?”

“Only if it’s moving and trying to kill you,” Tathan said in all seriousness. “This one seems to be truly dead though.” It wasn’t a formed skeleton, so much as assorted bones lying on the altar. There may have been clothing or other things on it at one time, but if so, they had decayed.

“There’s a ring on one of the fingers.” Liselle pointed at a finger bone in the middle of the ribs.

When she reached for it, Tathan put a hand out to stop her. “If it’s been here this long when all else has decayed, then it’s probably magical, perhaps even cursed.”

“It’s not cursed,” Vevin said as he walked past, casting an uninterested glance at the bones.

Tathan folded his arms. “How do you know that?”

“Because it’s not cursed,” he said with a shrug that implied Tathan was being silly. Then he went over to examine the stream.

“We probably shouldn’t touch it anyway.” Liselle gestured to the body and altar. “It was obviously an important person. The Gods might become upset if we disturb it.”

When Tathan didn’t answer, she turned to see him staring at her.

“You’re one of those.” he said.

“One of what?” she responded in confusion.

“One of those ‘Don’t take things off of dead bodies because it’s bad and might be wrong’ type of people,” he said.

“What?!” Liselle held her arms out in exasperation. “You said when we burned the warriors that we should respect other people’s customs. Shouldn’t we respect the skeleton’s customs?” she challenged, pointing at the body.

“That’s different.” Tathan held a finger up in the air. “I’m sure customs were observed when it was placed there, so that’s all taken care of. Now there’s just a skeleton with a valuable ring sitting in an abandoned cave in an abandoned city, so it’s acceptable to procure it,” he finished with a decisive nod.

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t like it if someone took something off of my parent’s bodies.” She brushed that memory aside. “Vevin!” Vevin took an unnatural leap back to the altar. Liselle asked, “Is it acceptable for us to take the ring, or is it sacrilege?”

Vevin reached out and slid the ring off the finger bone, which cracked and fell to pieces at the movement. He handed the ring to her. “The bones don’t need it. It would be sacrilege for it never to be used again.”

She looked at the ring in her hand, then at the bones, and then at Tathan. “Well, there you go. It’s not sacrilege.” Liselle put it on the ring finger of her right hand.

Tathan gasped and reached out to stop her, but was too late. He stood there waiting to see what would happen, eyes wide.

Liselle looked down at the ring. It was beautiful. There was a round diamond set into the top with a ruby on each side. The ring itself was gold with interwoven designs.

Nothing happened. She didn’t turn inside out or start speaking in tongues. The ring fit her perfectly, which was normal since magical rings tended to fit their wearer automatically.

“Can you take it off?” Tathan asked.

She took the ring off then put it back on. “Yes. I don’t feel any different when it’s on. I think it’s safe.”

He took her hand and studied the ring. “I think the designs are some sort of rune, unlike anything I’ve ever seen before.”

“You seem to be seeing a lot of things you’ve never seen before, Cousin,” she said with a teasing smile.

“Yes, I suppose so,” he agreed with a chuckle. “Promise me that you’ll be more careful when dealing with magic or unknown things, Liselle.”

“I will, Tathan. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” He smiled to let her know he wasn’t angry. “Also, be careful not to show that in civilization. It’s worth a great deal of money, not just because of the magic, but the gold and gems as well.”

“Oh, alright. I will.” She looked down at it with new admiration.

“Aha! I found the way down, and it’s very big!” Vevin exclaimed from the north of the cave. He was, of course, dancing in excitement.

Chapter 10

The ramp that curved down into darkness was large enough for a wagon. The rock walls were natural with reinforcements similar to the cave.

Vevin did a spin. “I get to go first this time. It is my home after all!”

“Alright. You go first,” Tathan agreed.

Vevin waved for the lights to follow him into the tunnel. It took a lot longer than they expected to reach the bottom where they found a pair of steel doors lying on the ground in rusty pieces. Vevin jumped over them and the cousins followed.

The group walked into a larger cave. Vevin’s purple flames moved to the ceiling, casting their illumination over the new area. The cave was much bigger than the previous one and there was a design covering the entire floor.

“Oh my! This is extraordinary!” Vevin traced the lines through the air with his finger. “This is a rune cut into the floor. The magic is gone from it, but it must have been very powerful at one time.”

“That *is* a rune isn’t it?” Tathan said in amazement.

“Tathan, Vevin.” Liselle pointed across the cave. “There’s someone standing on the other side, I think.” The figure’s arms rested on the crossbars of an enormous sword, which was point down against the stone floor.

Vevin waved. “Hello there!”

Tathan buried his face in his hands. His companions were terrible at being stealthy.

Liselle put a hand on Vevin’s arm. “I don’t think that person is going to be friendly to us, Vevin. The black armor he’s wearing looks scary.”

There was disappointment on Vevin’s face. “Oh really? You don’t think he’s going to take my new home and hurt me do you?”

“I don’t know Vevin. This might be *his* home,” Liselle said. “We can go ask him, but let’s be really careful, alright?”

Tathan dared to lift his face out of his hands.

“Alright.” Vevin brightened. “We’ll go talk to him. Yes! That’s what we’ll do.” He waved at the figure. “Hello! We’re coming over to talk to you now!”

Tathan replanted his face in his hands.

Liselle giggled at both of them and began to walk across the floor toward the mysterious figure. Tathan and Vevin protectively moved to either side.

As they walked, Liselle studied the area around the figure. There were ornate doors just behind him -she had decided the figure was a him because women didn’t usually stand around in metal armor holding big swords. The doors showed no signs of rust,

indicating that they were reinforced with magic. Runes similar to the ones in the floor were etched in filigree over their face. Dim white globes hung from the wall on either side, casting minimal light.

When they were within twenty paces of the tall figure, it put up a hand. A hollow voice echoed throughout the cave. "Hold, figments."

They stopped as commanded. Vevin's flames illuminated nearly-invisible runes running throughout the plate armor. More runes, mixed with etchings of flames, ran down the center of the shining sword. A golden clasp at the base of his neck attached to a rich red cloak flowing down his back. His visor was down and they could see nothing of the figure inside.

"Why did you call us figments, Sir Knight?" Liselle asked courteously. She didn't know what else to say.

The knight put his hand back on the thick crossbar. The sword was tall as the knight from the bottom of the steel-threaded hilt to the tip of the blade.

"You are obviously figments," the knight responded. "No one has been here in one millennium plus six centuries," A great sigh escaped the armor. His chest heaved with the breath. "It's alright. I'm used to it. I must say, you are a very pretty figment, Milady."

Liselle smiled and blushed. "Well, thank you Sir Knight. It's nice to meet someone so polite."

Vevin nodded. "Oh yes! Sayyy . . . I'd like to make this my home. It would be very polite of you not to object," he suggested hopefully to the knight.

The knight looked at Vevin. Then he looked back at Liselle. Lastly, he turned toward Tathan who had his sword at the ready and was in another crouch. "You are very odd figments, not at all like the usual ones created by my mad imagination."

"I didn't even realize that I was a figment until you told me!" replied Vevin. "I feel quite real, I must say."

"I apologize, Sir Knight, but we are real, not figments," Liselle said.

"Are you certain, Milady?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir Knight. I'm certain. Tathan and I come from a valley twelve days south of here. We met Vevin in this city."

"I don't know that I'm not a figment in all honesty," Vevin said, turning to Liselle. He didn't see Tathan roll his eyes.

"You are *not* figments after all!" the knight exclaimed. "I must say my warning then!" He cleared his throat. "Ahem. Hear ye, hear ye, you who would come to steal the Crown of Morhain! You must know that I, Sir Danth Wazmordin, shall dutifully guard the doors to the vault 'til death and beyond!"

"Oh wonderful! That's a vault behind you! What good news. I need a vault for my home," Vevin said enthusiastically.

Sir Danth Wazmordin lifted his sword and settled it onto his shoulder. "I do not like this talk of you making a home here, Sir."

"What if we're not here to steal the crown, Sir Danth?" Liselle asked.

The knight paused for a moment as if the thought had not occurred to him. "Well of course you're here to steal the crown. Why else would you be here, Milady?"

"Tathan and I are exploring and Vevin is searching for a new home since his old one was stolen along with all of his treasure," she explained.

“Stolen?! What a travesty,” the knight sympathized.

“And he hurt me!” Vevin exclaimed, turning so that Sir Danth could see the wound.

“Terrible! It is not at all right!” Sir Danth agreed. “Well, I’ll let you live here then, but you cannot have the vault. I have sworn to guard the doors.”

“We won’t steal the crown, Sir Knight,” Tathan said. “We’re sorry to bother you and will leave now.”

“What?! Leave?!” Sir Danth asked with alarm in his voice. “You can’t leave! Please don’t leave! Please!” He got down on his knees.

The group stared at the sudden transformation in stunned disbelief.

“I’ve been here for one and a half millennium! Do you know how long that is? Not one person has come to steal the crown!” Strangled sobs came from inside the helm. “My soul is bound to the armor and I can’t escape unless it is destroyed, but it’s magical and will most likely exist until the end of eternity! Please don’t leave me! I can’t stand it anymore.” At that point, Sir Danth Wazmordin began banging his head against the floor.

“Oh, Sir Danth!” Liselle exclaimed. She knelt down in front of him and stopped him. Then she wrapped him up in a big hug. The sobbing from inside the helmet continued.

Vevin and Tathan looked at each other and shrugged.

Liselle stood, drawing Sir Danth with her. Then she turned to Tathan. “We must help him, Cousin.”

“Umm, alright . . . How are we going to do that?”

“I don’t know. Come up with something, please!” she demanded.

He threw his arms up in exasperation. “Really? It’s your idea to help, why can’t you come up with something?”

Liselle folded her arms and tapped her foot while narrowing her eyes dangerously.

Tathan turned to Vevin. “Do you have any ideas?”

Vevin shook his head no and held his arms out helplessly.

Tathan sighed and paced for a moment. He turned to the knight. “You said you swore an oath to guard the doors to the vault, which holds the Crown of Morhain, right?”

Sir Danth gave a single nod. “That is correct. I don’t care anymore if that helps.”

That threw Tathan off. “You don’t care?”

“Exactly. At this point, you can go in and steal the Crown of Morhain. I can’t live in this cave any longer, never seeing the light of day, never having anyone to talk to.”

There was a pleading tone in Sir Danth’s voice. “I don’t care if you take the crown.

Nothing is worth this eternity of seclusion that I have faced.”

“What about your oath?” Tathan asked.

The knight folded his arms. “Have you ever kept an oath for one millennium plus six centuries?” The massive sword was put away in a sheath on his back with the hilt sticking over his shoulder.

“No,” Tathan admitted. He hadn’t noticed the knight put the sword away, a detail he wouldn’t have normally missed. It bothered him.

“When you have, you will be more than welcome to judge me,” Sir Danth suggested.

“What’s so special about the crown?” Vevin asked. “Is it powerful and magical?”

“Not at all,” the knight said. “It is just a symbol of the Kingdom of Morhain. The crown is made of gold, encrusted with valuable gems, but has no magic, though there are other items in the vault that are powerful.”

Vevin seemed disappointed. “No magic? Why in the world would a knight be made to guard it for a millennium if it isn’t magic?” He scratched his head in confusion.

“A millennium and six centuries,” Sir Danth corrected. “It was a crown made for the last king of Morhain. It is a symbol of the kingdom,” the knight explained. “The king insisted it be guarded. I took the oath when no one else wanted it.”

“Will there be any consequences if you break the oath?” Tathan asked. “Will you die, be cursed, or something?”

“No.”

“No? Isn’t there usually some sort of consequence for breaking an oath?” Tathan asked again.

“I am a knight. When I give an oath, it is understood that I will not break it. There is no curse upon me if I do. I will lose honor for breaking it though.” Sir Danth’s shoulders slumped. “I have always been an honorable man. But sixteen hundred years of guarding an item of wealth for vanity’s sake is not a matter of honor.” The knight straightened, holding a finger up as he thought. “I will let you in the doors myself. That will solve the problem.” He walked over to the doors and said a few words that made the filigree glow. The doors opened toward them.

“There you are. Take the Crown of Morhain and anything else you like. I don’t care anymore.” Sir Danth turned to Liselle. “I’m afraid I’ve been a bad knight, Milady. I hope you won’t be too disappointed. I’d invite you to spank me, but you’d hurt your pretty little hand on my armor.”

Liselle blushed and giggled as Vevin and Tathan stared at the knight in shock. “I certainly wouldn’t want to hurt my hand, Sir Danth.” Liselle put a hand on his plated arm and walked toward the vault with him. “Shall we go steal a crown, my brave Knight?”

[Chapter 11](#)

Just when Tathan thought things couldn’t possibly get odder, something new would throw him for a loop. A millennium and six centuries would be enough to make Tathan break an oath. He knew that for a fact. The knights of today were a joke. Most were controlled by kings or priests and were used for political purposes, not purposes of honor.

There was a cool draft coming from the vault, which struck Tathan as unusual because vaults were shut off from any source of air. Liselle and her knight and Tathan discovered the source of the draft.

A rough tunnel tall enough for a man to walk through reached from the forest to the back of the vault. Not an ounce of treasure was left, unless one considered the nuts and harvests of forest rodents to be treasure.

“Powerful wards and runes protect those doors,” Sir Danth said, his voice filled with raw irony. “And only fifty paces of simple rock protected the back wall of the vault.” He began to laugh. It was a hollow, haunted laugh. “They even took the pedestal the crown was on!” Sir Danth walked over to the nearest wall to bang his helmet against it. The laughter became uncontrollable.

“Oh, Tathan! Should we do something?” Liselle asked, looking at the poor knight.

“No. Sometimes a man just needs to bang his head against a wall for a while.” Tathan put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Let him be. The helmet isn’t taking any damage. I can’t say the same thing for the wall.”

“This will be a perfect entrance if I dig it out some more!” Vevin told them excitedly. “There was another set of doors on the north side of the last cave that might hold a vault.”

Liselle was looking at Sir Danth with pity. “That sounds nice, Vevin,” she said.

“Do you think Sir Danth will let me have this as my home now?” He was doing a hopeful dance. Tathan was beginning to notice that Vevin had different dances for each mood.

“I’m pretty sure he doesn’t care anymore, Vevin. You may have to patch up the hole he’s making in the wall by banging his head against it though.” Tathan pointed at Sir Danth.

“Tathan, we should do *something* to help him,” Liselle pleaded.

He studied Sir Danth for a moment. “Sixteen hundred years of guarding an empty vault alone? If he’s still banging his helmet tomorrow, we’ll talk to him.” He linked his arm in Liselle’s. “Let’s see where the tunnel leads to, shall we?” Without waiting for a response, he dragged her to the tunnel.

“Let me know what you find!” Vevin shouted after them. “I’m going to go look at those other doors to see if they lead to a vault.”

“Scream if something tries to kill you,” Tathan shouted over his shoulder.

“I will!” Vevin danced away.

“Neither one of them is human you know,” Tathan said to Liselle as they walked down the tunnel.

“I know Vevin isn’t, but Sir Danth seems to be . . . Isn’t he?” she asked.

“Humans don’t live for sixteen hundred years, Cousin. He may have been human at one time, but not anymore.”

Realization dawned in her eyes. “Oh . . . I hadn’t thought of that.”

They reached the end of the tunnel and looked around. The entrance was on the side of a verdant hill leading down to a small valley, which had a stream running through it. Above them was the edge of the ruined city. To the north, the stream fell over a cliff.

Liselle pointed to an animal trail going through the trees at the level of the tunnel. It appeared as though forest animals had used the tunnel as shelter over the years. “I think we can get to the cliff without going all the way down to the stream.”

“Let’s go have a look then,” Tathan agreed.

It was a short walk to the cliff. A blanket of thick trees covered the valley thousands of feet below. Liselle held onto Tathan’s arm as she peered over, a big grin covering her face. The stream turned to mist as it fell past birds soaring above the valley. Snowcapped mountains rose to the east far in the distance.

Tathan had known the Willden Forest was vast, but not to such a degree. They had just traveled through it for ten days and it still stretched north for as far as the eye could see. It was intimidating to think it would take at least another ten days or longer to reach the end of it. He turned to the left and saw that the cliff curved north, gradually lowering down to the forest on the western side. The road they traveled must continue on that way.

Liselle pointed toward a lake far to the northeast near the base of mountains. “What’s that over there?” Tathan didn’t see anything, so she described the location. “There’s a structure on this side of the lake next to the mountains. It looks small from here, but I swear it’s there.”

Tathan saw it then. The structure looked like a fortress built into the mountainside. He couldn’t tell if there was any life inhabiting the place, but it had to be as big as a city to see it from where they were. It was odd to see a fortress built up against one of the biggest mountain ranges bordering the largest forest in the world. No one knew how wide the Caaldith Mountains were, but Tathan knew they were at least hundreds of miles wide at this point. “It must be another ruin like this one. There was obviously a civilization around here . . . one millennium and six centuries ago?” he suggested with a chuckle.

She nodded. “Probably the Kingdom of Morhain. Maybe we can ask Sir Danth about it.”

“If he’s done beating his head against a wall,” he nodded in agreement.

“Tathan!” Liselle whacked his chest with the back of her hand. “That’s not nice.” It was hard for her to glare past the amused grin she had. “Let’s go back and see how our friends are doing.”

He followed her, still chuckling. It was nice to chuckle and smile again. A long time had passed since he had done so. Tathan looked around at the trees and stream as they walked. It was a rich forest with varied trees and wildflowers. Moss grew on rocks and fallen trunks. Insects and small critters went about their business with no regard to the two humans in their midst.

Tathan’s sword suddenly swung in a great twisting arc as he leapt into the air. He jumped down the hill to avoid the attack he sensed and then rolled to lunge back at his attacker.

Liselle saw Tathan attack, so she tumbled to avoid the danger. Her bow was off her shoulder and she had an arrow nocked immediately.

There was no one there. Her cousin was crouched, with a wild look on his face. His eyes looked strange, even dark. It was worse than when he had drawn the sword on her mother back home. “Tathan? I don’t see anybody . . . Are they invisible?”

Tathan stood straight and shook his head to clear it. “No one’s there.” He sheathed his sword. “Just . . . Let’s go back to the tunnel.”

As he tried to walk by, she placed a firm hand on his shoulder. “What happened to you, Cousin? Why do you jump at shadows?”

“I . . . I can’t explain . . .” he said lamely. He saw the worry in her face and gave her a weak smile. “I’ll be fine. Since we’ve traveled together, I’ve done much better.” He tried to move ahead, but she held his shoulder. Tathan could see that she wanted more of an explanation. “Peace, Cousin.” He took her hand off his shoulder, kissed it as one would a lady, and then released it.

Liselle watched him walk to the tunnel before looking back in the direction they had come. She wondered what could cause a man capable of killing thirty warriors to be so afraid. Then she thought that perhaps she didn’t *want* to know. Back home, he had

mentioned something wanting his sword. His voice had an otherworldly quality to it at the time. With a shiver, she followed Tathan to the tunnel. Liselle didn't put away the bow and arrow until they were inside.

Sir Danth was still banging his head against the wall when they returned. There was a sizeable hole in the wall, but not even a scratch on the helmet. Tathan motioned that they should continue back into the cave.

Vevin was nowhere to be seen, but the doors that he had mentioned were opened. They went over to them. The large chamber beyond was empty like all the others they had seen, but there were niches in the walls.

"It will be perfect for treasure!" Vevin exclaimed behind them, making them jump.

"Vevin!" Liselle yelled, turning around. "Please don't scare us like that!" She had a hand on her chest to catch her breath after the shock.

"Oh! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to surprise you," he apologized. "Once I explored here, I went to check your horses." He held their packs up in either hand. "I also brought your gear. I thought we could camp near the stream tonight."

"That's a good idea," Tathan agreed. "Are you sure the horses are safe? I'm worried about a forest creature attacking them."

"Oh yes!" Vevin nodded enthusiastically. "They are very safe. I put a ward over them."

"Thank you, Vevin. That's very nice of you." Liselle smiled at him.

"Oh! You're very welcome, Lady Liselle," he said. "I didn't know you were a lady, by the way. You should have told me!"

"A lady? I'm not a lady. I'm just a . . ." she trailed off, turning to Tathan. "What am I, Cousin?"

He shrugged. "You don't have a title. 'Farmer's daughter' or 'Free woman' would be the most likely phrases if you were to need one."

"But Sir Danth called her 'Milady'," Vevin protested.

"Sir Danth will probably call any woman 'Milady'," Tathan said. "It's a thing knights do."

"I think it suits her." Vevin smiled and bowed to Liselle, "Lady Liselle! Oh yes! I like it." He proceeded to do his happy dance.

He headed up the ramp. "Let's set up our camp then."

"What about Sir Danth?" Liselle asked as she followed.

"We'll get him in the morning if he's still banging his head."

Chapter 12

The next morning, the cousins awoke to the smell of breakfast. Vevin brought them plates of food when they sat up. "I hope this is good. I've never cooked before."

They looked dubiously at each other as Vevin watched for their reactions. Liselle took the first bite. Tathan waited for her reaction and was surprised to see a positive response. "Mmm!" she nodded behind a mouthful. As she finished chewing, she said, "This is good, Vevin."

Tathan took a bite of his. It *was* good. "Thank you, Vevin. It tastes excellent."

“Oh good! I’m glad you like it,” Vevin said. Liselle noticed he wasn’t dancing. Vevin lightly touched his cheek next to the wound, wincing as he did so. The gash looked particularly angry.

Liselle set her food down to climb out of her sleeping roll. Vevin watched as she moved toward him. When she put out a hand to touch his cheek, he shied away. “Shh,” she whispered to calm him. He began trembling as she touched the skin near the gash. The skin felt firmer and more textured than human skin. It was hot near the wound but cool elsewhere.

“Shh.” Liselle calmed him again. She placed her other hand to his right cheek in order to hold his head still. “I think I can ease some of the pain for you, Vevin.”

Even as a child, Liselle could ease pain in animals and people. It was something she hadn’t told Tathan, thinking it would seem frivolous to him.

“It’s alright, Lady Liselle. It will get better.” Vevin tried moving away, but she held him firmly.

“Shh. It’s alright. I’ll be gentle. Shh.” Liselle moved her hand to the top of the wound. Invisible energy ran from her fingertips to the wound and the redness began to ease. Liselle wouldn’t be able to heal it completely. Something magical had caused the gash. Her eyes were able to see inside of an injury and determine how to mend it, but this did not look natural at all. It didn’t help that Vevin’s skull was made of something different from bone. Added to that was the fact that his skin was much denser than human skin.

She could take away the infection developing in it though. Her fingers moved lightly down the length of the gash, mending as much as possible while removing the infection. Vevin’s breathing came easier as she healed him. By the time Liselle was done, much of the redness was gone and the skin around it was cooler.

Vevin looked at her in awe. The swirling of his eyes was calmer. “Thank you, Lady Liselle. It feels much better.”

“You’re welcome, Vevin,” she said with a smile. “I wasn’t able to do much, but hopefully that helped.”

“Oh yes,” he assured her. “It helped a lot. Your hands are very soft. They feel good.” Vevin did a slow version of his happy dance.

Liselle blushed at the compliment. “Thank you, Vevin.” She sat down, grabbing her plate of food to finish eating. Tathan was staring at her with an eyebrow raised, but she didn’t want to answer any questions. “Vevin, have you seen Sir Danth this morning?”

“Oh yes! He’s still banging his head against the wall. He’ll make a nice new cave in a few weeks at the rate he’s going!”

She turned to Tathan with an arched eyebrow. “Now may I go get him?”

“I’ll go with you,” he said getting up. He led the way, taking his plate of food with.

Liselle took her plate as well, but Vevin was empty-handed. Tathan looked back at the creature. “Did you eat, Vevin?”

“Oh yes!” The first time I tried to cook breakfast, it wasn’t good, so I ate that. Then I made this and it tasted good.”

“Why did you eat the first breakfast if it wasn’t good, Vevin?” Liselle asked.

“Well, we didn’t want it to go to waste, did we? Never waste food,” he admonished.

“Alright then,” she agreed with a bemused look. They headed down the ramp into the lower cave. From the open doors of the vault, they could hear the sound of metal hitting stone.

They walked up behind Sir Danth. Tathan tapped the knight on the shoulder. “Sir Danth. Please stop banging your head against the wall.” Then he turned to the other two. “There, I asked nicely.”

Vevin nodded. “Oh yes! You asked very nicely!” Sir Danth, however, did not stop.

Liselle glared at them. She placed a hand on the knight’s back. “Please, Sir Danth. Come talk to us,” she pleaded softly.

The knight suddenly stopped and turned to face her. “Of course, Milady. I apologize. It was not my intention to upset you. It does not hurt if that’s any consolation.”

“Well that’s good. We have a camp in the cave above with food if you would come with us.” Liselle showed him the food.

“Actually, since I no longer have doors to guard, I would like very much to go outside,” he suggested.

“Yes, of course we can do that.” Liselle set her plate on a rock to take the arm Sir Danth offered. Then the two walked down the tunnel. Tathan and Vevin looked at each other, shrugged, linked their arms and followed.

Once outside, Sir Danth took a deep breath of air. He looked at the stream burbling along its merry path. “How very different from before,” the knight remarked. “I believe this is the Prolly Stream, which once ran through Aaltdiin,” he explained.

“Aaltdiin?” she asked him.

“Yes, Aaltdiin is the name of the city we are in.” He looked around at the peaceful forest. Flowers were everywhere, butterflies fluttering about between them. “Or at least the city that used to be here.” He pointed toward where the stream went off the ledge of the cliff. “Prolly Stream used to be the same height as the rest of the city. It fell to the forest below. The stream must have worn this modest canyon in the centuries since.”

“I imagine it was a beautiful city at one time, though I find the forest that’s taken its place delightful as well,” Liselle said with a smile to her knight.

“It truly was, Milady. Tens of thousands of people lived here. There were smaller towns and villages throughout the forest.” He gestured grandly toward the cliffs. “And beyond was the rest of the Kingdom of Morhain.”

“What happened to the Kingdom?” Liselle asked.

“Everyone disappeared,” he said.

Liselle’s brow furrowed in puzzlement. “Disappeared?”

“Yes. Everyone just started disappearing.” He shrugged. “Wizards and scholars tried to figure out how or what happened, but they never succeeded.”

“People don’t just disappear from an entire kingdom, Sir Danth,” Tathan protested. “Something must have happened to them. Surely there was a disease, or they left, or something.”

“I would agree with you my good man. However, that is exactly what happened. Poof!” the knight said dramatically, gesturing with his hands. “More and more people disappeared. Over the course of six years, nine out of every ten people disappeared and no one ever figured out where.”

“Poof!” Vevin said with a giggle. “Poof, poof.” Liselle smiled at their purple friend who seemed to enjoy the word.

Sir Danth ignored Vevin. “It was decided that all who didn’t disappear should leave. As one of the last Knights of Morhain, I agreed to stand watch over the Crown of Morhain to protect what the king considered the last and most important symbol of the kingdom.”

“I’ve never heard of people just disappearing though. It doesn’t make any sense,” Tathan insisted.

Sir Danth spread his arms.

Liselle became thoughtful. “So . . . What will you do now that there’s no crown to guard? Do you intend to search for it?”

“Go after it? Heavens no. There is no reason to do so.” A hollow chuckle emanated from within the armor. “Besides, I might find myself honor-bound to protect it again if I did. I *don’t* want to stand around for another millennium.”

They laughed at that. Tathan asked, “So what will you do, Sir Knight?”

Sir Danth was silent for a moment. Then he held his arms out helplessly.

“Travel with us, Sir Danth,” Liselle said with a smile. “We could use the company.”

Tathan turned to her. “We could?”

“Yes, Cousin. We could,” she insisted, her arms crossed as though daring him to disagree.

“Alright,” he said. “But next time you decide to invite someone to travel with us, don’t you think you should be considerate enough to discuss it with me first?”

Liselle’s cheeks flushed in embarrassment. “I’m sorry, Cousin. I should have talked to you first.”

“Thank you.” He put a hand on her shoulder and smiled to let her know he wasn’t upset. Then he turned to the knight. “Sir Danth, I agree with Liselle. Will you join us in our travels?”

“I would know where you are traveling to and what you intend to accomplish before I agree,” the knight said.

Liselle and Tathan looked at each other and shrugged. “We don’t know,” Tathan admitted. “Our home . . .” Tears welled in his eyes. “Warriors killed our parents. Liselle and I were the only ones to survive and we’ve been traveling without knowing where we’re going or what to do.” The loss stung Liselle, drawing moisture to her eyes as well.

“Would you go back to seek vengeance then?” Sir Danth asked.

“The warriors are dead and I don’t feel like fighting a kingdom for vengeance,” Tathan replied. “Our parents and family are buried in peace. That is enough.” Liselle nodded in agreement.

“You show great wisdom in this. I have seen people eaten by vengeance and it is not a pretty sight.” Sir Danth paused in thought. “I would travel with you, but there is something you should know about me.”

“What would you have us know, Sir Knight?” Liselle asked.

“I am hollow,” he stated.

“Hollow? You mean you have no sense of purpose, or . . . I don’t know what you mean,” Tathan said.

“I mean I am quite literally hollow. I have no body,” the knight explained without really clarifying anything. When he saw them looking at each other in confusion, he continued, “I was once a strong, tall, and especially handsome man. However, I no longer have a body. I am hollow.”

Tathan looked at Liselle. She shrugged. He turned to Vevin. “Poof,” the silver-eyed creature said with a smile. Liselle giggled.

Sir Danth sighed and took his helmet off. The group stared in shock upon realizing that he had no head. Then, holding helmet in the crook of his elbow, the knight bowed. They could see the inside of the armor. Sir Danth Wazmordin was definitely hollow.

Liselle paled at the sight. “Oh . . . hollow . . . I see now,” she said weakly.

Sir Danth stood straight, though he didn’t put the helmet back on. “Wizards, clerics and the greatest smiths of the land created this armor. It was made to withstand everything in order to keep me alive to protect the doors of the vault.” His rich voice came from where his mouth would have been. It was an odd experience to listen to the disembodied sound. “My body survived for two hundred years before finally giving out. My soul, however, was bound to the armor, so I was not able to go to the heavens.”

“Well . . . that must have been disappointing,” Tathan said lamely.

“Quite! My body began to decay in the armor. That vault was humid and warm, which compounded the matter. Fortunately my body was dead, so I couldn’t smell myself.”

“Oh yes! That would have been terrible. I can’t stand the smell of decaying bodies,” Vevin agreed. Tathan and Liselle weakly nodded in agreement.

“Anyway, my flesh, meat and innards sloughed off my bones and oozed out of the armor,” he continued explaining, ignoring the sick looks on the faces of his audience. “One of the enchantments on the armor is that it is always clean, so I had that going for me.”

“That’s a nice touch,” Liselle agreed, nauseated.

“Most definitely,” he nodded. “My skeleton remained for a hundred years or so, but then fell apart into my armor. After that, I rattled every time I walked. It was irritating. I did find it interesting that I can still hear and see even though I have no sense of smell or taste. Anyway, I finally emptied what remained of my bones onto the altar in the cave above so I wouldn’t have to listen to them anymore. I organized them properly of course.”

“Oh!” Liselle exclaimed in sudden realization. She took the ring off her finger and held it out to the knight. “I’m so sorry, Sir Danth. I took this off of your finger.” She turned to glare at Vevin and Tathan for putting her in the situation.

Sir Danth waved his hand in refusal. “No, no. I saw that on your finger right away. It looks very nice on you. Please keep it as my gift to you for rescuing me.” He smiled at her . . . at least Liselle imagined it would be a smile if the knight had had a mouth or face to smile with. “The question is, do you still wish me to travel with you now that you know I am a hollow man?”

Liselle was about to answer yes, but decided it might be wise to consult with her cousin this time. When she looked to him, he smiled gratefully and nodded. She smiled back then turned to the knight. “Sir Danth, it would be a great honor to have such a noble . . . knight as you join us regardless of whether or not you have a body.”

“Thank you, Milady!” He bowed, unintentionally showing the inside of the armor once more. Liselle looked a little more closely and was thankful to see no sign of innards or flesh left inside.

“Oh wonderful!” Vevin did his happy dance. “This shall be exciting!”

Liselle looked at Vevin for a moment, and then turned to the knight. “Sir Danth, Vevin was hoping to use this for his home. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Truthfully, the place is not mine to give or refuse, but I will certainly not stand in Vevin’s way.”

“Oh wonderful!” Vevin did two backward somersaults in a row. “Thank you so much! I have a new home!” The happy dance continued with new vigor.

Liselle laughed in pleasure at the sight. “Does this mean you’ll stay here, Vevin?”

The dancing stopped. “I was hoping I could come with you,” he said with a hopeful look, much like a puppy dog.

She was about to agree, but looked to Tathan first. The expression on his face was uncertain and he shrugged in response. “You don’t mind leaving your new home, Vevin?” Liselle asked, turning back toward him.

“Oh no! I don’t have any treasure yet, and it’s never a home without treasure!” he exclaimed. “Plus, I like you, Sir Danth and even Tathan. I like you and want to be your friend and travel with you!” He nodded vigorously.

Liselle laughed again. “Well, then it’s settled. We are four,” she announced. “Shall we continue on the path north? Or . . .” She waited to see if anyone else had any ideas.

“South is where your home was, Milady?” Sir Danth asked.

“Yes, we believe there’ll be more warriors. It was my intention to explore the world anyway. I just didn’t expect my journey to have started so violently.” Tears welled in her eyes again. She wished they would stop doing that.

“Then I vote for north as well,” Sir Danth said, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. He was very gentle considering his gauntlets were made of steel. It was a bit unnerving to be comforted by an empty suit of armor. She thought of him more as a person when not looking at the missing head.

“Oh yes! I like north. North is fun!” Vevin’s happy dance added a new move. He altered it for each situation.

Tathan thought about it for a moment. “I agree with north because there isn’t any other way to go right now. It was originally my intention to reach the northern kingdoms and find a new start there, but when Liselle and I were looking over the cliff, we saw some sort of fortress by a lake in the north. It looked curious.” Tathan pointed toward the cliff he had stood with Liselle the day before.

“Would you show me, Master Tathan?” the knight asked. Everyone followed Tathan to the cliff. When he pointed out the structure by the lake, Sir Danth said, “That is not a part of the Kingdom of Morhain. I don’t recognize it at all. The lake used to be much smaller if I remember correctly.”

“There are people there. Not all are human. I’ve never seen the other race before!” Vevin exclaimed.

“Other race?” Sir Danth asked in obvious surprise. “Humans are the only race in the entire world of Ryallon.” The knight still had his helmet off. With or without it, he still managed to convey expressions. Liselle thought it might be part of the magic of the armor.

“Oh no, there are others,” Vevin said. “I’ve never seen or heard of this one though. They have four arms I think. It’s hard to tell from this distance.” Vevin was straining to see. No one saw the tiny blue tendrils running through his liquid eyes due to their own futile attempts to view the new race.

“You can see people there Vevin? It’s so far away that I can barely make out that it might be a fortress, let alone see any people,” Tathan said in amazement.

“Yes, of course I can! You mean to tell me that you can’t?” he asked in surprise.

Tathan only sighed in response.

“It looks like there are lots of bugs there too.”

“Bugs? Do I even want to know?” Tathan asked.

“Big bugs,” Vevin replied.

“Let’s see if we can find a way there. Perhaps there will be adventure,” Liselle suggested enthusiastically.

“I think that an excellent plan, but we must be cautious, Milady,” Sir Danth warned. “Master Vevin mentioned a race he had never seen before as well as big bugs. It could be dangerous.”

They all looked toward the fortress in thought. Vevin, of course, was doing a little dance, a thoughtful dance.

The horses were content when the group returned to the building where the cousins had left them. “We can all ride I think,” Tathan suggested. “Do either of you have any supplies you need to bring?” he asked the new members of the party.

“No, just my sword,” Sir Danth said.

Vevin shook his head. “Nope! Not until I get treasure.”

“Alright then, we can redistribute the supplies evenly between the four horses,” Tathan said.

It was noon when they rode out of the ancient city. The day was warm, but did not yet contain the heat of summer. The sounds of hooves echoed from the walls until they reached the softer road.

Sir Danth was an experienced rider. “Apparently riding a horse is something a person doesn’t forget in a millennium and a half. It probably helps that I no longer have buttocks to become sore.” They chuckled at that.

The road to the north led them into the trees again. Occasionally it neared the edge of the cliff where they would look down at the lush forests below. The scenery was stunning with mountains in the background framing the view. When they looked back to the south, the companions could see the ruined city at the edge of the cliff.

Sir Danth told them that it had been a beautiful sight when the city was in its prime. He pointed out features that would have existed then. Minarets and towers had fallen in the centuries since, he explained. After a while, the path along the cliff face trended toward the west more and more, hiding the ruins from their sight.

Liselle glanced down at the ring Sir Danth had allowed her to keep. It glistened in the light of day. “Sir Danth . . .”

“Yes, Milady?”

“Tathan and Vevin think this ring is magical. Is that true?” she asked. They were riding two by two with Liselle and Sir Danth in the back. Thankfully, Sir Danth had put his helmet back on.

“Ahh yes, Milady. It is magical and quite powerful, a gift from a woman I was betrothed to. She bequeathed it to me shortly before she disappeared.”

“Disappeared . . . You mean with all the others?” she asked.

“Yes, during the third year of The Great Disappearing,” he nodded. “I had agreed to stand watch over the doors of the vault. She gave me the ring to help me in my duties. Two days later, she disappeared.” His head hung in sorrow.

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Sir Danth.” Liselle smiled compassionately.

“Thank you for your kindness, Milady,” he replied. “I must admit that I haven’t a clue what it does though.”

“You don’t?”

“I’m afraid not. My Lady never told me, only that it would help me when I most needed it,” he said.

“Is there any sort of key word to activate it?” Tathan asked over his shoulder.

“No. She told me it would work when I needed it, and that there were no gestures or words required,” the knight said. “Truth is, I was never in danger the entire time I guarded the vault, so it wasn’t necessary.” He shrugged.

Liselle looked down at the ring again. His gaze followed. “It fits you, Milady. I believe it is right that you should wear it.”

“You said the armor keeps you alive, do you need any sort of sustenance, food or otherwise?” Tathan asked.

“No. I am attached to my armor and the magic it uses is recharged by everything it touches; air, stone, grass, water . . . anything,” the knight explained. “It is a brilliant piece of work.”

“Can anything harm it?” Liselle asked. “I noticed there isn’t a scratch on it, even from the wall you were banging your head against.”

“It can be damaged by magic, either directly or through a weapon of some sort. It would be difficult however. Plus, I’m likely to kill anyone who tried to damage me,” he said with an amused tone to his voice.

Liselle giggled. “Well, I suppose there is that. I’m curious as to why your armor is black though. Aren’t knights supposed to wear shiny, silver armor?” she asked.

“No. That’s a terrible idea. It doesn’t even make any sense,” he stated. “Shiny armor would be a distraction, Methinks. A knight needs dark, intimidating armor, preferably black or red. Intimidate, then kill!” Sir Danth exclaimed with a fist in the air.

“That is definitely intimidating, Sir Danth,” Liselle said with a horrified look on her face. “Certainly you don’t like killing?”

“Of course I do,” he said with surprise in his voice. “One doesn’t become a sword wielding, killing machine and then avoid killing people. That would just be silly!”

All the blood drained from Liselle’s face. “Oh.”

Sir Danth studied Liselle for a moment. “Here now, Milady. I did not realize how truly gentle you were. Do not fear for those who die. One lifetime is not the end of existence.” He banged his chest with a gauntlet. “These are just bodies. Expendable bodies . . .” Sir Danth looked down at his chest-plate. “Well . . . this is armor, but you get the point!”

“I know that we continue to exist even after our bodies die, but . . .” she trailed off.

“Yes, exactly!” Sir Danth nodded. “We are immortal souls. We have bodies for a while, do noble or ignoble things, love and kill each other, then get on with existence,” he explained. “After death, we go to the heavens, or to a new life, or to another existence elsewhere in the universe.”

“Well . . . still . . . to kill things . . . is considered bad . . .” It was obvious she was having a very hard time wrapping her mind around Sir Danth’s beliefs.

“There are many who feel so, Milady. However, I assure you that life is purely a game spiritual beings play. Death is an aspect of a temporary life.” He saw that she was not convinced. “I fear that I have upset you terribly, Milady and that makes me sad.”

“I don’t know, Sir Danth. Give me time to think about your words.” Liselle rode on in disturbed thought. Sir Danth raised a gauntlet as though to make another attempt at convincing her, but thought better of it, falling silent.

“What about you Vevin?” Tathan asked a few moments later. “I know you aren’t human. Will you tell us what race you are?”

Vevin looked at him with concern and then looked at the other two to see if they felt the same way. “You don’t think I’m human?” he asked.

Tathan stared at him. “You are definitely *not* human, Vevin.”

The creature thought about it for a moment and then asked, “Why do you think I’m not human, exactly?”

Tathan raised an eyebrow. “Really?” He counted off the points on his fingers.

“One, you have liquid-silver eyes that glow in the dark. Two, you have purple hair and your skin is tinted purple. Three, you have very sharp teeth. Four, you can see through rock, in the dark, and across vast expanses.” He used his thumb for the last point. “Five, you leap distances that aren’t humanly possible.” Tathan looked at the creature intently. “You are most *definitely* not human, Vevin.”

The creature looked at Liselle and Sir Danth, who both nodded in agreement. Then he looked back at Tathan. “Oh . . . I tried to look human,” he explained hopefully.

Tathan raised the other eyebrow. “Tried? . . . What exactly are you, Vevin?”

Vevin panicked. “Oh no! I can’t tell you that! You might not like me!” He shook his head side to side.

“It’s alright, Vevin. We already like you,” said Liselle.

“Nope. Uh, uh.” He shook his head in refusal. “I’m not gonna tell you. I like you and I promise never to eat you, alright? I promise!”

“Uhh . . .” was all Tathan could come up with.

“We accept your promise, Vevin,” Liselle agreed. “Will you tell us what you are now?”

“Nope. But I promise not to eat you.” Vevin smiled hopefully. The sharp teeth didn’t make his audience any more comfortable.

“Do you like killing too, Vevin?” Liselle asked quietly.

“Oh no! I don’t like killing at all. Killing is bad unless you need to eat, but only to eat. You should never kill if you don’t have to eat!” he said rapidly.

“Oh. Alright, Vevin. As long as you promise not to kill or eat us,” she said with a hesitant smile.

“Oh yes! I promise,” he agreed, nodding his head vigorously.

Tathan didn't look convinced. He wanted to argue, but relented at Liselle's determined look.

The party traveled on for the rest of the day and engaged in small talk. At night, they stopped in a clearing near the cliff to eat and rest. For the next four days, they rode peacefully deeper into the forest. Most of the conversation was light. Tathan told a few general stories of his past, Liselle talked of growing up in her valley, and Sir Danth told of his knight training and details of the city in which he lived. Vevin remained mostly quiet, but was always helpful and eager to please.

Chapter 13

During the cousin's journey to Aaltdiin, as well as the time traveled since, the road had been wide enough in most places for two people to ride side by side. By the time they reached deep forest, the road had turned into a single path.

"I say, the road isn't what it used to be when I was young," Sir Danth remarked. "The army kept it in very good condition. "They used prisoners to do much of the labor while army wizards put protections on it to keep animals and monsters from harming travelers."

"Monsters?" Tathan asked, peering into the forest on either side. He was at the front of the group, leading the way. The farther a person traveled from civilization in the world of Ryallon, the more dangerous it became. There were real monsters that could rend a full-grown man with little effort, even a capable man like Tathan.

"Yes. The Willden Forest has a variety of creatures that like to eat people. It's not a problem if you stay on the road, even now. However, I would not recommend venturing out on one's own for any distance though," the knight cautioned.

Liselle also looked into the forest nervously. "And people lived here?"

"Yes. In fact, we should have passed a few small towns by this point. There has been no sign of them," he said. "It is very odd to travel through a kingdom that no longer exists." Sadness tinted Sir Danth's voice.

Liselle looked back at him with an encouraging smile. "I can only imagine how hard it must be for you, Sir Danth. I'm not sure I could handle it as well as you are doing," she said.

"Thank you, Milady."

Tathan spoke loudly over his shoulder. "What sort of monsters are we likely to find, Sir Danth?"

"The sort of monsters attracted to loud noises," the knight replied in a deadpan.

"Oh, ha, ha. That's very funny," Tathan replied. He *did* look around at the trees to see if he had attracted anything.

"Do not concern yourself, Master Tathan. There is no monster in these forests I cannot dispatch with efficiency," the knight reassured.

Tathan asked a little less loudly, "Where does this road lead to, Sir Danth?"

"At one time, it led to the capital city of Brondaggiin," he said. "Brondaggiin was a beautiful city made to be in tune with the forest. The buildings of Brondaggiin existed in harmony with the trees."

"Do you think it still exists after all this time?" Liselle asked. "And how did Aaltdiin survive when the other towns did not?"

“You ask excellent questions, Milady. Aaltdiin was built at the top of the cliffs, where the trees did not have a strong hold. The architecture was some of the finest our engineers had ever made. But most of Aaltdiin is gone as well. Only remains of the larger buildings toward the cliff face are left,” the knight said with sadness in his voice.”

“I’m sorry your home has fallen to such condition, Sir Danth,” Liselle sympathized. “So Brondaggiin is most likely gone now as well . . .”

“I don’t know. It was a vast city covering miles, but of the forest. The Willden may have let it continue to exist.” He shrugged.

“How long before we reach it?” asked Tathan.

“In another seven days or so, should the road hold true,” Sir Danth said.

“And how would we get to the fortress we saw from the cliffs?” Liselle asked.

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine there would be a road to it. Perhaps we can try to explore from Brondaggiin.”

The forest grew thicker and darker over the next few days. Light rarely reached the road they traveled. Liselle took advantage of each stop to seek out new flowers she had never met before. One of the men would always accompany her to keep her safe from danger.

Sir Danth tried sniffing the flowers Liselle showed him, but to no avail. He was amazed at how animals would come up to her in curiosity. The same furry creatures scampered from his presence.

Vevin was especially enamored of Liselle since she had eased the pain of his wound. The gash looked much less angry and his mind didn’t seem quite as addled as it had when they first met him. Tathan thought that perhaps the pain had been driving him slightly insane.

They heard sounds of animals and monsters from within the forest, but none ever ventured onto the road. A steady drizzle fell most days, but it seemed right and Tathan enjoyed it. At night, Sir Danth would take watch. He needed no rest and was always diligent.

Tathan awoke in the middle of the night, twelve days after leaving Aaltdiin. There was no rain and he could see stars in the sky above. The clearing they camped in that night was nice, with a clear, cool stream running along the western edge.

It worried Tathan that he was able to sleep at night. He hadn’t slept well in years. Another thing that bothered him was that he felt safe with Sir Danth doing guard duty. Tathan felt as though he was beginning to lose edge that he had gained in his travels.

Another thing that worried Tathan was the fact that he had no idea what to do with his life. At times, it seemed as though he had found a place to live, but things always went wrong and he had left every city, usually in a hurry.

The Eastern lands held the Empire of Iynath, whose emperor was trying to take over the world. Tathan thought that to be a silly idea because Ryallon was an enormous world and no one had ever ruled all of it. But he wasn’t an emperor, so his thoughts didn’t count. To the north was . . . well, nothing. They might make their way to the Kingdom of Kethril to the northwest and from there take a ship to another land.

They could also try to discover what the fortress was, but in Tathan's experience, fortresses contained people with weapons who didn't invite intruders into their midst. There was also the fact that the group had no clue how to get there. The concept of a new race was both intriguing and frightening though.

Tathan looked over to his cousin sleeping peacefully on his right. She had done an amazing job of keeping her wits about her considering what she had been through. Many people would never have recovered from the experience. Liselle brightened the days when she smiled. Tathan had found himself smiling in return and that was not normal for him.

He worried about what the future would hold for her. The world was a rough place where many kingdoms suppressed the rights of women. There was one organization in the Western lands where women became soldiers called Blue Wyverns. They were powerful in bringing about change, but many kingdoms wanted to see them done in.

Sir Danth was an oddity. Tathan had met a few ghosts in his time, but the knight was different. There was an aura of death and danger about him that Tathan recognized and it concerned him. Should the knight ever turn on them, he wasn't sure they would survive.

The biggest enigma was Vevin. For days and days, he had tried to figure the creature out. He had a feeling Vevin was even more dangerous than the knight, but couldn't place why.

Tathan looked on the other side of Liselle where Vevin normally slept. His bedroll was empty. Tathan quietly stood, put on his sword belt and looked around. Both of Ryallon's moons were half-full in the sky, casting lavender illumination over the clearing. He could see Sir Danth near the road and went over.

The knight greeted him pleasantly. "Hello, Master Tathan. What wakes you at this hour?"

"Have you seen Vevin?" Tathan asked.

"Of course. Nothing gets past without my knowing."

"I didn't mean to imply otherwise," Tathan assured him. He stood there for a moment, waiting for Sir Danth to continue. When the knight didn't, Tathan asked, "Where did he go?"

"He went off into the forest like he does most nights," Sir Danth answered.

"And you didn't stop him? It's dangerous out there," Tathan said incredulously.

"Whatever monsters and animals may be in the forest, I assure you that they are more frightened of our friend than he will ever be of them," Sir Danth stated matter-of-factly.

"Right . . . I honestly believe you're correct," Tathan said with a sigh. "What is he? Do you know?"

"I do not, though I must admit to curiosity. Dawn will be breaking shortly, Master Tathan. Would you like me to begin breakfast?"

"No, I'll get it this morning." Tathan paused for a moment and then faced the knight. "I've wanted to thank you for all you're doing for us," Tathan said.

"Not at all, Master Tathan. I am grateful for the opportunity to do something other than stare at walls, which refuse to pose a danger to the vault," he said with a metallic chuckle.

Tathan chuckled as well. "I imagine so." He walked back to the fire pit, stoked the fire and began breakfast, enjoying the smell of wood smoke in the crisp morning air.

When breakfast was almost ready, Vevin came back. He arrived at the fire pit just as Liselle was waking up. Sir Danth came over at the same time. Vevin whispered, "We have company. People just arrived and they surround the clearing. They were hunting in the forest when they saw our campfire."

Tathan loosened his sword in its scabbard. Liselle slid out of her bedroll, picked up her bow and strung it as she moved to Tathan's side.

"I see them. I wasn't expecting invisibility in the middle of the forest," Sir Danth said after looking around.

"They're invisible and very, very quiet," Vevin replied. "They have magical cloaks, which allow them to blend into the forest."

"Are they human?" asked Liselle.

"Oh yes. Most definitely human," he answered.

"They are Druids. It is good to know they still exist," Sir Danth said. "The Kingdom of Morhain and Druids co-existed in this forest for centuries."

"Of course there would be Druids," Tathan said with a snap of his fingers. "The Willden Forest is believed to contain more Druids than anywhere in the world."

"I always wondered what a Druid looked like," Vevin said thoughtfully. "They've been around for as long as humans and forests I think," he said, frowning in deep thought. "I think the first humans were Druids. Druids are good. I like Druids." He went into his happy dance.

"Alright. So what do we do now? . . ." Liselle asked the more experienced members of the party.

"They won't be very friendly if I remember correctly. Druids don't like anyone in their forest," Sir Danth said. "But as long as we don't attack them or take hostile actions, we should be fine."

"They're coming now! Yay!" Vevin clapped.

The figures materialized out of the trees like silent ghosts. They wore green and brown leggings, tunics, footwear and cloaks. They didn't make a sound as they walked toward the party. There were twelve; four each from west, south and north. Each one carried a bow and the feathered ends of arrows resting in quivers were visible above their shoulders.

Tathan grew angry right away. He should have the right to walk through some stupid trees on an ancient path if he wanted to without having to worry about being questioned. When Tathan realized he was beginning to crouch in a position to attack, he took a deep breath, forcing himself to relax. It would not do to endanger his cousin's life like that.

One of the Druids, a woman of middle years, raised a hand to halt the rest. She and a man beside her moved forward toward the campsite from the north side of the clearing. Upon coming within ten paces of the group, they stopped and removed their hoods. The others stayed back, keeping their faces hidden.

"Greetings, Travelers. I hope the morning finds you well," the woman said pleasantly. She was the same height as Liselle. Her hair was brown with touches of grey beginning to show. Her face, fingers and body were long and thin in form. She had an

intricate tattoo of vines starting behind her right eye, circling around her cheek, then trailing down to the point of her chin. Honey-colored eyes looked at them above a smile.

Tathan was not used to leading, preferring to stay in the shadows, but his companions turned in unison for his response. The woman followed their gaze to him, raising a questioning eyebrow. He stepped forward.

“And greetings to you, Lady Druid. My name is Tathan.” He gestured to his right. “This is my cousin, Liselle.” He gestured to the left. “The gentleman in armor is Sir Danth, and Vevin is to his left.” Just because Tathan wasn’t used to leading didn’t mean he didn’t know how to handle it.

“Greetings, Tathan, Liselle, Sir Knight, Sir Dragon,” she said, nodding in turn to each. “My name is Adele Skiewin. It’s a pleasure to meet all of you.”

An icy wave of shock went down Tathan’s spine. He was fairly sure the woman had just called Vevin ‘Sir Dragon’. He remembered the stories he heard of dragons, including those of their liquid-silver eyes.

“Are you alright, Tathan?” The woman asked him. “Your face has become pale.”

Tathan also remembered that dragons were nigh invincible, the most dangerous creatures in the entire world. “Umm . . . Yes . . . I’m alright, thank you.”

Adele looked as though she didn’t believe him. “Very well. I would ask what your intentions toward the Willden Forest are.”

The question angered Tathan and he forgot Vevin. Color came back to his face. His hand was on the hilt of his sword again and he didn’t see the worried looks his companions exchanged.

Adele put forth a calming hand. “Peace, Friend Tathan. We are Druids, protectors of the forests. You are free to travel as you wish. However, were it your desire to destroy or burn down the forest that is our home, we would feel a bit cross with you.” She smiled at him while speaking.

Tathan blushed as he realized that he was acting like a fool. The woman was being courteous to them. “I’m sorry.” His hand left the hilt. “I’ve been treated badly in many places I’ve traveled. It’s not right for me to take it out on you.”

She smiled even more. “Not at all, Friend Tathan. Do you intend to wreak havoc amongst the forest?” she asked half-jokingly.

He smiled wryly and answered, “No. We don’t intend havoc or harm to the forest.”

“Excellent!” she said with a clap of her hands. “Now then, I see you have breakfast. Do you mind if we join you? We bring food as well.” She motioned her companions to approach. The Druids all lowered their hoods. They were male and female, most with tattoos similar to Adele.

“Of course. We would welcome the company.” Tathan gestured for them to join around the campfire. Some dragged over a couple of old hollow logs to sit on. Liselle put her bow away and joined Tathan in sitting on the log they had placed the night before. Sir Danth moved outside of the logs and remained standing, while Vevin sat on the ground at Liselle’s feet with a happy smile on his face.

Vevin. Dragons were the most powerful of all creatures in the world of Ryallon. They lived for centuries, even millennia. They were vastly more intelligent than humans and had powers of magic that the greatest wizards only imagined. Even in his current form, he could most likely kill everyone here with ease. Tathan felt another shiver go down his spine when he realized they had been traveling with him for days.

“You look pale again, Friend Tathan. And you’re shivering. Have you caught cold?” Adele asked, obviously concerned.

“No . . . no, I’m sorry.” Tathan tried to recover from his thoughts and pay attention to their guests. “Druid Skiewin, I assure you that we travel through the forest only with great respect.”

“Of course. I am not concerned, truly,” she replied. Two of the other Druids were adding their own food to what Tathan had prepared. “Please call me Adele. We don’t rest on formality in the forest.”

“Alright, Adele,” Tathan said with a smile.

She turned to Vevin. “It is an honor to be in your presence, Sir Dragon. Might I ask what brings you to the Willden?”

“I lost my home,” Vevin said sadly. A look of fear crept into his expression and he turned to show her the wound on his face. It was healing ever so slowly, but still looked angry. “He took it from me and all my treasure!” Then he smiled. “But Lady Liselle and Tathan found me a new home and Sir Danth said I could have it and they are my friends now and isn’t that wonderful?!” He got up to do a little dance, complete with spins.

Tathan noticed the rest of the Druids had given the dragon a fair amount of space. A few gulped nervously when Vevin got up to dance. It was nice to know he wasn’t the only one. Tathan wondered what in the world could hurt a dragon like that. Then decided he probably didn’t want to know.

Adele smile at the dance. “It truly is wonderful, Sir Dragon . . . Your home is in the Willden?”

Vevin stopped and thought for a brief moment. “It’s in Aaltdiin, which is in the Willden. You won’t destroy it will you?” he asked in a worried tone.

“No. We most definitely will not destroy your home, Sir Dragon. The Druids revere dragons as well as all life and would not deign to harm you or your home,” she said sincerely.

“Oh, thank you so much!” Vevin exclaimed, doing a happy dance.

Adele smiled once more. Tathan thought he saw a bit of relief there. She turned to the knight. “Sir Danth, to be honest, I have never seen a knight in the forest. Will you tell me of your order?”

“But of course, Druid Adele. I am Sir Danth Wazmordin, Guardian Protector of the Crown of Morhain, Black Order of the Knights of Morhain.” There was a formal tone to his voice that spoke of great honor and position.

“Knights . . . of . . . Morhain.” Adele spoke in a voice that became quieter with each word. Her face was now pale. Tathan looked at the rest of the Druids as they put hands on weapons. Every single set of eyes was wide.

Even though Sir Danth didn’t have a body, Tathan got the distinct impression that he had raised an eyebrow at the movement. “I have no quarrel with the Druids and I would recommend they not have a quarrel with me,” the knight warned.

Adele swallowed nervously. “Of course, Sir Knight.” She frowned in thought. “The Knights of Morhain have been gone for over a thousand years . . .”

“A sacred duty required me to exist longer than my civilization. That duty is done now and I travel with these people and this dragon.” He gestured to his companions. “I will also tell you that I consider them my friends.”

The Druid swallowed nervously again. “Of course, Sir Danth. Are your friends aware that the Knights of Morhain were reputed to be the most deadly and bloodthirsty of all ancient warriors?” she asked in a critical tone.

“Bloodthirsty? I assure you, my good woman, that I have never had thirst for a single drop of blood,” he stated with head held high. “Although I do admit there was an order of the knights that did. Rather disgusting habit I should say,” he finished in a more casual tone.

“I see . . . Well . . .” Adele trailed off.

“Do not concern yourself, Lady Druid. I have no intention of killing everything I see,” Sir Danth said in a comforting tone that didn’t seem to comfort any of the Druids. “I am traveling with my friends and will only kill to protect them.” While he made the statement in a way to set aside any concern the Druids may have had, it sounded more like a threat.

The Druids all stared at him in mild panic. It struck Tathan as extremely odd that they would feel comfortable around a dragon, but be afraid of a knight. He thought it might be a good idea to get the conversation off Sir Danth. “Do you know if the city of Brondaggiin still exists?” Tathan asked Adele. “It’s my understanding that it was made to be one with the forest and that we were getting near it.”

Adele stared at the knight for a moment more, and then turned to Tathan. “Yes, only two days travel. The city won’t be as it was in its prime, but it’s still beautiful . . . which brings me to my next point.” She gave Tathan a hard gaze.

Tathan had a feeling that his original mistrust was about to be justified. “Yes?”

“The Druids do not allow outsiders into Brondaggiin,” she said.

“Then there is no problem. They may enter as my guests,” Sir Danth stated.

Adele stared at Sir Danth. There was tension in the air and the potential for violence was palpable. Tathan *didn’t* want to get into a fight with Druids in the middle of the Willden Forest. It was not a formula for survival.

“When we were in Aaltdiin, Tathan and I noticed what looked to be a fortress next to a lake by the mountains,” Liselle said, interrupting the tension. “Does that belong to the Druids as well?”

“No! The fortress city is an abomination and the beings that built it are unnatural,” Adele said, biting off each word in anger. “It isn’t the work of Druids.”

“Enough!” Tathan yelled, startling everyone. He stood up and began pacing back and forth. “Everywhere I go, people get territorial and hostile toward outsiders.” He turned to Adele. “You say we’re welcome, but then tell us that we can’t go in your city.” He gestured toward Sir Danth while still addressing the Druid. “You become hostile toward him, calling him a killer, which he probably is, but you’re getting cranky about it.” He threw both of his hands into the air. “We ask a question about a fortress and you get angry about that!” Tathan pointed at Adele. “We’re not truly welcome here are we?”

She was quiet for a moment. The rest of the Druids removed hands from their weapons. With a deep breath, Adele replied, “You have my apologies. Things have been . . . difficult.”

“I understand difficult, I really do. But I ask you to understand that we’re just traveling through the Willden. The way south is not open to us,” Tathan said. “It’s our intention to travel north to the Kingdom of Kethril. When we saw the fortress, we

considered exploring it. The truth is that we don't know for certain where we're going, or what we're going to do."

"I *do* owe you an apology. My behavior is unaccept . . . Aaaaaiiggghhhh!!" Adele screamed, rising into the air, arms and head arched back. Tathan instinctively drew his sword, causing the Druids to also draw weapons.

Adele straightened upright, still floating mysteriously in the air. Dark green energy emanated from her eyes and mouth. A deep, supernatural voice came from within. "Come to me, Tathan of the Shadows. Come to me, Liselle, Child of Flowers. Come to me. I am the Mother Tree. Come and speak with me."

Adele collapsed on the ground as the mystical energy left her body.

The man that had approached with Adele moved to tend to her. The rest of the Druids remained motionless with awe showing on their faces. Tathan sheathed his sword and looked at Sir Danth who only shrugged. After a brief moment, Adele came to and stood up, dazed.

"Are you alright, Druid Adele?" Liselle asked her with concern in her voice.

"Y . . . Yes," she replied weakly. "I . . . The Mother Tree has only spoken through me twice before and it is difficult." She wiped an arm across her forehead and took a deep breath before sitting down. "You shall visit the city of Brondaggiin after all. And you shall visit Mother Tree." She looked at them all one by one. "It's a rare honor, one that few have been granted."

[Chapter 14](#)

After eating breakfast, they traveled the road to Brondaggiin. The four companions walked out of respect for their guides, their horses led by members of the Druids so the party could talk to Adele.

"Druids have existed in the forests of the world since the beginning of humanity," she began. "Few know our ways and nothing is written so as to keep it so. Most Druids are born into the order, though on rare occasion a person will feel a call to join." She shrugged. "It is as the gods will it."

"Druids are human then?" Liselle asked.

Adele smiled. "Yes. We are human. I think the difference is spiritual. Druids are different spiritually than all other humans though we wear the same race of bodies," she explained. "Many people have decided that Druids are different anyway. It doesn't matter." She waved off those opinions with a flip of her hand.

"Some people hold you in fear," Tathan said.

"And do you fear us, Friend Tathan?"

He chuckled darkly. "Me? No. Fear is a waste of time." It was a simple truth for him, but to the rest of them, his answer was cryptic.

"I see," Adele responded. "In any case, Druids care for the forests of the world. Wherever there is forest, at least one Druid will tend it." She went on, "The Willden Forest is one of the largest in the world. There is a thing very few people know about forests." She made certain their attention was entirely on her. "Each and every forest in the world has a Mother Tree. She's responsible for the well-being of the forest."

"Does she spank the other trees when they're bad?" Tathan asked dryly.

The Druids looked at him in shock while Liselle, Vevin and Sir Danth laughed aloud. The party fell quiet in a hurry when they realized the joke wasn't appreciated.

Adele glared at him and took a deep breath to keep her temper. "The Mother Tree is a sacred being." Her eyes narrowed, warning not to make any more jokes. "The Mother Tree of the Willden Forest is powerful and wise beyond all. I expect you to treat her with dignity and respect."

Tathan tried to behave himself, but couldn't succeed. "Yes. I wouldn't want her to send me to my room without dinner," he said with an irreverent grin. Liselle covered her giggle with a hand.

The Druid glared at him in anger. In fact, all of the Druids were glaring at him. Tathan concluded that hugging trees didn't cultivate a sense of humor. "So why are you so upset about the fortress?" he asked.

Adele would have glared at him, had she not already been doing so. Instead, she shook her head, muttering something Tathan couldn't distinguish.

"Seriously, what's the deal with the fortress?" he persisted, not caring whether or not she was cranky. Tathan was tired of people being cranky and over-involved in their own issues.

She didn't say anything for a few moments before answering him. "It's where the Rojuun live."

"I thought the Rojuun were a rumor . . ." Tathan said. Adele shook her head and looked forward as she walked.

"Rojuun? I've never heard of them," Liselle said.

"It's a new race and they are not a rumor." Adele picked at one of her nails. "The Rojuun appeared from the depths of the mountains about eight hundred years ago. It's their intention to take over the world, keeping humans as servants."

"And if humans don't wish to be kept as servants?" Liselle asked, incredulous at the concept.

"That is a good point. Humans *don't* wish to be kept as servants in general. The Rojuun are powerful though, and many people consider servitude to be better than death," she answered.

"Perhaps if you were to tell us more of this race we would better understand, Lady Druid," Sir Danth suggested. "It is not surprising that I have not heard of them if they have only existed for eight centuries. I find it difficult to believe they could force the entire human race into servitude."

"Of course, Sir Danth. I will tell you what I know." Adele cleared her throat. "The Rojuun first showed up eight hundred years ago in the Caaldith Mountains. We haven't been able to discover how they came to exist."

"Extraordinary. Please continue," Sir Danth said.

"They are similar to humans in some ways; with two legs, a body and head with hair that is always black, but then things get unusual." It was clear she didn't like this subject. "Their eyes are shaped like upside down teardrops with catlike pupils. Their skin is pale white, without color. They have long legs and fingers, but four arms and hands. Their eyes and arms are the most shocking part."

"Alright. I can understand that they're different, but what I don't understand is how a race that's new to the world could possibly think to convert humans into servants," Tathan insisted.

“They are beautiful,” Adele said. “Rojuun are artistic and people who would face them discover they suddenly don’t want to hurt them anymore,” she explained with irritation. “They’re also fast, strong warriors.”

“So they’re pretty, and good with a sword. I don’t see how that would enable them to take over the world,” Tathan said dubiously.

“Why do they want to take over the world, Adele?” Liselle asked.

“They feel that they are superior to humans,” she answered with disgust. “There is an arrogance about them. I don’t think they can take over the world, but they certainly seem determined to try.” Adele lifted a finger to make her point. “They wield four long knives, not swords, and they’re lightning-fast with them.”

“And they live in the fortress?” Liselle asked.

“They live in the mountains, deep in the caverns. The fortress city was built to protect them from the Druids.” Adele smiled darkly. “We do not think them so pretty. A Druid is a formidable fighter as well. The Rojuun have outlawed bow and arrows within the fortress because of us,” she said, patting the bow on her back.

Liselle reached over her shoulder to touch her own. She didn’t want to give away the gift that her uncle had made for her. Adele noticed the movement. “That is a very well made bow, Liselle. It is obvious that it was crafted with love,” she said with an approving nod. Liselle smiled quickly then ducked her head to hide the tears that threatened.

“Is their engineering any good, Druid Adele?” Sir Danth asked.

“They did not build the city. Humans did it for them,” she said in disgust. “Rojuun are in league with Emperor Kravka of Iynath, who has been taking over lands with their help. The emperor captures people of conquered lands then turns them over to the Rojuun.” Adele shook her head. “Between the forces of the Iynath and the Rojuun, the captured people don’t dare try to revolt.”

“That’s terrible,” Liselle said, shaking off her memories. “Tathan, we must save them.”

He looked at his cousin and saw that she was serious. Tathan sighed. “That sounds like fun, but . . .”

“I know. I’m being silly,” she said in embarrassment. “I just can’t stand the idea of people being held as slaves.”

“I would clarify a point,” Adele interrupted. “They are servants, not slaves.”

“If they’re being kept against their will, then they would be considered slaves by definition,” Sir Danth stated.

She shook her head yet again. “They make an income, but must declare allegiance to the Rojuun and Empire of Iynath.” She shrugged. “If they do that, then they’re allowed to prosper and own land. Adventurers may even carry weapons providing they aren’t used against the Rojuun.”

“How extraordinary. It is not possible to own land. The land exists irregardless of humanity or the existence of any other race,” Sir Danth remarked.

Tathan looked at him with raised eyebrows. “A new, four-armed race that turns humans into servants and you’re struck by the concept of owning land?”

“Well . . . I suppose you have a point,” he said. Tathan got the distinct impression that the knight was grinning at him.

“What if they don’t agree?” Liselle asked.

“The Iynath warriors kill any who don’t agree. Here we are, The City of Brondaggiin,” Adele said with a wave of her arm. Before them was a city within the forest. Dwellings were made of branches and leaves from living trees. Those trees were enormous, easily fifty to a hundred paces in diameter. The branches joined with each other as though the trees were all holding arms in friendship. Dwellings hung from these at different levels.

“I thought we were two days out of Brondaggiin, Druid Adele.” Liselle looked around in awe as she spoke. It was late morning.

“We took a shortcut,” she replied with a smug smile. It was clear she intended to keep the method of travel a secret. “Come with me. I’ll take you to Mother Tree.”

The party, with the exception of Sir Danth, looked around at the trees and dwellings in awe. There were people living in the city, though it was not crowded. A light breeze rustled the leaves and brought the sounds of wildlife mixed with voices of people in the distance. Children ran and played in the trees and on the ground.

After walking for ten minutes, they came to a large clearing with an amphitheater dug into the center. It would sit two thousand on the benches with probably another five thousand in the trees surrounding it.

“I won a competition among the knighthood here,” said Sir Danth. “Lords cheered me while ladies threw their scarves . . . and other items . . . to me for their favor.”

“That sounds exciting!” Liselle said with a smile. “I wish I could have been there.

“You would have been the fairest of all the ladies,” Sir Danth said to Liselle.

Adele rolled her eyes and led them forward for another fifteen minutes. The largest tree any of them ever laid eyes upon appeared before them. Instead of one central trunk, this tree had eighty, the smallest of which was one hundred paces thick. Each of these trunks rose from the ground, wrapping around each other as they reached toward the sky. It was hundreds of feet tall, towering above the forest around it.

“I introduce to you, Mother Tree of the Willden Forest,” Adele said in a formal voice with a grand, sweeping gesture.

“How extraordinary,” Sir Danth stated. “That wasn’t there before.”

Chapter 15

They turned to look at Sir Danth. He shrugged. “It wasn’t here the last time I was here. I have never heard of a Mother Tree in Brondaggiin, or anywhere to be honest.”

“Mother Tree did not live in Brondaggiin until centuries after the Great Disappearing, Sir Danth. It moved here when the Rojuun appeared,” Adele explained.

A deep, rich and sonorous voice sounded within their minds. It wasn’t painful or even intrusive, more like the touch of the breeze upon a leaf. “Greetings, Travelers. Welcome to Willden. May the breeze bring peace and warmth to your hearts.”

Sir Danth bowed while Vevin did a dance of greeting. Liselle followed Sir Danth’s example with a curtsy. Tathan tried to decide between giving a simple hello or a bow before saying, “Hello, Mommy Tree. How are your children behaving today?” He immediately thought to himself that there were probably good reasons so many people in his life wanted to kill him.

Laughter drifted through their minds. The enormous tree rustled as though moved by wind. “My children are well this day, Tathan of the Shadows. I enjoy your irreverent humor.”

Tathan bowed respectfully. “Thank you Mother Tree. It tends to get me in trouble most of the time.”

A deep, motherly chuckle touched their minds. “Yes. I see that trouble follows you even now. Do not worry. That trouble will not reach you in this forest.”

Tathan wondered what Mother Tree knew. Could someone have followed him even this far, and what did she mean by ‘that trouble’ would not reach him?

“Sir Danth, it is good to see a Knight of Morhain in the Willden once more. I am afraid all of your people are gone,” she said with sorrow in her voice. Tathan imagined drooping leaves in his mind.

Vevin was the next to be addressed. “My dear dragon, I see the pain you suffer and I suffer with you.” Vevin looked very sad and his lower lip quivered. A branch filled with leaves and flowers reached down from the canopy and gently brushed his face. The wound closed, leaving a long white scar. Relief washed over Vevin’s face. Tathan wondered yet again, what in the world could do such a thing to a dragon.

“And you, Liselle, Child of Flowers.” Everyone’s attention turned to Liselle, who took a worried step back. “Did you know that you were born of flowers, my dear?”

Liselle frowned, slowly shaking her head no.

“It is true. Your mother was not able to bear children,” the voice spoke gently through their minds. “She would go to a field of flowers where she would cry for hours. She would lean down and caress the flowers with her cheeks to brush the tears away.” Tathan looked at his cousin who didn’t seem to know how to react. She moved closer to him and smiled thankfully when he put his arm around her shoulder in comfort.

The Mother Tree continued, “One evening, after telling the flowers of her sorrow, she fell asleep in the field. The flowers held her through the night and the next four days.” Realization was beginning to dawn on Liselle’s face causing her eyes to widen. “At the end of the four days and nights, your mother stood up, smiling in the knowledge that she was with child.”

Tathan caught his cousin as she fainted. He let her down to the grass. “It appears as though her mother never told her the story,” Mother Tree mentioned offhandedly in their minds.

“It would seem so,” Sir Danth said with a chuckle. “Now we know why she is ‘Liselle, Child of Flowers’ but I would know why her cousin is called ‘Tathan of the Shadows’. Was his mother impregnated by shadows?” he asked with another chuckle.

Before anyone else could react, the tip of Tathan’s sword was at Sir Danth’s neck where the helmet met armor. The knight’s posture showed surprise at the speed. Everyone froze as Tathan held his sword at the knight’s throat. Everyone except for Vevin, who did a nervous shuffle dance.

Tathan sheathed his sword just as quickly as he had drawn it. Not saying anything, he knelt once more by Liselle’s side, ignoring the dropped jaws of the Druids. The loss of his mother was still fresh and it hurt to hear a joke in her name.

Mother Tree’s voice sounded through their minds once more just as Liselle was coming around. “Tathan was made in the way of humans, not shadows. His name is his own and not mine to tell of,” she said. “I am sorry for the loss of your mothers, Liselle

and Tathan.” They felt flowered branches lean down to touch their cheeks and both of their eyes widened as some of the pain from their loss healed. It was as though a balm had touched their souls in the place where loss was stored.

“It is not possible to fully heal the pain of loss, only to ease it.” Her audience envisioned a smile from the matronly tree.

“Thank you, Mother Tree,” Tathan said as he helped his cousin to her feet. “And thank you for making us welcome in your forest.” He turned to the tree, smiling at her both physically and with his mind.

“You are welcome, Tathan of the Shadows. I can see in your mind that you wonder what I want from you,” Mother Tree said. Tathan had been getting ready to ask exactly that. She answered the question before he could. “I have called you here to help the forest with a problem.” A leafy chuckle flowed through their minds. “It was rather convenient of you to be traveling through here at this time.”

“I see,” Tathan said suspiciously. “So did you somehow arrange for all of us to be here at this time?”

The Druids bristled at his accusation of their holy tree. However, she just chuckled through their minds once more. “No, Tathan of the Shadows. You would have been here years ago if I possessed that much ability. The Willden is in danger, as are my Druids, as is humanity. The very fate of the world rests in your hands.”

“Oh, yegods!” Tathan yelled, surprising everyone including the Mother Tree. “Really? You’re honestly going to do the whole ‘Save the world! Save humanity! Save the trees!’ thing. Really?” He threw his hands up in the air. “Sorry, but I’ve already saved the world twice in my adventures. It gets old after a while.” Tathan crossed his arms stubbornly.

Mother Tree was silent, her branches motionless. Everyone stared at Tathan in disbelief. “Don’t look at me that way! Those are the lines they all use. ‘The fate of the world rests in your hands.’ or ‘Only you can save the world.’ By the way, you don’t mind not being paid do you?”

Tathan turned to the Mother Tree. “So if we were to go on without helping you, your forest, humanity and the world would be destroyed. Is that what you’re saying, Your Holiness?”

No one said a word. Even Vevin had stopped moving. There was nothing but stillness from the Mother Tree for a few moments before she finally spoke. “I don’t know that the world, humanity or even my forest will be destroyed,” the Mother Tree admitted quietly. “I am neither omniscient nor prescient. I do not see the future. But that isn’t as impressive as saving the world is it?” she asked, physically shrugging her branches as well as shrugging in their minds.

Tathan was by her honesty. “No, it isn’t. I might be willing to help you, Mother Tree, but I don’t want to be treated like a naïve fool.” He smiled to let her know he meant no offense.

“You have every right to feel so. I do wish for your help. I also believe it might be very important to the future of humanity,” she stated sincerely. “I won’t ask you to save the world as I don’t believe it’s possible for any one person to ever do so. A world may only ever be saved by all of its denizens working in concert.”

“What of prophecy, Mother Tree?” Sir Danth asked. “At times there is prophecy stating that a blessed one will save the world or a cursed one will destroy it.”

“There is no such prophecy here, Sir Knight. Forests do not have prophecies, nor are the Druids allowed them,” she replied. “Tathan of the Shadows is correct. By telling you that you are saving the world, it calls to your sense of duty.” The branches shrugged again. “I am asking Tathan of the Shadows and Liselle, Child of Flowers to help my forest and my Druids. It is my hopes that you will help them, Sir Danth, though I have no idea how I would repay the debt. I would also like Vevin Dragon to help them as well.”

“I’m willing to help, Mother Tree,” Liselle said. They all turned to look at her. “I don’t know what else to do now with my parents gone.” She shrugged, hugging her arms around herself. “I’ve been following my cousin Tathan because he knows the world and I don’t know what else to do.” She smiled at her cousin who smiled back. “I would like a purpose now, whether to save the world, a forest or just to help a friend. I’d like to help you if Tathan is also willing.”

“I’m willing to listen at least,” Tathan said.

“I go where Master Tathan and Lady Liselle travel and will aid them in their endeavors. I have no goal of my own at the moment and need no reward,” Sir Danth said.

“Oh yes! I would love to do something! I like doing something! Something is fun!” exclaimed Vevin who had been hoping for an excuse to do his happy dance again.

“Very well. Adele has told you somewhat of the Rojuun. I will tell you more now,” Mother Tree began. “Eight centuries ago, a race appeared from the depths of the Caaldith Mountains. That was not a problem. The problem is that they declared humans should serve them. At first, Druids did not take them seriously. Then the Rojuun attempted to punish some of the Druids for not serving them.” There was anger in the Mother Tree’s voice. The forest became darker and ominous. “They entered a village near Trohiin Lake, killing the Druids there including all the children.”

Their escorts had hard looks on their faces. The companions stood still, noticing that darkness had fallen over the forest.

“I knew instantly, but could not protect them fast enough. I moved from my previous location near the lake to the City of Brondaggiin, which was safer. The Rojuun did not know of me or the powers of the forest. They learned quickly though.” The forest began to relax a little, allowing the party to breathe easier. “Druids followed the Rojuun into the caves, killing many of them.”

The hostility of the trees turned to sadness. “The Rojuun are very good warriors and many of my people were lost. Druids are very capable when it comes to fighting, but are not naturally warlike. Their purpose is to promote the growth of forests.”

“If Rojuun attacked Druids, would the forest not turn against them? The Willden is not an entity I would wish to be hostile toward me,” Tathan said.

Sunlight flowed back into the area where they stood as trees moved back. Mother Tree flowed peace to their minds. “I apologize. You are welcome here and are safe with us,” the Mother Tree reassured them. “Rojuun have not come into the forest since then. Two hundred years ago, humans came through their tunnels to begin building the fortress city with its walls.”

“Humans built it? Why not the Rojuun?” Sir Danth asked.

“The humans who built the city were captives of Iynath. The current emperor’s grandfather began the conquests, which continue to this day,” Adele said, breaking into the conversation.

“Then we will definitely help. What do you need us to do Mother Tree?” Liselle asked fiercely.

Tathan turned to her and saw the fire in her eyes. “Liselle?” he asked hesitantly.

“They killed our family, Cousin. If the Rojuun and the Empire are the reason they died, then I want to stop them,” Liselle said intensely.

Vevin came over and gave her a big hug. “Don’t be mad Lady Liselle!” She relaxed some, hugging him back.

Tathan turned to the Mother Tree. “What exactly is it you want us to do, Mother Tree?” he asked.

The great tree didn’t respond right away. “I don’t know.”

The party exchanged looks before turning to the Druids who seemed just as surprised by the answer. “You don’t know what you want us to do?” Liselle asked, releasing herself from Vevin’s hug.

Mother Tree shrugged her branches again. “I’m very sorry, but I know trees, animals, forest, the sky and . . .” she trailed off for a moment before continuing. “I don’t know how humans or Rojuun do things. I don’t know what I need you to do other than save my forest from being destroyed.” There was a pleading tone in their minds. Mother Tree seemed momentarily helpless.

“Do you need us to destroy the Rojuun?” Sir Danth asked.

“I don’t think so,” she replied, twisting her trunk back and forth as one would their head to say no. “I do not wish the violent death of living things, even though they may wish the death of trees.”

Tathan had never been offered a job without definite purpose. “Let me see if I have this straight. The Rojuun are a new race that wants to take over the world, making humans their servants. They do not have respect for forest, but are afraid of Druids.” He looked up to see the nods of their escorts as well as a mental nod from the Mother Tree. “You want us to do something about the Rojuun, but don’t know what, other than you don’t want us to just kill them.” He looked at the Druids again and after exchanging a few looks, they nodded once more as did the Mother Tree.

“Right. You said there are humans in the fortress and they’re treated well. You also mentioned that people are allowed to carry weapons?”

“With the exception of bows, Yes,” Adele confirmed. “The Rojuun are rather naïve and trusting when it comes to humans who agree to be servants. Humans are allowed to live normal lives. It’s very odd.”

“So the four of us could walk into the fortress with our weapons and . . .” Tathan had no idea what they would do then.

“Yes,” Mother Tree said.

Tathan rubbed his chin. “Perhaps we won’t have to harm them. We know the Rojuun are a threat to the forest. They’ve shown a willingness to murder for their purposes.” He paused for a moment. “What we don’t know is what to do about it.”

“That sums it up. It’s not helpful, but it sums it up,” Adele said dryly.

Tathan grinned at her before continuing. “My suggestion is that the four of us go to the fortress, mix in with the humans there and start asking questions. Perhaps we can discover some sort of resistance and help them to overcome the Rojuun.”

They considered his words. He shrugged. "Failing that, we can gather information and formulate a plan. I don't mind helping, and I'm curious about this new race. In addition, I don't have anywhere else to go right now."

"It seems like a good plan to me. It sounds frightening, but I want to try it," Liselle said. "What do you think, Mother Tree?"

"That is an excellent plan." The air was warm and pleasant. Birds sang in the trees and wildflowers bloomed. It was clear that Mother Tree was very happy.

"Well, it's not really. I don't even know if we can get into the fortress." Tathan admitted.

"It's a good plan. Getting into the fortress won't be a problem as long as you aren't a Druid," Adele said with a smile. "They don't like Druids. If you don't admit allegiance to us, you should be fine."

"There is something else, Tathan," the Mother Tree said.

"Yes, Mother Tree?" he asked.

Mother Tree smiled at them through their minds. "I have a special item to help you and your companions on your quest." A small stick came down from the tree above and floated before him.

"Oh joy. A stick!" Tathan exclaimed with an irreverent grin.

The Mother Tree chuckled at his humor, though the Druids all glared for his disrespect. "Yes, a stick. It is magical if that means anything to you," she said with a mental smile.

"Yes. It means a great deal." Then with a straight face, Tathan said, "You see, I've always wanted a magical stick."

"I never knew magical sticks existed!" Vevin exclaimed. "How wonderful!" Two somersaults were thrown into the happy dance.

Mother Tree chuckled some more, ignoring the scowls given to Tathan by the Druids. "In truth, it is a simple thing, but one you will find very useful." She did not allow him to make another joke before continuing this time. "You are a person of shadows, yet one needs light to cast a shadow. The caverns of the world have light in them from plants. This I know. However, I believe many caverns are dark. This stick will cast a light, which will enable you to see in them." As she spoke, a green light came from the tip of the stick. "However, it is not a normal light. It will also cast light upon hidden things."

Tathan plucked it out of the air. "*That* sounds interesting. What exactly do you mean by hidden if you don't mind my asking?"

"I mean things you do not see with normal sight. It may be a secret passage, or an item that is hidden," she explained. "You will be able to see them for what they are."

"Why do you need a light to see hidden things?" Vevin asked with his head cocked to the side in curiosity. "Can you not see these things normally?"

They all turned to look at Vevin. The Mother Tree explained, "Humans do not have the vision of dragons, Vevin. They cannot see that which is hidden."

"Or that which is through walls, floors, hundreds of miles away, invisible or most other things," Tathan finished the sentence with a smile for Vevin. The dragon smiled back at him with his sharp teeth. Then Tathan turned to the Mother Tree and said "Thank you, Mother Tree. We'll do all we can and let you know as soon as we find out anything."

“You are very welcome, Tathan of the Shadows. Go with Adele and she will show you to dwellings where you will be comfortable. I wish you the best in your venture.”

“Please, come this way.” Adele motioned for the party to follow them. The rest of the Druids left the party to go off about their own business.

“I like the Mother Tree,” Liselle stated to no one in particular. “She was so very nice.”

“The Mother Tree is wonderful. She is a holy being, deserving of respect and dignity.” Adele said with a pointed look at Tathan.

Tathan grinned at her. “I respect Mother Tree a great deal. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have joked around with her. Besides, she enjoyed the banter.”

“Of course,” Adele said, unconvinced. She led them to a small grove of trees a distance away. There was a clearing in the middle with simple, natural looking chairs and table. A wood and leaf shelter covered the sitting area from the worst of the elements.

Dwellings hanging from the trees faced the clearing. They were made of intertwined living branches. Each one was at a different level. Vevin jumped to the highest and looked down at them. “I like this one!”

The cousins chuckled at him and went to the ones closest to the ground. Each contained a bed, table and chairs, plus an area to prepare food. The side toward the clearing was open, but had a curtain made of leaves for privacy when necessary.

“Dinner will be delivered to you,” Adele told them before leaving.

Looking beyond the clearing, they could see the forested city was lush with life. Globe lights hung from various trees. When they had entered the city, one of the Druids mentioned that the globes glowed magically at night.

There were flowers around the clearing, which were very happy to see Liselle. She made it a point to go around touching them, smiling. Flowers liked it when Liselle smiled.

After exploring the dwellings, they sat around the table. “This is going to be dangerous, isn’t it, Cousin?” Liselle asked with both excitement and trepidation.

“Yes. I honestly don’t know how we’re going to do it. I’m used to sneaking around in places to discover information, but it’s difficult to sneak around with full armor,” Tathan said while looking pointedly at Sir Danth.

“My good rogue, Have you not noticed how little noise my armor makes? I believe that I do not make a sound when I move,” Sir Danth said.

Vevin nodded in agreement. “It doesn’t make any noise at all.”

Tathan’s jaw dropped in realization. He had just assumed Sir Danth was making noise because anyone wearing that much armor would make noise. Tathan had been lost in his own thoughts too much lately. It was a habit he would have to drag himself out of.

“I thought we were going to try walking in and see what happens.” Liselle said.

“I think so, but I can’t believe they’ll just let us walk through the gates,” Tathan said, standing up to pace. “Hopefully they don’t attack us on sight.”

“They won’t attack you,” a voice said from the forest. Three young women walked into their clearing with assorted food, setting it down on the table. Steamed fruits made taste buds water.

The one who had spoken was pretty, with blonde hair and green eyes. She wore a green tunic with short sleeves that left her arms exposed. A tattoo of leaves spiraled around her right arm from wrist to shoulder. She had an airy voice like the breeze.

“They don’t attack anyone walking up to the fortress.”

“That’s good to know. Will they let us in?” Liselle asked.

“As long as you aren’t a Druid, yes. The Rojuun have some sort of magical device that can tell if a person is a Druid. It sets off alarms if one passes the wall whether through the door or over the top. Anyone else can go in,” she explained while pouring drinks. It looked to be a juice made from fruits. “My name is Donna, by the way.”

“Hello Donna. My name is Liselle,” she responded pleasantly while taking a sip of the fruit juice. It was refreshing. Liselle looked at her cousin who seemed content to let her talk to the girl while he attacked the food. Turning back to Donna, she asked, “Do you think we’ll just be able to walk around and talk to people?”

The young woman shooed the other two Druids off after they finished serving the food and drink. “A few people have escaped from the fortress. Usually, they’re people who have been sent to forage for food. The Rojuun tell those people that we’re dangerous monsters who snatch people, and to run for safety should they see a Druid.”

“I wouldn’t imagine those people see the Druids unless the Druids want to be seen,” Sir Danth said.

Donna chuckled. “Yes, well, there is that.” She turned back to Liselle. “We usually let a person see us from a distance in case they want to get away from the fortress. If they do, then we take them to the Kingdom of Kethril where they can find their own way.”

Tathan laughed aloud, surprising them all. “So the Rojuun send people into the dangerous forest. Some of those people disappear, but not all of them. It makes stories about Druids snatching people all that more real.”

Donna blushed as she sat down. “I suppose it does at that. The people we rescue, tell us they’re allowed to roam freely through the lands of the Rojuun. The Rojuun have extensive caverns throughout the Caaldith Mountains. There are also numerous valleys and plains in the mountain range few humans have ever visited.”

“Oh yes! There are lots of valleys.” Vevin agreed. He was sitting down, but his head still bobbed in time with his invisible music. Liselle noticed he was much brighter since Mother Tree had healed the wound. “There are lots of canyons too. It’s fun to fly through them!” he exclaimed with the biggest smile any of them had seen.

Everyone turned to look at him. Vevin put his arms out like wings then leaned back and forth as if he was making sharp turns in the air while making a whooshing sound.

Tathan shook his head in amazement. “Liselle and I were both raised in one of those valleys south of here. It’s difficult to get through, though the range isn’t as thick there as it is here in the north.”

“Exactly. The Rojuun have humans farm and raise livestock in those places. They have others mine in the caverns. Many live in the Empire of Iynath and their labor goes to the Empire as well as the Rojuun.”

“Mining is bad work,” Tathan interjected. “I would imagine those who do it suffer?”

“The people we’ve rescued say the Rojuun make certain humans don’t suffer. In fact, some say it’s better to work for the Rojuun than any king or lord.” Donna shrugged in embarrassment.

“That’s not what I expected,” Tathan said with a frown before going back to eating.

Donna brushed aside a strand of hair. “No. Keep in mind that this is just what we are told, so we can’t verify the information.”

“From what you are telling us, Donna, it doesn’t sound as though the Rojuun are truly evil,” Liselle said in confusion.

“In many ways, they aren’t. Rojuun are rather naïve and childlike. However, they believe that they’re a race of destiny and humans exist to serve them.” The expression on Donna’s face became serious. “The Rojuun believe humans were put on Ryallon to prepare the way for them. Now that the Rojuun are here, humans can use all we’ve learned to take care of them.”

“What about dragons? They don’t think dragons should take care of them do they?” Vevin asked.

“I don’t even know if they’re aware that dragons exist.”

“Can I eat them?” Vevin asked hopefully.

They all stared at him.

“We’re not allowed to eat humans you know. Dragons and humans get along and we agreed long ago not to hunt or kill each other. Some dragons eat people and some people kill dragons, but that sort of thing is punished quickly by specific individuals, both human and dragon. Dragons don’t have an agreement with the Rojuun, so can I eat them, and do they taste any good?” Vevin asked Donna.

The young Druid stared at Vevin for a moment with her jaw open. “I . . . I really don’t know.”

“I think it might be best to avoid that when we go to find out information about them,” Liselle said, trying to think of the best way to handle it. “Perhaps finding out if dragons are allowed to eat them can be one of the things we learn.”

“Oh! That’s a very good idea, Lady Liselle!” Vevin exclaimed. “But I don’t think they’re protected, so I may taste one just to see if they’re any good.”

Liselle gulped as the party and Donna exchanged looks. Tathan took a deep breath. “I would ask that you wait until we find ourselves in a position where we have to defend ourselves against the Rojuun, Vevin. Then you can taste one.”

“Oh yes! I will wait until we are in danger and then eat one . . . or more if they’re yummy.”

Tathan sighed as he went back to eating. Donna stared at Vevin for a moment longer and then continued with her story. “One thing you should know about the Rojuun is that they are artists.”

“Artists?” Sir Danth asked.

“Yes. They create music, paint, and sculpt as well as things I don’t comprehend. Much of their time is spent performing,” Donna said. “Part of the reason humans can go wherever they want is because the Rojuun spend so much time on their art that they don’t care what humans do as long as it’s not disruptive.”

“That’s amazing,” Liselle said. “You said humans farm and mine, but how do we explain Sir Danth in his armor, or Tathan’s sword, or Vevin’s teeth?”

“The Caaldith Mountains have dangerous creatures throughout them. It’s said that caverns and tunnels go throughout all of Ryallon, even through the center of the world.” Donna sounded as though she was reciting something she had learned from a teacher. “In these tunnels are many creatures. Some are harmless, but others are very dangerous, just as in the forest.” Donna smiled as she finished as though she had just passed a lesson. “Rojuun hire adventurers to kill the creatures that are dangerous to them.”

“What do they pay?” Tathan asked, suddenly curious.

Donna smiled shyly at Tathan. “They have gold, silver and gems. Word from the people we rescued is that the Emperor of Iynath turns gold into coins for their use.”

Liselle realized that Donna was attracted to Tathan. She didn’t know how to feel about it.

Tathan smiled at Donna. Apparently, he realized it too. “I’m sure the emperor keeps some of the gold for himself. So, we could go in there as adventurers and say we heard there was money to be made?”

“Yes, that is an excellent idea. I think it’ll work,” Donna agreed.

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Tathan proclaimed. “Let’s stay here through tomorrow night and leave the morning after. That’ll give us time to rest with as much traveling as we’ve done. We’ll travel to the fortress as adventurers and discover everything we can about the Rojuun once inside.”

They all agreed, excited now that they had a plan.

[Chapter 16](#)

The companions woke the next morning feeling refreshed. Liselle noticed that Tathan had left them for most of the day to spend time with Donna. A few of the Druid men had visited the clearing looking to strike up conversations with her, but Sir Danth and Vevin sent them about their way, for which she was thankful. Her parents had wanted her to get married and have children, but she didn’t have any desire to start a family. It was overwhelming when men made advances toward her. Luckily, no man was willing to irritate either a Knight of Morhain or a dragon, even one in human form.

Vevin had the horses ready to go, holding the reins as she mounted hers. Liselle found it amazing that the horses liked Vevin so much until he explained that dragons sometimes charmed their prey so they didn’t have to waste time chasing it down before eating. He further explained that the time chasing down animals was better spent flying through the sky in lazy circles, or hunting for treasure.

It had been decided they would ride along another narrow, ancient road the forest hadn’t claimed. It was five days journey to a small village where Druids would care for the horses. Liselle would leave her bow there in order to retrieve it when they returned. Tathan took the lead with Vevin behind him then Liselle. Sir Danth brought up the rear. It gave Liselle time to think about all that had happened.

There was a part of her excited by the adventure ahead. Liselle had wanted to explore the world ever since she was a little child. She would sit in fields with the flowers and look at the mountains, thinking about fascinating lands waiting to be explored on the other side.

Another part of her was filled with trepidation. It seemed like there would be a great deal of danger in their path. True peril was a new concept to her that had only become

real when her family died. The ache of loss was still there, but the touch of the mother tree had removed much of the pain in her heart when she thought of them.

Now they were going to a fortress with a new race of people, not the sort of adventure she had expected. On their journey through the forest, Tathan had told her of more remarkable cities. The way he described it though, they were all dark and sinister. It still fascinated her and she wanted to see them.

Sir Danth told her about wondrous cities of the past after joining the group. He spoke of magical lights in the streets with people in fine clothing going to grand parties where there was music and dancing. Liselle wanted very much to dance. It sounded truly divine.

What no one had ever suggested was visiting caves under the ground where humans were servants. They hadn't told her that her life would be in mortal danger as she tried to gather information on a mysterious new race no one understood. Well, Tathan had mentioned mortal danger, but that was a running theme with him.

Liselle had always imagined meeting new and interesting people too. What she hadn't anticipated were a hollow knight, a dancing dragon in human form, or a crazy cousin who drew a sword at every shadow.

She turned back to look at Sir Danth. His armor was magnificent, but in a sinister way. When Adele and her group of Druids had reacted fearfully of him, Liselle had begun to think of the knight differently.

"Are you alright, Lady Liselle?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Thank you, Sir Danth." She turned back around in her saddle. Part of her felt as though she should be afraid of the dark knight, but another part couldn't help liking him.

Vevin scared everyone else around her as well. She had even seen Sir Danth watching the dragon warily a few times. Liselle felt safe with Vevin though. The purple haired dragon was a happy individual and it made her feel good. Whenever he smiled at her, she made it a point to smile back.

Occasionally, a dragon would fly across the valley when she was a child. Her parents never noticed them, but flowers would point them out and she would watch them flying in the distance.

Liselle remembered one time, about the age of ten, when she was running through a field on a summer day. Flowers drew her attention to the sky where a small dragon was flapping erratically. It crash-landed nearby. Liselle ran to it hoping to help, not thinking that it might be dangerous.

The young creature had an injured wing. When Liselle went to aid it, the dragon turned on her with a hiss, biting her arm. She had staggered away from it, bleeding badly while the arm hung limply at her side. It was the most frightened she had ever been.

Then an enormous shadow fell over her. When she looked up, there was a full sized dragon landing. It was whiter than new-fallen snow. The young dragon waddled to its mother whining plaintively. Liselle fell to her knees crying, certain this new dragon would eat her. The mother dragon touched the young dragon with a claw. It glowed with energy, healing the injured wing. Then the dragon moved to Liselle who trembled in fear. "I . . . I only wanted to help," Liselle said, sobbing.

The mother dragon said nothing, reaching out with the same claw that had healed her baby. She touched Liselle's arm and the same glow came from the tips. Liselle watched in awe as her arm became whole again with no trace of the bite. Then she fainted.

Upon waking, the dragons were gone. Nearby flowers were huddled around her, keeping her safe. Liselle didn't get home until after dark that night and her parents were upset with her, but she always remembered that incident and the dragons flying over the valley.

Vevin bobbed his head side to side as he rode in front of her. She smiled at the sight of him. Hopefully, someday he would let her see what he looked like as a dragon. Liselle imagined that he was remarkable.

She looked past him to her cousin. Tathan scared her more than Vevin or Sir Danth, though they were supposed to be more dangerous. There was something dark and frightening about her cousin that Liselle didn't understand.

When she first saw him there in front of her home, he had looked lost. She remembered him drawing his dark sword on her mother. Liselle had never been so frightened in her life, not even with the young white dragon.

It was the look in his face and eyes. She didn't know if he realized that his grey eyes became tainted with black streaks when he lost his mind like that. His face filled with fear and hatred and he moved faster than anyone could react.

For the first time in a while, she allowed herself to think about the riders. Her cousin had killed thirty experienced warriors without getting so much as a nick. Liselle was naïve about the ways of combat, but not so much that she didn't realize her cousin was deadly dangerous.

She liked him though. He was nice to her and talked to her like a person, not like a child. Tathan was dangerous, but not toward her. He protected her, just as Sir Danth and Vevin did.

It helped Liselle to sort these thoughts out in her head. So many things had happened since Tathan arrived and the two of them had begun traveling immediately after the attack. The journey north had been filled with sorrow from the loss of her family. At the same time, the trip was wonderful. There was so much to see and the forest was beautiful. Tathan's tales of faraway lands helped her mind to focus on new things.

They had also discussed magic. Tathan showed her how to create normal red fire, how to cast wards of protection, and a spell to open a lock. He had her practice on a lock that he kept with him.

He had also shown her a book of magic. Tathan wouldn't admit it, but she was sure he had taken it without permission. There were words, runes, images of gestures and drawings of the effects created within it. The problem was that she had never learned to read. He admitted that he hadn't when growing up either, but had learned at the monastery. Later that night, Liselle had asked the flowers if they could help her, but they didn't know anything about reading.

She remembered the story the Mother Tree told her about her conception. At first, Liselle was upset, but later became happy. She loved the flowers and they took care of her. It had surprised Liselle when her parents didn't understand the flowers the same way. Her father looked at her as if she were crazy when she mentioned it, and her mother looked at her in fear. After that, she never brought it up again.

Now she had met Druids who were supposed to be able to commune with nature, only to learn from the flowers that Druids did not understand them the way Liselle did. The Druids had more of an affinity for trees, though most couldn't communicate with them as Liselle could either. She liked the trees well enough, but they were too stodgy and impressed with themselves. Flowers were pretty and happy. They smiled too, trees didn't.

When she was young, the flowers showed her places that Tathan most likely never discovered. Flowers were her friends and family, but she had the distinct impression most people would consider her somewhat crazy if she went around advertising it.

The horse she was riding whinnied, knocking Liselle out of her reverie. Clouds above made the day gloomy and her flower friends were positive it would rain. Soon, they would be at the walled city and the adventure would begin anew.

It was frightening, but Liselle decided it would be exciting as well. Besides, she had three very dangerous individuals to protect her.

Chapter 17

Five days passed quickly and they were at the Druid Village. From there they set out on foot, leaving the horses and Liselle's bow in the care of the Druids. After a day of travel on foot, they reached the edge of the forest.

Grey stone walls in each direction were the height of a four-level building. Numerous wisps of chimney smoke from inside the walls indicated people living inside. They stood at the southwestern corner and would have a bit of a hike to reach the gate that was supposed to be in the middle of the western wall.

"I've never seen anything like it," Liselle stated. "It's so large that it's frightening. Do you really think they'll let us in?"

"The Druids said they will," Tathan answered. "These walls are larger than most I've seen in my travels.

"This stronghold does not have very good defenses." Sir Danth pointed. "There is no one walking the top." They followed his gaze and sure enough, the walls were empty. "There is no moat or trench around the perimeter, not even spikes or stakes. It would be simple to use siege engines and ladders to take it with little loss of life. I dare say a determined individual could sneak over without notice." He glanced in Tathan's direction.

"I could fly over, but people tend to panic when they see a dragon flying over their city," Vevin said.

"I think we should just go to the gates as planned, and if that doesn't work, then we can sneak over the wall," Liselle decided for them.

"Of course, Milady. That is the proper course of action," Sir Danth agreed.

"Good." She led the way while the others followed with bemused looks. A short time later, the companions reached the closed main gates, large enough for a full-grown dragon. Four human guards stood next to a smaller postern gate at the side.

The guards put their hands on sword hilts at the sight of the approaching party. They wore chain mail armor with red tabards. Tathan cautioned his companions, "Make no hostile moves and keep your hands off weapons. Let me do the talking."

One of the guards stepped forward with a hand up. He was tall with dark skin, thick shoulders, dark brown hair and a bristly mustache. "Hold there adventurers," he said in a rough voice. "I've not seen you at this gate before. Are you Druids?"

"Nah, we're not Druids. We heard stories of work to be done and money to be made." Tathan spoke in an exaggerated tone. "I didn't believe it at first, but suddenly we walk out of the dark forest to see this place!"

"Aye, it's not normal for such a place to be out here." The man looked to be a veteran with scars from battles past. Tathan's manner had made all of the guards relax and their hands were off weapons now. The speaker looked at them with suspicion. "I'm Sergeant Soam. How did you get through the forest and past the Druids? They're dangerous ones, they are."

"Nah, they aren't that bad. They don't like strangers in their precious forest or something like that, but they didn't mess with us," Tathan said in the new manner he was using. "We didn't see them much, but Druids don't like to be seen."

"Aye! That's the truth," the sergeant agreed. "You don't see them until they're right on you. Then it don't matter. Lost more than a few foragers to them." He shook his head sadly.

Tathan drew back in surprise. "You send foragers out into that forest? Not a job I'd want! We can handle a couple of Druids, but I wouldn't want to forage from their forest."

Liselle wondered why Tathan was surprised until she realized he was being devious with the guards. The thought excited her, so she paid close attention to how he did it.

Sergeant Soam reacted well to Tathan's words, nodding in agreement with his sentiments about foraging in the forest. "Aye. I don't feel entirely comfortable here at the gate. I've seen a couple of them from a distance you know?" the sergeant said in a low voice, leaning toward Tathan.

"I'm not surprised. We saw a few on our journey here too. I think they like showing themselves from a distance to scare folk," Tathan responded with a disgusted shake of his head.

"Aye, true enough. No need to worry about them inside though. The Rojuun have defenses on the walls that prevent them from crossing over," he said. "Druids know about them, so it's no problem to tell you."

"Rojuun," Tathan said thoughtfully, pretending to have just heard the name for the first time. "I was wondering what they were called. The person I spoke to in Tillg didn't know what they were called, just that they looked funny."

Liselle had never heard of Tillg and wondered where it was and who Tathan had spoken to about them. Then she realized he was making it up for the guard's benefit.

"Ahh, Tillg. You're from the Kingdom of Kethril then," the sergeant remarked. "So they know of the Rojuun there. Some of us were wondering how far word had spread." The other guards nodded at this new knowledge.

"Well, it's just a rumor. Most folks don't believe it," Tathan said. "I was leaving Tillg anyway and needed a place to go." He continued with gestures, holding the attention of the guards. "Didn't want to go to the south. Got into some trouble down there a while back," he said, leaning forward with a wink.

The sergeant chuckled. "Yeah, that's how I came here too. Little bit of trouble on the other side of the mountains." His face became serious. "That said, it would be

unwise to cause trouble here. Rojuun don't pay too much attention unless threatened at which point they get dangerous." Sergeant Soam took a closer look at the group. "Well, you're an odd bunch aren't you?" His eyes settled on Vevin and grew wider.

"Yeah. Civilized folks don't like unusual people. That's why we thought we might stand a chance somewhere new," Tathan said, getting the attention of the guards back on him. "It's hard to live where people don't give you a chance, you know?"

The sergeant nodded. "I do know. Things are different here though. Just don't cause trouble and you'll be alright."

"No trouble, got it. Say, can you tell me anything about these . . . Rojuun? What do they look like? I hear they got seven arms," Tathan said convincingly.

"Just four," the sergeant said with a chuckle. "They have four arms with long fingers. Their skin is pale white." He described them in some detail. "The Rojuun guards wear colorful armor, yellow and burgundy. The rest wear colorful robes," he continued. "Their hair is black and thick while their eyes are like upside down teardrops with pupils like a cat. Amazing, really."

"That's remarkable. I wonder what you could do with two extra arms," Tathan responded thoughtfully, waving his about.

"Well, for one, they carry long knives in each hand when they fight. They're good with them too so don't upset them," the sergeant warned. "Mostly, they use them to play music unlike anything I've heard before. Or they paint. They seem to like to make music and paint and things like that."

"Seems like a waste of time to me." Tathan shook his head just like the sergeant. "What else should I know?"

The sergeant gestured toward the mountains behind the keep. "Well, if you're looking for work as you say, you'll need to go through the tunnels to the city of Alluu. The Cavern Road travels under the Caaldith Mountains all the way to the Iynath Empire." He pointed to the gates behind him. "This is the city of Puujan, although most call it the winged city. I think the names all have some sort of meaning to the Rojuun, but I haven't heard their language. They speak common all the time. Anyway, Puujan here is more of a human settlement. It's a good place for you to start."

"Why is it called the winged city?" Liselle asked.

"You'll have to see for yourself," Sergeant Soam said. The guards gave each other knowing looks.

"Probably because of all the bugs," Vevin said.

"Anyone I should talk to, or can you recommend a good inn?" Tathan asked, ignoring their purple friend.

"The White Tree Inn is a good place. The sergeant made turning motions with his hand as he gave directions. It sounded as though it would be easy to find and there would be a large wooden banner with a white tree in front.

"White Tree Inn. Got it," Tathan said. "That sounds like a human name for an inn. Do the Rojuun use human names for inns and that sort of thing?"

"Rojuun don't name or even build inns. It's a human thing," the sergeant said. "Most everything here is human built. The Rojuun don't care as long as they get what they want."

"What do they want?" Liselle asked. "Why do they need humans to work for them?"

“Well, they don’t like building things, foraging, hunting, or . . . well anything really,” the sergeant said running his fingers through his hair. “They can do all of that, but prefer making music, painting and stuff I don’t understand. They want humans to take care of them so they can do the things they like.”

“That sounds nice. I wish someone would take care of me so I could do the things I want!” Tathan exclaimed with a laugh. “They sound like an odd folk if you ask me, but if they pay . . .”

“Aye, they are odd, but they pay well and leave humans alone for the most part. Just don’t make them mad. Don’t cause trouble and they won’t bother you too much.” The sergeant looked at them warningly.

“We won’t be causing trouble.” Tathan reached out and shook the sergeant’s hand. “Thanks for the information, Sergeant. It sounds like there’s adventure to be had.”

“Aye, that there is. Good luck to you.” Sergeant Soam stepped aside, waving them in through the postern gate to the city.

Chapter 18

The Companions walked into a plaza with people going about their business along cobbled streets surrounding a beautiful, multilevel fountain. Mothers watched their children at play in grassy areas. It was early evening and the air was cooling after a warm day.

The sight of so many buildings awed Liselle. The myriad of people with different colored skin and wearing exotic clothing was a shock to her. She listened to their voices mingled with numerous other sounds of the city.

The most amazing thing was the surreal sight of multicolored wings sprouting from the buildings. They were like fairy wings of gossamer and lace. Each building had a set of wings upon it, each set was different from the rest. Many were multicolored, glistening as rainbows would in the light.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Tathan said. There was awe in his voice and he was staring at them just as she was. It made her feel better about gawking. Tathan outlined the shapes of them with his finger in the air. “They’re attached to the buildings, but they serve no actual purpose that I can see.”

“Bugs!” Vevin somersaulted in the air before doing a buggy version of the happy dance.

“They *are* beautiful. I traveled in my time and saw many ordinary cities,” Sir Danth stated after glancing at Vevin. “I liked the cities of Morhain, which were one with the forest around them. They were beautifully built using nature as inspiration. The wings of this city make it interesting and . . .”

Tathan cut Sir Danth off. “But they aren’t part of the buildings! The buildings are plain stone and the wings are attached to them as an afterthought.”

“Hmm, I suppose you are right,” the knight responded.

Vevin continued his dance, waving his arms about. “I like them! They’re pretty and shiny. I think I’ll put wings on the building above my lair.”

Liselle looked around. The buildings were solidly made of stone with slanted slate roofs. No wood or thatch was used. “I like them too. “The wings are beautiful and they fit. It’s the buildings that don’t fit, regardless of which was built first.”

Metal rods had been placed against the stone and something like wax had been melted to hold them. There were two, sometimes four wings on the opposite sides of each building. They were constructed of gossamer materials that fluttered in the breeze, making it appear as though the entire city were alive. Colors and metallic filaments ran throughout the wings, glistening in the sunlight. It was a beautiful spectacle that made the buildings they were attached to appear mundane.

“I would love to see it from the sky!” Vevin exclaimed. “I’ll fly over the city the first time I get the chance. It will be so wonderful!”

All of a sudden, Tathan’s sword was at the neck of a lad. The boy’s arm was outstretched and his fingers an inch away from Tathan’s money pouch. “You’ll not be picking my pockets, Boy.”

The lad appeared to be about twelve years of age. He wore ragged clothing and had dirty brown hair. Small silver earrings hung from each ear. He looked out of place among well-dressed citizens. In fact, the boy was the only person in the plaza who looked poor. There was fear in his brown eyes.

“In Morhain, we cut the hands off of thieves. I can take care of that for you, Master Tathan, should you wish,” Sir Danth suggested.

The boy’s eyes grew wider and tears began to well up. Liselle intervened. “Nobody is going to cut his hands off! Cousin, put away your sword.” She stepped between Tathan and the thief. He moved the sword away, sheathing it smoothly.

Then she turned to the urchin. “I would not recommend upsetting my cousin. He tends to be jumpy. Perhaps you can help. We’re looking for the White Tree Inn.”

The lad kept Liselle between him and Tathan. “Y . . . Yes. I can take you there.” He put out his hand as though waiting for something to be put in it.

“Are you putting your hand out to be cut off, Boy?” Sir Danth asked. “I would be willing to oblige.” The lad hastily pulled his hand back.

“What is your name?” Liselle asked him after glaring at the dark knight.

“M . . . My name is Athron. I live here,” he said nervously. “I didn’t mean any harm, I promise.” The lad brushed an escaped tear from his dirty face.

“Well then, Athron, as long as you didn’t mean any harm you’ll be just fine. Don’t mind my cousin and Sir Danth. They’re just trying to scare you,” Liselle reassured him. He relaxed a bit.

“BOO!” Tathan yelled with his arms raised like a monster. Athron stopped relaxing.

“Tathan! Enough!” Liselle scolded. “He’s not going to try to steal anymore, and he’s agreed to show us to the inn.” Liselle turned to the terrified thief. “Come now. Show us to the inn and tell us about the wings on these buildings.” She moved him toward the nearest street, glaring behind her at Tathan and Sir Danth.

“It’s this way.” Athron pointed toward a street at the far end of the plaza. The party followed while Liselle walked next to him. “I wasn’t going to steal anything. The Rojuun kill people for stealing,” he explained timidly.

“They just kill thieves? Is there no trial or prison?” Tathan asked sharply. Liselle looked at him with a raised eyebrow. Her cousin had admitted to being a thief.

“They don’t have any prisons. They just kill anyone who breaks the law,” Athron said in low tones. Tathan became very silent, frowning darkly.

“So tell me about the wings, Athron,” Liselle suggested. “They look like they were attached to the buildings.”

“Yeah. The Rojuun did it,” he said. “They do all kinds of things like that. Sometimes they paint stuff or just start playing music somewhere.” He pointed to a pair of rainbow colored wings on one of the buildings. “Those are my favorites.”

“They’re very nice,” Liselle agreed. “I don’t understand why the Rojuun put them there though. Do they do something?”

“Nah, they just look pretty I guess,” he said with a shrug. “They say that after the buildings were put up in the city, Rojuun came out of the caves and said the buildings needed wings.” Athron shrugged again. “Rojuun are really weird if you ask me.”

“How are they weird?” Tathan asked from directly behind the lad. He had moved closer to listen.

Athron jumped forward in surprise. “Mother of . . . I . . . They just are.” He moved to the other side of Liselle, watching Tathan warily. “They do weird things.”

“Like what?” Tathan persisted. “I mean besides the wings. What else do they do that is weird?”

“Well . . . The way they walk is weird. It’s more like gliding. And then . . . well, they don’t really do any real work. They always want to sing, dance, paint or . . . stuff. I don’t understand them.”

“Hmmm,” Tathan responded with an unsatisfied frown. “Are there any in this city or are they all in the caves?”

“They don’t come out by the gates very often, but there are some in the city,” Athron said. “There’s a Rojuun district along the mountains. They have large estates with big, colorful gardens. Say, you don’t know anything about them?” Athron asked suspiciously.

Tathan narrowed his eyes. Athron moved away as though to run before Liselle replied. “We just arrived. That’s why we need an inn. How close is it?” she asked with a reassuring smile.

“Oh, it’s not far away, we’ll be there in a minute.” Athron pointed up the street. “It’s a nice place, not too crowded.”

“Why isn’t it crowded? Is there something wrong with it?” Sir Danth asked.

“Nah.” Athron looked nervously at the knight. “It’s just that most people here are from the Empire of Iynath or the Kingdom of Klizania and they have their own inns and styles of food and stuff.” He indicated a couple of people as he spoke. One of them looked like desert folk and the other was dressed colorfully in the ways of Liselle’s parents. “The owner of the White Tree Inn is Hulda. She’s from some kingdom in the west and there aren’t many people from there in Puujan.”

“Any idea what country in the west?” Tathan asked.

“Nah, I didn’t pay attention,” Athron said. “Hulda keeps her place real nice though and she gives me a little food sometimes.”

“That sounds nice, Athron.” Liselle smiled at the lad who returned the smile, obviously smitten with her. “Where would we go if we wanted more dangerous work? I hear there’s good money to be made.”

“Well, there’s not much work for that sort of thing here. You would have to go through the Cavern Road underneath the mountains to Alluu. There’s a lot of work down there from what I understand,” he answered.

“Thank you.” Liselle noticed holes in the gutters along the streets. “What are those, Athron?” she asked, pointing to one.

“Those? They’re called drains,” he answered. “The water runs down them and into sewers below. It helps keep the streets clean and makes it so they don’t flood.”

“They’re common in most large cities,” Tathan interjected, “especially where it rains a lot or floods.”

“Oh.” Liselle realized that her naiveté was showing. After living her life in a secluded valley cut off from the world, this city with its walls, buildings and variety of people was overwhelming to her.

There were new aromas everywhere. It was dinnertime and she could smell cooking food from the windows of dwellings around her. The scent of the forest drifted over the walls, mingling with scents from people. Many wore perfumes, a thing Liselle had never experienced before.

A cacophony of sound assaulted her ears. The valley had birds, animals and elements of nature such as wind and rain. Here though, were people talking and making the noise of city life. Liselle could not help but look at all the sights of the city. This was what she had been dreaming of experiencing for years.

“I had forgotten that you haven’t been to a city,” Tathan said softly next to her. She turned to see him looking at her with a mild smile. “I remember my first time in a town. It was smaller than this, but the sight awed me.” He chuckled at the memory. “The first real city was an experience for me.”

“It must have been exciting,” Liselle remarked. “All of the sights and sounds. It’s so much to take in all at once!” Her eyes sparkled and her smile was bright.

“It truly is,” he admitted, though he didn’t share in the enthusiasm. “It’s also dangerous. The first time I explored a city I was mugged and left for dead. I won’t allow the same thing to happen to you.” He looked pointedly at Athron.

The boy’s eyes widened and he shook his head, thoroughly cowed.

Liselle put a gentle hand upon Tathan’s arm. “All is well and I know you’ll keep me safe. I’m also not quite so foolish as you of course.”

“Wha . . .” Tathan he saw the mischievous grin on her face and glared playfully as she laughed out loud. Vevin and Sir Danth laughed as well. Even Athron joined in a little bit, though he did so warily.

“Alright, Cousin. I’ll remember you said that.” Tathan grinned at her and gave her a playful shove in the shoulder. He continued in a more serious tone, “I truly will keep you safe and do everything in my power to protect you. I swear to that.”

She smiled at him, realizing how strongly he meant it. “I know. You’ve already shown that,” she said, playing with the flower pin in her dark hair.

“I will protect you with my life . . . existence? . . . I will protect you as well, Milady,” Sir Danth stated nobly. He stood straight and tall in his black armor and banged his gauntlet to his chest for emphasis.

“Oh yes! I will too,” Vevin joined in. “I’ll eat anyone who harms you!” he said doing a dance that probably had something to do with eating people.

“Thank you both.” Liselle blushed. “Thank you all. Thank you for keeping me safe and for . . . just for being my friends.”

“Here we are, the White Tree Inn,” Athron interrupted, gesturing at a large building with glittering white wings and a signboard with the picture of a white tree upon it.

Chapter 19

The White Tree Inn was a two-level whitewashed building with a grey roof that took up half the block it was on. The other half of the block consisted of stables and a yard. In addition to the sparkly white wings on the inn, there were dark green wings on the empty stable. Glass windows were set in the lower windows and shutters at the upper windows were open.

Tathan gave Athron a silver for his trouble and waved him away. "Thank you for bringing us here lad."

The boy took it and ran off the way they had come.

"This looks like it'll be a good place to stay," Tathan said. "We'll have to see how much it is. I have some money, but it's not wise to waste it."

"Oh! I have money," Vevin said. Then his face fell. "But he took it from me and I don't have treasure or even money now." The dragon moved side to side in a sad dance.

"It's alright, Vevin," Liselle said with a hand on his arm. "We'll get you some new treasure. Don't worry about it for now. Just having you here is treasure enough for us." She smiled wide at him in reassurance.

"Oh, thank you!" Vevin went back to doing his happy dance once more.

"Alas, I also have no money. Knights do not often need it. Even then, I used to be wealthy before my honorable duty, but I released all physical possessions when I swore my vow," Sir Danth said. "As you saw, there was no longer any money in the royal vault either, so grabbing some gold for expenses was not an option."

"That's alright. As I said, I have money," Tathan reassured them. "I have no idea what costs are here or how much we'll be able to make when we do get a job. Let me handle the finances and negotiations for rooms and services."

The party went in the double door entrance made of fine wood, which swung on well-oiled hinges. Tathan realized such doors would be expensive here with as difficult as it must be to get lumber from the forest. The scent of warm food wafted through the common room from the kitchen. He hoped accommodations wouldn't be too costly. There were a few gems in his purse, stolen in his travels. He could use them, but didn't like to do so. In some ways, he was just as much of a treasure hunter as Vevin.

Some of the money, a few of the gems and some minor jewelry had been scavenged from the warriors who had attacked their home. He had divided it into two equal purses, one for him and one for Liselle. Tathan had never figured out how to talk to her about it, so hadn't given it to her.

The large common room had few people in it. Tathan noticed the straw on the stone floor was clean, as were the tables. A small fire crackled in the main fireplace, keeping the temperature pleasant. A few patrons noted the party's arrival, but no one stared.

"Hello there travelers!" a tall, heavyset woman said with a great smile. She stood at the bar, cleaning mugs. Her hair was strawberry blonde and she had a ruddy complexion. "I've not seen you in town. Come have a seat and tell me of yourselves." Her voice was loud and cheerful as she waved them over to the bar with a thick hand. "It's a pleasure to see you. Dinner's just about ready if you're hungry."

Liselle sat on one of the bar stools. "That would be wonderful. The food smells delicious." Indeed, mouthwatering aromas were emanating from beyond swinging doors at the far right of the bar.

“It is superb. My sister, Renna is the best cook you’ll find in this town,” she stated confidently. “I’m Hulda, by the way. The White Tree Inn is my pride and joy, though we don’t get many customers at the moment.”

“Why don’t you get customers?” Tathan asked, though Athron had already told him. Sometimes, it was good to hear a story from different people. It could lead to new information.

“Renna and I are from Swelth, a kingdom to the west of here. We left to get away from a couple of lords who were fighting all the time.” Hulda rolled her eyes. She had gold piercings in each eyebrow as well as a silver one in the side of her nose and more in her ears. “We traveled for a long time looking for a new place to live until we found Puujan and were able to start our own inn.”

“You were just able to start an inn?” Tathan asked in surprise. “Most cities require all sorts of bribes and money to build an inn or any other business.”

Hulda shrugged her stout shoulders. “It’s different here. The Rojuun had the city built all at once. They designed the entire thing with the help of human architects.” She leaned on the bar as she continued to speak. “There are still a lot of buildings, homes and businesses that a person can move into. You just have to agree to pay some sort of tithe or tax in exchange and you can have one.”

“What sort of tithe or tax?” Tathan asked, instantly suspicious.

“Oh, it depends upon what you can do. I offer the Rojuun free room and board, and also a place to perform whenever they like. They accept that,” Hulda said.

“Are there any staying here now?” Liselle asked, looking around the common room to see if any were in sight.

“Nah, not at the moment,” she replied. “They don’t stay here too often, although sometimes one will wander in to perform on the stage over there.” Hulda pointed to a stage at the opposite end of the common room. It took up the entire wall, coming out a good twenty-five feet. “All inns have large stages and there are other platforms in common areas around town.”

“I heard they liked performing,” Liselle said to Hulda. Tathan liked that his cousin was asking questions. Most people found him to be too suspicious and tended to guard their answers. He noticed that they took to Liselle right away.

Hulda did respond well to Liselle. “Oh yes. They’re always singing and playing instruments. Some dance or just move slowly. I don’t understand it, honestly.”

“What do you mean by moving slowly?” Liselle asked in puzzlement.

“It doesn’t make any sense to me, but they think it’s ‘art’ for some reason.” Hulda shook her head in amusement.

“I’d really like to meet one or at least see one,” Liselle said. “They sound fascinating and even a little scary.”

“Aye, at first they’re scary but once you get used to them, they can be interesting.” Hulda became thoughtful. “At times, I think they’re even beautiful. Their voices are different from humans, sort of haunting.”

“How so?” Liselle asked.

“They have more than one voice,” Hulda said in a low tone, leaning forward. “When they sing, it’s like there are two or three voices coming out of them, but I don’t know where from. Even when they talk, they use two voices.”

“That sounds amazing,” Liselle said. “When do you think one will show up?”

Tathan could tell that his cousin was getting excited about the idea of the Rojuun. It worried him. He ignored the fact that almost everything worried him.

“I don’t know,” Hulda said. “Sometimes they show up every day. Other times they don’t show up for a week or two. It’s been a few days since one was last in here to perform.” The innkeeper scanned over the party. “Say, where are you from? You strike me as an odd lot.” Her eyes stopped on Vevin whose head was bobbing from side to side. His silver eyes gleamed and sharp teeth were in a big smile.

Tathan was surprised that people appeared to ignore Vevin most of the time. Neither Athron nor the guardsmen had paid attention to the dragon who walked among them in human form.

“We’re an odd lot from various places,” Tathan admitted, drawing Hulda’s attention to him. “I’m a bit of a traveler myself. In fact, I’ve been to Swelth before, but only for a short time. That kingdom has a bit too much conflict. The lords have recruiters who search for capable young men to fight for them.” Tathan grinned winningly at the innkeeper.

“Aye, I lost my betrothed that way. Of course, he was an ugly git, so I wasn’t sad,” Hulda said with a wink. Then her eyes narrowed and she leaned forward. “You’ll not distract me though. Humans don’t have silver eyes and sharp teeth.” She jerked her head toward Vevin. “He’s not Rojuun either. So what is he, and is he safe?” she demanded.

That was a difficult question and Tathan wasn’t entirely convinced. “Vevin *is* safe. He’s just . . . different. Don’t worry, alright?” Hulda just stared at him, obviously not even remotely reassured.

Liselle saved him. “Vevin is my friend. He protects me because it’s so dangerous in the world.” She smiled at the suspicious innkeeper. “I’ve found there are many things in the world that aren’t human and can’t be explained, but it doesn’t make them bad. Vevin is good,” Liselle stated firmly.

Hulda looked from Liselle to Vevin and then back again. “Well . . . if he’s not dangerous . . .” she said.

“Oh he’s dangerous alright. Very dangerous,” Liselle admitted. “But Vevin likes me and protects me. He’s the sort of dangerous you want on your side.” Vevin nodded vigorously.

Hulda’s eyes widened and she took a step back. The innkeeper looked at the four of them before settling on the knight. “And are you dangerous as well, Sir Knight?” she asked.

“No. I’m not at all dangerous, my good lady,” Sir Danth said with a straight face. Not that he was capable of any other sort of face, not having one and all. But the helmet was very good at hiding expressions . . . or would have been had he had any expressions. “I dance through fields of wildflowers and gaze at clouds, imagining what shapes they might be.”

Vevin was the first to giggle after a moment of silence in which they all stared at the black-armored knight. Liselle and Tathan burst into laughter immediately thereafter. The innkeeper took a moment, but then she joined in the laughter as well. Sir Danth looked pleased with himself. Tathan wondered how he managed to convey such impressions through the armor like that.

After a moment, the laughter died down. “We won’t harm your inn, Hulda. I promise,” Liselle reassured her with a smile. “Would it be possible to get a room and bath as well as dinner?” she asked hopefully.

“Where are my manners?” Hulda smoothed her apron and looked toward the kitchen. “Dinner is ready now. You should have some while it’s fresh and hot.” She smiled at Liselle. “I’ll have your bath heated while you eat. I know how nice it is after traveling.” She looked at the rest of the party. “How many rooms will you be needing?”

“We need . . .” Tathan realized that he had no idea. Up to this point, they had slept under the open sky. He and Liselle normally rested in sleeping rolls next to each other. Sir Danth didn’t sleep and Vevin just curled up on the ground. Nothing bothered the dragon, even when it was breezy or rainy outside.

“I do not need a room, Master Tathan,” Sir Danth said. “I will sit in the common room and reflect, or go for a walk around the town should the whim take me.”

“Alright.” Tathan thought for a moment then turned to Hulda and asked, “How much are the rooms, dinner and the bath?”

“The rooms are two uun silver pieces each with an evening and morning meal included,” she answered. “Dinner without a room is one uun silver. The bath is one uun silver with or without the room.” She spoke as though it was something she told people often. “If you want drink, we have good ale for a copper uun and a local red or white wine for two copper uun.”

“Uun silver?” Tathan asked.

“Ah yes. If you are new to Rojuun civilization, you probably don’t know that they have their own money,” Hulda said apologetically. “It’s called ‘uun’. They have gold, silver and copper just like most kingdoms.” The innkeeper pulled coins out of a purse underneath her apron. She laid three down. They were small with intricate designs on them. Copper was the smallest of the three. “Four copper uuns make a silver uun and eight silver uuns make a gold uun.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. In most countries, it’s ten copper to a silver and ten silver to a gold piece,” Tathan insisted with a frown.

“Aye, they’re an odd bunch with the money,” Hulda admitted. “But four and eight are holy numbers to them. They don’t explain why, but that’s the way it is.” She shrugged with her hands out helplessly. “Most people use silver for just about everything as there aren’t a lot of copper or gold coins available.”

“I see,” Tathan said, bringing out his small belt-pouch. He didn’t tell anyone about the other pouches in various places around his body. They had some of his gold coins and jewels, which he didn’t like to show to would be thieves. “I mainly have coins from Altordan. They’re widely accepted everywhere,” he said, pulling out seven silver pieces from that country. “Will you accept them or do you need the uun coins?”

“Aye, I’ll accept them. The Rojuun exchange almost all coins at equal values” she said. Hulda put away her three coins and then counted the seven silver pieces Tathan had put out. “Seven silver. Does that mean you’ll be wanting three rooms and a bath?” she asked.

“Two rooms, a bath for Liselle and one for me. One silver for all the information and advice,” Tathan said with a smile to the helpful woman. He turned to Vevin. “We can share a room, Vevin. If you want a bath, I’ll pay for that too.”

“I’d rather sleep with Lady Liselle,” Vevin said with an eager nod of the head.

“Umm . . . no.” The idea of Vevin sleeping in his cousin’s room bothered Tathan. He didn’t think a dragon would be attracted to a human, but until now, he didn’t even know that dragons could take human form. “It’s not proper for a man and woman to sleep in the same room if they aren’t married.”

Vevin’s expression saddened. Liselle frowned at Tathan. “So proper and so concerned for my purity, Cousin?” she asked with eyes narrowed. The innkeeper looked at the two of them with an eyebrow raised in amusement.

“Yes. It’s my job to protect you and keep you safe,” Tathan said. “Vevin and I can share a room.” He didn’t like the way his cousin was looking at him. It made him nervous. The flower pin in her hair seemed to be glaring at him just like the flowers had back in that forest clearing. He noticed its petals became a darker purple when angry.

Liselle’s eyes narrowed even further. “I see. Let me explain something to you.” She pointed her finger at him. “I know you wish to protect me and I appreciate that. You don’t get to make decisions for me though. Especially not with regards to who shares my bedroom or even my bed. Is that clear, Cousin?”

Tathan looked into his cousin’s eyes. There was fire in them . . . literally. Blue flame ghosted the pupils and irises from behind. He didn’t like it, but had a sense this wasn’t an argument he could have with her, let alone win. “Yes . . . it’s clear, Cousin.”

“Good,” Liselle said. The fire left her eyes as she straightened, though her gaze was stern toward him. She turned to Vevin. “If you are willing to take the floor, you may sleep in my room, Vevin. I don’t mind if you share a room with Tathan though.”

Vevin’s face brightened and he bounded off his chair to do a happy dance. “I don’t mind the floor at all!” His purple hair bounced around as he danced. Hulda stared at him, wild-eyed at the sight.

Tathan wasn’t happy about the arrangement. “Let’s sit down and have some dinner before we rest. We can figure out what to do next while we eat.”

“Take a seat at one of the tables then. I’ll have dinner brought to you,” Hulda said, gesturing to the tables around the common room.

“No dinner for me, thank you.” Sir Danth held up his hand to make certain Hulda did not get him anything. She looked puzzled but nodded as she headed toward the kitchen. Tathan chose a round table along the wall and sat so that his back faced the door.

Tathan had learned from various shady characters that you should always sit facing the door while keeping your back against the wall. He realized quickly that it was easy to spot the most dishonest people in a room by who sat with their back to the wall and watched the door all the time. Tathan had taken to sitting with his back to the door because those dishonest people ignored him the instant he did. Most rogues tended to neglect the fact that trouble didn’t usually announce itself when it walked in the front door anyway.

Sir Danth took the seat against the wall instead. He leaned back, crossing his arms as his helmeted gaze settled on the doorway. Tathan got the impression that their hollow knight wasn’t completely noble. Liselle sat on Tathan’s left while Vevin stood for a moment, wanting to sit next to her. He finally settled on the remaining chair across from Liselle.

Tathan studied the dragon for a moment. It had been hard to read him at first, but once a person learned his dances, it became easier to figure out the dragon’s moods. In

fact, Vevin tended to wear his emotions on his sleeve, or more accurately, in his dance. The purple haired being was staring at Liselle the way a puppy dog would its master. Tathan didn't know whether to be worried about it or not. Vevin either had a crush on Liselle, or just adored her the way a pet would. He hoped it was the latter even though the thought of his cousin having a dragon for a pet was a bit disconcerting.

"So what are we going to do next, Master Tathan?" Sir Danth asked. His voice was clearer than one would imagine coming out of a suit of armor. There was a metallic tint to it, but it wasn't heavy. Tathan wondered idly how the knight produced it without a mouth or vocal cords.

"I've been thinking a lot about our next move." Tathan used peripheral vision to see that no one was listening in before continuing in a quiet tone. Everyone leaned in to hear. "I want to spend the night here at least. We can find out more about the Rojuun by talking to people." Tathan looked at Sir Danth. "You mentioned taking a walk tonight. I think that's a good idea. See what you can discover about the town and its people. I plan to explore a bit as well. I want to see what sort of guilds the town has and whether or not there's a dark side.

"A dark side? That sounds dangerous. Will you be alright, Cousin?" Liselle asked with a worried tone in her voice.

"I'll be fine," he reassured her with a smile. "I know my way around towns and I take care of myself. In fact, I prefer the city streets at night. They're home to me."

"I know you can take care of yourself, Cousin," Liselle said. "I've seen how you handle your sword. It's just that I worry about you." There was a look of concern in her eyes as she placed her hand on his. "I sense that you've seen trouble and perhaps it follows you."

He would not discuss that with her. Tathan could feel it watching him, although it hadn't been bad when they were traveling through the forest. He had hoped it would be gone in Puujan, but he could sense it was stronger. Tathan squeezed Liselle's hand and forced a smile for her. "I know you worry about me, Cousin. I promise I'll be careful."

Liselle looked at him dubiously. At that moment, Hulda and a younger woman came out with food.

"It's the finest stew you'll ever taste," Hulda claimed as she placed the bowls on the table. The young woman with her set down a basket with bread and a plate with fresh turned butter. "This is Trina." Hulda gestured to the woman. "She'll get you drinks and anything else you need."

"Thank you very much Hulda," Liselle said. "It looks and smells wonderful." Tathan had already taken a bite and noticed the taste was as good as Hulda claimed.

The party ate in silence for a little while. Sir Danth didn't eat, staring at the doorway lost in whatever thoughts rattled around in his armor. The knight was quiet most of the time. Tathan wondered if it was because he didn't have anything to say or if it took effort to do so.

Sir Danth abruptly sat up straight. Tathan heard someone behind him and turned around to look. He became very still as he watched the pale creature glide through the door. It was wearing an extravagant robe that touched the floor. Dark reds, blues and greens all intertwined in patterns Tathan had never seen. The creature's movement was such that there seemed to be no steps, only a smooth flow as it progressed forward.

This had to be a Rojuun from all the descriptions they had been given. It had four arms, which ended in long, graceful hands and fingers. The cat-like eyes caught a person's attention right away. It was hard not to stare at the turquoise irises set in an upside down teardrop shape. They were more captivating than Tathan had seen in all but the most extraordinary humans.

The Rojuun had a lute in each of its right hands. It nodded in acknowledgement as Hulda greeted it. "You will get me red wine," it ordered the innkeeper pleasantly. Its voice sounded like two intertwined. Tathan noted that it commanded the wine as though obedience was expected. There was no request in its voices regardless of how pleasant the Rojuun was about it.

The creature was taller than anyone had mentioned, nearly seven feet. Tathan realized that all the doorways they had seen in the city were at least eight feet high. The grace with which it moved to the stage was beauty in itself. The gliding step of the creature made it look as though he was floating on air.

Functionally, the arms and legs worked just like a human's with elbows, knees, wrists and ankles. Tathan did recognize that the four long-knives sheathed on the Rojuun's belt would be deadly in the hands of a trained individual.

They watched it put the lutes on a small table near the middle of the stage. Then he took a tall stool from the back of the stage and placed it near the table. The creature seemed incapable of doing anything without grace, even sitting. When it settled its feet upon one of the crossbars of the stool, Tathan could see the creature was wearing silver slippers on long, thin feet.

The head of the creature was very much like that of a human. It had thick, black hair flowing down its back. The nose looked much like a human's, only longer while the mouth was somewhat wider. Tathan noticed there were earrings all the way from the lobes to the top of the ears. There were also piercings in the eyebrows and nose.

Hulda brought a bottle of wine and one of the finest crystal glasses Tathan had ever seen to the Rojuun. She poured a glass for him then set it and the bottle on the table. The creature took a slow sip before setting it back down. It drank just like a human . . . only more gracefully. Tathan decided he didn't like the Rojuun just because they were so much more graceful than humans were.

It took the lute in its upper set of hands to tune it for a moment. After doing that, it moved the lute to the lower hands and picked up the other with the upper hands, tuning it as well. Tathan watched in fascination as it strummed the first lute to compare tones on the second lute. It was as though two people were playing at the same time. Looking around, he could see the rest of the party was just as fascinated.

"This tune is entitled 'Light Blue Bugs floating along a Sad River'. I insist you enjoy it," the Rojuun commanded. It began to play the twin lutes, fingers delicately picking at the strings. The party watched in awe as the sounds of the dual lutes intertwined, flowing throughout the inn's common room.

Tathan had seen numerous lute players in his travels, even a few troupes of musicians playing together. None of them sounded like this though. The creature played melodies on the top lute while strumming rhythms, harmonies and countermelodies on the bottom lute. Its fingers danced along the strings, both sets of hands working independently of each other.

The creature swayed from side to side, smiling as it played. From time to time, the Rojuun would close its eyes, lost in the music. There was no other sound in the room as everyone watched, entranced. Tathan noticed that the Rojuun glanced at the lutes now and then, but for the most part played without looking.

Tathan enjoyed the music in spite of a strong urge not to because the creature had insisted the audience enjoy it. It was mysterious, even giving the impression that light blue bugs *were* flowing down a sad river.

After a few moments, the creature finished the song. The last few notes hung over the common room for a bit and everyone remained still. Then the creature stood and bowed. All of the listeners started clapping at once. It seemed that everyone had enjoyed it as told.

The Rojuun took one last drink of the wine before out of the inn, leaving everyone wanting more. "Only one song?" Liselle asked plaintively.

"Aye," Hulda said standing next to their table. Tathan hadn't even noticed her, which was unusual for him. "Sometimes they play a few songs, but they usually just play one or two that they're working on."

"It was so beautiful," Liselle said. "His fingers looked as though they were dancing across the strings when he played. I've never seen or heard anything like it."

"It was extraordinary." Sir Danth turned to the innkeeper. "Was it a male Rojuun? It looked to be."

Hulda nodded. "Yes. Female Rojuun are shorter and have breasts, which aren't large, but you can tell. Their features are also more delicate. If anything, their music is more beautiful than that of the males, though that's just my opinion. You might want to know that female Rojuun are often referred to as 'feju', while male Rojuun are called 'meju'. It takes a little while to get used to." She left to fetch the wine and glass from the stage.

"So now we know what they look like," Sir Danth stated. "The music was wonderful, but I find it hard to believe the entire race is comprised of artists. In the best times of Morhain, there were only a few minstrels, most of whom played at courts for the nobles and royalty."

"There are quite a few musicians in this day and age. The best play for the courts, but many inns and taverns have minstrels play on small stages or tables. Many faires have entire troupes of minstrels as well," Tathan explained.

"Oh! I've heard of faires," Liselle said excitedly. "I'd love to go to one. I hear that people wear colorful clothes and there's dancing, music and treats of all kinds."

Tathan didn't like the idea of Liselle being at a faire. "Rogues and all sorts of dangers exist as well, Cousin."

"Yes, I'd imagine there's at least one rogue at a faire anytime you arrive, Cousin," she said with a sly grin.

"Oh ha, ha." Tathan stuck his tongue out at her and they all laughed. Tathan decided that it was nice to have friends to laugh with. He had been a loner most of his life. "In any case, I've never seen any human play the lute like that. Of course, most humans don't have two sets of hands."

"Most humans?" Sir Danth asked with raised eyebrows. Tathan did a double take and realized the knight's visor was still on. He had no idea how he got the impression that the knight had raised eyebrows.

“Well . . . speaking of the faires, I was at one where a person had an extra arm,” Tathan admitted. “It was a birth defect. Most people die when that happens and those that live sometimes join the freak show at faires where customers pay to see them.”

Liselle narrowed her eyes. “You paid to gawk at someone with a birth defect?” She seemed very upset by the concept.

“Of course not, Cousin,” Tathan reassured her. “I’m a rogue and would never pay for such a thing. I snuck in.”

Liselle’s mouth opened in shock for a moment. Then she giggled as Vevin and Sir Danth burst into laughter. “Very well, Cousin. I just don’t like the idea of things like freak shows.”

The party ate their dinner and talked awhile, musing over the Rojuun who had played the song. They discussed his robes, the grace with which he moved and the music that he played. Afterwards, Hulda escorted them to their rooms. Sir Danth went with them to see where the rooms were before going back down to the common room. Vevin followed Liselle to her room and instantly curled up on the carpet. It bothered Tathan that the dragon was so enamored of his cousin. He didn’t know what could be done about it though and Liselle seemed rather determined to make her own decisions.

Tathan sat on his bed after taking a bath. He listened to the sounds of the city outside his window. It was good to be back in a city. It felt like home more than the valley ever had and certainly more than the Druid’s forest.

After things became quiet, Tathan went to the window. He studied the buildings across the street as well as the street itself. There wasn’t anyone watching the inn. He didn’t have any reason to think there would be, but always liked to make sure. When he was positive no one would see, Tathan jumped out of his second floor window to the street below. A quick tumble and he was on his feet, quietly walking up the street to explore the city.

[Chapter 20](#)

A gentle mountain breeze brushed against Tathan’s cheeks in the clear night air. Most large cities he had lived in reeked of unwashed people, trash and other such odors, but Puujan was clean with no trash in the streets.

Streetlights with a blue-tinted magical glow made it easy for him to see. Villages were often lit by torch, as were the slums of larger cities. The richest had magical lights lining the streets. Most extraordinary of all was Dralin, a city of magicians and business where the lights were multicolored and chaotic.

Tathan looked at the buildings as he walked up the street. Shutters were occasionally open and nowhere did he see bars protecting the windows to keep thieves out. It bothered him more than if there *had* been bars. There were different ways to deal with thieves in a city. If there were no bars in the windows, it meant there would be a way to deal with thieves that would deter them from even wanting to enter a window.

The street led to a large, well-lit plaza with an ornate fountain in the middle. A few people moved about their business. He stood at the corner of the street to study them awhile. Siah-ray was large in the sky and a Rojuun woman was sitting at an easel by the fountain, painting it. A group of young men and women walked through the place on their way to begin a night out on the town. Others looked to be on their way home from

whatever jobs they had. One man had flowers and an eager look on his face, most likely going to meet his sweetheart.

The one thing Tathan *didn't* see was anyone else watching the plaza. It was a prime spot for a rogue to find targets, yet he could see no one lurking in the few shadows that existed. There also didn't appear to be any guards about. Nothing about Puujan was right to Tathan. Tathan decided to head toward the mountain side of the city. Perhaps there would be something there.

Halfway down the next street Tathan tumbled to the side, coming up with sword in hand. He swung at the air around him twice, not hitting anything. A cold sweat broke out over his body. Nothing was there. He lashed out at the air in anger. Illumination from streetlights was hungrily sucked into the dark blade.

He swung his sword through the air a few more times to punish it for being empty. Someday the air might get cranky at him for the abuse, but he didn't care. After sliding the sword back into its sheath, Tathan continued up the street.

A moment later, he saw one of the Rojuun gliding in his direction. It moved much like the one in the inn and wore a colorful robe of swirled blue and yellow. Tathan stayed to his side of the street, watching the creature out of the corner of his eye.

The Rojuun angled to approach him. "You will assist me human." It gestured at Tathan's sword. "You wear a weapon at your side and you walk in the ways of the stalstalkuur which hunts deep caves looking for prey."

This Rojuun, like the one from the inn, spoke with two voices at once. Tathan looked closely at the throat and noticed that it was especially thick. He wondered if perhaps there was more than one windpipe in their necks. "Yes, I wear a sword, though I've never heard of a stalstalkuur."

"I need humans good with weapons. There will be danger and pay. You will get more humans with weapons and come to my house for your assignment," it demanded pleasantly.

"Oh . . . umm . . . where exactly is your house?" It took all of Tathan's effort not to rebel against being told what to do.

"I am Jarrn Garrn and my house is in a place." The Rojuun rolled the r sound in his names with both voices.

"Uhh . . . alright. My friends are good with weapons, but they're asleep. Do you need me to wake them and come now?" Tathan asked.

"Yes. The danger is urgent and human warriors are needed now." With that, Jarrn Garrn turned around and glided back the way he came.

Tathan stood there stupidly for a moment before following. It was easy as Jarrn never looked back to see if anyone was behind him.

Before long, they were in the Rojuun District at the base of the mountains. The houses were a riot of colors. Their yards had grass with trees manicured in various shapes. Tathan paused for a moment to take it all in. It was as though someone had given a child a rainbow and chisel and then let him loose upon the city.

He turned to search for Jarrn Garrn who was far down the street. Tathan hurried to keep up. In a moment, he was within range of the Rojuun who turned right onto another street heading closer to the mountain. Tathan saw him walking past a few houses before entering a gate.

It was a dark blue house with yellow and green highlights. Odd shaped bushes filled the yard. Night flowers, which worshipped moonlight, were blooming while flowers needing sunlight remained closed for the night. The wings on the house were predominately yellow with green tingeing the outer edges.

Tathan headed back to the inn. Now that he had found the house, he would be able to return here anytime. Tathan had a perfect memory for anywhere he had ever been. Even in the city of Dralin he had been able to retrace his steps though wizards had a habit of casting spells to confuse people who passed by their towers.

It didn't take long to get back to the White Tree Inn. He thought about climbing back into his window, but chose to walk in the front door instead. A quick scan of the room showed that Hulda was gone and a different bartender was cleaning up.

Sir Danth was sitting at their original table with his back still against the wall. He looked at Tathan, then at the stairs to the rooms and then back again. Tathan grinned and jerked his head for the knight to follow him. They went up the stairs to Liselle's room and knocked on the door. Vevin opened it, smiling and bobbing. He stood aside to let them in.

Liselle was sitting up on the edge of the bed, wiping the sleep out of her eyes. Her hair was mostly dry after the bath she had taken before bed. It glistened in the purple ball of light Vevin had cast near the ceiling.

Tathan took a seat on the one simple chair in the room. Sir Danth stood just inside of the door while Liselle remained sitting on the bed in her night robe. Vevin, incapable of standing still, shuffled from side to side.

"While walking along a street, one of the Rojuun came up to me. His name was Jarrn Garrn." Tathan did his best to repeat the name, but his tongue didn't roll as easily. "That's not exactly how it sounded, but it's as close as I can get with only one voice."

"What did he want?" Sir Danth asked.

"He ordered me to get more people with weapons and come to his house for an assignment," Tathan told them.

"Ordered you, Cousin?" Liselle asked with a raised eyebrow. "I can't imagine that went over well."

He chuckled in response. "I didn't like it, but wasn't about to cause problems. They give orders in a nice tone, but they're definitely orders. I'm not sure what would happen if I refused or didn't respond."

"We are looking for work here with the Rojuun," Sir Danth said. "It would make sense to accept, especially if they want people with weapons." He touched the hilt of his sword over his shoulder. "I believe you to be capable with a sword while Master Vevin is a dragon. But regardless of how capable either of you are, I can handle any danger that comes our way. There is little that can stand against me short of an army. Or a dragon," he admitted with a glance at Vevin.

Vevin did a little spin and grinned at Sir Danth.

"I'm sure the three of us can handle any danger we may be asked to face," Tathan said.

"Well then, you won't need me, will you?" Liselle said in a dangerous tone. Her jaw was set and her cheeks were flushed with anger.

“We meant no offense Milady. You may travel with us, but we will need you to stay aside should danger approach.” It was probably the worst thing Sir Danth could have said.

“Of course I should. I will stand aside like a weak little girl who is obviously not capable of doing anything worthwhile due to the fact that she does not possess a sword.” There was blue fire in Liselle’s eyes. Sir Danth noticed this and took a step back, bumping into the door. The young woman was now standing and projected an aura of menace worse than Tathan had seen in the field of flowers. He was very glad there were no flowers in the room.

“I sincerely apologize, Milady.” Sir Danth was repentant. “Your ability is very calm most of the time. I did not see the power within you.” The knight stood straighter and put his fist to his chest. “For this, I apologize.”

Liselle stared at him and then turned her attention to the other two, staring each of them down. “I don’t like killing and will leave matters requiring violence to you. But!” she said with a pointed finger in the air. “Do not make the mistake of thinking that I will meekly stand aside and cower like a little girl. When my abilities are needed, I will do my best to use them.” She became unsure of herself, the fire dying from her eyes. “I don’t fully understand them to be honest with you. I’m still learning.”

“Of course, Milady. We will not restrict you,” Sir Danth said reassuringly. “It is customary for companions to know each other’s manner of battle. I suggest we discuss basic tactics so that we may account for each other.”

“Good idea,” Tathan said.

Sir Danth folded his arms behind his back. “To be honest, I have not fought a battle in centuries. I’ve kept my skills sharp through drills though.”

“That’s wise,” Tathan said. “It would’ve been easy to ignore them. I’d imagine you need a good amount of room to swing that beast,” he said, pointing at the hilt above the knight’s shoulder.

“Aye. It would be best to let me take a good lead ahead of the group, say twenty paces or so. I can handle the first hundred of anything that should try to attack us, but sometimes things get through.”

They stared at the knight, realizing that he wasn’t boasting. Tathan spoke up next. “I’m good at scouting ahead. I’ll be able to let you know what’s coming and how many, then I can drop back and handle anything that gets past Sir Danth.”

“Good plan,” Sir Danth agreed. “I like it. A scout is always useful and can save lives.” He turned to Liselle. “And you, Milady, what do you know that you are able to do?”

“I’m good with a bow, but it’s in the Druid village. Besides that, I’m able to create blue fire and talk to flowers. It doesn’t sound like much, but . . .” she trailed off, not knowing how to quantify her abilities.

Tathan came to her defense. “I’ve seen the fire. It’s substantial and capable of damage. My cousin has good control over it as well.” He paused, unable to say that a field of flowers had intimidated him. “I don’t know how things will work with the flowers, but I feel that it’ll come in valuable at some point.”

Liselle gave him a thankful smile for the support. “I also have some healing abilities, so should anyone receive injuries, which aren’t life threatening, I can help.

“Oh yes! You made my cheek feel much better,” Vevin said.

“Excellent. That leaves you, Master Vevin,” Sir Danth said. “I know you are a dragon in human form. How do you fight when something attacks you?” Tathan was curious to know the answer to that as well.

Vevin stopped dancing. There was a puzzled look on his face. “I usually just eat them, or slash their throat with a claw if I’m not hungry, or destroy them with lightning or magic.” He ran a hand through his purple hair. “I haven’t been attacked very often, being a dragon and all.”

“Are you able to cast the lightning and magic in human form, Master Vevin?” Sir Danth asked.

Vevin breathed in, filling up his lungs. When he exhaled, a purple mist came out of his mouth and spread around his body. Small bolts of lightning ran through the fog. His liquid-silver eyes swirled and his hair ruffled from the magical wind only he could feel.

With one large inhale, the lightning charged mist disappeared back into his mouth. Vevin stood with arms out wide and head up in a grand gesture. And then he began a magic dance with extra spins. They applauded him. Not only had the dragon made it seem effortless, but he also had style.

Sir Danth put a hand up for attention. “I put forward this plan for battle should we find it. Master Tathan shall scout ahead, discovering numbers and details of the enemy.” The knight gestured toward Tathan, who nodded in agreement. “When it comes time to engage, I shall confront the main force and do maximum damage,” he said, putting his hand upon his chest. “Master Vevin and Lady Liselle will provide magical support and protect the rear from surprise attacks while Master Tathan handles any enemies that try to get away.” He finished with a flourish.

“That works for me,” Tathan agreed. “We can work out any further details as we learn more about each other.” Liselle and Vevin nodded. “I say we go to see Jarrn Garrn then.”

They gathered their things together and informed the bartender downstairs that they didn’t know if or when they would be back. Then they walked into the night air and headed toward the house of Jarrn Garrn.

Chapter 21

The companions stood in front of the Rojuun’s colorful house. Tathan chuckled to himself as everyone stared at it. They looked around at the other vibrant dwellings with wide eyes . . . well, Liselle looked around with wide eyes, Vevin’s eyes swirled and Sir Danth’s eyes . . . he didn’t have any, but Tathan was sure they would be wide if he did.

They went to the door and knocked on it. Moments later, a human butler opened the door. He wore a long yellow jacket over green leggings. His clothes and appearance were immaculate. “You are the warriors the master has hired?”

“Well, he hasn’t hired us yet,” Tathan responded. “I was told to gather people with weapons and come to his house.”

The butler frowned and glanced behind him to see if anyone was listening. “Are you familiar with the ways of the Rojuun?”

“We just arrived in town this evening,” Tathan answered. “We traveled through the forest from the kingdom of Kethril.”

“Kethril, through the forest?” he said, raising his eyebrows. The butler looked impressed by this fact. “That’s rare. The forest is dangerous and Druids frighten even the Rojuun.”

“The Druids didn’t bother us,” Tathan responded with a wave of the hand. “Treat their forest with respect and they usually leave you alone.”

The butler didn’t look convinced. “Ahh, still I find it impressive. I don’t know how much you’ve been told, but the Rojuun do things differently than you’ll be used to. It’s important that you understand certain things.”

“Of course,” Tathan said. “What should we know?”

“The first thing to know is that when a Rojuun tells you that they need you for a task, you automatically work for them,” the butler explained. “I know many adventurers who can’t handle being told what to do and might take offense.”

“It took all of my restraint not to tell him how I felt about getting an order,” Tathan admitted.

“Of course,” the butler said with a nod. “You look capable, but the Rojuun are extraordinary fighters. They’re fast and their knives are sharp.” He put a finger up to emphasize his next point. “If you were to kill one, the rest would hunt you down.”

“What is the penalty for killing one?” Sir Danth asked.

The butler raised his eyebrows. “Penalty? They kill you of course. There are no jails in Rojuun territory. If you kill one, or even another human, they kill you. If you steal from them, they kill you. If you irritate them or refuse a job, they kill you. There is no other penalty. You can try to defend yourself, but they’ll hunt you down and kill you. You’ll find very little crime in Puujan as a result.” He leaned forward. “Am I getting the point across to you?”

They all nodded. Tathan answered, “Yes, we get the point. If we do anything the Rojuun don’t like, they’ll try to kill us and keep coming until we’re dead.”

“Precisely!” the butler exclaimed. “So essentially, Master Jarrn Garrn has already hired you. If you tell him you can’t do the job, he will tell you to get more people to help. If you refuse, he’ll kill you.” The butler took a deep breath and stared at them with his arms folded. The look on his face suggested that he didn’t think they would be smart about the whole thing.

“I don’t intend to refuse,” Tathan reassured him. “I don’t think he could kill me, but I don’t want to cause trouble. There are certain things I just won’t do though. I’m not the best man in the world, but I’m not an assassin either.” The others nodded at that statement.

“That won’t be a concern. They don’t seem to care about politics, stealing or murdering each other.” The butler shrugged. “They’re extremely honest about things and treat each other, and even humans, very well. I can’t imagine the master will ask you to assassinate anyone.”

“Well then, I guess we’d better see what he does want us to do,” said Tathan.

“Of course. If you give me your names, I will introduce you.” The butler was back to the business of being a butler.

“I’m Tathan. These are my companions: Liselle, Sir Danth and Vevin.” Tathan introduced each of them one at a time. The butler acknowledged each with a nod. Vevin didn’t get so much as a second glance. When Tathan looked at his dragon friend, he saw nothing different. Vevin noticed him looking and gave him a big grin.

“Come this way,” the butler said, motioning them to come inside. “The first entry on the left is the sitting room. Make yourself comfortable in there and I will announce you to Master Garrn.” He said the name and rolled the r better than Tathan, but it just wasn’t the same from a human.

They walked in and went to the sitting room. It had two couches and a number of chairs with cushions to make a person comfortable. Most places that Tathan had traveled to had sparse wooden furniture with only a few cushions to be seen. This room had a level of comfort in line with the royal chambers of a castle.

Sir Danth remained standing while the rest sat down and looked around. There were rugs on the floor and numerous paintings on the wall. A small magical fire was lit in the fireplace at the end of the room. It was a chamber fit for any king.

“There you are and you have companions with you.” Jarrn Garrn entered the room gracefully, followed by the butler. He was just shy of seven feet, shorter than the Rojuun that had played the song at the inn, but taller than any of them. His cat-like eyes were bright blue. His hair was thick and black, just like the one from the inn, but braided into four braids.

“Your armored friend looks capable, though I don’t know how he can move in all of that.” Jarrn smiled pleasantly as he greeted them with dual voices. There was a chuckle at the end that sounded like two children laughing. “I don’t see any weapons on your other companions though.”

“They have other skills that serve the purpose,” Tathan reassured him. “Together we are formidable.”

“Very well then. Have a drink.” Jarrn motioned for the butler to pour drinks from a liquor cabinet. “I have a dangerous task you will gladly accept.” Once again, his voices were pleasant, but it was a definite command.

Liselle giggled at the look on Tathan’s face. He ignored her. “Of course. I would know what the details of the task are, Master Garrn.” Tathan had worked for dangerous people and knew how to speak without offending them. He just wasn’t used to being ordered to accept things and to be glad about it.

“The details are simple. My family’s home in Juulla is in danger and you are to remove the danger.” Jarrn sat in a chair near the fire, accepting a glass of wine the butler handed him.

The butler then brought a tray with four glasses and a bottle of red wine to the rest of them. Tathan and Liselle each accepted a glass.

“You are the human called Tathan, yes?” the Rojuun asked.

“Yes,” Tathan answered.

He gestured at the knight. “Your companion does not accept my drink, Tathan human?”

Sir Danth said, “A knight must keep a clear head at all times, Master Garrn. I intend no offense.”

“Very well then,” Jarrn Garrn responded pleasantly, not seeming to notice Vevin. “Before I explain, tell me if you know anything about the city of Juulla.” He addressed Tathan directly, ignoring the rest.

“We’re new to Rojuun territory and don’t know anything at all about the cities to be honest with you,” Tathan answered.

A puzzled look crossed Jarrn's. "Why would you be anything other than honest with me?"

That question caught Tathan by surprise. "My apologies, Master Garrn. It's a human expression, nothing more."

"Ahh, I am not used to human expressions. They are odd," the Rojuun admitted. "Let us get to the matter you will attend to." He set his glass of wine on a side table. "Most of Rojuun civilization is underground in what you call the Caaldith Mountains."

Jarrn Garrn's manner of speech was eloquent and melodic. He emphasized his words with delicate gestures using all four arms and hands. It was very easy to listen to and understand what he explained. "The world of Ryallon is very large and has thick layers of rock and earth, throughout which exist natural caverns." There was a look of wonder on his face as he spoke of where he came from. "It is in these caverns where the Rojuun have grown, developed and learned of our destiny."

"There are a great many dangers in the depths of the world. Rojuun have become exceptional warriors." His voices were deep and smooth as he narrated his story. "Yet the dangers of the underground do not rest. It is not right that Rojuun should lose their lives defending their homes when there is a servant race that can fight those dangers."

Tathan used all of his willpower to resist the urge to slice the creature's throat. The other three sat in stony silence.

The Rojuun continued, oblivious to the restrained hostility of his guests. The butler was very aware of it though, and stood behind his master with fearful eyes. "Juulla is the city where my family lives. It is at the edge of Rojuun territory in deep caverns," Jarrn Garrn said. "The main city is in a vast cave, larger than the city we're in now. Rojuun cities are all in caves, some smaller, some larger. We have built our architecture beautifully. It is also done in such a way that it braces the cavern to keep it whole."

The party *was* learning information about the Rojuun, so they listened intently while managing to set aside their irritation at Jarrn's manner.

"Many smaller caves exist in which small communities or families settle and it is in one such cave that my family lives. It is at the outskirts of Juulla and therefore very close to danger." Jarrn Garrn leaned forward, a serious look on his face. "I am hiring you to remove the danger to my family. You will accept the job. It will please you to receive pay for this."

He stood, drawing two pouches out of a pocket in his robe. One was small and fit in his palm, the other was the size of two fists. "It is my understanding that humans like gold and gems." He poured them out onto a table in the middle of the room. Gold coins came out of the large bag. In the small bag were diamonds, rubies, emeralds and assorted lesser gems.

Tathan stared at the small fortune. "Alright, I admit the pay is good. I'd like to know the nature of the danger."

"That is very sensible of you," Jarrn Garrn responded. "There are creatures in the caverns who foolishly consider Rojuun to be food!" All four of his arms waved about as he spoke in anger. One of his voices had become shrill and the other lowered to a growl. The butler took a step back.

"They must be very stupid to think such a thing," Liselle agreed with a nod and frown. Tathan looked at his cousin with respect. She was saying exactly the right thing to keep him friendly.

“Yes! They are very stupid!” the Rojuun agreed emphatically. He clenched all four of his fists and then took a deep breath before sitting down. “But they attack and though my family fights back, sometimes we lose someone.” Sorrow washed over him. “My son was taken from me. He was *so* wonderful.”

“Tell us of these dastardly creatures who would treat such noble beings and their children in such an indignant manner,” said Sir Danth nobly. Tathan thought the knight was laying it on a bit thick.

Master Garrn seemed to appreciate the sentiment. “That is what I like to hear! Proper outrage,” he replied with a double fist pump into the air with both of his right hands. He leaned forward. “They are called sstejj.”

Their employer sat back and described the sstejj in quiet, seething tones. “They come from the very rocks of the caverns and are a malignant mutation of the substance that makes up the world of Ryallon. The creatures have no eyes, hunting by scents in the air and vibrations in the ground.” He used his hands to outline what the creatures looked like as he spoke. “Their heads are like jagged rocks with sharp rows of teeth in long muzzles. They do not have proper noses, but breathe through gill like openings on the side of their heads.” The Rojuun looked at the companions intently as he made his next point. “They can breathe underwater while traveling in underground lakes and rivers making them all that more dangerous. Nowhere in the caverns is safe from sstejj.”

His tone was ominous as he spoke, causing the hair on Tathan’s neck to stand on end. “They move on eight legs, each with eight joints. The legs are made of hard stone, which dulls knives. Their bodies are disgusting. They are thin and long when hungry and fat after they’ve eaten.” A look of disgust covered his face. “The body feels like soft, slimy stone. It makes one sick to touch it. This is where you must cut!” he exclaimed standing up once more. “A deep cut anywhere in the body will incapacitate it and it will die. It’s very difficult to get past the head and legs though, nor can a being sneak up upon them as they feel and smell you coming.” He shook his head in frustration. “They travel in packs always. You will never face just one.”

He slumped in the chair, all four arms hanging down over the sides of the chairs. Jarrn Garrn looked tired.

“How large are they?” Tathan asked quietly.

“About as long as a Rojuun is tall and their legs are each half as long. The legs move in all directions and they can crawl along the walls of a tunnel, though not the ceiling.” He made long gesturing motions with his arms that indicated crawling. “They are not intelligent. They just hunt and kill and keep killing.”

Tathan was amazed by how expressive a person could be with an extra set of arms. He considered the information for a moment with his own arms crossed. “A wizard I worked for in Dralin liked to talk about the caves of Ryallon. He said it would be impossible for any creatures to live in the depths, as there’s no way for breathable air to get down there. Can a human survive?”

“Did your human wizard ever enter a cave?” Jarrn asked with a superior look. “I realize you humans try to be intelligent and it is cute, but not necessary.” He waved a hand in dismissal at the concept. “There is plenty of breathable air in the caverns. Do you understand how air is made, human?”

Tathan was trying hard not to sputter in outrage at the outright dismissal of human intelligence. “Air isn’t made, it just exists.”

“Of course you would think that,” Jarrn replied with a sigh. “Very well. I will attempt to explain it to you once, but I will not waste my time again should you prove too dense or righteous about your own ignorance,” he warned with a waggle of his finger.

Tathan took a deep breath and exhaled. He felt Liselle put a hand on his arm to calm him.

“Rojuun, humans, and all living creatures breathe in one type of air and breathe out another. I won’t go into technical terms so as not to confuse you or make your head hurt,” he said with a gracious smile. “What you humans don’t seem to understand is that plants also breathe in and out.”

Tathan thought that was silly. How could plants breathe in and out when they didn’t have mouths or noses? He didn’t say anything about it as he was too angry. Plus, if he was being honest with himself, he didn’t want to sound ‘dense’.

Jarrn Garrn leaned forward with a finger up to emphasize his point. “Now, this is where it gets tricky. The air we breathe in is the air plant life breathes out. The air that plants breathe in is air we breathe out.”

Tathan didn’t know if he believed that, but he was curious. He liked learning new things, always trying to figure out for himself if they were true. “Alright,” he said to show that he was still listening.

The Rojuun continued with a smile. “You humans seem to like it here above the ground with all the sky above you,” he said, gesturing above him with one hand to indicate the sky while pointing at them with another. “You get your breathable air from vast forests, grasses and plants. There are also many plants in your oceans that produce breathable air.” He leaned forward, enjoying the lecture he was giving. “You have more air than you need, in fact! It fills the sky to great heights.”

Tathan had never considered that the world could run out of air. It wasn’t a pleasant thought.

“Now, the reason you need to know this is to help you understand how there is air in the caverns.” Jarrn Garrn took a sip of his wine. “Within the extensive caverns of Ryallon, there is an abundance of life. There are vast open caves with plants, animals and even trees.” He gestured to emphasize the size of the caverns. “Many animals graze while others prey upon them just as animals do above ground. There are also numerous rivers, lakes and seas underground. Plants within them also give off breathable air.” There was a smile on his face as he spoke of his home. “It is absolutely wonderful to breathe that air.”

Liselle was frowning. “Plants need sunlight to survive, but there’s no sunlight underground. How do they grow?”

“Now that is a very good question.” Jarrn pointed toward Liselle. “Plants are not the same underground as they are here. They grow differently, with less color.” He stood and moved to a potted flower. “I must admit that I love the colors of your flowers above ground. They are so beautiful.”

The flower was leaning toward Liselle and even seemed to be happy to see her. Liselle waved at the flower, smiling, which seemed to please it to no end.

“The flowers underground glow, even the ones underwater.” A look of divine pleasure crossed Jarrn’s face as he closed his eyes to imagine the sight. “Glowing moss covers many walls and ceilings. And the plants grow from the dirt floor.”

“Dirt floors? I thought it was all rock,” said Sir Danth.

“No. There is a great deal of dirt. Rivers wash sediment from above ground throughout the caverns and have been doing so for as long as Ryallon has existed. There are worms everywhere that pulverize rock into dirt while plants and animals return to the soil in death, making it soft and fertile.” As Jarrn explained, he moved one hand to the next, then that one to the next and all the way around in a circle to show each point and how it affected the others.

Tathan wanted to see the things the Rojuun described. He felt wanderlust not experienced in a while. “How far away is Juulla?”

“There are tunnels, but it would take weeks to get there. I have a teleport portal set up in this house that connects to my family’s home,” Jarrn Garrn said. “If you are prepared, we can go now. I will take you, introduce you to my family and give you a place to stay while you work.”

Tathan was almost beginning to like Jarrn. The companions were being treated better than most employers had ever treated him, even if everything was a command. “We’re ready.” Tathan looked at the rest of the party to see them nod in agreement. Liselle had wide eyes and a big grin.

“This way then.” Master Garrn led them through the door. Liselle brushed her hand gently against the flower as they followed. Tathan could have sworn the flower purred.

[Chapter 22](#)

The room they entered was large. Four stands with orbs floating above were set around a large circle on the floor. Silver runes ran throughout the circle, glowing with energy. Moonlight illuminated the room through a multi-paned glass dome above.

Teleport circles were rare and only the most powerful wizards had them. Tathan had only seen one before and it was much smaller with space for just one person. This was a grand room and the circle was large enough for them all to stand in with room to spare.

Jarrn Garrn gestured while making a multilayered sound with his voices. Magical light globes around the room began to glow. The four floating orbs above the stands started to spin rapidly, while the runes in the floor grew bright.

“This is my teleport room. You are to walk slowly without touching anything,” he warned them. “This room and the teleport circle took nine years to build. You could damage it by being careless.”

Tathan noticed that the Rojuun’s hands were all on knives. He had no doubt Jarrn Garrn would do his very best to kill them should they not agree. “We’ll be extremely careful, Master Garrn,” Tathan reassured him.

“Very good,” he replied, relaxing a little. “I do not normally transport humans, but the distance is great and the sooner I get you to my home, the better.” He motioned for them to stay while he went to each of the orbs, making gestures and chanting in quiet tones.

“I want one of these in my lair,” stated Vevin. “Oh yes I do! This is wonderful!” The dragon was barely restraining himself from doing a dance so as not to upset their employer.

Jarrn Garrn still didn't seem to notice Vevin as he came back over to the companions. "I will take you to your place in the circle one at a time. You are to stand completely still once there." He motioned for Tathan to follow him first.

Tathan walked slowly behind the Rojuun and moved to the spot indicated. Liselle and Sir Danth were next. He placed them all so they were facing back toward the door they had entered. When it came time to place Vevin, Jarrn did a double take before shaking his head as if to clear cobwebs. He led Vevin to his place in the circle.

Once they were set, Jarrn strode to the middle of the circle. He took one last look to see that the companions were in their correct places. His gaze lingered on Vevin for an extra moment, who simply stared straight ahead, ignoring the Rojuun.

"Now we will teleport," Jarrn said. "I need you to keep your minds and bodies as relaxed as possible. It will feel as though your soul is being held while your body is magically moved from one place to the next. I will not explain the process, but rest assured that all will be well."

Tathan didn't know what to expect. He took a deep breath, relaxing his mind and body.

Jarrn began speaking in the multilayered tone he had used on the floating orbs. His arms were outstretched and his head was back. A magical breeze began to flow from in front of the Rojuun, ruffling a few loose hairs in his braids and blowing the hem of his robe back. Silver tendrils of power flowed from his hands out to the orbs. Power gathered around them, spinning down through channels on the pedestals to the runes within the circle.

Time slowed for Tathan. Everything became blurry and then ceased to exist, including his body. There was no sound, smell, sight, substance or . . . anything. It felt as though he were in a soft cocoon of nothingness. The universe shifted around him, but only an infinitesimal amount. He had the impression that the universe wasn't aware of him, nor did it care.

Then everything became blurry again and reappeared. Only they weren't in the same room. The teleport circle was still there as were the orbs and pedestals, but the room itself was different. He looked up and saw a glass paneled dome above them, but there was no moon or stars, just a soft glow from a cavern ceiling high above.

"Here we are." Jarrn stepped forward out of the circle. The orbs slowed as the power dimmed. "Take a moment to compose your thoughts then come forward into the hallway."

Tathan looked down at his body, holding his hands out. Everything was where it was supposed to be and felt the same. Vevin was the first to walk out of the circle, smiling after the experience. Sir Danth was the next to go, not giving any clue about his feelings. Liselle took a deep breath and then departed the circle as well. Tathan followed, joining them in the hallway.

There were doors along the hallway, each one with elaborate designs. The floor was made of polished stone, possibly the stone floor of the cavern. Various paintings lined the green walls and the ceiling was yellow. Those seemed to be the family colors.

Jarrn led them into another sitting room, more lushly decorated than the one at his house in Puujan, though the furnishings were of an alien design. It didn't appear as though humans had made any of it.

There was another Rojuun sitting in the room, the first female the party had seen. “This is my wife, Yrrraa Garrn,” Jarrn announced with a gesture. “You will be exceptionally pleasant to her and greet her with a bow. Do not touch her as she is not familiar with humans.”

They all bowed and said hello. She nodded to each in return. Yrrraa was shorter than Jarrn, reaching his shoulder. Her features were more delicate. Bright yellow, catlike eyes peered from a soft brow. Her body was somewhat wider than that of the male Rojuun they had seen and she had round breasts about the size of a human’s. She wore robes with yellows, oranges and reds to highlight her eyes. It would be easy to believe that she might be considered beautiful by Rojuun standards.

Yrrraa turned to her husband. “They are rather intimidating, especially the one dressed in metal,” she said with an awed voice while pointing at Sir Danth. “They are also much more pleasant than I expected, though you told me they would be, Husband.” Her voices were lighter with even more variations than Jarrn’s.

“Yes, Wife. They are pleasant and it is good that they are also intimidating. We need strong, dangerous humans to fight off the sstejj so that we may be free to explore artistic endeavors.” He put a hand on her shoulder. With another hand, he gestured to the seats around them. “Sit and be comfortable.”

They sat, with the exception of Sir Danth who moved to the back of the room to out a window.

“You are now in my home. This is a place you will treat with respect,” Jarrn said in his normal commanding manner. “It is resting time for us as it is for you, though we do not have night here as you do above the caverns.”

“I cannot imagine what it must be like above the caverns,” his wife spoke in awed tones. “I would be afraid of falling into your sky, though I know that to be silly.” She giggled. One of her voices emitted a normal, girly giggle, but the other sounded like bells. It was an extraordinary effect.

Jarrn smiled at his wife and then turned to them, “I will show you to your quarters in a moment, but my wife wanted to meet you first.” He tenderly stroked her neck and shoulder as he spoke to the party. “In the morning I will introduce you to my sister, Marrraa. She is responsible for defending the family home. After that, I am leaving to conduct more business in Puujan.”

Yrrraa pouted. “Must you, Husband?”

“You know I must.” Jarrn smiled while stroking her shoulder. “Let me see them to their room after which I will meet you in ours.”

“Yes, Husband,” she replied, standing. She ran her two left hands seductively along his chest as she moved toward the door.

Jarrn watched her leave the room with appreciation in his eyes. He exhaled deeply before turning his attention to the guests. “Come with me to your rooms.”

Tathan found it harder to dislike the Rojuun after seeing them interact with each other. They smiled, laughed and felt anger like humans did. The difference in features and voice didn’t bother him. If anything, they were pleasant. The one thing he *didn’t* like was the way Jarrn ordered them around, but even that wasn’t done in spite.

Jarrn led them down the hall to another. Tathan realized that it was a huge place after they turned down the eighth hallway and still hadn’t reached their room. Finally, they walked out into an open courtyard.

There was a fountain in the middle with water flowing over five, tiered pools. Around the edges of the plaza were glowing flowers. Liselle was wide-eyed with an enormous smile on her face. Tathan looked closely and saw that even these flowers leaned toward her as though wanting to be touched.

The most amazing thing to Tathan was the sight of a rough cavern ceiling high above. He could make out small stalactites scattered across its span. There was phosphorescent moss covering the surface, casting ambient light throughout the cavern.

Jarrn noticed the party looking at the flowers and cavern. "It is different than above ground, but just as beautiful, no?" he asked them.

"It is extraordinary," Sir Danth said. "I have never imagined the depths of the world to hold such beauty as this."

"Oh yes! It's wonderful," said Vevin who was doing his happy dance. He darted about, looking at all of the new things. "Will the pointy things fall?" he asked, pointing up.

Jarrn followed his gaze. "The stalactites? No, they will stay. Those are very sturdy." He began explaining again, using expressive gestures with his hands. "There are a number of different types of stalactites. Limestone is common in upper caverns, but there are slower moving substances in the lower caverns that create stalactites. These are more solid and do not fall easily."

That was comforting to know. Jarrn motioned for them to follow him across the courtyard. They did so, taking in as much as they could. He led them into another hallway. A short distance later, he opened a door. "Here is your suite. There are three rooms and a sitting area. There is also a bath. You will use it as Rojuun do not like strong odors."

"Of course," Liselle responded right away. "A bath sounds lovely." She smiled at Jarrn and received a smile in return.

"Marrraa and I will be back in the morning to show you your tasks. Rest well." Then the Rojuun left them in the suite, closing the door behind him.

"Oh, this is exciting!" exclaimed Vevin, doing an excited version of his happy dance. "We have met Rojuun, been teleported and are now in deep caverns far below the mountains. What an adventure!"

"It really is," agreed Liselle enthusiastically. "The flowers are wonderful. They're different, but beautiful." There was a big smile on her face and she played with the flower pin in her hair at the same time. "They were happy to see me and told me they're treated well, so that was nice to hear."

Tathan exchanged glances with Sir Danth. Vevin, on the other hand, didn't seem to think it unusual at all that Liselle talk to flowers. "That is wonderful, Lady Liselle! It's good to know the Rojuun treat flowers well." He suddenly became still, tipping his head to one side in thought. "I still want to eat one of the Rojuun to see what they taste like though," he said.

Tathan interrupted. "Let's wait on that for a little while at least, Vevin. Right now, they're nice to us and we're trapped in their domain. I don't want to upset them."

"Do you think they would be upset if I only ate one or two?" Vevin asked innocently.

"Yes!" Tathan answered quickly and emphatically.

Vevin burst into laughter at his response. Liselle and Sir Danth joined him. When Tathan realized that the dragon had gotten him, he joined in the laughter as well.

Chapter 23

In the morning, Jarrn brought his sister, Marrraa, who came up to Jarrn's nose in height and had a rounded face much like Yrraa. Instead of the robes others wore, she wore leather armor colored different shades of brown that would blend in with the rocks of the caverns. There were numerous pouches and weapons on it and she looked well geared for any battle.

"I'm going to leave you in Marrraa's capable hands. She will take you into the tunnels to hunt sstejj after breakfast," said Jarrn. "I must go back to Puujan right away to deal with some matters." With a nod and a smile, he left.

"Hello humans. I am the Weapon Master. The safety of Garrn Dwelling is my responsibility, as is the training of new recruits," Marrraa said with a smile. Her eyes were a few shades darker blue than her brother's. "You appear to be capable enough, I suppose." She frowned at Liselle and Vevin as though not sure that they *were* capable. "Let's get our breakfast."

She led them to a large dining room where other Rojuun were eating. Most were adorned in robes, but a few were dressed in leather armor similar to Marrraa's. They all turned to look at the humans entering the room. Some pointed and whispered, while others just stared.

Marrraa led them to an empty table. Two Rojuun girls served them. After serving the food, they stood staring at the odd strangers until Marrraa shooed them off.

Breakfast was a meal of plants and meats the companions didn't recognize, but tasted good. The humans studied the Rojuun as much as the Rojuun studied them. Neither group seemed bothered by the fact.

Toward the end of the meal, Liselle broke the silence. "Marrraa, I thought the Rojuun were used to humans, but I get the impression nobody here has seen one before."

Marrraa shook her head. "Only in a few of the larger cities are there any humans." Her voices weren't as melodious as Yrraa's, but they weren't unpleasant. "Here, on the frontier of Rojuun society, we have to do most of the work ourselves. We are delighted to know a servant race exists to care for our needs as we expand out into the world."

"So no one here has seen humans before. Now I understand. We're not used to Rojuun either," Tathan said.

"Of course. You are honored to be in our presence," Marrraa said with a nod. "Breakfast is finished. It is now time to show you where the sstejj attack us from." They left their plates for the girls to clean up.

Marrraa escorted them down another hallway to the main entry of the dwelling. The doors to the entry were made of a rough, waxy wood that none of them had ever seen. Tathan ran his hand down the face of one, admiring the etched designs covering it. Both doors were painted amber with highlights of dark green. Everything the Rojuun touched was turned to art in one way or another.

"This door faces north," Marrraa told them. Then she pointed to a large tunnel off to the east about a thousand feet away. "The main caverns of Juulla are down that tunnel," she said. "Most Rojuun cities are built within a series of caves around one or more

primary caves. Families often build dwellings in smaller caves around the main city. This is Garrn Cavern of Juulla, meaning it belongs to the Garrn family in the city of Juulla.”

“Thank you for explaining that,” said Tathan. “I was wondering about it.”

“Certainly, I think it is important that you understand our ways as much as you are able. It will make it easier for you to get along,” Marrraa said with a smile. “We will be going through a tunnel on the far side of Garrn Cavern.” She pointed toward a tunnel on the west end of the cavern. “It leads to wild, unexplored areas, many of which are overrun by sstejj. It is there that I will lead you.” She began walking in that direction.

Garrn Cavern glowed like moonlight. Because light came from the bioluminescence of the plants in every direction, no shadows were cast. It took the companions some time to get used to the differences.

Plants of different shapes and sizes were everywhere. Tathan was surprised to see manicured trees that glowed with the same light as the moss and plants. Flowers glowed different colors. They could see pinks, purples, blues, greens and yellows as well as many other variations.

The air tasted different. Cool moisture filled his lungs when he breathed in. The temperature was pleasant, while a breeze delivered alien scents from native flora and fauna.

He stopped to take in all the new sensations. It was disorienting to handle everything at once. The earthy taste of the air was the thing that threw him off the most. He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then exhaled.

The others were looking around at their surroundings. Predictably, Liselle was caressing and smelling the flowers. Each one leaned toward her, wanting her to pay attention to them over the others. Some had fragrant perfumes while others had no aroma at all.

Sir Danth held out his hand to a bird whose body glowed green while its wings were shades of lavender. When it landed upon his gauntlet, he appeared to be surprised.

“That is a daliit,” Marrraa told him. “They feast upon insects like the uulifly.” Indeed, as she spoke, the bird flitted away after a little glowing red bug that was darting past. There were small creatures all over the place. Every single one glowed in different shades. Tathan had to shut his eyes for a moment to rest them from the riot of colors.

Vevin was listening to the sounds of the cavern. It didn’t stop him from dancing of course. Tathan absentmindedly labeled it the listening dance. Being underground changed the dynamics of the sounds. It didn’t echo as much as he expected due to the plants and moss covering most of the rock. At the same time, the sound had nowhere to escape.

It was hard to distinguish each individual sound. There were different noises made by the animals; flapping wings, bird chirps, insect buzzing, chattering from various small mammals that scurried about. Added to all of that were the voices of Rojuun. It sounded like someone was playing pipes, while other Rojuun sang melodious songs.

“I am told that when Rojuun first see the sky, it is overwhelming. It takes a while for one to gain their bearings,” Marrraa said. “I expect the same is true of humans who visit underground.” She gestured for them to follow her.

They walked casually along a curving path of stone pavers. There was a footbridge over a small river flowing from the outer wall of the dwelling down to a good-sized lake.

The water was crystal clear and the companions could see that the fish and plant life within also glowed.

Liselle paused on the footbridge. “Mistress Marrraa, the water comes from inside of the dwelling. Does the river begin from within, or does it pass through?”

“The dwelling was built over the river. Many Rojuun dwellings have rivers or natural springs within them,” she explained. “It makes it easier to get water and is visually pleasing. This river enters the cavern from a wall on the other side of our dwelling.”

“It *is* beautiful down here,” Liselle said. “The plants around the dwelling look cultivated and cared for.”

“Yes they are. Everything is grown in beautiful patterns and is pleasing to the eyes. Even our homes are works of art.” Marrraa gestured toward the building.

The building was made of stone, rising five different levels in height, filling the heart of the cavern. It was rounded in most areas showing no seams, as though they had taken the rock itself and shaped it. Braces extended from the building to the top and sides of the cavern. In many ways, it resembled a colorful cocoon or wasp’s nest. There were windows with glass panes. The Rojuun had glass in all of their windows, unlike human lands.

The dwelling was painted a number of colors much as Rojuun houses in Puujan had been. It seemed more natural on this building somehow. “How many Rojuun live here, Mistress Marrraa?” Liselle asked.

“There are eight hundred twenty one members of the Garrn Family and four hundred eighteen members of other families that live here,” she said. “The Garrn Family has a number of dwellings in other cities as well, though we are far from the largest family in Rojuun territory.” Marrraa resumed walking. “This is a good place to live and will be even better once the danger is removed.”

The companions followed her down the path. Liselle smiled the whole way, holding her hands out for plants to touch her fingertips as she passed. Upon reaching the large tunnel a short time later, they paused to look down its length. It was thick with luminescent plants, though they were not manicured or maintained. In the distance, the tunnel curved to the left.

“This tunnel goes for about two miles, all of which is safe. At the end is a gate that keeps the sstejj from entering. They hover around the gate, trying to claw and bite through it.” Marrraa gestured angrily. “The abominations can’t resist the smell of Rojuun. They howl at the gates with their eager cries of hunger.” A look of fury crossed her face and her cats-eye pupils narrowed to dark blue slits. “They have broken through twice. The last time they were able to kill twelve before we drove them off. Seven of those who died were children. Sstejj like to feed on the young . . .”

“It is appalling that the creatures would kill your children,” Sir Danth proclaimed. “As such, the purveyors of this evil must be dealt with harshly. Let us see to these sstejj that we may make them pay for their misdeeds.”

Marrraa wiped a hand over her face to remove the suffering. “I like you . . . Sir Danth isn’t it?”

“At your service,” he said with a bow. “Let us go now to the gate if you will.”

The tunnel sloped downward, taking them deeper into the ground. The air was cool and the breeze that Tathan had felt in Garrn Cavern flowed around the party from behind.

After traveling about a mile and a half, they heard a discordant yelping. There was also a new smell in the air, like mold and slime mixed with mud. In the distance, iron bars covered the entrance of the tunnel. Closed doors in the middle were large enough to let four people through at once.

The horror was on the other side of the gate. Numerous yelping, snapping creatures were crawling on and around the gates. Their snouts were cruel and vicious as they bit the bars.

“Those are sstejj,” Marrraa said calmly as she continued walking toward them. “They will become very excited when they catch our scent.”

The sstejj were just as described, with thin bodies and stony, jointed legs. They crawled over each other trying to get through the gate. As the party moved closer, the monsters began to scurry.

About fifty paces away from the doors, Marrraa stopped. “They feel our footsteps through the ground. You can see by their thin bellies that they are hungry.” Her voices were deadly calm. “We will kill the abominations, yet more will replace them. They hunt us constantly. They will even pass a smaller, tastier creature to feast upon Rojuun.”

Tathan looked thoughtfully at the crowd around the doors. “It’ll be a fight to get past the gate without letting any through.”

“We can kill them through the bars. It will take a while to do, but we should be able to thin them out enough to make it,” Sir Danth said.

Most of the bars had teeth marks on them. The monsters were gnawing on them even more ferociously with the party so close. Stony legs clawed the air through the bars, trying to get at the party.

Marrraa turned with a smile. “Getting them away from the gate isn’t a problem. The problem is that more always follow. Wait here a moment.” She walked forward until she was fifteen feet away from the gate. Sstejj screeched hungrily at her presence.

Marrraa began casting a spell, using gestures with all four arms. Speech emanated from her throat much like the words Jarrn Garrn had used during teleportation.

All spells used magical energies from the air, earth, water or any other thing that existed around the caster. All life gave off excess energy that could be manipulated for spells as well. Evil wizards could pull life energy from living things whereas good wizards would use the energy in the air to make a person better. There were many ways to perform magic. Some people could take specific elements of energy and manipulate them while others would just grab power from the closest source available.

When an individual cast a spell, that energy gathered around them. When releasing the energy, it would blast past the user from behind as though they were being hit by a gale of wind. The more it looked like the caster was being hit by wind, the stronger the spell. It was a good gauge for warriors to use when determining whether or not to run away. Many young wizards died when casting a spell that used more energy than they were able to channel. Others lost their minds in the casting.

The companions could tell that the spell Marrraa was casting was especially powerful by the amount of energy flowing around her. An intense look of concentration

dominated her face. When she released the spell, magical wind ripped past her. She braced her feet and bent her knees as it dragged her forward.

The result of the spell was phenomenal. Tendrils of icy mist rushed from her outstretched hands. The creatures screamed in agony as the tendrils sliced into their bodies. Wave after wave ripped through the sstejj near the gates. A few, dazed by injuries, stumbled away.

As the last of the spell evaporated from her fingertips, Marrraa fell to her knees. “That will keep them away for a short while. If you humans intend to betray us, then this would be the time, as I will be too weak to defend myself for a short while.” She did not look back at them as she spoke, but stayed on her knees waiting for whatever they might do.

Chapter 24

The companions looked at each other in surprise. Marrraa was vulnerable and it would have been easy to kill her. Magic did that to a person, which was why few wizards ever traveled without some sort of bodyguard.

Tathan responded, “We’re not going to kill you, Mistress Marrraa. We’re here to do a job and I don’t make a habit of betraying my employers.” He didn’t mention that there was no way they would antagonize the only people that could get them home from wherever they were, deep underground.

“Not to mention that we happen to like you, Mistress Marrraa.” Liselle assisted the Rojuun woman to her feet.

Marrraa nodded. “That is good to know. I hoped you would be trustworthy, but trusting another race does not come as easy for me as it does for my brother.” She fumbled food out of her backpack to help her recover energy.

“That’s understandable.” Tathan looked toward the gates. “How long do we have before more come?”

“They will be gone awhile,” she answered. “Never try to hunt them alone, as they do not relent. I hope you are capable of fighting them, but I have concerns,” she said, looking nervous at the idea of going outside the gate with them.

“Do not fear, Mistress Marrraa,” said Sir Danth. “All will be well and the curs shall fall beneath our might.” The knight had drawn his sword and stepped toward the gate. “Now, let us venture forth to deal with these unnatural spawn of evil.”

Marrraa pulled keys out of a belt pouch. “The cavern on the other side of the gate is vast, three times larger than Garrn Cavern.” She unlocked and opened the gate. “There is a fast river in the distance to the right, which flows to a small lake on the far end. From what we have discovered, there are twelve tunnels coming into this cavern.” She explained all of this as they moved through the doors. “I recommend that we travel along the wall to the left for now. It is not wise to walk to the middle only to be surrounded by sstejj.”

“Wise plan, Mistress Marrraa,” Sir Danth said. “Tathan, you will scout ahead, yes?”

Tathan moved forward wordlessly, sliding his sword out of its sheath.

Marrraa took a few steps after Tathan. “It is not wise to separate in such a manner. The sstejj are quick and scouts are found dead, if they are found at all.”

Liselle put a hand on the feju's arm. "All is well, Mistress Marrraa. Tathan isn't an ordinary scout. I notice there aren't as many plants in this cavern as in the last."

"No, the sstejj trample them when they gather in packs," Marrraa said sadly as the rest of the party followed Tathan at a slower pace. "It is as though their only purpose is to kill Rojuun," she said through clenched teeth. "I don't understand it. There are other creatures down here that are dangerous, yet coexist." Marrraa's fists were clenched around the knives she had drawn absentmindedly. She was angry and it showed in her body language.

Tathan moved ahead at a low run. He ignored Marrraa's warning. The life of a scout was always dangerous. That was part of what he liked about the job.

It wasn't long before he found one of the creatures limping around in a circle. One of its legs was missing and another was broken halfway up from Marrraa's spell. It stopped and turned its head to the side. Tathan could see the gill like openings, about ten of them, on the side of the head where the ears would be on a normal creature. They opened and closed in a ripple effect from front to back.

The sstejj was tapping the ground as though searching for something. Tathan figured it was probably trying to feel vibrations in the ground, which would be futile as he was standing absolutely still. He carefully picked up a rock and tossed it to his right.

The sstejj dashed to that area. When it found nothing, the monster remained, puzzled as to where the vibration had come from. The gills on the side of its head flared, searching for the scent of its prey. Tathan had watched the movement in order to learn. The sstejj moved like a fast spider. There were no leg muscles for a leap, which was good considering Tathan hated creatures that could leap.

It caught his scent again and took a few steps toward him. Tathan saw movement coming from the center of the cave. It would be bad to give the creature's friends time to gang up on him.

Tathan stomped his foot twice and then readied his sword as the sstejj dashed toward him. The injured legs caused the monster to swerve to the right of where Tathan stood. As it passed, Tathan thrust his sword into the soft body between a pair of legs. The blade slid easily and Tathan pulled it out just as fast.

The creature screamed, jerking its head around in reaction to the wound. Tathan ducked easily underneath the snout as it swung past. It gave him a good view of the gills, so he decided to poke his sword in one to see what would happen.

He almost lost his sword as the head jerked back around. The creature fell to the ground, screaming. Tathan jumped back and watched the monster writhe in pain. It went through a few death throes before falling still.

The shapes in the distance were moving in his direction. Looking past the body, he could see about twenty more sstejj approaching. That was more than he was willing to handle by himself. Tathan turned back toward the rest of the party.

Hearing the screams of the sstejj, Marrraa stopped in place. “He should not have gone alone! The sstejj will kill him.”

“He’ll be fine. The sstejj are the ones who will die.” Liselle had seen his cousin fight and had no doubt he would handle himself fine.

The sstejj screamed again, causing Sir Danth and Vevin to spring forward at a trot. Liselle gave Marrraa a smile in response to the dubious look on the feju’s face. “Let’s go see what Tathan found.”

“About twenty of the sstejj are coming up to the dead one over there,” Tathan said, pointing at the body of the one he killed. “Cut their bodies if you want to kill them easily. If you slide your sword into their gills, you’ll hit whatever it is they have for a brain and they won’t be able to fight anymore.”

“You slid your sword into a gill?” Marrraa said in surprise. That is difficult. Many Rojuun warriors try desperately for that feat.” She shook her head. “I will have to see you do it before I can acknowledge the accomplishment.”

“It wasn’t that much of a feat,” Tathan admitted. “It had a missing leg and another one injured. I had already stabbed it once in the side too.” What he didn’t say was that he was going to try to stab every sstejj he came across in the gills from that point on.

“Alright, I’ll take on these twenty. The rest of you cover the flanks,” Sir Danth said with casual confidence. He turned to the Rojuun woman. “Mistress Marrraa, Relax for now. Regain your strength. We’ll take care of the creatures. I would like to examine their tactics.”

“It is good that you wish to become used to fighting them, but foolish to think you can take on twenty by yourself, Sir Danth Human,” Marrraa warned.

The pack of sstejj reached their fallen brethren. The companions were appalled when the first three began feasting upon it. Others began scurrying in her direction.

“They’re eating each other,” Vevin said slowly. “Cannibalism is the lowest form of evil.” There was a dark swirl in his silver eyes.

“Yes, they eat each other when one falls. We never have bodies to clean up,” said Marrraa. “It is disgusting and adds to our loathing of the abominations.” She spat on the ground.

“Well here they come,” said Tathan. He moved to a crouch, covering Sir Danth’s flank. The knight had been walking forward all the while, tossing his greatsword from hand to hand in anticipation of the battle. Vevin moved to the left flank.

“Vevin Human has no weapon,” Marrraa said in alarm to Liselle. “I have extra knives I can give him.” She pulled out two.

“No. Vevin will be fine.” Liselle looked around to find an area clear of plants before pulling off her cloak to set it on the ground. “We should just sit here and let the boys have their fun, I think.” She then sat as per her own suggestion.

Marrraa looked at Liselle in disbelief. “But . . . they . . . sstejj . . .” she sputtered and remained standing.

At that point, the slaughter began. Just as the first sstejj was about to reach Sir Danth, the knight suddenly shifted forward in space. One moment he was ten paces

away, the next he appeared right next to the creature's head and rammed his sword into the gills. Apparently, Tathan wasn't the only one going for gill shots.

The creature's head stopped abruptly while the rest of its body continued forward. It flipped over itself, snapping the neck joint. Sir Danth didn't budge under the force of the sstejj's movement. He twisted his sword and pulled it out. He shifted to the side of the next one and rammed the sword into its gills as well.

Sir Danth's sword flashed through the air. By that point, three more had surrounded the knight, trying their best to get at him. They also died quickly; one through the gills, the next with cuts to the body, and the third with a great slash across the neck. His enchanted blade even cut through the legs of the creatures without slowing down.

Liselle glanced at Marrraa, who was staring at the knight in wonder. She didn't blame the feju for being in awe. Liselle knew that Sir Danth was dangerous, but it was another thing to see him in action. She turned to look at her cousin. Tathan was stomping the ground to get the attention of a sstejj near him. There was a mischievous grin on his face. "Oh look, Sir Danth is going to let Tathan play with one too," she said, pointing Tathan out to Marrraa.

The Rojuun woman gasped in alarm as the sstejj scurried toward Liselle's cousin. It stopped where Tathan was, only to discover that the rogue had somersaulted onto its back and sat down behind the first set of legs. The creature just stood there, vibrating, unsure what to do. Apparently, it did not have the ability to react to anything on top of it.

Tathan squeezed his knees as one would on a horse, causing it to scream in response. He looked back at Liselle with his arms spread. She just shrugged in return. Tathan plunged his sword down into the creature, causing it to collapse and die instantly. He sprang off, looking for his next kill.

Liselle looked back at Sir Danth to see that the knight had killed four more monsters. He was laughing at the creatures that were still attacking him. Both ladies turned to look at Vevin, who was studying a charging sstejj. They both gasped when the creature's snout came forward to bite down on Vevin.

Their purple friend caught the creature's jaws in his hands, forcing them open. It screamed horribly, trying to get away. The sstejj put its forefeet against Vevin, pushing to no avail. Vevin stared down its gullet. After a moment of study, Vevin lifted the creature into the air by the jaws and slammed it down. Then he picked it up and slammed it down to the other side. Four more times he did this until the creature's neck snapped and it was dead.

At that point, everyone stopped in their tracks. The sstejj stopped because of the large vibrations. Tathan and Sir Danth stopped to watch the display of strength.

Vevin rammed his hand into where the heart might be. He pulled a mess of goo out and sniffed it. Then he licked it. A sour look crossed his face.

Vevin turned to everyone else and held up the goo. "I don't know how they can be cannibals. They taste absolutely horrible!" He shook the goo off his hand.

Liselle, Sir Danth and Tathan all burst into laughter while Marrraa just stared, completely in shock at that point. Then the remaining sstejj continued their attack.

Sir Danth took out most, but Tathan was fortunate enough to kill two more, both with gill shots. Vevin changed tactics, waiting for the next one that came toward him. He raised his right hand, which began to glow. When the creature reached him, purple

lightning shot out of his hand to run along the body of the sstejj. It shuddered and died instantly.

“He . . . he used no incantation, no gestures . . .” Marrraa said, both of her voices filled with awe. “He does not appear tired.”

A moment later, all twenty sstejj were dead. Vevin surveyed the battlefield and shook his head. Sir Danth was standing on top of one with sword raised in the air. “The Knights of Morhain once again know glory!” he yelled to the top of the cavern, and then burst into wild laughter. Tathan joined him in the laughter from atop another of the creatures.

“Men!” exclaimed Liselle. “They do seem to enjoy their fights!” Then she laughed with them as well. She laughed even harder when she saw the obvious look of disbelief on the Rojuun woman’s face.

She stopped laughing when a sstejj that had circled behind them lunged forward and bit Marrraa. The creature latched onto one of the feju’s arms causing her to shriek in agony.

Chapter 25

Liselle mentally kicked herself for being so caught up in the boy’s activities that she didn’t protect their rear. She stood and a stream of blue fire from her arm hit the sstejj. The monster jerked back, releasing the feju before quickly dying.

Marrraa stared at her mangled arm and fell to her knees, still screaming in pain. Liselle grabbed hold of the injured arm and placed a hand on Marrraa’s cheek. “Shh.” Marrraa looked into Liselle’s deep, misty-grey eyes and quieted down. “Hush now, you’re going to be just fine.” Liselle made Marrraa relax with her will.

Looking inside the wound, Liselle could see that the bones were broken in numerous places. With another, “Shh,” she magically stopped the bleeding. Then she closed her eyes, asking the plants around her for strength. Energy came rushing in and Liselle turned it into healing power.

It flowed from Liselle’s hands into the mangled arm to knit everything back together. Using the magical vision she had while healing, Liselle was able to watch the bone as it mended. The muscles reattached and the veins, fat cells and flesh reformed. Even the camouflaged leather armor wrapped back around the arm and mended itself just as good as new.

Liselle rubbed the arm with healing energy, flowing strength and health back into it. It was an additional step that would save weeks of recovery. After Liselle was done, she shook off the extra energy. Rather than being exhausted from the spells, she was invigorated from all of the power the plants had sent her.

“You have healed my arm completely. That is not a thing any Rojuun can do,” Marrraa admitted in amazement.

“It wasn’t that big a deal,” Liselle said casually. She didn’t want to talk about it. The plants had given her way more energy than needed and it itched within her veins.

“It *is* a big deal, Cousin” Tathan said next to her. “Very few people can heal and none so completely as to mend the very garment a person wears. That is an extraordinary talent, Liselle.”

“It’s not that hard,” she said. “You just do it.” She shrugged, not knowing how else to explain. The power was bothering her. Liselle hopped up and down while shaking her arms, trying to get rid of it.

“Ahh yes. I’ll have to remember that next time I’m injured,” Tathan said with a roll of his eyes. “Just do it.”

“More sstejj come,” Vevin interjected. “Many more.” He looked in the direction the first pack had come from.

The power in Liselle’s veins was itching even worse than before. She felt an urge to let it loose on something. The plants didn’t like the sstejj. They had been telling her that ever since she had arrived in the tunnels. The sstejj were unnatural and not meant to be in the world.

The plants also told her that something else controlled them, created them, and drove them to a hateful lust for the taste of Rojuun. The plants didn’t care one way or another about the Rojuun, but the fact that the sstejj trampled the plants in made them mad. Sstejj were not supposed to be in the world.

She felt the plants in her mind saying they would give her all the energy she needed to destroy the sstejj. Liselle took a deep breath and turned toward the approaching sstejj. The men were beginning to move into position, so they didn’t notice that Liselle’s eyes had become pure blue fire. Marrraa noticed, shrinking back in fear.

The plants told Liselle that a flood of sstejj was coming out of the tunnels to break down the gates and overrun Garrn Cavern. They didn’t use words or even pictures to communicate this. Liselle simply understood them.

Liselle told them to lessen the energy they were sending. Flowers had taught her since birth how to handle power, but these were going to kill her with their eagerness. They didn’t know how to handle her like the flowers above ground did. The plants eased up, but the power was still making her veins itch.

She needed to physically see the sstejj to combat them and it was imperative that she release the energy soon. Liselle jumped into the air and began flying toward the center of the cavern.

The rest of the party watched in shock as she glided up on blue mists. In a moment, Liselle had a vantage from which to see the sstejj. She tried adjusting her vision to see in the distance as Vevin could. She succeeded, but it required a lot of energy. The horde of the aberrations streaming into the cavern was a terrifying sight.

Liselle was held firm in the air by a web of magic extending from the plants. She would be able to channel as much energy as needed without moving, but her body wouldn’t be able to handle it. The plants offered theirs. Out of necessity, Liselle changed her understanding of magic and learned a new way to cast.

The wind that her gathering of energy created was extreme. If the plants hadn’t been holding her steady, she would have been flung into the wall behind her. Liselle felt the blue fire gather around and funneled it back along the strands of magic to the plants in the caverns. Then she paused and told the plants to hold her companions. They did so by casting a net of protection that would shield them from what she was about to do.

Blue fire screamed throughout the cavern. The largest blast came from Liselle while hundreds of smaller flames shot forth from a myriad of plants.

It washed over the sstejj like a wave, instantly incinerating the front lines. From there, fire jumped from sstejj to sstejj, killing each one. Flames coming from the plants

lashed out like great whips at the sstejj, killing each one they touched. The screams of dying sstejj echoed through the caverns, hurting the ears of any who listened.

Liselle guided the fires through the hordes until it had killed all in the cavern and many in the tunnels beyond. She felt the rest of the energy leave her body. The last thing Liselle remembered was the plants letting her gently back down to the ground where her cloak was. Then everything went black.

Tathan knelt beside his cousin, filled with dread. He checked her pulse and found it strong. A breath of relief escaped his lips. Every time he thought he had seen the most impressive thing ever, something new would happen making everything else seem trivial. The magic Liselle had cast should have killed her or anyone else who tried it, yet somehow she was alive.

“Liselle.” Tathan gently shook her shoulder. “Liselle.” She remained unconscious. “We need to get her to safety as soon as possible.” He stood, looking toward the gate. “I think she killed them all and we can make it back to the caverns. I’ll carry her.”

“I don’t mind carrying Lady Liselle,” Sir Danth said. “It will be no effort at all.”

“No! I get to carry her!” Vevin shouted. “I told her that I would keep her safe and protect her and I didn’t do a good job and now she’s hurt!”

“Alright, alright.” Tathan motioned for everyone to be calm. He turned to the knight. “Sir Danth, you and I will keep the creatures from attacking the group while Vevin carries Liselle.” It was hard for him to trust his cousin to anyone else, but something told him that Vevin would protect her with his life.

Sir Danth nodded reluctantly. “Of course, Master Tathan. That is a wise decision. I do believe that Lady Liselle killed them all though. And here I thought I was the most dangerous person in this group.” He let out a tinny chuckle while shaking his head.

“Are all humans like you?!” Marrraa asked in high-pitched tones. She had finally come out of her shock and stood there gaping at the lot of them.

“Like us?” Tathan asked with a wry grin. “No. There aren’t any humans out there like us.” He didn’t bother to mention that he was the only one in the group who could be considered fully human. “You know enough about magic to understand that my cousin’s health is in danger, yes?” he asked the Rojuun woman.

She looked at Liselle’s body lying on the cloak and slowly nodded. “Of course I realize that. Human bodies can’t handle magic as well as Rojuun bodies and the spell she cast would have burned out all but the most powerful Rojuun.” She looked at each one of them. “I do not know who you are, but . . .” she trailed off, shaking her head. “Bring her with. It should be safe to go back to the gate. We accomplished more than I expected today.” She paused to look at the small flames dancing upon the few bodies of sstejj left in the cavern. “There shouldn’t have been that many of the vile creatures. We should have died out here today.” She looked at each of them again with suspicion and just a little bit of awe, and then she turned, motioning for them to follow her.

Vevin deftly picked up Liselle and wrapped her in the cloak before anyone else could grab her. He followed Marrraa with Tathan and Sir Danth behind. It didn’t take them long to get to the gate. There were no further attacks or even the sounds of sstejj in the cavern.

None of them saw the red eyes watching them from a distant tunnel, or the sharp teeth that were bared in hatred for the creatures who had slaughtered his pets. Vevin might have seen with his eyesight, but he was concentrated on getting Liselle to safety.

Chapter 26

Liselle woke in a comfortable bed. Her head ached and her body felt drained. She moaned as she sat up. Her eyes opened, but she closed them right away when light seared through her skull.

“Lady Liselle!” Vevin exclaimed, jumping onto the bed next to her. The volume of his voice rammed through her head, making her wince.

“Shh, shh, shh, Vevin. My head hurts,” she pleaded piteously.

Vevin dropped his voice to a whisper. “I’m sorry. I’m just happy to see you awake.” He ran fingers gently through her hair to sooth the pain.

“Mmm,” she responded, leaning into his touch. She liked it when he did that. Vevin liked to sleep in her room at night and when it was quiet, he would come to the bed and run fingers through her hair, humming until she was asleep. She knew he had a crush on her, but didn’t mind. Liselle hadn’t told him that she had a bit of a crush on him too.

“How long have I been unconscious, Vevin?” she asked, her eyes still closed.

He kissed her cheek before whispering, “For two days now. Tathan was afraid that you might have burned out your mind, but he wouldn’t admit it to anyone.”

The kiss felt wonderful and she secretly hoped he would do it again. “My mind is whole. It just hurts a lot right now,” she said just as quietly as he had. Liselle wondered if dragons and humans were allowed to be attracted to each other. “I was very careful even though I shouldn’t have used that much power. The plants wanted me to, and they helped me while making sure I was safe.” She remembered that she was only half Human. The other half was flower or something like that.

“The plants were worried about you too, Lady Liselle,” Vevin responded. They leaned toward you as I carried you back.” He continued to brush her hair back and even gave her the other kiss on the cheek she wanted.

She wondered if dragons and *flowers* were allowed to be attracted to each other and couldn’t help letting a giggle escape at the mental picture.

“What’s so funny, Lady Liselle?” Vevin asked with a smile in his voice. He stopped running his fingers through her hair for a moment.

“Nothing, Vevin. I just had a funny thought about flowers,” she said while moving closer to him in hopes that he would start again. She still wasn’t brave enough to open her eyes. “Where are we now?”

He resumed playing with her hair. “We’re back in our room at Garrn Dwelling. Tathan and Sir Danth have gone back to fight sstejj. They protect workers who are putting up gates at the other tunnels so they can claim that cavern.”

“You stayed with me?”

“Yes, Lady Liselle,” Vevin whispered. “I couldn’t bear to leave your side while you were hurt.” He kissed her earlobe gently, sending goose bumps throughout her body.

“I’m glad you stayed, Vevin. I feel safer when you’re near.” Liselle wondered what he looked like when he was a dragon. She knew he was a purple dragon and purple was her favorite color. She especially liked purple flowers . . . and dragons.

“I didn’t keep you safe in the cavern.”

Liselle opened her eyes just a bit. The light wasn’t as bright as it had been. They were sensitive due to her headache. She focused on Vevin and saw the angry set of his jaw and his refusal to look her in the eye. “Vevin dearest,” she said, gently running a hand along his jaw. “You mustn’t be upset with yourself. I did what I felt to be right. I’m allowed to take chances and experience danger too, you know.”

He looked her in the eyes as though to argue that she was not, in fact, allowed to take chances. She loved his eyes. There were so many shades of silver swirling in them all the time and he expressed so much with them. His jaw began to relax as she continued to caress it. “I don’t want you to take chances. I want you to be safe,” he said guiltily.

“I know, dearest Vevin. But I am not your treasure to tuck away safe in your lair and you must always understand that,” she told him with a firm tone.

He didn’t answer at first, but then relented with a nod. “Yes, Lady Liselle.” Vevin sighed and ran fingers through her hair some more. “You are strong, magical and nice. That’s what I like so much about you. You’re very pretty too.”

Liselle smiled happily and curled closer to him. “Thank you, Vevin. I like you too.”

They stayed like that for a short while. Vevin ran his fingers through her hair and would occasionally lean down and kiss her cheek. Liselle closed her eyes and purred.

She gradually became aware of a severe hunger in her belly. “Vevin?”

“Yes, Lady Liselle?”

“Can I have some food, please? I’m really hungry.” She opened her eyes and looked up at him pitifully.

“Of course, Lady Liselle,” he said with a toothy smile. He went over to a table and picked up a tray. “There’s a little bit of cold food here for you: some of their breads, cheese and water to drink.” The tray had legs that he opened before setting it over her lap. “I’ll get some hot food for you now,” he said, getting up and doing a small, eager dance.

“Alright,” she said as he danced out the door, looking over his shoulder to smile at her. She ate the food in front of her without tasting it. Mostly, she thought of what had happened back in the cavern. The spell had been too powerful, nearly killing her. She had given the plants too much control.

Underground plants were different from the ones above. There wasn’t as much love and sunshine in them. It seemed silly, but that was the best way Liselle could describe it. They had a greater drive to survive and flourish. It seemed that way with all the creatures in the caverns. She would have to remember to be wary of the power they sent.

The sstejj were another creature that seemed to have an insatiable desire, but theirs was to destroy, specifically Rojuun. The plants had let her feel the hunger the sstejj had for Rojuun and it made her shiver.

Vevin came through the door with a tray of warm food in his hands. Liselle looked down, surprised to see that she had finished all of the food and water already. The growl of her tummy told her that she was still hungry.

“Master Hurrn Garrn told me that you would be very hungry when you awoke.” Vevin jerked his head to the Rojuun entering behind him. This meju was taller than any of the others Liselle had seen. There were lines in his face similar to what one would find in an older human. He wore brown robes with violet swirls. The Rojuun glided gracefully across the room to her bed.

“Now then, Liselle human,” he said in gentle, relaxing tones. “I will examine you to ensure that you are well.” Hurrn smiled as he sat down on the bed next to her, opposite of Vevin. It was a very calming smile and his dark amber pupils widened in a way that was comforting. Liselle saw that all of his qualities of voice and physical gestures made him a very soothing healer.

“Please understand that I am not completely familiar with human anatomy and energies. However, we are very similar in many ways,” he said. He reached out a hand, touching her leg through the blankets. It was a calming touch, much as Liselle had used with Marrraa when mending her broken arm. Liselle allowed herself to relax in response. She trusted this Rojuun even knowing he had magic to amplify that trust.

“I also know that you used a great deal of magic all at once. Marrraa Garrn believes that you may have burned yourself out on it,” he continued. “This is something I am familiar with and would like to discover whether or not this is the case.”

Liselle nodded as she snuck a bite of food from the tray that Vevin brought. The breaded drumstick tasted wonderful.

“Very good,” said Hurrn with a smile. “Now, it’s my understanding that you can do magic.” He frowned a bit. “Marrraa told me that you did a healing spell and then a spell with blue fire immediately after that.” He wagged his finger at Liselle. “That is much more energy than a young woman should channel! I’m not sure I believe all of what she told me, but that’s not important right now.” He crossed all four arms, waiting to see how she would respond.

Liselle took another bite and stared at the healer while chewing. She didn’t have any desire to talk to him about her magic. Plus, her mouth was busy with tasty food.

“Hmm. Well, I suppose we should just see if you’re still capable of doing any magic.” The healer took a candle out of a pocket in his robe, setting it on the tray next to Liselle’s meal. “Now, I want you to try to light this candle. Let me know immediately if you experience physical or spiritual pain. Is that understood?”

“Yes Healer Hurrn,” mumbled Liselle around a mouthful of food.

“Very well, please light the flame,” he said, gesturing to the candle.

Liselle considered as she finished chewing. The Rojuun healer probably wanted a proper flame. She thought back to the normal fire spell Tathan had taught her. Liselle whispered the words quietly, gesturing with greasy fingers. The flame grew easily, if a bit large. She still didn’t have it down. “Lighting small fires isn’t my strong point,” she admitted before grabbing another bite of food.

“I see,” he said. “Marrraa said you make a blue flame. Can you show me that?”

Liselle extinguished the candle with a flip of her hand. Still chewing on the drumstick of whatever creature they were feeding her, she waved her hand again toward the side of the bed. A small, dancing flame appeared in midair. Then she made another and another. The three flames began to dance around in circles, bouncing up and down in the air.

Suddenly, she felt very dizzy and tired. Her head hurt again, though not as sharply. Liselle waved away the flames and rested her head against the pillow, setting the drumstick back on the tray.

“Hmm, there is no permanent damage, my dear human,” the healer said gently. “But I can see that you are still exhausted. Do not cast any spells for a few days. Wait a week or two before doing anything significant.” He wagged his finger at her again. “You will

be fine, but it is obvious that you channeled too much energy through your body. It needs time to recover.” Hurrn Garrn stood up, straightening his robes. “It was a delight to meet you, Liselle Human. I will tell Marrraa not to let you join battle for two weeks at least. From what I understand, you’ve already done a great deed, so don’t worry about fulfilling your contract,” he reprimanded her with the wagging finger once more. Liselle had a strange urge to bite it, but was too tired.

As the healer walked out of the room, Vevin took the tray and put it back on the table. Liselle smiled at him weakly as he came back over to the bed, silver eyes swirling with concern. “You are to do as the healer says, Lady Liselle,” he admonished, sitting down to run fingers through her hair once more.

“Yes, dearest Vevin. I will behave,” she agreed tiredly. Liselle looked up and smiled at him. She was glad that he was here instead of Tathan or Sir Danth. She slid back down under the covers, getting comfortable as he tucked her back in.

Vevin leaned down and kissed her gently on the lips. It was a shock that she thoroughly enjoyed, her first kiss. He pulled up, smiling at her and she smiled back. She rolled over onto her side and began to nod off.

Liselle felt him lie down behind her and wrap his arm around her. He kissed her cheek and earlobe for a moment then lay still. She didn’t mind at all, falling asleep with a smile on her face.

[Chapter 27](#)

Tathan was nervous about his cousin. He knew she was different, but couldn’t help feeling that he had put her in *way* too much danger. She was inexperienced in life and naïve to the ways of the world. Yet he had gone and dragged her deep underground to an alien world with ravenous creatures hell-bent on destroying anything even resembling intelligent life. Some cousin he was.

“Your mood is on the ground and your head is hung low to look at it, Master Tathan,” Sir Danth said. “You are concerned for your cousin, yes?”

Tathan sighed. “Yes. I feel as though I led her into danger and I’m the reason she’s lying in bed, unconscious. I feel responsible for her.”

Sir Danth gave his shoulder a comforting smack. Tathan staggered forward. It would have been more comforting had the knight not had a gauntleted hand and the strength of a horse. “I understand what you mean and I agree with you. You are responsible for her.”

The words didn’t make Tathan feel any better than the bruised shoulder did. “Uhh, yeah.”

“After all, she *is* a woman and everyone knows women are to stay in their chambers, waiting for a man’s pleasure, right?” Sir Danth continued. “Dragging them away from home to have adventures and risk their life is the worst thing you can do to a lady. It was very foolish of you to do so.” He patted Tathan’s shoulder a few more times until the rogue finally ducked.

“Is that how the knights of your time treated their ladies, Sir Danth?” Tathan asked with barely disguised contempt in his voice. Marrraa, who was leading the work party, looked back at the two of them with a frown.

“Nay, but it is how you sound when you talk about your cousin, Master Tathan,” the knight said with a flip of a gauntlet. “You assume responsibility for her decisions. From what I’ve seen, she makes her own decisions regardless of whether or not you approve. I was under the impression that you travel together as equals in addition to being cousins.”

Tathan was irritated now. He had treated Liselle with nothing but respect and dignity throughout their journeys. At least he had tried to. “Sir Danth, don’t treat me like an idiot. Liselle is my cousin and she’s lived in a quiet valley all her life. I’m not a knight, but I do feel as though I have some honor and a responsibility to make sure she’s safe.”

“Aye, you do have honor, friend Tathan,” Sir Danth said with a more gentle hand on the shoulder. “And you should protect family wherever you can. At the same time, you have to let people make their own decisions and live their lives. It is a difficult balance. Lady Liselle is not a normal woman and I truly believe she will do whatever she wishes, regardless of anything that might be said to her by you or anyone else.”

Tathan relaxed some. “I worry about her, that’s all,” he said. “She just lost her entire family, and then we went off exploring the world. Now we’re in caverns with hostile creatures that like to play with their food and we qualify as food.”

“I am sorry for the loss of her family and yours, Master Tathan,” the knight said. “It is a hard thing. My family was killed when I was young too. The knighthood took me in.”

“I didn’t realize that, Sir Danth. I’m sorry to hear it,” Tathan responded with a friendly hand on the knight’s arm.

“It is *long* in the past.” He and Tathan chuckled. Marrraa looked back at them in puzzlement, not getting the reference. Sir Danth continued, “I grew up in the order and became one of the finest warriors the Knights of Morhain had ever known.”

“I’ve met a few knights in my travels and they’re not half as capable, nor honorable as you, Sir Danth,” Tathan told him. “I’m glad you’re on our side.”

“I second that sentiment,” Marrraa mumbled from in front of them.

Tathan grinned and continued. “Liselle seems to me like the flowers she has an affinity for; beautiful, fragile and too good for the world.” He shook his head with a sigh. “I know I can’t keep her safe, but it doesn’t prevent me from wanting to try.”

“Aye. It will not prevent me from trying either, my friend,” Sir Danth said with another gauntleted smack. Tathan was going to have a dislocated shoulder if he kept talking to the knight. “Lady Liselle is as beautiful as the stars in the night and glows more brightly. She is lovely to speak with as well. Both good and evil will be attracted to her as the bee is to the flowers our lady loves so much.”

“May she find more good than evil,” Tathan said hopefully. He became thoughtful. “Do you think that Vevin is more good than evil, Sir Danth?”

“I don’t know, Master Tathan,” the knight admitted. “I believe he would die for Liselle, but I am not entirely certain that his mind is intact.”

“It’s his attraction to Liselle that concerns me most. It seems like he feels more than simple adoration for her,” Tathan said with a frown.

“Oh yes, I believe he does feel more than simple adoration,” Sir Danth acknowledged. When Tathan looked at him with widened eyes at the confirmation of his fears, the knight went on. “I know it is not what you would wish to hear, Master Tathan,

but I believe that he is truly in love with her. I have no idea how you should feel about it though.”

“I don’t like it,” Tathan admitted. “As her cousin, I feel as though I should intervene, but at the same time I’m pretty sure she would strangle me with flowers if I tried.”

Marraa turned and gave him a funny look at the comment about being strangled by flowers. Sir Danth chuckled. “I trust you are right about her reaction. Lady Liselle makes her own decisions and I believe she may be fond of Master Vevin in return,” he said, holding his finger up to make the point.

“Do you really think so?” Tathan asked. “I know she likes him, but he’s so . . . different?” He let out a sigh. “I just don’t know, Sir Danth. Liselle’s feelings are difficult to read and I just don’t know what to make of Vevin at all.”

“Aye. He is odd, but I must say that I like him,” the knight admitted with a small laugh. “As you said of me, ‘I’m glad he is on our side’.”

“That is very true. I don’t know that I’d feel comfortable if he were angry with me,” Tathan admitted.

“I agree with that wholeheartedly.” Sir Danth nodded his head. “I don’t believe I would survive a battle against him.”

Marraa stopped and turned around to stare at them. “I have seen you battle, Sir Danth Human. I cannot imagine anyone defeating you in single combat.” She was very earnest in her praise of the knight.

“Thank you for the confidence in my abilities, Mistress Marraa,” the knight said with a bow. “While there are few who could stand against me, Master Vevin is a rare individual and I would not care to test my abilities against him. Shall we continue?” he suggested with a gesture for her to lead on. He didn’t want to get into details about their dragon friend.

Marraa frowned at both of them for a moment. Seeing that they were not going to elaborate, she turned around and led the way at a quicker pace. Tathan and Sir Danth followed in silence.

Tathan thought about the events since Liselle had cast her spell. Marraa had spoken to a council of elders. Jarrn was the head of the Garrn family, but Rojuun families had councils of elders that took care of judicial aspects of society.

Tathan, Vevin and Sir Danth had been called into the chamber of the elders. Eight council members sat at tables on a raised dais while other Rojuun in fine robes sat in rows on either side of the chamber floor. Eight was a holy number for the Rojuun and many things were done in eights.

Marraa stood in the center of the chamber floor, telling of the events in the cavern and the human’s decimation of the sstejj. Many of the Rojuun in the room expressed disbelief at various points in the story. After she was finished, the council asked the humans to approach one at a time. Each was asked to tell their version of what happened.

Tathan was first and told them a simplified, modest version of events, which still seemed to impress them a great deal. Sir Danth gave a clinical description of his actions, which didn’t quite portray the violent deaths of the sstejj at the point of his greatsword. They both downplayed Liselle’s magical display as much as they could, which meant that it was merely awesome instead of earth shattering. They admitted Liselle was capable of powerful magic, both healing and offensive magic, but warned that she was still

inexperienced and the amount of magic used was more than she could handle. The companions assured the council that they would help to guide her in the future.

When Vevin's turn came, he asked the council about sstejj and their habits. The council told them that the sstejj had hunted Rojuun for a long time, but the monsters had not always existed. They told him how the sstejj primarily hunted their race, forgoing easier prey just to get at one of them. They also told Vevin details about the anatomy of the sstejj.

The council told Vevin many things before he sat down. The elders were very happy with their questioning of Vevin even though they hadn't actually asked him one single question. Sir Danth and Tathan looked at each other and shook their heads in amazement.

Everyone was asked to leave the chambers while the Council of Elders deliberated. Tathan and Vevin checked on Liselle then ate a meal in their common room. Sir Danth went outside the dwelling to stand by the lake in contemplation.

When they were brought back in, the elders thanked them for their actions in the cavern. They had sent a scouting party to verify the story. The scouts found the charred and sliced bodies left behind as there hadn't been enough time for more sstejj to eat the corpses. Marrraa told them later that the scouting party had given their report to the council with awe-filled voices.

The council gave the companions a reward above and beyond their pay. Four gifts were to be divided as the companions pleased. They chose Liselle's reward first, a necklace of fine platinum and jewels more beautiful than any of them had ever seen. That was saying a lot considering that Vevin was a dragon, Sir Danth had guarded royal treasure and Tathan was a thief with a taste for wizard's vaults. The second treasure was a large tapestry of a bejeweled cavern with rivers flowing through it while fairies flitted along the water. Sir Danth admired it. The council agreed to set it aside for him until such time as he could collect it. Vevin took a golden dagger with a bejeweled hilt that was perfect for his treasure trove. Tathan accepted the last item, a gold ribbon ring with two small pearls set in it. They told him that it could cause the wearer to be invisible for a short time once per day. It was the best thing they could have given him.

After the council rewarded the party, it was made clear that they would still be expected to honor their contract. Liselle would be allowed to rest as long as needed. The elders were certain the rest of them could handle the duties, as they had proven so capable. It was an unceremonious end to the ceremony, but the group didn't mind. It was good to have it over.

The next day, Tathan and Sir Danth had gone out to provide protection for a gate crew. The crew would build a new gate in each of the twelve tunnels. The doors of the new gates would remain open until such time as they would be able to lock the entire cavern.

In the past, efforts to build gates had been futile due to the number of sstejj in the cavern. With Tathan and Sir Danth protecting the crew, a gate was successfully built that first day. Now they were traveling to the next tunnel with every expectation that it would be finished as well.

There weren't as many sstejj as there had been the first day the companions had fought, but the boys were able to make a game out of seeing who could get the most gill shots. Marrraa had brought three young warriors in training in order to teach them how

to fight the monsters. The humans made it easy for the Rojuun to gather around individual sstejj and test their skills on it.

Hours passed before the next gate was finished and the party made their way back to the dwelling. The workers were happy at producing so much work two days in a row. Marrraa was happy that she had been able to train the young warriors. Only one came back injured. He had a broken arm from trying to imitate the human's gill shots. He would be fixed up by the healer and be ready to go in a week or two.

The party was informed that Liselle was awake just as they entered Garrn Cavern. Both Tathan and Sir Danth ran back to the dwelling.

Chapter 28

Liselle reassured the boys that she was fine while they hovered around her bed with concerned looks. She had slept a while longer before waking up hungry again. Vevin had brought her more food, which she nibbled on.

Tathan sat at the foot of the bed. "I'm glad you're safe, Cousin. A part of me knew you were fine, but another part worried the magic had damaged you." Liselle saw tears welling in his eyes. His jaw was set in a manly attempt not to let them flow.

"There's no damage, Cousin," Liselle told him softly. "I know you're worried about me. I worked hard to keep that spell under control and just barely managed. If I had made a mistake, I would have died," she admitted. "The plants in the cavern are different from plants above. They give their energy differently and don't have as much care for my well-being." Liselle held up a drumstick to make her next point. She *really* liked the drumsticks and eyed it hungrily while talking. "I learned quickly what happened and I will have no problem controlling it in the future. Please believe that this will not happen again," she finished and took a large bite of the drumstick that taunted her.

"I *do* believe you. You learn magic faster than anyone I've known and show intelligence in using it," Tathan said with relief in his voice. "I feel a responsibility for you, Cousin. I know you can take care of yourself, but I still feel as though I should look after you."

Liselle wiped drumstick juice from her chin with a napkin Vevin handed her. "I look to you for guidance, Tathan. You know the world better than I do. While you look after me, you've also been respectful of me, which is nice because it means I don't have to bonk you in the head," she finished with a wide grin, sticking her tongue out at him.

Sir Danth laughed loudly. "Well said, Milady. Well said. It is good to see you in high spirits. Have you been given your share of the reward, by the way?"

"Reward? What reward?" That got Liselle to stop eating for just a moment. "We got a reward? I don't think I've ever gotten a reward before."

Vevin brought it out in a beautiful box, which he opened. "I wanted to wait 'til everyone was here before giving it to you." The jewels on the platinum necklace glistened in the light of the room when he opened it.

Liselle brought a hand to her throat and gasped. She ran fingers over the delicate weave of patterns in the necklace. "It's so beautiful."

"Our actions in the cavern that first day were considered heroic," Sir Danth explained. "The Rojuun believe that horde of sstejj would have broken through the gate

and overrun Garrn Cavern had we not been there to fight.” He crossed his arms and took a serious tone. “I believe they may be right about that fact.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” Liselle looked away from the necklace. “Something is driving the sstejj to kill the Rojuun. Something dark and sinister.” Vevin put the necklace back in its box while Liselle grabbed another drumstick and began nomming on it.

“Something? What sort of something, Milady? Can you give us more detail?” Sir Danth asked.

“I don’t know. The plants told me there’s something sinister driving the sstejj to kill Rojuun,” she said, waving the drumstick in emphasis. “They don’t really speak or give me images, communicating in . . . concepts I suppose.” She looked at the drumstick in disappointment, realizing that she wasn’t going to get to bite it until she finished speaking. “The creature, whatever it is, lives in the dark depths of the caverns along with the sstejj. They both have an unnatural hunger for the Rojuun and will keep trying to kill them until they’re exterminated.” She pounced on the drumstick that had waited so patiently for her to finish.

“What do we do with that information?” Tathan rubbed his chin in thought. “We originally came here to get information about the Rojuun for Mother Tree.”

“I realize that I recently broke an oath, Master Tathan, but I do not intend to stand by and let a noble race, regardless of their misguided opinions about humans, be slaughtered by monsters,” Sir Danth said.

“Oh no! I like the Rojuun, Tathan.” Vevin stood and nodded his head rapidly for emphasis. “They have beautiful music, paintings and lots of treasure. They’re nice too and their voices are pretty and fun to listen to.” He stopped. “Although I still haven’t had a chance to taste one . . .”

Liselle chuckled. “I know we work for Mother Tree, Cousin. However, we agreed to get information on the Rojuun, not let them be slaughtered by aberrations.” A sigh escaped her lips. “Besides, I truly believe that if these creatures were to destroy the Rojuun, they would then spill out of the caverns to the lands of humans, becoming a scourge across Ryallon.”

Sir Danth nodded. “Truly spoken, Milady. Creatures like the sstejj have unnatural hungers that will only die when they do. Besides, I’m having fun killing them. Everyone agrees that they’re aberrations that need to die. Bloodshed and mayhem are always more enjoyable when there is no moral ambiguity involved.”

Tathan grinned at the knight while Liselle rolled her eyes. “Alright, so we agree the sstejj need to be destroyed. At some point, we do need to get information to Mother Tree,” he pointed out.

“Well then, we will,” Liselle agreed. “But we’ll do it when we’re able. I don’t think asking to be teleported to Puujan so that we can give information about them to the Mother Tree would be all that good of an idea,” she said with a wry smile.

Tathan chuckled. “I agree. Should we let Marrraa and the Council of Elders know about the thing that drives the sstejj?”

“We should probably tell them something drives the monsters,” Liselle agreed tentatively. “But I don’t know *what* it is.”

“Alright then. I’ll go tell Marrraa and see what she says,” Tathan said. He left the room.

“It is my understanding that you are to rest for a week or two, Milady. You intend to do so, yes?” Sir Danth asked firmly with arms crossed.

She gave him an innocent look. “But of course, my dark knight. I will rest until I’m better.” Sir Danth stared at her for a moment before sighing. He would rather face sstejj than try to convince a woman of being sensible. “Peace, Sir Danth,” Liselle said with a hand on his crossed arm. “I know what my body can handle. I promise to take care of it.” To that, Sir Danth nodded.

The three of them were quiet while Liselle finished her meal. A short time later, Tathan walked in with Marrraa close behind. “The Council of Elders wants to see us right away. They were already in session.”

Marrraa had a look of worry on her face and she wrung her lower set of hands together. “Yes, this news you bring is very troublesome. Please come right away if you are able, Liselle Human.”

Liselle stood gingerly. She was in a robe made for her by a Rojuun girl who had met Liselle while cleaning the room. The girl liked the idea of making something for a human and the robe was at the base of Liselle’s bed the next day. It had blacks and greys in it and was gilt with silver. Liselle had put it on right away. The robe had no wrinkles even though she had worn it in bed.

Marrraa led them to the council chambers where the eight elders sat at their tables. The rows of seating were half full.

The companions were given seats while Marrraa explained the bit that Tathan had told her. Then the council bade Liselle to stand and speak of what she knew.

“Young Liselle Human, please tell the council of this thing that drives the sstejj,” said one of the elders in the middle. He looked to be the oldest with many wrinkles and a slow, deliberate manner about him. He was dressed in a gown of deep reds and golds.

“Yes, Elder.” Liselle considered how best to phrase things. “My magic has an affinity for flowers and plants. I’m able to gather energy from them.” She tried to keep the details as simple as possible, but wanted to explain enough so they didn’t think her merely crazy. “I understand concepts they communicate to me though they don’t speak in words or images.”

The council members looked at each other with some whispering behind their hands. One on the end asked, “It is rumored that the Druids in that horrifying forest outside Puujan speak to plants. Are you one of them?” The elders all looked at her with frowns on their faces.

“No, Elder. I know of Druids and my magic is nothing like theirs. They dance around in the trees and hug them or something,” she giggled and dismissed Druids as flighty in order to belay suspicion of her.

The elders visibly relaxed and a few even chuckled. “Very well, Liselle Human. Continue with your information,” said the original council member in the middle. He appeared to be the leader.

“Yes, Elder. When I cast fire upon the sstejj, the plants helped me with the energy, taking much of it into their own bodies. That’s how I was able to survive.”

“Extraordinary,” said one of the elders appreciatively.

“The plants don’t like sstejj either. They sense within the creatures a hunger to destroy Rojuun,” Liselle said in serious tones. “They also sense a darker force driving the sstejj with an unnatural hatred for your race.”

“What is this darker force and where does it come from?” one of the other elders asked.

Liselle shook her head helplessly. “The plants don’t communicate beyond concepts I’m afraid. They can only tell me that it is a dark, living force coming from lower caverns.” She held her arms out. “I’m very sorry I can’t tell you more than that. I felt it important to tell you what little I do know so that you may better understand the sstejj’s lustful hatred for the Rojuun,” she finished.

“Thank you, Liselle Human. Please have a seat,” the middle elder said. The council members discussed the matter amongst themselves in low tones for a few moments. They didn’t make the companions leave.

After a short while, the council turned their attention back to the humans. “There is very little detail in your warning; however, we take it seriously,” the council leader said. “We will be sending word to the Ultimate Council of Elders.” A few of the members nodded in agreement. “This will no longer be your concern unless you should discover more information. You humans will continue guarding the workers as before. That will be all.” With a wave of his hand, the elder dismissed them.

They went back to their suite with Marrraa tagging along. Once there, she closed the door. Liselle got back in bed and Vevin tucked her in. Tathan looked at him with lidded eyes, not sure how to react. Sir Danth went to the window and looked outside.

Marrraa spoke first, “Thank you for all that you are doing, humans. Many servants are lazy, doing as little as possible. However, you go far above and beyond anything that has been asked of you.” She studied them when they didn’t respond. “I have spent enough time with you to learn your facial expressions and body language. You don’t like being called servants.”

Tathan sighed and admitted, “No, but we won’t cause problems about it. Human history has nothing in it that calls for us to be your servants though and we don’t take well to it.”

“You do not behave as servants,” Marrraa admitted slowly. “In many ways, you are equals, though I won’t admit that publicly,” she said in all seriousness. “I pity you for having only one voice and one set of arms though. You do not seem to see the beauty in life nor do you have ways to express it.” She shook her head sadly. “Even with that, you are strong and capable. You also speak earnestly, with honor and passion, qualities of a noble race.” Marrraa clapped her hands together in a decision. “I will consider you servants no longer. Instead, you will be my friends, yes?”

Liselle smiled at her and said, “Yes, Marrraa. That would be wonderful. We already consider you a friend.”

“Oh yes! You are wonderful and I like you a great deal,” Vevin said, doing a ‘You are wonderful and I like you a great deal’ dance.

“You would make an excellent knight. I would recommend you if my order still existed,” said Sir Danth, turning from the window.

“We’re glad to call you friend, Marrraa,” agreed Tathan with a smile. “And we’re happy that you call us friend in return. Sometimes a person needs all the friends they can get to make it through life.”

“That is very true, Tathan Human,” Marrraa said with a smile of her own. “Life is easier with friends.” She smiled at them all then turned to leave. “I will see you tomorrow when we return to the cavern. The workers hope to build gates in the next two

tunnels as they are very near to each other.” She walked out the door, leaving them to their rest.

Chapter 29

“I want to stay with Liselle and make sure she’s comfortable.” Vevin stubbornly stood next to the bed with his arms crossed. He didn’t want to leave Liselle’s side to fight the sstejj. Tathan was staring at him with lowered eyebrows and Sir Danth was chuckling at the two of them. Marrraa had come to get them and listened to the disagreement with wide eyes. She remembered that both of these men considered Vevin to be the superior warrior.

“Vevin,” Liselle spoke from the bed with a stern voice. “I’ll be just fine. It’s bad enough that I have to stay in bed while everyone else does the work, but it’s not fair that your efforts should be taken away from them as well.” She reached out and touched his arm. “I know you care for me, but I’ll be displeased if you treat me like a figurine to always stand guard over.”

The dragon blushed, his cheeks becoming a dark purple. “I’m sorry, Lady Liselle. I just don’t want to leave you,” he said shyly, moving his toe back and forth on the floor.

“I know, Vevin. Sometimes a girl needs a day alone to rest quietly though. Go beat up some sstejj and have fun with it,” Liselle encouraged him with a smile.

His face brightened at that. “That will be fun. I should catch up on gill shots. I bet I can pass Sir Danth and Tathan combined.” He began doing what the rest of them assumed was a gill shot dance. His smile was sharp and he did a spin.

“Go, boys. Go with Marrraa and keep the workers safe,” Liselle said, shoing them away.

They each gave her a hug before going. She settled back down under the covers, falling asleep as they closed the door.

The companions walked to the gate bragging about gill shots. Marrraa had four trainees with her and they listened to the humans in awe, knowing the deeds to be true now that many Rojuun had witnessed it. The workers who followed listened just as intently to the stories.

When they reached the end of the tunnel, Marrraa cast her ice/mist spell on the ones trying to get through the gates. Once the sstejj were cleared, the workers went toward two tunnels a distance to the right of the main tunnel.

Each of the fighters was assigned one trainee. Vevin and his trainee, who looked scared out of his wits, took the first group of four sstejj. Vevin ran up to the first sstejj. When it tried to bite him, he grabbed it by the jaws and threw it against another one to slow it down. The workers and other trainees watched with open mouths. Tathan, Sir Danth and Marrraa had seen it before, but still looked on in amazement. Vevin quickly went back to his trainee and told him how to use his knives to attack it.

The trainee tried to move to the sstejj’s side to get a gill shot. He misjudged, tripping over his own feet. The sstejj sensed easy food until Vevin touched it with his hand.

Purple lightning coursed over the sstejj's body, killing it instantly. The trainee shuffled away on his butt as the creature's snout landed between his legs.

"Get up!" yelled Vevin at the trainee. Another sstejj attacked. Suddenly a great magical whip was in Vevin's hand. It was dark purple with his trademark lightning coursing down its length. The whip flew back over Vevin's shoulder then came forward in an arc. It hit the gills on the right side of the monster's head, exploding through the gills on the left. A loud snap echoed throughout the cavern on impact. The force of it caused the creature's head to crack as it crashed to the ground. Vevin pulled the whip back, entwining it around his body.

The trainee was beside Vevin now. The look on his face crossed between awe at Vevin and determination not to make a fool of himself. He sprang forward as another sstejj charged. The Rojuun trainee tumbled to the left and attacked the gills when he came to his feet. The knife was pulled out of his hand without any damage to the sstejj, but the trainee recovered in time to jump up and land on the back of the creature. He thrust two of his knives into the body for his first kill.

The last sstejj was the one Vevin had thrown. It was back on its feet, starting for the main group of builders. Vevin's whip flashed through the air and rammed into the gills, killing it instantly. When he pulled the whip back, the sstejj's twitching body was carried into the air a few feet before falling to the ground.

No one saw where Vevin's whip disappeared to, though Tathan thought it looked a lot like a dragon's tail might. Vevin was the first to congratulate the trainee on his first kill. They joined the rest of the group. Marrraa took the trainee by the ear as they walked and explained exactly how *unimpressed* she was with his work.

A group of eight attacked next. Sir Danth led his trainee ahead into the fray. The trainee managed to get a gill shot on the first sstejj right away. He pumped his fists into the air in excitement. That gave the next sstejj plenty of time to knock him down. Sir Danth's sword through the gills was the only thing that prevented the creature's teeth from plunging into the prone Rojuun. Sir Danth showed his own extraordinary strength by leveraging the sstejj into the air and throwing it to the side with a great heave.

The trainee managed to get on his feet and actually succeeded at taking two more kills from Sir Danth, though neither was a gill shot.

Marrraa claimed the next five sstejj that approached. She and her trainee dashed forward to meet them. Her trainee was her younger sister, Turrr. She was fresh out of the academy and showed more promise than most. The two of them dashed across the cavern floor. Marrraa somersaulted into the air, coming down on the first sstejj's head, ramming knives into the gills on both sides. It was an impressive move that drew oohs and ahhs from the watchers.

Her sister didn't try to be so tricky. Turrr rolled to the side of another sstejj and came up next to it. She dashed between a set of legs and slashed deep with two knives, killing it quickly. Another one attacked right away. She dodged the attack and rammed a knife into its gills.

Marrraa had come over to see to her sister's safety, but finding that the young Rojuun was doing well, she instead went after the next sstejj and killed it with rapid cuts to the body. The fifth one fell with knife wounds to the torso from both women. They stood still as it stumbled ahead five steps before falling to the ground. Then the sisters saluted each other and headed back to the group to cheers and congratulations.

Tathan and his trainee had the opportunity to take on seven of the creatures. His trainee was a quiet female named Aaruulaa who was small compared to most Rojuun. There was a mischievous manner about her that he liked.

Aaruulaa raced ahead of Tathan, eager to get a kill. Tathan paced himself to see what she could do. He would be there if she needed him, but was willing to let her take out all seven if she could. That would be better than any number of gill shots, he thought to himself.

She did a standard tumble and dash to the left, slashing deep into the body with a long knife. As it died, she went into another tumble coming up to hit the second one in the side. Aaruulaa wasn't wasting time on gill shots Tathan noticed with approval.

She darted to one in the middle of the pack. The feju's scent drew the other sstejj around her. The middle one went down and with a quick move she was at the fourth, slashing along its body. One tried to bite her. Aaruulaa ducked under the one she just killed before it fell to the ground. The biting sstejj stumbled into the dead creature.

With a quick twist, she avoided the teeth of another one and rolled under it, slashing up against the belly with one of her knives. As it fell, she rolled and leapt up to the back of the sixth, driving two knives into it.

The last one had crawled over the dead body of its companion to reach her. She hurdled from the back of the one she had just killed to the back of the charging sstejj. That one fell. Tathan thought that it was nice of the sstejj to die so easily.

He roamed the perimeter of the battle the entire time, ready to jump in and protect the young feju, but it hadn't been necessary. Aaruulaa looked around at the dead creatures. Turning to Tathan, she saw his sword was clean. "I . . . I . . ." she stuttered, looking guilty.

"Don't worry about it," Tathan said with a grin. "I'm sure you'll leave me one or two next time."

They walked back to the group with Aaruulaa blushing deeply. She was greeted with applause and pats on the back. Tathan went to Marrraa, Vevin and Sir Danth who were all glaring at him. "Well, I didn't get any gill shots or kills," he said with a shrug. "I guess you guys are winning." Their glares became darker. He laughed and walked past them, knowing that his trainee getting all seven kills was worth more than a hundred gill shots.

It was a long day with many more sstejj attacks. They split up; Tathan, Vevin and their trainees protected the builders working on one tunnel. Sir Danth, Marrraa and their trainees guarded the other.

Throughout the attacks, Tathan noticed that sstejj would always go for the Rojuun before coming near him. It made it very easy for Tathan to kill them most times. The Rojuun fought so fiercely because the attacks were unrelenting. At times, one or two of the builders would join the fight if an attack was particularly heavy. They were all proficient at fighting the sstejj. He came to realize that they had to be because the creatures thirsted for their blood, stopping at nothing but death to get it.

Tathan came to the conclusion that the main goal of sstejj was to kill Rojuun. Most creatures took time to eat and rest. Even carnivores would procreate and show signs of community. The sstejj did nothing but try to slaughter Rojuun. They didn't even care about each other or their own survival. Liselle was right about them.

He took the time to study one of the monsters. The bodies had no real organs. They were just bits of guts in a slime casing. Most importantly, there was no heart or blood. Something was definitely unnatural about the creatures.

By the end of the day, the builders and their protectors were tired. Even Sir Danth moved at a slower pace. His sword and armor gathered power to keep him going. It was not infinite though. Tathan had also noticed that the sstejj gave out no energy. People, air, plants and even rocks all had some sort of energy as did just about everything else in the world. Tathan wasn't extremely knowledgeable about magic, but he had learned the basics. Sstejj were the only thing he had ever come across that didn't have energy.

Tathan didn't honestly know what it meant, but he was sure that Liselle might understand. She seemed to have better instincts for magic.

Walking back, the trainees all talked excitedly among themselves about the day's events. Tathan's trainee had the most kills for the day, though none were gill shots. Once the others realized that they could take out more by hitting the bodies, they stopped trying for the more difficult and dangerous method of kill and became more effective fighters. After that, Vevin, Sir Danth and Marrraa also stopped the gill shots realizing that while they were more impressive to each other, it was a bad habit to teach trainees.

It was a good day's work for all involved. Two gates had been built, the trainees had received extensive field experience and no one died or even received an injury. They made it back to Garrn Cavern in good spirits.

When they got back to their suite, Tathan shared his observations with his companions. They listened intently to the theories and discussed them for quite a while. Vevin was the one who verified that all things in the world had energies. He also agreed with Tathan's assessment that the sstejj were the exception to that rule. He hadn't paid attention to it before, but he concurred that they didn't project energy.

They cut the night short to get some rest. Marrraa had told them to take the next day off. More work had been done in four days than in the previous four weeks. The elders felt that all needed rest.

They spent the day listening to musicians and watching painters in a garden in a different area of Garrn Cavern. All sorts of foods were brought to them by Rojuun who wanted to see the human warriors up close. Even the presentation of the food was done with artistry.

The companions were each given Rojuun style robes made specifically for them as gifts. Sir Danth was given a new cloak of exquisite artisanship, as he never took his armor off to put on a robe. In that day, they all grew even fonder of the Rojuun and their innocent beauty.

Chapter 30

"I'm fine," Liselle said in frustration. She was determined to go with them today no matter what they said. She wasn't completely back up to strength, but was well enough to take care of any minor healing that needed to be done and could also throw a fireball or two if a sstejj got too close. "I'm not going to cast fire throughout the caverns. I'll do only what I'm able to do and that much only if necessary."

"I'm not convinced, Cousin." Tathan stood with his arms crossed. "The healer said two weeks, not four days." He held up a hand to prevent more argument. "I know you

understand what you're able to handle better than anyone. I also know that you won't strain yourself if you can avoid it." He took a deep breath and continued. "But those creatures don't stop coming and you may not be able to avoid using magic."

"I can!" exclaimed Vevin leaping to her defense. "I will keep her with me and make sure that she gets to safety if things get that bad." He stepped toward Tathan. "You know I'll protect her with my life, Tathan Friend. You know that nothing can stop me from keeping her safe."

Tathan sighed. Having Vevin spend all of his time with Liselle wasn't the solution he was looking for. "I know, Vevin." He sighed again when he noticed his cousin smiled at the idea. Tathan wanted to argue more or even put his foot down, but had the wisdom to know that wouldn't go well for him. "Alright. If things get bad, Vevin is to get you to safety," he said to Liselle. "I know you can take care of yourself, but I want to be smart about this and not stress your powers too soon."

"I agree to that, Tathan." Liselle came over and gave him a big hug, holding him tight. It felt good and relieved some of his tension. "So let's go," she said eagerly, grabbing the picnic lunch she had packed for them.

Tathan sighed again, leading the way through the door. They met Marrraa and the trainees outside the main entry then headed to the cavern. Marrraa glanced at Liselle then gave Tathan a questioning look. He shrugged and said, "She's going to limit her magic and if things get bad, Vevin will get her to safety."

Marrraa nodded in response. A short while later they were back at the gate at the end of the tunnel. There were only a few sstejj this time. Marrraa let Sir Danth through the door and he quickly dispatched them. Tathan, Marrraa, and the knight scouted ahead, finding one more small pack, which they let the trainees dispatch.

The warriors led the builders to the right, heading toward a tunnel past the two that had been gated the day before. They came across two more packs, one of which Tathan handled with Aaruulaa's help. Once again, he let her do most of the fighting, though he did take out one of the creatures that headed toward the builders. Marrraa and her sister took out the other pack. She let Turrr kill all but one as well. The young trainee walked back with a large smile on her face.

Tathan had a bad feeling. Part of it was that there should be more sstejj trying to get to them, especially since the companions had taken yesterday off. He also felt unreasonably worried for Liselle.

Mostly, he just had a very bad feeling about things. He used to trust those bad feelings, but he had cut through so much empty air lately that he wasn't sure anymore. They were doing everything right and it *should* be safe. He was certain they could handle any sstejj intrusion. After a few moments of restlessness, he moved next to the knight. "Sir Danth, I have a sense of dread and I can't shake it," he said quietly.

"I am certain Lady Liselle would not have come out were she not feeling well enough. She does not strike me as a fool."

Tathan shook his head. "It's not Liselle, it's just a general sense of dread, like something is wrong. I can't place it."

The knight looked at him thoughtfully. "I believe your instincts are to be trusted, Master Tathan. I do not know how to attack a sense of dread, however."

Tathan chuckled. "I haven't figured that one out either. Just be ready for the unexpected I guess."

He nodded. "I will be extra diligent, Master Tathan."

"Thank you." Tathan smiled gratefully and placed a hand on his shoulder.

They reached their destination a short while later. This tunnel was near the river, which flowed just a short distance away. A waterfall poured out of the wall about twenty feet up, creating a pool that would be perfect for swimming in when the cavern was safe. From there, the river traveled to the lake on the far end. They were on high ground, enabling the party to see everywhere else. The glow of life in the river made it bright, while phosphorescent moss from the ceiling and walls combined with the plants, giving the cavern a moonlit cast.

The builders set up camp between the pool and the tunnel they were going to gate. They began work just as soon as everything was set. Liselle stayed at the camp with Vevin and his trainee. Sir Danth, Tathan and Marrraa took their trainees and scouted the area.

It wasn't long before they came across a pack of sstejj that had caught scent of the builders. Sir Danth and Marrraa led their trainees into the pack while Tathan fell back to catch any that might get past. He looked at Aaruulaa to see if she were ready. She was juggling her knives and grinning at him, ready for anything that should come.

He was surprised to see three of the sstejj get past Sir Danth and Marrraa right away. It was a larger pack than usual. Tathan leapt onto the back of one, slicing through it and somersaulted to the next, killing it just as efficiently while his trainee took care of the third. She looked at him in surprise, as he had never taken the first kills like that. There was also some awe there as she saw how easy he made it seem.

Suddenly there were more sstejj rushing toward them, a lot more. Sir Danth was yelling at his trainee to fall back. Tathan and Aaruulaa covered the retreat. Marrraa and Turrr also fell back to Tathan's position. The sstejj were rushing past their flanks. There were too many and Marrraa pulled out a horn to sound the alarm to the building party.

Sir Danth stood at the front of the rush and raised his sword. Brilliant light emanated from the blade. He plunged it deep into the ground. An enormous shockwave knocked scores of sstejj off their feet and shattered creatures close to him. The force of the shockwave acted as an overload to the sstejj, stunning them. The warriors dashed back to the perimeters of the camp, taking defensive positions.

Sstejj began flowing toward the camp like a tidal wave. The builders gathered with weapons ready. Vevin stood at the right, rear flank of the camp in a crouch, purple whip coiled around his body. Liselle stood behind him, not taking any action. They would be safe near the pool.

Sir Danth, Tathan, and Marrraa spaced themselves at the outer diameter of the camp with their trainees and fought the rush.

A crack of thunder sounded through the cavern, then another and another. Purple lightning killed large swaths of sstejj as Vevin cast his spells, determined to keep Liselle safe. Tathan felt a burst of speed and began cutting through sstejj twice as fast. All of the warriors were moving faster. He felt Liselle's touch in the magical energy and knew she had done something to give them speed and strength. He hoped that it wasn't too much for her, but decided to be more thankful than upset.

Magic flared forth from the builders. Tathan had been told that all Rojuun could do magic, but was surprised to see so many spells cascading into the pack. Vibrant colors of fire, ice, lightning and other spells washed through the sstejj. In addition, Tathan

discovered that his vision became sharper, he moved even faster, and there was power in each action he performed. Rojuun spellcasters were sending their own boosting magic toward the warriors. Suddenly Tathan became confident that they could take this fight easily in spite of the numbers.

The cavern shook with a deep scream, which sounded like one made by sstejj, only louder and larger. Tathan dispatched the creature in front of him and looked. The scream came from a sstejj the height of five Rojuun. Slime dripped from its enormous teeth, each as thick as Tathan's waist. Behind it came even more sstejj, swarming like ants moving in for the kill.

Tathan turned to Vevin and started to yell for him to get Liselle to safety. But he realized there was no way the dragon could take her back through the locked gate without breaking it down, endangering Garrn Cavern. It was a terrible oversight on their part. A cold fear struck his heart. He didn't want his cousin to die. He didn't want any of them to die, but the terrifying horde coming toward them did not look to be stopped.

Before he could worry further, he was surrounded by sstejj, each trying to take a bite of him. Then they were being hit with blue fireballs, screaming as they died. Tathan turned to see Liselle cast two more in rapid succession. He felt like an idiot as he realized his cousin was just as worried about him. At that moment, she was doing a better job of keeping her head than he was.

Aaruulaa was moving at magically boosted speeds, killing every one of the creatures that came near her. Marrraa and her sister were holding their own. Sir Danth was even more deadly with the additional speed and strength from the magic of the Rojuun. Tathan leapt onto the back of the next sstejj and ran his sword along its length as he jumped to the next, dispatching it just as easily. He began slaughtering the beasts in earnest.

Then the monstrous sstejj was in front of them. Numerous spells from the builders shot forth into the creature's face and body. A cold fist grabbed all of their hearts when they realized that it was not affected by magic. The creature had a large red gem in the center of its head that glowed brightly as each spell hit. A magical force field flared around its body each time, deflecting the spells. The only good thing that came out of it was that the spells killed any sstejj that were in the location of the deflection.

Battle slowed for a moment as everyone digested what had just happened. The monstrous sstejj let out a scream of triumph that rocked the cavern. It moved forward once more with the rest of the horde.

Tathan was still leaping across the backs of sstejj as he killed them. They couldn't fight someone who never touched the ground and he moved too quickly for the creatures to pin down a scent. There were so many sstejj coming that Tathan could walk across the cavern on them, but he needed to kill the monstrous one.

He dashed toward it, slashing every sstejj he ran across with his sword as he went. Tathan had more agility than any acrobat and could keep his feet in an earthquake. In an odd way, running atop the shifting and dying bodies was fun for him.

An instant later, he was at the monster. It was going to reach the camp soon if he didn't kill it. Tathan leapt for the first leg. He grabbed the stony structure with his free hand and swung to the next, moving closer to the body. He hit the second leg with his feet in a move only the most dexterous could ever accomplish. A somersault, which would have made Vevin proud, brought him to the third leg right next to the body of the

monstrous sstejj. Tathan did a sideways somersault and landed on the body, driving his sword into it.

He was stunned when the creature didn't die. His sword went into the body easily enough, but when Tathan pulled it out, the wound resealed. He thrust repeatedly, each new wound resealing. Tathan managed to keep his feet when the next spell hit the creature, this one a bolt of lightning from Vevin. The monstrous sstejj staggered for a moment, but the gem in its head flared bright, protecting it from destruction.

Tathan realized that the gem was key to killing the creature. He ran up to the neck and leapt to the head, thrusting his sword into the center of the gem.

His world exploded in a flash of red as the gem shattered. The sword had strong magics within it or else it might have failed to do any damage. The resulting explosive reaction wrenched the sword out of his hands, throwing him into the air.

For a moment, Tathan floated. He couldn't see anything but the red flash. The only sound was ringing in his head. Tathan flung his body around in order to land as well as possible even if he couldn't see the ground. When he did land, it was hard. He tried to get up, but could only find his hands and knees. Tathan was momentarily blind, deaf and disoriented.

Something grabbed his shoulders. He tried to shake it off, thinking one of the sstejj was trying to kill him. Tathan felt a face against his cheek. Suddenly, hands were on his shoulders, lifting him. Whoever had him was trying to yell something in his ear, but he could only hear ringing.

Tathan stumbled and nearly passed out a few times as the person led him back to the camp. Someone else grabbed his other side and they carried him. He couldn't see where they were going, but by the number of hands on him, he thought that he was being carried by Rojuun.

He weakly asked for his sword. That wasn't something he never wanted to lose. They didn't reply or slow down. A moment later, whoever was carrying him set him down on the ground and left. Tathan lay on his back for a moment, trying to regain his senses, but could still only hear ringing and see the red blur from the explosion of the gem.

Tathan leaned up on one elbow, fighting off a bout of dizziness, and reached into a secret pouch inside his shirt. He fumbled it open, feeling for the seed that was in it. When he found the seed, he placed it under his tongue. The seed was very addictive and very dangerous to use, not to mention illegal in most countries.

His back arched and he yelled as the drug took effect. It was painful at first, but then a wave of adrenaline hit him. He lurched to his feet before falling back to his hands and knees. Tathan finally managed to reach his feet, though he wobbled. Slowly, the blurry images began to clear. Sounds began to filter through and he could hear shouts of Rojuun intermixed with screams of the attacking aberrations. Tathan's vision was still tinged with red, while the ringing was a dull noise in the back of his skull.

After staggering forward a few steps to join the fight, he realized he didn't have any weapon but his belt knife. He pulled the knife and watched it shake in his unstable hand. Tathan took a deep breath, trying to compose himself better. It worked a little bit, but there was no way he could fight anything.

Tathan looked around for Liselle. Marrraa was fighting in the distance; at least it looked like her, though it could have been Turrr. Sir Danth was killing just as fast as

ever, moving from sstejj to stejj. He wasn't using his energy to disappear and reappear, conserving it instead for fighting. Tathan couldn't see his trainee or Sir Danth's. He also couldn't see Vevin.

To the left of him, builders were fighting sstejj that had broken through the defenses. There was a commotion to the right where a smaller group of the monsters had attacked. They were running away back through the river to the tunnels, leaving behind the bodies of six Rojuun builders and Vevin's trainee.

Tathan stared at them for a moment. He had never seen sstejj run away. He looked at the bodies of the Rojuun lying on the ground and realized that the sstejj had left without trying to eat them. Something was very wrong. The remaining builders in that direction were shouting, yelling and pointing at the retreating sstejj. One of them saw Tathan and started yelling at him, pointing frantically at the creatures.

It was all so confusing. Tathan took a few steps toward the retreating sstejj and waved his knife weakly at them, but it was no good. A blast of magic to the left destroyed another swath of the creatures, diminishing their numbers just a little more. The Rojuun to his right had made it over to him and was yelling while gesturing madly at the retreating sstejj. The monsters were well past the river and nearly at a tunnel in the distance.

Sir Danth was suddenly on his left. Tathan absently noticed that the dark knight never got messy in battle. He decided if he ever got enchanted armor that he would make sure it had the ability to stay clean like that.

The knight took him by the shoulders. "Master Tathan, the creatures took Lady Liselle." His voice was muffled, but Tathan could distinguish the words. The meaning wasn't clear to him though. "A dark creature riding one of the stejj took Lady Liselle and ran off with her into the tunnels!" the knight repeated.

Tathan finally understood the words and felt the blood drain from his face. The sense of dread he felt earlier returned tenfold.

A great roar reverberated throughout the cavern and a very angry purple dragon appeared in the air above the waterfall. It inhaled deeply as great wings spread out to keep it aloft. When it exhaled, purple flames laced with lightning shot the distance of the cavern, killing nearly all the remaining sstejj in its path.

The dragon heaved forward through the air and let out another rumbling scream of fury. It shook the cavern, causing debris to fall to the ground from the walls and ceiling. The few surviving sstejj were paralyzed by vibrations of the roar while Rojuun stared at the magnificent creature in awe.

The last thing Tathan saw before his legs buckled and his vision went black was the sight of Vevin in dragon form darting toward the tunnels where Liselle had been taken by a dark creature.

[Chapter 31](#)

Krraa stood in the shadows of the tunnel, watching over the cavern with powerful eyes as the Rojuun and their new friends walked across the far end. The one it wanted was there. The dark creature had waited for the glowing one to come back.

She had killed his pets with her painful blue fire that hurt his eyes just to look at it. That was not why Krraa wanted her though. It was the glow. The girl had a soft blue

glow that was power. She could fix him. Her blue power could make him better. He could wrap it around himself, stand straight and finish growing. He could stop the pain. He could be real. He could kill the Rojuun. He *needed* her power to fix him.

An evil chuckle escaped his unnatural lips, dripped to the floor and oozed into the crevasses of the tunnel. The sstejj hungrily waited for Krraa to release them to kill the creatures they hated so much. He ordered his pets to attack with a silent command. They poured out of the tunnels on the far side of the cavern by the lake. The Rojuun hadn't dared to gate these tunnels yet. If he had his way, they would never be able to build another gate again.

Krraa could see that the Rojuun were going to camp near the waterfall. It was the perfect place to set up the ambush. He would be able to get the glowing one if he could stay away from the other new creatures.

Those creatures killed more of his sstejj than any Rojuun ever had. The unnatural one in metal scared Krraa the most. It killed and killed and had no flesh to rend. The fast one had flesh, but couldn't be felt. Krraa could see it, but it made no vibrations in the ground. He saw it touch the ground, but there was nothing. There was another creature that Krraa couldn't quite remember, but it wasn't important.

The horde of sstejj he had just let loose upon the group should be able to kill even the fleshless metal one with the great blade and the silent one with the dark blade. The rest would not be a match. Krraa watched as his biggest pet walked above the horde. He had found a beautiful gem with great power in the depths of the caverns. By setting it in the forehead of his biggest sstejj ever, he had created an invincible minion. Even if the rest of the horde failed, the largest sstejj would destroy all Rojuun.

The giant beast was clumsy. Occasionally, it would step on one of the smaller sstejj and impale it. Then it would shake the smaller creature off and keep going forward. Krraa laughed every time it happened and enjoyed the screams of the dying sstejj.

He petted his special mount. It was larger than normal sstejj. There was a red gem in its head similar to the goliath. He had five of the smaller gem sstejj. They surrounded and protected him. He controlled them with his mind and they did his every bidding. He rode his favorite by sitting on a special granite saddle he had built into it between the first and second set of legs.

Krraa bid his gem sstejj forward at a slower pace than the rest of the horde. He wanted the horde to kill as many Rojuun as possible as well as the new, terrible beings that protected them. His small group traveled on the far side of the river away from the rest. They moved quietly and efficiently as he watched the beginnings of the battle. Krraa wanted to see the new creatures die and watch the Rojuun scream and suffer before he took his prize.

What he *didn't* want was for his pets to hurt the glowing one. He had told them not to kill her, but they were too stupid to follow directions. They just wanted to kill Rojuun. They would kill the glowing one too unless he got to her first. Krraa made his small pack hurry forward a little bit faster.

The horde crashed over the black fleshless one, only to die. They attacked the silent one, only to die. They attacked the Rojuun woman who learned from the others and died against her long knives as well. Krraa hated them. He hated them so much. The Rojuun needed to suffer. These creatures were stopping his pets from their desires. His red cat-

eyes flashed and a high-pitched, double whine of frustration came out of Krraa's unnatural throat. The pack of gem sstejj answered back with whines of their own.

Krraa watched eagerly as his goliath reached the fight. When Rojuun spells glanced off the gem barrier, Krraa howled in triumph. The gem sstejj pack howled in response. He knew the Rojuun would die soon and quickened his pace. He could see the glowing person in the filthy Rojuun camp. Krraa wanted that glow very badly.

Before plunging into the river, he looked at his biggest pet to see how many it had killed. With horror, he saw the silent one stabbing the back of it. Krraa stopped his mount and watched fearfully as the silent one stabbed it again and again. He laughed nervously when his goliath didn't die. The silent one *couldn't* kill it. Nothing could kill it. Another spell glanced off of his pet and Krraa laughed louder. He stopped laughing when the silent one ran toward the gem.

Krraa screamed as his creature shattered into a thousand pieces under the force of the blow. A metal blade shouldn't have damaged the gem. His biggest pet was invincible! The red flash was bright and Krraa shielded his eyes. He saw the silent one fly through the air and fall to the ground. There was no more time to waste. The battle wasn't going as he had hoped, but the sheer numbers of his pets were keeping them busy. He would just have to take his prize quickly and escape.

The gem sstejj scurried into the river, running along the bottom to the waterfall pool. Their gills enabled them to breathe underwater as did Krraa's. In a moment, they were on the other side of the pool. He could see the glowing one taking care of an injured Rojuun. It made him mad. The Rojuun needed to die and it wasn't acceptable that the glowing one use power for anyone but Krraa.

A purple whip laced with lightning hit the gem sstejj to his right. It staggered though the gem kept it from being destroyed. Krraa had forgotten about the purple lightning creature. It shouldn't matter though. That one wasn't important, it couldn't be. Another whip crack drove the gem sstejj to the ground again. Its gem became unstable with magical sparks shooting out of it.

Important or not, the purple lightning creature had to be dealt with. Krraa rose into the air, spreading his dark, wasp-like wings to hover above the purple creature. He drew in dark energy and then released it violently as it buffeted his wings. Black, poisonous webbing hit the purple creature, slamming it back against the cave wall.

The purple creature screamed in pain as it found itself trapped in the poisonous silk. Krraa settled back down upon his mount and folded the wings he loathed. The glowing creature was also screaming and trying to get to the purple creature. It irritated Krraa. The glowing creature was supposed to fix him and it needed to stop wasting energy on anything else.

One of the Rojuun leapt to attack him. Krraa unleashed magical black liquid from his palm. It covered the Rojuun's body causing it to scream as it fell dying to the ground.

Krraa rode his mount up to the glowing one who had neutralized the poison in his net and was trying to release the purple creature. He jumped off to grab her. She turned, shooting blue fire at him. He deflected it with darkfire. Then he slapped her across the face, knocking her down. He put his hand forth and sprayed more of his web, trapping her. He did not lace it with poison as he had for . . . he didn't remember why he had cast the other web. That made him mad. He didn't like wasting spells.

The glowing creature struggled in the web. Krraa slapped her again to shut her up. She sputtered, trying to cast a spell. He could see her gathering energy, but before she could succeed, he released a dark mist into her face from his twisted hand. It sent her into unconsciousness.

Krraa picked his prize up and tossed her on the back of a gem sstejj. Magic hit the sstejj, causing the gem barrier to flare. Krraa looked up to see the pathetic Rojuun builders attacking him. With his mind, he directed three gem sstejj to attack them. When the Rojuun performed their tumble maneuvers, Krraa guided his pets to attack where their enemies would end up. Two of the Rojuun were shredded by the teeth of the gem sstejj. The others drew back in fear and tried to cast spells again.

Krraa didn't want to be caught up in the fight. He could see the fleshless killer was still destroying his pets and he didn't want to face it. Krraa secured the glowing person with more webs and then leapt upon his own mount, turning away as quickly as possible. The remaining gem sstejj killed four more of the Rojuun before following.

Spells were cast at them, but the gem barriers made spells impotent. The small pack was back into the river and on the other side in a short amount of time. The webbing enabled the glowing one to breathe while being carried underwater. Krraa looked back over his shoulder, certain the horde would be overrunning the camp. Even the fleshless one must have fallen back. He adjusted his vision to see detail in the camp and was shocked to see the fleshless talking to the silent one. Krraa had been certain the silent one had died when the goliath exploded.

Krraa screamed in frustration once more with both of his voices. The gem sstejj screamed with him. He turned back toward his tunnels, ordering his pack to run as fast as possible.

Just before the pack entered the tunnel, Krraa heard the roar that shook the cavern. He turned in time to see the great, fearsome beast rise into the air. It exhaled lightning breath down upon Krraa's pets, destroying most of them. Krraa had no idea where that creature had come from. It was the most horrifying thing he had ever seen in an existence filled with horrors.

When his pack reached the tunnel, he spurred them to even greater speeds with his mind. The next roar made Krraa whimper in fear. The tunnel was darker than the cavern had been. There was still light from plants and moss, but his pets had trampled most of the larger vegetation. Krraa felt more comfortable in the dark. He could still see, but it was much easier for him and his pets to hide. The cursed Rojuun did not like the dark. They were cowards who believed evil lived in the murky depths of the world.

The monster roared again. It was more distant this time and Krraa hoped it wouldn't come into the tunnel. He didn't even look over his shoulder for fear that it would be following him.

The hole to lower levels was just ahead. Krraa led his mount into the depths of the world and slowed down. It wasn't wise to move quickly on the sides of holes even though sstejj were sure-footed on the rocky surface.

Krraa looked over his shoulder only to see purple light flare in the tunnel above. Lightning crackled through the air, creating a sharp scent in his nose. He decided that his pack could move fast. Safety wasn't *that* important after all.

He took the next level of tunnels and traveled a ways to another hole, going down. That led to another level where he turned a different direction. The next hole went down even further, and then another direction change in the next tunnel.

After more of this, the pack was in a dimly lit, medium sized cave with few phosphorous plants and little moss. Krraa stopped to listen. There was a stream running quietly over the rocks. Drops of water, created by humidity in the warm air, fell from the ceiling. He could hear the skittering of sstejj that he hadn't taken to the battle above. What he could *not* hear was the sound of that horrible monster.

Krraa guided his mount across the cave to his lair on the other side. The glowing creature was still tied to the back of the sstejj next to him. She wasn't glowing very brightly now, but he could still harvest the glow to make himself better. He dismounted, leading the gem sstejj with his glowing treasure.

He led it to the room where he did much of his work. There, he stopped his pet and unattached the glowing one from it. Krraa slung her over his hunched back.

It was a dark, gruesome room where unnatural experiments were performed. Jagged rock walls covered in slime looked sickly in the light of the fire. Sharp, evil tools hung from hooks on the walls. They were not the tools of a smithy or any kind of craftsman, rather they were implements that would make a torturer feel at home.

A stained iron table was in the middle of the room. It could be raised, lowered or tilted by gears and levers underneath. Krraa roughly laid his treasure on it. He then turned to a fire pit in the corner of the room and lit it with darkfire. The coals smoldered with red flame, tinged black.

Krraa moved back to the large table where he removed the webbing on his treasure with a gesture of his hand. There were shackles at the corners that he attached her wrists and ankles to, making them tight so she wouldn't be able to move. He turned a crank underneath the table, which raised the top. When he was done, the table was at a slant.

The malformed creature stared at his prize for a moment. She hung at an angle by her wrists. Krraa would take the blue glow from her and wrap it around himself.

Food was needed before he would be able to take that glow. The battle had drained more strength than he had anticipated. He stared at his prize for a while longer and wondered if she would scream when he cut into her. He hoped so. Krraa did like screams so very much. First, he needed food.

As he walked out of the room, the glowing one opened her eyes and stared at his back in sheer horror.

[Chapter 32](#)

When the footsteps moved away, Liselle opened her eyes. Insect-like wings hung loosely down the creature's hunched back. There were four sets of arms like the Rojuun, but the lower two were misshapen and deformed as though they had never fully developed.

Tears flowed from Liselle's eyes as she began shaking in terror. She couldn't help the sobs that broke from her chest. Liselle desperately hoped it wouldn't hear her and come back. She caught her breath and tried to focus. Her robe was dirty from webbing, slime and dirt. The sleeves were hanging down, leaving her arms exposed. An acrid odor clogged her nostrils. Heavy silence was broken by the crackling of a fire.

The unnatural fire sent shivers down her body. When Liselle noticed the tools of torture, she began to sob again.

She wished that she hadn't gone with the party into the cavern. She wished that she had never even heard of Rojuun. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to be in her own bed back in the valley with her mother running fingers through her hair.

Suddenly Liselle calmed down and stopped sobbing. What she *really* wanted was for Vevin to come and rescue her. He would run his fingers through her hair and kiss her cheek, earlobe and lips. Liselle remembered the web the malformed creature had cast and how Vevin had screamed. Fear shot up her spine and she began sobbing again.

She wanted to be strong, but it was so dark and frightening. The tools on the wall looked cruel and she knew that diseased monster wanted to cut into her with them. Liselle could feel them eagerly reaching out for her, wanting her skin. She sobbed again and gasped for air. Her body was weak. There were no plants anywhere and the evil mist that he had cast into her face had sapped all of her strength. Liselle felt the room spinning and dizziness overtaking her. Desperately, she tried to focus her mind, but darkness overwhelmed her.

Liselle felt a tug in her hair. She didn't wake, instead entering what felt like a dream. A purple flower, which looked a lot like the flower pin she wore, formed in her mind. It let her know that it would tell her what to do when the time was right. The flower told her that she must do it, no matter how frightened she would be. Liselle mentally agreed before darkness beset her again.

When she regained consciousness, red cat-like eyes stared through her soul like jagged knives. She tried not to react, but an involuntary sob escaped her lips. The creature was more frightening than anything she had seen. There was no hair on top of the overly large head and its skin was sickly yellow with blue splotches that glistened in the murky firelight. The twisted creature sneered with yellowed, rotting fangs as it studied her.

Liselle whimpered and struggled against the bonds that held her tight. The creature was over six feet tall. It kept the wings that grew out of its back tucked away as though ashamed of them. Two arms ended in hands that were twisted with oversized knuckles on the fingers. Below those were useless, misshapen limbs that made Liselle's stomach turn just to look at them.

It appeared as though someone had taken a Rojuun and twisted it with dark magics. "You glow brighter again," it said in eerie tones. "Your glow will fix me and make me better." Its voices were shrill, like a twisted version of the Rojuun, hurting Liselle's head. A putrid odor emanated from the creature, filling her nostrils.

She desperately tried to think. Perhaps if she offered to heal the monster it wouldn't hurt her. "D . . . Do you want me to h . . . heal you?" she stammered weakly between sobs.

"No, not heal," the creature said, tilting its head slightly. "Your glow will fix me. I will take it, wrap it around me and *fix* me." It shuffled a little closer to the table, reaching out a twisted finger. "I will *take* the glow," it said with a sinister smile.

Liselle writhed in her bindings, struggling to get away. A dreadful laugh emitted from the creature, echoing throughout the room. The torture devices along the wall seemed to laugh along with the creature, taking on a malicious life of their own.

The creature grabbed a small hooked knife and moved to her side. Liselle arched away as much as she could, but to no avail. “Do you scream, glowing one?” it whispered in her ear. Then it put the tip of the brutal knife against the soft inner skin of her stretched arm. He didn’t cut deep, but it burned badly.

Liselle *did* scream. Then she felt another tug in her hair. The flower in her mind told her to relax, the time was coming soon when she would need to do what it asked.

“Such a pretty glow,” the creature said in a creepy, high pitched tone. “I must taste it.” Liselle saw the aberration sink its teeth into her arm. Agony rocketed to her fingertips and down her side. She screamed even louder, wanting it to stop more than she had ever wanted anything in her life.

The creature pulled away from her arm, though the burning agony did not ease. It licked its disgusting lips in pleasure. “Ohh, the glow tastes so very nice,” it said. Then it gave a shrill, haunting giggle. “It will fix me so nicely and I will have so much fun pulling it out of you.” He moved his face even closer to Liselle’s. “You scream nicely. I like it very much.”

She pulled away from him as much as she could, her eyes wide in terror. Heaving sobs racked her body as she tried to wrap her mind around what the creature was doing to her. What she didn’t understand more than anything was why. Why did the creature exist, why did it hate the Rojuun, why did it want her glow and why did it want her to suffer? All she could get past her lips was, “W . . . why? ”

“Why? Because you glow and your glow will fix me,” it said, moving back to study her. “I hurt. My body isn’t finished and I need your glow to finish it.

“Not finished?” Liselle asked, desperately clutching at anything to make him stop hurting her. She took a deep breath, releasing it in a sob while trying to stay focused. Her head was swimming with pain and fear. “What do you mean not finished?”

“You don’t know of me? They didn’t tell you of my kind?” he asked, suddenly interested in talking. The creature stepped back and played with his hooked knife. He licked the blood off the tip. “No, they wouldn’t would they? They are ashamed of me, aren’t they? Did they tell you of my pets, glowing one?” he asked, tilting his head sideways as he looked at her.

“P . . . pets? They didn’t t . . . tell me a . . . anything.” Liselle could feel blood trickling down her arm and side.

“Of course they didn’t tell you. You wouldn’t help them if they did.” The creature began pacing back and forth, getting angry. It was a shuffling pace, not at all like the graceful glide of the Rojuun. Then it stopped and smiled at Liselle. “I will tell you, glowing one. I will tell you what they won’t. You’ll like that, won’t you?” There was a cajoling tone to one of its voices and a whining tone to the other. The combination sent chills down her spine.

She didn’t want it to tell her anything. Liselle just wanted it to go away. More than that, she didn’t want it cutting the glow out of her even if she didn’t understand what that meant. “Y . . . yes. I would like that,” she answered in a wavering voice. Her head swam with pain.

“My name is Krraa.” The name sounded like pebbles being crushed together. “I am hhorrtj. My pets are sstejj. They tried to make us, but they failed.” The words were spit out as an accusation. “Rojuun thought to create life. They thought they were gods. They thought they could create animals and people. Rojuun were arrogant and foolish to try.” Hatred oozed from both voices.

Liselle only whimpered.

“The Rojuun did not finish the job. They did not make us right. They gave me wings!” Krraa yelled in fury. “I don’t want wings! I hate wings!” He slashed through the air with his knife. The creature stared into the fire. “Rojuun caged us, laughed at us, studied us, and . . .” it trailed off, looking back into its memory. Turning back to Liselle, it said, “Other Rojuun came to put those who made us on trial. They executed those who made us.” His voices were sinister and cold. “They said we were pitiful creatures that should not be seen and then they cast us into pits to fall deep into the world.”

He stepped closer, running the tip of the hooked knife along her cheek, drawing blood. Something about his knife made the cuts burn. Liselle turned her head in fear, sobbing at the pain. “They did not finish us.”

Krraa stepped back, tilting his head as he studied her. “I make more pets like the arrogant ones made. I watched as they created the sstejj and I learned how to make more. It’s easy. I make many more and send them to kill Rojuun.”

“Then I see you. You glow a pretty blue glow.” The monster ran his finger along the cut on her cheek. The pain in her arm was throbbing. She could smell infection in it even though Krraa had just made the wound. “I can take the glow out of you and it will fix me,” he said, licking her blood off his finger. “The glow will finish me. The glow will feel good.”

The creature put his hooked knife back on the wall and took down two other devices. They looked very sharp and Liselle began to sob in fear once more. She wanted so desperately for Vevin to rescue her.

There was another tug in her hair. “*Relax now, beautiful child. Shh. Relax now,*” The flower said in her mind. Liselle took a deep breath and, with the help of the flower, relaxed her entire body. “*Good, beautiful child. Listen carefully for this will be more difficult than anything you have known,*” it said. “*The beast is going to hurt you.*”

She saw the thin, sharp devices moving toward her belly. Everything slowed to a snail’s pace.

“*When it does, you must die,*” the flower said softly in her mind. A description of how to die appeared. It would require great willpower on her part.

Time resumed its normal movement. Liselle watched as the first device pierced her belly through the gown. She screamed yet again at the explosion of pain and hunched over as much as the bindings would let her. It was so overwhelming that she couldn’t remember how to die.

Liselle dug deep within her own mind and concentrated on the instructions the flower had given her. The other device cut into her next to the first, causing even more pain.

She remembered the instructions and followed them. Liselle let the life flow out of her body.

Krraa stared at his treasure as the glow vanished. He quickly pulled the implements out of her stomach. She wasn't supposed to die. He hadn't done anything that would kill her. Krraa needed the glow to fix him. The glow couldn't disappear. "NO!" he screeched with both voices.

A light appeared on her finger. Krraa looked closely and saw the ring. It was glowing brighter and brighter. Suddenly, the ring flared with a great white radiance. Krraa hated light and shielded his eyes with his arms. The light flared, filling the room. It was hotter than Krraa had ever felt.

How could this happen? It wasn't fair! He was supposed to get his glow and become whole again! The deformed creature screamed terribly as the light seared flesh from his misshapen bones.

Everything in the room caught fire including the stone walls, which began to melt. The holy light from the ring obliterated the hhorj named Krraa, leaving nothing. The radiance destroyed all of the creature's tools of suffering and the table holding Liselle. It even burned the sick, unnatural fire until it too was obliterated. Then the light flared out and one of the rubies in the ring was gone. Liselle's lifeless body collapsed in the middle of the empty cave.

[Chapter 33](#)

Liselle gulped a deep, shuddering breath. She opened her eyes and tried to stand, but was only able to make it to her hands and knees. She stayed there, gasping desperately for air. The ring on her finger was hot and it still shined brightly.

When Liselle died, the ring pulled her inside one of the rubies while it destroyed the creature that killed her. Then the ruby melted, releasing her. The substance of the ruby traveled throughout her blood to heal the wounds, leaving her whole once more.

Her heart hurt. It had stopped when she died then started again once the ring was done with its work. Her lungs had stopped breathing and needed air badly. Liselle buried her head in her arms and cried between gulps of air. She cried because of what had happened to her. Terror and pain had owned her for a while. She cried because she had died and it hurt. She cried because she was in this awful place and didn't know how to get out. Mostly she cried because she was still scared and wanted Vevin to come rescue her.

After a few minutes, the crying subsided. Liselle remained on her knees, with head buried in her arms. She became still, listening for a moment. The room was quiet, but she could still hear skittering noises from beyond the entrance. She didn't know what was outside of the room and it frightened her.

Slowly, she stood and looked around. The only light was from the gradually dimming glow of the ring. A sharp, clean smell had replaced the acrid odors of Krraa's torture chamber. Liselle stretched her arms out carefully. They were sore like the rest of her body, but it wasn't as bad as she had expected. The wound on her inner arm was gone. She felt her cheek and discovered that cut had disappeared too.

Liselle attempted to cast a small light. She smiled in relief as the blue orb appeared. The light showed that all of the torture devices were gone, as was everything else in the

room including the table. The rock walls were smooth and shiny, scoured clean by the ring.

Liselle wore sturdy slippers, which muffled her footsteps as she moved toward the entry to inspect the skittering sounds. She reached the entry and directed the light out a bit. Her worst fears were realized.

Sstejj milled by a stream where water murmured past. The scent of water mixed with the slimy stench of the monsters. It was a dark cave half as large as Garrn Cavern. A few patches of phosphorescent moss gave off the only other light. Liselle stood still while letting her orb travel to the top of the cave. The sstejj didn't have eyes, so she wasn't worried about them seeing it.

Two tunnels led from the cave. Liselle had no clue which one would lead back to Garrn Cavern, nor did she have any idea where in the depths of Ryallon she might be. She wondered why the sstejj hadn't caught her scent or felt the vibrations of her steps.

Liselle began moving toward the closest tunnel, hugging the wall of the cave. Reaching halfway, she noticed runes etched into the cave floor in a semi-arch. The sstejj did not cross the runes, which concerned her. After she took a few paces on the other side, the closest sstejj smelled the air with its gills. Liselle froze, watching it. The creature began moving toward her, sniffing the air as it came. Upon reaching her, it took an experimental bite.

Liselle ducked out of the way of its teeth, retreating behind the runes. The creature sniffed the air again before losing interest and walking away. She was sure that if she had been Rojuun, all of the creatures would have converged to feast upon her without hesitation.

There had to be a way to distract them. They were milling around as though waiting for someone to give them orders. Liselle didn't know them to eat anything other than Rojuun, though she was certain they would try to eat her given the opportunity. Thinking back, she remembered that the creatures were cannibals who would eat each other when one fell.

Perhaps if she were to kill one, the others would set upon it. It felt like a mean thing to do, but they were terrible creatures and she didn't want them to eat *her*. Liselle thought about it for a moment then gathered her concentration.

A small dagger of fire formed between her hands. Liselle hoped it would pierce the disgusting flesh of one of the creatures and kill it. The dagger was only as long as a finger, but it burned brightly. She looked for a sstejj in the middle of the pack. With a flick of her wrists, she sent the fiery dagger flying through the cave.

The sstejj screamed as the dagger ripped into it and started burning. The monster collapsed to the ground in death throes. Other sstejj felt it fall and converged on it. Liselle nearly threw up in disgust as she watched them devour it. The tunnel wasn't as close as Liselle would have liked and she didn't know if they would all stay busy, so she made two more of the daggers and shot them into other sstejj further away. When the rest of the sstejj converged to rip their brethren apart, Liselle moved to the tunnel as quickly and silently as possible. The sounds of teeth rending slimy flesh made her gag again.

The tunnel was as dark as the cave, so she called her light and sent it ahead. Moisture dripped from the walls and ceiling, creating little rivulets of water along the

floor. The reek of sstejj merged with wet rock. Three of the abominations were moving about in the distance of the tunnel, illuminated by her light.

Liselle had no idea where the long tunnel led. She just hoped she would be able to find her way home or, at the very least, find some plants to help guide her. Ideally, Vevin would save her. Tears welled in her eyes again from fear and she angrily brushed them with a sleeve.

One of the sstejj ahead caught her scent and started sniffing the air with its gills. Liselle decided to try to sneak by it. She didn't know how many daggers she could create and didn't want to exhaust herself more than she already was. The monster came near her and she slid to the wall of the cave.

The sstejj opened its mouth and casually tried to bite her. Liselle dashed to the left. It followed her and tried to take another bite. Liselle moved to the other wall of the tunnel and hit it with a fireball. That was faster and took less energy than the dagger because she didn't have to concentrate so hard to shape it. The monster screamed in agony as it turned to bite at the pain in its side. When it fell to the ground, the other two sstejj in the tunnel scurried toward it to begin feasting. Liselle froze against the wall. From the cave came two more sstejj attracted to the smell of burning flesh. Liselle took off down the tunnel at a run, not caring if they felt the tremor of her steps. She just wanted to get away as fast as possible.

She stopped after a ways and put her hands on her knees, gasping for breath. The light had bobbed along next to her, faithfully illuminating the way.

The tunnel was a dark stone Liselle hadn't seen before. Rocks covered the floor and there were occasional patches of phosphorescent moss, but not enough to see by. It was wide enough to fit a couple of wagons through and four times as tall as she was. The slow moving air was warm, sticky and unpleasant to breathe. Going back through the cave to try the other tunnel wasn't an option, so she began trudging down its length.

It seemed to continue forever, never going up or down. Liselle wanted it to go up, but was happy that it didn't go down. She eventually stumbled to a stop and sat down on a large rock for a moment.

Liselle had lost track of time and was too tired to cry anymore. The feel of all the rock above her was heavy, as though the sky was worlds away. Her stomach growled with hunger and she realized she didn't know when she had last eaten. Something clattered back the way she came. She stood quickly and directed her light that way. Nothing appeared.

After a few minutes of straining to see anything, Liselle turned and continued walking, hoping to find a way out. Her feet hurt and all of her muscles ached. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep, but was too afraid.

The next hour or so was a daze of darkness relieved only by the small blue light floating above her head. Then Liselle saw the tunnel widen in the distance. A slight breeze cleaned the stale air she had been breathing.

Liselle's mind cleared some and she gained a second wind of strength. She began to jog toward the opening. After a moment, she slowed back down to a walk, quickly winded. A soft light was just ahead.

She reached the end of the tunnel and looked into the new cave. There were patches of phosphorescent moss on the ceiling far above and even a few plants here and there.

Most of the dim light came from fish and vegetation in a small lake to the right of the tunnel. Two small streams fed the lake from different directions.

Even though she was out of the tunnel and its darkness, Liselle didn't feel comfort. Sstejj milled around like the ones in Krraa's cave. The abominations seemed to have no purpose or direction unless Krraa was directing them. Liselle thought she could see three or four more large tunnels, but all of them would require making way through a hundred sstejj.

She leaned against the wall of the tunnel for a minute with more tears flowing down her cheeks. Liselle was so tired of crying. Going forward was the only choice. She would have to try to kill enough sstejj so they would go after each other instead of her.

Liselle heard a noise down the tunnel she had just come from. Looking back, she thought she saw light flare far away. The tunnel had been almost completely straight its entire length. A new sense of dread fell in the pit of her stomach. She didn't think Krraa could have survived, but she hadn't seen a body. Krraa had also talked about "them" when it referred to the hhorj, meaning that there was more than one. What if another had come to the cave and was now hunting her. Another flash of light appeared. At least she thought it did. It was far away and she couldn't make it out clearly. Liselle stayed frozen against the wall.

A sstejj appeared at the tunnel entrance, sniffing the air. Liselle prayed that it would go away. Her prayers were futile in this godforsaken place. The creature moved closer to her while she stood paralyzed in fear.

When the beast was right next to her, she felt the flower tugging in her hair. It was just enough to get her to move. She hit the sstejj in the throat with a fireball, killing it quickly. Then she ran into the cave, keeping to the left wall in order to avoid being surrounded.

Nearby sstejj smelled their dying friend and began heading toward it. Liselle walked along the cave wall, too tired to run more than a few steps. There were rocks and pebbles that she tried to step over. Her feet were sore and tired from walking on so much stone and she wished for the soft grasses of the valley.

When she stumbled and fell to her knees, nearby sstejj turned to sniff the air. Liselle attempted to cast a fireball into one as she got back to her feet. It flickered out the first time but worked when she re-focused and tried again. They were becoming harder to create and she was so *very* tired.

It worked for a moment, but others started moving toward her. Liselle stopped to cast another fireball and another before falling to her knees again. It took all of her strength to stand up again and continue stumbling along. The next tunnel seemed far away. After a few more steps, she stopped to catch her breath. "Vevin," she cried out weakly. It was all she could think of. Liselle wanted Vevin to come, take her back to the room, kiss her earlobe and lie down beside her.

She cast another fireball, killing one that was getting too close. The next fireball she tried to cast sputtered out. Liselle tried again, the flame flared and dissipated instantly. Her blue light began to flicker and dim, making things worse. She leaned against the wall of the cave and watched as the sstejj moved toward her. "Vevin . . ." she whimpered pitifully.

A great roar rammed through the air from the tunnel. Following that was the body of a dragon hurtling from the entrance and into the horde of sstejj that stalked Liselle.

Vevin's scales were lighter purple than Liselle had imagined. His liquid-silver eyes glowed in the darkness, swirling in anger. She could see the scar on his cheek. It traveled from the bottom of his jaw all the way back to the top of his head, looking even worse in his natural form.

A grateful smile cracked Liselle's face for the first time since being in the forsaken darkness of the sstejj-infested depths. Vevin did not breathe great bursts of lightning or cast terrible spells of destruction into the monsters as Liselle expected. Instead, he began stomping them with all four of his great, clawed feet. Liselle imagined that he was doing a sstejj stomping dance. The dragon whipped his powerful tail about to crush them while his enormous wings created gusts that knocked them flat.

Liselle watched as he trampled the sstejj. Vevin looked tired and worn. She felt sorrow for her poor dragon friend. How long had he searched for her? How many of the aberrations had he already destroyed?

She found one last reserve of strength from somewhere deep inside. Liselle tossed a fireball at the one sstejj who had gotten just a little too close. Then she blew softly toward the dragon who would rescue her. A strengthening energy was in that breath and it flowed toward Vevin.

When the breath reached Vevin, it filled him with new energy. He inhaled deeply. Purple lightning shot in an arc, killing all that remained. When he was done, he stood there huffing. His eyes swirled rapidly. They were large and even more beautiful than in his human form. Liselle took a few steps toward him. "Vevin?"

Four purple lights appeared and moved to the top of the cave, illuminating their surroundings. "Liselle! I feared I would not be in time. I would never have forgiven myself." His voice as a dragon was deep and sonorous. He did not form the words with his mouth, as would a human or Rojuun, but instead used an innate form of magic to create them.

"Oh, Vevin! I was so frightened!" she said, stumbling toward him while trying to avoid the fried bodies of sstejj. The greasy, burning stench of the creatures combined with the sharp smell of lightning made her stomach turn.

With four large steps, Vevin was next to her, lowering his head. "Don't be frightened anymore. I'll keep you safe now."

"Oh, Vevin!" she exclaimed again. Liselle threw her arms around his toothy snout and hugged it as best she could.

"I'm going take you to safety," he told her soothingly. "I won't allow you to be hurt. I simply will not allow it," he said in a firm tone that left no doubt that he would not, in fact, allow it.

"Oh, Vevin," she responded. There didn't seem to be anything else to say. She just held him by his wonderful, scaly dragon snout.

He let her hold him for a few moments. "Liselle?" he said quietly.

"Yes, Vevin?"

"I love you, Liselle," he said even more quietly, as though afraid of how she might answer.

Liselle straightened, releasing his snout. She looked into his swirling eyes and said, "I love you too, Vevin." It was true. She had been falling steadily in love with him since they had met. She hadn't told him before because she didn't want to rush it and falling in

love with a dragon seemed like an unusual sort of thing, but at that point, it seemed foolish *not* to admit it.

Vevin did a shuffling, tired, happy, in-love dance. Then he smiled a toothsome smile and leaned into her gently. “Climb my leg to my neck and we’ll get back to safety.” He put his front leg down next to her so she could climb it.

Liselle scrambled up his leg to the shoulder. She swung her foot between two large spine ridges at the base of his neck. When she was set, he turned, going back toward the tunnel.

“No!” she cried out in fear.

Vevin stopped. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to go back there,” she said tearfully.

Vevin turned his head to look around the cave at the other tunnels. “I don’t know how to get back through those tunnels, nor do I know what dangers lay in them,” he said. “There’s nothing left down this tunnel or in the cave beyond.” He looked back at her with a silvery eye, his long neck twisted in a half turn.

“Are you certain there’s nothing there, Vevin?” she asked timidly. Liselle didn’t want to go back, but she didn’t want to get lost either. She was just so tired, scared and tired of being scared.

“I’m certain, dearest Liselle,” he reassured her. When she didn’t protest further, he moved into the tunnel. It wasn’t big enough for him to fly through, so he jogged, which was faster than she would have imagined. He must have been running at full speed when he came through the tunnel to save her.

She ducked down against him to hide her face when they entered the cave with the room where she had been imprisoned. The smell of burned sstejj remained, but Vevin moved quickly into the other tunnel.

The new tunnel did angle up a bit, which made her very happy. The way was illuminated by one purple light Vevin had kept. Dragons could see in other ways without light, meaning he was providing it for her comfort.

A short while later there was a small cave with a hole in the top. Liselle saw the mangled bodies of more sstejj before Vevin spread his wings. With a great leap of the legs and thrust of wings, Vevin shot upwards toward it.

Liselle held on for dear life as her stomach sank to her toes from the lift into the air. Two more flaps and they were hurtling into the hole that quickly became too small to spread his wings, so he tucked them in. Just as his momentum slowed enough to go into free fall, the hole opened into a new tunnel. Vevin spread his wings as much as he could and landed on the edge.

Liselle’s heart beat rapidly at the wild ride she just experienced. Vevin glanced back and saw an enormous grin beneath her wide eyes. He jogged up the new tunnel, running over occasional sstejj bodies he had killed in his search for her.

There were more tunnels and shafts to travel through. Each tunnel had increasingly more plants and phosphorescent moss. A dawning realization came over Liselle that she had been taken over a mile further into the depths of the world. That was in addition to however deep Garrn Cavern was. From what the companions had been told, Garrn Cavern was lower than most Rojuun territories.

Vevin finally entered the cavern from which Liselle had been taken. She was relieved to see the glow of plants once more. The smell of slaughtered sstejj was still

heavy. Vevin spread his wings, rising into the air so that he wouldn't have to walk across anymore of the beasts. The cavern was more than large enough to accommodate his size.

He flew to the waterfall where the camp had been, but didn't see anyone. Vevin turned and glided to the tunnel leading to Garrn Cavern. Just before they reached it, he landed. Then he lowered himself, holding his leg out as a ramp.

Liselle climbed down the leg without needing to be told. Upon reaching the claw, she stepped down to the ground, only to have her knees buckle. She fell to the ground before Vevin could react. A second later, he was in human form, kneeling next to her. Vevin's eyes swirled with concern. Liselle tried to stand, but dizziness overwhelmed her and she blacked out.

Chapter 34

Tathan was lying on his back and couldn't see. He tried to reach for his sword, but something was on top of his body, holding him down. "Unghh . . ."

"It's alright, Master Tathan. You are safe now." Sir Danth's voice was everywhere, rattling through Tathan's head.

"Sword . . . need . . ." Tathan couldn't be without the sword. It was a part of him and he needed it to fight off the danger. He tried to open his eyes, but they were crusty and stuck together.

"You want your sword?" Sir Danth's voice came from just to the right of Tathan. It still rattled in his head though. "Your sword was recovered and I have kept it near. Here you are."

Tathan felt the pressure holding him down lessen a bit. Then the hilt of his sword was placed in his hand. He couldn't lift it, or even do more than weakly squeeze it, but that was enough. Tathan felt consciousness leave once more.

The first thing Tathan felt when consciousness came back was the sword lying in the crook of his arm. He tried to move, but every part of his body ached miserably. A low moan came out of his throat.

"Ahh, there you are, Master Tathan," Sir Danth spoke quietly. "Take your time, but it is important that you wake up," he said ominously.

Pain shot through his head when Tathan tried to sit up. His body felt terrible and he wondered if he was even still alive or if this was some sort of afterlife punishment for his transgressions. When he tried to open his eyes, he discovered that something covered them. This experience didn't seem to be going well and he was getting cranky about it.

"You were badly injured, Master Tathan. Your body has received healing, but your senses were damaged and they are still recovering," Sir Danth explained. "Here, I will help you sit up and we will take the bandages off your eyes." He pulled down the covers and moved the sword aside for a moment. The knight lifted under Tathan's arms until he was in a sitting position, leaning on pillows against the headboard.

Tathan realized that he was in bed back at the suite. Sir Danth had been as gentle as an individual in plate-mail can be. Tathan lifted his hands to remove the bandages from

his eyes. It seemed like his arms had lead weights in them and it took an enormous effort to raise them.

“Let me help,” the knight said. Tathan felt the bandages being taken off. Sir Danth didn’t make for a gentle nurse, but he was doing his best.

Tathan squinted against the glare. He kept his eyes narrowly open in order to give them time to adjust. The light gradually dimmed and the pain in his skull settled. Sir Danth was sitting next to him in a chair, watching him worriedly. The lights in the room had been turned down as much as possible, but it was still hard on his eyes.

Alarm ran up his spine as Tathan remembered the last parts of the battle.

“Liselle . . .”

“Vevin brought her in this morning,” the knight reassured Tathan. “He stumbled to the gate with her unconscious body in his arms. We still don’t know what happened. They are asleep in Lady Liselle’s bed.”

“She’s alive then,” Tathan said with relief. He paused for a moment. “They’re asleep in her bed, *both* of them?” That was not what he wanted to hear.

“Yes, when Vevin moved away, she woke up and yelled for him,” Sir Danth explained. “Your cousin grabbed Vevin and told him never to leave her. They fell asleep together with their clothes on if you need that comfort.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m just glad they’re both safe,” Tathan replied with a light wave of his hand. “Nothing went right in that battle. There was something driving them and they took Liselle for a reason,” he said with a frown.

“I agree. Lady Liselle will have the answers I think, but the Council of Elders wants answers now and they are not happy that I will not respond to them without you. The council has been insisting on speaking to us since all of this happened yesterday” Sir Danth told him in a solemn tone.

“They want answers?” Tathan asked incredulously. “I thought they owed us answers.”

“Well . . .” the knight replied, trailing off.

“What?”

“There is the fact that the sstejj with the gems, especially that large one, didn’t exist until we showed up,” he said. “Then Vevin went full dragon on them and destroyed most of the sstejj with a single blast. He did leave a few for me to kill for which I was grateful. I didn’t want to get bored after all.” Sir Danth gestured casually. “They are more afraid of Vevin than the sstejj at this point though and they’re not happy that we didn’t mention the fact that he is a dragon.”

“I see.” Tathan sighed. His strength was starting to come back, but he felt as though he had been rolled down a mountain . . . then kicked a few times after reaching the bottom. “So they want us to explain Vevin.”

“They also want to know why the creature took Liselle instead of one of the Rojuun,” Sir Danth told him in a worried tone. “There was some sort of misshapen creature that rode the sstejj and took her. It killed seven Rojuun easily.”

Tathan frowned as he tried to stretch his muscles enough to get up. “There was a creature driving them then? I remember seeing some of the sstejj run away, which didn’t seem normal.”

“Yes. It was riding those creatures with the gems in their heads. There were four or five smaller ones in addition to the goliath you killed,” the knight said. He put a gentle

gauntlet on Tathan's shoulder. "That was superb work you did in killing the goliath, and very brave."

"Brave?" asked Tathan in surprise. "I just did what I had to," he said with a shrug. "So the creature took Liselle. Do we know what happened to her after that?"

"Doing what needs to be done is brave at times," Sir Danth said philosophically. "After that, you passed out. Vevin transformed into his natural self and took off after her. The rest of us fought off the sstejj that survived." He hung his head sadly. "Vevin's trainee tried to rescue Liselle, but was killed by a black liquid that dissolved his body. It was horrible. He has been marked as a hero. Marrraa's sister, Turrr also died in the battle as did others."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, friend," Tathan said consolingly. "Did Aaruulaa survive? I really like her."

"Yes. She is very capable and also considered a hero." Sir Danth nodded approvingly. "After we fought off the rest of the sstejj, everyone else retreated back to the tunnel while I went to search for your cousin. Aaruulaa insisted on traveling with me." Sir Danth hung his head. "We went down the tunnel they had taken Liselle, but I didn't feel as though I would be able to assist and I was concerned for you and the rest of the building party." He looked Tathan firmly in the eye. "You *must* believe I felt Vevin better suited to saving your cousin."

Tathan put his hand on the knight's metallic shoulder. "I do, and I believe that you did right. Thank you for that, my friend. It's not a decision I'd have wanted to make."

"Are you feeling well enough to see the council?" Sir Danth asked hopefully. "I will carry you if I must, but I don't think I can hold them off much longer."

"Are they trying to break down the door or something?" Tathan asked with concern.

"No. They are being very polite, but they insist someone talk to them and I hate talking. I hate explaining myself more than anything." If a helmet could blush, Sir Danth's would have done so. "I will fight anything you ask me to, but ask me to speak in front of any sort of council . . ." He shuddered.

"Oh," said Tathan, nonplussed. "Alright, I'm getting up." He sat up and braced himself to swing his legs over the edge of the bed. Sir Danth pulled the covers down the rest of the way.

Tathan was dressed in a dark green robe the Rojuun had made for him. It had black and white patterns in it that were striking. He gingerly put his feet over the side of the bed. With Sir Danth's help, he was able to stand, though he gasped in pain a few times.

Tathan stood still for a few minutes so that his head could stop swimming. He wondered how badly he had been hurt before the healers had used their magic. The knight steadied him and stayed beside him until Tathan was ready to go.

Sir Danth kept Tathan stable as he shuffled forward. When they opened the door, there was a council representative with his fist up to knock on the door. "Oh. There you are," he said in surprise. "The council of elders insists upon seeing you and will not accept any further delays."

"We're coming," Tathan replied. "I'm moving slowly though. My body isn't fully recovered."

"Of course," the Rojuun said. "I'll go ahead and let them know you are on your way." With that, he left at a quick pace.

Sir Danth and Tathan followed at a slower rate. Tathan's body began to move a little easier as he worked out the stiffness in his muscles. His head hurt and any bright light made him squint. Sir Danth kept his arm out, which Tathan used as a brace to keep steady. After a few minutes, they were at the council chamber.

Once inside, they were given chairs in the middle of the floor. All of the seats were full and quite a few Rojuun stood around the edges in order to listen in on the proceedings. A low murmur of voices filled the chambers. The sound soothed Tathan, making him want to fall back to sleep. A Rojuun girl brought them wine to drink, which Tathan thought was a good sign. He eagerly took a glass and sipped from it in hopes of calming his head.

"Tathan Human and Sir Danth Human," said the council leader who had addressed them in previous meetings. "We have questions regarding the sstejj attack on the builders yesterday. It was our hope that all of you would be able to make it, but we understand the health of your companions is poor. Is this correct?"

Tathan stood. When he began to fall over, Sir Danth caught and steadied him. The Rojuun in the chamber all gasped in alarm. Tathan took a couple of deep breaths before speaking. "That is correct. I don't yet know exactly what their experience was. I promise that as soon as I'm able to speak with them, you'll have that information. For now, I'll tell you what I can." Even though it wasn't his favorite activity, he was very good at speaking in front of people. In fact, he had stayed out of jail a few times that way.

"We will accept that," the speaker agreed. "Now I will ask questions and you will answer." It was definitely a command, delivered in that pleasant way that all Rojuun seemed to possess. "Tell us of the sstejj with gems in their head. You killed a very large one said to be immune to magic. There were also smaller ones."

"The large one definitely had a gem in its forehead," Tathan responded. "When I saw that spells didn't kill it, I ran up its legs to the body and thrust my sword into it."

Tathan realized he had left the sword back in the room and a cold sweat enveloped him. He didn't like being without it. "My sword didn't kill it as it would have any normal sstejj," he continued. "When another spell hit the sstejj, I noticed that the gem in the beast's head flared with light. I thought it might be the key to the barrier blocking the spells. I ran up and rammed my sword into it. That action destroyed the gem and the sstejj." Tathan explained all of it matter-of-factly. "It resulted in a magical charge being released in a violent manner that hurtled me through the air. My vision and hearing were temporarily lost as well as my consciousness."

The council members exchanged looks and there were murmurs in the audience. "Your feats of skill in combat have been remarked upon and your statement verified by others. You tell us that you ran up the creature's legs so casually . . . It is impressive, I will admit. I have not heard of such feats being accomplished by humans."

Tathan responded by shrugging and holding his hands out to the side. He didn't really care what they thought of his abilities. "As far as the smaller sstejj with gems, I didn't see very much of them and what I did see was their backs as they ran off."

"Sstejj have never been known to run away. They only kill with lust and never retreat," the council leader stated.

"That is my understanding as well," Tathan agreed. "I was having a hard time focusing at that point though, so I can't tell you much more. The backlash from

destroying the gem knocked me out awhile and made it hard for me to tell what else was happening.”

The council leader continued with the questions. “A dark, twisted creature riding the monsters with gems in their head took Liselle Human. I believe she is your family member, a cousin?” he asked, looking at a piece of parchment with writing.

“She is, and that’s what I’ve been told. I didn’t personally see her being taken,” Tathan admitted. With genuine relief, he said, “Truly, I’m grateful that she’s alive.”

“Why would the creature take your cousin? What purpose did it have?” the Rojuun asked with a frown. He leaned forward. “Why would it take a human rather than a Rojuun? That is difficult for us to understand.”

Tathan put his arms out again. “I’m very sorry, but I don’t understand that either. It doesn’t make any sense,” he told them. “I’d really like to know why it took her too.”

The elders frowned. They had obviously been hoping for some insight. “Very well then,” the middle elder responded. “It was observed that your companion, Vevin Human, turned into a great beast and destroyed most of the sstejj with purple fire and lightning. Then Vevin Human flew forward on large wings, still in the form of the beast.” The elder read statements from the parchment in his hand. “The creature let out a roar that shook the cavern.” He turned to Tathan. “If everyone there had not agreed on these events, we would not believe it. Some of us are still not certain.”

Looking back at the paper, he read once more. “The guards at the gate said this about the arrival of Vevin Human and Liselle Human: ‘The beast flew through the cavern and landed near the gate. Liselle Human climbed down from its neck then collapsed. The beast transformed into the human known as Vevin and went to her side. Then Vevin Human picked Liselle Human up and carried her to the gate where we let them in.’” He turned to look at Tathan. “This is what the guards told us. Their words are to be believed,” the elder stated, holding the parchment up.

Tathan took a drink of his wine. There had been no question in all of that. He didn’t know how to tell them about dragons, so he just waited to see what they would ask.

The elder stared at him. The rest exchanged glances. When it was clear that Tathan wasn’t going to respond, the council leader leaned forward. “Is Vevin Human a beast and if so, what sort of beast is he?”

“He’s a dragon,” Tathan said. “I don’t know if dragons are called beasts. I wouldn’t recommend it.” He raised his glass to take another drink. “Dragons are the most powerful and noble of all creatures in Ryallon. They also like to eat things, although Vevin *did* tell us that sstejj were very disgusting.”

“We have not heard of dragons before,” the elder said. “You say he is powerful and likes to eat things. Is he dangerous? Will he harm the Rojuun?”

“Well, he *is* dangerous. Dragons are some of the most dangerous beings in the world,” Tathan admitted. “As far as whether or not he’ll harm Rojuun, he’s decided that he likes you. However, he’s curious as to how Rojuun taste, so I wouldn’t recommend upsetting him.” There were looks of horror on many of the Rojuun faces and irritation on others. He waved off their concern. “It’s pretty hard to upset Vevin, so I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“Your words are disturbing, Tathan Human,” the elder said. “To say that this . . . dragon can simply choose to eat Rojuun as though there is little we could do about it is

offensive. Why does he take human form?" There was anger in his voices. That anger was mirrored in the faces of the council as well as many of the audience.

"It's not my intention to offend you, Elder," Tathan said with a calming tone, holding a hand up in peace. "Dragons have existed for a very long time. They truly are powerful beyond anything and entire armies have fallen before them. Also, if you kill one, the rest avenge it and where one is dangerous, many dragons are a sight to be feared." Tathan sighed. "Vevin won't harm you. He's shown that he is your friend by fighting the sstejj alongside you, probably killing more than even Sir Danth." He gestured toward the knight. "His reasons for taking human form are his own. In fact, I didn't even know dragons could do that before I met Vevin."

"I see. We have one last question for you until your companions are well enough to answer the other questions," the council leader said.

"Yes?"

"Did you or your companions have anything to do with the sstejj attack, the creature that killed Rojuun and took your cousin, or anything else to do with any of these events?" he asked.

Tathan did not respond immediately. He was mad at them for their suggestion and mistrust. Sir Danth stood behind him, stepping forward to his side in support. "I give you my word that we did not have anything to do with the sstejj, that creature, the attack or anything else to do with these attacks," Tathan finally said, biting his words in anger. "Until coming to these caverns, we had never heard of sstejj. Since coming here, we've fought alongside Rojuun to kill untold numbers of sstejj at great risk to our own lives."

"Thank you for your answer. We did not believe you had, but felt it a question that must be asked," the elder said in a conciliatory manner. The council members relaxed and sat back as well. "Everything about the attacks was unusual and we don't understand why," he admitted. "That is enough for now though. It is obvious that you are still not recovered from your ordeal, Tathan Human. You keep leaning to your left and the color is gone from your face. We also see pain in your features. Go and rest. When your companions are well enough, we will ask more."

Tathan took the wine back to the suite. They checked on Liselle and Vevin to find them sleeping hard. Both looked exhausted and gaunt from their ordeal. Rojuun had stripped their dirty robes and covered the sleeping pair. Vevin's arms wrapped protectively around Liselle who was curled up against him. Tathan sighed and headed back to his own room where Sir Danth helped him into bed. He fell asleep immediately.

[Chapter 35](#)

The companions were before the Council of Elders once more. Tathan was standing and had just exchanged pleasant formalities, thanking the elders for their hospitality. This time Liselle and Vevin were with them. Both were tired, but had smiles on their faces. They were holding hands, giggling and flirting with each other. Tathan sighed, knowing there was nothing he could do about it.

Two days had passed since the last council meeting. Tathan, Vevin and Liselle had all slept until dinner the day after the meeting. When they woke, each moved gingerly to the common room of the suite and had their meal. Very little was said, but they gave each other gentle hugs and smiles of relief before going back to bed until morning.

The morning meal had been eaten in quiet as well. After breakfast, they talked of their experiences. Liselle told of the hhorj that had tried to take her glow. Vevin held her as she remembered her fear of the dark tunnels. Sir Danth and Tathan talked about the end of the battle and the council meeting they attended.

Vevin then told how he had flown into the tunnel after Liselle. It had been filled with sstejj, which he killed with another blast of his breath. He continued down the tunnel for a long ways, passing other tunnels and holes that were in the ground. After a while, he had come to another cavern where he destroyed more sstejj with his breath.

When Vevin found no trace of Liselle, he stopped. Numerous tunnels led from the cavern and he had no idea which way to go, so he turned back to find her scent. It took quite a while for the dragon to find it down the first hole he had passed. After that, he had to explore each tunnel to find the scent again. Vevin explained that scent was the weakest of a dragon's abilities and the injury that he sustained to his head before meeting the cousins had actually made things worse. He had hoped to find tracks, but only the marks of sstejj were visible.

It took much longer than he wanted to find the cavern where Liselle had been imprisoned. Her smell was stronger there, but he was even more afraid for her when he saw that she was gone.

Throughout his searching of the tunnels, he killed hundreds of sstejj. When they were heavy, he would use his breath. However, his powers were not infinite and he began killing with tooth, claw and tail. His lightning was pitiful in the cavern of the hhorj, only killing a few sstejj. The rest had to be physically killed and Vevin developed a severe distaste for the slimy meat of the creatures.

When he heard Liselle weakly call out his name from down the tunnel, Vevin raced down its length at full speed. More of the foul beasts were converging upon her. The dragon went into a rampage and began slaughtering them as fast as he could. The small breath of energy that she had sent him was just enough to release one last breath of lightning.

When he was finished with his account, Vevin told them that he was in love with Liselle. Then he looked into her eyes and told her once again. Liselle kissed him deeply and told him that she was in love with him as well. They both turned to Tathan. Vevin had a determined, but worried look on his face as to how Tathan would react. Liselle had a challenging look, as though daring him to disapprove.

Not being willing to risk the wrath of flowers, Tathan stood and said, "Oh yeah? Well, I'm in love with Sir Danth!" Then he turned, reaching toward the knight with outstretched arms and a kissy face. The knight put out an arm in sudden fear and held Tathan's face in his gauntleted hand to keep him away. Tathan pushed forward saying, "Come here my knighty, knighty! Give me kisses. Smoochy, smoochy, smoochy."

Vevin and Liselle burst into laughter at the sight of the two. Tathan pulled back with a grin and even Sir Danth joined in the laughter, though he did sit a little further away from the rogue after that.

When things had settled once more, Liselle watched Tathan rubbing his head, which still hurt from the explosion. She sat next to him and took his head into her hands. With a whisper and light breath, she eased the pain that rang in his skull. The touch of her fingertips was cool and healing. Tathan smiled gratefully.

They went to the council meeting wondering how the news would be taken and how the Rojuun would treat them from that point. The four were united in their friendship and they vowed that they would stay together no matter how the Rojuun treated them. A small part of each was fearful that things might come to a fight, but they earnestly hoped not. None of them felt good enough to endure sustained battle. In addition, they had grown fond of the Rojuun and didn't want to be at odds with them.

"Tathan Human," the council leader spoke his name, drawing Tathan out of his reverie.

"Yes, Elder?" he responded.

"We would have Liselle Human and Vevin Dragon tell us of their experience so that we may fully understand the events of the other day. Are they well enough to speak now?" His voices were pleasant and the entire council seemed much more relaxed, though eager to hear the missing parts of the story.

"Yes, Elder," Tathan answered. "They're still weak, but will answer any questions you may have.

"Very good. Our first questions are for Liselle Human," he said with a gesture toward Liselle who stood up gingerly and stepped forward. Vevin stood to provide a steady hand, but sat back down at a smile of reassurance from her. "Liselle Human, please tell the council about the creature that took you and why it took you," the Rojuun elder said while looking at his parchment. Tathan thought the council leader must keep a list of questions on it for as often as he referred to it.

"Its name was Krraa and he said that he was a 'hhorj'. It wanted my glow," Liselle answered succinctly. All of the Rojuun in the room became animated at the mention of hhorj. There was a great deal of discussion and alarm even among the elders. After a moment, the council leader yelled, "Quiet!" It was a sound like an avalanche rolling. The room instantly became quiet.

"What did it look like, Liselle Human?" the council leader asked.

Liselle described Krraa's red eyes, malformed lower arms, hunch and wings. She detailed the terrible appearance of the hhorj with a haunted look in her eyes.

The elders and audience listened to every word. When she was done, the elders nodded sadly. "It is as you say, one of the hhorj. It is forbidden to speak of them as they are a dark blight within the short history of the Rojuun," he said in heavy tones. "I will not tell you any more of them and you must know that you are not to speak of them outside of this council meeting," he warned firmly.

None of the companions responded and the elder did not push it, seeming to assume that they would simply obey the directive. "Liselle Human, you mentioned that the creature wanted your glow. Explain what this glow is and why it wanted the glow," the elder insisted in pleasant, demanding tones.

Liselle took a deep breath and composed her thoughts. "The creature told me that I had a glow," she began. "It said that the glow would fix him . . . finish him." Liselle gulped and took another breath. "It said it would take my glow and then it began to cut . . ." she stopped as tears began to fall. A sob wracked her body as she hunched over, clutching her stomach in memory.

Tathan and Sir Danth stood and reached out, but Vevin was there with his arms around her instantly. He put her head against his shoulder and let her cry.

Tathan looked at the response of the Rojuun. The elders were stoic, but Tathan could tell that they felt sorrow for her as well.

After a moment, Liselle composed herself with effort, wiping the tears away from her cheeks. Vevin used his thumbs to catch a few she had missed. One of the Rojuun came to her with a glass of wine, which she accepted gratefully. Liselle smiled at Vevin and let him know that he could sit back down. Sir Danth and Tathan sat as well.

Liselle had told her friends that the ring saved her life, but they didn't feel entirely comfortable letting the Rojuun know about it, so she told the story they came up with instead. "Right after the creature began to cut me, Vevin arrived in dragon form and killed it," she said, turning to smile at her dragon. "He saved my life." Then she turned back to the council. "He took me out of the terrible room I was in and then destroyed it with magical fire," she told them. "We were both exhausted from our ordeal, but made our way back, not wanting to stay in that forsaken place any longer."

The elders nodded and discussed with each other for a moment. Then the council leader asked another question. "Liselle Human, do you know what this glow is, or can you tell us what is so special about you that the creature would want to take said glow?"

Liselle thought for a moment then shook her head and held out her arms. Tears streamed down her face once more. The tears hit a nerve with the elders and they relented. "Very well, Liselle Human. You have been very helpful. Please sit down and have some more wine," he encouraged her. Rojuun did seem to be fond of their wine.

After Liselle sat and accepted the refill, the council leader spoke again. "Vevin-Dragon, we will ask you questions now." Vevin got up and moved forward. The dance that he was doing was very subtle. Tathan watched it indirectly, out of the side of his eye. The movement was hypnotizing.

"What was I going to ask?" the elder began with a look of confusion on his face. Vevin continued the slow dance. His head moved back and forth much like a snake. The elder looked at his parchment and frowned. He rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes. Much of the audience had gone back to talking amongst themselves, totally forgetting about the hearing. The elder closed his eyes and concentrated, breaking the spell he was under. "Vevin-Dragon," he said suddenly and the audience paid attention once more. Many of them looked surprised. "What exactly are you? The Rojuun have no knowledge of dragons and your actions are extraordinary."

Vevin still continued his hypnotic dance, but he answered the question. "I am a dragon," he said in a deep tone that filled the room. It also filled their minds, much like Mother Tree's had done. "We are an ancient creature dating back to the creation of life on Ryallon. Dragons are powerful and mysterious. Your lives are too short and silly to understand us fully." Vevin smiled as he spoke, his words washing over the Rojuun. They all nodded as though in a trance. "I am not a danger to you and you like me," he told them in a pleasant tone reminiscent of the way Rojuun spoke to humans. Once again, the Rojuun audience nodded. "Know that I have helped you, made you safer and that I am friendly to you." Vevin bowed as he finished. All of the Rojuun nodded in agreement with his words.

After a moment of discussion, the council leader held his hand up to quiet the room. "Vevin-Dragon, we are very thankful that you have helped to make Garrn Dwelling and the nearby caverns safer. We like you a great deal and we thank you for your efforts. We also consider it an honor that such a powerful and mysterious being as a dragon

would grace us with its presence.” All members of The Council of Elders agreed with enthusiasm, as did the audience.

Tathan sat in awe of Vevin, who gave him a grin and wink as he took a seat.

“Tathan Human,” the elder said with a gesture for him to rise. Tathan stood. “We ask that you and your companions wait outside while we discuss matters.”

“Yes, Elder,” Tathan responded. They went into a waiting room just outside of the council chambers. Food and drink were brought to them. Liselle and Vevin fell asleep on a lounge and Tathan nodded off as well. Two hours later, they were called back into the council chambers.

“The council thanks you for your efforts in safeguarding Garrn Cavern,” the council leader began after the companions had sat down. “However, we find your methods chaotic and dangerous,” he said sternly. The other elders frowned in agreement. “You kill many sstejj, but are reckless in your methods and the fact that Liselle Human was taken for her glow is alarming to us. We do not like unexplained glows in our society.” The elders murmured in agreement that unexplained glows were bad and shouldn’t be tolerated. “Do not feel badly about this. You are only humans after all and can’t help your nature, I’m sure.” The elders nodded in pity for them. “You will be teleported back to Puujan. Once there, you may seek employment with another family or go back to your human lands.”

The elder became very serious and leaned forward. “The information that you gave us regarding the one called Krrea and the matter of the sstejj are not to be discussed outside of this room,” he said warningly. “Nor are you to discuss your time in our territory. You are not to discuss it with other humans or even other Rojuun. Is this perfectly clear to all of you?”

Tathan responded immediately. “That is perfectly clear, Elder.” What he didn’t tell them was that he wasn’t an obedient human by nature. The elder sat back and nodded in satisfaction as did the other council members.

“That will be all then. You have received sufficient pay and rewards. You will be escorted to gather your things. Afterward, you will leave for the teleport room.” With that, the elder dismissed them.

A while later the companions were sitting in the common room of the White Tree Inn back in Puujan. Hulda had rented them rooms for the next few nights. They were all tired and needed time to recover.

Liselle sipped the wine Hulda had brought them. “So where do we go from here, Cousin?”

“I think we should speak to Mother Tree next,” Tathan replied, making sure that no one could overhear. The feeling was back. Something was watching him, hunting him once more. He had even jumped with his sword drawn on the way back to the inn, alarming his friends.

“I agree with Master Tathan,” Sir Danth said, sitting with his back against the wall again.

“Then it’s settled,” said Liselle with a smile after Vevin nodded in agreement. “We’ll rest a few days then off we go.”

They raised their glasses in a toast. None of them saw the cowled woman staring from the window. Her dark green eyes studied their every move.

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Books 2 and 3 of the Willden Trilogy, “Anilyia” and “Kethril”, are available where you found this book.

About the Author

John H. Carroll was the youngest of seven children and was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1970 where he was kept in a dresser drawer with the clean socks. Luckily, he wasn't kept with the dirty socks or else he might have grown up to become slightly warped.

As a child, John spent most of his time wandering through the Mojave Desert in an attempt to avoid people. He would stare at the sky, imagining what it would be like to explore different worlds. One of his favorite memories is watching his dad build the fuselage of Evel Kneivel's skycycle in their garage. One of his least favorite moments was watching that skycycle fall into the Snake River. (Not his dad's fault and he has documentation to prove it, so nyah)

As a teenager, John spent most of his time driving wherever he could in an attempt to avoid people. He would stare at the road, imagining what it would be like to explore different worlds. He was the captain of the chess team, lettered in golf and band while in high school, and wasn't beaten up anywhere near as much as one might imagine.

As an adult, John spends most of his time staring at a computer screen in an attempt to avoid people. He stares at the monitor for hours, imagining what it would be like to explore different worlds. He has been married to his wonderful wife for sixteen years and they have three obnoxious . . . wonderful children who always behave . . . when they're asleep.

Emo bunny minions surround John at most times. He is their imaginary friend and they look to him for guidance. At one point, they took over the world. No one noticed because they left everything exactly as it was. They gave the world back after a week because it was depressing.

The Willden Trilogy is his first endeavor into the field of writing. Other series and standalone works will be forthcoming. In addition, John has written a number of short stories that can be found at most eBook sites. He writes in the evenings and weekends whenever possible. Regrettably, the family mentioned in a previous paragraph desires food and shelter, requiring the author to possess a full time job until his writing makes him rich.

You can follow his blog where he discusses writing, emo bunnies, family and various other topics of insanity.

<http://www.ryallon.blogspot.com/>

Follow him on twitter if you like insane ramblings and random comments.

<http://twitter.com/kookoo88>

Find him on Facebook where he discusses current projects and writing in general: [http://](http://www.facebook.com/John.H.Carroll.Author)

www.facebook.com/John.H.Carroll.Author

His Goodreads Page:

http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4479427.John_H_Carroll

Stories for Demented Children:

New! The Emo Bunny that Should - Illustrated Edition: With beautiful illustrations by Arlene Rose. You can get it at the store where you found this one.

Emo the Bunny was a sad bunny. He preferred gloomy days, walks over a cliff and misery of any sort. One day he saw something very unusual. Normally he'd take a nap and try to forget about it, but for some reason he took an interest. Then things happened. Emo the Bunny hated it when things happened. Caution: This story is not for normal children.

“A Collection of Stories for Demented Children” You can get it at the store where you found this one.

Five short stories combined into one, written for demented children and adults too. Text versions of these stories can be found for free individually. I am charging for the compilation in the hopes of earning a living from my writing in order to support my own demented children. Some content may be disturbing for younger, or sane, children.

Novels of Ryallon:

My full-length novels are set in the world of Ryallon. They are high fantasy with rogues, knights, dragons and flower children. You can get them at the store where you found this one.

Willden Trilogy (Written first)

Ryallon

Anilyia

Kethril

Dralin Trilogy (Set in time before the Willden trilogy)

Dralin

Ebudae

Pelya

Stand-alone Novella

Rain Glade

Coming soon:

The Crazyed Trilogy (Set in time after the Willden Trilogy)

The Morhain Trilogy (Set in time after the Willden Trilogy)