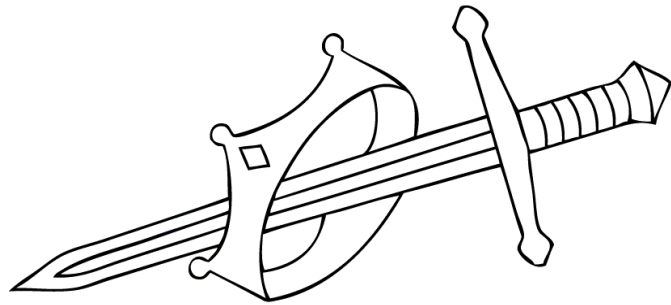


All Things Impossible

D. Dalton

THE SWORD OF PALLENS

All Things Impossible



THE SWORD OF PALLENS

Author: D. Dalton
Editor: Thomas Szott
Cover Art: Dennis Saputra

Copyright 2011 D. Dalton. All Rights Reserved.
ISBN: 978-0-578-08145-8

This work's copyright has been
registered with the US Copyright Office.
First Edition, printed April 2011
www.allthingsimpossible.com

This book or parts of this book may not be distributed or reproduced in any form without express permission from the author who is the sole copyright holder.

No one may acquire this novel in a digital form or any form for free and distribute it in any form for profit without documented permission from the author.

This is a work of fiction. None of it is real or based on real persons, with the single exception that one of the characters is named after a dearly departed friend of mine. Other than that, there is no intentional correlation between what is written here with any other works of fiction, or real world events, places and/or persons.

This book is dedicated to Kelin Mead.
1982-2000
You are still my friend, just as you were when we were
five years old and just as you were in high school.

Prologue

White knuckles choked the wooden casing of the spyglass. The captain fired his gaze up to the crow's nest. "Anything?"

"Not a thing, cap'n!" The shout spiraled around the ropes of the rigging. The waves nudged the ship closer to the foggy shore.

"Two months, two months," the captain growled beneath his breath. He twirled the spyglass in his hand and his boots clicked against the polished wood under his feet as he paced.

"You!" He pointed to a sailor mopping the deck. "Get up there!" He jerked his thumb up at the nest. The unlucky sailor slipped on a puddle and kicked over his bucket. "Sir?"

"Four eyes are better than two, now git!"

"Aye, sir!" The sailor saluted at the same time his feet propelled him toward the rigging.

The captain's gaze leveled the deck like a sword's swipe. Sailors, understanding their captain, dropped what they were doing and thrust their heads over the railings. Their noses sniffed the salty wind and their eyes scanned the horizons. The captain joined them, looking port out to sea.

And still there was no sign!

The captain wrenched the spyglass free again and made another thorough stare at the sea and shore.

Nothing.

Again.

A gust of wind exploded from his nostrils. He pressed the spyglass to his chest. If he returned to Alscane without the treasure ships, it would be his head on the prince's platter. As an honest man, he would swear by the sea god Kreighton's amulet that there was nothing to be found.

Three quarters of the Alscane navy was out searching for the missing treasure fleet. The other quarter had been guarding it.

Could it be pirates? No one else had a navy who could threaten theirs, save the Blue Farers, of course. But everyone knew how honorable they were. The weather was more likely a culprit.

The continent of Dosmar still offered many, many riches even though the Empire of Pallens was long dead. Most of it came in the form of raw materials: gold, silver, iron ore, copper and gems. Few dared its rich heart, and the Empire's much removed descendants lived in sod huts, so Alscane faced no competition.

The captain heaved another sigh. Harvesting the riches of the Empire's land felt too much like plundering an abandoned temple. Yes, only a handful of people remained in the ruins of the city of Pallens; and he prided himself on being one of the very few who had actually visited there. And yes, those people didn't do anything with the great natural wealth about them. Yes, Alscane was prospering tremendously and he owed his city his allegiance. But, it just didn't feel *right*.

That wasn't his worry, he told himself as he lowered the spyglass. His duty was to find and guard those treasure ships. He let his gaze fall back to the deck of his ship, the *Pride of Mendelin*. He hadn't looked much at her in weeks. He'd been too busy staring at empty horizons.

The sleek caravel was heavy enough for warfare, but she could cut quickly through the water like a schooner. Her many, tall sails snapped proudly in the light breeze. The seawater licked her sides lightly as she tiptoed around the coast toward a small cove off the starboard side.

The sunlight glinted off of the ocean and through the captain's spyglass once more. He twisted the cylinder for better focus. He pressed the device into his eye and ignored the pain. Something along the shoreline wasn't quite the same pattern as the rest. The shape was too rectangular.

He inhaled sharply and re-focused the glass.

A ship!

The splintered hull rose up against the rocks. By the good condition of the wood, it had been recent. Shouts rang out over the ship as crewmen noticed it too.

The captain lowered the glass. His mustache twitched in thought.

"Shall we go closer, sir?" His first mate materialized by his side.

His frown folded even lower. "It'd be a nasty chore to get out of that cove, we can't maneuver at all. I don't like it."

"We'll have to tender to investigate anyway since she's run aground." He paused "The sun's getting long too, sir, and we won't be able to patrol the shoreline much longer."

"I know. But that ship's built like one of ours." He sighed again. "Let's see a closer look. No longboats and we can't get that close, but let's actually see what we're so busily staring at."

As the ship rounded into the cove, the tattered blue of Alscane's banner flapped toward the *Pride* from the stricken vessel. The crew rushed the prow as they caught sight of the blue. All eyes nailed themselves into the broken hull.

Suddenly, the cold fingers of sea mist stroked the back of the captain's neck. He had learned to walk with the ocean waves knocking him down and learned early to listen to the water's song. She called out in mourning now.

Mechanically, he swiveled his head behind him. Four devilishly fast ships swam at them from a hidden inlet on the other side of the cove. They moved as gracefully as hunting sharks. The captain suddenly recognized the wreckage for what it was: bait.

He stared hard at those ships. They screamed toward him and made whitewater in their wakes. He'd never seen ships built like these. They glided sharply over the water twice as fast as he could with good wind. They were only two thirds his size, but he couldn't stave off the four of them, not with that speed. He saw ballistae peeking over their railings. Their massive bolts reflected the setting sun. The wind began to pick up the scent of burning pitch and he suddenly knew they had the compact catapults for ship to ship combat, bolted carefully in the center so not to unbalance the boat.

Behind the four selachian boats emerged the largest vessel the captain could have ever imagined. Its hull was wide and flat, and the entire ship was painted midnight black. A sable flag he had never encountered before marched triumphantly in the breeze from its perch on the massive ship.

He read the name painted in careful lettering on the side: *Hound of Hell*.

"What manner of a name is that?" the captain murmured softly.

On the *Pride's* deck, men hollered aloud and scrambled for their own weaponry. The captain looked around at the trap again. There was no escape. He removed his hat and glowered at the attacking ships. "Clever bastard."

Doors pulled out through the sides of the *Hound of Hell's* hull, and the captain saw that the entire deck was just a hatch for the belly of the boat. A hatch for what?

The spyglass slipped from his fingers. Its lens shattered against the deck, breaking the silence. The sailors shouted now too, but the captain was too busy staring.

A long silver neck, followed by wings unfolded from the belly of the boat. Then the entire dragon blossomed free from its confinement. It lowered its head and glared at the *Pride* with pulsating, ruby red eyes. It opened its mouth. Lightning crackled inside its jaws and looped through its sword-like teeth.

The captain wondered if they would have time to see it coming, or if the dragon would let the ships slaughter them and laugh at the exhibition.

Despite it all, a question bubbled up in the back of his mind: why would a dragon bother with a ship?

Chapter One

The Dead Rising

The skull split like a grapefruit as it cracked on the sword. The body tottered for a moment, and then collapsed into the snow. Kelin Miller noticed that the corpse failed to steam against the frozen ground. It was already cold.

His breath certainly frosted the air before catching on his perennial whiskers. The single edged, slightly curved sword loosened in his hand. It was a magic sword, but it really didn't do anything other than glow with a meager light. It'd saved his life against undead and more before, though, since only magic could kill such things as were-creatures.

He'd fought undead before, but not like these. The ones that had ambushed them on their way to Riverfall had scraped along the ground, barely dragging their feet. These moved like they were dancing over the fires of hell.

He looked at the chemman. "I don't understand. We're well beyond the edge of nowhere! Do the undead just happen out here? Naturally?"

Thistle snorted and sharply shook his head. He shot forward and the snow failed to crunch beneath his boots. Absolute silence seeped from his black sword. All sound vanished around it like numbness spreading across skin. Only a thin line of red on one of its edges marred its smooth blackness as it cut down another unnatural monster. Another body fell.

Until the blade stopped all motion, it silenced the oncoming moans from the couple remaining creatures. Kelin yelled, but the sword's power overrode his shout. Thistle held the blade still and arched his eyebrows.

"I don't know; that's why I asked!" Kelin yelled again and spun to face his next target. This one couldn't move as fast as the others. It hopped madly toward them on its only leg. Its remaining flesh had rotted to brown. Kelin squinted, and thought he could see worms between the holes in the thing's skin. Frozen dead worms. How long had this guy been out here?

It hopped closer. "Grrrrlllll..."

Kelin nearly dropped his sword. "Oh dear gods! It's trying to speak!" He gulped. They'd never seen that before!

"Grrrrlllll..."

Something suddenly snatched the back of Kelin's shirt and yanked.

He barely stopped swinging his blade in reflex. He glared down at the half-chemmen, half-elven boy. "Thalon! Don't do that!"

The boy looked up with helpful innocence shimmering on his face. He blinked his orange eyes. "Can I get this one, please?"

Kelin's mouth twisted as he tried not to frown. "Can you even reach?"

The corpse of the very late fat man hopped closer. They could hear the moans as whatever was left of his vocal chords tried to vibrate. "Grrrrlllll..."

"Yes," the boy replied sulkily.

"Oh really?"

Thalon closed one eye and sized up his opponent, which was twice his height and at least four times his weight. The creature extended one brown hand. Several of the fingers had rotted off, but its first finger pointed stubbornly at the child. Moss dangled freely from its fingernail.

The boy's confidence evaporated from his face. He stared, hypnotized by the outstretched aberration. It thrust out its other arm, and Thalon didn't even blink. The creature thundered toward him, only ten feet away now.

Thalon still didn't move.

Kelin and Thistle both jumped, swinging their blades. Sparks lit up the evening air as their swords accidentally crashed together over Thalon's head.

Thalon, ignoring them, dropped his hand to his belt and tossed up a sleek long knife. He caught it by the blade and launched it at the hopping corpse. The knife twirled through the air between the adults symmetrically.

It stuck more than halfway to the hilt directly between the creature's eyes. Perfect. The arm of the body rose as if to pull it out, but stopped midway and the corpse crumpled.

Thalon grinned and jumped in place and pointed. "Look, Dad! I got one!"

Thistle whirled toward his son. He ground his teeth. "Don't wait."

Kelin opened his hand to the final one. "Do you want this one as well, master warrior?"

Bones reflected in the blue moonlight. Clumps of hair and skin clung to patches all along the very late man's body, but more bone was visible than flesh. With no tendons surrounding its ankles, it could only stumble along. The wind stirred behind and the bones shook together to sound like wooden wind chimes.

Kelin shivered, and he wasn't entirely certain it had to do with the winter breeze.

Crooked yellow teeth mashed together as if the monster were already munching on their flesh.

"Uh..." The boy retreated half a step. "You can have him."

Thistle's lips split in mockery of a smile. His feet whispered against the ground and he spun around behind the undead thing. With one definite stroke, he broke open its head. The body fell as heavily as a toppling oak.

Then only silence assailed their ears. Kelin looked around just to make certain. "I thought no one ever came this way, even if just to die."

Thistle shrugged. He stood over the fat one. His sword tip hovered over an empty eye socket. If this were a recent kill, he would poke it in the eyes to see if it were truly dead. But for these – he thrust the black blade down – he made sure he knew.

Kelin knelt to wipe the blood, hair and gray splatters off his blade in the snow. The process just seemed to make a bigger mess, but it scraped most of it off the weapon.

Thalon left only a dusting of footprints in the snow as he darted past his older friend into the bush. "Chloe? You can come out now." He pushed his head into the frozen foliage and offered the golden haired girl a hand up. She pushed the snow off of her simple green skirt with her mittens. The pair stood side by side with the girl slightly higher than Thalon. She tried to smile; all the while her eyes darted around them into the darkened forest, as if looking for more monsters.

Kelin finished scrubbing his curved sword clean. "That's the second batch. Someone's tangling with horrible magic, raising the dead like this." He spat.

“Why?” Chloe’s face faded to a shade akin to her skirt at the sight of the slain monsters. “And they’re people!”

“They’re not human anymore.” Thistle smiled toothlessly. “Soul’s gone.”

“But— but, it used to be a person!” She rubbed her cheeks with her hands and tried to push the tears back into her eyes. “And why would they attack us?”

“Survival is more important for the living than for the dead.” The chemman snarled at the motionless creatures on the ground. “Even if they do want to feed.”

Kelin knelt in front of the children. He offered a small smile. “They’re just decaying bodies that should be put to rest. That’s all we’re doing.”

“We know, Kelin.” Thalon slipped past him and bent over to pull his long knife out of his kill. It came free of the corpse’s face with a sucking sound. “They’ve been out here awhile, haven’t they? ‘Cause it’s winter and, um, the meat’s frozen.”

Kelin shrugged. “I don’t think there are recent dead in these lands. People don’t come here.”

“We’re here,” the boy pointed out.

“Often.” Kelin brought his eyes up to Thistle’s orange orbs. “Could it be? They’re the only ones that I know who would...”

“Aye.” Thistle’s face remained blank. “They are.”

“But those were different!” He flung his free hand out to encompass the snowy darkness. “But wouldn’t it be like the chemmen to create undead and just let them wander the wilderness?”

“Chemmen?” Thalon’s eyes shot wide open. He spun toward his father.

Thistle nodded. “Some may have been in the world when Darkreign was sealed again and who were not at the battle.”

“They’re here?” Chloe gasped.

He shook his head. “I said it was possible.”

“But we haven’t seen any signs of them!” Thalon protested.

“Never did before either,” Kelin mumbled.

Thistle’s gaze swept over the small group. “They are starving for revenge. It is all that they have become. If you were tiny in number and couldn’t risk showing yourself, what would you do?”

Kelin pressed a hand to his forehead in an effort to halt the dizziness suddenly attacking him. “No.”

“Create a few creatures that won’t stop, even out here until they literally rot or are destroyed,” Thistle continued. “They could have been practicing out here, trying to improve—”

“Stop!” Chloe cried. “That’s too terrible!”

Kelin felt his knees sag. He’d always known it could happen, but even evidence of a *suspicion* was too much.

He knew it had only been a year, but it felt as if the war had taken place in another life. He had never been that young. He’d never been that ignorant as to how large the world truly was, or of the inventive cruelty of some of the people in it.

Before last autumn, the entire world was fifteen buildings huddled together around an unnamed river. That was all of Riversbridge. That was home.

He hadn’t returned. He could stomach fighting the undead out in the middle of nowhere, but he didn’t think that he could face home.

Before last winter the village had mapped out his entire life. He'd had training as a blacksmith; he'd get married and raise little blacksmiths. Now that future existed only as the memory of a daydream.

It was all Der's fault.

She'd gone, and he'd followed. That's how it had always been. Even throughout the torture and the war, he'd followed her. Only after the calamity had passed did he venture out into the world without his friend.

The thought of meeting the chemmen without Derora Saxen made his heart jump. She may have always gotten them into trouble, but she'd developed a habit for – he paused – well, she had a habit for making it worse. But they'd survived.

Yet here he was, fighting undead monsters in the Wild Lands without her.

It was still all her fault. He wouldn't have even known the chemmen existed if it wasn't for her. He didn't even want to think about what they'd done to him after they abducted him a year ago. His teeth still hurt when he thought of their methods of giving someone a taste of hell.

The chemmen were only a myth to the humans on the continent of Solquin. The elves pretended that they didn't exist, and in one night, they'd walked out of the nightmare and scattered the elven nation. Of course, he'd known nothing of this until that day he and Der met with a curious stranger who turned out to be the elven crown prince.

Instantly, they were washed into the war. Then Der had an idea. It was insane. She wanted to invade the chemmen homeworld when the elves had no army. And it had worked. They'd tricked the chemmen and won.

He hung his head. The victory hadn't been won without leaving deep, deep scars.

The coldness of winter soaked into his bones, and he realized that he was staring off into the darkness. More often than he'd admit, he waited for the undead to come for him from out of the blackness again, and the chemmen right behind...

Now, he stared into the shadows of the moonlit forest and waited.

What could they possibly be doing now? Creating better undead slaves to do what? Conquer them a new homeland?

Thistle slung his sword back into his sheath. "Of course, it might not be the chemmen at all."

Kelin strangled a surprised cough. "Could you name something else?"

"Would you want to?" Thistle countered.

He deflated. "I– I just absolutely do not want to go through anything like that war again. All those elves dying..."

"Too much death." Chloe dropped her eyes to the corpses. "I mean, it's barely been three moons since Uncle killed that Alcomm wizard, and your friend Morana died."

Kelin jerked himself rigid. He dropped his eyes. "Yes. It has."

Thalon reached up and put a consoling hand on his arm.

The larger man pressed his hand over his heart. "I'm losing her voice."

Chloe moved next to him. "What do you mean, Kelin?"

He tried to clear his throat. "In your mind, when you think about someone, you can hear them speak. I'm losing her voice." The snow squelched underneath his boots as it started to melt and flow away from his feet.

“Just think about it then, really hard,” Thalon suggested.

He shook his head and didn't look at either of them directly. “For now. I'm scared though. I know that no matter what I do and how hard I try, I will forget.”

“We could find a magician to enchant something, like a ring or a necklace, so that you can hear her whenever.”

He turned his face to hide a single tear. “It's not the same. She's dead. Even if I could have that ring or necklace, it isn't *her*.” His gaze drifted off into the endless darkness again. “She wasn't bad. She was just so scared. And it got her killed. I wish she'd told us, we could have helped her.” He squeezed his eyes closed.

Thalon looked up at his father, and read a completely different opinion in the chemman's blank face. Still, Thistle said nothing.

Kelin let his gaze fall to the snow. “I don't even know what I'm doing here. Why we're out here.” He curled his fists. “I'm afraid I don't even know who I am these days. I never daydreamed any of this.”

“That's silly,” Chloe chuckled in the oncoming silence. She patted his arm with a mitten. “You're Kelin.”

Kelin attempted a smile at the girl. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“When you know who you are, nothing can stop you.” Thistle said. Then he shrugged. “Of course, with the chemmen, the original saying goes ‘when we know who we are...’ But I'm sure you understand.”

Kelin shook his head mutely.

“When you know who you are, nothing can stop you,” the chemman repeated.

“Yes!” Chloe grinned and patted the large man's arm. “We're all here—” The girl's hand jerked tight against his sleeve, and he almost tasted the cold sweat bristling on her forehead.

“Chloe!” Thalon took her by the shoulders. “Chloe, what's wrong?”

“Very strong magic here.” She dragged out the final word as she tried to hide beneath her hood. She bit her tongue and tried to stamp down on her own power. It couldn't lash out now! The last time she had lain deathly ill for months!

Thistle moved to stand over the girl, hand on his sword. Thalon cupped her waist with one arm and drew a knife in his free hand. He looked up at his father and mouthed, “Move?”

A scream shredded the night air around them. The party slammed their hands against their ears. The earth seemed to tremble as the shrill howl ripped its fingernails into their souls.

Suddenly freed by the terrible cry, Kelin's well of tears streamed down his cheeks and despair coursed through his veins. His heart felt like it stopped beating. Without thinking, he collapsed to his knees and banged his fists against the ground. “Stop!”

“What is it?” Thalon shrieked. His small face twisted with agony. Chloe was crying too. Only his father's face remained impassive.

The chemman nodded ahead, eyes focused on a distant object.

Upon a gray rock, a barefoot woman wailed at the moon. She was too slender. Nothing living could be that thin. Chalk white skin was partially covered by the tattered rags of a once silk gown. Black hair, as long as she was tall, caught the breeze and was as ragged as her dress. She screamed again.

The chemman spun on his heel. Thalon tugged Chloe after his father, but her feet seemed anchored to the snow. "Come on, we have to go!"

Kelin gave her a slight push from behind. He didn't trust his own voice at the moment.

Thistle guided them between the trees and around clearings. He never once checked over his shoulder. Finally, he raised his hand to signal a pause. The children, panting through flushed faces, tugged at the stopper on the waterskin.

"Was that another—" Kelin broke off.

Icy water sprayed both the children as the stopper popped free, but neither noticed.

The screaming figure suddenly stood only twenty feet away. She was *ahead* of them. Her face was still turned skyward and she wailed again.

The sepulchral scream drove thousands of flashes of pain through their ears. Thalon and Chloe fell to their knees, helplessly sobbing. Kelin felt his own legs sag, but he stubbornly planted his feet this time. Thistle remained expressionless.

The apparition dropped her face and looked directly at them for the first time. Her eyes were larger than any human's and entirely black. The face was carved in sorrow.

Then the body shattered into thousands of pieces, like flower petals caught in the breeze. They faded as the wind teased the fragments higher into the sky.

Chloe carefully pried her fingers from her ears. Her bones trembled with the remnants of the scream. A hand touched her back and she turned to Thalon. He licked his lips fearfully.

Kelin wiped his cheeks. "What the hell was that?" His voice sounded hollow, even to himself.

"Banshee," Thistle said.

Kelin fought down the arctic shiver flooding his body. "One of us is going to die?"

The chemman shrugged. "Or someone we know."

Chloe jumped to her feet. "I have to see my grandfather right now! I want to see him!"

Thistle waved his hand. "I'm sure that he's well. I don't trust this omen. Something more is going on. Too much undead."

"Are you sure?" She glared up at the warrior.

Kelin rubbed his arms together. "I don't like this. I don't like this *at all*."

Thistle shrugged. "Perhaps. Or perhaps it was just drawn here by the undead. They died, again. Maybe that's what she's declaring."

The children steadied themselves on each other. Chloe shook her head again. "I want to go see my grandfather!"

Kelin shook his head. "I'm sure he's fine. Remember why he sent you with us."

"So I could spend time with my new friends."

He licked his lips. "Right."

Thistle snorted softly. "No, Chloe, your grandfather wanted you away from there so that *he* wouldn't find you."

Kelin winced, and didn't meet the girl's brown eyes.

She crossed her arms and her brown eyes blazed. "Grandfather wouldn't lie to me! Tom's my *uncle*. He's not a bad man!"

The girl's glare bounced off the chemman without effect. Thistle arched his eyebrows. "I would argue that he's not a man."

"He's my uncle!" She lined herself up with Kelin. "He's not a bad man!"

Beside her, Thalon nodded in agreement. "He saved her life, Dad."

Thistle narrowed his eyes. "And also gained something very powerful for himself in the process."

Kelin swallowed and patted the air down with his hands. "I know, Chloe, I know, but your grandfather doesn't trust him. You're here at his request."

She gasped. "Grandfather wouldn't do that! You tricked him!"

"We did not," Thistle replied coolly.

"And my uncle can find me anywhere!" She raised her skirt and took a running start at Thistle. She stopped short and kicked some snow up at him. "Why don't any of you trust Uncle? We trust *you* and you're supposed to be evil!" She slapped a hand over her mouth as her ears caught her own words. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"I trust him," the boy piped up and stepped between them, blocking his father's view of the girl as best he could. He dared to meet his father's eyes, and immediately ducked under the thundering glare of disapproval.

"Who knows?" Kelin asked. "Perhaps we can take you home now. Your 'uncle' may have finally left forever, like he kept promising to do. After all, we've seen no signs of him."

"Well, there wouldn't be," Thistle remarked.

"He is a shifty—" Kelin bit his tongue and glanced over his shoulder. Nothing but silence and darkness met his gaze, which only reassured his fears.

"I want to go home!" Chloe yelled.

The chemman shook his head. "We'll go to Elloan."

"What? Why?" Kelin asked.

"That's not home!" Chloe puffed out her chest and slapped her hands on her hips.

The chemman didn't answer for a long moment. "Lady Evelyn."

Kelin coughed. "The cook who just happens to be the baroness of Elloan?"

Thalon's eyes darted around as if looking for an escape. "Dad, do we have to? I don't think she'd be happy to see me, 'cause I ran away from her during the war and— well— well, that."

Thistle kept his sight trained on his son. "She is a very commanding sorceress."

Kelin stroked his chin thoughtfully. "And she might know what's going on with all these undead creatures and the chemmen. Elloan's none too far from here."

"But, that's in the elven lands!" Chloe protested. "No one can even find them! You have to be an elf!"

"I'm half," Thalon said. "And Dad and Kelin have special permission from the king of Arborn."

"We must be careful, even in Arborn." Thistle started to walk. "Especially if there are chemmen nigh. We may have to hide you children while we hunt them."

"No, Dad, you always leave me when you have adventures!" Thalon flinched at his father's expression.

“We’ll have time to prepare, and know what we’re getting into this time.” Kelin raised an eyebrow down to them. “And if we say you stay there, you’re going to stay there. You had no place being in Darkreign when you chased after us last time.”

The boy’s face flushed. “Fine.”

Chapter Two

Silver Dawn's Horizon

Massive wasn't big enough of a word. The lone mountain was the horizon. Other jagged peaks vied for height against each other some thirty miles away, but the near mountain eclipsed them all. An inch of ice weighed down the treeless plain between the lone mountain and the others. The sun reflected off the ice more brightly than off the ocean.

But Derora Saxen's eyes weren't anywhere but the gigantic complex atop the solitary mountain. She started her eyes at the giant, central tower and let them fall. A flag that *looked* small graced the huge keep. Three individual walls wrapped around the citadel. Defensible towers lined each wall, and they coalesced back into the battlements seamlessly.

She closed one eye in thought, and then immediately had to open it again because one eye was just useless to take it all in.

Der rubbed her throbbing temples.

"Paint," Jakkobb chuckled. "Silver paint."

"What?" She shaded her eyes and tried to keep staring. "Why?"

"So that it does exactly what it's doing to you. Imagine an army camped out on the plain, all getting headaches from the paint's reflection."

"Not more than the ice," she muttered, before losing herself again to the sheer enormity of the mountain and the castle. Castle wasn't the right word, she thought. Castles were realistic.

Her horse's hooves clicked against the frozen ground as they rode toward it. Surrounding the mountain from a considerable distance were two complete rings of massive, sharp rocks. Some of them were twice the size of her parents' cabin, she realized. Immense icicles, most of them taller than she was mounted, stabbed the ground like mighty stalactites.

Silver Dawn's Horizon pulled her eyes back up its slope to the complex. She squinted. Lightning rods sprouted at various angles. Her green and brown eyes scanned the complex. It was all smooth. The castle didn't allow for corners for attackers to hide behind. Corners would have cut into a defender's line of sight and given the enemy space to hide. Also, she mused, it gave the defenders maximum arrow range.

Jakkobb's chuckle broke her trance.

She finally blinked. "What? No moat?"

He smiled. "Well, wouldn't that be a tad extreme?"

"Compared to what, sir?"

"Ree." The chubby little golden dragon stretched his wings and dug his tiny claws into the pommel of Der's saddle. His pounces and talons were almost exactly like a bird of prey's, made for snatching animals and swooping back up into the sky. She looked at her pommel. And made for scratching leather too, apparently.

"Ooh! Look at that." His almond brown eyes widened and he flapped his wings slowly.

"You're finally awake, little one," Der teased.

"And cold. I'm cold." He dipped his head lower than his feet and shook like a puppy.

Spike, the disguised unicorn and Jakkobb's mount, tossed his head. *Wait until we're close. That blasted thing's still hours away.* His dinner plate sized hooves left craters behind in the iced road where he stepped.

Der still stared. "How did you build this? Afford all this? Dragon hoards?"

Goldie whirled around and glared at her. "Not my hoard!"

She smirked. "You mean the pile of pebbles in the bottom of my backpack?"

Jakkobb laughed. "No. We do not touch our dragon members' hoards."

Der frowned. "Then how?"

The knight's grin spread. "Banking."

"Banking?"

"Banking."

She threw a hand out at the Horizon. "Money lending? Really?"

He nodded. "We're fair and honest traders."

"But you're dragoons! You're the greatest warriors in the world!"

Which is why not many people attempt to rob us, Spike commented.

"Why haven't I heard of this?" She narrowed her eyes and glared at the knight and unicorn as if they were the heart of the conspiracy.

Jakkobb shrugged. "You haven't spent time in any cities."

She snorted. "I have too! Second Acron, Duelingar, and even Tenmar City once."

"Oh yes. And all of those times, you were waving your sword around being chased by chemmen. You didn't have time to ask for a loan."

She shook her head stiffly.

"What? Do you still think life is nothing but epic battles?"

"Well, no." She wrinkled her nose. "You've gotta regroup in between."

The knight and unicorn rolled their eyes. Goldie stared blankly, and Der's horse just plodded on. The citadel expanded in size as they drifted nearer.

The knight's face was as bright as the ice's reflection, and almost as bright as his armor. "Ah, it is good to be back."

Der gave her horse a little more head to keep pace with Spike. She said, "There's no local water supply."

"Of course there is. It's underground, you see, or rather, don't see. Do you remember the Pelippen River and the swallow hole?"

"Yes."

"It's kind of similar to that, only in reverse."

"Oh. But why?"

He replied, "So no one can dam it or poison it."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Huh. There are also no trees around, no firewood."

"No timber for siege weapons either."

"What do you do for cooking and heat?"

"Magic most of the time, especially in the keep where the officers' quarters are. Other than that, we have a very large store and we ship it in daily."

“That’s a lot of work.”

“Just be thankful you weren’t around when we built this thing.” His blue eyes rolled into his head in thought. “Only about two hundred years ago. In fact, we even built this mountain.”

Der reined her horse to a halt. The mare snorted irritably, but she didn’t notice. “What? You *built* that?”

“Ree.” The dragon stretched out his neck as far as he could. “It’s bigger than I am.”

“Impossible.” Der shook her head.

Jakkobb’s grin only spread. “In fact, that exaggerated motte is much heavier than a natural mountain, we feared it might actually cause an earthquake, but it hasn’t yet.”

She blinked a couple of times. “I still don’t believe you built a mountain. But since you so obviously did, why would it cause an earthquake?”

“The weight of it on the underground faults.”

She raised a confused eyebrow. “Um. Whose fault is what now?”

He laughed. “Cracks underground that sometimes move and cause earthquakes.”

She chewed her lower lip. “I’ll take your word for that.”

He smiled, but it was smaller. “Sorry, an old friend of mine was an earth warlock, and just being around him I learned too much about rocks and the earth.”

“Is he here, at Horizon?”

“What? Oh no. This is when I was younger. A long time ago. He was killed in the fall of Pallens.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, sir.”

He waved his hand. “That was a long time ago.” He dropped his hands to his saddle. “You wouldn’t believe it, but he married Evelyn of Elloan.”

“What?” She narrowed her eyes. “Well, she mentioned she had a son to me once. I always thought that remark was rather odd.”

The elven knight drummed his fingers on the raised pommel of his saddle. “Oh yes, I vaguely remember him now. Bright lad, green eyes, had his father’s smile. My gods, I can’t even recall his name. Don’t mention that to the lady, please. I didn’t see him more than once as a toddler.”

He blew out a blustery sigh. “Huh. Haven’t thought about him in years. Never did find out what happened to him. And even Evelyn, with all her powers, couldn’t learn his fate. But anyway, way long ago, my friend and I were recruited into Silver Dawn. He was a warrior, but also a natural earth wizard. Had the strangest powers around rocks, too.”

“I didn’t think the dragoon orders had too many magicians.”

“No, but those were different times. We do employ them, Der. Now you won’t meet hardly any because you’ll be too busy training.” He tossed her a lopsided grin.

“That brings up another question of mine, sir. How can an entire army manage on a hundred recruits every year? I think you’d have to take in a lot more just to maintain yourselves?”

Jakkobb’s eyes danced. “Simple, we don’t die. Well, not too many of us. It does happen, obviously. We also don’t fight many full scale battles these days – no one honestly wants to fight us. And a significant number of our ranks are elvish or part elven. Even dwarves live a few centuries more than humans. And finally, we’re not as big of an army as everyone assumes we are.”

She nodded. “Ah, right you are, sir.”

They rode ahead in silence, and the sun's blinding glare on the frozen fortress began to slip downward against the slick ice as evening marched closer. The magnificent rock ring grew even larger than the view of the fortress. Eventually, they passed through it in a narrow constriction barely broad enough for a wagon. Der squared her shoulders against the pressure.

Behind the intimidating rock ring, she felt trapped. The narrow road paraded openly below the very high walls, and it was a long way between the rock ring and the road up. No one could shoot an arrow up that high, but arrows could most certainly be shot down.

She looked at the ground between the stone rings. Vigorously sharp rocks sprouted haphazardly in the field. They ranged from ankle to knee height and there wasn't a foot of free ground between any of them. Attempting to run through the field would be sprinting through a leg meat grinder.

She looked forward again as they stepped through the other gigantic rock ring. She could see ahead where the rocks the road turned almost vertical. A narrow and exceedingly steep set of switchbacks ascended skyward.

"Did you have anything to do with the design of this monstrosity?" she asked eventually.

"No," Jakkobb responded.

"Was it built by people like you then?"

He sat back in his saddle. He could make leather creak suspiciously. "What do you mean by that?"

She pointed. "Alright, you wear very thick full plate mail and you still carry a *kite* shield. You also use an unbreakable axe, and yet you carry a sword too."

He shifted. "We-ell, we like to be prepared, that's all."

She shook her head. "Sir, you carry that stuff with you *all the time*. I won't even venture to guess how much you can lift if you ever take your gear off."

Spike snickered. *Probably your horse.*

Jakkobb thumped the unicorn on the shoulder. "Shut up, Spike."

I could do without the excessive weight sometime, you know.

Der grinned. "It won't happen though. I've known you for over a year, sir, and I've never once seen you without the armor."

"Yes, you have," he replied.

"For ten minutes in Darkreign when we were prisoners. It doesn't count."

It does need to be repaired on occasion, Spike muttered.

Jakkobb rapped his armored fingers across the dented and claw-raked breastplate. "But it's like a good scar. You don't want to just get rid of it."

How about a compromise of washing it?

Der shrugged. "I can't imagine it all shiny and un-dented though."

Jakkobb scowled. "Shut up, the both of you."

"Ree?" The dragon bobbed his head up from Der's saddlebag. "What about me?"

The knight rolled his eyes. "You too, little one."

They walked into the shadow of the colossal complex, and turned tightly between the second ring of giant rocks, just like the first circle. She reined in her horse and gazed up and up. "Jakkobb, those—very, very big and steep switchbacks, they're going to be covered in ice. I don't feel like risking my life right now." She frowned. "But it's not shiny like everything else."

“Well, you wouldn’t be shiny either if a dragon breathed on you.” Jakkobb smirked.

“No. I wouldn’t even be a pile of ashes.”

“You are very observant, kid. Notice anything about the mountain itself?”

“It’s unnaturally steep, there’s no conceivable way to climb it? It’s also very smooth; I’ve never seen stones that unblemished before.”

“It’s all one solid rock, magically sealed. Try to tunnel through that, ha!”

Der looked appreciatively at the hundreds of feet of rock. “Has anyone ever tried?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Oh no. In fact, life at Horizon is rather boring— if you’re not a recruit. No one’s ever tried to assault it.”

“I wonder why,” she said dryly. The horse’s shoulders heaved a little underneath her as they began the climb. It took the better part of an hour to reach an external stone corridor at the summit.

Der shifted. “Um, Jakkobb? Where’s the gate? Were you so cautious that you refused to even build one?”

“It’s just defense, Der. Alright, we walk through this narrow corridor, and at the end of it we take a sharp right turn onto the space between the outer and the middle wall, where we must immediately take another sharp left turn, and then another left turn. There’s a gate, I promise. Eventually. And there’s five more gates behind that one.”

They passed through another turn, too small to get a battering ram through. At least, not quickly enough not to get killed by arrows from above.

“I see it. Makes attackers bunch together, and they have to stop to make the turns. Can’t charge that way.” The sun faded completely as they rode into the corridor, through the turns. “Alright, alright. This place is incredible! How thick are the walls?”

“First wall is twenty, second is also twenty, and the third is fifteen.”

“Solid? All around?” She gazed up and at the second and much higher wall. Thin metal, collapsible bridges occasionally ran between the walls. Looking down, there was a seventy foot deep pit entrenched between the walls. They stood on the only elevated space between the walls, and under a heavy, nasty portcullis. Behind that, a thick gate stood open.

Jakkobb and Der rode exactly fifty feet where the platform dropped off into the pit. A heavy portcullis waited at an abrupt left turn into a claustrophobic funnel with another portcullis at the end of it. The guards yelled down from the walkways directly on top of the gates and saluted Jakkobb as he rode ahead. Der eyed the death trap hesitantly. She was suddenly very glad she was on the dragoon knights’ side. She stared. Six adamantis gates. Six! No one could breach those.

Then, finally, they were inside Silver Dawn’s Horizon. A blast of cold air struck them and Der’s horse shied in surprise. She didn’t even notice.

Even on the inside, the fortress was divided into many baileys by internal walls and gates, all manned and guarded. If an attacking army ever made it this far, they’d have to start the offensive all over again, this time against separate castles within the giant citadel.

“It’s colder up here,” she muttered as she stroked her horse’s neck. “I didn’t think that was possible.” She looked around and pointed at a building, the roof of which was seemingly supported by stacked barrels. “Is that a brewery?”

Jakkobb grinned. “Smells like it.”

“You would know.”

He winked. “Strongest beer on the continent. Worth building this whole citadel to defend.”

“For the beer.” She rolled her eyes.

She never finished her eye-roll because the fortress snatched back her gaze midway through the motion. There were warehouses, stables, smithies, barracks, even a tavern. None of them carried even so much as a splinter of wood or thatch in their construction (except for the beer barrels). It was like an entire city, if a city were organized with the efficiency of a beehive. She even noticed how the roofs of the buildings were flat enough to boast gardens, but slanted just slightly. Flat enough, she mused, defenders can run around without having to worry about falling, but also grooved to collect every drop of water that the sky gifted.

The wind teased the hundreds of banners hung as laundry everywhere in every color and nearly every shape upon them.

“What are those?” She waved her hand in a circle over her head.

Every knight has his own flag, Spike snorted.

“What’s Jakkobb’s—”

“Der,” Jakkobb interjected, “You’re not here to be a knight. You’re a recruit for soldier training. You still have your interview to see if you’ll be accepted for candidacy at all.” He grinned. “So are you going to sit on your horse all day gawking or get to that interview?”

“Oh.” She felt her face heat up. “Is Strival really the best swordsman in the entire world? I mean, we’ve all heard the stories, even back in Riversbridge.”

Jakkobb shrugged. “Well, no one’s been able to prove that he’s not.”

The knight dismounted and Der followed suit. Two stable boys rushed forward and the first took Der’s reins. Spike, of course, had no bridle, and the other stable boy floundered like he was swimming in too strong a current.

Absently, Der unstrung a saddlebag, careful not to disturb the nearly constantly napping dragon, curled up in his warm ball at the bottom of the bag. How he fell asleep through this, she’d never know. Maybe the climb was too boring. She looked back up.

Atop the giant tower of the keep, the flag snapped proudly in the wind, a salute every time. From a distance, it had looked so miniscule, and now it looked as large as a mansion. On it was a silver strip of land with a silver half circle representing the sun.

“This way.” Jakkobb set off with his long stride toward the keep, rising up from its own artificial motte. A proud wall encircled it, but at least the gate to its courtyard stood invitingly open. The keep itself was the incredibly high tower with the huge banner. The small road rising to it had only one switchback.

They entered through the gate of the keep to find an austere block room. It barred entry into the rest of the tower by a very heavy door above a platform of stairs to the side of the room. An armored guard immediately saluted Jakkobb.

The guard grinned. “Been awhile, sir.”

“No longer than usual, Harken.” The captain shrugged off his great sword. Next, he pulled off the axe. He set them carefully on a table underneath an arrow loop. “Disarming room, Derora, do it.”

Her face pinched tightly. “We aren’t allowed our weapons, but, sir—”

“Not when we have guests, like yourself.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders drooped. “Right. Jakkobb, um, sir, could we make an exception, please?” She clutched her cloak over her sword.

“Don’t worry, lass.” The guard forward with a gentle smile. “I’ll be here the whole time. I won’t let anything happen to it.”

“He’s a good man, Der,” the captain said. “It will be safe here.”

“Will you say that in half an hour?” she asked, sharper than she meant. “I’m sorry, sirs, but—”

“You’ve been around Thistle too long.” The knight sighed. “Now, I’m not going to order you to disarm, but we are already pretty late meeting the commander, I say by a couple of months.”

Her shoulders slouched. “Yes, sir.”

She pulled her cloak away from the longsword. The light caught the blade in its ethereal blue-gold sheen. Green and blue lines cavalcaded around the whole design in an unending knot; in a brook of flawlessly melted gems. The Pallens secret of jewel working had died with the Empire.

The metal of the pommel wrapped itself around a sapphire the size of Der’s fist. It made a small pyramid on either side of the pommel and danced appreciatively in the sunlight.

Harken dropped to his knees. “Is that— is that— Pallens?”

“Yes.” Jakkobb shrugged off his riding cloak and draped it carefully over the weapon. “Don’t breathe a hint of it.”

“Yes, sir!”

Der bit down on her lower lip and folded her arms. “I still don’t see why I have to let it out of my sight. Are you sure everyone is disarmed, sir? I mean, everyone?”

The captain rolled his eyes. “Yes, Der.” He turned back to Harken. “I assume he’s in his office.”

“As far as I know, sir.”

The captain winked between the two of them. “One thing about our commander, Der, he sadistically enjoys surprising us and rarely bothers with a routine schedule. He says it makes him harder to assassinate, but I think he just likes surprising us.”

“The only surprise today is that you’re actually here.” A broad shouldered elf leaned comfortably against the wall at the top of the disarming room’s stairs. He was shorter than Jakkobb, but seemed to be just as muscular. The commander was mostly fair haired, but it was peppered with red streaks. Keen hazel eyes marched across the room to the newcomers. “You’re late, captain. Three months late. Training starts tomorrow, as a matter of fact.”

Der rubbed her palms. This was it. Here was the commander of the world’s most elite army, reputed to be the best swordsman in the world.

Jakkobb winced and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Der suddenly stabbed her finger at Strival. “Hey! He’s still got *his* sword!”

Chapter Three

Interview

Der thumped her ear with the palm of her hand. It still felt persistently numb except for the high pitched whine. Here she was in the presence of the greatest swordsman in the world, and suddenly, her head felt like a cloud.

And she couldn't figure out why.

Goldie massaged his talons against her shoulder. He shifted his wings, and then shifted them again. Then he pouted and glared up. "Don't like ceilings."

"Sorry." She stared ahead at Jakkobb's back and squinted against the light as it bounced off his armor. She had followed him and Strival up a rush of stairs. A *lot* of stairs. The spiral stairwells religiously curved in the same direction, giving advantage to the defenders by allowing quarter for their swords, while any attackers' weapons would be pressed against the wall. Provided, at least, the attackers were right-handed.

She continued to follow the knight, and he followed his commander. The corridors were wide, well swept, and brightly lit. Der waved her fingers through the air like she would to feel the water in a smoothly flowing stream. "There's no torches. The air's just glowing."

Both knights paused and turned. Jakkobb chuckled. "And it's not magic."

"Well, maybe a little." Strival smirked. He nodded his head toward the ceiling. "Those rocks you see up there?"

Der nodded. "Yeah. I mean, yes, sir." Next to her face, Goldie also stared up at the glowing rocks.

"It's called triboluminescence," Jakkobb explained.

A glaze crossed over her eyes.

"It's the rocks, Der. Rocks under pressure emit light. They were quite common in Pallens, used to be manufactured there, actually."

Strival smiled. "Still remember all of your friend's babblings?"

Jakkobb shrugged. "Well, not really, sir; we had just been talking about him briefly today, that's all."

The commander retrieved a key from his pocket and pressed it into a crack in the stone wall.

Fifteen paces down the hall, a large stone door opened silently on its hinges. Strival and Jakkobb strolled down the hall and disappeared into the hidden doorway.

Der's feet locked in place, followed immediately by her knees. Suddenly, all that sureness evaporated. She licked her lips.

"Ree?" Goldie bent his neck and nibbled on her hair.

Goosebumps lined her skin. She inched toward the door. On its outside, a little drawing had been glued to the stone. Der squinted. Two tiny drawn figures waved tiny swords at each other. Below the picture, someone had scrawled, "And then I stabbed him one."

"What does it mean?"

"Der?" Jakkobb called from inside the room.

She squared her shoulders and lifted her leaden feet across the threshold.

The office expanded before her. A massive desk squatted in the center of the room. A couple of red and silver, and also red and gold, banners adorned the walls, and were home to several large dust colonies. A shield directly behind the desk bore Strival's personal symbol: a combination of the Silver Dawn's horizon symbol and the symbol of the earth with its crossed circle.

An arrow, savagely snapped halfway up the shaft, stood with its nasty barbed head buried near one of the corners of the desk.

Der began to raise a finger and open her mouth when Jakkobb explosively cleared his throat. He shook his head.

Strival's gaze never left a foothill of paperwork on his desk.

Meanwhile, Jakkobb plucked Goldie from Der's shoulder and moved in front of the desk. He dropped the chubby dragon on a paper pile. "Sir, this is the biggest damn dragon that I have ever seen."

Goldie waddled in a circle to face the commander. Strival looked the little creature over. Goldie blinked his liquid almond eyes and tried to mimic the human habit of smiling, which only revealed all of his dagger-like teeth.

The commander sighed and looked up. "I assume that there is a punchline to this joke, captain."

"No, honestly." Der nodded her head vigorously. "Sir."

Jakkobb matched her nod. "He's young."

"Looks like a hatchling, which need I remind you how dangerous—"

"I'm not a hatchling!" Goldie stomped around the desk, issuing smoke from his nostrils. "Why does everyone call me that?"

Jakkobb snatched up the creature. "He's still very young, sir, and he can change his size. I think that since he hasn't yet learned to sustain himself on magic more than food, he stays small. I mean, there just isn't enough food for his size."

Strival eyed the creature again, like a hunter might eye a new species of deer. "Excuse me?"

Goldie dropped his head. "Ree."

"Magic, sir. It's adapted his body so that he can survive. He also has to sleep a lot, apparently."

"Ah. Such a simple explanation for such a strange phenomenon."

Der frowned. He'd just seemed to accept it. And it was strange. But, he'd taken it with so little protest, and surely—

"Not the most unusual thing I've witnessed this year," Strival continued. He leveled his gaze at the dragon. "Little one, you are excused. There are a great many dragons nearby for you to meet, and learn how to be a dragon."

"Really?" The dragon rose onto his hind feet and tilted his head completely to the side.

"Yes, and now I think is a good time for you to meet them." The commander picked up a tiny red glass bell from a drawer and rang it. Its tinny sound sprinkled across the room.

Der frowned when a rush of air thundered down the hallway. A tall, choleric man suddenly stood in the doorway as if he had arrived by the wind.

Strival waved his hand at the dragon. "Please introduce him around. You know what I mean."

The man bowed his head. "Yes, to the mountains then."

Der looked nervously between the stranger, Goldie and Jakkobb. The captain patted the air down with his hand and mouthed, "It's fine."

Goldie twisted his head upside down, making his long neck into a corkscrew. He chirped at the newcomer. The man nodded to the dragon and Goldie flapped his wings and launched himself to him.

The stone door ground to a close behind them. Strival finally looked at Der directly. "Again, you're late."

"I take responsibility for that, sir." Jakkobb stood at attention and rigidly stared at the far wall. "We stopped a war between Thealith and Urael, sir. Is that excusable?"

"So, you drag a *recruit* into the work of a full dragoon knight?"

"It was nothing beyond her abilities, sir, and I would not have been able to do it without her."

The elf looked over at her again. He gestured to the chairs in front of his desk. "Well, take a seat, the both of you. Now," he paused to gaze at Der again, "You're aware that I am knight-commander Strival of the Silver Dawn Dragoons."

"Of course, sir." She licked her lips. "I am Derora Saxen of Riversbridge. Sir."

"Known to King Edillon, my captain here, and many others of repute, including Duke Farallon."

Der felt her face turning pink. "Oh. You know about that, sir?"

He laughed with the musical bells of all elvish laughter. "Oh indeed."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, do you have a shorter version of your name, Derora Saxen of Riversbridge?"

Jakkobb chuckled. "Just say 'dare,' sir."

She nodded dumbly.

"How old are you, Der?"

"I will be nineteen next summer solstice."

"And you've already had at least one adventure the likes of which I myself may not have considered sane."

"Yes, sir." It was a safe enough phrase.

He hinted at a smirk. "Do you know to which incident I am referring?"

"Uh. No, sir." After all, there were so many for her to choose from so far in her life.

"That you and my captain, with a mixed team, raided a city in Darkreign."

"Oh. Zazocorma."

"Exactly." He folded his hands and gazed over the top of them. "I would ask if the both of you are insane, but I already know the answer."

She bunched a fist against her leg. "We won the war, sir, and saved the lives of many elves because of it."

"It was still a fool's errand, and you were betrayed."

"Yes, sir," Jakkobb said, "But Thistle was improvising. It all worked out."

Strival waved a hand dismissively. "Now, Der, my captain here led this party, but it was your suggestion." He drummed one hand on his desk. No laugh lines creased his eyes. "And it was one of the worst ideas I think I've ever heard of."

She squeezed her fists together. "It was the right course of action, sir! I still believe that. I mean, in the end, it *worked*, sir, and we brought that war to a close."

“A war, which by rights, you should have never been in.”

She shrugged and met his ancient gaze evenly. “Perhaps or perhaps not, sir, but I was.”

He leaned back in his huge leather chair. “Of course, some may say the same thing about a few of my ideas, the Bridge in particular.” Finally, he smiled, and Der’s muscles wilted; she hadn’t realized how tense she had been.

Strival looked at Jakkobb and chuckled. “I now see why you and the king of Arbourn both speak of her the way you do. However,” he swung his no-nonsense gaze back to her, “If you dare try to climb over a wall into one of my secret war councils, you’ll find yourself hanging over the battlements by your smallest finger. Which will only be partially attached to your hand.”

She fought back a grin of her own. “Yes, sir.”

“Even so, sir, I advise caution,” Jakkobb said. “The room was actually magically hidden, and she still weaseled her way inside.”

Der held up one hand. “Only the door. Not the room.”

Strival said, “If the two of you don’t mind, I’d like to get back to our interview. How did you, Der, with no proper training or experience, come up with the strategy that won the war?”

“Um.” Her eyes darted around frantically. “It was just the obvious answer, sir. I will admit that Jakkobb here actually made it possible.”

“Derora, if you came up with a perfect plan, you wouldn’t be a recruit.” He steepled his fingers. “Could you do it again?”

“Well, I think the chemmen would be expecting us, since we already did it once.”

“No, no, you misunderstand. I mean to ask, could you invent the winning strategy again in a different situation?”

She shrugged. “I would like to think so, but I won’t know until I’ve got my back up against the wall.”

The commander sighed, as if he’d been expecting something else. “Right answer. Now, tell me about this conflict between Thealith and Urael.”

“Well, we had this enormously large gold dragon.” Der shrugged. “And he was the one who actually stopped the battle.”

“The midget that just left? Then what’s this rumor about a vampire?”

Jakkobb crunched up his expression as if confused. “I’m not aware, sir.”

Strival returned his expression with a blank one. “Of course not.” He looked at Der. “So, what did happen these last four months?”

Jakkobb put a hand on the desk and recounted the entire adventure. Der clicked her mouth shut as he omitted Tom completely and any mention of the monastery. If Strival noticed any holes in the other knight’s tale, he did not ask.

“Since you’re speaking so eloquently now, captain, why don’t you tell me what you think of her personally? This is her interview, after all.”

Der’s shoulders tensed again. She found herself worrying about his opinion more than Strival’s.

Jakkobb rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “She does have some incredible experience now, but it’s all narrowly focused. She doesn’t know what a soldier’s life is like, despite what she sometimes thinks. When I arrived in Riversbridge, I found her training the local militia even though she had no experience with the weapons she was training.”

Strival looked at her when he asked, "How well was she doing it though?"

The captain's eyes darkened in thought. "Very well, actually. I hadn't thought past her lack of experience at the time."

Der grinned beside him. Strival continued to speak directly to the captain. "How do you describe her?"

"Crazy, hotheaded, too reckless, acts before thinking even if she usually gets things right, sir. She has learned an invaluable talent though – to save herself after it's already too late."

"Ah." The general smiled. "Much like one of my captains."

"How can you insult Captain Yurik like that, sir?"

"Indeed." He shot Jakkobb a rather dryly amused look. "Now, anything more?"

Jakkobb slapped his forehead. "Of course, the Pallens sword!"

The commander nodded thoughtfully. "A weapon that escaped the Blackhound's wrath, incredible." His eyes clouded over for a moment, but then he returned to the present. "It's been quite some time since I've seen one."

"The chemmen had it in Darkreign too, along with the crown of Arborn." Der shrugged. "I never understood that, sir, and it's not like we can ask them."

Strival smiled. "No, it isn't, and yes, that is a query we all would like to have answered."

"I could go fetch it for you now, sir." She leaned forward in her chair to rise.

He waved her back into her seat. "No, I'm actually quite busy tonight."

Jakkobb raised his eyebrows. "Too busy to see a sword from Pallens, sir?"

"I've seen plenty before when Pallens was alive. Besides, she's going to be here awhile."

Der nearly knocked the chair over backward. "I'm accepted!"

Now, the knight-general smiled openly. "I'd decided my mind about you when Jakkobb first returned after Arborn's war and told me everything, including the suggestion that you should get some proper training."

She returned the grin, she couldn't smother it. She glanced over at the captain, who laughed. Her feet tapped the floor excitedly as she tried to dance while sitting.

"Very well then. Now, despite popular rumor, not all dragoons are knights. If you graduate this year of candidate training, you will be admitted as a dragoon soldier. After a few years of service as a soldier, and if you are ready and able, you may enter dragoon knight training. We work with dragons openly, hence our name, but dragons are for knights exclusively."

"Yes, sir." She still grinned.

"Now, we are one of the three dragoon orders, the army in fact. There are the aerial dragoons under Commander Arthang Garis, and the naval dragoons under Commander Nicisea Armistad." He pushed himself away from his desk and further into his chair. "Have you any questions of your own?"

Der inhaled slowly. "Well, yes, I do, sir. A rather burning one."

"Oh?" He chuckled.

"What is it that dragoons actually do? Besides banking."

Beside her, she heard Jakkobb stiffen. Strival maintained his grin, but it took on an exhausted sheen. "Here I foolishly thought this interview would be done in an hour. That, candidate, could be a dangerous inquiry."

“Yes, I know. You are the world’s elite, sir, everyone knows that, and that you are honorable and courageous. But if I am going to join, I would like to know what hole I’m jumping into.”

Strival glanced to Jakkobb. “As you said, she thinks for herself.”

He nodded. “Yes, sir, I said that, immediately after infinitely stubborn.”

“Well, Der, that is actually a very wise question. I shall answer to the best of my ability, but even that I fear is not a complete answer because there will always be a new challenge we can’t quite foresee.”

She nodded. “I understand, sir. But the dragoon orders answer to no authority save their own. That’s dangerous if you weren’t in command because someone could run all over the continent with that power, and no one in the world could stand up to him.”

“Somehow, I think *you’d* try,” Strival replied. “It’s a good thing for us and the world we are all responsible and honorable individuals. The three orders often check on each other too, to make sure things are running smoothly.”

Der twisted in her seat. “I meant no offense, sir, I truly didn’t, and I’m not saying anyone is abusing it. You yourself are a good leader, and immortal. For all I know of history, you’ve commanded Silver Dawn. But I need to know what exactly we do.”

Jakkobb watched her from the corner of his eyes. “Shouldn’t we just promote her to an officer right now, sir?”

The commander nodded ruefully. “We may have to, Captain. Alright, Der, it’s true we answer to no political lord. In fact, many lords beg me every year to fight for their various causes, and I decline all of them.

“We came to power in the aftermath of the fall of Pallens. Nobody had a true army but us, and all the races were in disarray, some more than others. There were no human kingdoms left on Dosmar and none yet founded here on Solquin. The orders sought to aid and protect the people, but we never wanted to rule. Under my authority, we still maintain that tradition. We fight for those who are being wronged, such as you saw during the elf-chemmen war.”

She nodded enthusiastically. “That makes sense, sir. I realized when Thealith and Urael were fighting, I didn’t want to fight for a political lord I might disagree with.”

He winked. “Very true, but here you are under my command.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We do more than just fight too. Your first mission could very well be rebuilding a city after a flood or an earthquake. We help those in need. We fight for those who cannot fight themselves. We do not turn a blind eye to atrocities. Where politics halt doing what’s truly right, we step in.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Also, we aren’t as large as rumor tends to say, and I’m happy to let those rumors continue.”

“Does that include the bankers?” Then, she immediately attempted to stuff her entire fist into her mouth.

Strival nodded placidly. “Yes, actually. We must finance ourselves somehow. Especially since we have no roads of taxation like governments do. And we must remain neutral in politics, except on those rare of occasions when a government is slaughtering its own people and they have no one between the king’s swords and them. And so we have been for thousands of years. Today, I’m not

sure if it even crosses kings' minds to think otherwise of us. Besides, most of the kingdoms on this continent are invested with us." He drummed his fingers. "Quite often, we are often just arbitrators. But when we do act, the world knows that we are acting in defense of others."

"I understand, sir."

"Good. You'll find things are different here too. You'll find that with no political allegiance we do not behave entirely like a standard army, and we make our own rules." He smiled stiffly. "You are now a candidate. Do you agree?"

"Yes, sir!" She looked between him and Jakkobb. "I think I'm finally home."

"Excellent." He stood and she also jumped up. "Now, if you'll excuse us." He held an open hand to the door.

She bowed quickly, still grinning. "Yes, sir."

Jakkobb punched lightly her in the shoulder. "See? Knew it, kid."

"Yes, sir." As she was closing the door, she overheard Strival saying, "I fear trouble is still rising. Alscane has not yet discovered the scourge of their treasure fleet."

Chapter Four

The Baroness of Elloan

The late blooming gladioli twinkled in the chill wind. The rain had turned into ice while the tall flowers remained standing, and froze them in their gorgeous colors of life. When the wind blew, the blooms jingled like thousands of tiny, colorful bells.

“Has it only been a year?” Thalon tiptoed around the ghosts of the gladioli.

Kelin nodded and steam flew out from his lips. “Just over.” His breath caught in his throat. “The flowers grew back. I didn’t think they could.”

“And I’m older.” The boy puffed out his chest.

“So are we all.” Kelin frowned as he remembered his knee sometimes creaked like an old tree branch now. It hadn’t done that before he had first arrived at this place.

Chloe’s brown eyed stare met the mountain surrounded valley and its castle. “What happened here?”

“A battle.” Thalon’s boots crunched the ice and snow as he marched. “And I was there!”

She crossed her arms. “You’re only seven too!”

He stomped his foot, breaking through to the frozen ground. “I’ll be eight soon! In like,” he stopped to count on his fingers, “Five and a half months. We were both in the river battle too! We’re not little kids anymore!”

“I disagree.” Thistle folded his arms and gazed down at his son for an endless moment.

“He did fight, Chloe, even if he wasn’t supposed to,” Kelin said. “We all did, even Der and Jakkobb. It was terrible and... incredible.”

“Alright then.” She looked around the field again. “Who’d you fight?”

Kelin bit his lip. “Um.”

Thistle stopped walking. “The chemmen.”

Chloe knotted her hands together and gazed firmly at Thistle’s boots. “The chemmen weren’t supposed to be real.”

Thistle shrugged. “And if they are, and really are nigh, we can’t linger here. They know this place.”

“I’ve got an idea!” The boy bounced to the balls of his feet. “Let’s go see what the elves did to the Darkreign entrance that was right here!”

“Good luck,” Kelin said dryly.

“What do you mean?”

“King Edillon ordered the elves to hide it, magically and physically. It’s hidden so much now that it almost doesn’t exist. Before the elves even tinkered with it though, the dwarves filled the cave with stone too.” He sighed and grinned. “Elves and dwarves working together openly in elvish lands, thank you, Derora.”

Chloe closed one eye. “What do you mean by that?”

He grinned. “Alright, Der, you met her?”

“Yes. She has dark hair.”

“Yes, well, she sneaked her way inside the secret elvish war council, and not only suggested raiding the chemmen city, but also to call on the dwarves for aid.” His eyes unfocused and unfolded into memory. “Then she forged the motley raiding party – elves, humans, Thistle, and dwarves into a functioning force. She doesn’t have magic, not the normal kind, but I swear she has *something*.”

Kelin rolled his eyes to the cold sky. “Why do I befriend the crazy ones?” He stopped and slapped his forehead. He knelt down beside the girl and pointed. “Anyway, you see that castle ahead, Chloe? That’s where we’ll get answers.”

The deceptively slender Moonrise Castle rose gracefully at the height of its hill. An elegant vaulted tower speared the sky. The rest of it, however, was made to keep uninvited people out, with high walls and a fortified gate.

“This isn’t a typical elvish castle, Chloe,” Kelin said. “Usually they build palaces with great, open expanses, not proper defenses. Come on, it’s not far now.”

Two elven guards manned the gate, halberds erect. One grinned beneath his helmet. “Well met, Thistle, Kelin Miller, Thalon, and Chloe of Westlake. The lady awaits you in her kitchen.”

Chloe pointed a finger at him. “How’d you know our names?”

The other guard winked. “You’ve not met the lady, little one.”

“So? She didn’t know we were coming!”

Kelin bit down against a chuckle. The guards let theirs slide through their teeth.

Chloe slapped her hands on her hips. “What?” Thalon just grinned.

Suddenly, the guards’ faces sobered. The first one said, “However, you will have to leave your weapons with us.” He looked directly at Thistle’s orange orbs as he spoke.

Thistle shrugged off his sword belt. “Had expected worse.”

“Lady’s orders are to let you pass,” the second guard said, with an edge in his voice that suggested those wouldn’t have been his orders.

When Kelin, and even Thalon, had likewise surrendered their arms, Kelin asked, “Where is the kitchen? Last time, we didn’t have the leisure to look around.”

“Ah, naturally,” the first guard said. “Well, go on in through the courtyard; take a right turn, down through the corridor. It’s off of there, you won’t miss it. If you do, I’m sure she’ll be wherever you end up.” They stepped to the sides of the open gate. “Enter and be welcome.”

Thalon snatched Chloe’s shoulder and pulled.

Immediately, the courtyard tasted like spring instead of snow. The air zipped with insects that nipped at their heavy cloaks.

They passed through the courtyard into the corridors of Moonrise. Inside, bright carpet released the scent of roses as their boots rustled its fibers. Polish brightened the wooden carvings of forest scenery and dragons along the walls. Water chuckled along its stream that flowed through most of the castle. The waterway was carved into the walls and occasionally across the floor.

A window, set deep into the stonework, was outlined with frost and snow on the outside. Inside, green tendrils of fresh plants outlined the portal. The children’s boots thudded across the carpet in a rush to the window. Chloe pressed her hand to the glass.

“It’s warm!” But on the outside, the frosty outline of her palm and fingers formed.

Thistle tapped his boot against the floor. "Come along, young ones."

Kelin, sweat already appearing on his brow, tugged his winter cloak from his shoulders as they continued through the corridor.

They rounded the next corner and stared.

Long Range Castle, the heart of the elven empire, sat erect on a massive table. Lady Evelyn stood to the side, back to the party, head tilted, all the while gazing critically at the creation.

"Is that...?" Kelin started.

"In cake?" Thalon finished as he stared at the seven foot replica. White icing shone as the walls and the amazingly high windows of the throne room were there in full. Every crack in the stone was there. The three towers, including the tallest tower of Mendelin, seemed to race toward the heavens.

"In every way," Thistle murmured.

The lady smiled as she applied icing with a toothpick. "Forgive me, this will just take...a...moment. I know that the proper coronation isn't for another century, of course. This is really just an idea. The next one will be better."

"I'm not sure how, my lady," Kelin said as he walked to the side of the edifice. "Oh my gods, you've even got the throne inside the cake!"

"Oh yes. I was also thinking of doing something else. You probably don't want to eat your own home." She glided away from the cake for the first time. The lady brushed some of her artful strawberry blond curls from her face. A brilliant diamond adorned the center of her forehead, and the golden cord supporting it was braided into the natural ringlets of her hair.

She smiled like a thousand glorious sunrises. "Ah, my friends."

Thistle and Kelin bowed. Chloe gasped and darted behind Thalon.

The boy tried to spin around, but the girl's grip pinned his shoulders. "What?"

"Her eyes!"

Lady Evelyn's smile didn't falter. She blinked her jeweled eyes, which sparkled with many facets like a cut gemstone, and they glowed like a sapphire's reflection.

Chloe braced herself against Thalon's shoulders and gasped. "That's what an elf looks like? Wow!"

"You didn't notice the guards?" he hissed back.

"They didn't have eyes like that! Is it just her?"

Evelyn chuckled as her gaze fell onto the children. "Thalon I've met before, but not you."

Chloe squeaked and crouched behind her friend.

The baroness knelt before the pair and held out both her hands. "I've got some fresh spice cake in the kitchen, young one, but you must greet me properly first."

Thalon tentatively duplicated his father's stiff bow. "Lady Evelyn."

Chloe, mesmerized by the lady's eyes, fumbled a small curtsy. "My name's Chloe."

"I know."

Kelin coughed from behind them. "We were expected."

The elf smiled. "I wouldn't be a very good psychic if I didn't know you were coming, or why."

He licked his lips. "So, um, do you know then? What's happening?"

Her smile faded, and everyone saw the shadows extend from the corners of the kitchen and the light dim. "Yes, the spiritual world, that is part of the larger world we all inhabit, is very disturbed."

However," she rose and straightened her skirt, "A meal first." Her face glowed as she winked at the children. "Cake first, though."

Both Thalon and Chloe chirped and clapped, the undead and the banshee forgotten for the moment.

Evelyn stood and offered a slender hand to Chloe. "This home has been too long without children. Thalon, please take my other hand. I don't want you running away again."

He dipped his head. "I was hoping you didn't remember that."

Chloe leaned forward. "What'd you do?"

He avoided the lady's gaze. "I, uh, ran away from her during the war, she was, um, keeping me safe."

His father snorted behind them.

The lady led them into a larger, more hospitable kitchen where several cooks dashed about open hearths. None of them crossed the lady's path, like small birds fluttering away from a swan's entrance.

Thistle watched cautiously as she sliced two pieces of the spice cake, still warm and moist from the oven.

Kelin broke into another smile. "She's wonderful with the children."

"Quite." The chemman crossed his arms.

Chloe looked up at the noblewoman and tried to mimic Evelyn's expression. She shifted her feet and shoulders to match.

The baroness each handed them a slice of cake on a gold rimmed plate. "The dining room is this way." The lady extended her arm and led the way.

Chloe swung her arm wide too and turned to follow. She tripped over her own skirt and, off balance, stumbled forward, spilling her cake onto the floor. The plate rolled, spun a few times and then shattered when it crashed back down.

The girl gasped and complete horror outlined her eyes.

Thalon caught her around the waist. "Are you alright?"

She blushed. "But the cake. It's a tragedy."

Evelyn laughed. "No, my dear. We have more."

A cook appeared with a broom and dustpan and the cake and plate shards vanished, almost as if by magic. Meanwhile, Lady Evelyn quickly cut another slice for the child.

Then she led them to a large dining hall with an elegant polished wooden table. Fresh flowers lined the wall in place of torches. Servants mysteriously appeared out of the woodwork and set the table. By the time they were seated, a steaming feast had been laid out before them.

Evelyn reached for her chalice, and Chloe immediately did the same. They both regally sipped. Chloe nearly dropped her cup. "Milk?"

The lady chuckled like the laughter of a mountain stream. "What did you expect?"

"Grape juice at least," Thalon said.

"You'll have to settle for milk too, my lad."

Kelin carefully tested a tiny bite of the roast lamb against his tongue. "My gods!" He slapped a hand against his mouth. "This is what the gods must eat! The spices! And it's perfectly tender!" He

started digging into the food, tormented between savoring it or swallowing as much as he could because he was afraid the flavor might vanish like a dream.

"I'm pleased you enjoy it so."

He smiled. "I remember that meal around the campfire. I never thought anything could be better – well, I was wrong." He raised his wine. "Here's to you, my lady."

Thistle also lifted his chalice in salute. Thalon waved his hand happily, while Chloe imitated Evelyn's modest nod of acknowledgement.

Thistle chewed on the recently picked orange, and it was so sweet that even he closed his eyes to relish the fruit.

"I have heard troubling reports on the wind." The lady wasn't eating, and she sat back and watched the others dine. "Alscane, of course, but also troubles in the waters east of it. Perhaps even as far as the old Empire."

"Pallens," Chloe breathed through her food.

Kelin swallowed. "I sometimes wonder what the world would be like if the Empire had survived."

Thistle set down his fork. "Honestly, I've been surprised that no one has tried to lay claim and rebuild it."

"Who could possibly be worthy?" Kelin asked.

"And if there are chemmen still out in this world, they wouldn't allow it. Not Pallens. Not after the first banishment into Darkreign." Thistle picked back up his fork. "However, the more I think about it, the more I consider that my suspicions may be misled."

"Yes," Kelin added. "But you saw what the chemmen did to Darkreign. It was dead beneath their feet. They need a new kingdom!"

"Never Pallens," Thistle replied darkly.

Evelyn leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. Chloe immediately did the same. The baroness pursed her lips. "Please, tell me what you know, not what you suspect."

Kelin set down his chalice. "All we've personally seen are two attacks, out in the Wild Lands, and then the banshee."

The elf nodded. "But you feel that this is something greater."

"Uh...yes."

"You're not wrong. This is another shift in the wind. The first when the new king was crowned. This is the second." She paused. "In the coming years, the world will not be the same again."

"There's going to be another war, isn't there?" Chloe asked.

"Yes."

"There's always a war somewhere," Thalon muttered.

"Not like this. Some wars are just wars. Not every one produces heroes and villains."

"Why am I not surprised?" Kelin rolled his eyes. "A time of heroes. Sounds great."

The lady sighed. "What you forget is that heroes are only needed when people are desperate and dying. The heroes that get remembered are the ones who are there when the most people are in strife. And some heroes get there too late, or they fail." She closed her jeweled eyes.

Evelyn opened her hand toward him. "You are welcome to stay here until it is safe again."

Kelin fumbled with his fork and coughed against the food in his throat. "Thank you, my lady, but our place is out there making it safe again."

"Of course. I know you must say that."

Chloe swallowed nervously. "But, me and Thalon, we can just stay here, right?"

"I fear that nowhere is safe for you, dear child."

"What does—"

Evelyn's head fell forward. Her chin bounced against her chest. "This is the second shock to shake the world to its knees. But not until the world's highest mountain falls will the final truth be done. Stone and bone. Holy and unholy united and marching to death hand in hand."

She inhaled sharply and her head snapped up. "I— I can't see it." Goosebumps erupted along her slender arms.

Kelin opened his mouth, but a quick foot exploded against his shin. He glared at Thistle. The chemman silently shook his head.

Chloe stared open mouthed at Evelyn as she continued heedless of those around her. "This is no small thing. The spirits are crying in fear and warning. The banshee warned you of death. This you already know. But she's trying to say more; you just don't know how to listen." Sweat glistened across her brow. "The earth herself is trying to tell us something. They are coming. The living and the dead burn in their wake."

Silence swallowed the room.

"The kids can't stay here," Thistle said softly. "The chemmen know Moonrise. They'll come here." He rubbed his arms as the chill continued to cool the dining hall. Winter was trying to reclaim the castle's interior.

"Perhaps." She hummed to herself.

"Perhaps?" Kelin repeated. "Are the chemmen really still out there? Who or what are we up against?"

Evelyn opened her eyes upon him. "I can only say what I see, which regrettably, outside of this castle, is never a definite present or future." She smiled sadly. "I do see this, Kelin. You can stop this as much as you could halt a flood, but you will do what you must." She exhaled slowly and seemed to descend back into the room.

"Now, these creatures," Thistle said, "The ones we fought. Are you saying that someone's making them and just letting them roam? These are different than what the chemmen have done before."

"You're right. They do have a different purpose." Evelyn's gaze fell to the yellow haired girl. "They're after you, Chloe."

The girl gasped and started to shake her head.

"But the wizard's dead!" Thalon protested.

"They're still coming," Evelyn assured.

"I want my uncle." Chloe gripped her fists and stuck out her chin. "Can you find him? Please!"

The lady shook her head. "I can't see him. He is powerfully protected by something." Her beautiful brow furrowed. She gasped. "Oh!"

She lifted her fingertips to her forehead and wiped away a thin trail of blood. It oozed out of the pores on her forehead with no break in her skin. She breathed in heavily. "I'm sorry, child, I cannot find him."

"Who's surprised?" Thistle murmured. "What about those creatures we encountered?"

"But," Kelin said, "No one's going to know in the Wild Lands. How would they know to search for Chloe there?" He drummed his fingers on the table. "We should call on Gnirun and Clan Heavyaxe. Safer for Chloe than the Wild Lands, it seems."

Evelyn suddenly pushed back her chair. She offered her slender hand toward Chloe. The girl, as if in a trance, slid down from her chair and accepted the grip. "Let us walk." She led the girl out of the dining room.

Kelin and the others wiped their mouths clean and followed.

Evelyn and Chloe passed through a stone portal out into a large corridor. Quickly, they arrived at another archway, which opened to an outside garden where early summer blooms shouted colors to the sky.

Snow lined the tops of the walls, like icing on a cake. However, inside the walls, warmth kissed their cheeks. There was no meandering path through the wild garden. Yet, as the lady approached, vines snaked out of her path, and leaves wrapped themselves around their stalks to make space.

Lady Evelyn's jeweled eyes drifted around the garden before she turned to look at Chloe.

"I know of your power, child." The soft words echoed like thunder around the garden. "I know how it almost killed you when you tried to defend yourself."

Chloe nodded, and tried to hide her sudden tears. It wasn't her fault! And evil men were after her, and it wasn't her fair!

"And it's not your fault. I want you to remember that every curse is also a gift."

"But, but, I can't even use it!" she wailed. Tears sprang out freely. "Uncle said that I can just cancel magic, but it doesn't work! I'm gonna die if I ever get around magic! It's not fair!"

"You're around it now, little one," the lady whispered.

Chloe paused in her sobs. "Wha...? Then you're doing something!"

"Nothing, actually." Evelyn smiled. "You would be in peril if I tried anything. That is where your trouble lies."

"But all the other times, I was just around it!"

"And still interacting with it." She pressed her fingertips against some silver blossoms. They looked like tulips, but unfolded with several layers of petals like roses.

"Pray take this." She unfolded her fingers to reveal a seed. "Silverseed. Magical, yes, but not in an active way I think is dangerous for you."

Chloe reached up and took the pecan shaped seed from the lady's hand. "But then why?"

"Magicians often use this plant as protection from perceived magical attacks. It will guard you until you learn to defend yourself."

The girl clutched the seed. She kept her breath and rose to the edge of her toes. She inhaled on top of the air she was already holding in her lungs until "Iwashopingyoucouldteachme!" exploded.

A smile tugged at the lady's face. "Well, I am not certain what your power truly is, and to be honest, all of my other apprentices have sought training elsewhere before they finished mine." Her smile grew like the songs of heaven. "None of them really wanted to learn how to cook properly."

Chloe started to grin just as a blast of icy wind crested the garden walls and knocked the snow off the walls in clumps, crushing the summer flowers. The girl fumbled the silverseed in her fingers and planted her feet against the sudden wall of air.

"Whoa!" Thalon yelped from the garden's entryway. He ducked behind his father to hide from the wind. Kelin and Thistle gritted their teeth against the stinging breeze.

Lady Evelyn's jeweled eyes shot up to the edges of the walls. "It is not just the undead. The land is disturbed. Other things are happening." She dropped her gaze back to Kelin and Thistle. "Like a wave on the seaside. The water is drawing back now, and we know a massive wave will be crashing down on us."

Chloe shook her head ever so slightly. "I don't understand."

Dishes clattered from somewhere in the dining hall, along with elvish cursing. One of the cooks ran into the corridor and charged for the garden entrance. "My lady! Please, we need to get to the keep! Everyone!"

The lady move swiftly back inside the castle, and the scent of fresh flower petals wafted in the air around her motion. "Please go."

The cook bowed hastily, but hesitated in the archway. "We must—"

"We will be fine."

The cook sprinted away.

Evelyn strode into the corridor and turned in the opposite direction of the cook. Kelin swallowed, and with a glance back in the cook's direction, followed the baroness. Thistle and the children fell into step behind him.

"I want my cloak." Thalon pushed himself back. "It's freezing." He ran down the hall and tripped over his own two feet. He caught himself on the wall and pulled himself upright. "Look, look!"

The boy pressed his nose against a window. Then he ran down the hall, rounded a corner and disappeared.

They found him on a balcony. Blinding snow swirled around Thalon as it whipped wildly through the air. Thunder exploded and the noise rebounded off the castle walls and back into the storm.

Kelin held his hands in front of his face against the wind that was laden with thousands of tiny, stinging ice fragments. "I can't see anything. Thalon!"

Lady Evelyn emerged. The blizzard around the balcony immediately calmed. The group turned to look out into the storm.

A white tornado cut diagonally across the field of gladioli. It ripped the frozen flowers from the ground and swept them up into its heights. The wind roared like the continually crashing surf.

Chloe grabbed Kelin's belt. "Are they attacking us here?"

"This shouldn't be!" Kelin shouted. "There was no warm wind behind us when we came up! This isn't possible!"

The tornado stole his gaze once again, and the girl's reply was lost in its thunder. The funnel wrapped the blizzard around itself and danced in defiance of the laws of nature. Kelin imagined he could hear the frozen flowers tinkling like bells inside the rumble of the winds.

The baroness closed her hands in front of her as if praying and the roar instantly muted. "This is a warning."

"A warning?!" Kelin shouted above the winds. "Of what?"

"The earth, Kelin. Land is not just land. She may be dormant in human realms, where they whip and plow and tear out her hair when they cut down the trees; but, she's still alive. She's warning us."

Thistle stared evenly at the tornadic fury. "I've not heard of events such as this since the Battle of the Bridge. Could it...?"

Immediately, Evelyn shook her head. "Thankfully no. Not that I sense, at least."

Kelin scratched at his beard stubble. "Then what could be that powerful?"

Thalon tugged at his father's shirt. "Dad, is this them?"

Thistle's frown weighed on the corners of his mouth. "If this is the chemmen, then they are not acting like themselves."

Kelin grimaced against the horrors that his imagination pinned up on the underside of his eyelids. "It's something else!"

Evelyn hummed underneath her breath. The lady's eyes suddenly rolled up into her head, so that only the whites stared at them. "*Omnes sciunt me solem de caelo eripuisse.*"

Then Lady Evelyn fainted, falling down gracefully. Thistle caught her before she even touched the stones.

Kelin glanced between his friends and the snow tornado. "Thistle, what's...?"

"Palls." The chemman shook his head.

"Don't you know what it means?"

"Don't speak much Palls. Had my wife for that." He gritted his teeth against the screaming roar of the winds, now back in fury. "Can't remain here."

"Agreed! We'll go to Heavyaxe!" Kelin buried his hands in hair as he sighed. He swallowed against the rising bile as he watched the white tornado. For the moment, he really wished his best friend was there.

Chapter Five

The First Day

Goldie sat back on his haunches, balancing with his tail on the edge of an ancient, scarred table. “Ah-ha!” He punched with his front legs, curling his pounces and talons into awkward fists. “Hey! Did you see that? Did you see that?”

Jakkobb walked the two steps across the tiny room. Der sighed, gazing at the Pallens sword propped against the wall. It glistened gold and blue against the fading sunlight.

“I’m cold,” the dragon announced.

“So hold your breath,” Der replied. She never looked away from the weapon.

The little dragon gasped and his chest bulged out. Jakkobb smirked and closed his eyes.

After a moment, Goldie twitched. His cheeks started to glow purple. His almond colored eyes rolled up into his head. A stream of fire popped out from his backside in a squelching screech.

Der jumped. “What the hell was that?”

The dragon hunched his wings over his hindquarters. “Sorry.”

Jakkobb grinned and shook his head. “Now, Goldie, you know that you’re going to go with the other dragons that live in the mountains nearby while Der is at training.”

The dragon shook his head. He punched at Jakkobb with his front feet, and his paws bounced harmlessly off the armor. “No! I don’t wanna!”

“Well, you’re going to.” The knight’s shoulders trembled with the effort of not laughing. “You need to be a dragon among dragons. You can still see each other.”

The dragon waddled around in a tight circle, goose-stomping his feet.

Jakkobb laughed and crossed his arms. “Doesn’t change the fact, little one.”

Der hid a smile behind a hand.

The knight turned to her. “Now, Der, the knight-commander said to hide your sword in this room.”

“I know. I heard.” She tightened her jaw. “But it’s my sword, sir, and I’ll do what I want with it.”

Jakkobb snapped his fingers. “Der, shut it. I don’t care that it’s yours, but you can’t walk around with a Pallens sword. You know this.”

“But I have been walking around with a Pallens sword, and using it!”

“Derora, hide it.”

“No, sir.”

“Then I’ll do it for you.” He reached over and wrapped his fingers around the handle. He pulled. The sword remained firmly against the wall.

Der bit back against a smirk. “You know, you’re the only other person who’s ever tried to pick it up.”

He grunted. The muscles on his arm, hidden by his ever present armor, were wider than the blade. The sword still didn’t move, as if it were part of the wall.

Der sighed and reached out. She lifted the sword as lightly as a fork.

He didn’t smile. “Der, hide it now, or you can just walk all the way back to Riversbridge.”

The grin evaporated and her shoulders slouched. “Fine. What is this room anyway?”

"I think it's a little chapel. For last minute prayers. Or a closet." He shrugged. Like most of the interior of Silver Dawn's Horizon, a wallpaper weave lined the stone. The weave was designed to absorb heavy impacts and hold the walls together in case of severe damage.

Der wedged her sword up on the underside of the table. She traced her fingers over the endless knots made of melted gems on its guard, not quite letting it go yet.

Goldie hopped off the table and waddled underneath, straining his long neck upward to see the light bounce off the elegant blade.

Der chewed her bottom lip and frowned.

It was Jakkobb's turn to smirk. "You're in the safest citadel in the world with a sword that no one else can pick up."

"But—"

"But, what? Now, come on, you need to get to your first formation, candidate."

She looked up. "Candidate? What happened to recruit?"

"It's your first day, and you're already a rank up."

She grinned half-heartedly. "So tomorrow..."

"So you need to go. Now." He glanced down to the little dragon. "And you are going to meet some very large friends." He shut the door behind them as they exited into the corridor.

Jakkobb pointed. "Goldie, I told you this before, you have to go to the top of the keep."

The little dragon shook his head and wrapped his talons around Der's bootlaces.

"You're not a hatchling, you're, well, you're like a teenager. You should be storming out of here."

The creature raised his almond eyes. "Yes, but..."

"You both are growing up." Jakkobb knelt down. "And this is part of growing up, but you'll still see each other."

The dragon sniffed. "Promise?"

"Of course. You're both here, at Horizon."

Goldie sniffed again as he turned away.

Der's brow furrowed as they walked down the corridor. "So you told me before, but I still don't believe you. I mean, there's castles inside the big castle, and us recruits— *candidates* have our own castle?"

"Yeah."

"Just for us?"

"Yes, Der." He chuckled, and then stiffened as another armored man appeared around a corner into their hallway. The newcomer's silvery armor seemed to glow. Dark hair crowned the human's head, and he carried his helmet in one arm. His footfalls echoed confidently.

Der looked the new knight up and down. The sword and shield of Zine, god of war and justice, shone over the man's heart.

He smiled and dark eyes twinkled. "Hail and well met."

"You're not a dragoon." The words fell from her mouth before she could muster a greeting. Beside her, Jakkobb rolled his eyes.

The man paused and then smiled. "No, I'm not. I was, however, hoping to find you, Derora Saxen."

“But I haven’t done anything yet!”

Jakkobb exhaled. “You’re not in trouble, Der.”

Confusion flickered across the man’s face. “No. My name is Cacilin. I was actually looking to see your sword.”

Jakkobb growled in the back of his throat. “It was supposed to be a secret. Did Harken tell?”

“No,” Cacilin replied mildly. His gaze swept over Der. “Some things just shine. That, and Strival thought I at least should be told.”

“Why?” Der asked immediately.

“Because I might be able help you, Miss Saxen. I’ve heard the stories about you.”

“Um.” She bit her lip. “Hopefully the good ones.”

Cacilin laughed. “I wouldn’t go that far, but there are good parts to them.”

The knight-captain's pale blue eyes widened. “Der, what did you do?”

She threw up her hands. “Nothing! I promise, sir!”

Cacilin clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Of course you haven’t. Honestly, I was just here to see if I could witness a Pallens weapon. I’ve never seen one, not sure if anyone has, really.”

Der smiled and nodded, uncertain of what to say next.

He continued, “We all know the story. That the Blackhound ordered all weapons of Pallens destroyed.”

“Yes, sir. But, I doubt he could’ve gotten them all. That would just be impractical.”

“And still, there are no Pallens weapons to be found. You’re right though, most likely a metaphor on some level. Of course, stranger things happened back then, and this is the man who broke the world. You know that we started counting the years anew because of him.”

“Of course.”

Jakkobb slapped his armored fingers over his raised visor. “Der, once again, the only languages that you know are Common and Elvish.”

“What?” she asked while Cacilin suddenly grinned.

“Of course, there was the incident with that tablet,” the knight continued. “What are you two even saying?”

“*Quid?* What?” Der cocked her head to the side. “Oh...”

“She knows, and she’s not even ordained,” Cacilin said.

Der frowned. “The tablet... You mean the holy language thing? We were just... Wait, you know it too?”

Cacilin nodded. “I have the ability, yes. I’ve never met anyone born with it though.”

“Heh.” She shrugged and tried to smile. “I didn’t know it existed until after I found my sword. How do you do it?”

“I studied.”

Jakkobb raised a hand. “I have not seen you here before, Sir Cacilin.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. The temple sent me, actually.”

“Temple of Zine, right?” Der pointed at the shield on his armor.

He clicked his heels and bowed. “Indeed. At your service.”

“Ah.” Understanding alighted on Jakkobb's face. “Der, I think he could see your sword.”

“Why?” Der's head swung back and forth between the two men amiably.

Jakkobb sighed and smiled at the same time. Exactly like her dad used to do, Der thought. He said, “Because he's a judicar of Zine, Der.”

She gasped. Her mouth formed an ‘O’. A grin cracked open on her face and sparkled like fireworks. Judicars of Zine and avatars of Ahtome were the most widely known. Every god had their own champion.

Cacilin smiled. “Indeed. And I wanted to be fortunate enough to see what could have possibly been a paladin's weapon.”

And there were no paladins any more. There hadn't been since the death of Pallens.

Jakkobb cleared his throat. “However, sir, may we appoint another time? Because this one is about to be late for first formation.”

Disappointment fleeted across the judicar's face briefly. “I understand. This is a pleasure, meeting you. Soon, then.”

Der nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Until sometime soon.” He bowed his head, turned and walked down the hall.

Jakkobb and Der started to head away in the opposite direction. Her grin continued.

“I may see you around from time to time, but I can't guarantee that I won't be away on a mission.” Suddenly, only his footsteps echoed in the corridor.

Der paled. “What?” she asked in a small voice.

He grinned. “I'm not your older brother here to beat up all the boys. I know you'll do that on your own anyway.”

“But...”

“You'll like your trainers. Alright, that's a lie, but you'll hate them in a good way.”

“But.” She hadn't moved.

He sighed. “I was going to wait for your graduation next winter. But why not now?” From somewhere in the hidden depths of his armor, he produced a small brass disc.

She took it and frowned at it. She flipped it over. “What is it?”

“Press the button on the side.”

She did and gasped as the lid popped up. She pulled it open the rest of the way. A small arrow spun around a marked circle. “Huh.” She turned it around, and the arrow spun once again, pointing in its original direction. Finally, she looked up at the captain. “It's broken.”

He laughed. “No, it's supposed to do that.”

“It's supposed to be broken?”

“It's a compass, Der.”

“Oh. Thank you.” She paused for only a heartbeat. “What's a compass?”

He chuckled. “It's a tool. So when you get all twisted and confused in the wilderness, which you will this year, you'll know which way to go. The arrow always points north.”

“There are tools for that?”

“Yes. And that thing's an antique too. I figured if it survived the War of Hell on Earth that it can probably survive you.”

“Thank you, Jakkobb.”

He nodded. “Of course. It belonged to that earth warlock friend of mine I was telling you about. Come on now, you shouldn’t be late for first formation.”

She folded the compass into her belt pouch. “Why is first formation in the evening? Shouldn’t it be at dawn?”

The knight rolled his eyes and shrugged. “Don’t know, not my idea. But you’re asking questions, and that’s promising.”

“Alright then.” They turned the corner and started to descend the narrow staircase.

“Oh, and no fighting.”

She blinked. “What? Why not? We’re a fighting order, sir.”

He closed his eyes and sighed. “Because fighting isn’t always the solution.”

This time, she looked back at him as if he’d just told her that eagles had decided to burrow underground for the winter. “Fighting is *always* the solution.”

The knight clenched his jaw. “Der, there are some things that you can’t beat with your fists.”

“Right, that’s what kicking’s for.”

Jakkobb’s gauntlet covered hand smacked against his visor.

“And then biting, elbows, forehead—”

“Shut it, Derora.”

Grinning, she skipped down the rest of the stairs.

The last of the sunlight bounced off the metal of the dwarf’s helmet. Silver Dawn’s symbol gleamed over an impressive dent. The dwarf snapped his narrow gaze through his considerable eyebrows and mustache up at the dragoon candidates. He stroked his long brown beard thoughtfully and growled somewhere underneath all that hair.

“Welcome to hell, lads! And we dragoons have been there! We know how hot to make the fire!” He strode up and down the neat front line of candidates. His burgundy cape trailed behind him.

The candidates looked down at their would-be tormentor. Some of the humans bit back sniggers. Der remained quiet, as her mind’s eye took her back to the Battle of Gladioli Fields. She knew better.

However, the sniggers seemed to pass right over the dwarf’s head. If he noticed, he didn’t react.

“Bristlebeard. Sergeant Bristlebeard, and I will be your personal demon!” He spun again, and the cape flared out behind him. “We are dragoons! Any battle we fight must be an astounding victory and no enemies can be left to speak of us! It can’t be known that we can die in battle too. So it’s up to me to make you invincible. And if you aren’t, I will kick you off this mountain myself. The fast way.”

He either smiled or snarled at them next, Der couldn’t tell. She narrowed her eyes, but all she could see was teeth and hair. He rubbed his hands together and snickered. “I have these little things I call my rules and facts, for which I will use my warhammer to break open your skulls to let the light of my wisdom shine in. If, *if*, ye make it through the next year, ye ought to be able to command a regular army, but ye’ll only be a private here!

“One! No fighting unless we say so. Hell, ye don’t even blink without my permission. Two! Cussing increases yer pain tolerance. That is a medical fact! So cuss all ye want! Also, lads, don’t laugh at the girls. Women have a higher pain tolerance than all ye men. But, for the two of ye girls here today,

we're doing this the Pallens way. We're not like the rest of armies on Solquin, oh no, ye won't be doing chores and kept separate here. Ye will be treated just the same. If ye can't keep up, get out." He started to stomp his way along the line of candidates. "To the rest of ye, there are no misses or madams here; everyone is just a sir. Keeps it on the level with yer intelligences."

He grinned underneath the beard. "Three! Ye are, right now, as useful to this army as a bunch of wet kittens. And you want to be soldiers? And I never, never want to hear," he pretended to sob, "But I've been in battle before, I know what I'm doing. No, ye don't!"

A fair haired and broad shouldered human candidate in the front row snorted in defiance. He glared at Bristlebeard and clenched his jaw. The others never even saw the dwarf's gaze flicker, but the whole dwarf materialized before the candidate. Bristlebeard's hairy eyebrows shot up. "Hmm? I think I heard the wind of disapproval."

Suddenly, the dwarf knocked out the candidate's legs and sent the young man reeling forward. Being considerably taller than Bristlebeard, he had a lot farther to fall.

He thudded against the ground and then, so hard was his crash, he rebounded briefly back into the air. The dwarf hopped onto his back, leaned forward and snatched the young man's neck. "Now," he said cheerfully, "I want you to say, or at least croak, I'm a wet kitten."

He snapped his fingers. "Line!"

The other candidates straightened back into formation and curious eyes snapped forward. Der still cocked her head at the encounter and watched.

Bristlebeard growled, "Say it. Say I'm a wet kitten or you go home right now."

"What?" the candidate wheezed.

"You'll fail. Don't matter naught to me, I'll still get paid the same no matter how many of ye I send home with your tails between yer legs." He shifted his weight and the candidate groaned.

The young man coughed. His face beat brighter cherry red with every pulse of his heart. He glared hot enough to singe the sun. He choked against the sergeant's grip.

"I, I'm a wet kitten." A small tear bubbled up at the corner of his eye.

Bristlebeard smirked. "Now, meow."

The other candidates snickered.

Sobs erupted in the back of the man's throat. "Me—" Sob. "Meow."

The dwarf hopped off his back and grinned. He marched back up the line of candidates. "Four! Part of yer duties, from now until forever is to care for the livestock and the gardens of this beautiful Horizon. Why? Yer not here to be farmers, ye say? Well, soldiers need to eat too. We can outlast any siege here, but I prefer to eat goat over the sorry lot of ye— even though the goat is worth more than ye are right now, my sorry kittens!

"Five! I don't care if yer human, dwarf, gnome, elf, mix, nobility, runaway or have green skin! Ye're all just kittens here. Get used to it. Now." He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Now, you will be in hell for the next year. Ye will learn how to march, ye will learn history and algebra, even proper runnin' form. But, above all else, ye will learn war."

"And what about banking? Are we going to learn that too?" Der immediately mentally slapped herself, but her mouth had operated without consulting her mind, as usual. She glanced around. A

space widened around her as the other candidates, staring dead ahead, shuffled away from her without apparently moving their boots at all.

Bristlebeard paused. He looked back at the red-faced candidate and then back at Der. The massive eyebrows rose again. "Usually only takes one."

"I'm not afraid of a little beating, sir," she replied earnestly. "It bothers me more that the dragoons are bankers."

The dwarf walked up to her, pacing in front of her like a hunting cat trapped behind a window.

Suddenly, he grinned and slapped her on her arm so hard that she was sure she had an instant bruise. He chuckled. "Yeah, lass, it bothers me too, but at least we don't ever have to worry about not gettin' paid."

He started to walk the line again. Der heaved a sigh, not realizing that she'd been holding her breath until she let it go.

The dwarf chuckled as he strode. "So, to commemorate this year of hell that ye have damned yerselves to, we, the most generous of all the dragoon orders, give ye this one night, and one night only, to just be yerselves. Go, get to the candidate barracks and don't have too many nightmares."

A murmur shot through the candidate ranks.

Bristlebeard clapped his hands. "So get going before I change me mind!"

Der discovered herself shaking her head. She scowled. The other candidates fell out of line and started to wander toward the candidates' barracks. She remained, frowning.

Someone touched her shoulder. She gasped and her hand launched itself to where her sword had always been.

The young man scuttled backward, raising his hands.

She breathed out a smile. "Sorry. Sorry. My fault." She finally looked up. Auburn hair adorned a distinctly elven face. His eyes were very human though, she noticed, and just plain brown. He must be part human, she decided.

He wore a plain shirt and trousers, but his knee high boots were a work of art. The shiny leather reflected brightly, and dancing dragons had been etched into it. He offered an uneasy smile. "You looked lost, and we should get going."

She nodded. "Yeah. That sounds right, but this night off doesn't work."

He shrugged. "Either way, we probably shouldn't stay here. I'm Alluvius, by the by."

"Pleasure. Derora Saxen."

His eyebrows shot up. "Well, can't say that I'm surprised to find you here." He started to walk, falling in behind the other candidates. "I must say, I'm rather surprised to find myself here too."

"Oh?" She glanced at a large garden, now dormant in winter. Except for one patch of green grass with bright blue stems. Sheep and two horses grazed calmly on the grass.

Der tripped over her own feet. "Grass? It's winter."

"Blue stems?" Alluvius raised his eyebrows. "It's edible too. Tastes like bark though."

"Never seen anything like that before."

He grinned. "Yeah. From the northern elves, you know, the ones not part of Arborn."

"I've heard of them. I just didn't know they had winter blooming plants. Jakkobb never told me stories of this place. But I always imagined, and it wasn't anything like this!"

“Nor that, I assume.” He nodded forward.

The candidates barracks rose above them, complete with portcullis and battlements. Der blinked. “We get our own castle. Within a giant castle.”

“And a night to explore it. Maybe that’s why they’re giving us this night off, to get used to it, like. Odd though.”

She frowned. “When something’s odd, something’s usually wrong.” She scowled as they approached the gates to the candidate barracks. The castle design was simple enough. She passed under the raised portcullis, her eyes scanning the defenses critically.

The candidates squeezed up inside their own courtyard. Der tried to guess exactly how many candidates there were. Maybe a hundred, she reckoned. She cupped her hands. “Hey, everyone. Something bad is going to happen—”

The sound of a hundred people in a tiny space was as loud as a persistent ocean surf, and her voice was lost to sea. So, she yelled louder. “Hey!”

Once again, the noise drowned her words. Beside her, Alluvius threw his hands up and shrugged. Der rolled her eyes.

As they watched, spaces began to appear on the stone. The candidates shuffled away from each other and began to filter into the groups of species: the dwarves, the part elves, the two full elves, and all the different varieties of humans.

Der stared for a moment. She’d never seen a human with such dark skin and hair before. She read the looks on their faces; at least they were human. It was amazing, she thought, how humans had adapted to live all over the surface of the world. None of the other races had such an advantage, as far she knew. Then again, she thought, she barely knew of half the races on earth.

The groups took turns narrowing their eyes at the other groups. Meanwhile, Der espied the only other female hiding in a doorway, and standing entirely alone.

Der stepped into the open space in the center of the courtyard. “Alright, listen—”

A fair haired human stomped over to the lone woman in the doorway. He stabbed her in the shoulder with his finger. “Just go home already. War is for men, and we don’t want to wait for you to fail.”

The dark haired girl, barely taller than the aggressor, shook her head. “They said no fighting.”

He waved a fist under her nose. Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He whirled, snarling, to see Der.

She smiled. “She’s right, they said no fighting. But I bet if they don’t find out, it’s quite alright.”

The man spun to face her, and looked down at this young woman. The side of his mouth curved up in an unfriendly smirk. “Oh? You? *You* are gonna fight me?” He glanced around to the other candidates. Most them just looked on, stone-faced.

Der smiled. “No, I’m not going to fight you.”

He snorted. “Then don’t cry, ‘cause this might sting.” He brought up his fist over his shoulder.

Her smile warmed her face like a sunrise, and clashed entirely with her words. “Instead, I’m going to watch you crawl on the dirt looking for your ears that I just kicked off.”

The surrounding watchers straightened up. A few bit back chuckles.

Der gestured with her hand. "Or, you could apologize to the lady. We're all supposed to be brothers in arms here."

"Yeah, brothers. That's my point." He pulled his fist back further and smirked at the attention from the rest of the candidates. Der's eyes never flickered from his face.

The young man launched his swing.

Der waited, watching the oncoming fist. At the last second, she dropped straight down. His fist flew harmlessly overhead. Her fist, however, slammed into his crotch.

Gasping, he started to tumble down just as she leapt up from her crouch. She grabbed his ears and brought his head down against her rapidly rising knee.

Crack!

Every watching candidate grimaced and stepped back.

Der shoved his bloody face toward the young woman. She twisted his ears. He grunted and seethed, glaring with the force of his entire body weight. The female candidate pushed her shoulders against the door.

Der yanked at his ears again. He coughed and sprayed the ground with blood. "Ugh. Sorry."

She dropped him, and he barely caught himself on his palms. She shook her head. "You know, that just didn't sound sincere to me."

One of the part elves looked her up and down. "Who are you?"

"Derora Saxen."

"Of Riversbridge? Well, I guess this makes sense now."

Grins and nods began to flow through the candidate crowd.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

One of the humans chuckled into his hand. "We've all heard the stories. Was it true that you rode a gold dragon to fight the chemmen?"

"No." She pushed her hair behind her ears. "But—"

"And how you killed the wizard at the Dismal Horvath battle!" another piped up.

"No, that wasn't—"

"And that you wield a sword from Pallens," a doubting voice scoffed. "Well, I don't see it on you."

She patted her empty hip. "It's—"

"Wow," Alluvius' voice boomed over her shoulder. "Do you lads believe everything you hear in a pub?"

"No," the doubter replied, "But she's Derora Saxen."

"Right!" Der barked. "And now that I have everyone's eyeballs on me, I think this whole night off is strange, don't you?"

"Completely," one of the dwarves grumbled. "We'd worked up night sweats about this first day."

Der lifted a finger. "That's probably a good—"

"We can find bunks and store our stuff," another human said.

"Everyone!" Der yelled. "Lads, do you know that feeling when you're walking on ice and you see all those cracks spiderweb out from your feet? Yeah, that feeling. Are you feeling it right now?"

"Do you know something?" asked a voice bursting with silvery bells. The candidates turned to the elves.

Der shrugged. "Just the obvious."

"Would you please explain your feeling?"

"I don't know. This just isn't like the dragoons I know."

"You, mortal, should know more than feelings are required for action." He shook his beautiful face. The rest of the candidates dropped their eyes. The elf strode through the courtyard and pushed past the other female candidate and through the door. Other candidates shrugged and started to shuffle along behind him.

Der threw up her hands as the candidates streamed by her. She looked around the suddenly larger courtyard. Only Alluvius, the young woman and a handful of others remained.

Alluvius offered a weak smile. "If even half the stories about you are true, then I think we'll take a chance on your gut."

She sighed. "Thanks. However, we haven't been attacked yet, so perhaps I wasn't right."

The other woman smiled. "Thanks, though. I'm Irma. I can't believe that elf was so rude."

"Some of them aren't so bad." She nodded to Alluvius. "Hey, I'm even part elf too. Barely."

He blushed. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I hadn't noticed." Alluvius shook his head. "I am not offended either. I thought they were a little terse myself."

One of the remaining humans spat. "Ever notice how elves always talk so much?"

"It's who they are." Der shrugged. "To them, it's rude to parse a sentence down. It means 'I don't have the time to bother speaking with you'."

"Yeah, and it's rude to us to talk for a quarter of an hourglass."

Alluvius exchanged a glance with Der. She said, "I guess that's something else we'll have to get used to."

"It's very rude to say such things as 'keep out' to an elf," Alluvius persevered. "You should say something like, you must not enter the space beyond here because you do not have the appropriate permissions to proceed. In fact, they think humans are always being rude."

The human rolled his eyes. "And this is the army. They'll have to get used to it. I knew there were gonna be other races here, I just didn't know it would be this bad."

"This bad? Seriously?" Der shook her head. "How are we ever going to work as an army? You know your life is gonna depend on them."

The young man dropped his gaze and shrugged, mumbling under his breath.

Irma nodded to the open portal. "Shall we see our new home?"

Der grinned and rubbed her hands. "Indeed." She pushed through the wooden door and into a tight hallway. She counted the steps; ten paces in the little corridor. It opened into a massive box of a room.

The candidates already filled the hall with bustle. Some of them rolled out blankets onto the stacked bunks that lined the walls. Others rearranged mess tables that filled up much of the space. A large, utilitarian kitchen dominated a corner of the hall. On the far side, a spiral staircase ascended to the battlements.

Alluvius stepped up beside Der. "Didn't look too big from the outside, and it looks even smaller in here."

Irma slid her back against the wall. "I don't want to stay in this room."

Der pointed. "But the bunks are already set up."

"Because...well..." She petered out and waved her hand at all the other candidates.

Der shrugged. "But out here is probably better than trapping yourself in a room with only one door."

"Not to mention that we're not supposed to fight." Alluvius raised an eyebrow above his grinning face.

Irma pointed to the stairs. "There's probably a few rooms upstairs. We could take one. Please."

Der shrugged. "Well, we need to explore. Before something bad happens."

"Nothing's happened so far," Alluvius chirped.

There were two large closets upstairs in an even smaller second story. Der stuck her head out of a nearby door and saw that only half of the upstairs area was roofed over, the rest was left to a flat roof and battlements.

The elves already stood in the doorway of one of the closets. Stacks of old armor had been piled outside the door.

Der poked her head into the unoccupied closet. She blinked in an attempt to hurry up and adjust her vision to the low light. The room was stuffed with poles. Irma tiptoed in beside her.

"Is that gardening equipment?"

"I think so," Der replied.

"It'll do."

"You want to bunk in a closet?" She reflected on the fact that she hadn't slept inside a building in months, despite the winter. "No, closet's just fine."

Alluvius appeared at the top of the metal staircase carrying a large hourglass. "Found this in the kitchen. Looks about three hours." He set it on the floor, and the sands began to trickle.

A shout spiraled up the stairs. Irma dropped a rake she had been moving. She and Alluvius leapt for the stairs. Der hesitated, and grabbed the rake. Then she ran for the stairs, holding the rake as a halberd.

She spun around the stairs in a rather dizzy descent. Below, one of the half elves shoved a human. The human crashed into one of the wall bunks. Several other humans were already rushing over.

Der threw the rake down. The metal clattered against the stone floor. "Attention to me!" She marched toward the frozen fighters. "Oh my gods above. Why is this a problem?"

The same fair haired troublemaker from the courtyard pushed his way through the crowd. "But how do we know that they're here for the same reason?" He pointed at the half elf.

"I don't know," Der snapped. "Why don't you ask him?"

He narrowed his eyes, and he reminded her of a snake readying to strike. "And what about you then? Why are you here?"

"For the moment, to make sure that you all don't kill each other." She looked him up and down. He was big, but it wasn't all muscle, she could see. "What are you called?"

He raised his nose at her and straightened his shoulders. "Firth."

"I'm going to remember that."

He snorted. "Why? You don't outrank me."

"No, but I certainly can outfight you."

His jaw fell open, and his tongue limply moved as he tried to speak. A pink flush suddenly painted his face. He snatched up the fallen rake and stomped over to her.

She smiled.

Alluvius leaned over and hissed, "They said not to fight. Don't push it."

"We're here to be warriors. Fighting is a significant part of that."

Firth growled, but lowered the rake. "You know, we're human. If you weren't a girl, we'd be on the same side."

"You're only making enemies here," Alluvius said.

"I'm not entirely human either." Der grinned tightly.

Alluvius clapped his hands. "Look, we can continue this antagonism tomorrow. Why don't we all just get some sleep for tonight? You know they aren't going to give us any slack tomorrow."

"What about when the dwarves' farts fill up the room?" one of the humans hollered. The dwarves instantly bristled.

"Then you'll have to hope they don't stink as bad as yours," Der snapped back.

Alluvius tensed and scooted closer, but her words seemed to have dispelled the tension. The candidates slowly drifted toward their bunks. Der snatched up a bedroll from an empty bunk, and she and Irma treaded back upstairs.

A few minutes later, Der rolled out the blanket across the stone. She idly kicked her paper-thin pillow with the side of her foot. A few feathers poked out through a seam. She glanced at Irma's supine form, and then through the door to the hourglass. The sand continued to submit to the weight of the world and trickle between the glass bulbs.

She slipped a hand to a hidden pocket inside her trousers. She felt around, and finally pulled out the elegant platinum ring. A true elvish ring, with a portrait of beautiful castle with a vaulted tower cut inside the gem itself. She frowned.

Of course, she'd stolen the ring from a perpetually angry vampire, and that was cause for constantly peering into shadows, but something else tickled the back of her mind about the ring.

She'd seen that picture somewhere else before. The thought itched in her mind, where no questing fingernail could penetrate. In fact, it looked a little bit like Moonrise Castle, but she immediately shrugged the thought off. Castles were built to keep outsiders outside, and quite often, ended up looking similar because there were a limited number of ways to achieve the objective with stone walls. Well, except for Horizon, obviously. Besides, she hadn't been to Arborn in a year.

She settled for shoving the ring behind an old bucket and rested her head on the pillow.

Outside, the evening darkness let through a small army. They rushed through the open portcullis and into the candidates' barracks courtyard, disappearing into the entrance as quickly as the wind. No sentries even stalked the walls.

They swept into the main hall, fanned out and attacked.

A sleeping candidate's eyes flew open as he saw a blade coming down over his chest. He grabbed his ribs as the wooden weapon rebounded. He struggled to clear himself of the confining blanket, but there wasn't time.

"Sit up," a heavy voice ordered. "Sit up or the others won't know, and they'll kill you again."

The candidate winced, and met Sergeant Bristlebeard's angry face. He nodded and twisted himself upright. He cracked open his eyes fully and watched the scene repeated around the main hall. Most of the candidates were struck down before they even awoke.

A few of them crashed out of their bunks and tried to run. Wooden swords smashed them squarely across their shoulders.

"Is that all?" one of the dragoon soldiers shouted. "Fastest time yet."

"Looks a little short," another replied.

Jakkobb smirked and raised his visor. In one hand, he twirled a wooden axe. He nodded his head to the spiral staircase. The soldiers flowed to its base. The captain frowned at the stairs as they curled up into impenetrable darkness.

One of the soldiers trotted past him, and put his foot on the lowest stair.

Water roared out of the darkness, splashing against the soldier's face and armor. He raised a hand and flung the liquid from his face. "What in the four corners of hell?"

"Um," a female voice called down, "Pretend it's boiling oil."

Jakkobb bit back against a smile. "Derora Saxen. Should've known." He looked at the wet soldier. "You know the rules."

The soldier pawed at the water on his face. "You've got to be kidding, sir."

The captain shook his head.

The soldier glared at the other dragoons before sitting down, as if daring them to laugh.

Bristlebeard eyed the stairwell. "Well, sir, what shall we do?"

"Oh, I think we should attack," he raised his voice, "After all, I'm sure they didn't have time to heat up more than one bucket of oil."

The soldiers lined up. Jakkobb, getting in line himself, passed a wooden shield to the first man. They charged.

A metal bucket clanged against the stairwell and against the first soldier's helmet.

The bucket again failed to slow the soldiers, and they erupted out of the stairs.

A handful of candidates scattered away from the stairwell. The first dragoon sliced at the nearest candidate with his sword, only to have a pillow fold around the wooden blade. Another candidate struck him over the head with another pillow tied to a stick.

Jakkobb launched himself off the stairs, and blinked. Did he just see a fully armored dragoon knight attacked with a pillow on a shovel?

He kicked a rake into the candidate's path, and the young man's feet suddenly couldn't keep up with a third leg. The knight raised his axe above the boy's terrified eyes.

And then a pillow exploded in his face. The seam ruptured, and feathers sprayed across his entire world. He brought the axe up, arcing it in front of his entire body. His eyes were open, but all he could see was white. However, he could hear the sounds of the fighting slowing down around him. He grabbed at the feathers with his free hand. The combat died around him, and he saw the soldiers standing over the defeated candidates.

He spat out the last of the feathers from his mouth, but more stuck out, wedged between his helmet and his chin. He frowned down at his assailant. Der smiled, holding an empty pillowcase. He raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

“You should have had your visor down, sir.”

Chapter Six

Desert Crossroads

The ancient juniper tree creaked as its roots pushed out of the sandy soil. It looked at as if it were standing on its tiptoes.

From out of the roots and twisting branches stepped Thistle, Kelin, Thalon and Chloe. Behind them, the juniper sank back into the ground. Chloe stared wide eyed at the rapidly descending tree.

“Do all trees do that?”

Kelin shook his head. “No, just the magic ones. See the circle of trees surrounding this one? You got to look for that.”

The girl nodded. She followed as Thistle started to navigate through the sage bushes. Their shadows were already growing long in the dwindling sunlight.

Thalon clapped his arms against his chest. “By the Dawn Sword. It’s freezing. This is supposed to be a desert, ain’t it? Is this another one of those weird weather events Lady Evelyn was talking about?” He stopped and stared at a white patch on the ground. “Is that snow?” He scowled and kicked at it. “Why is there snow in the desert? Dad!”

Thistle smirked. “It’s a high desert. They have winter.”

Chloe also crossed her arms. “And this is supposed to be a dwarf town? Dwarves don’t live in the desert!”

Kelin sighed. He pointed off to some snowcapped mountains. “Does that make you feel better?”

She pushed out her lower lip and pouted. “Maybe. But everyone knows that dwarves don’t live in the desert.”

“And chemmen don’t exist.” Thistle exhaled. “Come on. If you think deserts are cold at night in the summer, you don’t want to face the winter.” He pulled his hood up over his face, hiding his telltale orange eyes.

They descended into Quon. The town sat just above the massive Sharmith River. It sparkled in the late sunlight. Riverboats lazily strolled across the fat churning waters. Oxen dozed on their feet as they treaded around in their circles, turning the massive paddlewheels.

The children’s eyes started to smile as they entered the market. Despite the chill and the evening, the market was as busy and loud as ever. Dwarves and humans ran about their business through the still very busy market crowd.

Thalon darted ahead. His father caught his shoulder in a lightning grab. The chemman sternly shook his head.

A small boy, barely older than Thalon, brushed past them. He swung a smoking censer, and musty incense blossomed around them. The child disappeared into the cemetery.

Thalon stuck his fingers up his nose. “Aw, smells like vomit!” He glared at the other boy’s back.

Chloe sighed. “It’s hard to lose somebody. I hope my grandfather’s alright!”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Kelin soothed.

They walked deeper into the market, and the sound increased to an almost physical pressure against their ears. Kelin dropped a few coins into mendicants' bowls as the market swept them into its roaring tide.

An old crone was making yarn while she verbally fenced with a merchant over the price of a still gasping fish. All the while, she took the loose wool shavings and ran them through large cards with holes near the bottoms with practiced ease. Yarn emerged from the other side of the cards. She never missed a beat in the bargaining.

"Never seen a river that's not frozen in the winter," Chloe chimed. Her eyes widened at the sight of the paddlewheels on the river boats. "Wow."

Thalon pointed. "Hey, look at those people!"

Warriors wearing ornate armor haggled with a merchant. They displayed decorated silks and some wore helmets bearing masks in permanent displays of anger.

"They look like Mora. What do those weird symbols mean?" Chloe chirped.

Kelin sighed. "It's writing. From Shin, land on another continent."

"And it's summer there," Thistle said.

Chloe's face bunched up. "How does that work?"

"Yeah," Thalon added. "Especially when there's snow in the desert!" He huffed and glared up at the sky, as if daring it to act like it should.

Thistle exhaled.

Thalon continued to pass his glare around the market, at least, until his jaw dropped. He extended a digit to a small crest on a brick building boasting decorative turrets. "Isn't that the dragoon symbol?"

Kelin nodded. "Aye, it is." He narrowed his eyes at the pale gray half circle, representing the sun, rising over a small curved rectangle acting as the horizon. He blinked. "And is that a bank?"

"We came here before after the Battle of Gladioli Fields," Thistle said softly. "How else do you think the dragoons fund their order?"

"Dragons," Thalon replied immediately. "They've got hoards."

"Yes, and dragons hoard their hoards." Thistle almost chuckled. "At least they're bankers with a good reputation, unlike the other money vendors you'll find in this hole."

Kelin watched a man standing in front of the building. He paced in front of it erratically, bobbing to and fro, as if his feet couldn't decide which way to go. Kelin found his hand drifting over to his sword.

The man bolted inside; and Kelin caught the silvery reflection of steel emerging in his hand.

"Robbery!" He slipped his sword free of its sheath and ran after the man. He skidded inside to see the thief lowering the weapon at a handsome young clerk. She raised her hands as the knife point danced circle eights in front of her.

Thistle appeared beside him, hand on his black sword, but he had not drawn it yet.

"Stop!" Kelin thundered from behind. The man flinched and half turned at his command. Armed soldiers appeared, weapons pointed at both of them.

Then the robber's footing vanished as a trapdoor beneath him dropped open. The darkness below swallowed him.

Kelin's sword sagged. The clerk reached down and adjusted a lever behind the counter. She straightened the shoulders of her clothing and smiled radiantly at Kelin.

“Thanks, but we got it. May I assist you with something?”

He felt his mouth dry. Below, he heard the man cussing and yelling. The soldiers around him chuckled and sheathed their weapons.

He swallowed. “Um, no. Er, just trying to help.” He backed out into the street. Thistle nodded to the soldiers and followed.

“Have a wonderful evening,” she called after him.

Kelin turned around. “Where are the children?”

“Damn.” Thistle ground his teeth.

“Where are they? They were right here!” Sweat exploded across his palms and forehead. He felt afraid to inhale. He scanned the market crowd. “But, but...” he dropped his voice and forced out the words, “Are the chemmen here?” Fear rolled over him like an icy wave, leaving goose bumps in its wake. He’d been a chemmen prisoner once. He stopped his caravan of thought right there. Or at least, he tried.

He rubbed his jaw. It still ached at the memory. He’d been forced to eat hot gravel after they’d collapsed one of his lungs. And that was just the prelude to the symphony of torture.

His hand gripped his sword again. And they had their bloody claws on the children!

He glared around the market and imagined orange eyes under every hood.

Thistle gripped his shoulder. “Stop holding your breath.”

He gasped. “But—”

“We don’t know that yet. Keep your hand on your sword.”

Kelin and Thistle broke off in opposite directions, as if they’d rehearsed. Kelin growled and glared, trying to stare at every bystander and passer-by’s face. Too slow! It was too slow while the chemmen were absconding at breakneck speed, leaving him farther behind with every step.

Would Thistle ever forgive him if something happened to Thalon? The memory of Thistle’s wife dying was enough to make him guilty of surviving that encounter; and to have failed to protect his son too...

He gulped. Focus on the people, he forced himself to think. Find the children. Now, where would a kidnapper flee to first?

“Kelin!”

His head snapped around and his fingers clawed at his blade.

Across the street, Thalon raised a mug and frothy beer splashed out over his hand. Chloe accepted her drink from the vendor at the stall.

Kelin’s legs pumped and hammered against the road as he ran. He cut across the path of the Shin warriors, who shouted at him. It wouldn’t have mattered if they cussed in a language that he knew; he wasn’t listening.

He loomed over the children and slammed his hands against his hips. “What are you two thinking?” He pulled them away from the vendor’s stall. “They’re after you, Chloe.”

She dropped her eyes. Thalon stepped in front of her and glared up at Kelin. “We were thirsty. And it’s getting late, we’d thought they’d be closing soon.”

Thistle appeared like a ghost behind his son. Thalon's eyes flinched at his father's thunderous scowl. He reached out and snatched the beers from their hands and let the liquid crash down to the ground. It splashed against Thalon's boots. "Kelin, you find the dwarves."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. I don't want any there to be any time for these incidents to keep happening."

"Alright." He frowned. "Alright. I'll meet you back here." He stepped back and melded into the market.

Thistle continued to frown at the children. "No alcohol."

"I'm sorry." Chloe shifted her skirts nervously.

"But Lady Evelyn only gave us milk," Thalon shot back.

"No alcohol," the chemman repeated.

"But, Dad, we don't know if the water in this town is safe. And alcohol makes it safe."

"So does boiling it." Thistle lifted his eyebrows.

"But—"

"Is that the only way you know how to start speaking?"

Thalon stamped his foot and glared.

"We're sorry," Chloe said. "We won't do it again."

Thistle's visage softened for just a moment. "Oh, I know *you* won't." His orange gaze drifted back over to his son.

Kelin passed under the runic sign. He had to duck inside the smaller office, and bumped his head against the ceiling just the same.

How typical, he thought as he gazed at the little forge behind the dwarves. He suspected it was for tourists and tradesmen. Coals burned brightly, but he could tell by the lack of debris on the floor that it was mostly for decoration.

Two dwarven warriors behind a counter looked him up and down. One of them crossed his arms in front of his massive beard. "Well?"

"Messenger service." Kelin pointed back outside at the sign. "And I'd like to hire you."

One of the dwarves spat. "Try the Blue Farer Dragoons."

Kelin fought down a matching scowl. "My friends and I need to get to the crossroads—"

"Yer at the crossroads," the one with his arms crossed growled. He nodded outside.

Kelin sighed. "No, the dwarven crossroads. I know the entrance is hidden inside this city."

"Humans ain't allowed without an invitation."

"I know. That's why I'm hiring you, the messenger service." He pointed over his shoulder. "Look, I can read the sign. It says messengers."

"It's in our runes," the other one grumbled.

"For a trading town, you sure are stingy about your customers."

"Most of them don't ask for such a favor," the first one snapped.

"It's not a favor. I'll pay you, probably more than what it's worth, but I'll pay it. This is what messengers do."

"Any human asking for that is asking a favor. No matter how much you pay us."

Kelin thumped a heavy fist down on the counter.

The dwarves stared evenly at him. Finally, one of the dwarves turned around. Kelin heard clanking as the dwarf grabbed some heavy tongs. He removed something from the far side of the little forge.

The dwarf ambled back over to the counter and set down a cylinder full of bubbling metal. "Liquid lead. Dip your fingers in that, and we'll take your message."

"Are you joking?"

"'Tis a rite of dwarven customs. If any outsider—"

"Yeah, I get it." He sighed and dragged a hand through his curly locks. Sweat dampened his fingers in this hot, cramped space. He gazed down at the bubbling gray lead.

The dwarves nudged each other in the ribs and snickered.

The children wandered over to a small deck stuffed with tables and chairs. Thistle followed in their shadows.

The horizon had already swallowed the sun, but night hadn't fully overtaken the sky yet. This was the storm readers' light, where Thistle's eyes worked best.

Deep blues and turquoise heavens floated over the land and the fat, muddy river. The mountaintops were already shrouded in shadows.

Chloe leaned against the railing overlooking the massive, sandy river. "I wish my uncle were here."

Thistle shook his head. "He may not be immune to whatever was affecting the undead we encountered previously."

"Of course he is."

"Why?"

Her cheeks began to glow. "Because he's my uncle, that's why!"

Thistle waved his hand dismissively.

"My, you have such beautiful little ones," a honey laden voice drawled. Thistle and the children spun around to see a tan lady, wearing shorter clothes than the weather suggested. She boasted a low neckline and a flowing green skirt that accented her tassel decorated ankles. A money bag banged against her skirt; it hung from her cloth belt by a string.

Thistle nodded and tugged his hood lower over his eyes. Thalon followed suit. They had to, especially since the story of the elf-chemmen war had traveled down the river. Now, people were believing in chemmen again, and believing the worst stories about them too.

"Aw." The lady leaned toward the boy. "You're shy, but you don't have to hide your face."

Chloe moved in front of Thalon and beamed. "Well met. Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Cora, the harbor mistress." She breezed through a curtsy. Then she leaned against the railing. "It's hard to think that something happening on the other side of the continent is a boon to us here. Can hardly imagine."

"What's going on?" Chloe asked politely.

Cora shrugged. "Something about a bunch of Alscane's ships going missing. I don't really know. But I do know that trade's coming this way instead of staying with them."

"Heard they've got a lot of ships," Chloe said.

"Yes. Strongest navy in the world, saving the Farers. At least, they used to be."

“What happened to them?” Thalon inquired.

Cora shook her head a little. “I don’t think anyone knows. And it’s not the strangest story I heard. Up around Tenmar’s river way, I heard about how the whole river dried up in less than an hour.”

“What?” Chloe yelled. “But we saw a tornado in the snow! That’s strange too, right?”

Kelin’s nostrils flared. “Get me a glass of water.”

The laughter immediately dissolved between the dwarves and the molten lead.

Kelin wagged his finger. “And don’t think for one moment that this is some rite of passage. I think it’s just some trick that you use because you don’t want to actually work. But I’m going to prove it; I’m going to dangle my fingers in molten lead.”

The first dwarf grunted. “Are you calling us lazy?”

“I’m just calling your bluff. Now, fetch me some water.”

The second dwarf disappeared behind the forge for a moment, and returned with a bowl full of water. He raised his hairy eyebrows at Kelin.

Kelin stretched his lips across his teeth in a very tight smile. He dunked his hand in the water. Then he plunged the first few digits of his hand into the molten lead. Steam erupted from the top of the cylinder.

After just enough time for the dwarves to grumble, he retracted his fingers. He flexed his intact hand in front of them.

Finally, he grinned. “Steam. Builds up a handy layer between the lead and my fingers. I used to be a smith. I know this game.” He freed a coin from his belt purse and held up the large, brilliantly shining coin. “I’m sure you can see this is elvish currency, you know, the one they use when they have to trade with the world? It’s probably worth more than your whole lousy messenger service.”

The dwarves mumbled between themselves, but it would have taken a crowbar to get them to budge their gaze.

“Now.” He dangled the coin over the molten lead. “Do we have a deal?”

Chloe watched as more rivermen and people crowded onto the platform tavern for a late meal. Lanterns glowed against the night, and laughter rang out around the little deck.

She’d never seen a town stay awake after nightfall. She covered her mouth as she yawned again, and blinked her eyes against sleep.

She blinked again and saw Cora approaching. This time, she carried two beer mugs. A little milk splashed over the lips. The harbor mistress proffered them toward the children.

Chloe smiled. “Thanks!”

Thalon frowned. “Milk.”

“Oh? Is something wrong?” Cora tilted her head.

Thalon glanced up at his father for the merest second. He slouched and shoved the mug back. “Thanks, but we can’t have it.”

“Why not?” Cora’s face creased in concern. “Does a milk allergy run in your family?”

Once again, Thalon glanced at his father. “But, Dad, we had it at Lady Ev—”

Thistle grunted.

“Um, yes, Miss Cora. Sorry.”

“It’s so very generous of you though,” Chloe said sadly. She still clutched the mug and confusion danced across her features. She stole a glance up at Thistle who mouthed, “Poison.”

Cora retrieved the mugs. “Well, I try. Why do you and your father hide your faces like that? Scars? Burns?”

Thalon shook his head mutely.

“Wanted men?” she teased.

“Wanted?” Chloe asked. “Well, I want them around.”

“I didn’t see we had company.” Kelin smiled as he approached.

“This is Cora,” Chloe said, waving her hand, “She’s really nice.”

“Oh, right. I’m Kelin.” He smiled, and felt a blush surge across his face.

The harbor mistress curtsied casually. “I was just telling your friend what lovely children he has.”

He smiled against his will. “Yes, I agree.”

“You seem more lively though.” She bobbed her head at Thistle. “May I ask why you’re passing through our city?”

“You probably wouldn’t believe us.”

“And you probably wouldn’t believe the stories that I’ve heard.” She winked and nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. “Especially from the young men heading out to sea.”

Kelin’s blush suddenly waged war on his cheeks. Then his face suddenly froze. He hadn’t thought about Mora! Not the whole time this woman had been smiling.

“Well,” she held up the mugs, “I’d better give these to someone else before they get too chilly. I’ll be right back.” She disappeared back into the crowd of diners.

“Aw, it was still warm.” Thalon slouched and licked his lips.

“What news?” Thistle suddenly asked. He twitched back his hood.

Kelin was still watching where Cora had walked off.

“Kelin.”

“Oh. Um. They’re taking the message to Clan Heavyaxe, and then we have to wait for an introduction.”

Thistle’s face morphed into stone.

“Hey, it’s what I could do. I had to dip my hand in molten metal to get even that far. So, hopefully, the people searching for Chloe will have an even harder time behind us.”

“But,” Thalon said, “We saved the dwarves’ lives in Darkreign.”

“We did,” Kelin replied.

“And you weren’t supposed to be there.” Thistle frowned down at his son.

“It doesn’t sound nice,” Chloe said. “Hey, she’s back.”

Cora reappeared. The crowd was still thickening behind her. More dinner plates vanished to be replaced by tankards. “Well, I can’t stay long. It’s been my pleasure. Just wanted to smile at the children one last time.”

She started to stroll away, and in the crowd, the boy who had carried the censer into the cemetery dodged behind her. The incense burner hung from his belt. A small knife sliced the string holding up her money bag. Cora never noticed. The thief smirked.

He spun around and smashed his face into Thistle's folded arms.

The boy's glare simmered, but he thrust the money bag at Thistle.

The chemman nodded and snatched it up. He tugged his hood lower while he picked his way through the crowd. He tapped Cora on the shoulder and offered her bag.

"What?" Her hands groped her skirt where it should have been. She yanked the bag from his hand.

"There was a thief." He nodded and turned away.

"Thank you!" she called after him. Her fingers quested through her bag, checking its contents. She paused, blinked her eyes momentarily, and withdrew a curving pendant from the bag.

A scream tore out of her mouth. She hurled the pendant and bag away from her and continued to shriek.

The pendant clattered on to the wooden deck. Thistle's orange eyes widened as he saw the double headed snake. His gaze whipped over to the boy.

The little thief stuck out his tongue at Thistle, and made a dipping gesture with his fingers. He pulled out the incense censer from his robe and started to swing it idly.

Gasps heaved in and out of Cora's chest; she swayed wildly. Trembling, she raised her finger at Thistle's face. Her breath suddenly froze as she saw past his hood.

"Chemman," she breathed.

The stunned whisper echoed around the deck. Men and women dropped their drinks and their jaws.

A dwarf grabbed an axe and pointed it at Thistle. "Remember, lads? The chemmen who killed all of our brothers and sisters in the Heavyaxe mines two years ago!"

The town suddenly bristled with axes and swords. A hunger flickered on the faces of the people, and it owed nothing to dinner.

The little thief grinned and silently clapped his hands.

Thistle remained motionless. Thalon had clamped both his hands on the hilts of his knives. Chloe clung to his shoulders.

Kelin swiftly moved to stand next to Thistle. He scanned the crowd and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Do you think we could make it into the river?"

"Doesn't look deep enough."

They retreated one step in unison.

Kelin swallowed. "So. I bet they don't know the chemmen don't worship Sennha."

"That would be a tidy bet. My people are far too full of themselves to have space in their hearts for any deity worship."

Kelin paused. "Did you just make a joke, Thistle?"

The chemman shrugged.

He eyed the advancing axes and blades. "But did it have to be right now?"

"Might as well, while we have the time." They backed up another step. "And this is not the work of the chemmen."

The townsmen advanced closer in a unified step, weapons raised. Thistle and Kelin were fast running out of deck. Their heels would be hanging over the river in a moment.

Chloe clenched Thalon's shoulder with white fingertips. "What are we gonna do?"

The humans and dwarves closed on the four of them in a half circle. They backed up to the edge of the deck.

The young thief with the censer silently laughed at them. He brought his hands up to his ears and wagged them back and forth.

Another scream ripped apart the night's air.

From out of the cemetery, undead corpses sprinted into the town. The stench that followed them swallowed the river's muddy perfume.

The departed men and women rushed as if they were escaping hell. Decay had eaten away so much clothing, flesh and muscle, but they ran. One woman had no tissue left on her legs, and she stumbled behind the rest of the escaping creatures.

The boy with the censer scowled. "Not yet, you mooncalves! Not until they kill the chemman!"

The undead halted in mid-stride.

The townsfolk gaped and trembled. The smell of urine around one man's ankle overtook the stench of death for just a passing moment. One elderly man dropped his cudgel and inched out toward an aged, unmoving woman.

"Elma?" he quavered.

The corpse turned its empty eye sockets toward him. A worm poked out of its half-missing nose. It opened its mouth. "Tenglin?"

"It's me, my love!" He inched closer. "Oh, in these months you've been gone..."

On the far side of the townspeople, Thistle murmured, "Now would be a good time to leave."

Tenglin reached out his hand and brushed Elma's cold digits. The corpse slowly grasped his fingers. "Tenglin, I love you, but you have to listen. You have to protect the girl."

The boy with the censer rolled his eyes and deliberately clapped his hands.

Elma snapped her husband's wrist back. With her other hand, she drove her fingernails into his throat. Tenglin beat at his wife's arm as his hot blood splashed onto her cold hand, but it was too late. He collapsed.

"Hey! No leaving early!" The boy with the censer stabbed his finger at Thistle, Kelin and the children. The undead jerked their heads at the party in perfect unison. "Well, don't let them get away."

"Run!" Thalon yelled.

They dashed past the dragoon bank. Some of the soldiers were rushing outside. Inside, the clerk kicked open the lever to the trap door and jumped down into it. The door closed above her. The astonished would-be robber gaped.

She said, "It's safer down here."

Above, the clash of weapons and screams of terror reverberated through the wooden ceiling.

Chloe gripped her chest. Her legs carried her as fast as she could go, and then carried her faster than she thought she could run. Inside her chest, she felt her power lurch, like a caged lion trying to force open the bars to its cage. It was awake!

"I don't wanna die!"

And then an icy sensation rippled across her skin. Lady Evelyn's protection! Chloe scrambled to feel the necklace in which the silverseed rested.

“Keep running!” Kelin snatched her shoulder and pulled her along faster.

“Protect the girl!” one of the creatures screamed. It paused to swipe its mostly skeletal hands at one of the dragoon soldiers. The bones ricocheted off the armor. “I can’t stop!”

“Someone kill us!” another pleaded.

“Damn chemmen!” one of the dwarves cursed. “This is their doing! Kill him, it’ll end this all!”

Undead and townsfolk ran after Thistle and his party. Kelin ran only as fast as the children could go; and Thistle guarded from behind.

One of the creatures closed ground. Gray fingers snatched at the chemman’s hood, and yanked it back.

The chemman jumped up, spun around, drew his black sword and beheaded the creature all in a single motion.

Sound evaporated around the jet black blade, and immediately roared back into life as Thistle held the sword still.

More charged after them. The creatures ran with the fires of hell beneath them. The townsfolk also charged after them, trying to fight their way through the undead to kill him. At least, until the undead turned their bony hands on them.

Below, on the river, ships splashed violently into the water. Four or five of them crashed into each other as people strove to get away from shore.

“Damn chemmen!” one of the humans yelled. “I’ll kill you!” He lowered his sword at Thistle.

The chemman rolled his eyes and raised his own sword.

Chloe backed into a wall, shaking her head. “Oh no, oh no.” Her back bumped against the wall, and she slid back into an alley when skeletal fingertips seized her from behind.

Chapter Seven

Dragoon Training

Der, Alluvius, Irma and the few candidates who had fought alongside them last night hovered over bowls of steaming oatmeal. Their spoons rattled and they inhaled the food under the weight of glares from the other candidates.

Those who hadn't defended against the dragoons' raid were made to watch them swallow breakfast. Their hands and mouths remained conspicuously empty.

Bristlebeard strode around the lines. "At night, ye are on yer own, and ye are easy pickin's! Easier to catch than baby birds that fell from the nest!"

Der just nodded as the dwarf marched behind her. She sucked the remaining oatmeal from her spoon and threw it down into the empty bowl.

"Next lesson!" the dwarf yelled. "Ye will never fight fair! I don't care what yer mammy told ye! Ye will learn to love the idiots that fight fair. Makes them easier to beat. So, remember, when yer life and yer mates' lives are on the edge of the sword, do what must be done!"

Bristlebeard thrust up a finger. "However, once ye are *out* of combat, ye will harm none!" His boots vibrated the floorboards where he marched. "We are honorable, and we will cut our teeth to always be, but we will always win! Honor is what ye do after the fight's over. Remember that!"

He clapped his hands. "Minute's done!"

The candidates with oatmeal hung onto their spoons. Bristlebeard raised his furry eyebrows and the utensils clattered down.

The sergeant clapped. "Now, to yer morning jog!"

Der's boot tips sprayed ice crystals over the edge. She leaned her head and shoulders out over the precipice; and it *was* a precipice, just a manmade one. She didn't remember Horizon's approach being this steep. Or this narrow. But then, she'd been going up, not down.

Candidates jogged past her, hovering near the wall.

Alluvius waved and cupped his hands. "Come on. You don't want to get in trouble, do you?"

Der took one last glance over the edge and then stared at the long trail of switchbacks.

She let her own weight pull her down the mountain. She knew she'd need her strength for the run back up. A groan echoed across the back of her throat, and she tried not to imagine the return to the summit. Instead, she concentrated on breathing and every breath felt like it froze as soon as she exhaled. The fog from her mouth hung in the air before vanishing.

Bristlebeard jogged steadily up and down the line of candidates, and he still had plenty of room left in his lungs. "Keep movin'! My great-grandfather can move faster than ye lot, and he walks with a cane!"

Irma hung close to the wall. She leaned too far toward it, and her shoulder clipped the stone. She tumbled sideways toward the open air.

Der caught her arm from behind. Gasping, Irma flashed a quick smile, and the two of them resumed the run.

“Can’t do this,” Irma panted between steps. “Can’t keep up.”

“Not a race,” Der replied, watching her own footfalls.

“No...here...the men...they’re bigger... stronger, can run faster than us,” she gasped out.

Der blinked. She’d never even considered that before. Not once in her entire life. She tried to smile through what she imagined was ice forming on her lips. “Yes, but they’re taller, so that means they have farther to fall.”

“No, I mean it.”

Der made sure her feet continued to land in the correct order. “Well,” she finally breathed, “They’ll certainly be if you believe that they are.” She tried to smile, but she just bared her teeth against the cold.

“I mean, I joined because I thought I could fight and I’m a wizard when it comes to mathema—”

“Are ye gonna talk or run?” Bristlebeard blared as he jogged by.

After what felt like hours, and quite possibly was, the candidates stumbled and slid onto the field below. Der didn’t dare turn around to look back up. Not ready to jog back up yet.

“Don’t stop, ye fat goats! Keep movin’!” Bristlebeard pointed to the road that led through the fields of rocks out into the plain beyond.

With weary feet hammering against the frozen soil, the candidates started to pull themselves along the road. Der eyed the ankle and shin high rocks embedded everywhere except the road. She hadn’t appreciated how much damage they could do to a person’s legs; they would rip tendons from bones in seconds!

So no shortcuts, she told herself.

Slowly, the line of recruits jogged through the first massive ring of rocks. Bristlebeard trotted ahead, fatigue bouncing off him like sunlight on a calm lake.

After what felt like another hour, they pulled themselves through the second massive ring of rocks. Many candidates collapsed on the spot. Even the elves’ natural glow had faded from their skin.

Der tried to stand, but her knees quaked. She thrust out a hand toward one of the massive, sharply edged boulders that formed the outer ring of the citadel’s defenses.

Bristlebeard clapped his hands. “Because this is yer first time, take a breather. Because ye’ll faint otherwise. Tomorrow, ye turn around on this spot! Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” groaned the consensus.

“We shall do this every blessed mornin’! I don’t care if it’s rainin’ fire, we shall do this!”

Raindrops, thankfully of normal water, began to pelt their heads and shoulders as the clouds let loose their load.

Bristlebeard grinned. “Or just good ol’ freezin’ rain.” He cupped a hand to his ear. “Aw, yer groans are like the finest symphony to me. Now, let’s get goin’ a-fore ye freeze to death. Movin’ll keep ye warmer.”

The last of his words rebounded from Der’s ears. She jumped back away from the black boulder she’d been leaning on. “Oh my gods! What in the four corners of hell is that?”

The rain leapt joyfully off the boulders and back into the air. Dozens of rainbows hung in the air just above the surfaces of the rocks. As the rain hit, it played a note like a tinkle of breaking glass. The notes blended together in constant chiming.

Der stepped back again, in order to catch more of the rocks in her field of vision. Millions of rainbows danced above the surfaces of the boulders.

Bristlebeard stepped up silently behind her. "You didn't think that Horizon had only soldiers protecting her, did you?"

"Magic," she replied flatly. "Built by Centum War survivors."

"*Wealthy* Centum War survivors," the sergeant corrected. "As we dwarves say, ye get what the other bugger pays for."

Der frowned. "Actually—"

"Explains why there ain't been no battle here. Not sure if there ever will be." He raised his voice, "Now, do ye want to freeze to death, or ye want to get goin'? That wasn't a question!"

"Yes, it—" Der bit her tongue and just started to lift the iron weights known as her legs into something like a jog. The fire building inside her thighs warmed her up, even though it also slowed her. The rain blurred her vision and she barely registered anything when she started to climb.

She overheard one of the candidates. A young man, with dark skin and eyes, worked to carry himself up the approach. "But, sir, it's freezing to the stone. It's dangerous!"

Bristlebeard jogged alongside the struggling man as lightly as a snowflake in a gentle breeze. "If you slip and fall off, then you're not worthy enough to be a dragoon. Nature's law. Now move!"

Der's attention faded. She didn't have the energy to waste on imagining the horrors of slipping on the ice on the approach; she was too busy pumping one foot up over the other. The entire precipice blurred into blissful numbness.

When her mind awoke again, she found herself staring up at the first portcullis. Her head felt like a boulder. It wanted to roll off in any direction. Vaguely, she watched as the other candidates sank to their knees and hands. She knew she should be freezing, and the rain was still coming down, but she couldn't feel anything.

The sergeant stepped around the candidates. "Well? Ye just gonna let yerselves freeze? Get inside yer barracks and change for the love of Zine's right boot!"

"But, but, these are the o-o-nly clothes I got," a shivering candidate burst out. He'd buried his hands in his armpits. "Thought u-u-uniforms."

"Ye haven't earned uniforms yet!" The dwarf huffed, leaving a trail of white fog clinging to his beard. "But, the almighty one, our commander, has said you should have them. Well? Don't wait! Go, go, go!" He clapped his hands.

Somehow, despite quivering muscles stuffed with exhaustion and ice, the candidates pulled themselves to their feet.

A quarter of an hour later, most of the candidates sat wrapped in blankets around the stoves in the kitchen area of their barracks. Uniforms had been dumped out into a large pile for them to pick over.

"They wouldn't surprise attack us now, would they?" a burly human in his mid-twenties with an already impressive handlebar mustache demanded.

Der pinched her rust colored uniform. That was really all there was to it. Functional, rust colored clothing.

Another candidate nudged the man sitting next to him and pointed. "I think Willard's taken it hard."

Willard, sitting nearest to the stove, stared off into nothing. Shades of white and gray drifted over his face like clouds.

"Yeah," the other snapped. "No food and that run."

Alluvius, moving stiffly, knelt in front of Willard. "We should tell someone. Like a surgeon."

"And what do you know about humans?" the first one snarled. "You're an elf."

"Not entirely," he started, but trailed off.

"They can both freeze to death," Der said. Her voice sounded dull to her, even though her mind raced ahead.

"What's this about freezin'?" the sergeant's voice boomed from behind them. "If yer hurt, say something! The surgeons round here don't ask no questions." He paused. "Except when they do." He pointed to some random candidates. "Now, you and you, run and fetch the surgeons. The rest of ye, yer on to your next part of training."

"Can't take anymore," a voice from the back of the crowd moaned.

"Then you're not a dragoon. Now, I must turn ye lot over to a trainer much more twisted than me. Let's go."

"Is it Strival?" someone asked. "Is he going to train us?"

Der suddenly felt her hands tingling through the chill.

Bristlebeard just shrugged, turned and left the room. Heaving, the candidates pulled themselves up and followed. Outside, they trudged through the freezing rain through the interior gates and walls. Finally, Bristlebeard deposited them into a large hall and disappeared.

Alluvius tilted his head. "Not what I expected."

Der stepped inside, letting her fingers slide over a smooth polished table. The long tables and benches were all polished and in rows, facing the front. But the benches were only on one side of each table facing the front of the room. The rain pattered softly against the large windows.

"Strangest mess hall I ever seen," a candidate said. More candidates filtered into the room.

Der slid into a seat on a bench just because she couldn't stand any longer. Everyone else matched her wobbly collapse.

"What are we doing here?" Irma slid next to Der.

Der held up her palms.

Irma said, "Well, unless something happens, I think I'm going to fall asleep."

"Remember what happened last time we thought that was safe," Alluvius chimed in.

After a few minutes, an elf with long blond locks, bent forward under the weight of the stacks of paper, stumbled into the room. He tripped, and his spectacles slid down to the tip of his nose. He let the papers collapse into a heap at the desk.

"Oh, sit up, do." He glanced at one of the candidates in the front absently. Then he leaned forward and stretched his own back.

Der felt her face change into a surprise. Next to her, Alluvius shrugged.

"As you know, there are three dragoon orders," the elf said as if picking back up a previous conversation. He absently shuffled through the stack of papers. "But we are the biggest. Most of the order isn't here, as I'm sure you noted." He pulled a paper free from the middle of the stack. He peered at it through the spectacles. Then he pushed the paper out. Next he pulled it back closer to

him. Finally, he sighed and took off the glasses and apparently read the paper without any further trouble.

Der frowned. "What kind of person wears spectacles to read when he doesn't need to?"

Irma shrugged helplessly. "I thought elves didn't need them."

"They usually don't; their eyes don't fail like ours." She shrugged. "Usually."

"Now," the elf looked up at the candidates for the first time, "You are here to learn history, mathematics, languages, politics, literature and economics as well as strategy and tactics."

"Not after that run," someone muttered.

The word 'school' floated across Der's foggy mind.

"What?" Firth yelped from the back of the room. "Schooling? I didn't come here to go to no school."

"I see that I will also have to add grammar to the list. You came here to be a dragoon," the elf replied simply.

"Yeah, I did. A warrior. Don't need this." He shoved himself back, or at least, tried to until his trembling muscles surrendered. He collapsed back down to the bench.

The elf waved his hand. "Then go. I will release you from your candidacy. What? Did you think that a dragoon was just another common soldier? If that's what you want to be, then go."

Firth opened and closed his mouth several times. Glaring, he sat back down.

"Next?"

One of the elves rose. He spoke in elvish, but that was no obstacle to Der and some of the others. "Excuse me, sir? We already know these things. I find it degrading that Strival would even put us in this class with all these others."

"Because, to us, you're just as old as the humans in this room," the teacher replied in Common. His gaze passed over to the rest of the class. "I understand that many of you in this room will not be here next winter. The three days of the week you spend time in this room may be the most challenging for some of you." His weak little smile unfolded. "I am the Scholar."

He raised an index finger. "For this morning only, if one of you asks me a question that I cannot answer, I will not fail that person from his candidacy, even though others still might. Today!"

Silence answered him.

Of course, Der muttered mentally, an opportunity like this and I can't think of a good question. And I've been to the secret realm of Darkreign! Surely, he can't know what it's like there...

Her thoughts petered out against that confident little smile. The Scholar opened his hands. "Well? Sometimes candidates like to trick me with a mathematical query? Trigonometry? Algebra? Any of you know these studies?"

Most of the class dumbly shook their heads.

Irma whispered through a smile, "I already know trigonometry!"

The Scholar continued, "Am I going to have to start with teaching you to tie up your boots?"

"What's trigo- trigo-? And how is it going to save my life?" a candidate demanded from near the back.

A little chuckle followed that persistent little smile. "Well, it is the limb of mathematics that is going to tell you how far away from the castle wall to place your trebuchet or catapult. So you can line up your shot in the quickest time and with the least amount of peril to those in your command. Next."

“What about dragoons being founded by sowing dragon’s teeth into the dirt?” asked another.

“Ah, that myth actually says fighting skeletons came up from the dragon’s teeth that had to be fought off by the dragoons. It is entirely fictional. Next.”

“Well, were they dragon skeletons?” the candidate persisted.

“No, human skeletons. But, it never happened. Next.”

A barrel-chested, long-haired young man shot his hand up. “Yeah. What was my grandmother’s name?”

The Scholar’s smile didn’t flinch. “Elena or Admath? You did have two after all.”

The candidate’s jaw dropped. “Are- are you psychic?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps I like to study my students.”

A ripple of suspicion danced in the sudden murmurings of the candidates. The Scholar continued with his little smile and the candidates dropped their gazes where he looked.

No one else challenged the teacher. Der tightened her jaw and her fists, but her mind failed to turn over anything that might be worthy. She was absolutely certain the elves had passed along everything she’d been through.

The Scholar continued, “What about Pallens? Always popular to ask about, and everyone *imagines* that they know something about it. Or, how about dragoon law? You’ll definitely need to know that.”

Firth stood up. “What about the Blackhound? How much do you know about him?”

The Scholar offered a little shrug. “As much as anyone can. For instance, he burned the library of Pallens.” For the first time, the Scholar’s face flickered and just a smidgen of remorse reflected in his eyes. “Next.” He idly picked up some papers and straightened them. “No one? Oh well, no challengers this year.”

“Wait!” Der’s hand leapt up. “What about the legend of stone and bone?”

The papers flew away from the Scholar’s suddenly limp hands. His eyes bulged. “Where did you hear about that, Miss Saxon?”

“A vampire,” she replied, honestly.

The candidates erupted into snickers around her. The Scholar regained his blank face.

“Good one.” Irma cocked a grin and nudged her in the ribs.

“It wasn’t a joke.”

Her grin faded. “What?”

In front of the class, the Scholar hummed to himself. He sang a few lyrics of what sounded like a children’s tune. He licked his lips. “One of bone, one of stone.”

Der gulped. A vision of the stone heart blazed across her mind. Of course, it was probably such an old legend that it didn’t mean anything anymore. She hoped.

“Yes, that was it. One of bone, one of stone, under the shadow of the midnight sun.” The Scholar cleared his throat. “It is an extremely ancient creation story, most notably found among the elves. It may have existed in human storytelling once, but it died out before the elven kingdom of Arborn was founded. Most elves don’t know this story.” He raised an eyebrow at the young woman.

“So,” she pushed the words out of her mouth, which was fast drying out, “What is it about? The story?”

The Scholar paused. "Let's see. Hmm. Two demon brothers arrived to stop the creation of the earth. They could command every demon but each other. Then, the one of bone killed his brother of stone. This action caused him to be bound to his brother by the anger of the very young gods."

Der frowned. "And that's it? Is there anything about crystal in this myth?" She remembered the tablet at the monastery: "what is sealed is not crystal, but stone. Where one goes, the other will follow."

The Scholar stared down at his desk. "Yes, there was. I believe it was a minor mention." He raised his face and the little smile faded. "Now, before any of you doubt my intellectual prowess, it is now my turn to ask you questions. Today! History! What do you know about the Centum Wars?"

Firth stretched out his hand. He smirked. "A lot. Pallens Front War, War of Hell on Earth, Battle of the Bridge, and the fall of Pallens."

The Scholar sighed. "That's just the end of the Centum Wars."

Another candidate said, "You mean it's said 'kentum' and not 'sentum'? I've been saying it wrong this whole time?"

"Palls had no soft 'c' sound. Now, they are called the Centum Wars because they lasted over centuries and there were about a hundred of them. Centum is Palls for one hundred. Most history of the earlier wars was lost at the end of the later wars, or simply never recorded.

"There used to be at least two billion people of all races across this earth. Two billion. You can't even imagine. After the hundreds years of war, we were left with only twenty-three million, approximately. You don't even know how many millions died in the fall of Pallens alone. The Blackhound was more effective than a plague."

The students sat up a little straighter along the benches while they listened.

"The start of the wars wasn't quite so dramatic as their finish. The rise of the wars was at the same time the world's climate significantly warmed. You will still hear Strival complain about how hot it is these days."

"You mean it's not cold now?" a candidate burst. "I nearly lost all my toes this morning!"

"Not like it used to be. That's why Pallens fared so well early on, she was on warmer soil. It wasn't as bad as some even more ancient stories that you may have heard about great ice sheets. No, it wasn't that cold."

"Great ice whats?" a candidate asked.

"Rivers of ice!" The Scholar started to pace in front of the hall. "Pallens wasn't perfect, not like the way history seems to remember it." His hands disappeared into a long shelf in the front of the room. The elf talked while searching in the shelf. "But it was better than now. The Empire was mostly along the coastal plains, and into the mountains, and a little beyond the rain shadow into the Expanse."

"What's the Expanse?" Der asked. "And why does it sound like it should echo when you say it?"

"The largest prairie on earth. Men have gone mad wandering there. Ah, found them." He brought out several small paintings and raised them up for the class to see. The eidetic pictures displayed laughing children and a dog in front of a white marble building.

"Elves, right? They're the only ones who can draw like that," Irma said.

The Scholar smiled his small smile. "No. With this." He held up a small white box. He flipped the box around and pulled out a long sliver of crystal.

“A magic box that makes portraits?” a candidate said doubtfully.

“Not magic. Crystal. Patterns of light stored on the crystal.” He twisted the little piece toward the light. “It can hold all the information you can ever dream. Sadly, the ability to know how to do this was lost. I try to keep the memory alive.”

“So, that box,” a young man pointed. “It makes those portraits?”

“Alas, it is broken. But yes, it could make them. Instantly.”

Many of the candidates shook their heads in disbelief.

The Scholar set down the little box. “Eight years before the fall of the Empire, it was attacked. At a time when this order was too wounded from the Battle of the Bridge, as were Pallens’ armies. Pallens was very vulnerable on her far eastern flank, over the mountains and into the Expanse. All one had to do was conquer the Eastern Empire, and have all the roads into the city herself.”

“I never knew about that,” Der said. She glanced around, and met other confused glances.

The Scholar nodded. “Of course you didn’t. This was the first attempt in many years to strike at the heart of the Empire, all of which before had failed. This one would have also felled the Empire if it weren’t for some unsung hero, who was inevitably lost later on.”

Irma tentatively pushed up her hand. “Are you saying the Blackhound attacked the Empire before and failed?”

The Scholar held up his hands and shrugged. “That is unknown, but it is a likely assumption.” He folded his hands neatly. “But what do you know about Pallens?”

Hands rose like green shoots around the room.

The elf pinched the bridge of his nose. “That doesn’t include the Blackhound.”

The hands quickly descended.

“Um.” Der scowled in concentration. “People got to pick their king, like, who was Midan, even though he was king all along.”

The Scholar’s fleeting smile scuttled across his face. “Well done, Miss Saxen. King Midan gave democracy to Pallens after centuries of rule, and yes, the citizens voted him in as king. He gave them a choice to depose him.”

Bafflement crossed the candidates’ expressions. Finally, another candidate frowned. “What’s a voted?”

The Scholar’s face froze behind the little smile.

“And what’s a democracy?” asked Irma.

Slowly, the Scholar turned around so that his back faced the class. He dropped his chin to his chest. “Every year. I should be used to this.” He spun around. “Do I need to start with the alphabets?” He snapped his fingers. “*Doctrina legis novae.*” He started to stalk along the rows of benches. “The doctrine of new law. Although *doctrina* translates more honestly into instruction or teaching. This is one of the most important documents in the history of the world, so please at least pretend like you’ve heard of it.”

“Yes, sir,” the candidates half-heartedly chorused.

“This document, penned by Midan the Merciful, changed his empire into a democracy. The king could no longer make laws. Instead, a chamber called the Chairs made laws, and then the entire population voted to accept the law.”

Der's face bunched up. "What? But, wouldn't that take way too long to do? You'd have to send riders to every village, and it was an *empire*."

"They had devices of faster communication than we do today. Also—"

"So, what's the point of having a king, then?" Firth burst. "Honestly. And, I'm not sure I'd trust this lot in here to make the right decision, so how am I to trust people half a continent away? They don't need the same things that I do. What's there to guard what I want?"

The Scholar clapped once. "You may have had a future in politics if you had lived only two thousand years ago."

"And who says what they chose to be a law was actually what they were told it was supposed to be?" Firth gripped his fists and glared. "The whole thing wouldn't work."

"Once again, you don't understand what life was like. The people, alright, most people paid attention; and nearly everyone could read. Midan did have his ways of demanding that everyone attend schools."

"Everyone?" a candidate repeated. "Then who's workin' the farms? Who's lookin' after the livestock? Everyone don't got time for school."

"Well, you do," the Scholar snapped. "As it so happens, you have to care for livestock here, too."

"But—"

"You have your answer." He sighed, and continued his stroll. "There are some things we did keep, ideas mostly, some history. We would know much more about ourselves if the library had survived."

"For example, we kept the religions of Pallens going. We still pray to the same gods. Interestingly enough, it was Midan, in the doctrine, who actually banned religion from having any official government recognition or involvement in its proceedings. It's the seventh major tenet: 'there shall be no religious institution or religious dogma included in the laws or legal processes in government. Every citizen is free to have beliefs of his own choosing with no government oversight'. It goes on about how no government funds can be used to fund temples, and so on."

Alluvius raised his hand. "Excuse me, sir, but isn't that a bit contradictory? Wasn't Midan a paladin of the gods?"

"Good for you. You're thinking, and on your first day too." The Scholar exhaled. "It's hard to explain. Paladins don't exist anymore, so it is difficult to understand what they were. But, Midan always said that humans and dwarves tended to use religion for politics, and he would have none of that. Please don't misunderstand, religion was very important in Pallens. It was just banned from politics."

Alluvius shook his head. "But he was a champion of the gods, and king. How did he keep the two things that made him the man he was separate and rule?"

"Because he followed his own laws."

"He wasn't human," Der added. She glanced behind her at the small cluster of elves. "Elves can be idiots, believe me. However, they also tend to learn the lessons that many of us humans keep failing at."

"Correct," the Scholar said. "As I said before, Pallens wasn't as perfect as history likes to remember her. Better than now, of course, but not quite heaven."

Firth crossed his arms. "Well, I want to hear about the Blackhound."

The Scholar shook his head. "The dark paladin. That's all everyone wants to hear about. You already know how that story ends."

"Is it true about the black dragon?" a candidate asked.

"Black dragon?" Der repeated.

"Possibly, and in the stories it was silver, not black," the Scholar replied. "Possibly. There were no survivors to tell the tale; at least, none of whom that dared speak with us."

Irma blurted, "And what about the story about him and Carme, Midan's daughter? Is that true?"

Der bit her lip and frowned. "Never heard that one either."

"You haven't?" Irma suddenly blushed, realizing that everyone was looking at her.

"Why don't you tell us?" the Scholar offered. He took a seat at the edge of the bench and watched her expectantly.

Irma's face flared pink. "Um. Um. Alright. Obviously, this was before the fall of the Empire."

"Why don't you stand up?" The Scholar raised his hand.

She stumbled to her feet, leaning on the bench for support of her wavering knees. "Er. Princess Carme went to negotiate a truce with Tallor the Blackhound—"

"I thought the Empire fell in a surprise attack," Der interrupted. "So, why would she be negotiating a truce?"

Irma stared down at her in horror.

Der didn't even blink. "It's a fair question."

The Scholar closed his eyes. "Please, be quiet. Irma, why don't you come to the front of the class?"

Irma inched her way to the front of the hall. She knotted her fingers together. "Well, um, the story goes that Carme, fearing the danger to her homeland, ventured out to the Blackhound's camp alone. He instructed his men to prepare a meal and to poison her wine, but that she wasn't to be harmed by any of them. But when he came to dinner and saw her beauty, he switched their chalices. He became deathly ill, and she nursed him to health in his own camp. So, despite everything, he decided to let her live if she paid him with a kiss."

Der frowned and opened her mouth. Alluvius grabbed a small piece of Der's arm between his fingernails, squeezed and twisted.

"Ouch!"

He whispered out of the side of his mouth, "She's already terrified enough."

She hissed back, "But it sounds made up and it doesn't make sense. They were enemies."

"You've never been in love, have you?"

"No." She scowled and crossed her arms. "Never."

"Right, so you've never had to forgive a fault in anyone else before?"

"Not when that fault is being evil."

He rubbed a hand over his forehead. "In love, you may not have a choice."

"Exactly. That's why love is stupid. Clouds rational judgment." She glared hard at the polished tabletop. "Especially when he's just so downright angry all the time."

Alluvius arched an eyebrow.

"But, he's got these green eyes like you wouldn't imagine. Anyway, it wouldn't last. It couldn't possibly last."

“That’s what Irma’s story is about. You know. He knows. So, did you ever just give in, even for the space of just one heartbeat?”

She met his eyes evenly. “No.” Then, she slouched back and glared at the tabletop again.

In front of the class, Irma’s story continued behind a wistful smile. “And, as the Blackhound took the citadel of Pallens, Carme pleaded with him for her father’s life and for the Empire. When he would not stop, she turned to a balcony and stood out on the railing. She transformed into a bird and flew away.” The longing smile flickered and then faded from Irma’s lips.

Der set her jaw and rolled her eyes. “Besides, this story is just a story. It never actually happened, so it doesn’t have to make sense.”

“You got me on that one,” Alluvius agreed.

“See? Anyway, I like the story of Mendelin and Tara better anyway.” Her frown deepened. “Why do all the famous love stories end horribly? And why would someone even make up this story about the Blackhound? Why would you want to make the worst man in history into a lover? That doesn’t make sense.”

Alluvius sighed loudly. “Most of the world must not make sense to you.”

“Give Irma proper attention!” the Scholar barked. An old book sailed over the heads of the candidates directly at Alluvius and Der. The part human ducked.

Der reached out and snatched the book out of the air as easily as from a shelf. She sighed and opened the cover to reveal the title “Successful Siege Strategies”.

“No, people don’t make sense to me,” she sighed, “But fighting does.”

Chapter Eight

Stronghold of War'kiln

Chloe screamed again as the creature dragged her back toward the alley. Its skeletal fingers dug into her shoulder. She craned her neck back and saw two worms poking the air through the rotted nose opening on the teenager's gray face.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" He wrenched her mercilessly around to face the boy with the censer.

The silverseed warmed against her chest. A whimper escaped through her lips. The lady never said it would burn!

She felt her power to absorb magic lunge against its chains. The silverseed stung her skin as it whipped her power back into its cage. The girl heaved against the creature's grasp.

The boy in front of her stroked his chin and swung the incense censer casually. Abruptly, his face brightened. "Let's be friends!" He reached out a hand.

A blade neatly sliced off that hand. The boy didn't even flinch. Kelin stood over him and brought his sword down again, this time plunging it deep in his chest.

Thalon drove his long knives down into the spine of the undead teenager holding Chloe to the boy. He dropped his skeletal digits from the girl and yelped in pain, but smiled as he fell. "Thank you! Thank you!"

And then Thalon spiked a knife down into the teenager's brain stem.

Chloe leapt away, and dove behind Thalon, almost pushing him forward with her weight. She sobbed into his shoulder.

The boy with the censer looked down at the sword, and then back up at Kelin. "What are you doing? This body was already dead when I got it."

Kelin didn't pull back and raise his sword dramatically; instead, he barely withdrew it from the boy and immediately thrust from the waist.

The boy dodged, as fast as a vampire. But Der had told Kelin about this trick. He thrust his sword out where the boy was most likely to appear.

The boy's twisted face twisted in surprise as Kelin's sword nicked his cheek. And then he was gone again. Kelin whirled, readying to thrust again, and didn't have time to notice the hair rising along his arms.

Suddenly, a massive bolt of lightning stabbed down from the clear sky into the streets of Quon. And it remained. The white, glowing beam pulsed and hurled out spikes of electricity everywhere.

When Kelin could tear his eyes away, he thrust at the source, but the little necromancer ducked his blow. Funny, Kelin thought as the world slowed, the bastard looks just as stunned as everyone else. He wasn't ready for this either. Was this like the snow tornado? Some weird nature event?

The lightning vanished.

"Ha!" Kelin struck at the necromancer again. His sword sliced home in his chest and the body just collapsed this time.

Immediately around town, the rest of the undead also fell to the ground. A burly stevedore, who had been fighting his late mother-in-law, dropped his sword on his foot in surprise.

“Is it over?” Thalon asked. “Did you see that lightning? Now I can’t see anything!” The boy rubbed his eyes furiously.

Kelin stared at the most recent corpse, trying to blink the pulsing purple remnants of the beam out of his vision. “Can’t be this easy. I don’t know, but I guess this rules out the chemmen.”

Thistle backed up toward them. “No, this isn’t over. They’re still going to kill us.” He held his sword up against the townsmen.

Screams of rage and torment broke out of throats all over town, and only half of them were from the townfolk.

Tenglin, the elderly man, and the other townfolk who had just perished rose up as if pulled by overhead strings.

A little squeak of terror slipped out through Thalon’s teeth as a dead squirrel rounded the corner of a building and charged at him. Dead birds and deer emerged from outside the market at a run.

The teenage boy that had so recently grabbed Chloe stood back up.

“I just killed you!” Thalon stabbed at the teenage boy again. This time, the teenager didn’t even glance down at him.

“Leave him!” Kelin snatched the back of Thalon’s shirt and hauled. The teenager grabbed after them.

Kelin shoved the children into the dwarven messenger shop. He blazed over the counter and past the forge. Sure enough, there was a slow burning fuse leading to a large barrel in the corner.

“Hurry! Hurry!” He started jumping down on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Dwarves! Trapdoor!” His eyes dragged their gaze back to the fuse. “We’ve got to find it *now!*”

Outside, someone yelled, “They’re in here!”

Windows smashed as men hurled stones at them.

“Ah ha!” Kelin stabbed the air with his sword. Using his free hand, he heaved the trapdoor open.

“Go now, go, go, go!” He spared a glance at the shortening fuse.

The children slipped away into the darkness below.

“Thistle! Come on!” He jumped feet first into blackness. He landed several yards below and dumbly stuck out a hand for balance.

“Kelin?” Chloe whispered.

“Find a wall, and just keep moving!”

The sound by the entrance vanished. Thistle crashed down through the trap door, in silence as thick as the surrounding darkness.

“No time!” Kelin hollered in the stillness when Thistle stopped moving. “Run!”

On the surface, the windows left intact by the townfolk burst outward. Wooden shards and nails spun wildly through the air as the shop exploded. Fire chased after the wood and glass.

Below, the blast echoed like thunder. The floor of the messenger shop collapsed into the tunnel, spraying dust and dirt. The little forge landed next, spilling its coals across the pile of timber and mud.

After a moment, Kelin lifted himself up onto shaky knees. He felt along the wall until his fingers found some thin cables. He followed them to a little metal box.

He banged on the box with his fist. “Work!”

He smacked it again, and this time, a network of lanterns sprouted into life, illuminating a seemingly endless tunnel. Bright, polished discs behind the lanterns diffused the light into a wider glow. Sparks flickered and spat from some of the damaged cables.

"It's not fire!" Chloe walked over toward the trail of lanterns. "How does that work?"

Kelin shrugged. "Something about lightning. They never explained it to me because it's a dwarf secret."

"Uh, Dad, Kelin..." Thalon petered out and pointed. Water was bubbling through the rubble underneath the trapdoor's hole. Steam rose up from the forge's coals as they flared out.

"Oh, no," Kelin moaned. "We're so close to the river. They would have to pump out these tunnels."

"And the explosion?" Thistle raised his eyebrows.

"What do you think?" Kelin snapped. He softened his gaze. "The explosion took out the nearest pump."

"So what's going on?" Thalon tugged on his father's tunic.

"The river," the chemman sighed.

"But we're underground." Chloe pointed down the tunnel. "Rivers are above ground."

Kelin flinched at the old memory of the swallow hole of the Pelippen River, where the land just sucked the river right underneath. "Not always. A lot of the water is actually underground, in the cracks and the soils, right? And now it's no longer being pumped out."

"Are we going to die?" Chloe clutched her arms to her chest.

"No," Thistle replied calmly. "Look, the dwarves like mountains. Everyone knows that. This tunnel will go up toward them, but we have to move, now."

Kelin sighed as they started to trudge. "I miss Der. She has a knack for getting out of this sort of trouble."

Thistle rolled his eyes. "If it's not her fault you're in this sort of trouble."

"I know." He sheathed his curved sword. "Whatever is after Chloe knows we came this way."

The water started to pool around their ankles. Thistle sighed. "Well, let's just hope that the undead don't like to get wet."

Chloe lifted her skirts out of the rising water. "It's coming up fast."

Kelin cautiously eyed the sparking lines of wires and lanterns. He reached down his hand and took the young girl's. "Yes, yes, it is. But these tunnels are going to go up, away from the water."

"Where are the dwarves?" Thalon asked. "The ones that came this way first."

"Ahead of us," his father replied.

"And we're going to meet them?"

Kelin shrugged. "Who knows?"

Thistle's strides splashed against the water. "I just hope that they remember that I am a traitor to my own people."

The tunnel marched upward at a steep incline. The lanterns hung in an endless glowing line. The dampness and water soon disappeared behind them.

"Are we going to run out of air?" Chloe asked suddenly. "I hear that it happens." She trailed so closely behind Thalon that she kept kicking his heels.

"No." Kelin shook his head. "The dwarves made this so we won't."

“But they also made the tunnel to pump out the water, you said. Couldn’t the air have been broken too?”

“Uh.” He paused. Two sets of shimmering eyes stared up at him. He flashed a bright smile. “We haven’t run out of air yet.”

“But will we?” Thalon persisted.

“No,” Thistle clipped.

Much later, Kelin attempted to massage his feet inside his boots by wiggling his toes. His feet felt like grapefruits trying to hide inside an orange’s skin.

He had no idea how long they’d been walking, or even which way was north. He certainly didn’t know the way out of here.

And he’d been in this area before too! After the elf-chemmen war, he’d gone with the dwarves while Der had gone home.

Thalon let gravity suck down his foot with every step. The thuds echoed across the walls.

Chloe leaned her hands against the wall, pushing herself along the way.

Thistle was barely panting.

They rounded yet another sloping curve and stopped. Chloe sank to her feet, her face pink with sweat.

Marble tiles enchanted the floor. The electric lights glowed behind inlaid quartz and amethyst. Mother-of-pearl sparkled along the ceiling and walls. The patterns danced down the hall for about twenty feet and then stopped.

Thalon set one foot down on the marble. Kelin pulled back on the boy’s shoulder.

“One step. Now, they’ll know we’re here.”

The boy blinked. “How?”

“Something about springs, wires and bells under the floor. Look, we just wait, alright?”

Thalon snatched the hilts of his knives and stared off down the tunnel. “But they could be behind us!”

“Yeah, and we know that dwarves with nice, shiny axes are in front of us.” He waved his hands at the crystals. “This is part of the crossroads. This means we’re entering Heavyaxe territory, and they’re territorial.”

He slowly sat down on the floor and rested his back against the cool rock. Thalon’s protest washed over him, and he wasn’t even sure of what the lad had said. Right now, he wanted to rest. Maybe a nap if possible.

Kelin rested his head against the rock. He didn’t know how long they’d been walking. He honestly had no idea. He didn’t know which way was north or if it was night or day.

Or how far behind their enemy was. And, at the moment, he didn’t have the strength left to care. He closed his eyes, and didn’t know how long they remained closed.

Eventually, some grumbling and shuffling bounced down the tunnel from the other side of the Heavyaxe entrance. Gnirun Heavyaxe hoisted up his belt as he stomped down on the marble tiles. Another dwarf wearing spectacles trailed in his wake.

“Mm, more visitors, have we?” He grinned beneath his beard. “Kelin, I should have known ‘twas you those messengers was complainin’ ‘bout.”

Kelin stood and bowed. “We are in need of aid, Gnirun.” He smiled. “Carak, good to see you too.”

The dwarf in spectacles dipped a bow in return.

“Trouble again?” Gnirun chuckled.

He nodded and sighed. “And it’s worse this time.”

The dwarf’s eyebrows rose. “Worse than the undead destroying the fair town? Worse than the chemmen?” He glanced at Thistle. “Oh, I remember you. We here know, but just you keep those eyes hidden.”

The chemman’s face remained impassive.

“So, did ye have anything to do with the trouble in Quon? No, don’t actually answer that.” Gnirun looked the four of them up and down. “Hey, where’s old what’s-her-face? The troublemaker?”

“Derora Saxen?” Carak prompted beside him.

“With the dragoons,” Thalon replied.

“Oh my whiskers.” He turned back down the way he’d arrived and waved. “Well, ye’d better come on in then.”

The group pressed their toes against the marble tile. Chloe lifted her skirt. She started to smile. “I’ve never seen a mine before.” Despite her exhaustion, her eyes glowed with imagination.

“And you won’t, little princess,” Gnirun chuckled.

“I’m not a princess,” she mumbled.

“Well, you sure dress like one, little one. You’ll see our halls and maybe some more, but we’re not takin’ the lot of ye into a mine. The hall is hardly a mine these days anyway – only on the holy of holidays.”

They trotted along after Gnirun and Carak. The tunnel continued on, just like it had for the miles before.

Another sharp turn marked the end of the tunnel. It opened up into a mammoth, dwarf-made cavern. Electric lights drove out the natural darkness; and the light reflected brightly off the polished stone.

Massive pillars held off the weight of the mountain above. An underground waterfall spewed out of a mighty hole in the rock wall, and was immediately divided between constructed channels. Waterwheels spun along busily in the flows.

Chloe gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. She traced the outline of the mighty underground river. Her eyes followed the dozens of streams as their tracks led them various destinations through the cavern. They weaved their way through the stone streets of the city. Houses and buildings were stacked high against the walls, while others extruded directly from the stone.

Laughing dwarf children kicked a ball to each other in a courtyard. Metropolitan dwarfs shopped and carried on with their lives around them.

“Welcome to War’kiln.” Carak smiled. He pushed his spectacles back against the bridge of his nose.

Gnirun stepped onto a large platform in front of them. Chains and belts slithered along underneath it, and a couple of levers rose from one corner. He beckoned the others to the platform. "We're going up."

"What?" Carak gasped. "But—"

"Well, this ain't exactly dining conversation we're about to have." He rubbed his nose. "It'd upset the other diners, that's for sure. So it's up we go." He kicked a lever.

The platform shuddered beneath them. An unseen mechanism latched into the moving chains, and they started to pull the party sideways.

Thalon peered over the edge at the chains. "Who's pulling all this?"

"No one." Carak pointed at the waterwheels. "It's just transfer of motion."

The moving platform carried them along in full view of the city. Chloe grinned and pointed. "Are we going down there?"

Gnirun chuckled. "Mayhaps later, child." He raised his hand to a glimmering of natural light above the waterfall. The platform shuddered again, and began to rise on a new track.

Chloe dropped to her knees and scooted to the center. She started to pant again. "It's going really high."

"What?" Gnirun laughed. "Yer no taller than a dwarf." Her jerked a thumb at Thistle. "He's the tall one. If he gets knocked off, then you can worry."

Slowly, but not slowly enough by the look on the girl's face, the platform slid on its tracks hundreds of feet over the dwarven city.

Thalon plopped down beside her as they continued their ascent. He watched as the thin hole of light became a huge hole covered in snow and icicles.

He pointed. "Are we going there?"

Carak shook his head. He clamped his hands together against the growing chill. "No. Chains would freeze."

"Then where—" And then he saw a patch of black against the sheer rock of the mountain. "Another tunnel?"

"Just a small one."

He folded his arms and stuck out his chin. "I don't wanna see another tunnel for the rest of my life."

A blast of freezing wind brushed past them as they neared the smaller tunnel. Ice crystals drifted over them in the air, dancing prism's in the winter's light.

Kelin caught sight of a square hole cut into the mountain. He knew that these mountain peaks were death in summer, and instant death in winter. How could the city of War'kiln be so comfortable with an open window to the roof of a mountain?

The next tunnel was completely dark. He reflexively raised his hands to find the wall. His fingers brushed by the whizzing rock. He hissed and jerked back his hand.

The platform slowed to a stop, and with a mechanical lurch, took off in an entirely vertical motion. Another box of light beckoned above.

The elevator's chains clattered to a halt. Soft crimson carpet lounged across the floors as they stepped inside a palace. Large golden and silver tables stood erect across the hall. Thick pillars, swathed in velvet, held up the roof.

Kelin and Thistle stooped in order to walk into the interior.

“Sorry ‘bout that.” Carak winced at the angle of their backs. “Not many non-dwarf visitors here, obviously. Or any visitors.”

“I’ve been here before, to War’kiln,” Kelin protested. “You never even mentioned this place.”

Gnirun shrugged. “Never had a reason to.”

Thalon dashed forward and pressed his nose and hands against the glass. The wind stirred some snow against it. The boy’s mouth dried. The world was ice and frozen rock on the other side of the glass, and seemingly endless.

The palace had been carved from the peak of the mountain itself. Nearby, higher peaks were already losing a battle to a growing blizzard. The boy’s view began to fade in the blowing snow.

Carak adjusted his spectacles. He smiled down at Thalon. “Would be on a good day, we could see all the mountains and glaciers.”

Gnirun suddenly frowned. He marched across the hall and glared up at a skylight. “Damn glacier’s covering it up again!” The old dwarf lord growled and stomped over to a trapdoor in the wall. He yanked it open.

A delicate, glass tray rested on a golden table. Multi-colored river stones glowed gently in the electric lantern’s light.

Gnirun shoved his hand in the dish, nearly knocking the table over. He selected a red stone and chucked it down a tiny trap door opening near the elevator.

He turned around. “Red means send up the heat.”

Chloe rubbed her arms. “We should be freezing.”

Carak grinned. “Right, but it is on the other side of the windows. You can’t even spit, little one, without it freezin’ fore it hits in the ground. They’re not actually glass, you see, it’s actually an old dwarven—”

Gnirun suddenly coughed explosively.

Carak scowled. “I don’t see why not. We’ve taken them up here, after all.”

The old dwarf didn’t drop his glare. Carak sighed and slouched.

“That still doesn’t explain why it’s not cold,” Thalon piped up.

“Heat from way down in the rock,” Gnirun replied. “We pump it up. It’s like a volcano, but without the nasty effects.”

“So you can live on the top of a peak in the middle of winter,” Kelin said.

“Indeedy. Safer than even Silver Dawn’s Horizon. No army could ever march up here, and best yet, they don’t even know it’s here!” He stomped over to a velvet couch and parked his leather and chainmail clad rump on it. “Hence, it should be safe enough to speak yer troubles here.”

Kelin sighed and turned away from the window. “I don’t know where to start. I guess... Well, you know about the troubles in Quon. We heard talk yesterday about something going missing with Alscane’s navy.”

Gnirun frowned. “Aye, heard something about that too. They’s been buyin’ up the most expensive metals.”

“Mithril and adamantis. I used to be a blacksmith.”

“What are those?” Chloe asked. “I didn’t used to be a blacksmith.”

Carak smiled. "Mithril is mined; it's strong and light. Adamantis is the strongest metal known in the world. And it's so very rare, because it only falls from the sky. Wicked heavy it is, though."

"Falls from the sky?" Chloe's face bunched up. "You're playing with me. Everyone knows that rocks don't fall from the sky."

"Oh yes, they do," Gnirun chuckled. "In great fireballs."

"Really?" Chloe tapped her foot.

Gnirun laughed and held up his hands. "Really, little princess. And we watch the skies for them."

Carak added, "And Alscane wanted it all, until their treasure fleet failed to return. Then more ships disappeared. That's all we know. Dwarves are not welcome in the streets there."

"Why not?" Thalon asked. "They're buying from you."

Carak shrugged.

"Moving on," Gnirun grumbled. "So name yer *particular* troubles, unless ye've been lootin' Alscane's ships."

The rest of the party took a seat on the floor, if only to avoid crouching. Thistle knelt upright. "They're after us. Obviously."

"Chemmen?"

He shook his head.

"We don't know," Kelin said. "We honestly thought so until earlier, today? Yesterday? I don't know, when we were in town."

"This got anything to do with that battle between Thealith and Urael a few months ago? You know, the wizard and dragon?"

Carak remarked, "The one that both sides are pretending never happened."

"Yeah." Kelin nodded, trying to nail his gaze straightforward and not look at Chloe.

"It was Der's fault," Thistle said.

Gnirun smiled. "She just can't help herself, can she? But, unlike ye, at least she knows ye can't fight destiny."

"Maybe," Kelin grunted. "But you don't need to go charging off after it either."

"Bah. Some chase, and others have the beast jump on their backs."

Carak readjusted his spectacles. "And you're certain it's not the chemmen? Undead are a common *modus operandi* for them."

Thistle shrugged. "We'll always wonder if some escaped the Second Banishment just like we did with the First. Of course, Darkreign is dead beneath their feet. Who knows? I might be the last chemman left alive."

Gnirun's voice clipped along, "Well, I don't feel sorry for yer people. They killed their own land, and I say, givin' it back to them was a kinder gesture than they deserved."

Thistle shrugged.

"So if it's not the chemmen..." Kelin petered out.

Thalon said, "What about Senna's cult? The wizard followed him."

"Maybe," Kelin sighed. "And the chemmen did use them for their dirty work before, but I don't know."

Gnirun's gaze strayed toward the white-out through the window. "Most people don't think we dwarves watch the stars. We do. And we've been watchin' the demon's star rising behind Mendelin's star." He paused and his face softened behind his beard. "We don't just look for those meteors of adamantis. We watch the planets and the moons, and no matter what anyone tells ye, alignments ain't worth spit.

"But there are these things way up in the sky without light or color. Things that make other lights disappear, in fact. These things give off spikes of energy – some say magic, but who knows? And sometimes, bits of that energy can come to earth. Our instruments—"

"What instruments?" Kelin interrupted.

"Ones we don't tell humans about, so, be thankful yer hearin' this much and keep yer damn mouth closed." His voice relaxed immediately, "Something fell over Urael, oh, seven or eight years ago."

His gaze dropped like a hammer to the children. "This ain't the chemmen. It's not their usual style, and I don't think they've ever had a new haircut since the First Banishment."

Thalon's stare couldn't match that of the old dwarf. "The wizard was after Chloe," he whispered.

Gnirun's voice was as cold as the glacier, "Not only he then, ain't it?"

Carak pointed toward the skylight. "We keep watching the stars, and something else is coming. There are holes between the stars widening into nothing but the void."

Kelin shifted uneasily. The children inched closer together.

Gnirun grunted, deep in his throat. He watched the winds whipping around the snow against the window. "War'kiln probably ain't safe enough either, not if they saw ye in Quon. We can provide ye shelter, but it won't stop the storms outside."

Chapter Nine

Queen of the Mountain

The blizzard whistled and raged against the mountain peaks, and snow ricocheted off the rocks like a tidal surf. Der frowned as she and the others stared up the slopes, rapidly losing their field of vision to the snowy blur. Their training had already driven them into early summer faster than they'd imagined. Sweat started to seep into her clothing down here at the base, but winter wasn't letting go up on the mountain.

Spring had seemed to last as long as a thunderclap, and the long summer sun was already warming up the unpopulated plains around Horizon. Der had hardly even seen Jakkobb or Goldie. Weapons and formation training had been one very sore blur.

The candidates ran down and up the citadel's approach every dawn, and every dawn, it was hell. Some nights, they got no sleep to rest up for the run. The dragoons still attacked with surprise nightly raids.

And now this.

Der, Irma, Alluvius and the other candidates continued to gaze up and up at the mountain. Behind them, Horizon looked small. The mountain in front of them didn't.

They stood rigidly in their lines, even more so than usual. Strival, knight-commander, strode in front of the ranks. Der hadn't seen him since her interview. His golden armor, chased in red, glowed against the sunlight. Behind him, Jakkobb, Bristlebeard and few other dragoon knights stood to attention.

"This is for the individual warrior! This is not for your units! I want to know who is the best of this year's lot."

Der shifted against the weight of her backpack. They'd all gotten identical kits. Her hand rested against the comforting hilt of her sword. For a moment, she traced the curving patterns of the intricate knots until her fingers found that they weren't there. Even after these months, she still longed for her Pallens sword.

Strival marched in front of the candidates, briefly studying each face. "The one who returns with the flag that has been planted on the peak of the mountain will be allowed to sleep instead of running the approach for a week."

Faces brightened up, and the candidates stood a little straighter.

The commander tossed his arm up behind him. "However, you will make decisions about your survival on your way up this maze. Make no mistake, your life will depend on the choices that you make!" He stepped out of the way between the candidates and the mountain. "Now go!"

The candidates ran. The voice of authority had yelled.

Irma pushed herself faster to catch up to Der. She groaned under the backpack's weight. "Do you think they'll ambush us?"

Der's gaze didn't waver from the mountain's peak. Or what would have been the mountain's peak if it were visible. She grinned. "When have they not? Remember that time on the approach?"

Irma was already panting. "And then they always point out what we did wrong."

“Right.” For the first time, Der glanced around. Behind her, Alluvius cantered while everyone else passed him. She jogged backward and waved her hands. “Come on!”

He shook his head and cupped his hands. “No thanks! If my life depends on it, I’ll let everyone else find the traps first.”

Der spun around and kept running up the slope. “What kind of logic is that? Oh well, one less person to outrun.” She let her legs pull her along. Blood beat faster throughout her body, she could feel it, and she surged faster. It felt like she was riding a wave.

Irma watched her go. Alluvius jogged up beside her. She said, “I don’t understand. Girls just aren’t that fast.”

“Tis strange about her, no?”

“Some of the stories though... Do you think the king of the elves gave her some powers?”

Alluvius barked a laugh. “Probably not, but who knows?”

The slope had gotten steeper and the trees had gotten smaller and eventually vanished. Der zigged around patches of snow.

Somewhere along the way, it had started to rain. Up here, the rain was freezing against the rock.

She straightened her back and stretched. She hadn’t seen another candidate in hours. Grinning, she hoped that meant she was in the lead. Also grin-worthy, she hadn’t been ambushed either. The only thing not going her way was the rain.

She dropped to the ground and put her hand on her sword. She tugged her gray cloak around her body in an effort to make herself less visible. Her eyes scanned the boulders and the snow.

She hadn’t been ambushed yet, and she intended to keep it that way.

Probably hiding on the shortcuts too, she thought, that’s what I would do. Of course, she had always been told that taking shortcuts on mountains was not a good idea, but those people hardly ever got to the summit anyway.

Der had looked at the mountains, and decided to climb the steepest slope first. That way, all the others would be easy in comparison. Wind sighed and rain splattered around her. Ice clung to the millions of pebbles.

After a few minutes, Der wiggled her fingers down to her belt and scooped up the brass compass that Jakkobb had gifted her. It was amazing! Even with the mountain in the way, it still pointed faithfully north. Of course, the mountain was just up. She didn’t actually need the compass for that, but in her heart, she knew it had probably given her an edge.

She let the thoughts of the compass drift away from her mind and she continued to watch the mountain. Eventually, she drew her sword and stood up. Still no ambush. But she knew they were out there. She retreated a single pace.

And slipped.

“No!”

The snow hiding the glacier disappeared under her boot. She landed on her back and accelerated down the sloping ice.

“No, no!” She tried to turn her head to see where the glacier was sloping, but the backpack seemed to be a magnet to the ice, and she couldn’t spin around to see where she was sliding.

She struck at the glacier with her sword. Ice chips sprayed across her face and up her nostrils. "Now I'm behind!"

Trees sprouted up along the edge of the glacier. "No! Not the tree line!"

For the second time, she tried to turn around, but the backpack was a lodestone. She grunted and heaved her shoulders and even stabbed at the ice again. She heaved and finally caught a fragment of vision behind her.

Some of the glacier curved away, but directly below, the river of ice boasted a very cut-off line.

She lashed out with her blade. The sword ricocheted and struck her leg. She hissed in pain, and the sword rebounded right out of her hand.

"Oh, godsdamnit."

Again, she craned her neck. Her slide was fast nearing the edge. The sword slipped down along beside her.

At the last half second, Der thrust out with her hands and scrabbled for whatever purchase she could.

Her fingers caught a sharp bump while her feet flipped out over the abyss. She heaved with all her might and managed to hang on to the little ice lip. The sword clattered over the edge.

She held her breath. She tried to see over her shoulder, but once again, her backpack was in the way.

"Great."

She heaved and tried to pull herself back onto the glacier. She managed to get up to her elbows. She felt the hot blood leaking from her leg down into her boot, and then falling off into space.

Then she noticed that her precarious grip on the little lip of ice was already melting from the heat from her hands. She wasn't sure if the icy spikes shooting through in her hands was pain or actual ice splinters.

"Oh, no, no. Stop."

She kicked her feet uselessly against the wall of the glacier.

"Der?"

She tried to turn her head, but couldn't see around her backpack. "Alluvius? I didn't know that you could fly."

"I can't." His voice sounded only a couple of feet below her. "You can let go now."

She clung tighter to the ice. "Um, so I'm not about to fall hundreds of feet, start a rockslide and die in twisted agony?"

"No, but you're welcome to join us in freezing to death."

Gingerly, she let her grip on the ice slip. She slid backward, grimaced as she fell, and then her boots landed on the ground.

"Heh." She grinned and picked up her sword.

Alluvius rolled his eyes. "Well, this is our camp."

Der turned to see Irma and two dwarves bent over a pile of pine needles and branches. Irma banged her dagger against a flint, but none of the sparks caught in the fine rain. Firth stalked around against the trees. He snarled at her.

Alluvius sat back down and picked up his whetstone and dagger.

She shaded her eyes and studied the view. Good glassing point, she mused, using the hunting term she had just learned last week. She could see nearly half of the mountain, and hopefully anyone hunting them.

Wincing, she eased the backpack off her shoulders.

“Yer bleedin’.” One of the dwarves pointed at her leg.

Der shrugged.

In the background, Firth barked a laugh. “Great, now we’re stuck with the hero too.” He kicked his own backpack.

“We’ll never get this fire going.” Irma buried her face inside her cloak. “And we’ll all freeze when it gets dark.”

The pine needles smoldered and coughed up some smoke. The pile of twigs and wood remained staunchly soaked. The dwarves held their hands over the pine needles.

“Already freezing a little higher up,” Der added.

“Yeah.” Alluvius smirked and looked up from sharpening his dagger. “And exactly what led you to come flying down the glacier?”

“Slippery ice.”

“It’s amazing that the hero isn’t dead yet,” Firth snarled. “You know, you wouldn’t ever believe this cute little *girl* could believe herself to be a warrior.”

Der refused to limp as she marched over to the trees. She put her hands on her hips and matched his gaze. “This whole time, you’ve been no more than a rock in a horse’s shoe. If you want to insult me, fine, but I’m not going to keep letting this slide. If you want to pick a fight with me, I’m right here.”

“And I no longer am.” His cloak swirled as he spun around and marched up into the pine covered slope.

“Hey!” Der tripped over his backpack. She sighed and picked it up while she limped back down to the not-as-of-yet campfire.

“Sadly, he’s got a point though,” Alluvius said. “You are too cute to be taken seriously as a warrior.”

“I saved the elven kingdom! What more do I have to do? Travel to the past and save Pallens as well?”

One of the dwarves snickered. “Wouldn’t do a damn thing. ‘Tis how you look, Miss Saxen.”

She dropped Firth’s backpack. “What? Do I need a disfiguring scar?”

Alluvius raised his dagger and whetstone level with his eye. He slid the stone across the blade’s edge. “Well, I am sharpening my knife right now. Although for a really disfiguring scar, I could leave it dull.”

She tapped the extra backpack with her foot. “He’s going to need this. Honestly, he could die without it.”

Irma shook her head. “Doubtful. The mountain’s probably got as many dragoons as trees.”

Alluvius snatched it up. “And I bet most of the stuff in here is dry enough to burn, and we can hold the backpack over the fire so the rain doesn’t put it out!”

A murmur of approval rumbled around the group. Der still frowned and looked into the trees beyond while the others tore apart the pack. Immediately, they lit up Firth’s rope and the party grinned at the first sign of heat.

Irma ate some of the nuts from the pack. "Best marching food."

"Hand me some," one of the dwarves said. "It's my birthday today anyway."

"What's a birthday?" Der asked.

Irma paused in passing over a handful of mixed nuts. "Never heard of that either."

"Tis the early anniversary of the day I was born. So I know how old I am."

Der frowned. "But everyone just gets one year older on the summer solstice because that's the new year."

"Simpler that way too," Irma remarked.

Alluvius smirked. "Elves start with a year celebration, then it's ten years, and then one hundred, and, well, you get the idea." He rubbed his mostly pointed ears.

"Most of the officers aren't human," Irma pointed out.

The two dwarves nodded. "The high ranks all seem to be elves."

Der nodded. "Well, if they don't die, who is going to replace them?"

"I hear that Strival's been around there forever," the other dwarf said. "And we all know his life's ambition."

"No, we don't." Der shook her head. "Is commanding the world's most renowned army not enough?"

Alluvius laughed. "Oh, it's a good story. But it winds up that his goal is he wants a rematch with his teacher."

"Who is?" Irma prompted.

"Zine."

Der snorted. "The god of war and justice. I wouldn't dare."

"Yes, you probably would," Alluvius immediately replied.

She rolled her eyes and started to walk the perimeter of their little site.

The part human continued, "Way, way, way back when. Strival was not even a warrior."

Irma chuckled. "Unlikely."

"And he was joyfully frolicking through the forest, singing the praises of the earth and to the forest animals. You know? Like everyone says elves do? Anyway, he's skipping along and he closes his eyes as he sings and lets the spirit of the forest guide him when *wham!* He runs into a tree. Knocks himself out. When he comes round, there's this dwarf, see? Laughing his beard right off—"

"Something's different," Der interrupted, and jerked her thumb into the trees. "We shouldn't stay here."

"But, we just got the fire going." Irma pointed.

"So make a torch. Something's different out there. Dragoons or bears, take your pick."

"This isn't supposed to be for teams." Irma scooted further away from the others.

"Says the woman at the campfire," one of the dwarves chuckled.

"Well," the other dwarf said to Der, "You know the way better than us."

"Right, we can all slide down the glacier." Der frowned. "I'm not taking everyone up that way. I don't mind taking myself, but I'm not takin' anyone else."

"But the first one to the peak..."

“And I bet he’s already there. No, it’s too dangerous for everyone. We’re in danger of freezing here and you want to go higher? It’s not worth a week of not running the approach. If you want that, you go on ahead. I’m not taking you.” Her eyes scanned the forest, looking for the source of the churning in her gut. She glanced over at the direction Firth had stormed off.

“But,” Irma protested, “Those are our orders.”

“And they’re stupid orders.”

“We have to take them,” Alluvius said. “No matter how awful. We’ll get in trouble.”

“Being in trouble is not as bad as you all seem to think.” She crossed her arms. “I’m not taking you.”

“This is not what I would expect from Derora Saxen,” Alluvius said.

“Well, damn.” She slouched forward. “I must be growing up.” She snorted, and then spun and kicked the glacier as hard as she could.

CRACK! Her foot ricocheted off the ice and right into her hands. “Ow! Ow! Ow!” She bounced around on her other foot and grunted against the pain.

Irma rushed over. “Oh my gods. Wasn’t that the leg you cut too? Sit down!”

Alluvius laughed, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. “No, I don’t think you are growing up.”

Der started to smile, but she suddenly stopped halfway into making the expression. “Line! Fall into a line!” She freed her sword from its sheath and sprinted toward the campfire.

Irma jumped to her feet. “What?”

A flash of silver skimmed between her and the dwarves and crashed into the fire. Sparks and ashes jumped into the air. The flash materialized into a throwing axe, steel shining in the flames.

“Ambush!” Alluvius yelled.

The candidates fell into a well practiced formation.

Ground diamonds reflected brighter than the ice along the edges of Strival’s sword. The golden knight-commander emerged from the trees. “My instructions were clear.”

Jakkobb, Cacilin, Bristlebeard and a few other dragoon soldiers followed him.

The commander raised his eyebrows. “I said to go it alone.”

“Yeah, well, sir, your order was stupid,” Der immediately replied.

Behind Strival, Jakkobb closed his eyes and winced.

The commander only paused for a brief second. “I suppose that is one approach. Would you care to try your response again?”

“Alright. Your order was stupid, sir.”

In unison, Alluvius and Irma each stepped on one of Der’s feet.

She wobbled for balance. “Hey!”

The part human smoothed out his hair quickly. “Um, officers, Miss Saxen was not part of our team. She rather landed on us by accident when she fell off the glacier.”

“Glacier, Der? Honestly?” Jakkobb cocked an eyebrow.

Der whirled on Alluvius. “What do you mean I’m suddenly not part of the team? You just asked me to lead you!”

“And now we’re disinviting you.”

Cacilin put in mildly, “So what we overheard about ascending as a team was not true?”

“Overheard?” Der slapped her hands on her hips. She nodded at Strival “And how do you hide in gold armor?” Then she added, “Sir.”

“You didn’t spot us.”

Der deflated with a sigh.

Strival lifted his eyebrows. “Despite my order?”

As one, the candidates’ faces fell. Irma gulped. “Are we going to be dismissed for this?”

“You did disobey a direct order. My order.” A hint of a smile flickered on his face. “There are two ways to pass this test. One is to be the king of the mountain. The other is to band together.”

“Wait.” Alluvius straightened back up. “This whole thing was a trick?”

“So...” Irma sucked her tongue. “We’re not going to be ambushed?”

“Oh, you are.” Strival grinned. “Ah-hem, on guard.” He raised his diamond-edged sword.

The candidates raised their swords and axes against the officers.

Strival’s sword knocked aside both of dwarven axes and he touched them both with the flat of his blade in less than a second.

Der’s sword banged against Cacilin’s in that same moment. Months of sword training sprang up in her mind.

Their sword instructor, a stout human named Jashan, marched up the line. “Real sword play isn’t dramatic! It isn’t flashy! It is done to kill people.”

Der parried and drove the tip of her sword at his heart. The judicar blocked her strike.

Meanwhile, Bristlebeard’s axe tore at Irma’s knees. Alluvius tried to spare a parry for her, but Jakkobb and his battleaxe took up his entire world.

Der also tried to steer her combat closer to Irma and Alluvius. She’d completely forgotten about her injured leg. It smarted, but pain was something she’d long ago learned not to notice, kind of like clothing. It was there, but she didn’t have to feel it.

Cacilin grinned at her. “Eyes forward!”

She tried to take another sidestep.

And he stuck his sword right in her path.

She scowled at him, and he laughed. Then she ducked her shoulder and charged. She caught him in the gut by surprise. He stumbled backward.

You don’t have to hit with all your might. Solid, quick touches. Keep yourself free, especially when you have more than one opponent. And when you’re down, aim for the knees.

Bristlebeard and Jakkobb finished off Irma and Alluvius in synchronized strikes.

Cacilin saluted Der with his sword and spun away. She jumped to follow. And nearly collapsed when she put weight on her injured leg.

She might be able to ignore the pain, but she couldn’t ignore the wound any longer.

So she thrust after the judicar, and a different sword parried. Strival slotted into Cacilin’s place.

Der felt her mouth dry. This was the greatest swordsman in the entire world. Suddenly, she grinned and felt the pain ebb and energy surge.

Keep your movements small! Large enough to be effective, but small enough not to waste time. Smaller is faster. It may take a strong sword to parry an opponent, but a fast man doesn’t even have to make that parry because his opponent’s already dead.

Der took one cross step. The knight-commander took an opposite one. They started to circle one another.

She feinted and offered a half-hearted thrust. Strival didn't even waste a parry.

Everyone else turned to watch. All the other candidates were already "dead".

Der lunged again and found that she had to immediately retreat, parrying wildly against a sudden onslaught. She'd never even felt his first parry!

Their swords weaved through the air, and she felt the huge notches appearing in her blade all through her shoulder.

She swallowed an eruption of panic at the same time she felt her throat dry. There wasn't even a hint of an opening. There were no clues. There was no way in!

Der had never known the feeling of being outclassed before. Certainly, Jakkobb and Thistle and others had been better than she, but that was only because they'd had more practice. Against Strival, she knew that no amount of practice would save her. The whole fight unrolled in her mind, and no matter what trick she tossed out or whatever she could make up on the spot, he could counter it.

Oh well. Might as well get struck down swinging.

Change the tempo. If your opponent is used to you moving as fast as you can, suddenly go slow. They'll react too quickly.

Der barely skimmed by against another strike. She knew, she *knew*, that he wasn't going as fast as he could. She returned with a painfully slow thrust. The commander's arm didn't even flinch.

Halfway through the slow lunge, she hurled all of her strength and speed into the thrust. Her sword shot forward like a lightning bolt.

Of course, he blocked and her right arm was extended way too far forward to ever have any hope of drawing her sword back in time to defend against any attack.

This also meant her empty left hand was closer to her opponent. She balled a fist and let it fly.

Crunch! Her fist pushed deep into Strival's nose, which bent away from her knuckles.

The sun froze in its arc across the sky. The birdsong suddenly quieted, and the wind stopped blowing.

His diamond-edged sword tapped against her stomach. It pressed into her mesh armor, just enough to let her know.

The world lurched, and suddenly spun back into motion. Der raised her hands and dropped her sword while trying very hard not to double forward in pain.

A gasp circled through the watchers. Jakkobb's eyes threatened to burst out of his face. Bristlebeard dropped to his knees and his mouth hung open. Cacilin blinked rapidly, as if blinking enough would correct his vision.

Strival raised up a hand and pressed the other against his broken nose. "Well, that's what we trained them to do. Almost, anyway."

Alluvius' face contorted like he had just felt the earth shift beneath his feet and awaited the worst of the earthquake.

"What?" Der pointed at the gawkers. "He just said it was a fair hit."

Strival began to nod. He stopped halfway.

The glacier moaned. Two distinct loud pops blared through the air. And suddenly, millions of tons of ice instantly thawed.

The unfrozen water roared like the death of a thunder god. It held the shape of the glacier for a heartbeat, and then the flood charged.

“Trees!” Strival commanded.

They sprinted to the few feet to the trees. At least these trees were shielded from a direct blast of the flood by rock.

Der wrapped her arms around a trunk and hugged the pine with all her strength.

The icy catastrophe exploded around her and the others. The water was so cold that it was numbing.

“Is...this...a test?” one of the dwarves yelled about the meltwater rapids.

“What...you think?” Bristlebeard hollered back.

Der twisted her head. The water was already up to her knees. But down the slope, without the rock protection, the flood was hauling out the trees by the roots. At least they seemed safe enough here...

She bit off the thought as chunks of stone shot past her leg.

Irma screamed. The water ripped her away from the tree, leaving her tearing at handfuls bark. Her body bounced up, buoyed by the water.

Der reached out and dove after her.

She managed to grab onto a length of bark still in Irma’s hand. She felt her own body rise up in the water. And then her foot stuck.

Behind her, Jakkobb grasped her ankle in one of his massive hands. “What were you going to do next, stupid?” he roared louder than the flood.

“I knew you’d catch me!” she hollered back. She pushed her other hand into the flow of the rapids and grabbed Irma’s length of bark with both hands. “Hold on!”

“I can’t, Der! I’m scared!” Her hands slipped on the bark.

“Hold on!”

“Don’t let me go! Don’t let me go!”

The water eroded Irma’s grip, and the flood captured her.

“No!” Der yelped.

As instantly as the ice melted, it refroze.

The ice entombed most of Irma’s and Der’s bodies in their prone positions. Der struggled; the ice was stronger. She could barely move enough to breathe. She tried to lift her chin, but it was frozen in place. Her back was arched and her arms and legs outstretched and completely encased in ice.

The others clinging to the trees struggled to free their legs.

“What the hell was that?” Alluvius blurted.

“Call the dragons.” Strival ordered. “Get us out of here and everyone else off the mountain. Then we’ll find out what the hell is going on.”

Chapter Ten

Into the Fire

The children, Kelin and Thistle gazed at the stars as they twinkled against the open sky. The sky lightened to a dark violet by their illumination.

"I wish we could go after this bastard." Kelin folded his arms and his eyes fell back to earth.

"But we have to watch the children." Thistle's face coasted down to them.

Ahead of them, the kids laughed and banged their frothy milk mugs together. They quieted down as nearby booms echoed across the open-air city of Humbolt.

Tonight, the dwarves celebrated Ansite. Something about a god's hammer touching the earth and turning some rocks into valuable minerals.

Chloe smiled anyway. Shortly after the initial booms, fireworks mixed with the stars overhead. A red rose blossomed in the sky overhead. Then a massive sphere of multi-colored lights. More and more followed.

She'd never seen fireworks before. Fire in the sky. Her mouth hung open as she stared up and up at the show.

The dwarves continued to shoot up the lights. They'd arranged shapes in the heavens, written in colorful flames. A golden axe replaced another rose, and a row of firework mountains overpowered the axe.

Tears lined Chloe's cheeks.

A face burst into existence up high, underneath the stars.

"Wow," she breathed.

The shape didn't fade. Instead, the particles of fire swept together and the face came into focus. The face of the boy with the censer smirked. He picked his teeth with the claw of a skeletal cat's foot. "I've been looking for you."

"No!" she screamed at the sky.

"No!" she screamed at the ceiling. Chloe yanked her bed sheets over her head.

"What! What!" Thalon struggled away from his own bedding. One of his long knives appeared in his hand, and he cut his foot free from the tangled web of cloth while he bounced across the room to Chloe's bed. He tugged at her bedding.

Her fingers still clung to the sheets as she looked around the room, completely puzzled. "But we were just outside watching fireworks."

"That was last night," Thalon said. "You were dreaming." A smile pounced on his face. "That was the best thing! Did you see the ones that changed color? Of course you did, you were there too!"

Chloe rubbed the sweat on her forehead. "Oh. Right. Dreaming."

"So." He wagged his pinky finger. "We'd better get back to sleep. Got school come dawn." He rested his hands behind his head as he lay back down. "Damn it. I wish we didn't."

"Watch your language." But her heart wasn't in it. She sighed and hesitated to rest her head back down on the pillow. "Kelin says we're lucky. He and Der never got a chance to go to school."

“But it’s so boring. We’ve been stuck in one place for far too long.”

“Thalon, I’d never been more than a mile away from my cabin before.”

The boy sat up. “What? Honestly?”

“Yes!”

“But now you’ve seen mountains and castles!”

“And people who are trying to kill me.” She pulled the sheets up to her chin. “I don’t want this power. Never did. I want my uncle, but he’s gone now too. I want my grandfather, but he doesn’t want me with him.”

“But, but, that was to protect you. And we’re friends!”

Chloe squirmed. “Of course, but... Let’s just sleep, alright?”

“Alright.”

Within a minute, she heard his breathing deepen. She rolled her head back onto her pillow and refused to fall asleep. Not if she was going to dream again.

The autumn wind carried leaves across the streets of Humbolt. Unlike War’kiln, it wasn’t much different from any high altitude human settlement Kelin had ever seen, aside from the ceilings being shorter. He’d developed a permanent bruise on the crown of his skull.

The dwarves trotted around them, preparing the city for another day. Kelin strolled alongside Chloe while Thalon marched behind them, carrying a pile of leather-bound tomes.

The boy locked his knees and staggered after them. “I’ve heard the weight of knowledge is” – grunt– “Heavy, but I don’t think this is what they meant.” Grunt.

Chloe let a golden leaf glide across her fingertips. “Where’s Thistle? He’s always here.”

“Elloan,” Kelin replied shortly. His gaze traveled up the slope of the nearby foothills to the specific ring of trees surrounding an ancient lodgepole pine. “We need more information, Chloe. You know we can’t keep running forever.”

“We’re not running.” Thalon’s voice was muffled by the books piled up to his nose. “We’re going to school. That is not running.”

A dwarf child ran up behind Thalon and shoved the boy in the back. “Got you!” The dwarf took off sprinting ahead.

“Hey!” Thalon called and tried to jog under the weight of the books.

Other laughing children swirled around them. Their beards were just starting to grow and barely passed their chins. Chloe giggled and took off running with the other children into the stone school building.

“Wait up!” Thalon called. “Um, uh. *Gakwa kreik!*”

Kelin tried to snuff out a laugh.

“What?”

“You didn’t say wait. You said ‘eat a flowery canyon’.”

“Aw!” He started to waddle faster under the books. “Wait for me!”

Kelin chuckled as the boy disappeared into the building. He unbuckled his sword and rested his back against the wall. He pulled out a cheap scroll and unrolled the crinkled paper. The dwarfish language was coming so much easier to him now.

The Humbolt library wasn't much, not even by dwarven standards. However, it housed an idea that Kelin had never encountered before: fiction. Every week, he read a new chapter of the *Adventures of Casem the Rogue*.

Casem was a dwarf, naturally, but he didn't know where he was born and he didn't know his family's lineage. And you can't have a dwarf hero without a family history, Kelin had learned through reading this. So, every time he saved his fellow dwarves, his deeds were annulled by the various councils and dwarf kingdoms. Hence, he was a rogue instead of a hero.

Kelin loved every adventure. Casem could do all the things that Kelin thought might be interesting to try. And the best part of it was that all these adventures happened without any actual danger to Kelin. Compared with what he'd actually been through, it was relaxing to read about dark lords and dragon armies.

He laughed along with the plot and unrolled the scroll out to its full length. He barely noticed the chilly breeze sweeping down from the foothills. Was it autumn already?

The cooling breeze chased the falling leaves across the wild gardens inside Moonrise Castle. Behind the thick grove of gladioli and other late blooming flowers, Evelyn of Elloan bowed her head toward a little wooden shrine.

In the back of this garden, the small, rickety shrine leaned obliquely against the wall. In this castle, where everything was timeless or new, this wood wasn't ever polished. Rot ate merrily away at its base. Intricate whittling and carvings were hinted at, but much of the fine detail had faded long ago. Plants besieged it on all sides, and their growth sneaked closer every year.

Inside its missing doors, flames burned brilliantly without wick or candle. Every few seconds, the color of the flame would change along the spectrum of the rainbow. One eternal flame burned for each who had died inside Moonrise Castle, foe or friend, and four others for those who had died far away but remained close to the lady's heart.

There were many flames.

The baroness remembered every one of them. There were two for the late king and queen. And two, much older ones.

Her multi-faceted eyes fell down to the oldest flames, whose edges burned black after all this time. One for her husband. And one for her son.

Slowly, reluctantly, as if her muscles ached with age, she turned her back to the shrine.

Thistle, standing like a statute, bowed stiffly when she looked at him. "Thank you for seeing me, my lady."

She nodded once and walked away from the shrine with heavy footfalls. "Anything to keep your children safe." She threaded her long, slender fingers through the gladioli blooms of the garden. "I know how hard it was for you to leave your son."

"I have faith in him."

"Sometimes, faith in your son isn't enough," she replied hollowly. The lady straightened her shoulders and offered a convincing, winsome smile. "Come to the kitchen, I divine better there."

Thistle followed the lady at a small distance. "It is no end of amazement to me that you would meet with a chemman, especially unescorted."

Her small laugh charmed the air around her, and brought with it the redolence of roses. "It should be less surprising, sir. I know what's in your heart."

"I suppose you know what's in the hearts of all living creatures."

"Well..." She smiled as she stepped inside her massive kitchen. "That might diminish my reputation if I denied such an assumption." She frowned at the kitchen, empty except for a couple of clucking hens wandering around. "I'm always loathe to see a barren kitchen, but for today perhaps it is best."

She pulled a worn ceramic bowl from a shelf and set it under the water pump.

Thistle stopped with his foot in the air. It just didn't look right: the lady, in such an elegant and well fitting silk gown shouldn't pump water while chickens strolled by her feet.

He set his foot down. Moonrise Castle wasn't his world. It was the lady's world. And a world, apparently, where the chickens went outside to mess. The kitchen's floor was clean as a polished statue.

She set the bowl of water on the counter. Two of the hens rolled an egg each with their beaks to her feet. "Thank you." She smiled and collected the eggs. She broke one in each hand into the bowl. She stirred it gently with a spoon and then let the motion continue on its own.

The chemman lifted his eyebrows. He'd heard of scrying by water, but by the egg? He watched the yolks start to swirl in opposite directions.

The lady spoke, "I'm glad this child is under your protection. If there is anyone skilled enough at hiding from the powers that hunt, it is you. She is still in as much peril as the last time you were here. I've only seen glimpses of the form of the boy after her. Alas, I do not know his location. He is under protection of his own." She closed her eyes and hummed. "You wish this burden was not yours."

He sighed. "Yes." He paused, but let himself continue; she probably already knew it anyway. "I almost wish that vampire were still around. Not that I trust him, but he has proven that he can take care of himself and her."

Evelyn nodded and leaned closer toward the swirling eggs. A thin line of sweat formed across her brow. Finally, she pulled herself away from the bowl and breathed out. "He still does not want to be found. Without some physical lead, I can find nothing of him."

"My point, my lady."

"Indeed, and well made."

"I also wonder, is something seeking us out by scrying? I wish to be able to peer back."

She leveled her face over the eggs and water again. She frowned at the mixture. "I'm not sure if this predacious spirit was ever human. Now it just looks like a boy, even a little like your son."

Thistle glowered. "Nothing like. It will not cause any hesitation in my blade."

"Of course not."

He realized that he was tapping his foot rapidly. He slammed his heel down. "Forgive me, my lady."

"You're a hunter, and now you're the one who is hunted. I know. And I also know that you want to hunt this spirit. That's why you want me to find it."

Thistle grunted. "How else will I know that the children are safe?"

"Is not Kelin a worthy protector?"

"He is. That's why I'm here."

“Yes. I have spoken with my people too. I fear that it may be related to the banshee and other disturbances. Have you seen any other natural phenomena that shouldn’t be possible?”

“The snow tornado,” he replied, “You witnessed that. And, in Quon, there was lightning that didn’t fade.”

“Hm. I’ve afraid I’ve been awash with both mysteries, and no time to cook either.”

“Mistress!” An elf maid in a yellow dress burst into the kitchen and fell down into a curtsy. “Forgive the intrusion, but the king! The king is here!”

Evelyn gasped before she could stop herself. “Now?”

“Yes, mistress!”

“I thought you knew when people were coming,” Thistle remarked.

She shook her strawberry blond locks. “Not when people make sudden decisions.” She waved at the maid to stand. “Please bring him to the hall.”

“No need.” King Edillon strode into the kitchen. He wore simple hunting clothing, and a shirt open to the breezes. No crown adorned his platinum hair.

Evelyn curtsied, and Thistle took a few steps backward and looked for another door. It was chemmen who had killed the young king’s parents.

“Allow me to prepare an acceptable dinner in honor of your presence here.” The lady slowly rose from her curtsy.

“Sometimes, I fear that our traditions eat away hours when minutes matter.” He smiled. “However, it does my spirits good to see you again, Lady Evelyn.” He nodded to the chemman. “And you too, Thistle.”

Thistle bowed his head. “I have not forgotten your previous kindnesses to me, Your Majesty.”

“Nor have I forgotten your deeds in return for them.” He stepped further inside the kitchen. “I need information, and from what I have already learned, you are on the same path.”

“Majesty,” Thistle said, “We are protecting the life of a human child; we did not think that you required such information.”

“And I understand that. However, you saw that snow tornado? It is not the only such unnatural event, and I fear that somehow, they may be intertwined. This is much larger than saving one life, I fear.”

Evelyn said, “That odd tornado was in the winter before, Majesty.”

“Yes. Such events have been happening for so long. Near Tenmar, a field of auroch vanished into quicksand, even though the soil there is very much loam.”

“Cows?” Thistle asked. “No people?”

“And, at Silver Dawn, a glacier suddenly melted and refroze,” the king continued. “These events started just as soon as the hunt for the girl that you are protecting began anew. I know what truly happened between Thealith and Urael, that the war was just a cover for a wicked wizard to find the girl.”

“You believe these events are intertwined?” Evelyn speculated.

“I do. I fear that this new danger to her is just the sword. I want to know who is wielding that sword.”

The lady raised her face to evenly meet his eyes, so dark blue right now that they looked purple. She said, "We will not risk an innocent girl, especially if it is she that this thing is seeking."

Edillon smiled wanly. "Of course not. You must see how this is larger than whatever creature is after the child. That is why that creature must be exposed. Now after that battle between the two kingdoms, weren't you saying that there was another with the same power as this child?"

"Another history lesson?" Thalon moaned. "Come on!"

"Quiet!" Chloe hissed. She strained to listen to the language. Something about bridges. No, something about rocks. Rocks were a reasonable guess, at least.

All the dwarves seemed to know Common at least as well as their local dwarf language.

"But it's not even our history!"

"It's really interesting!" Chloe plugged the ear closest to Thalon and concentrated on the teacher's words.

She leaned forward a little more, scowling in concentration. The words weighed on her, forcing her to prop her head up in her palm.

She slumped forward across her desk. She felt like she blinked.

Chloe stared up at the fireworks display against the black sky. Once again, the lights coalesced into that snarling face.

Inside her chest, she felt her power snap against its leash. It fizzled and whirled and whipped around like chained lightning.

It wasn't fair! Either this creature would kill her or her power would! It just wasn't fair!

Thalon knocked over his chair as he leapt to Chloe, who was lying flat across her desk. "Wake up!"

The young dwarves in the room also rushed over. "What's going on?"

"Is she alright?"

Thalon threw his hands into the air. "I don't know. She didn't sleep too good last night."

"Ew! Look, she's starting to drool!"

"Away, children, away." The teacher waded through the turbulent sea of students. "Give her space, everyone, please."

Boom.

Boom. Boom.

Outside the school, the scroll bounced out of Kelin's fingers. He stared as fireworks lit the daytime sky.

He squinted. Who was shooting the things up now?

He narrowed his gaze. They looked wrong – they didn't drift in the wind. Around the town, other dwarves emerged from their buildings and stared up at the clouds.

Kelin hardly noticed them. He shaded his eyes. The ashes were falling down over the town, many of them still burning.

No one was firing them up. They were just raining down.

“Kelin! Kelin!” Thalon hollered from inside the school.

He snatched up his sword off the wall, but stopped.

A hailstorm of fireworks attacked up from the ground, throwing smoke and sparks into the air. Kelin shielded his face against the heat.

“You’ve done a good job hiding like the cowards you are!” The boy with the censer emerged entirely unscathed from the smoke. He was whole and complete, unlike how they’d left him after their last encounter. “Almost made me think that I was going to be late for my master.”

Inside the school, Thalon wrenched Chloe’s shoulder. “Wake up, wakeupwakeupwakeup. We gotta go!”

Her brown eyes flickered open. “Thalon? Were there fireworks?”

“Yeah, and they’re way too close. We gotta go!” He pulled her so hard that they both crashed to the floor.

Thalon didn’t notice and sprung back to his feet, freeing a hidden knife from under his trouser leg. The students watched him with a mix of fear and awe. He blurted, “Well, don’t eat a flowery canyon! Get out of here!”

Kelin brought his sword on guard. The sharpened metal was a great comfort between himself and this undead creature, even though he knew that it wouldn’t do a damn thing.

What was it that Jakkobb had said about fighting wizards?

He scowled. They’d been on their raft on the Dismal Horvath before the battle where Mora died. It hadn’t seemed important then, but it meant everything now.

“You know why warriors don’t beat wizards?” the knight-captain murmured. They watched the distant blur of the army. From their vantage point, it looked like one black molasses mass, oozing toward the river.

“Because they can turn you into a strawberry at sixty paces?” Der asked.

“No.” The knight sighed loudly.

“Strawberry?” Mora rubbed her ear. “Isn’t the answer supposed to be a toad?”

Der shrugged. “I’m hungry. And a toad could do way more damage than even the most irate stra—” Jakkobb slapped her on the back of her head. “Warriors don’t kill wizards because they don’t plan.”

Kelin held his breath and his eyes slid toward the town-center. There must be something he could use!

All around Humbolt, dwarves kicked open their doors of houses and shops, bristling with beards and weapons. They growled and grumbled under their breaths as they looked around to see the boy with the incense censer. He swung it around like a child with a toy.

Kelin opened his dry mouth. “It’s not a boy! It’s undead!”

“Don’t spoil all my fun!” the boy hollered back.

Kelin’s word must have been enough for at least one dwarf. A throwing axe flew over the crowd, racing toward the back of the boy’s skull.

Suddenly, the boy pirouetted, bringing the censer around in a matching arc. The incense container knocked the axe out of its path with mathematical precision.

Kelin tensed. This was his moment!

He spun and dashed into the school. Thalon and Chloe gazed up at him from behind their overturned desks.

“We have to go, now!” he barked.

“But—” Chloe pointed at the dwarf children. The other students hunkered down behind the desks. The room seemed to shake from all of their trembling.

Kelin swallowed. “He’s not after them, he’s after you. They’ll be fine. We have to go, now!”

The pair nodded and he ushered them out the door. Chloe threw her arms over her head as she ran. “Kelin, where are we going?”

“Tree path!”

Thalon ran ahead. “Dad made us practice this!”

“No!” she yelled. “After we get there, where are we going?”

Kelin winced, but didn’t look back. He wasn’t sure how long the dwarves would keep the boy entertained, or even if the necromancer had seen them escaping.

His pace slowed, and he didn’t even realize it until his feet refused to carry him up the mountainside any further. His shoulders drooped and his head hung low.

“Thalon, you know how to use the trees, right?”

The boy spun around, knife at the ready. “Of course. Dad taught me.”

“Then you go ahead.”

“But—” Chloe reached out to Kelin.

“Just go already!”

“No!” She bunched her little fists. “I can help you! I’ve got my power!”

“It’ll kill you!” Thalon shook his head forcefully.

Kelin pursed his lips. “He’s right, Chloe. The last one proved that they can manipulate it against you. Tom’s not here to save you this time.”

“Yes, he is. He’s always there for me!”

Kelin threw up his hands. He certainly couldn’t disprove it, but if the bastard was lurking in the shadows behind them, Kelin would welcome his assistance.

“And, and...” Her hands fell open again. “I want to help.”

Kelin forced a smile as he gazed down at the girl. Her face was pale and her lip was trembling. He said, “And we don’t want you to die, and I want to know that you’re safe. It’ll turn out alright, I promise. But you have to hurry.”

“Promise?”

“I promise that I’ll do my best.”

“And you have to promise no more evil wizards after this.”

“I’ll do my best, Chloe!”

“Come on!” Thalon tugged at her shoulder.

She hesitated for a moment; and then they dashed off up the mountain. Kelin heaved another sigh, and turned back to the dwarven town.

He'd never wanted to be a hero. He'd never even wanted to venture outside the hamlet of Riversbridge. Now he was on a mountainside, trying to kill an undead wizard with Sigard's magical sword. Its only power was to glow, apparently, and therefore, it was as useful as a bent nail.

How was he going to pull this off?

If he were Der, he'd just charge. But she had an impossible sword that could absorb spells, or a vampire to tear her out of death's fingers. So, unlike his friend, he was going to have to think this through.

His treacherous mind thought about the banshee instead. Back when they were first starting to see the dead rising. Banshee, he thought, she screams on the rooftops of those who are about to die. Am I about to die?

No time for those thoughts! He plunged down the mountainside and into the necromancer's range.

The boy swung the censer around the scattering dwarves. Flames sprung out of it like tentacles and lashed at the dwarves' backs.

Kelin ran circumspect around him. He needed to get to the nearest forge!

Most dwarves had blacksmithing skills, it was traditional after all, but the professional blacksmiths had their own forge in the heart of the small town. They'd briefly shown him a sheet of steel a few months ago. They'd been heating the steel at different temperatures so that it would be much stronger when molded.

He'd been lucky that they'd even let him know that much. He just had to hope that they were at the right stage of smelting at the moment.

A whip of fire suddenly exploded in his path. Kelin skidded to a halt, dropping his sword. He knew the boy was right behind him.

"Where is she, meatsuit?"

He didn't even try to pick the weapon back up.

Kelin raised his hands, but didn't turn around. "Not saying a word!"

"Then, die! When you're just a head, you'll tell me everything."

Kelin jumped to the side and ran forward. He heard something hiss by where he'd just been standing.

He barely felt the heat of the censer's fire as he launched himself inside the forge. Immediately, sweat soaked his skin and clothes. It was hotter in here than the flames outside. For the briefest second, he wondered if he'd already been killed and this was hell.

He looked around and immediately banged his head on the ceiling. He barely acknowledged the pain.

Around the red and white glowing furnace were thick metal buckets of silvery liquid steel. There was no armor, not even a piece of a breastplate!

Kelin donned the massive mitts and used them to shield his face from the heat. He could feel the hair along the unprotected parts of his arms curl and begin to just burn off.

How did the dwarves manage it with those heavy beards? Where was the sense in it?

The boy with the censer strolled through the flames and into the heat as if they were a summer breeze. He smirked. "I'm just trying to make it easy for you—"

Splash!

Kelin dropped the now empty bucket of molten steel and ran back to grab another.

The necromancer raised his arms. His skin sizzled and bubbled beneath the liquid metal. He tried to step forward.

Kelin tossed another bucketful; this time at his face. The steel coated the boy's head and shoulders.

The boy fell to his knees, hands still outstretched. Chunks of meat drained off of him along with the metal. Half of his skull fizzled and dissolved. But there wasn't much blood; the solidifying steel contained all the mess. Small fires ignited on the wooden walls where the splashes of steel touched them.

Kelin produced another bucket, this one of water and tossed that on him.

Immediately, the steel began to stiffen and spit out steam. The boy tried to stand, but the steel held its new form.

"Such a thing will not stop me!" The boy managed to raise one finger toward Kelin. "I'll just steal your flesh. Just one touch."

The former blacksmith backed away, holding the bucket like a shield. The steel may or may not have been stronger than other steel he'd encountered, but it was strong enough to encase the necromancer.

"You're absolutely right," Kelin panted. He wondered if Der would've had the energy to sound cheerful right now. He certainly didn't. "But you can't move."

His legs quaked as he jerked the casting bucket back into the fire. He grunted as he pumped the bellows. The fires roared higher around the bucket. "Where the hell is that lousy physician when you need him?"

Peyna, the elf physician who had saved them from the last evil magician after Chloe, while being incredibly aggravating, had known how to fight. He knew about life and death, and what to do when things went incredibly wrong. Meanwhile, Kelin was so spun around when it came to things undead, he didn't even know if were-creatures counted as undead or not.

"You must be referring to that elf mage. I studied what happened with Alcomm. You know, physicians stop when their patients die, can I help if I care more?"

Kelin kicked in the general direction of the head, half deflated in the hardening metal. "Shut it."

"Whatever happened to that girl Alcomm mentioned? Morana, wasn't it? Oh, too late for her."

"Do you want me to pour this metal in your mouth?"

"Please. Because it can't do more damage than melting my brain!"

"Apparently not." Kelin snatched a new bucket of molten steel up in his hands and moved it over the necromancer's head.

"I can bring her back!"

The metal flowed to the edge of the bucket, but flowed back when Kelin pulled the bucket away. He hated himself for doing it, but his body had just reacted.

He growled. "She'd be a monster." He started to tip the bucket again. "Like all of those others."

"No, she wouldn't! A second chance. No one else will offer it to you."

His knees started to quaver. He tried to upend the bucket and stop this thing from talking, but his hands felt frozen against the molten metal.

They'd never really had the time to even try to be in love. It was a war. And she had so much more life to give, and it was stolen from her. Stolen from both of them!

He'd always imagined she was waiting for him in the next world. Watching him from there. Of course, what he had known about her was mostly a lie, so maybe she never had been what he imagined her to be.

But, if it wasn't real love, why did it still hurt so much almost a year later?

"You are disgusting," he mustered through thick lips. "And desperate."

The necromancer's laugh bubbled up through the hardening steel. "I am not the only one."

"Yeah, yeah." Kelin rolled his eyes. "My master will send more goons, and they'll be more terrifying and so on. Am I right?"

The sinister laughed died. "No, you're wrong. I'm afraid my master's run out of patience. You will know his personal wrath."

"Heard that one before too. Who sent you on this macabre errand anyway?"

"You will know his wrath," the creature gasped out again. It tried to raise its hand, but the molten metal had melted too much muscle for it to move. But Kelin saw enough. He saw the partially oozed ring figurehead: a snake for a ring with a wolf's head.

He'd seen it before. At the battle between Thealith and Urael. He'd seen it on the last wizard that had tried to kill her.

"Godsdamnit!" Kelin fought himself from making a child's warding symbol. He knew better by now! "Who is your lord?"

A skeleton of a laugh echoed in the boy's throat.

"You know what? Never mind." Kelin rested his back against the wall. Outside, he could hear the shouts of the dwarves. "I bet the dwarf shamans will know what to do with you. How to make you talk. They might go against the laws of nature, but hey, you broke them first."

This time, the creature's voice was as dead as the heart of winter. "Then you shan't hear from me again. I will be in hell, and loving it." The body disintegrated, leaving only the hardening steel.

Chapter Eleven

Raid

Der twisted the paper sideways. The numbers still didn't make sense. She tried stabbing at them with her quill pen. It didn't help, of course, but she smirked as she obliterated a few numerals. They'd been obstacles in her path, and now they were just black smudges. She especially liked the way the ink pooled around a couple of the ex-numerals.

"Done," Alluvius chirped cheerfully. He rolled up his finished scroll and opened a smile to the rest of the candidates huddled around a table in their barracks. "This has been both the fastest and slowest year of my life. I can't believe it's winter again and that graduation's here."

"And then soldiers beyond." Irma stared at her paper through hollow eyes.

A candidate named Ander chuckled dully at his paper. "And ol' sarge explained it. After we graduate, it don't change a thing. Hard to get excited about that."

"It'll take me four months to figure out this trigo-whatever-it's-called out." Der stabbed her paper again. "What's the point of this? I know where to put a siege tower! It's not about triangles, it's about looking at the bloody battlefield and saying, it goes there!"

Alluvius smiled. "Yes, but this is about positioning it in the perfect place."

"Yeah, wherever there is." She threw down her quill. The other candidates looked up from their own mathematical nightmares. She said, "I'm going to trade sentry duty with Willard or Sesquin."

"What? The knights haven't raided us for weeks." Irma pointed at the door.

"Which is why we're expecting it, right?" She started to march to the entrance.

"Der." Alluvius picked up her partially unrolled scroll. "The Scholar will tap dance all over your tongue if you don't finish— What's this?" He picked up a square piece of paper that had fallen out of her work. He first squinted and then frowned.

Another candidate leaned over. "Huh. Can't recognize it."

"Der." Alluvius waved the little paper square. "Who is writing to you in the language of squiggles?"

Der snatched it from his hands. "It's in Common. It says, 'I have written this missive to probe whether or not you can...read... this...'" She crumpled up the note and groaned. "Not again."

"What is it?" Irma asked. "And who's it from?"

Der pinched the bridge of her nose. "The judicar. Cacilin. It's in the holy language."

Firth slammed down his trigonometry review. "There is something that is so wrong with you!"

"Hey, I'm not the one who spills milk and then doodles on my assignments with it!"

Terror captured his eyes for a brief second, and then anger flared across his face. "Well, I can't make sense of squiggles! You know what? I bet you're lying. I'll wager you planted that note there to be found. Oh, Derora Saxen just has to be special."

Der dropped the crumpled up note. Firth, acting entirely on reflex, jumped backward and brought his hands up into fists. He would have wound up with broken teeth if Alluvius, Irma and a few other candidates hadn't grabbed Der's arms and shoulders at that moment.

She struggled. "Let me go!"

"You know the rules," Alluvius snapped in her ear. "No fighting."

Firth pointed at her. "You are a freak. You can lift as much as me and you're half my size. Something is wrong with you."

"Let me go!" Der roared. She lunged forward, and managed to drag the four people holding her back a few feet across the stone floor.

Firth danced backward. "You see, lads? She shouldn't be able to do that!"

"Barley makes the beer!" a voice shouted the candidates' password from the entrance. Willard stuck his head in the door. His long hair dripped with rainwater. "Um. Der, there's a little gold hatchling outside asking for you. So you'd better come out."

Der's gaze didn't move from Firth's terrified and enraged visage. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Well, it'd better be a quick minute 'cause it's pissing outside and I never knew how much a dragon can look like a lost kitten before!" He disappeared back through the entryway.

Alluvius and the others relaxed their grip on Der. Immediately, she dove after Firth.

The part human grabbed her waist and the four of them managed to tackle her to the floor.

Meanwhile, Firth sprinted for the door.

"Der," Alluvius said into her ear. "There is a dragon here to see you and you're going to chase some coward?"

She pushed herself up to her elbows. "Only because the coward deserves another black eye! He's never gonna learn to play nice if we keep letting him go!" She twisted and squirmed out of his grip, and like a bolt of lightning, shot for the door.

She squeezed through the narrow entrance and nearly stepped on the hatchling sized dragon. His golden wings crossed over his head like a tiny umbrella against the stinging rain.

The chubby creature's head bobbed up at her. "Ree! I'm so happy!" He waddled around in a circle, like a dog dancing for his food.

She dropped one knee to the ground. "I've missed you, Goldie!" She rubbed the dragon's scales. "I'll be right back!"

She jumped back to her feet and chased Firth down across the bailey. She caught up to him just as he started to slow.

The rain masked her footfalls, and he was just turning around when her fist collided with his cheek. He spun in an entire circle before crashing into one of the internal walls.

She had already turned her back and was trotting back to Goldie. The baby-sized dragon tried to shake his head. He managed to hold his head in mostly the same place and whip his sinewy neck back and forth. He huddled further underneath his wings.

"That was mean!"

"What?" Der checked over her shoulder. "Oh. He said that he's here to be a warrior. But he's the only warrior I know who runs away after calling someone a liar." She scooped up the dripping dragon and set him on her shoulder. "And I'm here to show him that we're not going to take his lip. Bullies are always gonna be bullies unless, well, you understand."

Back inside, Goldie shook himself like a puppy across the table. Water bounced away from his golden scales. He sniffled. "I hate the rain."

"Hey." One of the candidates pointed. "Why does she get a dragon? That's for the knights only."

Alluvius grinned. "I guess because the dragon likes her."

Der's face fell when she returned to her schooling. "I have to finish this." Goldie hopped from her shoulder and waddled onto the scroll. He cocked his head and stared at the mess of numerals. He sniffled and suddenly sneezed. Alluvius snatched his papers and held them over his head.

A bubble of fire erupted from the dragon's mouth and popped above the table and across everyone's lessons.

Dragon fire > Trigonometry. Hours of equations and headaches curled into smoke and ashes.

He waddled in a tight circle, his tail dragging through the smoldering scrolls. "Sorry! I'm sorry! Ah-choo!"

The second sneeze sent the chubby dragon rolling along the table. He dug his talons into the wood and managed to stop. He moaned as if he had a fever.

Alluvius set down his un-singed work. "Oh no. Willard and Sesquin haven't checked in."

"Not again," Irma moaned.

The candidates raced for their weapons. They weren't fast enough. Dragoon soldiers and knights had their sword points and axes at their vitals in less time than it took for them to shout.

Goldie dived under the table. He covered his mouth with the tip of tail and shivered.

Dragoons shoved Sesquin and Willard in through the narrow entrance. "Sorry," Will muttered. "Didn't see them coming."

The candidates slumped back down at the table. Der growled. "Still have to study."

Bristlebeard wagged a finger at them. "Too much studying is bad for your observational skills."

The Scholar burst through the doorway. "I told you not to interrupt them, sergeant." He huffed and straightened his robe.

"What is he doing here?" Der whispered to Alluvius.

"Don't know."

The Scholar thrust a hand at the table. "And why are your papers on fire? That was not part of the assignment!"

Still beneath the table, Goldie sniffed again and lowered his head to the floor.

The Scholar rolled his eyes at the tiny creature. Bristlebeard shrugged. The other dragoons appeared not to notice, or at least, saw enough dragons that finding one hiding under the table wasn't anything to stare at.

"You're not supposed to be here, little one." The Scholar snapped his fingers at Goldie. "Come now."

The little dragon shook his head. "No. I'm staying with my human."

The Scholar knelt down. "No, you won't. Or you won't be admitted into the dragoon order either."

"But!"

Der sighed and glared cross-eyed at the sword held in front of her. "Goldie, just go. I'll see you soon."

Goldie waddled out from under the table, where the Scholar scooped him up. Then as quickly as they'd come, the dragoons departed.

Sesquin dusted off his clothes. "I'm sorry, lads. We never saw them. As usual."

Bristlebeard hands thundered as he clapped. "No time for sorries! It's time to run the approach!"

"But, but, it's the middle of the night!" Irma exclaimed. "And graduation's the day after tomorrow!"

“That’s what you get for making excuses! Everyone on the move!”

The sergeant made them run it twice. By the second time they ran up the mountain, dawn’s early light was leaking into the plain below.

The candidates slumped along the tables and benches in math class. Der blinked. Or was it history class already?

“The war of Hell on Earth ended, to the very day, eleven years before the fall of Pallens. Now, who can tell me, did the fourth dragoon order disappear during the war or the fall? Ander?”

Ander gulped down a mouthful of air and managed, “Four?”

“No,” the Scholar snapped. “Math studies ended an hour ago!”

Der pried her eyes open with her fingers. She tried to pay attention. They all had to make it through these classes. She still couldn’t shake the horrible waking nightmare that those who failed to graduate became bankers.

“Alright, how much do we remember about the Battle of the Bridge?”

“Um,” a dwarf candidate furrowed his already permanently furrowed brow. “In a place called Shin, another human continent that isn’t Solquin or Dosmar.”

The Scholar rolled his eyes. “There is a giant empire called Shin, not a continent. But close. So what was happening?”

One of the elf candidates scoffed. “The demons were forcing the dragoon soldiers onto a bridge spanning the distance between earth and the gates of hell, which were open.”

“And why were the dragoons on the bridge?”

Alluvius answered, “Because they were going to destroy it and end the constant wave of demons and creatures from hell.”

Irma added, “And something about nasty teleporting demons all over the place.”

“Ah.” The Scholar pressed his fingertips together. “You’re starting to awaken. Moving along, why was the founding of Tenmar important?”

“First human kingdom on Solquin, for the refugees from the fall of Pallens,” someone answered.

“What about the murders of King Valladen and Queen Thia of Arborn and the following elf-chemmen war? Derora Saxen, what would you say about that, pray?”

She propped her head up in her hands lest it fall down. “That making history is a lot more fun than studying it.”

Then, two days of no sleep and intense physical demands finally caught up to her, and she was out.

Irma nudged her shoulder. Der lifted her head, making a mental note that wooden tables did not make for restful pillows. She blinked. Bristlebeard came into focus behind Irma. A few other candidates snored around them.

“The Scholar canceled class a few hours ago.”

Bristlebeard grunted. “Told you he’d be boring me candidates.”

“I came to wish you farewell, Der.” Irma smiled sadly. “You and Al are the only friends I’ve got here.”

“What?” Der’s face bunched in concentration.

“She’s leavin’ us,” Bristlebeard said. “Said she’d had enough.”

“But, but, you can’t!” Der sat bolt upright.

“This isn’t my world, Der. I might be excellent with tactics and math, but, well, I’m not strong like you.”

She shook her head and rambled rapidly, “No, no, it’s not about strength. Use your smarts to turn their literal strength into a weakness. Works all the time. You don’t have to go.”

The dwarf sergeant put a hand on Der’s shoulder. “She’s made her decision. I know it ain’t easy for us girls in this man’s army.” She stroked her own beard.

Slowly, Der felt her back straightening. She watched Irma’s eyes widen. She pushed her heavy tongue against motionless teeth. “You’re a woman, sergeant?”

Bristlebeard nodded, and she grinned beneath her thick whiskers. “Of course. It’s not something I flaunt in front of the candidates. Boys just don’t understand.”

“But, like Jakkobb and Strival, they know, right?”

The dwarf chuckled. “Naturally.”

Der shook her head, but couldn’t dislodge the surprise. Her gaze swung back to Irma. “Please, don’t go. Only a day until graduation, and then, apparently things really don’t change for us. Still training, still school.”

Irma shook her head. “I’m sorry, Der. This isn’t my life.”

Der halfheartedly waved to Alluvius as she trudged inside the candidate fort. She ascended to her room, and collapsed on her sleeping mat. Despite her exhaustion, sleep was only a distant daydream.

She’d never had a room alone her whole life, even if this room was actually a closet. She imagined the closet had become some sort of massive cavern where she was trapped alone, but that image quickly shattered in her mind. She didn’t know what to think.

Eventually, she wandered back downstairs to see most of the candidates sluggishly slurping their soup.

Had it been her turn to prepare the meal tonight? She frowned as she took a spot on the bench. Did it matter? She filled a bowl from the steaming pot in the center of the table.

Ander ran a hand through his hair and slouched forward over his bowl. “I can’t do this. If there’s another raid tonight, I will sleep right through it.”

“It may not happen.” One of the other candidates shrugged.

“Probably will,” Ander moaned.

“We don’t know,” Alluvius said, “And they torment us with that.”

Der’s head snapped up. “So why don’t we raid them back?”

Several spoons splashed down into their bowls.

“Because we’re not insane!” Willard fired back.

“It worked against the chemmen!”

Once again, silence circled the room.

“You mean,” Ander said slowly, “That part of the story wasn’t made up by the bards?”

“No, it wasn’t!” She slammed her spoon to the table. “And if the chemmen weren’t expecting it, I don’t think the dragoons will be either!” She straightened her shoulders and felt a fire tingling inside she hadn’t felt in weeks. “Don’t look at these raids as setbacks, but as examples for what we should do. When are we going to say that we’ve had too much?”

“When they ordered no fighting, Der,” one of the elven candidates scoffed. “Something I do not believe you have the capacity to avoid. You appear to appreciate only the uglier prisms that life offers.”

“Prisms?” a human candidate tilted his head.

“Elvish slang, I guess,” another replied.

Der’s glare never left the elven speaker. “At least I’m the one who is friends with your king.”

They gasped and jerked straight in their seats. They probably would have immediately stormed away in anger if they hadn’t been so shocked.

“And if there’s anything I learned from the king, it’s that you elves may have learned to appreciate things in life more. But, from my experience, humans feel things far more intensely than I think most of you can understand. Wood either burns hot or it burns long.” She didn’t wait for a response. “So either help us or go upstairs to your room.”

They glared at her with all the pent up fury of centuries, but even that was dull compared to a human’s sudden rage. In unison, they stood up and marched to the stairs.

Der hopped onto the table. Her boots rattled against the scrolls and plates. “So what’s it going to be, lads?”

Sesquin tried to hide his trembling hand by laying it flat on the table. “So like a kitchen or something?”

“We’ve already got enough food.” A grin curved crookedly across her face. “How about something in the officers’ quarters in the central keep?”

“Not a chance.” Firth threw down his bowl. “There’s maybe sixty-five of us left and you want to take on the Silver Dawn dragoons in their own house? I don’t think that Strival would even shed a tear for failing a whole year of candidates.”

Unease settled across the other candidates’ faces.

Der sighed. “Firth, shut it, alright? We’re not stupid enough to steal anything of importance, only significance.”

“And what the hell does that mean, Der?” Ander raised his hand.

“Oh, like one of them fancy rugs hanging off the walls. They won’t miss that.”

“A tapestry?” Alluvius stroked his chin. “That could work.”

“No, it won’t.” Firth threw up his hands. “Because even if this folly succeeds, we’ll all get the boot!” Shoulders and heads sank around the table.

Der stamped her foot once. “No, we won’t. I think this is what Strival and them have been pushing us to do all along. I think that the commander wants this.” Around her, faces started to rise. She continued, almost purring like a stalking cat. “Why not give them the hell they promised us? Dragoon soldiers are the ones who say enough to suffering and injustice. We are the ones who storm into such desperate situations that no one else dares. I remember when Silver Dawn came to our aid at the

battle of Gladioli Fields. I remember how hopeless it seemed even when they were there. But we won.

“However, we usually don’t fight battles as one army. We tend to be advisors to everyone else. Yes, we take orders, but we’re also trained to think for ourselves. Why do you think we stay up all night trying to figure out history and mathematics? We trained to learn to shout ‘enough!’” She spun around and started to march along the table. “And I’ve had enough nights of waking up to swords in my face, and so have you. I’ve had enough and I want all of us to earn our pride back, and give them back the hell they’ve been raining down on us!”

Ten minutes later, Ander sagged against one of the internal bailey walls. Der grabbed her sword in reflex and then sighed. “Not the time, man.”

“Or the place,” Alluvius hissed, checking over his shoulders. The small band of candidates huddled on the outside of the central keep’s wall. The rest were back at the fort, waiting to set off a distraction.

Ander rubbed his hands over his face. “Derora, you must be the greatest leader in the world.”

“What? Why?”

He sank into a crouch. “Because my mind just woke up. What the hell am I doing sneaking around the *dragoon headquarters* in the middle of the night going to steal something from the greatest swordsman in the world? Why did I believe you when you said this was a good idea? *Why?*”

“We’re going to give it back. This is just to send a message.”

Ander grabbed his head. “With any other army, we’d be executed for this. But I don’t know, getting booted from the dragoons might be worse.”

Alluvius chuckled. “Fortunately for us, they seem to have a sense of humor.”

“Lads!” Der waved her hands frantically. “This is not the place for an argument!” She stared up at the hall and cupped her hands to give Alluvius a leg up. After that, Ander or someone would have to climb on Alluvius’ shoulders, and then get a handhold on an arrowloop and let the climb begin. Behind them, the great tower of the central keep loomed.

“This is the best honey, sir.” Captain Yurik, a human missing two fingers on his left hand, raised his honey laden bread to Strival. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“The bees have everything they need here,” the commander replied. “You know it’s the one food that never spoils too. Great for sieges. That’s why I started my hives.”

“Yes, but I don’t recall any other honey tasting so fine.” The human captain took his seat next to Jakkobb. “And the mead is better than any merchant’s I’ve ever had.” He nodded around the table to the other officers and Cacilin.

“We used to take honey with us on voyages,” a dwarf captain chuckled. “So much for so little space. But it was oh so expensive.”

“Yes, and it’s about voyages that I called you here tonight, and again, I’m sorry for such a late meeting, especially since we have an early day tomorrow with graduation.” Strival cleared his throat.

“Tomorrow already?” Yurik laughed. “Ah, how the years don’t pass as slowly as they used to.”

“Indeed. The Blue Farers and Steel Eagle Dragoons will be arriving to present their candidates. And you know how they like to make entrances.”

“Well, so do we when it’s their turns to host,” Jakkobb remarked.

“At least it’s not like two years ago,” the dwarf chuckled. “When we all had to trudge up to Staghorn. Staghorn, in the winter!”

“I fear the winds may be bringing worse news,” Strival sighed. “The purpose of this meeting is to inform you that Alscane has no more fleet. It’s gone. They have a few privately owned vessels that the government has commandeered, but that is all.”

“All their warships *and* their treasure fleet?” Yurik leaned back in his chair and whistled.

Strival nodded stiffly. “And we’ve dawdled for over a year on this now.”

The dwarf captain blinked. “A year? We’ve known about Alscane’s disappearing treasure fleet for over a year now? But it was just a few ships, an entirely internal affair.”

Strival nodded solemnly.

Jakkobb drummed his fingers on the table. “And the ships they’ve sent after their ships have also vanished.”

“Indeed. As all of you know, Alscane has the most powerful navy aside from our sister order, the Blue Farers. In fact, their prince has asked our banks for a mountainous loan.”

“Why didn’t the prince of Alscane ask the Farers for assistance?” Cacilin mused.

“Pride, I assume.” Strival shrugged. “What bothers me is that the cause of such a powerful navy’s disappearance remains behind the veil. Who would hide a victory for so long?”

Just on the other side of the door to the meeting chamber, Der tiptoed in her steel and leather boots. Alluvius, Ander and a couple of candidates matched her stride. Ander rubbed his palms together, and immediately bit down on a hiss. His new rope burns ached across his skin. He’d never scaled a vertical height before. In the dark. In the wind. In the *winter on a manmade mountain*. If it weren’t for running the approach every day, he was sure he’d still be dizzy.

Der slipped ahead down the corridor and eyed the golden and silk tapestries.

“Alright,” she whispered. “Which one of the the lookth lethth valuable?”

“Why are you suddenly lisping?” Ander clapped his hand over his mouth immediately, and looked almost panicked.

“Trick I learnt from Thithle, the letter ‘s’ carrieth farthetht. Don’t uthe it.”

Alluvius bit back against a snort of laughter. “You’re being too serious. Nobody’s here. Let’s just get the thing and get out of here.”

“Then why do we want to steal the least valuable one?” one of the candidates asked. “Why not just take the nearest one? We’re already in so much trouble!”

“We’re not opening up the table to discuss creatures from the deep, are we?” Yurik rubbed his forehead. “I thought no one had told such a tale since the end of the Wars.”

“I do not believe so,” Strival replied. “The Blue Farers have seen ships with no banner. Who have always flee, and apparently, flee amazingly fast because they didn’t catch a single one.”

“Pirates, you mean?” Cacilin frowned. “In the Occidental? I thought the only actual pirate threat near Solquin was in the shipping lanes west of Quon.”

“The Marentide Ocean,” Yurik groaned. “Where the Blue Farers just don’t have such a strong arm.”

“That’s Arborn for you.” Strival rubbed his nose briefly. “They control the majority of the coast and you can never land on their shores no matter how hard you try. Not much good for a navy.”

“Pirates.” Jakkobb drummed his armored fingers on the desk. “But pirates powerful enough to defeat Alscane at that? I’m liking the sea dragons idea better.”

Strival leaned back in his chair. “A small navy, whittling off a few treasure ships off the shores of Dosmar, suddenly becomes a larger navy. If the attacks are against isolated vessels, it could work.”

Cacilin said, “Yes, however, Alscane always sends warships with its treasure fleet. Do the Blue Farers report anything more than phantom vessels?”

Jakkobb suddenly scowled and raised his hand. All the voices in the room dimmed. He didn’t speak, but instead, cocked his head toward the door.

“Is that whispering?” Yurik bent his head low over the table, and lowered his voice. “Is someone spying on this meeting?”

“More like arguing,” the elf captain murmured. He stood and walked over to the door, silent as if his entire body of armor was wearing foot gloves. His fingertips pressed against the door, and grimaced as the door registered a small creak.

Next, he quickly burst out into the corridor. This late, only one candle burned in its holder, barely illuminating itself. No one was there.

Der heard the door close and immediately pushed herself out from a doorframe.

“Why did you get the doorframe? I was out in the open!” Ander thrust his finger at her.

Absently, she grabbed it and bent it back against his hand before she realized. Ander’s face glowed white with sudden pain. She dropped his hand. “Behind a tapestry is not out in the open!”

Ander hissed and sucked on his finger. “Don’t do that.”

“Which is lucky for us that he didn’t look behind him,” Alluvius said. “Elves and dwarves can see heat in the dark, remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Der said.

“We should just go,” another candidate said as his knees quaked together. Several others slinked out from behind a tapestry.

“Agreed.” Der nodded. “Let’s get the fancy rug and go.”

“No!” He grabbed her arm and tugged. “Let’s just go!”

“Did someone leave a window open, perhaps? And the sounds are just carrying inside?” Cacilin held up both his hands.

“I still hear it.” Yurik cocked his head at the door.

RIIIIIIIP!

“Alright, I heard that.” The dwarf captain thumped a hand on the table. “Did that just sound like clothing tearing?”

Jakkobb lunged through the door. Again, the hallway was devoid of people. This time, however, a large tapestry depicting the birth of the goddess Ahtome from the wheat fields was hanging off the wall and bulging.

He snatched at it, but it backed away, squirming away like a very confused centipede.

Now he could make out the forms of several people behind it. One of which whimpered like dog who just knows he's going to get in trouble for that warm puddle.

Strival, Cacilin and the other officers emerged into the hall.

Jakkobb snatched at the tapestry again. This time, he managed to drag it down low enough to reveal the candidates' heads. "*Derora Saxen!*" he roared. "What the hell did you get these people into?"

"Why is it my fault?" she fired back.

Ander and all the other candidates except Alluvius stabbed their fingers toward her. "It is her fault!"

"Were you listening to that meeting?!"

"What meeting? It was supposed to be empty!"

The knight loomed over the candidates. "Then what in the four corners of hell are you doing here?"

She tugged at the tapestry, trying to raise it back up. Jakkobb's grip was titanium, and she couldn't get it even to budge. So, she pointed. "This is a raid. We're taking this tapestry hostage."

Chapter Twelve

Inside Invasion

“Winter again.” Thalon pulled his fur cap lower over his ears. He rose up on his tiptoes to peek between the battlements of Moonrise Castle. Chloe stuffed one hand into the sleeve of her other arm so no skin would be exposed.

“Yeah,” Kelin agreed. “This last year has really just vanished.”

The boy frowned. “No, it hasn’t. It’s taken forever. For-ever.”

“Wasn’t so slow to me,” Chloe sang. “You’re only sayin’ that ‘cause we were in school.”

“Which is torture by boredom!”

A brief storm crossed Kelin’s face. Buried memories banged on the undersides of the floorboards to his mind. He’d have taken school if he’d had the choice. But no, he’d been forced to swallow searing hot gravel. Among worse things...

The moment drifted past, and the sun poked its face out from the clouds. Kelin felt his muscles relax as he looked up at the light.

“Too bad such peace is deceptive.”

Kelin turned. The king smiled. But the smile didn’t reach his blue eyes.

The human’s mouth dried before he could swallow. He still gulped. “Your Majesty!” He threw himself forward into a bow.

Chloe gasped and stared in shock, while Thalon briefly bowed. King Edillon nodded once, and they took off running, leaving Kelin rooted to the spot.

“Just like this battlefield.” The elf raised his hand to the field below. “It only overlays. When the snow melts, the battlefield will still be there.”

“What are you saying, Your Majesty?”

“That this peace will not last. You know this.”

“I wish I didn’t.” The human heaved a sigh. “Still, at least we haven’t seen any downright freakish events since I killed that necromancer.”

“Yes. I wouldn’t have thought that just a necromancer could cause such natural disruption.”

“Neither did I.” Thistle unfolded himself from a shadow behind them. “I haven’t heard of anything similar to this since the War of Hell on Earth. Neither has the lady baroness.”

Edillon frowned. “Yes. Distinctly before the Battle of the Bridge.”

“I am thankful I was not there.”

“You weren’t?” Kelin asked. “Well, that makes sense. I knew Jakkobb and his commander were.”

“I heard the stories, though,” Thistle said. “Well, more accurately, my wife heard the stories and passed them along to me.” The chemman closed his eyes in thought. “Back then, everyone just assumed it was because hell and the abyss were open to earth that such unnatural events could happen.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Kelin shook his shaggy locks. “You’re telling me that there is a literal bridge over a literal abyss to the literal gates of hell. I thought it was all metaphor.”

“Was a bridge. That was the whole point of the dragoon mission, to destroy it.”

“And so they did,” Edillon chimed. “What stories did you hear?”

Thistle held up his open palms. “Most of the survivors went mad, so I have always doubted these. Apparently, the image that haunted them the most was a huge, distorted skull hanging over the gates. On the far side of the now destroyed bridge.”

His orange eyes traced some clouds overhead. “And the sky. How the sky frightened many of them so much that some refused to go outside ever again. They say it was fractured. And it wasn’t all sky. Parts of the sky were rocks, suspended by nothing. In some places, the sky was suddenly land or sea. The parts that still looked like clouds and sky were spliced, like someone had pasted together pieces that didn’t match. It changed every blink of the eye. Even bloody chunks of animals started to fall from it.”

“I fail to understand,” the king said.

“So do I,” Thistle said impassively. “Jakkobb and the dragoons might know more.”

The king nodded thoughtfully. “Yes. It’s fortunate we were already planning to visit Horizon. I do hope Der isn’t in too much trouble.”

Der shifted her weight to the other foot. And back again. Next to her, Ander started to whimper. She slammed her heel against his ankle. “You’re supposed to be a dragoon, for the gods’ sake!”

“Probably not anymore,” he moaned.

“You’re not the first with this idea.” Strival exhaled loudly. “But it’s always been one of the kitchens.”

Der tried to smile. “Well, we wanted to be original. So, sir, umm...”

Strival pursed his lips and finally shook his head. Der tried to match Jakkobb’s fiery stare, but faltered and so she glared at Cacilin instead. She didn’t know the dwarf or the human officer though.

Ander’s knees quaked and he groaned. “Oh no...” Beside him, Alluvius stood frozen.

“How far would you go?” The commander looked directly at their faces, one by one. “Let’s say that you struck us down? Perhaps poison or some sort of aerosol? Count us as unconscious, now what?”

“We wouldn’t hurt you, sirs,” Der stated.

“But you have to incapacitate us, or we’ll do this.” Strival reached up and tugged on a bell cord. Overhead, a myriad of bells began to repeatedly scream. “One of us sounded the alarm. What now?”

Sweat felt like it began to condense on her forehead because it was suddenly so cold. Der licked her lips. “Um.”

Strival raised his eyebrows. “*So get going or you won’t even be candidates anymore! Move! Move! Move!*”

The candidates’ slippery grips on the tapestry vanished. The thunder of their feet almost eclipsed the wail of the alarm bells.

Strival dusted his hands with a satisfied smirk.

Captain Yurik saluted sharply. “Sir, I think this is a terrible idea.”

Jakkobb snapped his body into attention. “I agree, sir. I mean, have you ever seen an elf with gray hairs before?”

“What? No. This will certainly shake up the rest of the troops, and they could definitely use it.” He eyed Jakkobb. “What do you mean gray hairs?”

“I mean to say that I’m happy to have blond hair, sir.”

“Why?”

The captain grunted. “I mean– it’s just that– well, I’ve never known you to underestimate an opponent before, sir.”

“Have I now? They’ll get outside the keep, get caught, beaten a little because they’ll go down fighting, and justice instead of breakfast.” He sighed at the growing wince on Jakkobb’s face. “Yes, the girl has promise. But promise doesn’t make victors here. She doesn’t even have a plan.”

“You have a plan for this, right?” Ander’s back foot knocked against his front foot, and if not for the wall, he would’ve fallen and cracked his jaw against the floor. He clasped his hands as if in prayer.

“Um.” Der smiled brightly. “I have a weapon.” She loosened the sword hilt in its sheath.

She barely even heard Ander’s groan of defeat as she dove into the disarming room while drawing her blade. The other candidates followed doggedly, checking over their shoulders.

Harken, the disarming room guard, gasped in surprise. Then he grinned and wagged his finger. “I knew it wasn’t the real thing. What’d you do?”

“Nothing!” She and the others never stopped running and leveled her sword in his direction. “But pretend we just killed you!”

Chuckling, Harken sat at a desk and tossed his feet on top. “Thanks! I could use a respite.”

Der snatched up a spare spear just as Alluvius put a hand on her shoulder. “We can’t do this, you know.”

She pointed back up at the massive keep. “But he said we’d be expelled otherwise.”

“And we’ll probably be expelled anyway!”

“Which is why we should fight, don’t you think?”

“No!”

Ander’s face twisted in terror as he stumbled faster behind them. “But, Der, it’s the entire army!”

“Most of Silver Dawn is not actually at Horizon,” she pointed out.

They blundered through the gates of the keep into the bright light of the torches of the keep’s courtyard.

Over a hundred knights and soldiers stood armed and at attention, despite that it was the middle of the night and even though Horizon had never been attacked.

She glanced behind them, to the knot of candidates hunched with their training bows and arrows. They were only supposed to be there just to cover her team’s quiet escape. Now they looked positively terrified. Somewhere in the group would be a curious gold dragon, and she could use that.

The alarm bells continued to screech overhead and all around the citadel.

Der stuck her fingers in her mouth and whistled. The weight of two-hundred and fifty eyes swung over to her. She cupped her hands around her mouth. “Hey, let’s wrap them up, shall we?”

One hundred and twenty five sets of eyebrows shot up.

“Command has been executed – *not really* – so, Horizon now belongs to us candidates! We just have to sweep up the rest!”

No one moved. In the distance a bird, woken by Der’s whistle, sang back.

One of the knights, holding a large spear, chuckled. "When you raid back, it's supposed to be a kitchen."

"We know." Alluvius rolled his eyes. "Thanks."

"Well then," the knight continued, "I guess now we ask for your surrender, you demand ours, and then we fight." Smiling, he saluted with his spear. "All of us, well, all of you save you lot, have done this before."

Ander moaned.

Alluvius patted his shoulder, but Der didn't even hear him. Her eyes cut through the crowded jumble of armed warriors surrounding the courtyard.

She raised her own spear. "Yeah, but we took out the command!"

"No, we didn't." Ander stomped his foot. "They said to pretend we did, so that we could get trampled out here."

"Ander, shut it!" Der waved the spear wildly over her head. "We're already beyond arguing! So, attack!"

No one moved. The soldiers and knights warily looked at the candidates with their padded arrows. The candidates just stared.

Der slapped her forehead with her free hand. "Did these months of training just pass you lads by? Honestly?"

She tossed the spear up into the air, where it flipped, and caught it. She raised the backward facing spear and hurled it into the knot of knights.

The butt of the weapon struck one of the soldiers in the leg, and down he went.

The dam broke. The knights and soldiers charged Der and the small group of candidates loosed their arrows. The candidates raised their bows and released their arrows.

The flour pouches tied to the ends of the shafts exploded against the soldiers' armor. Swords, still wrapped their sheaths, parried and sliced at one another.

Der and Alluvius raised their weapons and charged down the keep's single switchback. The candidates loosed one last round of arrows before the dragoon knights and soldiers reached their high ground.

A year of battle training came to their aid, and the candidates held their ground for the moment.

Der and her tiny team defended each other in a tight knot. Ander was too busy fighting to complain.

She parried two swords at once, and unlike in combats before, she never had the space to return the thrusts. The small circle of candidates dissolved quickly as Ander and Alluvius went down. She ducked and darted back up onto the switchback, parrying the entire time.

A whinny fell like laughter over the melee. Overhead, Der glanced up to see Spike trotting through the air. She didn't have time to wave because, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a red blur exploding from the entrance and waving an axe overhead.

Der braced herself to jump away from the Jakkobb's onslaught when some sixth sense told her to move, *now*.

She hopped forward, and while turning, barely caught sight of an unsheathed knife scything through the air where she had just been. Her heart started to scream inside her chest. “Hey! I’m not wearing armor!”

Firth didn’t say a word.

“What’d they promise you to switch sides?” She swallowed. She knew they hadn’t offered him anything.

He snarled.

Der wiggled her sword loose in its sheath. Just in case she had to draw it. She also tried to calculate how far Jakkobb had gotten in his mad dash.

“Is that why you tried to stab me from behind? You know you’ll lose this.”

For the first time, he smirked. “Let’s just say that I haven’t been completely honest with you.”

Vampire! It was the first thought in her mind, and the first to be dismissed. He didn’t have any of those subtle tells.

The smirk morphed into a sneer. “I’ll just make this look like an accident.”

Der freed her blade from its sheath. “I really wish I had time to get my actual sword for this.”

“And I really wish I had longer to enjoy this.” He raised the knife in one hand, and his sword in the other.

Then Spike trotted in the air at head height behind Firth, and nudged him firmly with one hoof in the back of his skull.

Firth collapsed like a sack of meal.

Der looked down at the unconscious assailant. “You know he—”

The unicorn nodded his head, indicating behind her.

She ducked at the last possible moment. Jakkobb’s axe cut the air above her, albeit still in its leather casing. Worry about Firth just vanished from her mind.

While she was near the ground, she snatched up a spear. She *liked* the distance weapon at the moment. Jakkobb up close and angry was just too personal.

She rose and angled the spear. The tip crashed against the knight’s axe. Der staggered backward, fighting for balance as Jakkobb’s onslaught continued.

Slowly, she slid her hand up the shaft, but kept the spear-point where it was. Suddenly, she jumped forward, abruptly changing the distance between the combatants. Jakkobb wouldn’t fall for such a trick, she knew, but it would give her time to figure something else out.

The spear shuddered in her hands. Jakkobb’s axe bit down in it again, and the blade ripped through the leather sheath.

Wooden fragments fountained up, and the spear exploded in her hands.

Der jumped back away. Jakkobb moved unstoppably forward. He raised the axe over his head and loomed over her.

Behind her, Spike reared, pawing the air with his dinner-plate hooves. They sparked with blue electricity.

Beneath the magical hooves and the axe, Der grinned. It was moments like these that made life *fun*.

“Spike!” Jakkobb thundered. “Not now!”

She lunged up with her sword, aiming right for the chainmail mesh that covered the joints that his platemail didn't cover. Jakkobb was watching the electric hooves, and his parry sliced through that desperate second of time too late.

Der bounced up to her feet. She heard Spike's snigger as the unicorn rolled away to fight another knight.

Jakkobb's face glowed so red that his skin complemented his armor.

"You have to sit down now, sir!"

He quaked like an earthquake and opened his mouth. Instead, of the enraged roar of a bull Der had been expecting, he hiccupped.

"You have to sit down now, sir!" She kept her sword on guard between them.

"Der..." The knight began in a tone of voice reminiscent to pebbles starting to bounce down a mountainside onto tons of loose rocks.

"Dead people can't talk, sir!" She retreated a step as he continued to vibrate. "Well, most of them anyway. Sorry, but I've got a coup to complete. Talk later!" And she whirled away.

Jakkobb loosed a howl of rage. Nearby combatants stopped, and both sides backed away from him before resuming the battle. Thunder would have fallen deaf to his roar.

He spun stiffly and marched back to the keep's doors.

Goldie skittered up to Der's leg, and dug his talons into her trousers while trying to climb. "Der, Der, Der."

"What?" Her gaze bobbed down up then immediately rebounded back up to the mock battle.

The tiny dragon pulled back his lips to reveal all of his many jagged teeth in an attempted grin. "I'm gonna get *big*."

He expanded in size like a star explodes, brilliant and massive. The golden scales reflected the moonlight almost as brightly as day. The dragon rolled gracefully into the sky over Horizon. Wings unfurled; their breadth spreading wider than the citadel.

A small tear stung Der's eye as she gazed up at the magnificent creature. He was so huge, and yet so fluid in his movements! And far, far too big. The central courtyard of Horizon was built to accommodate a dragon, and he could only set down one massive foot.

All the fighters, knights, soldiers and candidates dropped their weapons.

Rising on her toes, she tried to make out the distant mountains. Other dragons were there, and they'd have to see this. And Der very much doubted that she could keep the citadel away from a group of determined dragons.

But, in this moment, it belonged to the candidates.

Jakkobb pushed the doors closed on the keep's entrance. He breathed in sharp, rhythmic pants. When the doors were closed and barred, he turned and saluted. "Sir."

Strival stood at the window, but he wasn't looking through it. Instead, he was pulling short lengths of hair to the front of his face.

"Sir?"

"I'm looking for gray hairs."

Jakkobb was still too angry to laugh. He scowled.

“How could this happen?” The commander examined every strand.

“Derora Saxen, sir.”

Strival let loose an exhausted sigh. “The other orders will arrive tomorrow at dawn.”

“Yes, sir. I’m not sure if we’ll have this sorted out to let them in though.”

“Well, it’s not like the candidates can activate the wards.”

The captain shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Uh, about that, sir. Let’s just hope they don’t figure out *how*.”

Chapter Thirteen

Mutiny's Dawn

Adamantis portcullises slammed into place throughout Silver Dawn's Horizon's internal system of walls. Each was worth a wealthy king's ransom, and over a month's work to chip a single metal sliver from them. Tunneling through the solid rock was a faster option.

Der kicked the latch and a network of cables beneath the floor pulled metal locks into place, binding the portcullises closed. Until they were unlocked, not even pulling on their ropes would raise them.

"We did it!" Ander stumbled around in a daze. "We'll never get away with it, but we did it!"

Der grinned, but the grin quickly eroded when she saw Alluvius' face. He was watching the grayness expanding to the east before the dawn. She shivered, remembering how it was the storm readers' light.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to see Willard bouncing from foot to foot. "Uh, Der. What about the, well, I guess they're prisoners. The knights want breakfast."

"Ugh." She rubbed her face. "We've only got thirty-nine troops left."

"So?" Alluvius interjected. "Why not make the prisoners do it? I know you know better than us that the dragoons make their prisoners work."

She wiggled her pinky finger. It had only been two years since she was officially Jakkobb's prisoner of war, and now, he was hers.

"And I also know that dragoons make horrible prisoners. They'll just let all the others out."

"I see movement out on the plains!" Sesquin hollered from high on one of the walls. "But it's too dark!"

"The other armies," Alluvius breathed. "It's dawn. Graduation!"

"What?" Willard froze.

"It's tradition. For graduation, it rotates, but the other dragoon orders always show up at dawn. Show of force or something."

"You mean the Blue Farers and Steel Eagle?" Willard gasped.

Der eyed the first glimpses of the morning's colors starting to glow along the fortress's polished stone roofs. "Great. Honestly. You think you can take over the world's greatest citadel with ease, but no, there's always another army at your door."

Sesquin pointed toward the mountains, away from the armies. "I see some of the dragons!" He stretched to push his telescope just a little farther out. "Yeah. They're coming this way."

"Wards!" Der started to run back to the keep. "Something about magical wards!"

Chloe gazed up and up and up at the citadel as dawn started to unroll across the plain. "But why is everyone still out here?"

"Dunno." Thalon shrugged. "Somebody lost the key?"

Families and friends of those inside the fortress tried to avoid the path of thousands of warhorses and outfitted knights. Even the horses of those daily wagons delivering timber, food, clothing, metal and more stamped their hooves impatiently.

The children stared up in total awe of Horizon. Kelin watched it with his hands on his hips. It was difficult to be speechless standing next to flatulent livestock. He waved a hand under his nose and stepped backward until he was upwind of the aurochs.

What did Horizon need all those cows for anyway? Then again, he mused, there were rumors of a feast.

He frowned. Such a feast could not be had with everyone milling around on the plain.

Horns sounded, signaling a friendly approach. Kelin listened. No horn answered. Of course, as he gazed at the size of the citadel, maybe they just couldn't be heard.

Edillon shrugged beside him. He kept his face deep in the shadows of his hood. Behind him, several of his own knights stood with faceless expressions.

Thistle exhaled loudly. "What do you think she did this time?"

The young king chuckled softly. "Why do you assume Der has done something?"

"Majesty!" Another knight of Arbourn approached, nearly tripping over his own feet as he tried to bow and run at the same time. A human dragoon soldier followed at his heels. "Majesty," the knight repeated.

The human dragoon just fell to his knees, not even daring to look at Edillon's face. "Uh, your elvenness, uhhh..."

"Derora Saxen," Thistle prompted.

"Yeah, she, well, she took over Horizon..."

A wicked grin curved across Thistle's usually blank countenance. "That's why I always assume."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sure the other dragoon orders would like to know." Edillon nodded, and the dragoon soldier was off faster than an arrow.

Kelin clapped his meaty hands together. "So, wait here, I suppose?"

"I suppose. No one succeeds in getting in Horizon without an invitation."

"I can see that." He eyed the fortress again. "How would one get out?"

"There is no way out of this!" Ander yelled. "Look, let's just get Strival, grovel and maybe we'll be alive in an hour."

"This is Horizon. We can hold it," Der replied.

"Not against dragons." Alluvius pointed. They stood together on the highest and innermost wall of the fortress. Most of the candidates were there as well. It wasn't every day that they had such a magnificent view of two approaching armies.

Der pressed her knuckles into the wall. "This is why we need those wards."

Alluvius shrugged. "They're not going to tell us."

"Then we just gotta think like Strival and Jakkobb and them. Alright, alright. It'd be something easy, but something very hard to use against them."

"Exactly." Ander threw up his hands. "Which is why it ain't gonna work for us."

Alluvius pursed his lips. "Actually, I heard it's only something that Strival can do."

“What do the wards do anyway?” Ander asked.

Der shrugged. “I have no idea.”

The other candidate gulped. “So why activate them?”

“Because I assume they’re meant to keep dragons and armies outside! I mean, right? We could probably hold against the other armies—”

“Probably not,” Alluvius breathed.

“*Probably*. But not against dragons. And dragoons like dragons.”

“And you’re married to trouble.” Ander dragged his fingers through his hair. He rubbed some of the growing stubble on his chin.

All of the candidates gazed at the rising dragons. Two, three, then four of the magnificent beasts rose from the mountains. The vibrantly colored scales brightened the reflecting morning sun a hundredfold. Lazily, their wings unfurled like the sails of the mightiest warships.

Movement managed to steal Der’s eyes for a brief moment. On the plain, the Blue Farers, the dragoon navy and Steel Eagle, the most aerial of the dragoon orders, were lining up to advance. Pennants and banners caught in the breeze, but more importantly, warhorses and soldiers were coming up front and center.

She looked back at the dragons. “Where’s Goldie when I could use him?” She banged her fists on the stone walls. “Form up!” The candidates wrenched their gazes away from the dragons.

“Form up! We got approaching armies! Let’s go, move, move, move!”

Candidates ran along the walls. Some had hauled up buckets of water in place of boiling oil.

Der and Alluvius jogged along the curving wall to get a better view of the dragons. They didn’t even acknowledge the mountainous vista.

“They have amazing eyesight,” the part human murmured. “They’re how many miles away now? And look, they’re circling. They know something’s not right.”

“Well, it’s down to you and me to figure them out.”

He looked around and grabbed his head with both hands. “Der, I hope you’ve got some brilliant plan.”

She held open her palms and shrugged. “Plans never last anyway.”

“That’s why they’re made to be adaptable! Hey, what’s this?” He traced his fingers along the inside of the wall to some engraved symbols.

“What’s what?”

“I found some writing on the wall, here.” He squatted down and brushed away some errant dust from the grooves.

“And does it say the secret to defeating a horde of dragons?”

“Yes, it says run away.”

Der cocked her head. “Really?”

“No. It reads squiggle squiggle doodle curl. It’s not elvish either. I have no idea.”

“Let me see—” She leaned forward, and that was why the arrow burrowed into her shoulder instead of her chest.

She dropped flat on the stone wall, clutching at her stricken left arm. Alluvius also kissed the floor.

“Don’t they know it’s not for real? But, wait.” There was just no way the other dragoons could have shot an arrow up here.

Der reached across with her right hand and yanked the arrow out. The barbed head stretched and tore out more of her flesh.

Alluvius slapped her hand. “Hey! You’re not supposed to take those out!”

“Just tie it up!”

He ripped a piece of cloth from his sleeve and started to knot it around the wound.

Meanwhile, Der rolled her head back and peeked through one of the battlements. A lone figure with a bow sprinted along Horizon’s second wall. She couldn’t make out his face against the dawning sun. She heaved herself back to her feet.

Her shoulders betrayed her wobble. Alluvius raised his hand to steady her, but she sidestepped. She nodded ahead.

The figure dashed along one of the thin bridges interconnecting the walls.

Alluvius gasped. “That’s Firth. What is he doing?”

As he ran, Firth notched another arrow and let it fly. Der watched it cautiously, and breathed out as the shot sailed into the chasm between the walls. “He certainly chose the absolute worst time. We’ve got an army and dragons to fight! I don’t want to bother with him.”

“At least the dragons aren’t trying to kill us!” Alluvius shouted in her ear.

Der pulled her sword free and shrugged a little. She walked closer to the bridge, where the bowman was barely fifteen feet away and fast approaching them. She waved her weapon. “Firth! What the hell? You know I can beat you!”

Still running and instead of answering, he lowered the bow and loosed a third arrow.

Der dodged, and came back up into a fighting stance.

Firth dropped the bow as his feet landed on the walkway. “Either way, I’m done putting up with you!” He spread his feet out into a wide stance. Steel whispered softly as he drew his sword and a dagger for the other hand. He snarled.

“I’ve never seen him put his feet that way before,” Alluvius whispered. “Not with his legs like that.”

She said out of the side of her mouth, “Well, unless he’s wearin’ a cup, he’s gonna find out why that’s a bad idea.”

“Are you done talking?” Firth snapped. “Cause I am.” Sparks flew up from the metal on his boots when he charged.

And the world paused for Derora. She felt every individual heartbeat vibrate through her body. And she heard that rhythm slow down. The pain from her arrow wound was distant, but pulsing in pace with her heart.

She saw the dragoon armies – they had walked through the second giant rock ring. On the walls, the candidates ran like ants before a storm, preparing to defend the gates.

The dragons – one red, another blue, the third green, and the last bronze – still circled Horizon. Their giant wings flapped in defiance of natural law, but magic kept them buoyant. They closed their distance with each circle. The green dragon boasted blue eyes like sharpened sapphires.

She watched those eyes watching her...

Then the world snapped back into its speed.

Firth's sword passed in front of her neck, forcing her to lean back over the chasm between the walls.

With her back still leaning on the wall, she parried his next lightning strike. He didn't pull back, and pressed down heavily on their blades. Firth's dagger flicked at Alluvius, who was halfway through drawing his own sword.

Der frowned at the blade shoved over her nose. He'd never been this talented before!

He suddenly yanked sideways from her weapon and then sliced straight down. Der matched his move and stopped the sword, but couldn't prevent his pommel from digging into her arrow wound. Both swords pointed straight down.

Her arm collapsed first, and then she let her entire body fall away from him. It was that or be cut.

Alluvius feinted low and thrust high, but Firth caught his strike with the dagger. The part human danced away from Firth's free blade.

Der brought her sword back on guard and then caught sight of the writing Alluvius had seen.

"I can read this. It just says 'defend the horizon'."

She shook herself free and launched herself up. Firth snarled a grin, and beat back Alluvius with an onslaught of two blades.

Der was a step away when the entire citadel began to rumble, like the awakening of a volcano.

Chloe grabbed her stomach and fell on the ground.

"Chloe!" Kelin and Thalon shouted.

She watched the loose grains of soil bounce against the frozen ground. The vibrations sprung up through her hands and shoulders, and she felt them all the way into her bones.

"Earthquake?" Kelin asked.

She squeezed her eyes and fingered the silverseed necklace that Lady Evelyn had given her. "No. *Magic*." She could feel the silverseed's protection draining out of the pendant.

Thalon sat down beside her. "Are you alright?"

She gulped. "I, I think so." She let the necklace swing out in front of her. "But if I didn't have this..."

"We should stay away," Thistle murmured. He didn't bother with the unsaid "or".

Kelin licked his lips. "What is this magic going to do?"

A red glow surrounded the base of the enormous fortress. The stone burped out a spout of molten rock. It oozed its way onto the frozen ground below, where sudden steam hissed and spat back at the rock.

More gouts of lava burst forth from Horizon. The entire base melted. Then the whole of the manmade mountain began to float. The last chunks of lava pulled free from the flying base. All around, the rocks drummed the clinking of cooling stone.

A silver haze, like a gossamer veil, unfolded from the top of the central keep and kept on growing until it entirely surrounded the massive citadel. From a distance, it looked like fog. Up close, it shimmered like the stars.

Horizon continued to ascend.

The dragoons who had been advancing on the fortress withdrew with speed and precision. Despite their expert withdrawal, their jaws hung wide at the sight. The rock rings surrounding them crackled. Tiny beams of electricity bounced between the rock rings and the rocks in the fields. They grew in intensity with every strike.

The red dragon roared like the thunder over the prairie. It circled closer to the shimmering veil of light. As it passed, it extended one talon, and scratched the light. The talon bounced harmlessly off.

Edillon laughed, and wiped a tear from his eye. "Oh, Der."

Thalon hopped excitedly beside him, clapping his hands.

Thistle snorted and folded his arms. He glanced down at Thalon. "And this is why she is not a mentor for my son."

Edillon's grin glowed across his face. "Oh, yes. Der always has been more than many can stomach, which is wonderful against enemies, but not always smooth among allies."

Thistle's nostrils flared again.

Thalon turned around and pointed. He grinned like a monkey. "Dad! Dad! Look at that! Can we go up in that?"

"They'll have to bring it down first," Edillon chuckled.

"No," Thistle replied. "We're not going to do that."

Kelin dusted off his trousers. "Why not, man? It's... It's..." He stared into the crowds gathered behind the armies. "It's Der's dad." He waved. "Hey! Lord Saxen!" He started to jog.

Thistle quietly clicked his tongue against his cheek. Thalon immediately tightened his hood over his face, hiding his orange eyes.

Riodan and Rhoesia Saxen, arm and arm, stared at the floating citadel. They started as Kelin barreled down on them. Riodan blinked. "Who— Kelin?"

"Yes, sir."

Riodan grinned. "It's been a couple years."

Rhoesia smiled at the floating citadel. "Have you ever imagined anything like it?"

"Fortunately no, sir." Kelin grinned. "However, I am not surprised..." His voice petered out.

Behind Rhoesia stood another Riversbridge couple, equally enthralled by the hovering of Horizon. Kelin stared at them. "Mum? Dad?"

Firth kicked Alluvius in the face, just when Alluvius was starting to stand back up. The part human collapsed again. This time, he looked completely out to Der.

All she could do to help him was keep Firth busy. Sparks flew from their blades as they clashed.

Firth lashed out with his foot and popped her squarely in one of her ankles.

Der stumbled sideways, and had a very brief but superb view of their height through the silver-light veil. Horizon hovered straight up, parallel with the mighty mountains. The dragons still circled, but the dragoon troops below looked like seeds. She couldn't even hear the shouts of the other candidates.

"What the hell did you do?" Firth screamed. He thrust with both sword and dagger.

"I have no idea!" She ducked and parried. "When the hell did you actually learn to use a sword?"

His reply was to increase the speed of his blades.

“The others may be blind, but I see what you are. Because I’ve seen it before. Only, he’s better.”

She tried a few offensive pokes. “What the hell are you talking about?”

He turned aside all of her attacks with lazy motions of his wrist. She just didn’t have the time to figure out this new fighting style before another one of his blades slide past her defense to leave another little nick.

She bit down against the rise of fury. She knew what would happen if she lost control. Pressed against the wall, with nowhere to really move, she relied entirely on intricate blade-work. Only he had one more blade than she did.

It couldn’t end for her like this! Not to some misogynistic, selfish bastard. Even if he did know some very different combat style that she didn’t know how to defend against.

The dagger slid through her defense and bit into her ribs. She knew the tactic, since he couldn’t win an outright kill, he’d wear her down with enough small cuts. Her energy would just leak out.

Well, if she couldn’t defend against it, she might as well attack.

She parried his sword’s thrust, ducked and punched him as hard as she could in his underarm. He gasped in sudden agony.

Her fist hammered him again, this time in the throat while her sword kept his sword out wide. Nothing could defend her from the dagger, except the shock from being punched.

Gasping and choking, he stumbled forward. The dagger fell from his fingers.

Der kicked him in the knees, and he fell backward onto his rump.

She barely yanked the tip of her sword back from tearing his skin. “I’ve got you.”

He spat. “So finish it.”

The tip wavered. She pressed her free hand against her leaking ribs. “It requires more skill to beat an enemy without killing him.”

Behind his back, Firth fingered the dropped dagger. He shrugged. “Mayhap.” He pulled the blade up into his hand. “But you don’t have to ask nicely when they’re dead!”

He launched himself, bringing the dagger around.

In total muscle memory, she brought her sword down. It cut cleanly into his neck.

He sagged.

Der released her fingers from the hilt one at a time. She stepped back and felt the blood draining from her head and her ribs. Slowly, she folded down to her knees.

Certainly, this wasn’t the first time she had taken a life. But this was the first time she’d taken the life of someone she’d known. Even one she’d never gotten along with.

She stared at Firth’s face. His eyes were still alert and open, but entirely unflinching.

The Scholar appeared on the wall, followed by Cacilin. The teacher shook a fist at them. “Put the fortress down! Right now! Oh, is that real bl—” He broke off.

“What happened?” The judicar’s footsteps immediately hastened.

Der forced her shoulders back. “Is Alluvius alright?”

Cacilin pressed his fingertips against the part human’s neck. “Yeah, think he’ll be alright.”

“What’s going on?” the Scholar fumed. “I honestly thought someone gifted with the language would know better!”

“What language?” She pushed up her knees. “Oh, no, not again. Not this stupid holy language again.”

“Stupid?!” Cacilin and the Scholar erupted together.

“It’s brought me nothing but trouble.” She glared at the words carved into the stone. “Hey, it says something different now.”

“Repair the horizon,” Cacilin enunciated. Immediately, the mountain began to sink. Its base began to glow red again and the stone began to soften. The gossamer veil dissipated into the air like millions of tiny fireworks.

The citadel continued its descent. The rocks realigned to the exact same structure as they were before they had melted. The ground below began to steam again as Horizon touched down.

Alluvius groaned and blinked. He looked at Firth and then at Der, and finally just the sky.

Strival and Jakkobb sprinted up on the wall, steaming just like the ground around the cooling stone.

Alluvius heaved a sigh. “We should probably surrender.”

Der grunted. “Probably, but I’m stubborn as hell.”

The knights slowed as they neared the carnage. Cacilin and the Scholar stepped back.

Jakkobb stabbed a finger down at the body. “Why is he dead?”

“Because he tried to kill me,” Der said, matter-of-factly.

Suddenly, she felt hot breath roll across her back. Incredibly hot breath. She turned her face over her shoulder to find herself face to nostril with a massive red dragon. Giant purple eyes stared her down, and they looked so familiar.

“Ree!” A little golden ball of scales bounced off the snout of the red beast and into Der’s surprised hands. Goldie squirmed around in a circle to face her. “Ree! Oh, you’re hurt!”

She looked back up at the red dragon. She’d seen a red man with purple eyes during her interview on the day that she’d arrived. Could it be?

Still in some sort of shock, Der looked between the golden dragon, the knight-commander and Jakkobb.

The captain rubbed his forehead. “I really, really wish I could say that this is the most trouble you’ve ever been in. Because you are in for it.”

Chapter Fourteen

Out

“Mum? Dad?” Kelin gulped. The numbness tingled across his cheeks and was rapidly making a dive for his thumping heart.

Calindra and Gaius Miller stared at their son. A little more gray salted their hair and a few more laugh lines framed their eyes and mouths.

Kelin blinked. They also looked shorter for some unfathomable reason. He swallowed again.

Calindra burst with tears. “You never came home!”

The numbness shattered over Kelin’s body. He’d never leapt at an enemy as quickly as he ran to his parents’ embrace. How big was his baby sister now? Would she even know to recognize him? What about his brothers? What new skills they had they learned over the last few years? What about that old smith, Sigard, would he have quit— No, some things don’t change. He hardened his throat against a growing ache. Or did they?

He held his parents tighter. He hadn’t known until this moment that Riversbridge wasn’t frozen in time, and it wasn’t waiting for him. “I’ve missed you so much!” He exhaled and realized that he’d been holding his breath.

“And you too!” his mother nearly sobbed. Slowly, Calindra and Gaius released their grips. Their sad and joyful smiles remained.

Riodan nodded at Kelin’s weapon. “Making your life by the sword too? Dangerous trade, that.”

A frown hardened across the young man’s features. In his mind’s eye, he watched the necromancer melting underneath the molten metal. “Would be more dangerous without it, sir.”

Rhoesia chuckled and pulled on her husband’s arm. “I imagine so. And we’re here for a celebration, after all.”

“Indeed!” Calindra beamed, still holding onto her son’s shoulders. “Never in my day did I think I would ever see such magic. The entire mountain!”

Riodan, who had long ago developed an extra wary sense about these things, simply nodded. “I just pray it was intentional.”

Strival, Cacilin, Arthang Garis, commander of Steel Eagle, and Nicisea Armistad, commander of the Blue Farers, all glared down at Der with their arms folded. Alluvius sat further behind her and stared at Firth’s corpse at their feet.

Der rubbed her bandaged shoulder. She rolled her eyes, and thought, as if I’ve never been in trouble before.

Cacilin paced. “Derora Saxen, what were you thinking? Activating the wards!”

Der opened her mouth, but Arthang was faster. “How, exactly, was she able to accomplish that?”

“Holy language,” Strival snapped.

The brightly red haired Nicisea waved her hands. “Wait. This girl has already been ordained?” She looked between the judicar and Silver Dawn’s commander.

“She’s not ordained,” Cacilin replied darkly.

“Then how?”

Der tossed up her hands. “I just can. Always have been able to, apparently.”

“The wards are incidental!” Strival roared. “Did you honestly think you could get away with taking *my* citadel?”

She met his gaze evenly. “Well, I almost did, sir. And you let us go in the hall—”

Alluvius kicked her ankle. She mouthed, “What?”

Strival thrust his finger toward Firth’s corpse and glared at Der. “And why did he try to kill you?”

“The coup? I don’t know.” Der’s hand flinched toward her cut ribs. They’d been bandaged, but she’d been given no alcohol or special tea to dampen the pain.

The Silver Dawn commander clenched his jaw, possibly too angry to speak.

Alluvius licked his lips. “They never got on well.”

“And he attacked you first?” the judicar pursued. “You didn’t instigate this?”

“He shot at us with arrows.” The part human rubbed his face. “He wasn’t even trying to fight, not properly.”

Der perked up. “And when we did fight, he used these moves that I’ve never seen before. And he was suddenly ten times better, like.”

Alluvius continued, “I know for a fact that he did not enjoy the idea of the candidates’ mutiny.”

The Blue Farers commander sighed. “If he disagreed with you, why wouldn’t he have just freed the knights already here?”

Der shook her head. “No, I don’t think this is about the citadel. I think he just found an excuse.”

“But why?”

She pointed. “You’d have to ask him, sir.”

“Curious.” Cacilin leaned over the body. A corner of paper poked out from the folds of the body’s tunic and armor. The judicar tugged it free and turned it over in his hands. He looked up to Nicisea. “A blank letter with just an address to an office in Alscane, to be sent by your courier service.”

The naval commander grumbled. “What of it? Does he have family in Alscane or something?”

Cacilin shrugged.

A frown settled across Der’s face. She tapped her forehead. “He used to doodle on his assignments with milk. I always thought that was strange.”

Everyone in the room stared at her.

Arthang finally barked a laugh. “I guess he didn’t have time to script a regular letter around it yet. May I, sir?” He held out his hand; Cacilin wordlessly passed it to him.

The Steel Eagle commander walked across the floor to the fireplace and set the missive on the surrounding lava stones. The edges of the paper began to blacken. The invisible, dried milk also began to darken, revealing paragraphs of cramped, blotched handwriting.

Arthang nodded to Strival. “You had a spy amongst your soldiers, my lord.”

Strival clenched both his fists. Silence thickened in the air around them.

Cacilin gestured to Der and Alluvius. “That’s why Firth tried to kill her. She knew about the milk.”

“I didn’t know you could code messages with it!” Der held up her hands. “I would’ve said something. I thought he was just being a moron! Hey, wait, so who was he spying for?”

“Wouldn’t it be nice if spies properly addressed their letters, no?” Nicisea risked a chuckle.

“This is not a discussion for you,” Strival snapped at Der. “Alluvius, you are dismissed.”

Alluvius hesitated. “Yes, sir.”

Der felt her shoulders slouch as the door shut behind her. In trouble again. Couldn’t even escape it here.

Strival sighed audibly. “Derora, you can’t be a dragoon soldier.”

“What? Why?” She felt her complexion and temperature fading. “I think I’ve successfully learned how to conquer a fortress and I found out the spy for you!”

“I know.” Strival sighed again. “You went too far.”

“Too far?” She shook her head. “I, I don’t understand. You let the other candidates before us raid the kitchens!”

“The kitchens don’t activate the wards! Think, Derora, what happens if I send you on a mission and you decide that you don’t like it?”

Der wiped the icy river of sweat from her face. “But, but, I’m always honest, sir, you know that!”

“But that doesn’t mean that I can trust you. You are the most talented recruit that I’ve seen since this fortress was built. You already came here a hero. And, although heroes will always be needed, they don’t absorb well into the ranks. I wish you well, Derora, but your place isn’t here.”

Der felt the world washing away from her faster than the glacial flood. This was all she’d ever dreamed about, hoped for, and prayed to earn. And now...

Strival sighed. “Go to the infirmary before you pack your things to get that shoulder—”

She spun and, legs pushing through sand, she stumbled into the corridor. Alluvius wasn’t here, no one was. She heard herself gasping for air as if she was drowning. As someone shut the door she overheard, but didn’t process, what was said.

“What about your other candidates, Strival?”

“Oh, they’ll be punished, certainly, but I need the soldiers.”

Der ran through the corridors of the keep, not once checking over her shoulder. No one stopped her; in fact, she didn’t even see anyone else. Outside, she heard trumpets declaring the commencement of the ceremony.

And she wasn’t there!

All of her life she daydreamed about this. She just knew she’d be there, standing proudly amongst all the knights. Marching with the world’s elite.

She ruined it!

With her shoulder as a wedge, she crashed through the door into the small closet. Her fingers dug into the wood underneath the tiny table and she wrenched the Pallens sword free. Hugging the sheathed weapon, she collapsed to the floor. Her hold against her tears broke.

She clutched the sword and sobbed.

Outside, cheers erupted so loudly that the walls of the citadel trembled. The trumpets rose in salute to the cheers.

Der sank even lower against the stone floor.

“He did *what?*” Jakkobb exploded.

Cacilin nodded. "Don't you have some part in the ceremony, captain?"

"I won't be missed." He sighed. "I should've known this was going to happen, on all accounts. Do you know where she is?"

The judicar sucked his tongue. "No, I'm afraid not."

"Fine." The knight nodded. "I'll speak with the others." He sighed again, and his eyes creased as if in pain. "I should've watched for this."

Cacilin lifted his foot to walk and almost crushed a waddling gold blur. The chubby little dragon raised his front paws like a child waiting to be picked up. "Take me too!"

Jakkobb caught them leaving in the corner of his eye. His legs swung rigidly as he approached the glowing and excited faces of Der's friends and family.

Cacilin watched Goldie as he waddled along with his nose bumping against the stone floors of the keep. He smiled. "I didn't think that dragons had such a strong sense of smell."

The golden beast swiveled his long neck around to face the judicar. "Smell? No, I'm just sniffing out her aura."

Cacilin lifted an eyebrow.

Goldie almost went cross-eyed. "It's, um, it's like a magic smell?"

"Magic smell?" The other eyebrow rose to match heights.

"Yeah!" The little dragon dropped his snout back to the floor and kept on sniffing and waddling.

Cacilin followed.

Soon, the little beast turned and scratched at a narrow door. "Der?" He dropped his triangular head on the floor and pushed it under the crack. "Der, oh no! You're sad! I'm coming!"

He kicked his all four paws in a mad dash, and utterly failed to squeeze his round little body underneath the door.

Cacilin carefully slid his hands under the dragon's flapping wings and scooped him off the stones. He balanced the creature in one hand, and nudged the door open with the other.

Der clutched the Pallens sword to her chest.

The dragon squirmed and raked his talons over Cacilin's arm. The judicar dropped him, and he leapt into Der's lap. He stretched his neck and licked the tears on her cheek.

She finally broke her deadpan expression. "Goldie!"

The forked tongue disappeared back inside his mouth. "Hold on. I'm gonna get the others! We'll have our own party! Ree!" He beat his wings, which were too small in his hatching size to create enough lift to fly. He disappeared at a jumping run, each jump powered by a wing flap.

The judicar leaned against the doorframe. "So why did you do it?"

Der stared at his boots and shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just me." She held the sword tighter. "I always wanted to be a knight!"

"I'd still say you have the makings in you, child. You certainly led the candidates to victory here."

She strained to hold back more tears. "And look where that got me!"

He nodded. "Aye. Do you know what, in my opinion, defines a leader? The ability to make the right decision at the right time."

She sniffed and mumbled, "Guess I'd only gotten around to the second part of that first."

“Exactly. Right time, wrong decision.” He offered a smile. “Mayhap you weren’t meant to be a dragoon. Perhaps you were just here to learn the craft of war.”

“Then what else is there?” She continued to glare at the stone floor.

“Well, I know you actually believe what you say because you wear the Dawn Sword under your tunic.”

Her brow furrowed.

“You don’t flash it around for everyone to show that you wear a symbol that nobody has in two thousand years.”

Gingerly, she released her fingers from the sheath and pressed the hand to her chest above the medallion.

“There are other orders, Der. I belong to Zine’s order, and while I’ll admit we don’t boast the same notoriety as the dragoons, we certainly have soldiers who can compete with them.”

She wiped her eyes. “You’re right. I never heard a song about you.”

He shrugged. “Well, they’re around. Just not on this side of the continent perhaps. Back in the Wars, we guarded the cities, broke sieges and fought battles. The necessary things, while the dragoons played heroes at the Battle of the Bridge. As I’m sure you’re so very well aware, heroes don’t stand alone; they’re just the ones whose names get remembered.”

“Yeah. In defeat.”

The judicar laughed. “Defeat? You won, Derora. You had Horizon, and you could’ve held out against the world’s elite.”

She glared. “Sure doesn’t feel like winning.”

“That’s because you let Strival take back over. Now, that was the right thing to do, but that doesn’t take away the fact that you won. You conquered Horizon.”

She sniffed again. “So, now what? You want me to join the order of Zine? I don’t even know much about him.”

“You know that he’s the god of war and justice. I will admit, he’s strict, and the order is as strict than the dragoons.”

“Wouldn’t expect otherwise.”

“And, no, I don’t want you to join. I would, however, like you to see if you would be able to find a home with us. We’re headquartered in Tenmar, but we have temples in Staghorn, Urael, Alscane and others.”

“I don’t know,” Der mumbled. “I just don’t know. I mean, I had this entire plan. I was going to be a dragoon knight, and it was all coming true until, poof. Ha ha, fooled you!”

Cacilin tapped the pyramid shaped sapphire on the pommel of the Pallens sword. “Do you really think you could have come into possession of such a weapon if you weren’t meant for a great purpose?”

“Maybe,” she spat. “Maybe I’m just carrying it for someone else!”

He leaned back. “I am not the one with that answer, but you can certainly use it in the meantime. You’re young, Derora, and every young person I’ve ever met, including myself, has this crisis.”

“Really? Just like this?”

He chuckled. "Alright, perhaps not on this scale. But, you're still finding out who you are. Take some time to make sure you get it right."

"But I already got it wrong!" The sobs shook her shoulders again.

He offered a crooked smile. "Perhaps not."

"Reee!" A small golden sun appeared in the doorframe and launched itself at Der. The dragon's body barreled into her chest like a shiny boulder.

Cacilin stepped back from the doorway, and the heads of too many people almost completely obscured the light. Der sniffed and quickly tried to hide all the evidence of her tears on her sleeve.

"Come on!" Goldie tugged at her bootlaces with his talons. Slowly, and still holding the sword with both hands, she slinked into the corridor. Then she nearly dropped the precious weapon.

"Mother? Dad?" She gasped. Everyone was there: Chloe, Thalon, her parents, Kelin, his parents, Jakkobb, Alluvius, Edillon, and even Thistle, far behind and with his back against the wall.

Rhoesia stared openly at the golden dragon. Riodan smiled. "There we were, sharing news with Sir Jakkobb, when this, golden... This golden..."

"*Dragon!*" Goldie chirped happily. With a graceful bound and a push from his wings, he leapt onto Der's shoulder. He immediately lost his footing and cried like a falling toddler as he overbalanced.

Edillon plucked the plummeting dragon from his fall. He smiled like a rising star. "Well met."

"Kaleb!" Der blurted. "Er, Edillon, er, Your Majesty. Uh, well met." She scratched the back of her head absently. "So why are you wearing a different crown and not the spiky one?"

He raised his eyes up as if he could see the polished terebinth coronet, embedded with gemstones. "Because the other one doesn't leave Arborn."

Rhoesia's stare ricocheted from the dragon to the elf before she even moved her eyes. She gasped quietly while she and her husband drew away from him.

The glow faded from Der's green and brown eyes. "So, is everyone here to witness my grandstanding failure?"

"Of course not." The king smiled. "I was actually coming to discuss with Strival some strange earth events. However, since it seems that you are free now, perhaps you can help me with finding the missing clues I need." He leaned forward and whispered, "Also, I had to leave. Arborn reminds me too much of..."

He's still grieving for his parents, she realized, even though it's been two years. But he's an elf. Her eyes wandered over to her parents. Would she still be grieving?

Suddenly, Der reached out and grabbed both Rhoesia and Riodan, trying to fit one arm around both of them, still holding the sword in the other.

Her father laughed. "It is good to see you too, child."

Der sniffed and rubbed her nose on her sleeve and looked around the group. "Alluvius! What are you doing here?"

The part human edged away from the king, and tried not to stare. He grinned at her. "Well, Strival gave me a choice: quit or be booted out like you."

"At least you got a choice."

"Yeah, right," he drawled.

"What about—"

“Everyone else is fine. In trouble, but not cast away.”

She nodded and looked around. “Kelin! I can’t believe I didn’t greet you!”

Her best friend chuckled. “Well, you only have so many people.”

“And us!” Thalon pounced at her waist and hugged her. Chloe inched up behind.

She rustled his hair. “You’ve grown! And so you have, Chloe. That dress suits you very well.”

“Thank you.” The girl blushed.

Thalon planted his hands on his hips and threw back his head. “We defeated a necromancer!”

“You did what?” Jakkobb straightened. Behind him, Cacilin coughed in surprise.

“I did,” Kelin said, raising an eyebrow at Thalon.

“I’m not sure if I believe that more than the children.” Der tried to ease a grin, but the emotion was still too tender.

He looked her up and down. “We’ve both been training. I think I could take you on now.”

Der’s face suddenly collapsed. “I, I don’t know. Not right now.”

Edillon cleared his throat into the chilling silence. “At least there have been no strange earth events since his death.”

“Earth events?” Riodan asked.

“Yeah, what?” Der said.

Jakkobb pushed himself off the wall. “Like a glacier melting and refreezing suddenly?”

“Oh, that.” She frowned. “There were other things too?”

“Like a tornado in a blizzard.” Thalon punched the air excitedly. “It was great!”

“How did you see it in a blizzard?” Der suddenly asked. “Aren’t they, well, blizzards, all blowing wind and snow?”

“And we still need to know who this boy magician was,” Edillon remarked.

“Anyone talk to Lady Evelyn?” Der asked.

“Who do you think we went to first?” Kelin smiled. “Hey, and since you’re freelance again, we can all go investigate together.” He leaned forward and whispered in elvish, “Because something may still be seeking her.”

Der tried to fight a glance at Chloe.

Alluvius raised a hand. “I will be more than willing to join such a party. Especially if these events are related to that glacier.” A pinch of icy memory wrinkled his nose.

“That’s dangerous!” Kelin’s mother pressed her hands to her chest. “Oh, I wish you would come home.”

Jakkobb chuckled. “The last I remember, Riversbridge wasn’t big enough for all of this party.”

“If you can still recognize it,” Riodan replied.

“What? Like there’s a road to it now?” Kelin asked.

“More than that,” Gaius said. “The dwarves have been setting up shop now too.”

“It’ll be a city soon enough.” Rhoesia smiled. “And if you and Derry hadn’t left home, none of that would be happening.”

Der tried to smile again.

Alluvius squeezed up beside her. “So what do you want to do?”

Jakkobb said, "Well, Strival issued a fast order to create a fake letter in Firth's handwriting with all sorts of wonderful misinformation."

"Deliver it and see who picks it up," Cacilin finished.

"So you're going to Alscane, sir?" Der presumed.

"Yes, but you're not a dragoon, so I probably shouldn't even have told you that."

"Alscane?" Kelin straightened his shoulders. "That woman in Quon, Cora, she mentioned something strange in Alscane. That's where we were going to go, to try to track down where that necromancer had come from." He grinned. "Der, come along with us."

She tried to smile. "Uh, yeah."

Cacilin placed a hand on Der's shoulder. "Zine has a temple there, you're welcome to learn about us."

Jakkobb scowled. "I hope you're not trying to recruit for your order while you are a guest here."

"Of course not, but since the young lady is not a dragoon..." he petered out under the knight's steaming glare.

Der waved her hand between them. "I'll go. But, Jakkobb, I think I will go with Thistle and Kelin."

Calindra tugged on her son's shoulders. "Oh, but Kelin, promise me that you'll come home after this."

He wrapped his arms around her. "Of course, mum. I will come home."

"So we're all going?" Der held her hands out to the group. "Except parents, I guess." She winced.

Edillon smiled sadly. "Alas, I must return to Arborn. I need to discover why these strange earth events occurred. Please let me know what information you glean in your travels."

"Yeah, but they've stopped," Thalon piped up.

King Edillon frowned. "Well, Sir Jakkobb, I will ask of your commander to grant me whatever information you may learn about—" He froze, and his complexion faded to match the ice of the glacier. "It's—"

...Rumble...

....*RumbleRumbleRumble*...

"What is that?" Rhoesia clung to her husband's arm.

Der held up her hands. "It's not me this time!"

The citadel vibrated beneath their feet. The wickerwork wallpaper, designed to hold the walls and ceilings together in case of earthen missiles, creaked and shifted overhead alarmingly.

"Earthquake!" Thalon threw up his hands and ran to his dad.

"Jakkobb!" Der yelled. "Why would they activa—"

"By the gods!" Alluvius, pressed his nose and hands against the window. "The mountains! Look at the mountains!"

They dashed to the long, curving glass. Dragons were shooting straight up from the mountains like fireworks.

The strata of rocks that made up the range started to visibly jostle, even from the distance of Horizon.

Then they began to flow and move, just like the crashing surf of the ocean against cliffs. What took millions of years to raise high was grinding and heaving and the entire mountain chain was collapsing in seconds.

The peaks imploded in on themselves. The mountains went right on collapsing after they reached the ground into enormous sinkholes, as the world turned the entire range inside out on the crust of the earth.

The screams of tortured rocks finally assailed their ears, far out of pace with the sight of the destruction in front of them.

Below, in the citadel, Der could make out the mass of forms streaming for a view that could not rival the window that they had. The rumblings faded, but the rock dust still sailed further into the sky.

"This is impossible!" Der's mother cried.

The elven king licked his lips. "It should repair itself. All of the other events turned back."

Nothing happened as they waited. Rhoesia dug her fingers into her husband's shoulders. The children hugged each other.

Finally, Der took a step closer to the window. "So who wants to be the first to climb down to the tallest peak?"

"I hope you can swim because you'll have some massive lakes soon enough," Alluvius murmured.

"Not to mention some interesting weather," Cacilin added.

Silence herded them into a tighter huddle. They stared. The mountains remained sunken into the ground.

"My hoard!" Goldie wailed, shattering the silence. "My hoard!" He flapped his wings, kicking up wind around the party.

"You have a hoard?" Der shook her eyes free from the inverted mountains.

The little dragon sniffed and landed on the floor. "I'm a dragon. We hoard. And now it's go-oo-ooone!" Still sniffing, he dug his talons into Der's boot and started to work the lace free.

She just watched. The others continued to stare at the mountains.

The dragon dragged the lace away from her boot. His nostrils flared and he waddled over to Thalon. He gripped the boy's trousers and shook.

"Hey!" the boy yelped. A wooden button, freed from the last vestiges of string, crashed down on the dragon's head.

Goldie scooped it up and put it into a pile with the bootlace.

The king knelt down to the dragon and removed the wooden crown with his fingertips.

"Oooh! Shiny!" Goldie's snorted a poof of smoke in delight. He snatched the crown and struggled to drape it over one shoulder and belly like a sash.

"Your Majesty?" Jakkobb raised both eyebrows.

"Well, I can't wear it if I'm going to Alscane with you, now can I?"

Chapter Fifteen

The City by the Sea

Chloe felt the weight of the weeping willow's leafy tendrils against her hands. The dangling leaves swayed like dancers and glowed in the sunlight.

And then the smell crashed into her nose. Thalon marched through the leaves beside her. "Did the earth fart or something? Ow!"

His father withdrew his hand from the back of the boy's skull. Thistle shook his head.

Ahead of them, birds twittered and insects croaked in the swamp's midday air.

Sir Cacilin pushed the trailing leaves out of his path. He set his hands on his hips and ran his eyes over the weeping willow. "I had no idea that this was here."

Alluvius grunted under the weight of his backpack. "So Alscane doesn't know there's a tree path three miles outside of town?"

Cacilin shook his head.

"And we had to walk forever," Thalon moaned. "Why aren't there any tree paths close to Horizon?"

"Because that would be stupid," Jakkobb replied, emerging from the tree. Edillon followed him closely, with two silent knights of Arborn behind him.

Spike pushed through the leaves with his head and snorted in frustration as only a horse can.

Thalon plugged his nose with his fingers. "Smells like we're in ogre country again."

The black mount lowered his head to gaze at the boy, and for the first time, Thalon realized that his eyes were a little farther forward in front, much more like a predator's face than a horse's. Spike asked, *Would you rather spend over half a year walking on foot?*

"No," the boy mumbled.

Edillon took a step back. "Uh, Sir Jakkobb, when did your horse begin to speak?"

Kelin coughed. "You didn't know?"

Spike raised back his head and his silver and golden horn flashed into life. His hooves also glowed brightly against the swamp's mud.

"Oh." The king nodded. "I was not aware."

Derora, with Goldie sitting proudly on the top of her head, emerged from the willow. Behind all of them, the bark began to groan and the tree lowered itself into the swamp. Ripples escaped out from the back of sinking trunk into the swamp.

Der grinned. "Everyone here?"

"The dragon's here!" Goldie stretched in the sunlight. Between herself and the dragon, Der counted Jakkobb, Kelin, Chloe, Thistle, Thalon, Edillon, the two knights of Arborn, Cacilin, Alluvius and Spike.

She shifted the weight of her backpack. She carried everything she owned, including the Pallens sword on her hip.

Thistle wordlessly broke off a lengthy, dead branch from a tree. He prodded the ground in front of him and started to walk. Meanwhile, Jakkobb hoisted Chloe and then Thalon onto the unicorn's back.

Cacilin fell in behind Spike. "For the last year and a half, Alscane's navy has been slowly vanishing."

"We know," Edillon replied. "And some nation's pirates – ah-hem, privateers are responsible?"

The judicar shook his head and held up his empty palms.

"You don't think that and these earth events are related?" Der cut in.

"Most likely not," the elf replied.

The judicar twisted his head around to speak over his shoulder. "They're down to a dozen ships. Before this, they'd been sending miners over to Dosmar."

"Pallens," Alluvius said. "They were mining in Pallens."

"What used to be the Empire, yeah. People still live there, you know. Nothing like the kingdoms and city-states we have here, but there are still people."

"Strival was interested in that too," Jakkobb remarked.

"Well, maybe they should've known better than to venture over to Pallens." Kelin rolled his eyes. "I mean, we all know it's sacred ground."

Spiked tossed his mane as he daintily planted his feet in the air above the ground. His hooves shone impeccably above the swamp's black mud. *Sounds to me like someone's planning to rival Alscane.*

"An invasion?" Cacilin said. "Don't think the temple of Zine didn't think of that as well, but, there's no kingdom around here with reasons and the resources."

Thoughtful frowns descended over the party as they walked.

Kelin rubbed his chin. "I've never seen an ocean."

"Me neither," Der added.

Chloe tried to twist around on Spike's back. "An ocean's like a really big lake, right?"

Jakkobb chuckled. "You kids are in for a treat. The Occidental Ocean is quite nice around Alscane. Even this time of year, and it's not as cold either."

A scowl pinched Der's features. "Why is it the Occidental Ocean when it's east of the continent? Shouldn't it be the Oriental Ocean instead?"

"It's west of Pallens, Der," Edillon answered softly. "The name never changed."

Thalon piped up, "So then, what's the ocean that's west of Solquin?"

The king's smile lit up the swamp as if they were already on the beach. "Ah. On the far side of Arborn, over the mountains, there is the Marentide Ocean. We can go there after all of this is sorted."

The boy grinned. "I'd like that!"

"I'd like that too," Jakkobb murmured as he stepped over a mossy log. "Because I never liked coming here."

"Why not?" Chloe inquired. "You smiled when you talked about the ocean."

"The ocean, certainly, but Alscane isn't known for its hospitality to travelers."

Der cocked her head. "But, Jakkobb, it's a port city on a river, they must get barges of trade through here every day!"

"Yeah, I'm aware." He sighed. "But you, Der, can at least pass for human."

"Oh," Kelin said. "That kind of hospitality."

Der turned around and walked backward. "So, is it a good idea to, I don't know, bring the king of the elves?"

Edillon pulled up his hood. "I do not know to whom you refer, Derora. I'm just good ol' Kaleb, remember?"

Cacilin chuckled. "Other races are allowed in the city, Der, because Alscane understands that it needs to trade. They are not, however, given a hug and a place at the supper table."

Thalon said, "But didn't most of the humans come to Solquin after Pallens fell, and the rest of us were already here?"

"Mostly, yes."

"And that's not the worst of it." The knight-captain glared ahead at the thinning of the trees. "I assume there is still a weapons ban?"

Cacilin hesitated. "Yes, but as a member of Zine's order, I have an exception, and so do your bank guards, so surely your knights do too."

Jakkobb shrugged. "Who knows these days?"

Der curled her fingers around the Pallens blade and hunched over it.

"We are not going without the ability to protect our king," one of the Arbourn knights stated flatly.

Edillon pinched his nose. "What other exceptions are there?"

"What about dragons?!" Goldie chirped, leaning too far over on Der's shoulder and dug in his claws for balance. She hissed against the pain left by the arrow wound and bent forward, which set her injured ribs on fire. The little dragon hopped off her shoulder and started to trot along in her footsteps.

"Most likely not," the king sighed.

"Nobility and royalty." Cacilin shrugged. "And the human kind if you won't want questions raised."

Kelin snapped his fingers. "Der's nobility!"

"What?" Alluvius spun toward her.

"No, I'm not!" she shot back. "It doesn't count in our own kingdom, how's it supposed to count here?"

Alluvius poked her in the shoulder. "You're noble? Seriously?"

She hissed as his finger neared Firth's arrow wound. "No, I'm not."

"Well, you can't walk into town with that." Cacilin nodded at her sword.

She grasped the hilt. "I'm not leaving it behind."

Thistle rearranged his backpack. "Even if we sneak them inside, we will have to continue to hide them." His belt was conspicuously empty.

"Where'd it go?" Chloe demanded. "It was a big sword!"

Thalon leaned back toward his dad. "Nah, he's still got 'em all."

Jakkobb stepped around a puddle and stuck his foot deep into the black mud, obfuscating the red of his armor. He didn't notice as he stomped ahead. "Strival once said that when kings ban their people from carrying weapons he only does it because he doesn't trust his people. Honestly, it makes no solid reason to deprive a man a means to defend himself. You know the outlaws aren't going to turn theirs in, leaving those that actually did for easy muggings."

"Well said," Edillon began.

“And you know, Strival was right, it’s not the abundance of weapons that’s the problem – it’s the shortage of good people.” The knight glared ahead as he continued to splash through the mud. “I think Strival was right on this one.”

“I gathered that impression of you, yes,” Edillon offered.

Der tilted her head. “So, why’s there a temple to Zine if this city’s so corrupt?”

“It’s not that bad,” Cacilin replied while eyeing Jakkobb carefully. “The city government might leave much left on their plates, but the people here still need protection and aid. Besides, how much worse would it be if no one even tried?”

Der’s mouth hung open until a fly took a wrong turn into her uvula. She coughed. “Well, why can’t you just make things right?”

“You mean a bloody coup of the legal government?” Cacilin chuckled. “Were it only that simple.”

Edillon tugged his hood over his ears. “At least it’s cold enough not to attract attention wearing cloaks.”

“And dragons!” Goldie chirped. He padded along in Der’s wake, squelching his paws. He stopped and looked down at his feet. “And dragons don’t like mud.”

Alluvius picked up the little beast and held him at eye level. “I’m going to hide you in my pack, alright? If you chew or burn through it, I’m going to replace the holes with golden dragonhide.”

The little creature gasped and promptly burped a damp fireball.

“Now,” Edillon growled as he adjusted his hood, “To get into the city.”

“That was easier than expected.” Der twisted her head around back toward the gate before the city’s crowd swallowed the party. Next to her, Kelin shrugged.

The Lady Chloe of Westlake sparkled in the sunlight as she rode side-saddle on Spike. The war-saddle had been trouble, but not enough for the gate guards to start asking questions. Her knights and bodyguards marched firmly at her side.

“It’s true,” Der chuckled. “Elves really do like to trick people.”

“I want to see the ocean!” Chloe declared from her throne of a saddle.

Cacilin pursed his lips. “I’m sure there’s still a beach around here that hasn’t been dug out into a dock.”

“Mission first,” Jakkobb said firmly.

“You’ll take the children on your mission?” Thistle asked quietly.

The knight frowned. “Well, no. But the Blue Farers’ courier counter will be right next to a Silver Dawn bank.”

“Dragoons ain’t bankers.” Thalon stuck out his lower lip and frowned.

Thistle slapped the back of his head. “Aren’t.”

“Hey now.” Jakkobb raised his hand. “The world of banking is as competitive as the battlefield, just less bloody.”

“As long as you don’t try to rob the dragoons,” Cacilin countered. “Then, it’s a head on a spike, just like the battlefield.”

“What a horrible euphemism.” King Edillon’s nose wrinkled.

“Well, the man did murder three people at that heist,” Jakkobb replied.

“I’m just hungry.” Kelin shrugged. “So while our good knight is off on his clandestine mission, the rest of us should find lunch.”

“This is Alscaene.” Jakkobb pointed toward a nearby tavern. “Might be tricky.”

The tavern glowed with sunlight because it had no roof, and ivy and grape vines decorated the wooden supports. Two humans, one of dark complexion and the other fair haired and blue eyed, shoved a stout halfling back out the entrance. The blond pointed at a crudely carved picture of an ‘X’ through a set of pointy ears. “Humans only!”

The two humans briefly shook wrists like warriors before retiring back to their tables. Meanwhile, the halfling turned and meandered off into the packs of people.

“Let’s eat somewhere else, shall we?” Edillon prompted.

Der took a step forward and grinned. “No way. I want to see them try to throw Jakkobb out.” She looked innocently back up at the massive, armored knight.

The captain frowned with only one side of his mouth, making his entire face lopsided. Kelin just rolled his eyes.

Alluvius stared at Der. “Tell me again, how have you survived?”

Laughter broke through Cacilin’s stern face.

Der tried to shrug, and hissed against the pain lingering from the arrow wound. She still tried to grin.

“It’s not funny, Der,” Jakkobb snapped. “You’re supposed to be a dragoon—”

Everyone stopped. Der’s entire frame slouched. Finally, she said, “Not me. I’m just another wandering sword.”

Kelin dropped a large hand on her shoulder.

“You don’t have to be,” the judicar said.

She turned to Cacilin. “What?”

Behind her, Jakkobb stiffened and glowered at the judicar. King Edillon cleared his throat. “Sir Cacilin, what is the most expensive inn in the city, pray?”

“Pardon? Oh, that would be the Estate,” the judicar replied. He gestured up the hill toward Alscaene’s center, where the large, polished buildings boasted pillars and huge windows.

“Thank you.” Edillon turned to Jakkobb. “Go ahead and deliver the spy’s missive and then meet us there. Hot food will be waiting.”

Jakkobb stiffly clicked his heels and nodded. He shot Cacilin a final warning glare before turning into the tide of the crowd.

Der licked her lips. “I still don’t know anything about Zine or your order.”

Cacilin chuckled. “Well, I wasn’t expecting you to become an officer on your first day.”

Kelin chimed in, “Didn’t expect her to conquer Horizon either. Just saying.”

Der folded her arms. “And I’m not about following any god just because they say ‘follow’.”

Cacilin grinned and clapped his hands together. “Most excellent! You have no idea how many potentials I’ve heard get that one wrong.”

“Potential what?” Thalon piped up.

“Judicar.”

For the second time, the entire party froze.

Der swallowed. "Me? A judicar?" She bit off saying, that's not something I ever daydreamed about.

"Why not?" Cacilin pressed. "You're already a hero, have one of the best military pedigrees, and you know the holy language without being ordained. I've never heard of that one."

Der started walking again, and failed to see that the others weren't following as closely. "I don't know. Praying for strength and courage really isn't my mug of ale."

"Well, you wouldn't." He grinned. "Those, I believe, are already yours." His smile continued in face of her doubtful expression. "Look, you don't pray to be smart; for that, you study. You don't pray to be able to run ten miles; you start with running one mile."

"Oh." But she still shook her head.

"If I may quote one of Midan the Merciful's more famous speeches to have survived, being a good or wicked person isn't about your god. Religion is the belief in divinity and the powers that be. Morality is the choices that you make."

"Alright," Der said weakly.

"It was when the people feared he was going to be a religious leader when creating the Empire, and he had to assure them that he would not be."

"Oh yes, the paladin king."

"In essence, he went on to say that you choose your gods based on what you believe, you don't change your beliefs to choose a god."

Der's brow furrowed deeper and she wrapped her cloak about her, despite the warmth of the city.

"We don't get courage or wisdom from the gods, but we do get some gifts. Will you permit me?"

She stopped. "What?"

He pressed a hand on the back of her shoulder, and immediately, warmth flooded her back and clavicle and down to her ribs. Her first reflex was to jump forward and out of the way, and she was surprised when she didn't.

Cacilin smirked as he withdrew his hand. "Better?"

She flexed her shoulder. "Hey, yeah, it doesn't hurt anymore!"

"Healing," Kelin whispered. "Judicars can heal. Among other abilities."

Thalon pointed. "I want to learn to do that!"

Thistle held his finger to his lips.

"Um, thank you." Der continued to wiggle her shoulder underneath her backpack.

"My pleasure. I hope you learn to do it as well someday."

Der fought a smile, but it escaped. She nodded, and then looked up. "We're here?"

Edillon chuckled. "You didn't notice the uphill walk?" He passed her as he stepped up onto the white marble stairs. He led the way into the Estate's foyer.

Burgundy and gold velvet outlined the foyer. A keyboard rested on a small dais surrounded by plush couches. It was a proper foyer too, Der observed, and not a typical inn's common room where everybody ate and chatted and where the drunks slept.

Chloe inhaled and spun in a circle while her skirt swung out with her. "It smells so nice in here!"

"More of an absence of stink, I think," Alluvius suggested.

Thalon tucked his nose under his shirt. "I think it's us."

Edillon smiled. "Well, aren't we fortunate that this inn offers hot baths?"

“Haven’t had a bath in weeks!” Kelin nudged Der. “Ain’t that right, Der?”
“What?” She blinked. “Oh right, hot bath.”

Chapter Sixteen

A Stranger Reunion

Der's shoulders creaked like hinges as she let the pack slide off her back. She sagged against the sudden weightlessness. Neither the arrow wound nor broken ribs hurt – they weren't even existent any more – but Cacilin hadn't removed any of the exhaustion from all that hiking.

Her arms felt too heavy to start filling the bathtub. She slipped out of her featherweight elvish mail. Her shirt, though damp with sweat, allowed the cool night air to brush against her chest.

Gently, she placed the Pallens sword on the floor next to her backpack.

Then she kicked the corner of the pink porcelain bathtub, and glared at the funny faces popping out of the ceramic. Who would do that to a defenseless tub? It made it look like it was staring at the bather.

She sniffed at a bottle of oil to the far of the tub. Lavender. Not a bad choice, she mused.

The boiling water's steam whistle trilled in the fireplace. She shuffled along and lifted the large kettle, and then shuffled back to drain it into the tub.

She filled the rest of the tub with cooler water. She tipped up the oil and scented lavender rose with the wisps of steam.

She stiffened. The redolence of roses swept across the room, not lavender. Her eyes glanced around for another bottle, while her hands went for her sword.

An impossibly black boot kicked her reaching fingers. She didn't even recognize the pain as she spun around while balling a fist.

A pale hand plucked hers out of mid-swing, and *squeezed*. She hissed as she felt the bones starting to grind.

She unleashed her foot with all her strength behind it, and it connected with nothing. Then she immediately had to use her captor's hand, still squeezing her fist, in order to keep her own balance. "Tom?!"

The superiorly smug nocturnal nomad grinned, fangs and all. "I'm still at the point of breaking your hand again."

"Do it. I'll snap your nose again."

"I'll heal instantly."

"Good. Then I can break it again."

He released his grip, casually and dismissively. "Sadly, you have improved. Not by much though."

She stared at the half elven vampire. Of course, he looked human. He looked normal, maybe a little pale and better dressed, but normal.

He raised one pale brown eyebrow above his eyes, as green as an emerald's reflection. He held out his hand. "Ring. Now."

Her mouth still hadn't closed. "But, but, we agreed never to meet again."

He stuck his hand out farther. "Right, so give me my ring back so we can continue that happy accord."

"Chloe is—"

“Downstairs. I’m aware. And she is *not* to know that I am here. I just want my ring back and to leave you mortals alone.”

“How did you know we were even—”

“I’ve been following you since I healed from...” He jerked his head in the direction of the Pallens sword. “Since I suffered unspeakable holy acts.”

Her shoulders sagged. “That’s over a year.”

He folded his arms. “A year for you is a single night to me.”

She pushed her hands through her hair. “And I didn’t even notice.”

He tapped his foot. “Well, that *is* the entire point of stalking.”

“So, you’ve been following me for a year, huh? Is your ring worth—”

“The *ring* is worth it. Because it’s mine.”

“Even though I—”

He snapped his fingers so hard she thought he’d broken his own bones. “This has nothing to do with you. You don’t mean a damn thing to me.”

“Despite everything we’ve done for each other? I would think that—”

“I want nothing philosophical with you deeper than ‘target’ or ‘victim’.”

Her lower lip curled out, like a child who had lost her candy. “Not even ‘enemy’?”

“You’re not worth my time, child. Give it back, so I can leave.”

She crossed her arms. “What if I left it back at Silver Dawn’s Horizon?”

Tom spun and smashed his forehead against the stone wall. “Why did it have to be you? What have I ever done to earn you for torment?” He whirled back around. “Do you know what kind of protections that place has?”

She chuckled nervously. “Yes, I do actually. One of them is an angry commander.”

“No, girl, I’m speaking of those magical wards.”

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “Oh. You’ve got the heart. Could be trouble.”

“It could end my existence, and possibly destroy all of Silver Dawn’s defenses at the same time.”

The stone heart had the same power as Chloe: to cancel or divert magic. It was the only thing that could have saved her a year ago, when magic infected her body like the plague. The powers were apparently limitless, unlike their wielders’ physical bodies.

She tried to smile. “Um, so how is the heart working for you? I remember that you said you never wanted it.”

He shrugged. “Actually, not too different. What I want is my ring.”

It was her turn to shrug.

He sighed elegantly. “So, why? The girl who won’t even pick a fresh wildflower, why did you steal it?”

“I don’t know!” She threw up her hands. “There was a battle, and I forgot! I just put it in my pocket because you were panicking about bleeding out and going on a vampire eating rampage or something.”

His emerald eyes narrowed to brilliant slits. “I don’t believe you.”

“Really. Because I remember—”

“That doesn’t excuse the fact that you stole it!”

She huffed. "Fine." She drummed her foot against the floor. "Why did you let me steal it?"

"What!"

"If I knew, you must have!"

"I did not! I was afraid of bleeding out and panicking about—" He bit off his words and just glared daggers at her.

She thrust her hand into her backpack. The weight of clothing and camping supplies threatened to squish her arm. After some shuffling, she retrieved a small ball of cloth tied up with twine.

She hurled it at him. He snatched it from the air so quickly that she barely even saw his fist blur.

He scowled at the bundle, and shredded it with the nail on his index finger. The cloth and twine disintegrated to reveal the platinum ring.

"Huh." He snorted.

"What?" she drawled. "Were you planning on kidnapping me again?"

"If necessary. So you just gave me my ring, and I'm free to leave."

She paused. "Right."

He waited.

She coughed into the silence.

He narrowed his eyes again, while placing the ring back on his finger. "Things are never this simple with you—"

"Der!" a chipper girl's voice sang. Chloe pushed her way through the door. "I'm ready for my hot bath— *Uncle!*"

She dropped her folded pile of fresh clothes and charged. She buried her face into his stomach and glued her hands together around his back.

Der smirked. "Well, Thomas, you are in the women's bathing chamber."

He raised his upper lip in a snarl at her while gently placing a pale palm on Chloe's head.

"I've missed you!" the girl wailed. "They said horrible things about you, but I said that they weren't true!"

"I know," he whispered. The ghost of a smile graced his face. "I've missed you too."

Der's grin only widened. "Well, so much for your heart of stone."

His expression instantly burned away any trace of a smile. "You've been waiting an entire year to make that one, haven't you?"

"And I made it within the first quarter hour." She grinned. "Now, Chloe, you still need a bath."

"I know, but—"

Der folded her arms and lifted an eyebrow. "You're a big girl now, aren't you? And so you really don't want a *boy* in here, do you?"

The girl's face melted into indecision. "Um, um." She suddenly started to push Tom and Der toward the hallway. "I'm sorry, Uncle, but I'm gonna take the fastest bath ever!"

Der leaned against the bathing room door as it clicked closed.

Tom stared at her, stunned. "How in the corners of hell did you know to say that?" He stuck a finger in his ear and rubbed it. "I'm not sure if I heard correctly."

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's what my mother used to say to get me to tell my brother to leave."

Awkward silence began to pour in between them like sand filling an hourglass.

“So...”

He merely arched his eyebrows.

She said, “I still hate you and wish to never see you again.”

“Right.” He spun around deftly on one heel. “I’ll get back to that.” His boots made no sound as he walked down the corridor to the sole window.

Der waited until he put his pale hands on the pane. “You know she’s going to be rushing out here to see you.”

His hands curled into fists. He didn’t turn around. “I promised. It’s best for all of us.”

She started to tip-toe down the corridor. “That’s what I thought too. Logically, it is. You leave forever. But then I remembered that you’re a liar.” She scooted nearer, so that she could almost reach out and touch his back. “So good, in fact, that you can even lie to yourself.”

He whirled around so fast that Der barely even registered the motion. On the other hand, she remembered him being faster, so she was faster now too?

He rammed her shoulders into the wall and pressed her against it. His emerald eyes glowed cherry red and bore down into hers.

He snarled, “Forget you ever saw me tonight.”

A hurricane of dizziness lunged at her mind, but she let it pass right through. “Your little mind talent don’t work on me!” She kned him in the thigh as hard as she could.

He barely flinched. Slowly, he held up his hands and stepped back away from her. “I guess I’ll just have to hit your head, old fashioned, like.”

Her hand shot for her sword, which she remembered too late was still inside the bathing chamber.

She settled for placing her hands on her hips, as if she’d planned it that way. “Do you remember what I did to you last time?”

Tom’s expression disappeared like the wind blowing away the morning fog. He exhaled and his eyes became green again. “Yes I do, Der. It took me six weeks to heal! I had to use a crutch for six weeks! So unless you want me to—”

“I’m done!” Chloe, soaking wet and beaming a smile, charged out of the bathing chamber and straight at Tom. She trapped him in another hug. “I knew you’d come back! And I don’t care what you are! Grandfather told me a long time ago, but I don’t care! You saved me!”

Tom’s mouth moved as if he was fighting the smile. It broke loose. “I know, little one.”

Der’s stomach grumbled. “We haven’t had supper yet.”

He sniffed. “Nor have you had your bath.”

Chloe snatched his sleeve in one hand and Der’s wrist in the other. “No, you have to come to supper!”

Jakkobb ignored the creaking of the chair as he sat at the table. This always happened. No chair was ever really built for a seven foot man in full armor. He cleared his throat and said, “The Blue Farers are watching the letter.” Around him, torches and hundreds of candles warmed the Estate’s cavernous dining hall. Gold braid, swirling around decorative pillars, twinkled in the firelight.

Kelin sipped his wine and tried not to spit it out all over the embroidered napkin. He forced himself to swallow. This was the most bitter grape stew in the world!

Edillon smirked at him. "Nothing's quite the same after Arborn, is it?"

"Certainly not the wine!"

"I want the wine," Goldie chirped from somewhere under the table.

"Oh, I thought you slept most of the day," Alluvius grumbled.

Thalon jumped up onto his chair. "Hey, look!"

Chloe tugged both Tom and Der into the dining hall. The girl glowed with smiles. For once, Der's face looked as if she registered that she was in trouble.

Jakkobb slapped down his fork. After a moment, he managed, "Where did he— What is he doing— Why is there a vampire at the dinner table, Der?"

"I wanted my ring back," Tom snapped. "You don't think I can't hear you from across the room?"

Serving staff appeared, oblivious to the conversation, and prepared three extra places at the table. Chloe sat down, and tugged Tom and Der into the seats on either side of her. Goldie curled up like a cat at Der's feet.

Everyone stared. Cacilin's hand wrapped around his blade's hilt.

Alluvius gulped. He gently cleaned the edges of his mouth with his napkin. "Oh my, I thought you'd been exaggerating."

Tom narrowed his angry gaze on Der. "What element of my *secret* existence did you fail to realize was secret?"

"All of it." She leaned her elbows against the tablecloth. "So, what do you get with the ki— Kaleb, a chemman, a gold dragon, a judicar of Zine, a dragoon knight and a vampire all in the same tavern?"

Everyone continued to stare. The judicar pulled his sword one inch out of its sheath.

After a moment, Edillon swallowed. "I don't know, Der, what's the punch line?"

She shrugged. "I'm waiting to find out."

Everyone but Chloe started to lean away from them and into the backs of their chairs. Der grinned. "Don't worry about him, he's harmless."

"Harmless," Tom intoned in a completely deadpan voice.

"Would you prefer I make some joke about you having no bite instead?"

"No bite," he repeated in the same tone. "I see that reality hasn't entered your little world yet. How are those daydreaming fantasies these days anyway?"

"Not about you." With that, she took a massive swig of the wine and instantly began coughing.

Tom's eyes began to swirl, mixing with green and reds. His pale finger smoothly swept up and balanced a fork. Between two fingers, he broke the head off the fork as easily as snapping his fingers.

Edillon inched his chair further away. The twin knights of Arborn's hidden knives reflected the candlelight as they withdrew them from their hidden sheaths. The king licked his lips. "Uh, Der, he's..."

"Harmless," she finished.

Tom shoved his chair back, stood and straightened his shirt. "I am a fanged, deathly creature of the night. I deserve more respect than this."

"No!" Chloe dropped her fork and knife. "No, you just got here!" She looked around the table.

"Der's right, he really is harmless!"

The vampire closed his eyes and sighed.

Kelin cleared his throat. "So, um, Tom, have you heard about the undead and such things?"

Tom shrugged. "Perhaps or perhaps not, but until it becomes my personal problem, I don't care."

Chloe dropped out of her seat and climbed up into her uncle's lap.

Cacilin's jaw still hung wide. "A vampire? Inspiring loyalty? But he's an unholy creature, and Der has a holy sword from..." The judicar sagged.

Jakkobb frowned. "Yeah, you get used to it. Or not."

Alluvius whispered, "Der always said it, but I never believed her."

"You can't leave!" Chloe pushed all of her weight against Tom's knees.

Once again, Tom closed his eyes and exhaled. "I am not welcome. Child, you're safe with them, and I know this."

"No!"

"I saw that there was a piano in the foyer, would you like me to play you a song?"

"Yes... but you're still not going to leave me again!"

Wordlessly, the vampire picked up Chloe and stood. He strode out into the foyer to the giant, black grand piano. Thalon dashed off after them. Slowly, the rest of the party departed their table and followed.

"I just can't believe this," Alluvius commented. "I know she told me, but are we sure he's not just honestly pale?"

Jakkobb snorted. "Oh, he is what she said. And he promised to leave the girls alone."

Tom's fingers, almost as pale as the piano's keys, graced their way across the instrument. Music twirled out from deep within the strings of the piano. The notes dove straight through the eardrums and into the heart, stirring up memories and dreams in their wake.

Der hovered over the keyboard. She closed her eyes and thought about Riversbridge, and how the river lazily strolled through the village. Would it look the same if she ever returned?

She ran her fingers over the edges of the polished wood. "When did you learn to play like this?"

He smiled as his hands danced over the keys. "Before you were born."

"But you've never—"

"How many keyboards are out in the wilderness?"

"I hate you."

His toothless smile spread. Next to him, Chloe laughed and scooted closer to him. Meanwhile, the merchants, lords and ladies passing through the foyer slowed their busy steps as they listened.

Coins tinkled as the passersby dropped them at the edge of his bench.

"And here I thought you just stole your money." Der smiled at a lady as she set down a silver piece.

"I don't have to," the vampire replied.

Behind them, Alluvius fingered the ocarina, the small ball of a ceramic flute, inside his pocket. The music tingled along his ears and told him to join in. But he knew he couldn't match the grace of the piano's player.

King Edillon closed his eyes and swayed gently to the melody. "I have never heard such beauty in a heartrending song before."

Thalon twisted his neck to look straight up at the elf. "I know, but Dad says that you still can't trust the bastard." The boy shrugged and meandered off to one of the massive, gilded windows overlooking the bay.

Tom's hands flew around the keys like ghosts, almost too fast to see. Der smiled – she didn't recognize the tune, but then no one really knew how much Tom had composed over the centuries. She just let the music wind around her.

"Want to see what the heart can do?" Tom murmured, only audible to Der and Chloe.

She frowned. "I thought you had to have magic present."

"Music is magical." He shrugged, never missing a note. "Or, at the very least, close enough to magic."

Suddenly, the keys underneath his fingers began to change color. They became the shade of polished pine wood. The stain began to race across the rest of the piano at the tempo of the music.

The Estate's staff and watchers gasped. Tom played on heedless. Again, a new polished stain spread across the piano, this time more rapidly. Suddenly, waves of different colors appeared, dancing along with the keys. They moved with the rhythm, and danced like the ocean on the beach.

The music suddenly ceased. The colors stopped their march, and immediately darkened back to black and ivory. Tom stared at the keyboard, his hands hovering. "I hear—"

Over by the window, Thalon pointed. "I found the navy! And some of it's on fire!" He squished his nose against the glass. "This is great!"

"What?" Alluvius cocked his head and wandered over to the window. The others followed.

Four burning ships nudged the docks. Orange whips of fire jumped to the wooden docks and aboard the few ships remaining in the harbor. Behind them, over a hundred darker shapes bobbed in the waves, suggesting the return of the entire fleet.

"That's not Alscane's navy." Kelin gulped.

Alluvius swallowed. "But no one has this type of navy except Alscane and the dragoons!"

Jakkobb pulled at Der's shoulder, tugging her away from the window. "We need to go, now. Before anyone gets off those boats behind the fire ships." The knight clapped his hands. "We need to gather the finest soldiers in the city who can stand against this new foe." His blue-eyed gaze met the oncoming flaming warships without flinching. "We're going to a bank."

Kelin blinked, then blinked again. "What?"

Chapter Seventeen

Conquered

Screams bounced off buildings and echoed around the city of Alscane. Vast mobs swirled all around them, and any individuals caught up in the flood of people couldn't control the motion. Bodies just pushed against bodies, forcing them along, and no one could swim against the hot, screaming current.

Der and company dodged through the yelling, scattering herds of people. She tried to catch a view of the ocean, but all she could make out was a vast, everlasting darkness for a horizon.

The party crowded up behind Spike, whose massive shoulders and hooves made a wedge into the runners. He was a rock, breaking the surf. Jakkobb jogged along with one hand on the disguised unicorn's rump. Thistle ran on Spike's other side.

Thalon squished up against Chloe, who had both her arms wrapped around Tom's leg. He carried her weight without apparently noticing. Kelin and Alluvius crowded up behind them, while the two knights of Arborn flanked King Edillon on either side. Cacilin and Der, with Goldie clutching her shoulder, made up the rearguard.

Downhill, the harbor glowed orange from the fires from the ships and docks. Behind the obfuscating smoke and flames, dozens of darker ship shapes slipped into the shadows along to the unburned docks.

Der squinted, and was immediately tripped from behind by a panicking passerby. But for just a moment, she thought she saw the most massive ship in the world, lurking out in the bay. She looked again; it had vanished.

"Been picking off the navy for over a year!" Jakkobb yelled. "Now Alscane has no defense!"

"What about the dragoon navy?" Alluvius fired back.

"Anchored in Galaka."

Cacilin slowed his pace and bowed his head. "I must rejoin the order of Zine. I'm sure people are rallying at the temple."

Der whipped her head at him. "You're leaving? Now?"

The judicar nodded. "Indeed. You and Alluvius, come with me. You'll find a home and a use for your skills."

Tom frowned. "But she's in his order." He let a finger laze in Jakkobb's general direction.

Der dropped her eyes and glared at the ground. "I got booted out."

Tom blinked. Kelin said, "Yeah, she finally caused too much trouble. Who knew?"

The vampire grabbed his ribs and suddenly cachinnated. Chloe tugged at his leg and wagged a stern finger at him. "Uncle!" He didn't appear to notice, and his howling laughter even overpowered the roars of the throngs.

Der fingered the Dawn Sword medallion beneath her shirt. "I guess you really weren't stalking me then, huh?"

“Of course not! Not at Horizon!” He bent forward and huge guffaws escaped his normally expressionless countenance. He pointed. “Ha! Too much trouble! I knew it!” Laughs overtook his gasping words. His fist pounded against his own leg in laughter.

“Tom, shut your fanged trap!” Der yelled.

The city started to burn down around them, but Tom kept laughing. Der snatched at his arm. Something sizzled.

He yelped and wrenched away from her, suddenly all snarls. He cradled his forearm against his chest. Burnt slivers of cloth and ash slipped down onto the street. “What the hell, Der? Burning me with your little holy pendant like that?”

“What?” She held up her empty hand. “No, I didn’t.”

“Then, how did you—” He bit his own tongue and stared between her and the ashes wafting from his swiftly healing arm.

Cacilin stepped between her and the vampire. “Derora, no time. You might be a judicar yourself yet. Come with me.”

Der and Alluvius exchanged looks. Alluvius shrugged. “Your call.”

She grabbed her head and closed her eyes. “Uh, um.” She sagged, and looked at Cacilin. “I’m sorry, I have to stay here. After this, we’ll come meet you, but for now, I have to stay with my friends.”

Behind her, Jakkobb blew out a sigh of relief.

Cacilin nodded once. “Of course. Farewell.” The judicar quickly vanished from sight as he dodged between the panicking crowds.

“We can’t remain here,” Edillon said sternly. He placed a hand on Der’s shoulder.

Spike whinnied and shouldered his across the broad avenue toward a large alley between two neighboring manor houses. A stack of barrels and crates barred the alley’s entrance. The unicorn smashed through the wood like paper.

Panting, Alluvius rested his back against the wall. “We’re not making it to the bank, are we?”

“I don’t know.” Jakkobb stared ahead at the other end of the alley. “But we can’t linger here.”

A woman’s scream froze Der. It was more terrified than all the other shouts howling throughout the city. It was a helpless scream.

Der whirled back to the avenue and sprinted.

“Idiot!” Tom yelled after her. “Get back here!” He set his hands on Chloe’s shoulders and stepped away from the girl.

The woman on the street screamed again: in pain, terror and absolute denial of the inevitable. Der saw her. A middle aged lady in a brown skirt with a leg thrust out at an odd, definitely broken angle.

Citizens of Alscane stampeded around her as she screamed. Der ducked and dodged around the panicking droves. She sniffed. Was something burning? Nearby?

“Der, stop!”

She kept charging forward, but Tom gripped her arms and lifted her up. Her legs kept running, but wound up just kicking the air.

The woman shrieked again. An orange light spread across the cobblestones like a wind fueled wildfire.

A disintegrating mound of burning pitch and sulfur pounced on the woman, lighting up the street, the woman, panicking citizens and scorching several nearby buildings.

Tom wrapped his arms around Der and spun her around, shielding her. She heard him hiss in pain as the flames seared against his back.

"Idiot!" He started to drag her back to the alley. "If you'd looked up before you ran, you'd have seen—"

"But..." Der shook her attention loose. She knew how quickly life and death on the battlefield changed. Looking at the harbor, she saw men launching dozens of burning balls at the city. She also knew about how in the flash of the moment, the tunnel vision, the only thing she saw was the screaming woman.

Tom snarled. "I honestly wonder how you're still alive. Oh wait, because of me. Again."

"So why do you keep saving me?" she snapped.

He just glared and dragged her by her collar back into the alley.

"Soldiers." Thistle stepped back smartly from the smashed wooden barrels.

"What uniform?" Der wiped the sweat from her forehead.

The chemman shook his head.

"No standard?" Jakkobb scowled.

"And they're lining archers up on rooftops it looks like. Also advancing."

Kelin put his meaty hands on Thalon's shoulders. Chloe squeezed up next to the boy.

"So..." Edillon clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "The conqueror of the city doesn't want to be known."

"Even more of a reason not to be found," Tom said brightly.

"And where do we go?" the king asked.

The vampire shrugged. "Well, I can go anywhere I damn well please. You, however, are mired."

Both of the knights of Arborn stepped between him and Edillon and glared. Tom raised an eyebrow and peered over their shoulders to the king. "Just who are you to get an escort anyway?"

Edillon just offered a small smile in return.

"Whatever," the vampire snarled. "You wouldn't have even known about me if Der hadn't talked. But, then again, she doesn't know how not to."

She thumped the flat of her hand against the back of his head. "I also know how to hurt you."

Tom's eyes swirled both emerald and red as he raised a fist at her.

Jakkobb loomed up between the vampire and the other knights. "He might be an unholy bastard, but—"

"*My uncle is the best person who ever lived!*" Indignation radiated from Chloe as she balled her fists and stamped her foot. "I'm so sick of everyone saying he's not!"

"But he doesn't actually live..." Thalon petered out under the girl's fiery scowl.

In the avenue, another massive ball of fiery pitch rolled uphill, carried by its momentum and smashing through a field of panicking people like a horrible game of ten-pins. Another, louder explosion raked against their ears from the opposite direction.

Kelin slid up to the broken barrels. A red and orange glow haunted his vision, and new, distant screams of thousands of people washed over him.

“That wouldn’t be the main gate, would it?” Jakkobb drawled. “You know, the only escape to this city that we know about.”

Kelin tried to smile. “Well, it’s not like we would’ve gotten through the crowd anyway.”

“This reminds me of Second Acron,” Edillon mused. “How about underground?”

“No dwarves here,” Thistle replied.

Spike swished his tail. *And no escape, apparently.*

“Escape is easy.” Tom rolled his eyes. “Just do something that they wouldn’t dare.” He glanced at Der. “That shouldn’t be a problem for you.” While she made a face at him, Chloe wrapped her arms around his leg again.

“Then what are you planning?” the king asked softly.

He shrugged. “I can handle a few archers at night.”

We can’t run a ferry, Spike snarled. They’d see me fly, and we can’t take everyone in one chance.

Der pinched her nose and panted. “There has to be a safer way.”

“The word ‘safe’ isn’t in your vocabulary!” Tom wagged his finger at her.

“What?” She looked up. “I just used it.”

He scowled.

A grin scuttled across her face. “Besides, there is a way out of here.” She pointed.

Alluvius followed her finger. “I don’t understand.”

Kelin started to shake his head. “No, oh no, Der.”

Tom barked a laugh. “You think you can do it?”

“I still don’t understand!” Alluvius hissed.

Edillon suddenly breathed deeply. “Steal a ship. You want to steal a ship.”

“Well, they’re getting *off* the boats!” She pointed again, and watched as even more soldiers, thousands in total, set their boots upon Alscane’s ground.

Alluvius gasped. “But you’ve never seen the ocean before! What do you know about sailing?”

She shrugged. “Well, the pointy end of the ship goes in front, so it can’t be too hard to figure out.”

He stared. His jaw swung open and unhinged. “I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

“Damn it.” Jakkobb pressed his hand against the manor’s stone wall.

“You can’t be considering this,” Edillon gasped.

The knight growled under his breath. “It’s so stupid that they probably won’t be expecting it.”

Der grinned.

“Small groups. Alluvius, Kelin, you’re scouting in front. Children next with Thistle and Tom. Goldie, you cling to Der’s belt and you stay there!”

Kelin loosened his sword in its sheath. “Well, it’s a good thing that we left our backpacks behind. I’d hate to be burdened with supplies.” He winced as the sounds of the dying city swept over them.

He and Alluvius crouched along the edge of the alley and waited for a knot of soldiers to pass. Kelin could only identify them as soldiers because of the way they moved. They walked in a loose formation, weapons drawn. Their boots stomped confidently on the ground, as if they’d already conquered the principedom.

Alluvius pointed and the pair tip-toed out onto the avenue. The part human patted Kelin on the shoulder and pointed out to the bay. The fires continued to eat away at Alscane’s few ships and half

their docks. But behind the furious flames, they could see more soldiers disembarking onto the deep-water docks.

Staying close to the buildings, they led the way down the sloping hill.

“Hey, you lads!”

They whirled to see the knot of soldiers had turned around. Kelin cursed. Alluvius’ and his escape would have worked perfectly if the invaders had just kept on walking.

Their sergeant, marked by the sergeant’s insignia literally scarred into his arm, swaggered toward them. “You lads look like you know how to handle yourselves.”

Alluvius’ hand shot for his sword. Kelin stepped in front of him. “Yeah, maybe we do. What’s it to you?”

Der peeked over a remaining crate. “Trouble! Scouts got pinched!”

“Oh no!” Chloe yelped. Immediately, she covered her mouth with her hands. “What are we gonna do?”

“Nothing we can do,” Thistle hissed. “Fastest time we’ve failed yet on one of Der’s ideas.”

Der growled at the chemman, “All of us, we can take out six soldiers!”

“Right!” Goldie chirped from her belt. “Grr!”

“And what happens if we’re seen by more?” Jakkobb snapped. “Who call more soldiers, who call all those men down on the docks.”

“It’s a chance we can take! I’m not leaving Kelin—” A pale hand interrupted her. Tom squeezed her forearm gently.

He leaned toward her ear. “You know, there are other ways. Chloe, stay with Der, please.”

“Um, alright!” The girl quickly scooted next to Der. Tom moved through the crates and into the avenue as soundlessly as a shadow.

“Oh no, he’s gonna use his power,” Der moaned. “I don’t know if he can use it on six people though!”

Edillon slapped her other arm and mouthed, “Quiet!”

Suddenly, Tom thundered down the avenue, shoulders back, head high and with a glare that held no hesitation. “Unhand my servants, you common-bred serfs!”

Kelin, Alluvius and the soldiers jumped. Tom stood there, firelight clashing in his emerald eyes, and the wind swept his cape out behind him.

The sergeant clicked his jaw closed in surprise. On the second try, he managed, “My lord?”

Tom’s face remained as stone. The soldier shook his head free. “Sorry, my lord, we were just, ah, recruiting.”

“For whom? I see no banner nor have I received any declaration of war.” Tom’s voice was as icy as the winter sea.

The sergeant licked his lips and a smirk started to swim across his features. “Our master says to call us the victors. And you look like one who knows how to use a sword too.”

Tom scoffed. “I employ men who do. Now, state your business and be off.”

“For the lords and ladies of rank.” The sergeant snapped his fingers, and one of the following soldiers stumbled forward with a small scroll from a rucksack of scores. He tried to offer it up to Tom, who didn’t move. The vampire leveled a long, slender finger at Kelin. “You, oaf, fetch me my missive.”

Kelin’s eyes darted around in confusion. Alluvius jumped forward and landed in a bow. “Of course, lord.” He accepted the small scroll and then passed it up to Tom.

The vampire didn’t even look at it. His gaze never left the sergeant. “Now be off, before I take your tongue as a price for your temerity.”

The sergeant flickered a lizard smile. It was a smile with the strong probability of a forked tongue behind it. “Of course, my lord.” He started to turn. “Oh, and though I doubt your lordship has seen her, because she is a common girl, but we’re looking for her.”

He unrolled a wanted poster from his own belt. A likeness of Chloe stared back at Tom.

The vampire felt the stone heart lurch into rhythm. Faster and faster. That was his girl on a wanted poster!

“No, I have not,” he replied in a deadly calm voice. He took a step down closer. “And neither will you.” Cherry red swirled into his eyes and voice. All the soldiers started to sway as they stared at his eyes. “You will report back to your master that no one has seen this girl. And if you ever hear about this girl, from now to the day you die, you will deny her existence.” The red pulsated in his eyes, timed with his drumming heart. “And if you ever witness her, you will kill yourselves. Now, go.”

Tom stood on the street, shoulders razor-straight until the soldiers rounded a corner, heading toward the docks.

He fell forward. No sagging at the knees, no pushing his hands out in front of him. Stiff as a plank, he fell. The small scroll rolled free from his fingers as he landed, nose first, on the pavement. Something cracked, either the paving stone or his nose.

Der kicked out a crate fragment as she burst out of the alley.

Kelin grabbed the vampire’s shoulders and heaved.

Tom groaned and grabbed his forehead. He rapidly blinked his eyes back to emerald. “They’re still after her!”

“But,” Kelin shook his head, “We killed that necromancer.”

Tom rolled into a sitting position. “No, I killed that Alcomm bastard, not you.”

“Not him. The one after him.”

The vampire sat absolutely unmoving.

After a moment, he started to tremble, like an earthquake before volcanic eruption. “*There was another wizard?! And you didn’t tell me?!*”

Thistle said quietly, “And where did you want us to send the letter?”

Alluvius looked around wildly. “Can we panic later? Please?” He flipped the little scroll onto his boot tip and tossed it up to his hand.

Der looked down the street for another patrol. “What’s going on?” She slipped her arm under Tom’s shoulder. Kelin took the other.

“Oh, things just got worse,” Kelin responded casually. “And we still have no escape.”

“They’re still after her,” Tom breathed.

Alluvius smoothed out the scroll. He scowled. “It says something about a summit.”

Tom snatched the paper from the part human's fingers, crumpled it and tossed it away. "Of no importance. We have to escape. Now." His eyes flashed cherry red as he gazed out over the conquered city. "And when this gets worse, I'm taking Chloe and to hell with the rest of you."

"Not leaving without Thalon!" Chloe yelled. "Or everyone else! We're a family!"

"Let's work together, please." Edillon tried to hide a gulp. "So it doesn't come to that."

Goldie waddled forward and sat between the girl's feet. He swiveled his long neck upside down. "Ree." Alluvius picked him up and held him for Spike to view. "Too bad we don't have enough food for you to get big. And what would that accomplish anyway? More panic?"

The unicorn nodded and the part human tucked the chubby dragon into his saddlebag.

Tom nodded to Jakkobb and jogged down the street, in perfect view. And then, suddenly, he wasn't there.

The knight raised his hand, signaling a stop.

"They're still coming for her." Der swallowed, squeezing up beside Edillon.

"It's not just about her," the king whispered. "This is about something greater. Surely, with all those earth events."

"But she's important," Der hissed back.

"I suppose I cannot deny that." He winced as the roar of the victors overtook the scream of Alscane's inhabitants.

Chapter Eighteen

The Victor

As quickly as he had vanished, there was Tom, standing plainly in the street again. He beckoned.

The strangely mixed party sprinted down the hill toward the heart of Alscane. Der tried to count the ships in the harbor. From the rare stories she'd ever heard about the high seas, she thought ships had three big sails that were really just bed sheets. These crafts boasted nine sails at minimum in all shapes and angles. And rope too, lots and lots of rope. Some of it had even been woven in netting to allow the sailors to climb up into those sails. Der's footsteps unconsciously slowed. How were they going to pilot one of these things?

Edillon pointed. "Let's go for that one. It's smaller, and I can't see any soldiers on it."

She followed the line of his finger to one of the smaller ships in the fleet. Its polish shone brightly, even at this late hour.

But the extraordinarily mammoth jet black ship beside it stole her eyes. The harbor had been a naturally deep water port, so Alscane's power had risen because large ships could sail directly up to the city. This enormous vessel still had to be dragging against the undersea soil.

"Back to the present," Jakkobb murmured warningly. He nodded.

Ahead, a sentry with no obvious uniform rested his shoulder against the wall of a warehouse. His roving eyes, sword, and above all, lack of panic gave him away.

He flicked a match against his homemade rollup when he looked up at the approaching stranger, who hadn't been there a heartbeat ago, and suddenly fell into emerald-eyed bliss.

Tom grabbed his forehead and hissed as the guard slumped over.

The vampire's knees trembled so much that he couldn't hide the motion. He leaned against the warehouse wall and pressed a hand over his heart. He bared his fangs. "This is as far as we can go without being seen."

Der, without even realizing what she was doing, put a hand on his shoulder. "No more mind bending for you, huh?"

He lowered his head. "The only reason they're not all dead is because my little girl would've seen it."

"We're close, but what's left?" Jakkobb quickly peeked around the warehouse corner.

"The docks." Tom heaved himself upright. "And after you all stop dancing and I can see straight again, we'll go."

"Who is on the docks?" one of the Edillon's bodyguards demanded.

"Well, hundreds of soldiers and slaves. But luckily, this one straight ahead is apparently not for heavy cargo. Only a couple of guards on this dock."

"But if we kill them," Kelin mused, "That'll attract attention." He also peeked around, and saw a team of drovers whipping skittish horses disembarking from another ship behind the guards.

Across other docks, men were using Alscane's cranes to begin to unload massive ballistae from the holds of their ships. Kelin shivered. Whoever was here had certainly planned ahead.

"Slaves?" Alluvius asked.

Chloe gasped. "But that's forbidden on Solquin!"

Der watched Jakkobb, fully expecting him to charge. She tensed to follow. However, he only flinched at the word.

Behind them, Kelin also watched the knight very carefully, remembering their last encounter with slavers. It seemed such a distant past now.

"I guess someone's bringing back the old ways." Alluvius chewed his lower lip. "And it's not like slavery ever truly went away, even when it was outlawed."

"Still..." Edillon murmured. "We need to avoid becoming such ourselves. How can we arrange overcoming those two guards and slipping through all those horses without attracting unwanted eyes?"

A vicious grin curved across the vampire's face. He grabbed Der's shoulder and pulled. "Well, we need a female, so you're going to have to do."

Der dug her heels into the ground. "What? What? No, oh no! Not me! I'll make a bloody mess out of it!"

"Bloody is my territory, paws off!" He dug an elbow into her back and pushed. "Just go out there and be alluring for twenty seconds!"

She latched onto the warehouse corner with both hands and pushed back, despite the white hot pain of his elbow. "Another fatal flaw in your scheme, I don't know how!"

He pushed harder, grunting at her defiance of his obviously superior strength. She shouldn't be able to resist! "However you acted for your village sweetheart!"

"Never had one!" Fire lit her muscles as she refused to relinquish her grip on the warehouse. She hung on as if she were dangling over a cliff. "It is possible to live a life without lust, you know!"

"Now I know where all your energy comes from!" He heaved. Her fingers finally cracked free of the wood.

She pushed back against him with all the might of her legs, back and shoulders. "What the hell does that mean?"

"You're too young!" He shoved; she rolled to the side, out of the way of his forward motion.

Children! Spike nearly crushed both of their toes with his hoof as he smashed it down right beside their interlocked feet.

"I am not a child," Tom snarled.

Well, you certainly had me fooled. He swished his tail. *I got this.* He trotted around the warehouse and out toward the dock.

Abruptly, a whinnying scream thundered out of his deep throat. He reared, kicking his massive front hooves in the air before dropping them back to earth. He dashed off in a mad, panicked run directly at the guards and the other horses on the dock.

The drovers dropped their whips and ran as they saw the huge, crazed mount sprinting and screaming right for them.

The horses, already nervous enough, broke out into a true stampede on the narrow dock. A few of the flailing mounts skidded against the wood while more equine bodies rebounded against them, tossing several of them into the ocean. Immediately, they paddled for shore. At the same time, the

other horses formed a cloud of thunder as their hooves pounded toward the land and away from the blasted boats.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Goldie yelped, poking his head out of the saddlebag. The bouncing gallop shook him back inside the leather. Spike charged the first of the two terrified sentries, rooted to the edge of the dock, unable to inch away in the face of hoofed death.

Spike's hooves sparked against the cobblestones. The first sentry's head only rose as high as the unicorn's shoulders.

His sword pommel bounced off his foot as his fingers lost their grip. At the last second, Spike pivoted on his front hooves and kicked the other sentry in the chest with his rear legs.

"Go! Go!" Kelin pushed Alluvius on his shoulder. Like water breaking through a dam, the party burst through the terrified horses and sentries. They sprinted down the dock.

Thalon pointed at the ship's name, carved in swooping letters into the bright red cherry polish of the ship. "*The Maelstrom Fury.*"

Chloe stumbled when she put weight on her foot on the ship's gangplank. "Whoa!" The board sprang back into place without her weight.

"Go, Chloe!" Kelin put his hand on her back.

"No, no!" She backed away from the gangplank. "I can't do it!"

"You'll be fine, I promise!" Kelin pleaded. "Just gotta be brave a little longer."

"See?" Thalon darted halfway up the gangplank. He jumped in place and the board bounced along with him.

Chloe backed away further, still shaking her head.

"Don't have time," Tom muttered. He knelt down beside the girl and offered one pale hand. Her fingertips trembled as she accepted his grip. He rose and led the way up the springy platform.

"Gangway!" Kelin called as the others charged up toward the ship.

Der whirled around and jogged backward up the springy gangplank. "Oh, you just couldn't resist."

"You know me." He grinned.

Edillon also smiled and rolled his eyes. "Just like always."

Der spread her feet out for further balance as the water shifted the ship beneath her feet. She'd never been on the water before. Oh, she'd been on rivers, but never on a boat in which she couldn't touch both sides at the same time. All around her, the cherry red finish was polished so that the firelight of the burning city made the ship shine. No dust or fingerprints smudged its glow.

She licked her lips. "Now what?"

Alluvius pinched his nose. "I don't know, the pointy end goes in front," he repeated sarcastically.

She failed to notice. "Yes, but how do you get it to go backward?"

Jakkobb shook his head. "Wind's in the wrong direction, and no other boat is going to tow it. They're not planning on leaving, or they wouldn't have pulled directly up to the dock like this."

Der looked up at the sails that were reefed, although she didn't know that word. She licked her finger and held it out. The wind shot straight up from the south, and they had to back out due east.

"Something called tacking," Jakkobb grumbled. "But that's not for getting out of a dock!"

Thalon pointed at the overly massive black ship beside them. "At least there are no ships behind us!"

Kelin rolled his face over to Der. "Should I get out and push?"

The ocean sprayed Spike's hooves as he floated underneath the dock. He looked up at the huge black ship. Goldie peeked out from between his ears.

The Hound of Hell, the unicorn mused. *Who would name a ship that?*

"Why's it so big?" the dragon bubbled.

I assume because it's their flagship. It does make an impressive show.

The dragon's nostrils twitched. He raised his head and sniffed. He turned his head almost completely upside down in relation to his body, still sniffing. He gripped Spike's mane between his talons. "Go, go, I wanna see inside!"

Spike laid his ears back.

The dragon continued to sniff. "I gotta see!"

Spike, listening to the chaos still above, pondered the ability of the invaders to see a black horse against a black ship at night. *Oh, alright. But if you fall and get wet, you'll have to learn how to swim on your own.*

They glided over the water and up against the hull of the *Hound*. The dragon sniffed like he had to dislodge something deep in his nostril. He inhaled and suddenly blew a stream of white fire.

Goldie! Spike backpedaled with all four hooves as if he were on land.

The dragon bounced and squeaked on top of Spike's head, still sniffing like mad.

Against the unicorn's expectations, the wall of the ship was not suddenly ablaze. Only a hole the size of a coin smoked against the hull.

Spike drifted closer again. Goldie tried to stick his head through the wood, and rebounded off the tip of his snout. He swiveled his head to the side. "Dragon!"

The unicorn whuffed. *Yes, you're a dragon.*

"No, dragon!"

Spike eased his head back and pressed one eye against the hole aglow with cooling embers. Inside, silver scales sparkled as they rose and fell on the sleeping monster's back.

Time to go, little one, right now!

"Time to go!" Jakkobb paced around the prow. "Spike can catch up." He rubbed his forehead underneath his raised visor. "Um, pull up the anchor."

"The anchor's not down." Thistle pointed. "Because we're tied to the dock."

"Then cut the damn ropes!"

The knights of Arbourn leaned over, slicing with their blades.

The chemman rolled his orange eyes as he sauntered back toward the gangplank. He pressed his boot against the edge of the plank and flipped the board over the edge of the boat.

Splash!

"Watch it! I need to fetch—" On the dock, a stout, dark-haired man waved a hand up at the boat. He nearly swallowed his own tongue as he met Thistle's gaze. The papers he was holding vibrated out of his hands.

“Chemmen!” he breathed. He spun so quickly that one foot tripped up the other. It didn’t seem to matter – he made up for his poor coordination with pure speed as he stumbled madly down the dock.

Spike’s hooves cracked against the polished deck. Goldie lay splayed across the unicorn’s neck, clinging to as much of the mane as his paws could gather.

Der watched the man sprinting down the docks. “Alright, Kelin, you can get out and push now.”

“What?” He threw up his hands. “I can’t!” Slowly, deliberately, his gaze led him to look directly at Tom. “I can’t...” he repeated.

The vampire glared at Kelin and curled his upper lip to reveal one of his blinding white fangs. “Son of a bitch.”

Goldie slid down off of Spike’s shoulder and bounced when his butt landed on the deck.

Tom sidestepped Chloe and waved a finger under Der’s nose. “Never again.” He jerked his head toward Spike. The unicorn’s head drooped. He whinnied softly.

The vampire and unicorn hopped into the air as easily a person steps onto a staircase. They stood, on nothing, on either side of the prow as it pointed directly ahead into Alscane.

Tom dug his shoulder in; Spike lifted both front hooves against the ship, and they *pressed*. Tom braced his feet against nothing but air, and he grunted with the effort of pushing the vessel.

Wood groaned in protest, but the *Maelstrom Fury* inched toward the sea.

Suddenly, Goldie pushed his snout over the tip of the prow. “I could get big!”

No, little one, Spike strained.

“Just go away,” Tom grunted. “We don’t want this on fire!” Wood cracked and splintered underneath his shoulder, and brand new spikes dug into his skin. His arm went limp with pain, but he kept his shoulder pressed in and pushed with his legs. The ship bumped against the dock one final time and out into the bay.

White sweat foamed over Spike’s glossy hair. The *Maelstrom Fury* was moving by the yard now. Tom had stopped breathing entirely with the effort of pushing. He shifted and laid his palms flat against the cracking wood; the deeper his fingers sank meant the faster his little girl could escape.

“They’re turning it!” Alluvius shouted. “We gotta lower these sails!”

Kelin raced over to what appeared to him to be a bunch of tightly knotted ropes. “Which ones?”

Alluvius shrugged. “All of them?”

On the deck, Der leaned over the side. Her heart sped up and she raised her head into the salty breeze. Beside her, Chloe clutched Goldie like a doll, while Thalon tugged on some rope behind his father. Der nodded to Chloe and joined the others at the rigging.

Above, the ropes jostled some sails. With a little trial and error and a lot of desperation, the new crew quickly learned which ropes controlled the larger sails. An avalanche of white cloth thundered overhead, and began to bloat in the wind.

Tom and Spike heaved one final time, pointing the ship on a mostly northerly course.

The vampire stepped back from the wooden vessel, bleeding from the wood embedded in his shoulder and hands. His emerald eyes rolled up in his head and he fell.

Spike dived and snatched Tom's ankle in his teeth. He tossed Tom onto the deck like a bale of hay. He floated back above the ship. The unicorn dropped first to his knees and then rolled on his side.

Jakkobb placed both his hands on the unicorn's heaving flanks. "How bad?"

Spike spat. *I loathe the taste of the undead.*

Just as the knight went to his steed's side, Der leaned over Tom with her hands on her hips.

"Uncle!" Chloe lifted up her skirts and darted over.

"Stay back!" Tom ordered. He closed his eyes. "Just stay back."

He offered his bleeding, fractured hands up to Der. Wooden splinters jutted up from his skin. "Get it out of me," he snarled. She nodded. He coughed and wheezed, and looked everywhere but Chloe. "I have got to stop these heroics. This lie is going to get me killed."

Firelight burned fiercely through the windows in the great hall of Alscane's palace. It was the only light.

Dead soldiers lay sprawled across the court's stone floor. A small trail of blood had dripped from the single invader's sword as he'd advanced in a perfectly straight line up to the throne.

Pplini V, ruler of the principdom of Alscane, knelt in front of his throne. The portly, elderly prince raised his shaking hands up over his crown. His many rings clacked together on his fingers.

"Anything! Anything that I have!"

The sword tip gently lifted the edge of the crown from his temple. The crown's metal rasped softly against the steel of the sword as the man raised his weapon and flicked the crown across the room.

It clanged against the floor, destroying the motionlessness of the great hall. The prince's eyes caught movement – he hadn't dared to look up at his conqueror until now – and saw a champagne Staghorn retriever flinch at the still rolling crown. The dog gazed up at him and stiffly wagged his tail.

The prince stared. What was a dog doing here? Now? The animal stared right back at him with the saddest brown eyes he'd ever witnessed. Seeing this attention, the dog cocked his ears, and the prince noticed that part of the retriever's left ear ended early in a ragged line. But it was an old injury, healed long ago. The dog took a step forward and wagged his tail again. Apart from the ear, the prince had never seen such a beautiful hunting beast. Muscles rippled under his shiny yellow fur.

The thrall broke. Trembling, Pplini dragged his eyes up to his conqueror. A whimper died in his throat. He traced his gaze of the blade up to the man's left hand, and then up the man's arm to his face.

The conqueror was not what the prince expected. The top of his head was just shy of six feet, and he was too lean. He couldn't possibly loom.

And yet, he certainly was looming. He may have been lean, but it was all well defined muscle. His features were pulled tight across his face, and looked chiseled by the wind. A few wrinkles creased his eyes, as blue as crystal and just as hard. His hair was dark, but with gray sprinkled throughout, even though the man looked barely into his thirties.

He sneered and revealed straight and amazingly white teeth.

"Anything," the prince mouthed.

The distant firelight burned in the man's glacier blue eyes. "You can't offer me anything that I haven't already taken." He raised the bloody sword to the prince's throat.

Behind them, the lacquered doors to the great hall exploded open. Pplini's eyes opened wider with hope.

The sword tip bit deep into the prince's throat like a snake, fast and sharp. The conqueror sighed and turned to the solitary newcomer. "Yes, what is it, Axon?" He leaned forward and began to wipe his sword clean on the late prince's silk robe.

Axon stumbled over the hopeful dog as he tried to run. "Stupid, stupid cur!" Suddenly, he froze and stared. First his face colored bright pink, which immediately faded to white and then green surged up from his neck. He launched himself forward on his knees. "I'm so sorry, my lord! It's just that, that, such a dog isn't fearsome enough to be yours!"

The conqueror slid his sword home in its scabbard. A small frown weighed on his face. "So, let me try to understand your reasoning. You don't like my dog because he *isn't* trying to eat you alive?"

Axon opened his mouth and gurgled. The retriever inched closer and nudged him with his nose. He gulped. "They stole the flagship! It's escaping the bay right now!"

"Impressive." A mirthless chuckle slithered from the man's lips. "Well, they'll be in for a surprise. You know what's on the *Hound*."

"No, lord, the *Fury*! Your *actual* flagship!" Axon tried to inhale again before exhaling. He suddenly burst, "It's the chemmen! I saw their eyes! The chemmen stole your ship!"

The victor paused, and then said, "Apocryphal. The chemmen wouldn't just steal my ship. That's not their style at all." His gaze traced the blood trail across the stone floor, over the body of the dead prince and to the polished wooden throne. "But who would?"

His gloved fist blurred. CRACK! He punched the throne so hard that the wood splintered.

"Sink it."

Axon gasped. "But, your— all your—"

"Are not worth what they could learn. Sink it. And you find me that girl."

Chapter Nineteen

Chase

The ocean water turned cherry red in the *Maelstrom Fury's* reflection. The ship sliced through the water as neatly as a knife. Der stared. There was nothing in her experience with which she could compare the ocean. It looked as flat as a plain, but upon a closer gaze, the mutable water rose and fell like millions of tiny mountain ranges.

There were patterns too, but none she could pick out and follow for too long. When she turned her head away from the shore, toward the east, nothing but sea and sky met her gaze.

Nothing but the horizon.

When she turned toward the south, there was nothing but the warship creeping up on them.

Der's arms hung limply off the railings over the stern. "Ugh."

She looked at the sparkling ocean again and squinted against the rising sun. "It's been hours. I didn't realize that naval battles took so long to do nothing."

Not a wrinkle of a smile crossed Edillon's face as he stood beside her. "They're gaining."

"They've been gaining all night." Der yawned. "Well, at least, I assume they have been. I mean, they've been gaining ever since we saw them, therefore—"

"I understand, Der. Thank you."

She nodded and yawned again. Most of the night had been spent cursing each other while trying to figure out what happened when they pulled on a rope. Thistle, oddly enough, seemed to have an idea of what most things were and where they should go.

Der had caused the most panic when she tried to figure out the wheel by spinning it wildly. They'd learned that the ship responded excellently to the wheel, and also, that Chloe was the most susceptible to seasickness.

Kelin, Alluvius and Jakkobb climbed up the small stairs to the aftcastle, where Der and Edillon were watching their pursuers.

"Like a dog," Der muttered. "Following us like a dog."

Kelin shook his head. "I don't know what they're doing. Alscane's such a major port. They won't be able to hide this, even if they kill us."

"I'm sure they know that," Jakkobb murmured. "They have a couple of days, a week at the outside before all the armies from Horizon to Tenmar come throwing spears at them."

"Yes, but where are we going right now?" Alluvius pointed to the north.

Edillon frowned. "We've got three choices, if I remember rightly, Galaka, Staghorn, or Arinon."

"Arinon?" Jakkobb's eyebrows shot up. "Does it still exist?"

Edillon shrugged.

"Galaka's our best bet," Kelin said thoughtfully. "It's small, but it's the closest."

"And if it's invaded too?" Der prompted.

"Doubtful," Alluvius answered. "Blue Farers have a port there."

"Either way," Jakkobb said, "That place will have spies."

“Spies!” Der straightened up suddenly. “Firth! He must’ve been with— That means they’re after Horizon!”

“Easy, Der.” The knight held his palms open. “Perhaps, but perhaps not. I know if I was invading, I’d want information on the continent’s strongest army regardless if I wanted their stronghold.”

“But—”

The knight risked a chuckle. “Of all the things I want to panic about at the moment, Horizon isn’t one of them.”

“And you lived at Horizon, Der,” Alluvius pointed out. “You know that no army attacking *from the outside* can take it.”

“Yeah, but...”

The two knights of Arborn stiffened as Thistle crested the stairs behind them. The chemman ignored them and instead gazed at the chasing warship.

Der stretched. “Hey, you know, I bet if we slowed down we could get this battle started a lot faster.”

Edillon quirked an eyebrow. “I’d like more distance between us and whatever other ships they may send our way in support of that one.”

Thistle sighed. “And, you know, we’re probably going to lose to this ship alone. When it finally catches us.”

Der slumped further out over the stern. “But as it stands right now, I’m going to be asleep by the time they get here.”

“And you wonder why you got booted from the dragoons?” a voice drawled. They turned.

Tom was just there. His boots hadn’t echoed across the wooden deck; his clothing hadn’t rustled as he approached – he was just there, leaning casually against a railing with a smirk painted across his features. His hood protected his face from the dawning sun in a net of shadows. Gloves shielded his hands.

Thin elven mail jingled like the notes of a passing song as the two knights stood to attention between their king and Tom.

He just rolled his emerald eyes at them and then glared at Der. “Why do you always have to be friends with annoying people, like whoever is your special envoy here?”

Edillon’s smile spread slowly. “I’m merely the man on a quest to determine why the earth is acting out so much.”

The vampire shrugged and glared. “Well, until it becomes my problem, I don’t care.” His gaze crawled across the elf’s blank features. “Well, you don’t give anything away that you don’t want to. I’ll give you that.” He grunted. “Now, Derora, I need out of the sun. Come along.”

Der pointed to the chasing warship. “But we’re figuring out a battle plan. Important, here.”

“Right. And I’ll wager you sleep through real battle strategies too, when you actually have some idea what you’re doing. Now, come on.” He tapped his boot. “It’ll be hours before they’re even near.”

Edillon shrugged. Der nodded and turned to follow Tom. The vampire chuckled as they took the steps down to the captain’s quarters. “So, how did you get old Strival to give you the boot?”

Der’s hands suddenly went limp at her sides, and her footsteps slowed. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

He smirked. “You think that I can’t find out?”

“So why don’t you? And leave me the hell alone.” She rubbed her face, and snatched a tear out of her eye, hopefully before he could see. Pain blossomed in the back of her throat as she tried not to let her emotions free.

He paused at the hatch to the captain’s quarters and cocked an eyebrow. “I do hope that you’re not seriously considering joining Zine’s order.”

“Don’t know yet.” She stared at the deck. “Haven’t seen them in action.”

“If you do, just know that I’m never talking to you again.”

“Wasn’t that your plan anyway?”

They stepped into the seemingly spacious quarters. It wasn’t that the room was large, but everything had been designed to give the illusion of space. The bed was a nook in the wall with drawers buried into the wood beside it. A small polished sink gleamed in the morning sunlight.

Tom fingered the frame of mirror above the sink. Melted streams of ruby and diamond endlessly chased each other in the golden outline. “Pallens. The real stuff. This alone is worth more than all the gems in Alscane.”

Der looked around the quarters. Nothing else was like the bejeweled mirror, but there were some paintings of a beautiful white stone city.

On the floor was a large dog bed. Pale dog fur instantly glued to her dark trousers as she passed by.

“No holy symbols though.” Tom tapped his chin thoughtfully.

“I thought you said that most holy symbols didn’t work on you.”

“It’s Pallens, hallo?”

“So what did you want to speak about?” she asked. “Chloe?”

He held up a hand for silence as if waiting for someone to slide out of the shadows or scamper in through the door. “Maybe. As soon as I know that no one is spying on us, I’ll tell you.”

She rolled her eyes and leaned over the captain’s desk. It was the only thing that actually took up space. She pushed her hands through a strata of charts, both of land and sea.

Then she pulled open a drawer and immediately picked up a brass disc. She popped open the lid and frowned when the hands didn’t move. “This compass is broken.”

Tom leaned over her shoulder. “It’s not a compass, Der.” He snatched the disc from her hand.

“What? It has to be. It’s got the little hand and everything.”

Tom raised it up to his eye. “No. It’s got two little hands and they’re moving.” Together they watched as the smaller arm clicked over a tiny notch. “It’s no compass.”

“Fine.” Der tried to grab it back, but he lifted it over her head. “Then what is it?”

The vampire continued to scowl.

“You don’t know!”

He snarled, “Well, I’m a lot more sophisticated than you to be able to tell you what it isn’t.”

“It’s a pocket watch,” Jakkobb announced from the hatch. His voice was as hard as steel. “I keep telling you what the world lost when Pallens died.”

Der scratched the back of her head. “Fair enough, sir, but we still don’t know what a pocket watch is.”

Jakkobb exhaled. "You know those bells in big cities that ring out every quarter hour. Like that, but down to one minute." He pinched his nose. "The only bell we're like to hear on this ship is the alarm."

The wind caught Der's face as she and Tom followed the knight back out onto the deck.

"But this ship is probably faster, right?" Der squeezed out through her lips.

"Probably," Jakkobb growled. "If any of us knew how to sail."

Der walked over to him and her eyes slid away from him to the hatch. Her hand snapped out and she slammed the door.

"What are you—" The knight began.

The door bounced off a flexible seal around the door frame. Der frowned thoughtfully. "What the hell is this?"

Jakkobb exhaled. "The ship is old."

"I thought it looked new."

"Old ideas, anyway. All the portals have the rubber seals, so if one compartment is compromised, it won't sink the ship. At least, immediately anyway."

Thalon and Chloe pushed their way past the knight inside the cabin. Thalon shook a small stick in his hand. "We found this, and it looks like a quill, but there was no inkwell. See?" He reached up to a map of the Occidental Ocean and scratched a crude dragon in the middle of the ocean. "But it just keeps writing."

The girl crossed her arms, pouting. "But it's not magic. I would know if it's magic. But there's no inkwell!" She tapped her foot and pointed at the pen again while raising her eyebrows at Tom. "Well?"

The vampire smiled, lips only. "I'm glad to see you're in a better mood."

Der held out her hand and Thalon passed the strange object over. She turned it between her fingers, and then scribbled 'I hate vampires' somewhere in the middle of the continent of Dosmar. She held it up to the light. "I think the inkwell's inside the thing."

"And this belongs to the man that's hunting Chloe?" Thalon asked.

The girl's demanding expression fell to an avalanche of paleness. "Why are they after me again? It's not fair."

Thalon grinned. "So? We'll kill them again. Worked so far."

"But why me? I've been good."

Tom knelt down in front of the girl. "We'll always be here for you."

"But it's not fair!" Tears bubbled behind her brown eyes. "It's not fair!"

"Who said life was about being fair?" Der said. "The losers, that's who."

The tears broke through their dam. Tom wrapped an arm around the child's shoulders while firing Der a snarl.

"What? It's the truth."

Chloe sobbed and rubbed her knuckles into her eyes. "But it's not fair! Why are they after me?"

Tom gently squeezed her shoulder. "It doesn't matter, little one. We'll keep you safe."

Der tilted her head to the side. "Of course it mat—"

The vampire snapped his fingers. He rose and steered the girl by her shoulders to face Thalon. "I've got an idea. Why don't you go to the railing and try to count all the fish that swim by. Dolphins are lucky, and we could use some luck."

Thalon cocked his head. "What's a dolphin?"

"They're big and gray, and they look like they're smiling. Go on."

The boy took Chloe's hand, and the door shut silently behind them. Der waved her hand. "Of course it matters why they're after her! They don't seem to stop; we gotta dam this at the river's source."

He smacked her upside the head. "I know that, idiot. And do you honestly think I care if the rest of you are still here when I say 'we'll be here for you'?"

She rubbed her head. "I did think that was rather odd..."

"It's what sounds nice to her ears. I don't care if the rest of you are still breathing." He snorted. "All she needs to know is that she's safe." His radiant green eyes fell to the map. "There might be some clues here since we stole a nobleman's ship. I'll venture he's probably funding this."

She frowned at the desk. "Nobleman from where?"

Tom shrugged and knelt in the corner and picked up a beautiful, five stringed violin. "I don't know." He raised the bow with his other hand and suddenly it flew across the strings.

Der's hands were halfway to her ears. Instead of the loud screech from such a seemingly uncoordinated mad dash of his hand, music erupted from the strings.

Tom lowered the instrument. "It's in tune," he murmured. "Been played recently."

"I keep forgetting how fast you can move. I mean, outside of combat." She pulled a drawer out of the wall and reached inside. Her fingers skittered across raised leather. She leaned over the drawer to frown at a worn black book.

Spike bobbed his head as the children jogged by them to the railing, where Alluvius and Kelin were already looking at the waters. Goldie's head whipped in the children's direction too, just as a dog's gaze suddenly fixates on movement. He shifted his feet from his perch on Spike's back to see them better.

Jakkobb continued to brush down the unicorn's flank with a beautiful linen bed sheet they'd found in storage. The knight grunted. "We've got to figure out what to do about that ship before they catch us."

We could make for shore.

"We don't know how to beach this thing."

There's not much art in crashing. The steed stomped a massive hoof against the deck, and flicked his tail.

"Right, there's not much survival either. Then we're stuck trekking through the forests. We're already in a rush to let the dragoons know."

We'll be fine. He laid his ears back. If he was a human, he would have been scowling. *Besides, we probably don't know anything more than they do already.*

Jakkobb pulled the bed sheet away from the unicorn. "What is wrong with you?"

Spike shook his head and whinnied. *Do you know what people do to horses when the wind stalls on these things?*

"You're not a horse!"

He bobbed his nose toward the pursuing ship. *They don't know that!*

"I saw a dragon!" Goldie blurted happily.

Both knight and unicorn paused to look at the little creature. He grinned, revealing his dozens of fangs. "I saw a dragon. It was on the big ship. It was big, but not bigger than me."

He pushed both paws out in front of him and stretched like a cat while his wings fluttered like a butterfly.

Jakkobb rolled his eyes. "Dragon, right. Because a dragon would just hide in a ship instead of burning the whole town down and calling it a night."

Spike hopped off of his front two hooves; his shrug. *I saw it too.*

"What would a dragon want with a ship?" the knight mused.

Unless the dragon's not the one in command.

Goldie started to strut up and down the unicorn's back. "It was big and silver and sleeping."

Jakkobb rested his forehead against Spike's mane and sighed. "It's always trouble when the facts don't make sense."

The page crinkled like an old, dry twig when Der turned the first page. "I think it's a diary." The smooth cursive curled endlessly across the pages. "At least I learned how to read Palls."

Tom frowned. "Whoever this is, he's obsessed with Pallens. I mean the art and mirrors, now a journal written in Palls."

Der turned another page. "Well, there's nothing about Pallens written in here." She laid the book out over the map.

Tom peered over her shoulder. He stroked the page with a finger. "This is a song. Let's see, man's beloved affianced dies, killed by a gold dragon..." He raised an eyebrow at Der.

"Not mine. Mine's still a teenager. In dragon years."

"Right. So the man goes into the forest, into the river where he thinks to drown, but instead the river washes him into new lands." The rest of the page was blank. Tom turned over to the next one, where the writing continued. "This is a beer recipe."

Der held up her hands. "Is it any good? The beer?"

"How would I know? I don't drink beer, Der."

"Maybe you could have it on the side? I don't know. Blend in with the humans, like?"

The vampire rolled his eyes. "Not unless I want to spend the night puking."

"Well, that would be blending in at some taverns." She snapped her fingers. "Look for the name Firth. He might be mentioned. Or their strategy, like."

Tom thumbed through more pages. "No, sorry, Der, there's nothing entitled 'Conquest of Alscane and the continent of Solquin'."

She shrugged. "I would've felt stupid if was there and we'd missed that."

"Unless it's in code." He tapped his forehead slowly. "That could explain the nonsensical song followed by seemingly out-of-place recipes."

"The mountains at Horizon never did return to normal." Alluvius drummed his fingers against the railing.

Kelin fiddled around with the astrolabe. "Is this some kind of complicated sundial?"

Alluvius shrugged. Together, they stared at the brass circle with its fingers and lines matching up the constellations and the path of the sun.

Thistle, keeping a watchful eye on the children, directed his other eye at the pursuing warship. "We may not have to worry about that for much longer."

They stood to attention as King Edillon approached. He waved them to ease with his hand. The two knights were never a pace behind. The elf folded his hands. "I'm trying to imagine how any of this could possibly be in relation to the earth events."

Kelin gestured back over the ocean toward Alscane. "But there have been wars before and the earth didn't warn anybody."

"I know. The only time in history I recall with preceding analogous events was when the Bridge was created and the gates to hell were opened."

Only the creaking of the ship broke the following silence.

Alluvius shifted his feet. "What if they brought it with them? Think, Alscane's fleet started to vanish overseas when the earth events began."

Kelin licked his lips. "Is Arborn in peril again, Majesty? Forgive me, but I don't know why you left the kingdom."

"It is my imperative to protect the earth. It comes with the crown of my kingdom."

"You hadn't mentioned that before."

Thistle interrupted, "We were a little busy with our own lives at the time, Kelin." He let his orange eyes slide over the aft railing once again. "However, as it was then, we must survive now."

Alluvius shaded his eyes. "I can't see how many soldiers. Did anyone find a telescope? I'm sure this ship has one."

"Still only looks like a single ship," Kelin mused. "Alas, probably more than we can fend off."

The part human nodded. "Of course, whoever this conqueror is, he had more ships than he needed to take Alscane. I'll wager he's using it as a staging ground."

"Staging ground for finding the girl," Kelin muttered. "This can't be all for her though, right?"

Edillon sighed. "Probably not, but we don't know."

Alluvius asked, "Do you think that's why they're after us? The girl?"

Thistle snorted "No. We stole their ship, and might get the word of their arrival out sooner than they'd prefer."

"And they're still gaining," Kelin growled, staring at the other ship. "I mean, they're getting close enough to be dangerous now."

"Well, they know how to sail," Alluvius replied. "I'm thankful we haven't run this thing into the shore yet." He paused. "Isn't something supposed to be steering this thing?"

Kelin pointed. "Well, we tied a rope to the wheel so it wouldn't just spin."

Edillon exhaled. "From now on, somebody is going to have to steer the ship. The rest of us need to learn how to sail."

"More sails mean more wind." Alluvius raised his face. "So we should make sure that all of these things are open."

"Already are," Thistle replied. "As best we could do without tangling them together."

"How close are we to Galaka?" Kelin asked. "It's where we're going, right?"

Thistle shook his head. "I'm not so sure we're going to get that far."

Behind them, their pursuers unfurled another sail. It billowed out and tightened in the wind.

"Damn and blast!"

Der felt the wind from the book as Tom smashed it closed. She tried to smile. "Um."

"There is nothing about Chloe in there."

"We've only been looking for—"

"I can read *very quickly*, or have you forgotten?"

She broadened her smile. "Maybe it's a good thing that there's nothing about her. Or you, because you have the same power. The heart."

He slouched into a velvet chair, bulging with cushions. "I know. I'd rather they didn't know about either of us."

"The heart," Der repeated. "I learned a little about the legend of stone and bone. I don't like the part of the story about the demons being bound to each other."

"They're both dead," he snapped. "And it was so long ago that many elves have forgotten the story. So there."

"Perhaps, but would the demons know?"

"No. *'Cause they're dead*. And they don't have souls either, not like us. So when they die, it's over. Nothing. No afterlife, no reincarnation. Nothing."

"You still have a soul?"

He narrowed his eyes and snarled, "Yes, I do. Sometimes, I wish it wasn't still stuck to this dead body!"

Der leaned away and held up her hands.

He immediately amended, "I mean, I *used* to be. Not these nights anymore."

"Alright, alright. Do you remember that tablet when we were searching for the heart. It mentioned crystal, but the legend is stone and bone."

"The other demon, the one who wasn't stone, had crystal bones."

She blinked. "Well, that's stupid. They'd just snap apart as he walked."

"Crystal's stronger than you think."

Someone rapped his knuckles against the door, and Kelin poked his head in. "You both still alive?"

"I'm not." Tom rested his back into the chair. "But she is."

"Then I guess I owe Thistle a coin. Anyway, Jakkobb says we've gotten as far away from Alscane as we possibly can on this thing, and we need everyone if we're going to crash the ship into the shore and make a run for it."

He left the door open behind him. Der closed it behind Tom and herself. The vampire's already pale features were pure white beneath his hood. He clamped his arms against his chest and glared.

Jakkobb said, "Tom, you look unwell. Should we be worried?"

Tom patted the magically chilled flask on his belt. "You're fine. It's just sunrise and I'm on a wooden ship. You wouldn't ride on a ship made of knives, would you?"

"No," Der replied. "They'd leak and it'd sink."

The vampire just stared dully at her.

“Hey, a wooden stake through the heart kills me too!”

He continued to stare. Everyone else retreated a couple of paces, just like people preparing to watch a street fight.

She continued, “You’re just more afraid of being slain because less things can kill you.”

“What?” He blinked.

She grinned. “I know I’m gonna die. He who lives by the sword and all that. You’re the one who has got to be afraid since only very specific things can kill you.”

He threw out his gloved hands. “I’m already dead!”

“And yet still fearfully clinging to an existence. And you call me stubborn?”

A growl vibrated like a growing earthquake in the vampire’s throat, and it was a sound that no human could duplicate. Suddenly, Tom spun on his heel and marched into the captain’s quarters door and directly to the bejeweled mirror. He stared into his reflection and starting threading his fingers through his hair.

“What are you doing?” Der finally asked.

“Looking for gray hairs.”

Behind him, Jakkobb slapped a hand over his mouth and swallowed a laugh.

“But you’re dead.” Der inched closer, trying to see over his shoulder.

He scratched his fingernails against his scalp. “I know. That’s why I’m worried.”

The knight belched a guffaw. Spike stamped a hoof down on the knight’s armored foot, but Jakkobb continued to laugh.

Meanwhile, Thalon wandered to a small locked box built into the ship right beneath the flagpole. He pulled some lock picks from his pocket and set to work.

Jakkobb’s laughs soon gave way to his normal, serious voice. “Der, Tom, did you find anything about whoever owned this ship?”

She shook her head. “Just a really fortunate Pallens collector. I mean, it’s like he raided the Pallendale itself.”

“What about this?” Thalon dropped the lock from the box and pulled out the flag. A serpent intertwined around two parallel, opposite facing swords dominated the ebony banner. Each end of the snake had a vicious, striking head.

Der felt her mouth dry instantly. “I’ve seen that before. In Darkreign.”

Chapter Twenty

Critical Depth

“Huh.” Tom shrugged and let his emerald eyes drift over the flag. “Must be new.” He let the diary dangle in one hand.

“No, it’s not.” Der shook her hands out in front of her, almost blocking her view of the banner.

“Well, I’ve never believed your little we-raided-the-chemmen-in-Darkreign story either,” he said, staring directly at Der, and not even glancing at Thistle behind her. “Besides, I’m old, and I’ve never seen it before, therefore it must be new.”

She crossed her arms and her eyebrows. “You didn’t know what the pocket-wich-it thing was either!”

He shook his head and glared firmly ahead. “You said in Darkreign. This is not how chemmen act.”

“Well, maybe the chemmen finally realized that they have to change their ways!” she clipped. “They’d already killed their own soil in Darkreign, so maybe that was enough to wise them up.” She glanced at Thistle.

Thistle shrugged. “Who knows? I’m no longer invited to the family dinners. But this, this is worse. This is someone who the chemmen hate as much as the elves, but all that passion directed at one man.”

Chloe tugged on Der’s hand. “Whose is it?”

Der nodded at Jakkobb, who hadn’t moved since Thalon had pulled out the sable banner.

The knight’s eyes passed over the ship’s railing, past the ocean, through the horizon and back in time. His lower lip quivered ever so slightly. “I wasn’t there, and for that, I am shamefully grateful. Everyone who was there died. Including my friend Rowan.”

“Lady Evelyn’s husband,” Kelin breathed.

“The attack on Pallens happened too fast. We were just in time to see the wolverines picking through the last of the dead on the white marble streets.”

Spike bumped the knight with his nose. *We failed as soldiers. We were too late.*

“And that flag right there!” Jakkobb stabbed a finger at it. “That was snapping in the wind on what was left of the Arx.”

“The what?” Chloe asked.

The Arx, little one, Spike answered. The citadel of Pallens.

Jakkobb took a deep breath in order to force his next words to flow. “This is the Blackhound’s flag.”

The rumpling of the canvas of the sails was the only sound across the deck.

Thalon swallowed. “As in the death of Pallens?”

Jakkobb’s face paled. “The Empire fell at the end of the War of Hell on Earth. At that time, we thought the war was over. Victory was inevitable. Then, out of nowhere, the Blackhound strikes and fells the lighthouse that kept us alive during the wars.”

“What about the Battle of the Bridge? I thought we were losing...” Der petered out.

“No, at the death of Pallens, we were winning. The battle was the turning point. Until then, we were being slaughtered. But Pallens kept us together.”

Spike whuffed softly. *And that was where this flag was last known.*

"*Omnes sciunt me solem de caelo eripuisse.*" Sweat bubbled up on Jakkobb's forehead. "Let all know that I have stolen the sun from the sky." He swallowed. "It was painted on the wall, beneath the flagpole." He dropped his face and looked away.

We burned the flag, the unicorn finished.

"And he was never found," Alluvius whispered. "We all know the story."

Tom's scowl deepened. He fastened his emerald hard gaze on Der. "So we just stole the Blackhound's personal ship?" He waved the diary under her nose. "This is your fault!"

"It's not the Blackhound!" Der yelled back. "We don't know who it is!"

Chloe extended her arm and pointed. "But they're still catching up."

Slowly, everyone lifted their faces toward the tailing ship.

"Could he be on that thing?" Kelin shook his head vigorously. "But the Blackhound's dead! Pallens was killed two thousand years ago! He can't be alive!"

Edillon cut into the thickening silence. "It's not him. We elves know that age claimed him. He was human. How could it not? This is most likely someone using the name to ride its tidal wave of fear." He paused. "It's certainly working on us."

Der held up the pocket watch from her belt purse. "But the Pallens artifacts..."

Tom set his jaw. "A very fortunate and careful student of history."

"Try one who made history!" Kelin tossed up his hands. "We started counting by the year one again because of this man!"

"Well, it's not him!" Jakkobb cut in sharply. "And stop acting like it is!"

The unicorn stamped his hoof against the deck. *Yes, and once we catch whoever is toying with this flag, he is going to wish he died in the Centum Wars.*

Jakkobb blinked, and his eyes focused on the present. "Spike, we burned the only one. No one knows it. No one who wasn't there..."

Tom leveled a finger at Der and twisted his mouth up to reveal one fang. "Well, she knows."

Der rolled her eyes. "We found it in the chemmen trophy room."

"Do not throw that question at me." Thistle shrugged. "I had already parted ways with my nation."

"But the chemmen had already been banished when Pallens died," Kelin protested. "So why would they have his flag?"

"Not all of them," Thistle replied. "And it didn't take the others too long to find roads back into the world. You remember the thin spot in the swallow hole?"

"I wish I didn't."

Edillon shook his head. "How quickly did the storm readers find a way to move between planes of existence? And the chemmen are collectors, maybe they picked over the bones of Pallens before Jakkobb and company arrived." He shrugged weakly.

Thistle held up his open palms. "Like I said, I had already broken from my people before the First Banishment."

Alluvius gulped. "Are the chemmen pretending to be him? Don't they favor deception?"

"And the undead." Edillon shivered, remembering the night in the trees before the mad escape to Riverfall.

Kelin frowned. “The little boy necromancer was no chemmen, but he did say it wasn’t his original body either. And after what the chemmen did to Dis and Vlade...”

Chloe shook her head. “What did they do?”

“They sought to *improve* the limitations of their bodies,” Edillon replied carefully.

“And they do so enjoy human puppets,” Thistle added. “Maybe they’ve learned to actually disguise themselves as human – all they have to do is change their eyes.”

“And the flag,” Der breathed. “We all saw that they had his flag.”

“But they’re gone!” Thalon protested. “The lady banished them again!”

The following silence was broken only by the creaking vessel and the water against the hull.

Kelin coughed and shrugged. “Maybe we didn’t get them all?”

Der opened her mouth, but quickly closed it. Everyone else dropped their gaze or let it pass over to the ocean.

“I saw a dragon!” Goldie’s talons scratched the deck as he skittered to Der’s feet as clumsy and excited as a puppy. He craned his long neck up. “But it wasn’t like me. It was silver!”

A shiver visibly coursed along Jakkobb’s shoulders like a crackle of electricity. “That fits the rumors of history too.”

“Maybe it’s his dragon then,” Thalon suggested. “Recruited a new Blackhound.”

You’ve inherited your father’s suspicion, I see, Spike commented. *Not a bad idea though.*

Der shook her head. “That’s about as likely as... well, the chemmen.”

“Then who is on that ship?” Chloe suddenly whispered and pressed her back against Tom’s lithe frame.

One by one, their faces turned to the pursuing ship. They could finally make out individual sailors and soldiers as they hustled around on their own deck. The long arm of the ship’s catapult bent back, and the sailors rolled a massive metal ball into its cradle.

The whirlwind catapult looked more like a sling than a traditional catapult. Der had studied this; she’d just never imagined she’d be seeing it so soon. The iron ball would be hollow, and they’d pour molten metal inside of it; or it might not be hollow, and the ball itself would just be superheated. Either way, it would cause this ship to catch on fire if impacted.

Then again, it could just be a massive metal ball hurled to tear holes in ships.

Alluvius groaned. “I was really hoping that was just a crane.”

“Wait.” Der chewed her lip. “Wouldn’t that just throw their ship off balance? We studied this!”

“We also studied why it’s wide and flat, disperses more water.” The part human shoved his finger at the ship.

“Oh. Right.” Der blinked the glaze out of her eyes.

Edillon, trailed by the two knights, stamped his feet up the stairs toward the ship’s wheel. “This thing has got to be faster. Come on!”

His hands blurred. The ship’s wheel also blurred. Der and the others on deck swayed suddenly as the *Maelstrom Fury* jerked turned toward shore.

“We’re not going to make it!” Chloe cried and buried her face in Tom’s side.

Jakkobb shook his head briefly, and the steely light was back in his eyes. "Alright, everyone! Our priorities are to keep Ki- Edillon and Chloe safe." He nodded up to the king at the wheel. "I'm rethinking the wisdom of you joining us."

The elf grinned. "Don't worry, so am I."

"Do they know?" Thalon demanded. "Do they know Chloe's here?"

His father shook his head. "If they knew, I doubt they'd be trying to sink the ship."

Goldie threw up his wings behind him. "I can save everybody! I'm gonna get *big!*"

"No!" Jakkobb lunged for the dragon. "Not here!"

The shadow of the beast eclipsed the sun, and the dragon started to rise.

Wooden cracks resounded. The growing dragon expanded his wings and his wings caught in the ropes and his spine growing pressed against the ship's mast.

"Oh no," Thalon breathed through an open mouth. Tom snatched the back of his neck, Chloe's hand in the other, and wordlessly hauled them into the captain's quarters. He heaved the door shut with a foot.

The center mast shredded against the dragon's exponentially increasing size and weight. The rigging and netting ripped like damp paper against the rising wings. Goldie roared as some of the rope tightened and pinched against his scales. The dragon wrenched to the side and the top half of the mast shattered free from the vessel and crashed against his spine.

The dragon instantly deflated, and within the time of a single heartbeat, was hatchling sized again.

The mast continued to crack apart as it tumbled. The sails' shadow grew over the party as the white sheets came thundering down.

Spike, whinnying fiercely, took the stairs up toward the wheel, all eight of them, in one leap.

King Edillon and Jakkobb just stared from the aftcastle as the sails and mast crashed over the port side of the boat.

Immediately, the entire boat tilted to port. Edillon and Jakkobb adjusted their balance accordingly. The king's eyes color changed, passing from navy blue to sky blue. "What in the corners of hell was that?"

Jakkobb glared with his steely gaze at where the dragon was last seen. "He's clumsy. Don't you remember those adolescent years?"

"Yes, but we don't talk about those in front of the other races." Edillon buried his face in his hands. "Well, it's not like we were outrunning them in the first place."

A lightning barrage of cursing exploded from somewhere underneath a stricken sail. Abruptly, all sound ceased as the midnight black chemmen sword cut through the cloth. Thistle emerged like a leviathan from the depths, and with the fury to match.

Under the new, expansive blanket, Der crawled forward on her elbows and knees to the dragon. Goldie rolled back on his haunches and howled.

His tears dripped down his snout, and he wailed, "I'm sar-ar-ee! So sorry!"

She took the dragon in one arm, where he hung like a damp towel. She stroked his back. "No, it's alright. Everyone breaks a ship at least once in their lives."

Kelin accidentally kicked Alluvius in the face. The part human grabbed his nose. "Ah! Watch it!"

"Sorry, didn't know where you wound up."

Alluvius beat on the canvas dome. "Hey! Hey! Somebody!"

A black sword thrust down, tearing the canvas three inches from his head. He tried to yell, but the sound got nowhere. He looked up at Thistle's virulent expression. Slowly, he raised up his hands.

Meanwhile, Tom pushed the door open, shoving away yards of sail. A slab of timber from the mast blocked his passage. He shoved that out of the way too. Chloe and Thalon leaned out of the door, toes strictly behind the threshold.

"I'm so hungry," Goldie moaned in Der's arms. "So, very, hungry..." He opened his mouth and started to nibble on the sail. After a moment, his eyes drifted closed and the little dragon was out.

Der slid along underneath the sail. Above her, Kelin watched the form shuffle along, like some person in a ghostly white Candlebright costume. He sighed, pulled out his dagger, and cut a hole for his friend.

She grinned at him, still holding the sleeping dragon. "Thanks."

He shrugged.

Tom lifted Chloe up over the railing onto the aftcastle, floating the last few feet in the air to do it. Thalon scrambled over the canvas and up the stairs. Der passed him the little dragon.

Jakkobb smiled through thin lips at the vampire. "Oh, don't worry, they're still chasing us." He pointed with his thumb over the stern.

Edillon shook his head. "And now we can't outrun them to land. Perhaps we should've crashed earlier."

The knight scowled. "And then we would've been stuck walking further from Galaka. I didn't plan for the dragon."

The king shook his foot as if it itched. "I'm sorry for being short with you, Sir Jakkobb. Something's just... does the air taste like metal to you too?"

"Er, what?"

Chloe's face paled as she watched the black snake-and-swords banner rising over the pursuing ship. She slapped a hand over her eyes. "Look, the flag!"

"Look! Green fire!" Kelin pointed with both hands. Green electricity sparkled along the wood on the tip of the prow. Quickly, the fizzing green lights leaped across the deck and up the remainder of the mast. Flashes of the green electricity sparked through the wood poking up through the canvas.

Beneath them, the *Maelstrom Fury* spirited ahead faster.

Thistle shook his head. "There's no storm."

"Uh, lads?" Der leaned over the railing. "The water's getting a might rough." The blue ocean water, rapidly turning into the white ocean water, banged against the ship. "Whoa!" The ship suddenly dipped forward and then tilted up when a sudden wave just appeared beneath it.

"Earth event!" Edillon yelled, hanging onto the railing. He watched as the green electricity surged along past his boots and over the stern.

"Eyes up!" Alluvius yelped.

The pursuing ship had launched the metal ball from the catapult. It spewed a silvery liquid from its pores. The ocean steamed where the molten metal splashed down.

The part human lunged for the wheel. Thistle caught his wrist, and for one moment, Alluvius fought for balance as he stared up into those dreaded orange orbs. Thistle shook his head. "You can't

change heading fast enough in these waters. Especially with a broken ship. You'll just give them our broadside to aim for."

Dedicated, Spike said from over Jakkobb's shoulders. They watched the projectile arcing toward them with a tranquil displacement. *They're really going to take us down.*

Jakkobb shook his head. "Makes you wonder if they truly are the Blackhound's soldiers, doesn't it?"

They heard the ball start to whistle in the air. It reached its zenith and plummeted toward them.

Der eyed the incoming missile and then looked down to the churning, bubbling sea. She clutched the railing as the water grabbed at the ship. "Of course, if I was heading into these waters, I'd want the molten metal off of my deck too."

"We're gonna die!" Chloe screamed. Beside her, Goldie squirmed in his sleep in Thalon's grip. Together, they watched the ball coming with deadly accuracy.

The missile seemed aimed right at the small knot of people. Beneath them, the waters frothed like a rabid animal. The ship groaned like a collapsing tree.

A wave trough dipped beneath them, from where there had been no wave before, and the *Maelstrom Fury* nose-dived.

The catapulted ball, still spewing molten metal, clipped the edge of the stern's railing. Fires blazed up from its contact, and then the heaving water swallowed the projectile whole. The sea sizzled for just a moment.

Water curled over the edge of the stern, erasing the flames and soaking the party. It yanked and strained to pull the broken mast under the ocean.

Around them, the sea still dipped lower and they rode the wave down. The peace of the fall overrode the roar of the ocean.

"Oh ye gods above," Kelin whispered. "Look, look!" He pointed, withdrew his arm, and then pointed again. As the *Maelstrom Fury* descended, literal straight walls of ocean towered around them.

The water emptied out in front of them, feeding into the rising walls. "Ahead!" Alluvius cried.

In front of them, the sea withdrew entirely and revealed the uneven terrain of the seabed. Seaweed lay flat against the smooth rocks and the curves of sandstone. Complete schools of gasping fish struggled against the rocks. Sharks and their mackerel prey lay side by side, panting in the sun.

The water finally escaped from underneath the *Fury*. The hull groaned in agony as it crashed down on the sea floor.

No one appeared to notice. Everyone stared at the cliffs of water towering over them. At their heights, they could make out furious white foam; but from the bottom, it looked so distant and peaceful. Eventually, a fine spray drifted down and settled on their hair.

"Trapped in a box," Kelin murmured.

"This ain't gonna last long." Der curled the fingers of her right hand into a fist.

A wooden replica of thunder shattered the mysteriously silent air. The pursuing vessel had also crashed onto the sandstone ground. The panicked sailors' distant shouts carried across the empty seafloor.

Goldie startled in Thalon's arms. His head snapped up and his huge nostrils sniffed like a dog on the hunt. He squirmed and the boy dropped him. He flapped his wings madly and hopped over the

rail. With wings furiously flapping, he managed to glide down to the seafloor. His head snaked out and latched onto a heaving tuna. He started to chew while stuffing even more tuna into his maw.

“Get back up here!” Der leaned over the railing.

“Hunfree!” the dragon replied through overly stuffed cheeks.

“Spike!” Jakkobb yelled. He lifted Thalon into the unicorn’s huge saddle.

The steed shook his head. *I can’t carry this many people!*

The knight hoisted Chloe up next. Tom glared, but didn’t move. Both children squeezed up together inside the war saddle’s high pommel and cantle. Chloe hugged Thalon from behind.

“I don’t think this is going to last much longer.” Alluvius nodded his head to the heights of the wavering walls. The water started to bulge and sway. On the deck of the *Fury*, it began to sprinkle like rain as waves crashed far above them.

Kelin pointed at the other ship. “They’re getting off their boat!”

“What?” Der appeared at his side. “Why?”

“Has any one of us said anything nice about the god of the ocean?” Alluvius asked through a joking grin. “Ever?”

“I just hope he isn’t tired of last minute pleas.”

“I say we may not have the chance to ask.” Kelin drew his sword. They followed his gaze.

“But why?” Der fingered the Pallens weapon. “They’re in the same situation.”

Sailors from the pursuing ship slid down ropes over the hull of their ship and were starting to run across the sea floor toward the *Fury*.

Alluvius shrugged. “Look how shredded their hull is.”

“Yes, but being crushed by the weight of the sea, it don’t matter how good your hull is.”

Jakkobb sighed irritably. “You know, Der, why don’t you just ask them when they get here?”

The sarcasm ricocheted off her shrug.

Edillon ground his teeth. “I think I have an idea to get us to the surface, but I don’t know if it’ll work outside Arborn.”

“What are you planning to do?” Der demanded.

He cocked a forced grin. “Something. It’s a secret of kings, Der, I can’t tell you.”

She snorted, showing just what she thought about those rules.

“Now, I know you’ve been wanting to brawl.” He narrowed his gaze.

At least thirty men, all armed, smashed the dying fish with their boots as they sprinted over the ocean floor’s crevices and mounds covered in seaweed and tube animals.

Spike nudged Thistle’s shoulder. Then he turned his head to look at the children in the saddle. *I can escape when the worst happens. Either of the worst things at this particular moment.*

The chemman closed his orange eyes and nodded. “Very well.”

Jakkobb freed the massive axe from its sheath. “Ki– Ed– Kaleb, do what you think might work. Rest of us, get off this ship and create a line! Kelin and Alluvius on either side of me; Thistle and Der, you’re on the wings. Tom, you do whatever the hell you want as long as you don’t jeopardize the line.”

The vampire stared ahead, face as blank as a corpse. “I’m so ecstatic to be included.”

Chapter Twenty One

Trapped by Water

Jakkobb raised his axe. "They'll flank us, can't be stopped."

Kelin slipped on an octopus. He hadn't even seen the thing. He was too busy watching the oncoming soldiers. They stumbled across the uneven sea floor too. He glanced up at the towering walls of water. If they collapsed, this fight meant nothing. With all of these worries, he didn't notice the octopus. And that was breaking the line. That meant death. He had to stay shoulder-to-shoulder, no matter how uneven the terrain.

The sailors from the other ship ran over the seabed. Their bull-throated yells reverberated up from the depths of their spines. They leveled their swords and charged the tiny knot of defenders.

Kelin shifted the grip on his blade. Why couldn't they just fend them off from the ship? It made no sense to forfeit the high ground of their vessel!

He already knew the answer. The enemy sailors could go after Edillon. They could find Chloe. No, he and his comrades had to keep their attention. And Jakkobb knew it too, otherwise he wouldn't have ordered this.

Thirty against six. And he'd take the six. A dragoon knight, a chemman, a vampire and one Derora Saxen. He wasn't sure what category he and Alluvius could possibly share.

A sudden wind ripped through the sea floor. He looked up at the bulging cliffs of water. How long did they have? And then, there was no more time to worry about it.

His first attacker, a man whose beer had pooled too long in his belly, swiped at him. Kelin leaned back and avoided the strike. He parried another sword, meant for Thistle. He hadn't even seen the second attacker lunge; his body had reacted before he did!

Kelin's sword leapt back into contact with his fat opponent. He felt the blows vibrate all the way up and down his arm and shoulder. They weren't combating just another group of thugs. These men threw actual military technique at them.

Kelin forced their blades high by thrusting toward his neck, and then he suddenly dropped his point and drove it deep into the man's belly.

These men may have been soldiers, but none of them had a chemman warrior for a trainer. Of course, if they were all as fat as this one, Kelin's party could just be crushed by the enormous weight.

He glanced around. Jakkobb had already cut down two. Alluvius, Der and Thistle each outmatched every individual but pressed together at four to one. Kelin felt his own foot slide back as a new fighter stepped over the fat soldier's still wheezing body. From the corner of his peripheral vision, he saw at least a dozen men circling around behind them. It wouldn't matter how skilled they were in just a few more moments.

And then there was Tom, unarmed, unarmored and grinning like a devil. He hopped from one foot to the other like an amateur boxer.

Meanwhile, in unison, Der and Thistle spun around, forming a tight circle of the six of them. However, all enemy eyes were on the vampire.

The nearest soldier fainted. Thrusting was too obvious a move. Tom ignored their actions altogether. He jumped up and kicked the soldier in the face.

The crack of the soldier's neck shattering dimmed the clashing of steel. The vampire landed on his feet and beckoned with both hands. "If anyone ruins this shirt, his death will not be easy!"

The two stoic knights of Arborn shadowed King Edillon's movements exactly. The young ruler released his grip on the rope and kicked away from the hull. His feet thudded on the seabed. He drew his shoulders square and marched to the shimmering, freestanding ocean.

A fearsome wind flung itself against Edillon's back and up against the cliffs of ocean. The king reached out, palms flat and touched the wall of sea. His fingers sank through the barrier. He focused his gaze on the water.

Thousands of miles away, up out of the ocean, past the plains, around Silver Dawn's Horizon, through the Wild Lands and over the mountains, across the rivers and up into the high hills, up the walls of Long Range Palace, through the trees of the tower-top gardens, to a round seal carved into the most ancient of oaks.

Sweat prickled across Edillon's forehead. "I pray you can hear me from here."

The seal on the tree suddenly glowed with an inner light, as yellow and bright as the sun. The sigils began to spin in opposite directions across the oak's bark.

"I know the risk to your seal, but we will perish here. Only your spirit can save us. Please. Can you hear me from here?"

He released his hands from the wall of water. Nothing was happening. No stirring of the water. No sigils reflecting out of the water. He wasn't sure he could even feel the oak from here.

He squared his shoulders. "We shall see."

The two knights of Arborn bowed their heads. They turned and followed their ruler.

King Edillon scooped up the dragon as he marched. He'd eaten the fish, with their skeletons and intestines whole. Now, the golden creature's head bobbed as he tried to stay awake. The elf tucked the dragon inside his shirt and grabbed the rope hanging off the ship's railing.

The knight of Arborn followed, and behind them, the cliffs of waters started to waver at their bases.

Edillon braced his feet against the slippery hull. He grimaced at the cracks he saw at the bottom of the ship; they would have troubles with those soon enough if they survived. Except for the shredded front of the ship, the wood looked mostly intact.

Spike, with the children still perched in the saddle, raised his ears as the king and knights crested the railing to the deck. *Any luck?*

"We'll know quickly enough," the king replied darkly.

A shadow eclipsed the *Fury*. In a single motion, everyone turned their heads up. Overhead, the top of the nearest wall leaned over at least seventy feet and trembled. On deck, they didn't dare to breathe.

Finally, it surged back into the cliff. But now the entire wall was shaking like an active fault line.

Edillon sprinted over the soaked canvas and up the stairs to the aftcastle. The screams and metallic song of battle spilled over his ears. Handfuls of water splashed down from above. He skidded to a stop at the edge of the boat. "The ship! Get on the ship!"

“Fall back!” Jakkobb thundered. “Keep your blades up! Keeping fighting!” Another attacking soldier fell to the edge of his axe.

“Aye, sir!” Alluvius screamed, limping back on a bleeding leg. Kelin stood with their shoulders together to give him extra balance. Both their blades clashed in unison against their attackers.

The attacking ship’s captain hung to the back of his ever dwindling crew. The combat, especially here, on the sandy, uneven sea floor, had been as if the numbers were reversed. It shouldn’t have happened like this! These fighters were at the bottom of the ocean, and they fought like they’d done this before. He and his men were supposed to subdue and recruit all capable fighters, but even outnumbering them over five-to-one, they would not be subdued. Who were these warriors?

Who were these warriors? Der inched forward. Jakkobb’s armor bumped into the back of her head. Following his command wasn’t her problem; it was the remaining fighters in her way. If she disengaged her sword, then that gave her enemy a wide kill shot. If she didn’t disengage, they continued to block the path to ship. The only choice was to kill them.

Many had fallen to the group’s blades. The survivors’ gazes strayed more than once to the ever shifting cliffs of water. More water was dropping in large handfuls.

More attackers went down, and the party inched their way toward the ship.

“Move!” Jakkobb shouted again. Alluvius nodded to Kelin, who jumped on the single rope and started to climb.

Only four attackers assailed the party now, but now they carried the desperation of all thirty men. Alluvius followed, and Thistle climbed up after him. One down.

“Der, get over here!” the knight-captain ordered. He took hold of one rope and took another slash at one of the soldiers with his axe. The man hopped back out of reach, but jumped too far back, and tripped over a crevice. He couldn’t get back up in time. Two left now.

Tom’s boots softly kissed the deck without a sound as he landed. Beneath him, the wood suddenly shuddered. “Where’s Chloe?”

“Here I am!” She waved from Spike’s saddle.

On the sea floor, Der quickly sheathed her sword and jumped on the rope. The final two attackers jumped forward, stabbing at her feet.

At the last second, Der let go of the rope. She kicked the nearest attacker in the head and drove her sword through the skull of the other.

The last fighter stumbled back from her kick. Der landed in a fighting crouch. He charged back in, raising his weapon for one final overhead blow.

She brought her sword up to his neck. It was a faster move. She stopped her blade just as her sword pricked a line of blood. The soldier still held his weapon over his head, frozen in the motion. The ball of his throat wavered as much as the water towering behind them.

Tom shouted from the ship, “Der, kill him and come on!” He looked up to the walls of water, bending over the ship far above their heads. It wasn’t going to go back upright this time. It was too far.

Her eyes never left her opponent’s gaze. “Who are you?”

He grinned, despite the color running off his face like sweat. "Soldier of Pallens, me. Who are you?"

It was her turn to gulp and freeze.

Thalon tugged on Spike's mane. He raised his hand to point. He opened his mouth and tried to shout. He managed, "Uhhhh. Ummm."

"Get inside! Get inside!" Edillon pushed one of his knights toward the stairs and pointed at the captain's quarters.

Everyone stared. From out of the walls of water emerged the form of oak branches, blue and entirely shaped of water. White, watery leaves opened like flowers along the beached hull of the *Maelstrom Fury*.

"I never..." Alluvius breathed.

On either side of them, the branches of water spread and cradled the distressed ship.

Up on the towers of Long Range Palace, the wind shook the most ancient of oaks. The sigils on the seal glowed with sunlight and spun faster and faster. Suddenly, a tear cracked open. The light winked out. The sigils melted, staining the bark black. Salt water began to ooze from the newly formed rip.

The king's face suddenly paled and he grabbed his chest. The watery branches continued to surround the ship. Even so, cracks were appearing in the limbs.

With the roar of a hurricane, the ocean walls started to collapse.

"Derora Saxen, get up here *yesterday!*" Jakkobb roared from the ship's stern.

She didn't hear him. The thunder of the collapsing ocean only grazed her attention. She didn't even see the watery boughs raising the *Fury*.

The so-called soldier of the Empire was staring at the light bouncing off her blade. Gold and blue sheen, from any light.

She pulled back the weapon and held up the hilt in full view. The Empire's elusive artwork of melted gems was unmistakable. "Funny that, because I'm a soldier of Pallens too."

His sword slipped free from his fingers. He stared. He swallowed. "You, you thief. No, you *traitor!*"

Then, the ocean claimed back its territory.

She turned her back on him. It was a chance, she knew, but it was either die by a sword in the back or perish by sea. The moment she looked away, he was gone from her mind.

She sprinted toward the boat and the rope dangling over the aftcastle as the water surged to reclaim its territory. She held her breath, but spent a precious second to sheath the Pallens sword. Despite all the water around her, her mouth dried as she saw the oak limbs. The water rippled throughout them, and one of them cracked and twisted itself right off. The withered bough disintegrated into rain in the air.

The wood of the ship groaned as it left the seabed.

She didn't even waste her breath shouting. Her legs burned as she pushed them as fast as she could. She jumped, sailing through the air over rushing in water. Her arm stretched out for the rope, flying off the stern.

And she missed. The soul of the ancient oak had lifted the boat and the rope too high. Her hand smacked against the curve of the hull before she started to fall back into the ocean.

The boat rocketed skyward in the tree's grasp.

Der felt herself falling in slow motion. The collapsing water peacefully swallowed her view of the sky. Beneath her, she heard the tides rising from the ground too. She felt one foot sink below the surging waters.

A flash of black and silver appeared in her vision. She couldn't make it out amid the salt water crashing against her eyes and mouth. Funny, no one had ever told her that the ocean tasted like salt.

She reached up toward the object and caught a massive ankle over an electrically glowing, silver hoof.

Spike. She blinked against the burning salt in her eyes. Spike!

She thrust up her other hand, snatching the unicorn's leg. The steed climbed higher into the sky, away from the water. She looked up, but his saddle was empty. The last time she'd seen him, the children had been in his care. She looked down, and saw the last bit of sea floor consumed by the hungry ocean.

The *Maelstrom Fury* landed on the ocean surface like a wounded whale. The branches had vanished. The wild waters shoved it sideways, and like a single person in a raving mob, the ship had no power to fight the push.

Alluvius held his stomach. "Ugh. Seasickness and vertigo in one." He staggered for the railing.

Jakkobb gulped at the white, furious ocean. But the waves weren't as huge, and they seemed to be leveling out.

Spike dropped his passenger onto the deck. She didn't waste time panting and glared hotly at Tom. He crossed his arms. "What?"

She marched over. "Why didn't you fly?"

A cold chuckle echoed in his throat. "Spike was here. And I'm not a hero, idiot." He grinned. "Understand that I'm only here for Chloe's sake. Only."

"Not even me?"

His face was as cold as winter. "No. Because I hate you. I've always hated you! You were the only... Look, you're not even worth the breath that I have to inhale just to make my damn vocal cords work." He spun around, turning his back completely to her.

Behind him, Der heard that little wind associated with a smirk. She passed her glare over to Thistle.

"Hey, wait," Kelin called over. "Chloe's there, but where's Thalon?"

The chemman straightened.

Der frowned. "He didn't fall. Not that I saw anyway." She cupped her hand. "Thalon!"

No reply.

Thistle nodded to the captain's quarters. He pointed at Kelin. "Check he's not somewhere under the canvas. Der, check below."

She frowned. "But— Alright, alright, I'll go."

“Thalon!” Der splashed through one of the hatches leading to another below deck room. This side of the hatch was flooding far faster. The water was only at her shins, but she felt its icy prickle crawl all the way up to her thighs, numbing her legs and slowing her movements. Down here, the water wasn’t a pretty blue anymore. It was totally black, eating up all the light and warmth.

“It’s leaking!” the boy squeaked somewhere further ahead. “It’s really leaking!”

“I think it’s called flooding at this point.” Her legs felt twice as heavy as usual. Something crunched beneath her foot, and she felt her heel break through the smashed wood below. “Come on, Thalon. We’ll find out if these damn water-seals are worth anything!”

“Coming!” He trudged toward her; the water was already up to his waist and violently frothing higher. It had already created a waterfall through the hatch behind them.

She knew they were somewhere in the forward section of the boat, but had no idea what it was called. Was it the bilges? Or were those somewhere else down here? Did every ship even have bilges?

He turned. “Is it gonna sink?”

She grabbed his arm and yanked him closer. He floated along in the water. “I don’t know. But we’ll have more time if we get that hatch closed!”

Thalon rode the waterfall through the hatch. Der turned to follow him when her foot surprisingly didn’t turn with her. The icy, numbing water had already climbed to her thighs. She jerked. Her heel remained trapped.

“Come on!” Thalon motioned from the hatch.

Der swallowed and inhaled. She wrenched her foot again, straight up. The pressure was on her heel, she could feel, where it stubbornly would not move. The laces of her boot tightened in protest.

Outside, where she couldn’t see, Thistle stormed down the stairs into the hold. He clapped his hands once while he splashed through the water, still rising like the tide. “You’re nothing but trouble!”

Thalon shook his head wildly. “I’m sorry, Dad, but it’s leaking and Der—”

“No time!” Thistle roared. He shoved his shoulder against the hatch and heaved.

“No, Dad!” Thalon splashed forward.

The roar of water instantly quieted. Thistle bolted the watertight hatch.

Thalon jumped at the door, fingers clawing for the latch. “No, Dad! Der is still in there!”

“Oh, godsdamnit,” Thistle cursed.

“What’s going on?” Jakkobb called from the stairs.

Thalon pointed repeatedly at the hatch. “Der’s trapped in there, and it’s leaking really bad!”

Alluvius, Edillon and Kelin appeared behind the knight. “What?” they gasped in unison. The young king quietly picked his way down the stairs behind them.

Thalon wailed and grabbed at the hatch’s bolt. “Der! We’re coming!”

Thistle snatched his son’s water-wrinkled hands. He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“But she’s alive in there!”

Kelin’s face had paled. “What do we do? What do we do?”

Edillon paced in the much slower rising water. “I don’t know!”

“We have to do something!” Chloe leaped off the stairs into the water and splashed over to Thalon’s side.

At the top of the narrow stairs, Tom hadn't even blinked. His emerald gaze bore into the closed hatch.

Thalon wrenched against his father's grasp. "It was leaking really badly! *Der!*"

Edillon shook his head. His own voice sounded numb and saturated with doubt, even to him. The king whirled on Jakkobb. "What do we do?"

Thistle shook his head. "Nothing. We open that, this whole damn boat will flood."

"But it's already flooding!" Kelin protested, pointing to the hull. "We can take on a little more. We only need a few minutes to crash into the coast!"

"It won't be a little," the chemman replied stoically. "And then, we won't be able to close it."

Kelin, shaking his head, backed away from the hatch. "But, but, my best friend, before we could even talk." He spun and leveled a finger at the vampire. "You! You can use the heart!"

Tom finally stirred. "No, I can't," he replied in a low, dead voice.

"*Why not?*"

"There's no magic. The heart can't create it from nothing. Just cancel or manipulate it." He shrugged.

"But who's going to save *Der*?" Chloe wailed.

"I'm sorry," Thistle replied impassively.

Alluvius pressed his ear against the door. "I can't— I can't hear it rushing in anymore." He gulped.

Suddenly, Tom's head jerked up. Instantly, he was in front of the door. Water moved with geologic slowness to close over the wake he left. "Chloe! Get upstairs now!"

"But, Uncle!"

"Right now, Chloe!"

She hiked up her skirt and started toward the stairs.

Thistle moved between him and the hatch. "Not even you're strong enough to close that door, let alone do it twice."

"*Out of my way!*" Tom dug his fingernails, as tough as claws, into the chemman's shoulder and threw the warrior aside. He lunged for the door bolt, pale hands outstretched.

All sound died, and Thistle's black sword appeared between Tom's pale hand and the door's bolt. The vampire batted it away and curled his fingers around the latch.

He hissed as the sword stuck a rib, but it felt as only a bee sting to him. Thistle withdrew immediately. Sound slammed back into the world as the weapon stopped moving.

Tom lifted the bolt, preparing to yank open the hatch. "*Der!*"

"What?"

She stood at the top of the stairs, wringing out a corner of her shirt. The water bounced off the step and onto one boot and one bare foot. She coughed and wrung out the other side of her shirt.

Chloe peeked out from behind *Der*.

"Oh, thank the gods," Alluvius breathed. Everyone collectively exhaled.

"How did you manage it?" Edillon asked.

She flashed a grin. "I untied my stuck boot. Then I tried to fit through the hole in the front of the boat, but the water rushing in was just too fast. So I waited until it filled up, and then I was able to squeeze through the crack, swim to the surface and climb back on board. Easy."

“...Easy,” Jakkobb repeated.

“Yeah, ‘cause there are enough boards just sticking out of the hull for handholds at the moment, although that’s probably not a good thing.” She patted her chest as she coughed. “The ocean is very, very salty. What?” She stared at the continuously astonished expressions. “This is my first time to the sea!”

Thalon clapped his hands. “Yeah! I knew she’d be alright!”

Her mouth screwed down into a frown. “Were you all just going to stare uselessly at the door?”

Thistle withdrew his sword from the vampire’s chest and rolled his eyes over to Tom. “No, we were all just about to die trying to prove that you’re not worth the breath it takes our vocal cords to function.”

Tom, apparently deaf in one ear, stared straight ahead at Der. “You idiot! Why’d you even go in there in the first place?!” Suddenly, he standing nearly nose to nose with her, lips curled back in a fanged snarl. “Of all the stubborn, stupid, *incredibly* stupid—”

Spike thrust his head into the portal at the top of the stairs. *Another ship, closing fast!*

Chapter Twenty Two

The Coming War

Der watched the approaching vessel making its way into the light easterly wind. It was blowing no more than a breeze, but their ship was still at its mercy. The other ship apparently defied the wind, although it was avoiding a direct headwind by somehow zigzagging toward them.

That ship's hull was more round and wider at the base, and unlike theirs, it was intact. She stared at the triangular tacking sail as it shifted. It still didn't make sense to her, but it certainly looked neat and impressive.

"That's a Blue Farers' flag!" Alluvius barked. He pointed to the rising blue dragoon banner.

"We need our own flag!" Jakkobb's eyes fell down to the stricken and still dripping canvas across the deck.

"Why?" Thalon gazed up at the red knight. "They're dragoons."

"And we're in an enemy ship."

Kelin snapped his fingers. "The Saxen crest. It's nobility."

Der shook her head. "I don't even recognize it. How about the Dawn Sword? Easy enough to make if we can find the right colors."

Tom waved a finger under her nose and glared. "I am not sailing underneath that."

"Fine. Then get off my ship."

"I don't see why we have to use your holy— What! Your ship?"

She ran her fingers over the stern's polished railing. "Nobody else claimed it."

Jakkobb's gauntlet crashed into his armored forehead. "Der, this ain't exactly spoils of war." He looked up into her pained expression. "Alright, alright, what the hell are you going to do with a sinking ship?"

Thistle quietly stuck his boot in between Der and the knight. "And more pressingly, what flag do you intend to raise?"

Spike snickered and shook his mane. *Jakkobb's. Obviously. He's a dragoon too.*

"Oh yeah," Alluvius chuckled.

Der rubbed her chin. "Axes and leaves over Silver Dawn's symbol, if I remember, but where are we going to get red paint?"

Beside her, Tom opened up his mouth to a large grin.

Der rolled her eyes. "I'm never going to ask a vampire that again."

"There was a red bed sheet in the captain's quarters," Kelin volunteered.

Jakkobb clapped his hands. "Then get to it. I'll start cutting shapes out of the sails."

As people started to hustle away from the stern, Tom's gloved hand landed on Der's shoulder. She raised her eyebrows. "Yes?"

He tugged his hood farther over his pale face. "If any of those sailors ask, I have a skin condition. And you're going to have to tell them because I'm not saying a damn word."

"Fine, fine."

"Just wave your Pallens sword around, that should distract their attention enough."

Der's fingers wrapped around the hilt. She shifted her feet and dropped her eyes. "I'm not so sure that's wise. That sailor down there said he was a soldier of Pallens."

"So?" Tom rolled her eyes. "Any idiot can tell a lie. It's just that most of us don't tell insane ones."

Der shook her head. "No. He meant it."

Sharp whistles echoed across the water from the Blue Farers' vessel. On the *Fury*, Kelin and Alluvius draped the homemade banner over the railing. Alluvius waved in an attempt to be cheerful.

King Edillon emerged from the hull and took the steps up to the aftcastle. "The seals around the hatches are holding," he said, eyeing the approaching warship, "At least until we get more holes poked in the hull."

The dragoon ship sailed closer. All along the broad side, the sailors raised their swords. They were ready, and they must've seen how close they could get before actually steeling for battle. Of course, the dragoon sailors probably could've just waited for the *Fury* to fail on its own.

"Hail!" a thundering female voice sang across the sea. "What dragoon knight sails under that flag?"

Jakkobb cupped his hands. "Sir Jakkobb, Captain of Silver Dawn. With whom am I speaking?"

Der leaned over the edge of the ship and squinted. "That's their commander!"

"Nicisea Armistad?" Alluvius yelped.

"You know her?" Thistle raised his eyebrows at Der.

The young woman shrugged. "She was there when I got booted out."

"May we come aboard?" the commander called.

"Aye, if you don't mind sinking!" Jakkobb shouted back. "With all haste, sir!"

Grapples appeared in the hands of the sailors. The metal claws sank their teeth into the wood of the *Fury*.

"Hey!" Der yelled. "Don't scratch my boat!" She looked at the half of the mast, the downed canvas, and tried not to think about the inundated hull. "...Any more than it already is."

Even more grapples dug into the *Maelstrom Fury*. Wood groaned and the ropes and sailors and their interesting pulley system tugged the entire ship astride theirs. The hulls bumped and ground together.

"Glad you survived!" Nicisea called. "It looks like that was a closer run than you would've imagined."

"You honestly have no idea, sir," Jakkobb replied.

The lithe commander put one hand on the railing of her ship and jumped, swinging both feet over the railings of both ships and the thin line of ocean in between with as much thought as one usually puts into walking.

She waved her hand toward her crew. "We were just coming down to investigate a small tsunami."

Jakkobb removed his helmet and tucked it under one arm. "We just escaped from Alscane; making our way to Galaka."

"No port left there anymore." Nicisea shook her head. "Sabotage, mostly. And not the worst of it from what I've been hearing." She looked the knight up and down. "So you were in the fire, what did you learn of the enemy?"

The captain shook his head. "Nothing useful, sir. He knows what he's doing."

“Ah.” She paused. “Because we heard it was the Empire.”

“It’s not Pallens.” The acid in Der’s mouth burned the ears of everyone listening.

Nicisea nodded at Der. “We know.” Her eyes fell to the younger woman’s weapon, before she smiled at Jakkobb again. “Who is your crew?”

The captain glanced around his own party, and for the first time unease flittered across his usually stern features. “We’re not a crew, sir. That would imply that we have some idea of what we’re doing.”

Nicisea chuckled. She nodded to Der. “You, I know.”

Derora clicked her heels together. “Yes, sir. This is Alluvius, who you met at Horizon. And my best friend, Kelin.” Kelin bowed. Der pointed at Tom. “And him.” She raised her voice, “Avoid him because he’s got some weird skin infection.”

Nicisea lifted her eyebrows. Her nearby crew all stared quietly at Tom, or at least at his hood that completely obscured his face.

Der didn’t even blink, or at least not until her gaze moved on to Thistle. “Um.” She looked at Chloe next. “No...” She couldn’t introduce the girl, not when she was the most wanted person on the coast. And not King Edillon either, not when he wasn’t supposed to be outside Arborn. How about Spike? Did Nicisea know about him? And what about the dragon?

She had frozen, arm halfway in the air, staring at nothing as her thoughts ran circles around her mind.

Jakkobb stepped between the commander and Thistle. “Sir, may I ask where you’re going? It seems we may have to beg you for passage.”

Nicisea’s gray eyes lingered on Edillon for a moment. “Of course. We are planning to attend this summit that all the lords and ladies have gotten invitations to.” A grin lit up her face. “Of course, someone neglected our invitation, so we may have to force our way through the doors.”

“Summit?” Alluvius echoed. “We had an invitation.”

“Yeah, before we threw it away.” Der glared at Tom.

Nicisea frowned. “Then did you read the bottom phrase about how if the nobility and royalty don’t attend that they will be shown no mercy? After all the flowery language of peace?”

As one, the group mutely shook their heads.

“Chaos is spreading fast, my friends. I fear that the attacks on Galaka and Alscane are only the prelude.” The clouds overhead darkened her face. “I believe we can save your ship, but only if you promise to let me use it for this war. We had to scuttle many of our own ships in harbor so they couldn’t be used against us.”

Jakkobb jerked his thumb at Der. “She claimed it, apparently.”

Der nodded dumbly.

Nicisea smiled. “Thank you, Derora. I will have a contract and a legal deed drafted for claim of enemy military property during war.” She spun around to face her crew and whistled. “Alright, boys, get out the tow cables and save the ship!”

The *Maelstrom Fury* listed along in the wake of Nicisea’s boat, the *Aerendgast*, or messenger spirit, as the name meant. They both drifted toward the infinitely distant horizon. Derora smiled and leaned back into the wind. For just that instant, sailing didn’t seem innately evil.

Both ships sailed north. Der had stared as the *Aerendgast* had sailed out, turned around, attached lines and caught the wind.

Her feet vibrated beneath her, pulsing from the hammering below and whatever strange pump device the sailor dragoons had brought over.

She backed right into a Blue Farer dragoon. "Hey now!" he barked.

Der whirled. "Oh sorry!"

He'd dropped an oiled leather bag onto his foot and his eyes widened in surprise. Then he grinned. The motion caused a scar across his cheek to curve up like a laugh line. "Sorry. Didn't see you either." He stuck out his hand. "Name's Edwin."

Der gripped his wrist. "Uh, sorry still."

He rolled the bag onto his toes and kicked it back up to his hand. Next, he dove his fingers into the satchel and starting spreading powder over the soaked deck of the vessel. Der tilted her head and watched as the grains of powder swelled and the water just vanished.

"We don't usually do this on deck because it's not a problem, unless you've got everyone running around in a rush. Then, somebody'll break a leg." He shrugged.

She pointed. "What are these?"

"Oh, this?" He waved the bag. "Here." He dug out some more powder and held out his hand for her. She picked up a pinch and sifted it through her fingers.

"Dry-sickle grains. I'm sure you can guess what it does." He grinned again. "Dry-sickle stalks are getting pretty rare, but we Farers always know where to grow them."

She smiled. "Never heard of them, actually."

He laughed. "Not surprised. Don't want word getting out or there would be no stalks left." He took another step and sprinkled more grains across the deck. They expanded as they drank the water, then shriveled and dried. Those dry grains sprang up in the next breeze and out to the ocean.

Edwin followed her gaze. "That's how the seeds spread. They get carried by the currents."

"Oh."

"Lucky for you, you met us. I ain't never seen rigging torn up like that." He nodded overhead to the splintered mast.

Der shrugged. "Uh, yeah. Teenage dragon."

Edwin opened his mouth, but then snapped it closed. He sprinkled some more powder. "That's probably the strangest thing I'll hear today." He laughed. "Ah, Silver Dawn. You know, we may not have the high and mighty prestige like you, but we work with dragons too." He winked at her.

"I'm not a dragoon."

"Oh. You looked like you might be."

Der found herself fighting a smile.

He proffered the bag. "You want to try? I can help."

"Um. Sure." Movement in the shadows seized her attention and her entire body stiffened.

She exhaled. It was just Tom, lounging with his arms folded and glaring. She followed his emerald gaze. Funny that, he seemed to be glaring at Edwin and not her. Odd, she thought.

She pulled her hair behind her ears, where the wind immediately set it fluttering again. "Edwin, right? My name's Derora Saxen."

“Kreighton’s trident!” He dropped the bag again. “You’re her? The only person to ever have conquered Horizon!”

She winced, but he didn’t notice. He grabbed her wrist in the warrior’s handshake and pumped her arm. “I can’t believe it’s you!” He laughed again. “Tell me what chemmen are really like! I heard you actually knew one, like!”

“Um.” She checked over her shoulder again. Neither Thistle nor Thalon were in sight. Tom continued to glare.

Edwin carried on regardless. “What are you going to do now that you’re no longer bound by the dragoons?”

Der dropped her gaze to the deck and shrugged. “Um, I don’t know. Survive for now, it seems. Especially if we’re fighting the chemmen again, or a new Blackhound.”

Edwin’s smile paled. The color on his face dimmed. “New what?”

Der froze. “Oh. Um...”

“Derora,” Tom drawled from behind her shoulder abruptly. He slipped his fingers around her arm and slid between her and Edwin. “Please don’t frighten the good sailors with just a rumor from panicked townsfolk.” He leaned closer to her ear and whispered, but loudly enough. “You know how much they rely on their good luck bracelets and such.”

The ‘b’ of the “but” was well on its way out between her teeth when Der met his diamond edged glare.

Tom flashed a tight toothless smile to Edwin, followed by a thunderous glower at Der. Edwin tripped over his own boot in his rush to step away from Tom.

The vampire tugged at Der’s arm. “You were supposed to say that I have a skin condition. You said infection.”

“Well, they’re avoiding you!”

“Like I have the plague!”

She pretended to gasp. “You mean you don’t? You have something far worse, and you could give it to them.”

“Yes,” he grumbled. “I’ll give them you.” He pulled his face back further into his hood and jabbed a finger toward one of his fangs. “Do you want them to catch what I have?”

She cocked her head and guessed, “A taste in clothing that’s a few centuries past?”

He stared at her with a total poker face. “Honestly, Der? Why are you always so belligerent?” He dug his fingernails into her forearm and pulled.

“You’re only saying that because you don’t have a comeback.”

He pinched his fingernails tighter and dragged her to the captain’s quarters. Outside, they passed Spike, who stuck his head in the door after them. His shoulders didn’t quite fit.

Inside, Edillon had taken the chair in front of the desk. Thalon had curled up on the dog’s bed, while his father stood erect with his back to a corner.

Kelin pointed at Alscane on the meticulous map. “They didn’t know she was with us, or these so-called Pallens soldiers wouldn’t have tried to sink the ship.”

Chloe cuddled the dragon like a puppy. “It’s not my fault!”

"We know." Tom sat down crossed-legged beside her. "And we're going to keep them away from you."

"We should inform Commander Armistad," Jakkobb said.

Edillon shook his head. "Yes, but at this time, trust may not be such a valuable currency." He shivered. "You remember Sir Amthros, do you not? Traitors are found amongst the most trusted."

"Yes, but she is a dragoon commander."

"The flag," the young king leaned forward in the chair. "Show her the flag, but we cannot mention dear Chloe."

Jakkobb saluted stiffly. "I don't agree with it, sir, but I won't lie to you. I will not tell her of Chloe."

Der hovered over the maps on the desk. "How stupid is he? The invader. Sure, he got Alscane and Galaka by surprise, but now all the kingdoms of this continent are going to unite against him, including the dragoon orders."

"And?" Alluvius prompted. "You don't think they have plans for that? They have a dragon! What if it is the Blackhound? It's his flag that no one knows about!"

"What if it's not?" Thistle queried from behind the part human. "The chemmen knew it too. It's likely someone is just trading on his name? Does that change your opinion?"

"And what if it is?" Alluvius fired back. "What's the point, if no one knows the flag?"

"Could the chemmen have adapted so much?" Edillon mused. "They did favor elaborate plots laced with misdirection."

Or something darker. Spike pawed the floor. *Rowan was also human for a very long time.*

Der looked up. "Your old friend, right, Jakkobb? Lady Evelyn's husband. I didn't think he was human."

The knight shrugged. "It was a rough description."

"Are you alright?" Chloe asked, gazing up at Tom. "You've gone all tense."

He offered a tight lip smile. "I'm fine, child. I just got a cold shock, that's all."

"It is kinda cold in here."

Kelin frowned, and then shrugged. "So, your friend found a way to be immortal – well, at least to stop aging. And I'm going to assume he didn't massacre people like the chemmen."

"Yeah, but don't ask me how," Jakkobb replied. "He never said, and then he was lost in the fall of the Empire."

"He was killed by the Blackhound? The actual one?" Der burst, scattering several maps off the desk.

Jakkobb shook his head. "No. Well, most likely not. All we know is that he died. We don't know how or when. If he was still out there, he would have found his way home centuries ago."

Silence sailed into the room, broken only by the sounds of pumping and the ocean nudging the ship along.

Alluvius tried to look at Chloe, but instead glanced out the window. "But what do they want with the girl?"

Thistle sighed. "Apparently, they've been after her, you, Chloe, since the day you were born."

Kelin tapped his forehead. "The dwarves said something about this. I think."

"But what would they want with Chloe?" Alluvius asked.

“Who wouldn’t want someone who can cancel or alter magic at will?” Edillon postulated.

“Well, they can have it!” Chloe shouted, startling the sleeping dragon. “I don’t want it!”

Goldie bobbed his head up and looked around. “What?”

They ignored him. Kelin sighed. “And the way those wizards were after her.”

Edillon raised his hand. “Calm, please. I can offer her passage into Arborn. Our borders are hidden, as you know.”

“But they’re not impenetrable!” the vampire snapped.

“And how would you know that, pray tell?” the king inquired softly.

Tom shook his head and leveled a finger at Der. “She told me all about your little chemmen war. Obviously, they aren’t impenetrable if the chemmen got inside.” He brushed off his shirt.

“Arborn has no army,” Thistle stated. “A few guards and knights, spread around the kingdom, cannot win against this invader. Just in case they do find their way through the forest mazes.”

“I think I agree,” Jakkobb grumbled. “Arborn should not get involved, and I thought you were just here to determine the cause of the earth events.”

“Yes, I am,” Edillon agreed. “And I believe this matter is urgent, and possibly connected.”

The unicorn’s eyes suddenly rolled back toward his hindquarters. *Visitor. Ouch, mind the tail!*

Nicisea looked up at the massive black warhorse. “What is a unicorn doing here? Besides being a doorstep?”

Spike whuffed and stepped back to let her pass. The commander planted her hands on her hips. “What? A clandestine meeting and I don’t get invited? Tsk, tsk.”

“Just planning our options, sir,” Jakkobb said evenly.

“Aren’t we all?” she replied dryly. “We can’t take back Alscane without risking the rest of the coast.”

Thistle pulled his hood lower over his orange eyes. “They’re going inland anyway.”

“They’re going to this summit.” She thrust a small knife, which appeared in her hand from nowhere, down into a map. “I’m told along with most royalty and nobility from the coastal kingdoms.”

Jakkobb mused, “Obviously, he’s trying to cow them into some peace accord.”

“I’d want to make peace if I’d just invaded.” Edillon tapped his chin thoughtfully. “While everyone’s still panicking.”

“Yes,” Nicisea said, “But this is just a guess, no matter how likely.”

Kelin shook his head. “No one can stand against all the armies on Solquin, unless they have a citadel like Horizon. He needs to make peace fast.”

“And the local nobles are hungry for it,” the commander added. “They don’t want what happened to Alscane to happen to them. They’ll go.” She scowled.

Der frowned. “Then why would the coastal kingdoms even go to this summit at all? If he’s going to lose the war.”

“Because the coastal kingdoms have already lost, and they know it. It’s the inner kingdoms like Urael and Tenmar who will be victorious; they have the time to summon their strength.”

Tom covered his mouth with a hand and his face remained cloaked by his hood. “They have another plan. This is deeper than politics. Why would they be hunting that girl?”

Nicisea’s eyes passed right by Chloe. “There were wanted posters all over Galaka. And people are panicking, so they’re probably turning over every girl that resembles that picture.” She straightened

her shoulders. "And I intend to find out why at this summit." The commander offered a small smile. "Fortunately for you, you have no one who could possibly pass for such a girl."

Edillon bowed his head. "Thank you."

Nicisea nodded in return. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a war to attend." She started to turn when she paused to look at Jakkobb. Even in the sun's fading light, his armor reflected with enough intensity to sting her eyes.

She coughed into her hand. "Good gods, man, you're on a ship! You can take that off! Hell, you might not sink as quickly."

The knight stood at attention and saluted. "Yes, sir."

Spike snorted behind the commander. *I'm not sure if the gods could remove it, commander.*

She rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of a chuckle in the air. Spike stood back to let the Blue Farer pass. The unicorn eclipsed the doorway again. *So?*

"So," Alluvius swallowed, "We're going to war. And it's winter. It's the worst time for war."

"Fits snugly with the new year on the Pallens calendar." Edillon shrugged.

Der snapped her fingers. "Oh! I know this one! They celebrated the new year a few days after the winter solstice instead of right on the summer solstice."

"Yes, you are correct," Jakkobb said.

"Why?" Kelin asked. "And why not just on the solstice? Obviously."

"Because the days were starting to get longer," the knight replied. "New start, see?"

Kelin shook his head.

Jakkobb pinched the bridge of his nose through the open visor. "You kids don't really understand what was lost, do you?"

"Because they never knew it," Thistle said softly.

Der felt the cold metal of her sword's pommel. "But I have their weapon! It may be the last Pallens weapon to exist!"

Spike bobbed his head. *And we all know the story. The Blackhound ordered all Pallens weapons destroyed, and he himself threw the sword of King Midan to the underworld.*

"Er, what?" Der blinked. "I didn't know that last part."

"Surely you do," Alluvius protested.

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"Why not? I thought everyone knew that one."

"I know it." Kelin held up his hand.

She clenched the sword's pommel in her grip. "I have the last weapon of Pallens and *nobody* told me this before?"

Tom chuckled behind his hood. There was general shrugging amongst everyone else. Alluvius tried to smile. "We thought you knew. You know, the Blackhound threw the sword to the underworld to be guarded by the ghosts of the dark realm. It's all part of the story about the weapons being destroyed."

She snorted. "That one sounds made up too! Like the whole Princess Carme-Blackhound story!" She stroked her sword, like petting a dog. "And you know, how could he destroy all Pallens weapons? Couldn't more have been hidden or missed?"

“Some magician, I don’t know,” Kelin offered lamely.

“And why? They’re just swords and spears and such. They’re no good if nobody’s left to use them!” Jakkobb raised a finger. “Swords, like yours, that can apparently absorb lightning spells.”

“Oh yeah.” She deflated a little bit at the memory of her duel with Alcomm. She breathed in deeply and stood back up. “But then why not just use them for his own army? They are superior, even two thousand years later!”

“We don’t know, Der,” Jakkobb intoned. “However, there are no more Pallens weapons, save yours. That part of the legend is real.”

Der huffed and whirled around to face Spike. “Please move.”

The unicorn stepped back and Der slid around the massive black beast. She marched across the deck and felt the breeze stinging her face. However, she was still too angry to worry about the winter wind.

She sat down on one of the steps leading up to the aftcastle and glared at the shore. The sun was just starting to hide behind the distant trees. The shadows extended their reach across the ship, minute by minute. The *Aerendgast* and the *Maelstrom Fury* sailed into the cold, into the oncoming solstice.

She dropped her head into her fingers. Is that what the earth is trying to warn us about with all those earth events?

The others eventually strolled out of the captain’s quarters, and she didn’t even notice. She didn’t overhear Thistle. “Come on kids, you need sponge baths before you pick out a hammock.”

“I’ll find Chloe a curtain,” Kelin said. “Maybe a bed sheet or something.” They floated away from the stairs.

Der’s eyes idly drifted over toward the blue water. It was dark, navy blue and looked absolutely freezing. And below the surface, large, unmoving sharp rocks waited like giant tombstones.

Rocks!

The word caught in her throat. On the second try, she managed, “Rocks! Rocks!” She happily admitted that she didn’t know a damn thing about sailing, but it didn’t take a sailor to know that the rocks would win.

The Blue Farer above her, at the wheel, chuckled and ignored her. The other naval dragoons glanced up and then went back to washing the deck.

Edwin, chuckling, waved at her. He cupped his hands. “Just an optical illusion to keep other ships from finding this port! Not even magical!”

“What?” she called back.

“It’s paint, Derora! On a thin layer of cement!”

“Oh...” She sat back down, still feeling her heart pulsing in her ears.

“May I have a word?” Tom suddenly appeared in front of her. He nodded his head toward the captain’s quarters. “Because we failed to have one earlier.” His words were crisp and acidic.

“Again? Alright, speak.”

He yanked her upright by her shoulder. “In private, stupid.”

“Oh.” She followed him inside to the captain’s quarters and he leaned against the closed door. She sucked her tongue. “So what—”

His hand shot up. "I'm listening!"

"Listening for what?"

"Not you!" He paused for another moment at the door, and then walked into the room. "Making certain that no one else is listening."

"Oh."

He glared at her in the ensuing silence. Finally, he folded his arms and sent his glare out the window. "You have to protect Chloe."

"But Thistle and Kelin already have been, and she knows them far better than me."

"Yes, but I don't trust them."

"She does."

"Fine!" He threw up a hand. "Use them too, I don't care!"

"I don't use people," she returned softly.

"Whatever! Have them *help* you then, but you have to promise to protect her."

She tilted her head to the side. "Well, why can't you?" She crossed her arms. "Because you're leaving again. In all of this, when she needs you the most, you're leaving."

He looked directly at her, and her knees shook for a moment under the weight of his emerald gaze. "No, I'm going to cut the head off this snake."

"What? Then I'm going too!"

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

"What part of yes is confusing you?" she asked.

The air hissed between his fangs. "The part where you don't comprehend that no doesn't mean yes. Look, I need to know that she's going to be safe so I can solve this problem. You truly are a very promising swordsman, and she needs that."

"Well, when you put it that way..."

He let a small smile slip past his guard. "Because you're the only one I trust."

She frowned and leaned away from him. "How do I know you're not lying right now?"

"You don't," he replied, suddenly as cold as water saturating the hull.

She sighed. "And also, how do I know this won't be the last time we ever see you? You promised to leave Chloe alone and you've got your ring."

He smirked. "Well, then I guess you don't know that either."

"No, seriously. You could get dead. Deader. Deadeast."

"Slain," he corrected. "You're joking, right? This is me."

"Yeah, and whoever is out there has been two points ahead of us this entire match."

"When did you get wise?" he scoffed. "Der, I am a vampire. We sneak around, and hide in the darkness instead of kicking in the damn door."

She slapped her hand against the maps on the desk. "And what about the heart, Tom? It can do the same thing as Chloe's ability, and her power is why they're chasing her."

"They won't know the heart even exists." He rolled his eyes. "It's me, Der. Alright? They may have been after her for her entire life, but they still don't know about me."

Chapter Twenty Three

The Head of the Snake

Der glanced up over the pages of the diary to see a leather ball in a direct trajectory toward her head. She dropped her neck like a turtle and held the book in front of her face.

The ball passed overhead and spat up dirt when it crashed into the ground. At least they were on ground again.

“Sorry, Der!” Thalon called.

She rolled her eyes but still smiled. The boy jogged past her and retrieved the ball. He whirled around and hurled it to Chloe. The forest around them, probably around Galaka’s borders, had become a city overnight, with thousands more soldiers and refugees arriving every hour.

“Ree!” Goldie waddled hurriedly after the ball, flapping his wings. Laughing, the children started to chase him instead.

Kelin sat down beside Der. “Anything good?” He nudged the diary.

She shrugged. “Not unless you’re interested in prairie botany.”

“Er, what?”

She pointed to the page. Detailed sketches of plants crowded together, followed by cramped descriptions of each grass or flower.

She slammed the book closed in one hand and growled. “I don’t know.”

Kelin looked back at the children. He waved. “Hey! Don’t go far! I mean it, Thalon!”

Meanwhile, camp happened around them. Der and Kelin didn’t have much to do. They didn’t belong to any army, and those armies already had their orders and routines, thank you very much. Commander Nicisea Armistad had disappeared into the gathering dragoons as soon as they’d arrived. Jakkobb had gone with her.

That left Der and the rest of them without much to do.

Kelin tapped her shoulder and pulled himself to his feet. “Got to keep watching out for them.”

“Yeah.” She barely noticed his footsteps as he left. She sighed and opened up the journal again to a random page. *Cave canem*. Her eyes traced the words. Beware of the dog. Apparently, it had been a very common phrase after the death of the Empire.

“Any sense?” A new voice graced the air behind her.

She leaned back and looked straight up into Edillon’s questioning expression. She shook her head. “Well, I’m not quite certain on some of the words. My Palls isn’t the best. Also, I think Tom was right; it may be in code.” She sucked her tongue. “Or, it’s just whatever entered the author’s mind because it makes no sense.”

The king took the spot where Kelin had been sitting moments ago. “I still hope something useful comes from that book.”

“After all the trouble we swallowed to steal it, I’ll make it useful,” she replied darkly.

Edillon chuckled. “Good luck then.” He paused. “I’m going home.”

She turned a page. “First smart idea I’ve heard all week.”

“You, and especially Chloe, are welcome to come as well. I believe she may be safest in Arbourn, despite what the knight-captain may argue.”

“But the earth events are happening there too, right?”

He nodded. “Yes, it seems we cannot wholly escape them.”

She looked up to the few clouds outlining the pale blue sky. “Could whoever is behind this attack be what the earth is warning us about?”

Edillon frowned. “I don’t know, and I wish I did. Could be something worse.”

She tried to hide her sudden gulp. “We may be about to fight the chemmen or someone pretending to be history’s greatest villain, and you think something worse is going on?”

The king smiled sadly and shrugged. “Or not. Perhaps whoever this is has broken the laws of nature somehow, and this is the earth shouting in pain.” He rose. “Perhaps the answer is in that diary. Maybe you can find it.”

She shrugged and ducked her nose back toward the book and continued to furiously read.

“Ree!” The dragon twitched his tail like a cat as he readied to pounce. Alluvius snatched up the beast just as he launched.

Der slowly looked up over the diary. She met the gold dragon almost nose to nose as the part human held him in the air. Thistle, Edillon, the children and Kelin clustered around her and the dragon, like planets around a golden sun. She didn’t know how long she’d locked eyes to those pages.

Alluvius grinned. “Squirmy.” He released the kicking dragon.

“Where’s my uncle?” Chloe demanded. “He should’ve been back by now.”

“Do you even know where he went?” Thistle asked softly.

“Yes, he said he was going to scout the enemy camp. So we’d know.”

Kelin tried not to grimace. “We-ell, he might not even come back. He did promise to stay away.”

The girl shook her head firmly. “He’s coming back. Even I know he lies about that.”

Thalon raised a finger. “Unless he’s really up against the Blackhound.”

She slapped her hands over her ears. “It’s not real, and it’s not funny either!”

“That would be bordering on impossible,” Alluvius added.

Thalon pointed at Der. “And so is Der having a Pallens sword!”

Edillon patted the air down with his hands. “Children, please. Yes, that is a very unusual coincidence.”

“I found this sword in the same room where I first saw his flag.” Der swallowed; her voice sounded far too distant to be coming from her own mouth. “And the chemmen had burned out the eyes on each of the snake heads too.”

Thistle shrugged. “My former people do tend to hate everyone who isn’t them.”

“But, both the chemmen and the Blackhound were enemies of Pallens.”

“Der,” Thistle said, “The storm readers are enemies of everyone.”

She shifted uneasily. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Alscane was like a tidal wave,” Alluvius said, “What if it truly is him? Like that necromancer boy Kelin was talking about found his soul or something? What can we do against that?”

“Wait for it to break, and then kick it back out to sea,” Der replied.

Alluvius paused. Everyone else stared. The part human cleared his throat. “Uh, Der, you’re not very good with metaphor, are you?”

“Well, you didn’t give me much quarter to work with!”

“That was the point! Impossible odds!”

Der gripped her sword. “If the Blackhound was a man, then he died like a man. All men fall to the sword. Even the chemmen, we’ve proven that!”

“The Blackhound?” a wheedling voice pounced from behind them. They turned to see a beanpole of a man with huge brown eyes. He darted forward, like a nervous ferret. “You’ve heard the rumor too?”

“No,” Kelin corrected, “We started the rumor.”

The man, jittering in place, licked his lips. “But you know something, don’t cha now?” His always moving eyes landed on Chloe and froze.

The girl gasped and jerked her hood up.

The man raised his finger. “Hey, that’s—”

“No, it’s not.” Thistle appeared, inches away from the man. His hood had been drawn so low that all the jittery man could see was his mouth. “She’s just a girl who we rescued from idiots who were going to hand her over to those rough looking soldiers who’d been at sea for months. Now, you’re not that kind of idiot, are you?”

The man’s heels dug tracks into the dirt as he backpedaled. He tried to run backward, too afraid to turn his back to Thistle.

He blundered into the nearest knot of soldiers and immediately pointed back at the party. Der exhaled and dropped the diary onto the ground, where it cracked open like an egg. “I got this.” She pushed herself up and walked after the nervy man.

Edillon watched Der for a moment and then looked back to the children. “You are welcome to come with me.”

“Can we stay with Lady Evelyn?” Chloe blurted. Despite himself, the king cracked a smile.

Across the short distance, they heard metal scraping as the group of soldiers with the ferrety man shoved their swords in Derora’s view for her to see and back off. Der’s voice drifted, “Alright, then I will tell *all* of you to shut up.”

Kelin leaned back and stretched just as the cussing exploded.

Thalon grabbed his long knives. “We gotta do something!” he exclaimed just in time to see Der kick the original loudmouth in the shin. His buddies took another look at her, and then at Thistle and also at Edillon’s perennially silent bodyguards.

Still yelling, they helped their friend limp away into the crowds.

Kelin grinned and shook his head. “Yeah, Thalon, let’s just relax to the yelling and swearing. Honestly, after growing up with her, it sounds like music to me now.”

“Why does it sound like music?” Der kicked up dirt as she strolled back.

He looked at her. “It’s the sincerity in your voice that amuses me the most.”

“Captain Jakkobb!”

The red knight turned, and instead of the speaker, the ferrety loudmouth walked directly into his armor. He looked down. "Excuse you."

The man tried to march straight through the massive knight. "Move off!"

"Excuse *me*?" Jakkobb blinked. He glanced up to see Silver Dawn Captain Yurik behind the man. Yurik's face was stuck between yelling and confusion.

"Yeah!" The words bubbled up from the man's mouth. "You heard me, move off!"

"You ran into me."

The man balled up both his fists and waved them at Jakkobb's shoulder height. He looked almost ready to cry. "Get out of my way!"

Jakkobb didn't move. "No, because you ran into me."

"Dragoon or not, I will hurt you!"

The knight shrugged. "Alright. Hit me, I could use a laugh."

"You can't bully me! I'll get you kicked out the dragoons! I know the rules! I'll tell them that you hurt me and that I'm not a fighter!"

The knight leaned forward and the corners of his mouth turned up. "Right, and if I kill you, you won't be able to tattle."

The man froze, shrank, and looked up like a mouse staring a very widely grinning cat. He bolted.

Yurik held up his hands. "They're always tough at first."

Jakkobb pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled. "Tell me he's not going to be fighting on our side."

Yurik grinned. "No way of knowing. 'Tis good to see you again, sir."

"And you too, sir." Jakkobb frowned. "But Strival isn't coming. Doesn't sound like him."

Yurik slapped him on the shoulder. "And why would he need to? He's got the minds of the whole order right here. Not to mention many of his finely trained soldiers."

Jakkobb laughed. "Alright. So we're here, and so are the Blue Farers. What about Steel Eagle?"

"You need to ask?" Yurik nodded behind him. The red knight looked over his shoulder to see a green and a bronze dragon flapping their wings slowly as they started to land. Shouts of confusion and terror rang out from somewhere deep in the camp.

If he hadn't been an elf, Jakkobb might have needed to squint to see the saddles and riders on the dragons. Behind the riders, the dragons carried two giant crates of supplies and weapons each.

Captain Yurik shrugged. "They're only sending two fliers, but a good number of boots on the ground as well."

Goldie popped up onto his hind legs and keened. The green dragon passed over their heads, and its wings beat and threw blasts of air down at the armies below.

"Wow," Chloe breathed.

"Look!" Thalon jumped up and down as he pointed. "They got riders!"

Alluvius shaded his eyes. "You know, that could've been us. Riding dragons..."

Der snatched up the chubby golden dragon. "Hey, have you eaten lately?"

"I'm stuffed!" He pointed with his front claws and tail. "Did you see those dragons?"

"Yeah, and I got an idea!" She sprinted off toward the landing dragons.

She didn't hear Kelin and Edillon shouting after her. She had an idea. The crowding soldiers filled in the space behind her as she chiseled her way through the pack. Banners were going up all around, in some manner to organize the armed chaos.

She recognized the maroon banner of the order of Zine, right beside some lord of Tenmar's. The lord, standing beneath his flag, patted a handkerchief against the sweat on his neck. His guards surrounded him, but many, many more knights and soldiers surrounded them.

Der's eyes passed over to the two dragons and their riders. She slammed into a wall of men that grew thicker the closer to the center of the circle. The soldiers stood there, sighing and staring.

She knew that look; she knew how to daydream too. She dug her elbows in and started to slide between the armored squeeze of bodies. Goldie pinched his talons into her shoulder.

Her elbows, raw with use, flailed against the even tighter press of men. So, she stomped on the back of the unarmored heel of the man directly in front of her. "Pardon *me*."

"Oh, gods damn—" He gagged on his words as he came nose-to-snout with the chubby gold dragon. Goldie flicked out his forked tongue at him.

Der ignored him. She elbowed her path through the circle's inner wall. "Hey! Steel Eagle Dragons, right?"

She saw the knight riding the green dragon, in green armor to match, climb down leather slats running down the girth, just like the ones from her old tree fort back in Riversbridge. She waved at him. Goldie bounced on her opposite shoulder.

He snorted at her through his visor. "Keeping hatchlings is dangerous. Are you so stupid?"

She scowled. "Not most of the time. Hey, quickly, do you have any extra saddles that might fit the biggest dragon you've ever imagined?" She held up Goldie for inspection. He leaned forward toward the green dragon, sniffing and stretching like a puppy with food just out of reach.

The green knight just stared through his helmet. He growled, "Is this a joke?" Behind him, the bronze knight approached.

She shook her head. "No, sir."

The green knight leaned forward; Der didn't lean away. He snorted. "Who are you?"

"Derora Saxen."

Behind him, the bronze knight's laugh echoed inside his own helmet. He removed it to reveal a youthful human face, outlined by curly dark hair. "The same one who saved Arbourn and then got booted from Silver Dawn's Horizon?"

She exhaled. "There's only one of me, and I can't be everywhere."

He laughed again and slapped the green knight on the back. "Well, we are in the presence of a hero."

"Who wants to ride a dragon," the green knight snarled.

"I brought my own." She held Goldie up a little higher.

"Ree," the little dragon chorused.

The green knight narrowed his eyes. "Look, you're no dragoon. You don't get to ask for our equipment. And you're stupid enough to ask to ride a baby!" He spun his back to them and marched back toward the green dragon.

"I'll show you!" Goldie chirped.

“No!” Der caught his wings with her free hand. She whispered, “Save it for the battle.”

The bronze knight grinned lopsidedly and tucked the helmet under his arm. “I’ve heard the stories about a huge gold dragon, but that’s not him, is it? And do you know anything about riding a dragon?”

She shrugged. “I was just going to figure it out as we went along.”

The knight dropped his helmet. “What? In a battle?”

“Incentive to learn quickly, sir.” She nodded earnestly.

He retrieved and dusted off his helmet. “And what were you expecting to do? Swing your sword?”

“Well, no... I guess not. What about arrows?”

“Right, arrows.” His smile faded. “When you’re on a dragon shooting fire at a target half of a mile away? Oh, and who will never take an order from a land dweller, only suggestions.” He fired a quick gaze at the bronze dragon before turning back to Der.

“Um, no?”

“You only had dragoon soldier training, didn’t you?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I know, dragons are for knight training, not soldiers.”

“Aye, and if you would’ve gotten that far, they’d have taught you that you can’t fight when you’re riding. A lance is only a toothpick. We’re there for the aerial view, to command, to see everything. They’re allowing us a view, understand?”

She shook her head.

He continued, “Dragons, even dragoon affiliates, don’t take orders.” He sighed. “Look, sorry. Maybe you can sweet talk Silver Dawn next time, or just use him,” he nodded at Goldie, “To scare the hell out of some saddle maker.”

“But—”

The leather of the green dragon’s harness creaked as the magnificent beast turned its long neck to finally look at Der and Goldie.

Go away, little ones. We must prepare. The words fell like mountains in their heads.

“But—” Der began.

The dragon inhaled. The wind pulled her hair toward its massive nostrils. She could see the fire inside, orange and white smoldering against the dragon’s airways. The heat radiated out in its breath.

Der leaned closer to the nostrils, trying to get a better view of how it worked.

“Derora Saxen!” a voice erupted behind her.

She spun around, putting the dragon’s mouth to her back, but all she could see were soldiers. One of them was waving. She gasped. “Sir Cacilin!” She felt a grin stretch across her face. “You survived Alscane!”

“As did you!”

She shot the dragon one last glance, and then trotted over to the judicar. Goldie scrambled to sit on top of her head. Cacilin looked up at the little dragon and then down at her.

Cacilin started to pull her from the Steel Eagle dragoons and their admirers. “You know,” she started, “I did want to go with you in Alscane, but I had—”

“To see your friends to safety, say nothing more.” He lowered his voice, although he still had to speak loudly enough to overcome the sounds of thousands of people on only a few acres of land. “Especially with the children. You know what I mean.”

"I know, but running away probably isn't a very good introduction to a god. Especially if Alluvius and I want to learn more about your order."

The judicar laughed. "Then you don't know Zine. He knew what you had to protect." He strolled down the de facto lane between tents and wagons. "I still think you can find a home with us, even be a hero in our own ranks."

"Are you trying to tell me that I may have a future as a judicar?"

He grinned and shrugged.

Powers bestowed by a god, how much stronger of a warrior would she be? Then again, legend declared that everyone received different powers, even though all of them could heal. So, who knows what she could do?

Well, the gods, she thought.

"And you already know the holy language, which is unbelievable. I think you're already too strong for your size," he petered out, watching her suddenly stiffen.

She tried to stop her mind, but it walked right into a shiver that ran across her shoulders. She gripped her temples. "I just had a horrible thought! There isn't a candidacy, like with the dragoons, is there?"

He tried to smile through a frown. "Well, there are two. The first would be to demonstrate that you're worthy of the order. And then, in a few years, when you've shown your duty and mettle, then there is a candidacy for judicars, to see who Zine will bless."

She gulped. It would repeat. Just like the dragoons. She'd never get to dragoon knight training, and she'd never get to a judicar candidacy either. She never fit the mold.

Der stared ahead into nothing. This was not what she wanted. Even if she did get powers from a god, she didn't want to be tied to an order. They were run by people, and people didn't always get things right.

She didn't want to be bound to any order, even one as noble as Zine's.

"Der?" Cacilin prompted.

The world swirled back into focus. Goldie nibbled on her ear. She blinked. "Hey, Caci, does your order keep any dragon harnesses by chance?"

"Um." He paused. "No."

"Then do you have a whole lot of leather and rope you're not currently using?"

Edillon scrubbed at the dust on his trousers. "We shouldn't remain for whatever's coming. Too much chance to be taken off guard."

"Well said." Thistle nodded. "And in all this mass, I know that I could get a few spies through if I wanted. I say the sooner we depart, the safer."

Kelin sat up straight. "But where's Der? We can't leave without her."

Alluvius shrugged. "I assumed that she and I would be staying for the battle."

"What? Then I'm staying too."

Chloe tugged on Kelin's sleeve. "But you all promised to help me."

He smiled and dropped to one knee. "Yes, and this is the best way we can do that. Solve the problem. I know that's what Der's thinking."

"I don't want you to leave me!"

He chuckled. "We'd be doing naught in Arborn. It's too safe. And, with the king's invitation, we have the chance to end this for you."

She pouted. He grinned and stood back up. "Besides, I might be able to save Der's arse here."

"Speaking of." Alluvius nodded as Der appeared out of the crowd, grinning like a surprised monkey.

"What?" Kelin demanded.

She just grinned. "Nothing. Look, I just wanted to say farewell, because I can't find Jakkobb and I got an invitation to join Zine's order for the fight."

Kelin folded his arms. "Just like that? Going to wander off into the fray without your best man?"

"You're coming?"

"Of course! It'll be like old times."

She rolled up her eyes. "You mean being tortured, running for our lives, getting caught, getting caught again, and escaping Darkreign?"

"Yes." He winked.

Alluvius stepped up beside Kelin. "And you owe me, after you got me kicked out of Silver Dawn."

"Der!" Chloe stamped her foot. "You were supposed to tell them to come with us!"

"Yeah! Or let us fight too!" Thalon chirped. He knocked open the diary with his foot as he jumped.

Der completely avoided Thistle's thundering scowl and knelt down, so that the kids' faces were above her own. "Now—"

The color drained from her face. She stared down at the diary, open to where she had dropped it. The wind teased its pages over, but she'd already seen it. She clawed at the book.

She stared, immersed and mesmerized by the page. She dropped it. Her face had faded to Tom's complexion and her fingers trembled like leaves in the wind.

"Oh gods, it truly is him!"

Frowning, Kelin picked up the book. "I can't read Palls."

Alluvius peered over his shoulder. "It says, um, that can't be right." He backed away suddenly, as if he'd found a scorpion on the page.

Der looked up at Thistle. She swallowed. "It's the chemmen recipe for immortality."

Tom snorted, trying to exhale the campfire smoke and the sailors' body odor by force. It was his fault to start breathing to try to smell for anything unusual in the first place. He glared at the soldiers underneath his hood, just for smelling funny at him.

There seemed to be sailors, sailors who were also soldiers, and just soldiers. Also, there were thousands more soldiers since they'd given the Alscane survivors a choice: join us or die.

Men and women. Even the children did the cooking. The invaders were smart, too. Or, at least, the person giving orders was smart. Only the sailors and soldiers who came on the ships were allowed around the children.

Where were all these other people from? Dosmar still had a population, but it was nothing close enough to rival Solquin's. He paused. Perhaps it was just large enough to give them a chance at a continent better than theirs.

Somewhere, a woman screamed. Her cry was like a banshee's, terrified, angry and above all, helpless.

Tom walked on through the shadows. He stepped on the hem of a sitting soldier's cloak as he walked behind him. The soldier continued to sharpen his sword, oblivious.

Outside a guarded tent, Tom looked up at the Blackhound's flag, flying strongly in the wind.

Not a bad idea, taking the Blackhound's title, the vampire mused, if someone had the panache to pull it off. His feet took him closer to the tent and the shadows obscured his motion. He walked around behind another oblivious guard and listened at the tent wall.

He sniffed. Someone inside was masticating on mint leaves. So, someone else wanted to overpower the stench. He listened, two heartbeats, one of them rapid and uneven. The other could've been out for a stroll on a moonlit white sand beach. He'd never heard a human's heart so calm when bordered by so many swords and terrified people.

Tom's pale hands flickered in the firelight with speed as he assembled a spring loaded crossbow.

Only one shot, but one he could get as close as he liked to make it. He sighed. "Why is it always up to me?"

"Why is it always up to me?" Tallor the Blackhound narrowed his crystal blue eyes at Axon. The larger man cringed as if he faced that glare from a giant.

Tallor popped another mint leaf in his mouth. "I send Alcomm, dead. I send the boy wonder, also dead. And he was already dead to begin with. Now, it's down to me."

"Sorry, lord!"

The Blackhound sighed. "I've never seen a plan that didn't need adapting, but never one so much as this."

Axon went cross eyed watching the river of sweat make a waterfall off his nose. "Yes, lord!"

"And you haven't heard back from the *Osprey*?"

"No, sir, and no sign of the *Maelstrom Fury* either! I'm so sorry, lord!" He either dropped to his knees or his knees just couldn't take his quaking weight any more. "But I know I saw orange eyes!"

Tallor pinched his nose and shook his head. He paused and gazed around his new headquarters. At least it had a separate bedroom, unlike his ship. It also lacked the irreplaceable luxuries of the *Fury*. He missed the mirror. He'd found a few stubborn bits of stubble after this morning's shave.

"But why would the chemmen just steal the ship? Could it have just been a trick of the firelight in someone's eyes and they were just people? Incredibly stupid, desperate people. Although, I must doff my hat for pulling it off."

Axon studied the dirt climbing up the ornate legs of the master's new desk. Until recently, it had resided in the palace of Alscane. But now, here it was out in the wilderness between kingdoms, with dirt crawling up its carved legs.

Beneath the desk, the yellow retriever's ears unfurled and the dog's tail waved hopefully.

"Besides, the chemmen were sealed away from this world during the Pallens Front War. At least, most of them were. And now people on this continent are talking about a recent elf-chemmen war."

Axon gulped. "And, and we believe them, lord?"

Tallor chuckled. "Hard to say. Nobody knows details, but everyone apparently knows it happened. And there are no chemmen killing currently everyone, so again, hard to say." He squatted next to the desk and thrust out a hand. "Coda, come here."

The dog shuffled along under the table and pressed his head firmly into his master's hand. Tallor massaged the dog's fur vigorously.

"He should be afraid of you," Axon managed. "It's disrespect."

"Why? Maybe I like him because he's the only one of you who isn't afraid of me." Coda rolled on his side and then onto his back, exposing his chest and belly. "And he's the only one of you who can outrun me too."

"But it's not how it should be!"

"Do you really think that animals only know fear?" Tallor shook his head. "No, dogs have the full spectrum of emotions, fear, anger, protection, love. Unlike people, however, they are not burdened by pride. A dog doesn't feel shame in begging for food."

"You're saying he's too stupid to know his situation?"

"Not him." Tallor pushed himself back up to his feet. He leaned on the desk, already crammed with maps and letters. "So, nothing from our man at Horizon?"

"No, lord." Axon squeezed his fingers until they were white on the edge of the desk, like a man hanging over a cliff by his fingertips. Finally, he pulled himself up.

"Blast."

Coda stood up and poked his master with his nose. He stepped back and wagged his tail. Absently, Tallor reached down and continued to pet the dog.

"Only the last letter. He said he was going to write another one, that he'd learned too much for just one."

"And did he?"

Axon held his breath and then shoved the words out. "We don't know. The rioting in Alscane, you know, before we killed the rioters, well, they burned the Blue Farers' courier station."

"I suppose they were upset that the dragoons didn't save them."

Axon held open his hands, spraying excess sweat across the room with the sudden movement.

Tallor absently wiped a bead of sweat from his belt. "And the dragoons knew better than to lose the battle. Huh. I didn't think they would abandon so many people."

"Silver Dawn didn't. Those bankers took at least two hundred people out through a tunnel before they collapsed it."

"Yes, I expected that. Still, it comes back round to Silver Dawn. What did Firth's last letter say?"

Axon flinched, and dove his hands into the foothills of papers on the desk. "Ah! Yes, yes, here it is!" He held the dragoon homework paper over a nearby candle, and the heat changed the blank spaces into words as the milky ink heated.

"He said he could scout unseen because there had been a breakdown in the normal routines. And then, um..." Axon's eyes tried to burn the words off the page. "And," he gulped, "Then, well, my lord, the rest of this is about his hatred for another candidate. A girl. And to tell the truth, I think he's a little frightened of her."

"Of a girl?"

“Yes, nineteen summers, lord. And he goes on about how insane she is, and she was going to apparently try to conquer Horizon herself with only a handful of candidates in a mock raid gone wrong. He says he was going to take the confusion to learn what he could about Horizon’s true defenses and send that the following day.”

“Nothing about those magical defenses?” the Blackhound prompted.

Axon turned the letter over, and then upside down. “No, lord. But it’s only a girl! Taking Horizon with Horizon’s own candidates? And in a mockery of real war?”

A wan smile crossed Tallor’s features. “Axon, you seem to think of women as servants, but it’s that servant who knows a thousand ways to kill you. She’s obviously more capable than the men of that army.”

“But she’s only nineteen.”

“And I led my first army to victory when I was but twenty-one, and only eight years later, I conquered Pallens. Youth, although something to let go of quickly, is not always an impairment. Not if you’re not a daydreamer, at least.”

“Yes, lord. When you were twenty-one? Where was this?”

Tallor shook his head. “A long time ago. You need not worry about it. Any name to this aspiring girl?”

Axon flipped the missive over again. “Ah, yes, lord. Derora Saxen of Riversbridge.”

The Blackhound blinked. “Isn’t that the one mentioned in the new chemmen tale?”

“And in the story about the gold dragon killing Alcomm on the river, lord.” Axon’s hands sifted through the piles of paperwork. “He mentioned her quite a bit, actually.”

Tallor traced the fingers across the palm of his right hand, along an ancient, perfectly straight scar. He didn’t appear to notice his own action. “Our plans are still to continue. It’s too late to stop.”

“My lord?”

Tallor slammed his fist into the desk. Coda skedaddled for the bedroom at the sudden, violent motion.

Axon bent over as if he’d been punched and backed across the room. “What is it, my lord?” he quavered, hiding behind Firth’s letter.

“We knew they had dragons. We’ve got one too. It’s a *gold* dragon. Neither Silver Dawn nor Steel Eagle have a gold dragon in their ranks!”

“But, my lord!” Axon squeaked. “There are no credible reports. People said it just appeared out of nowhere, and a dragon that size just can’t appear!”

Tallor waved his hand and exhaled. “The last time I’ve ever heard of a gold dragon was... was...” He slouched into the desk’s cushioned chair. “I don’t remember. But there was one. I think it killed my wife.” He rubbed the scar unconsciously again. “Was I ever married? I don’t really remember; it was so long ago.”

Axon shrugged helplessly.

Tallor exhaled again. “It’s like trying to remember from before you were three. Or maybe seven, in your case. If there’s anything, it’s scattered and hard to put together, or perhaps even just imagined. And yet, I remember the Eastern Empire and Pallens as crisply as yesterday.”

“That’s what this is about, right? Pallens.”

“Of course.” The past was like staring out at an ocean from the shore. Most of it was just water, flat and endless and blank. Every once in a while, there was a glimpse of a ship on the horizon, but then again, perhaps not. He scowled at the vision of the sea in his mind. No, not an ocean, more like a sea of grass, and just as endless.

His eyes narrowed. There were sails on the grass too, sails attached to wagons. And that made no sense.

Axon cleared his throat. “I, I just said, you don’t know where you’re from?”

Tallor shrugged. “I remember crossing the Expanse, alone and on foot. Before that, it was rainy. And cows. That’s it. At least, that was before I learned most people are cattle too.” He shrugged again. “Funny though, I always knew how old I was.” He sighed and looked down at the paperwork on his desk. “Is there anything else in that letter? Anything other than gossip?”

“Uh.” The paper of one of Firth’s older letters crinkled in the clerk’s unsteady hands. “He mentions that this Saxon girl had asked about the legend of stone and bone, but he’d never heard of it before.”

Tallor sat up straight in his chair. “No one would be that stupid.”

“I, I don’t know it either, lord.”

“It was in the library of Pallens. Believe me, anyone who knows about it knows better than to hunt for the greatest nightmare before history began.”

Axon twisted the snake’s body with a wolf’s head ring around his finger. The same as Alcomm’s.

“So, this child is either very brilliant or idiotically naive. However, I am not playing soldier.” He dropped his eyes to the map of Solquin. “We’re still lacking in information on Horizon. Even though we’re not on the road to it, if the armies hold up there, we may never bring the light of Pallens to this continent.”

“Yes, lord!”

“After all, I am the paladin king. This destiny that we have made is too big to fail, so you find me that child.”

Suddenly, the candles flinched as something in the room moved fast enough to create wind.

Tom sneered at Axon’s quivering body. Each tremor that shook the man seemed five minutes apart to him. Immediately, his emerald eyes latched on to his target. A finger of doubt beckoned in the back of his mind. Was anything he said true?

This was not a man to hesitate when confronting. He was in control of every muscle. He might even be fast enough, and he completely lacked the stench of fear that was so very common to every other human in this world.

And that was precisely the reason Tom pointed the crossbow at the Blackhound’s ear and released the catch.

The vampire lurched. The stone heart had started to beat. He backpedaled, and in that moment, he saw the crossbow bolt dive directly through the man’s ear, burrowing deep into his skull. Tallor reeled forward, grabbing at the bolt.

Then Tom’s personal world went black.

Chapter Twenty Four

The Summit

Cacilin's eyes wandered over his troops. The order of Zine also taught people who couldn't be soldiers all the time, people who had to farm or smith or trade for a living. Of his three thousand fighters, maybe only one in seventy-five could fight toe-to-toe against one of the thousand dragoons.

Still, he was proud of them, and he knew he would be proud of them come nightfall. He nodded to his lieutenant, a man almost a head shorter than he, who scurried off. Next, Cacilin strolled over to a man who made him crane his neck like his lieutenant.

He cocked a smile up at Jakkobb. The knight-captain grunted, but didn't look away from the distant hill decorated with an overly large tent.

The tent was made of red cloth and must have been an eighth of a mile long. Below, the brightly blue ocean lapped at the base of the hill.

Their coalition army was not exactly hidden, because ten thousand soldiers tended to step on a significant number of twigs and do other things to alert the enemy. Hopefully, all inquisitive eyes were targeted on the Blackhound's summit, and the approximately seven thousand soldiers surrounding it.

Among the warriors, Cacilin counted the three dragoon orders; his own order; and many knights from Tenmar and a few from the coastal kingdoms; and even Urael had lent several squads. More still were local citizens who needed to fight for their farms. Those people had been sent to Zine's order for outfitting and placement, and in some cases, even some basic sword introduction.

Jakkobb exhaled. "We're not going to be ready in time."

Cacilin pointed. "But there many lords who had already arrived before we were here to block the road. I have never seen you or any dragoon demand a road be choked off. They're under a flag of truce for this summit. Do you know something, sir?"

The red knight closed his eyes briefly. "I wish I did. I just know the nature of the beast." He opened his eyes, and saw it.

Rising over the ocean toward the tent, a silver dragon skimmed toward the shore, its scales sparkling like the water.

Cacilin heard the murmurs, even shouts, shoot through their own armies. Most of them were curses, but there were also laughs and cheers.

"They don't know it's not ours," Jakkobb said quietly.

Lord and Lady Erswich de Galaka clasped each other's hands. The twins had jointly ruled the ducal throne of their lands since they were two. Now, they were nine.

"We're just here to make peace, right? They're not coming after us like Alscane, right?" Lady Erswich tilted her head backward to look at Arganth, their guardian and advisor who knew everything. The tall, thin man always dressed in gray.

Arganth nodded. He shifted his weight and leaned back. It certainly sounded like more soldiers outside than they had seen upon their arrival. Of course, the coaches were heavily curtained against the sun, but they had also quit the coach *inside* the massive tent, which he had never done before.

“But why did we have to come ourselves?” Lord Erswich persisted. “I wanted to ride my horse today.”

“This chair is uncomfortable!” The lady squirmed in the hastily constructed wooden seat.

Arganth snorted. All the furniture been tied together for the gods’ sakes! Not even properly nailed!

The chairs and the tables were much heavier and taller than most, which was befitting for nobility and royalty. However, the Lady had needed to be picked up and put in her chair, and that had caused the tightened springs of her lavender bustle to creak dangerously.

“Look!” Lord Erswich pointed. “That’s the king! That’s our king!”

Arganth leaned forward. “We shall greet him properly, but now is not yet the time.”

“It’s everyone,” Lady Erswich breathed. Around them, nobility and royalty from the coastal kingdoms brightened the tent in their velvet and jewels.

Arganth grunted and wiped his palms quietly across his trouser legs. He’d been to these meetings before, although none on this scale. But this is the way things were done. They were here to see that peace was agreed, demand some recompense even though their lands had not been touched, and make sure Alscane’s problem remained in Alscane.

There were rules. There was diplomacy. It had been this way since their ancestors from Pallens had carved out their domains on this coast, and the dragoons had always been there to punish the rule-breakers. This was how it was done, and now the lord and lady must learn how to grease the wheels of the rules.

After the guests had taken their seats, without too much squabbling as to who was not supposed to sit next to whom, a clerk stumbled inside the tent. His shoulders tried to squeeze together under the weight of everyone’s imperious stares.

Axon licked his lips. He smoothed his hair. When he had seen his master’s genius on the other side of the ocean, well, there had been an ocean in between him and all these lords.

“You know, it really shouldn’t bother you what they think of you,” his master’s voice drawled from the other side of the canvas wall. “Seriously.”

Axon’s tongue dried and felt like a rock inside his mouth. Trembling, he stuck out his chin. “Presenting my lord, the victor of Alscane!”

The Blackhound strolled into the tent and looked as if he’d just casually walked into any tavern on any street. His blue eyes cut across the assembly and the waiting royalty and nobility. Then he sighed.

“What is your name?” the plump king of Galaka demanded. He smashed his hand down on the table. His action caused his wine goblet, that he’d brought himself, to spill red wine all over the table. The king ignored the stains.

“Hm?” Tallor raised his eyebrows. “Oh, I’d rather not tell you because I don’t have time to deal with the panic.” His eyes continued to survey the tent, pausing briefly on Lord and Lady Erswich.

Lady Erswich clenched her brother’s hand. “I don’t understand! What’s going on?”

“Then what do you want?” The king pushed himself up from his chair and leaned toward the victor of Alscane.

A smile slithered across Tallor’s face. “All of you in one place.” The grin spread. “Otherwise, this might’ve taken me months.”

He clapped his hands.

The ropes and wires holding the tables and chairs together jerked tight as men outside the tent yanked on them. Wooden thunder exploded around the tent.

Lady Erswich screamed as her chair disintegrated beneath her.

“Help me!” Lord Erswich covered his face with his hands. Their table had collapsed on his legs. He pushed, but couldn’t free himself. Around them, their situation repeated again and again around the massive tent.

The Blackhound watched with the same bored expression. Outside, soldiers threw down dozens of torches. The canvas walls ignited. Instant, black smoke seemed to pull the flames higher.

Tallor, with Axon trailing, turned his back and strolled outside the tent. “See?” he raised his voice over the screams, “Told you, you wouldn’t have to worry about what they thought of you.”

Soldiers jogged by them to close the ring of men surrounding the tent, waiting for escapees.

Axon slammed his hands over his ears. “Yes, lord.”

“Now, go about readying the troops. The guests are still arriving.” His eyes slid over to the inland horizon. Distantly, he could see a flash of sunlight off of someone’s shield through the trees.

A shadow spread across the ground in defiance of the sun overhead. A whimper escaped Axon’s throat and he dared not look up. He scuttled away, his muscles too clenched to run properly.

Why do you keep him around? The voice of the silver dragon echoed in the Blackhound’s mind.

Tallor shrugged, squinting as the magnificent beast stretched in the sunlight. “Actually, he was the best of the litter back on Dosmar. Times have changed when civilization can be found on this side of the Occidental Ocean.” He frowned. “I do enjoy the dog’s company more. Alas, he’s safe elsewhere.”

The silver dragon with ruby red eyes snorted its disgust. It arched its long neck forward and nudged a wooden crate. It exhaled, and the crate instantly turned to ash from the heat alone.

A human looking form didn’t react. It was wrapped entirely in a cocoon of silver scales. The scales only failed to hide one emerald eye, open and unflinching.

I can’t keep this one restrained if something happens to me. The dragon pulled back.

Tallor stepped up to the cocoon and pulled a folding knife from his pocket, a style of blade also long since forgotten to the world. He poked at the enveloping scales. “I’m not bothered by a few latecomer dragoons. I know I’ve failed to kill you before.”

Yes. We still must finish that someday.

“Ha.” He frowned, and prodded the emerald eye with the blade. No reaction.

Had this thing known about its own power? Tallor certainly hadn’t, not until the silver dragon had spoken to him.

All Tallor had known in that instant was that he was sprawled over his desk and clutching a bloody crossbow bolt in his hand. Axon had gone off running somewhere and Coda was nudging him repeatedly in the leg, whining and dancing in place.

And this vampire was down on the floor, with a crossbow wound in his brain.

This was a surprise, he had thought through the fog of flight or fight response firing through his mind.

He’d leaned back and pressed a hand against his dog’s soft fur. He’d taken another moment to let his breathing and his heart slow.

Reflection. A divine gift. It had only ever saved him once before. Of course, it had spared him scrapes and cuts from when others had tried to cut him, but only his life once before. Against that bastard of an earth warlock who had decided that the old Pallens was worth more than their friendship.

He scowled at that memory.

Of course, reflection wasn't complete protection. It couldn't save him cuts from injuries caused by his own fault or natural events. Instead, it could only reflect back the blades and magic of things that meant him harm.

His upper lip curled in disgust at the creature. And this thing thought it could defeat him? That it was better than he?

And yet, this thing had the same power as the girl. So, had this vampire creature known this was what Tallor was seeking? Had he come to him for that reason?

No, he'd come to kill him. But why would a vampire care? Tallor could not shrug off such a coincidence of his power. It was the same as the girl's, and now he didn't even need to bother hunting her. Gifts like this didn't happen by chance. Had this thing known?

A smile slithered across his lips. Of course, the evil get miracles too.

The heat from the tent on fire warmed his back as his mind surfaced to the present. He dismissed the feeling, along with the cries of those who had survived so far.

"And no more unexpected variables!" he growled.

Two fliers. That's exactly what you predicted. The silver beast raised his head and sniffed the wind. Tallor watched the heat simmer in the winter air from the dragon's nostrils.

"Steel Eagle, I presume." He sighed. "Well, at least they didn't expect you, or thought that two fliers would be enough to kill you. Otherwise, we might be meeting our last stand early."

The Blackhound pulled his sword free of its scabbard. The sword shone brighter than the dragon's scales for a moment. Twin quillions of adamantis rose up at angles from the hilt, looking like two spikes sticking out at identical angles from where the blade met the hilt. The tip of the sword was also triangular at its end, a design meant to tear ragged edges into whatever flesh it bit.

He smiled and watched the sunlight glisten along the blade. "Let's have the men start moving to higher ground. They must be on the march by now."

The wind drifted through the rows of soldiers. They hadn't started to move from here yet, but along the lines, Kelin spotted motion. It was beginning. He nodded to Alluvius.

The part human was still gazing at how the wind fed off the black smoke from remains of the tent. He shook his head.

"Don't look surprised," Jakkobb snarled. "That was the Blackhound's idea of mercy. He killed them early."

Alluvius held his breath for a moment and then nodded.

"Where the hell have you been?" the knight snapped as Der jogged up.

She grinned and set Goldie down on the ground. "Sleeping. Been up all night."

Kelin nudged her in the ribs, and felt her elven featherweight mesh repel his elbow. "What were you doing?"

"I refuse to answer that on the grounds that I will get into trouble."

He rolled his eyes. "Since when has that ever stopped you?"

She just grinned.

Jakkobb's entire face pinched. "You were up all night trying to convince the dragoons to let you and Goldie ride."

"Oh no." She shook her head. "That was a wall I couldn't climb."

"Good."

"Won't let us ride!" Goldie waddled angrily in circles at their feet. Dead leaves smoldered when he snorted his frustration.

Der looked up to the horizon, the fire and tried to count the enemy soldiers. She had to smile. "A chance at the Blackhound. I never imagined this."

Kelin scowled at her expression. "Not even Midan could best him, and the entire population of the Empire."

"Fine. Go home."

"What?" he gasped. Jakkobb and Alluvius also spun toward her, surprise echoing across their features.

Der pulled her arm across her chest and stretched. "If you're convinced we can't win, even with greater numbers, then go home."

Kelin growled. "Shut up, Der. Millions of people have tried and failed. What makes you so different?"

She shrugged and started to pull on the other arm. "Because I'm the only one who hasn't already capitulated. At least, in my mind."

Kelin fought a sudden smile, watching Der's confidence. He quoted something Thistle had said, "When you know yourself, then nothing can stop you. Maybe the chemmen had something right after all."

"Yeah!" Alluvius jerked a finger toward the burning tent and smoke. "But he apparently knows himself too!"

"What? I'm not saying this will be easy!" Der glared. "Who knows? Maybe all the weird earth events will quit after this."

"Hopefully," Alluvius sighed. "Let's hope we don't have one now."

Der bent sideways to stretch. "I wish Tom was here."

"That's another thing," Kelin added. "It's like to him go missing, but I don't know. If the Blackhound was able to take him down, what can he do to us?"

Der waved her hand dismissively. "Tom's not that hard to beat. You just have to enrage him so much that he's incoherent or spouting off a tirade, and then you kick him."

Kelin deliberately raised an eyebrow. "Enrage the vampire and then kick him."

Der nodded. "Uh huh."

"Alright, I just wanted to be sure." He exhaled. He felt as if there were books for every individual on what one ought to be in the world, full of maps and diagrams including gender, social class, etiquette, schooling, and how reality always overcomes one's secret, hopeful dreams. Apparently, Der had just taken hers to the outhouse and never opened it except to tear out pages.

Jakkobb's voice broke through his thoughts. "Last chance to join the others at Moonrise is now."

The wind carried a mournful cry past Kelin, capturing his thoughts and hurling them back through time to last winter and the wail of the banshee. He swallowed. "No, someone's got to do this."

Three dragons shot into the sky. Below them, the front lines of the armies began to crash together, raging against each other, like the surf caught in a tight channel. Tallor's army held together on the high hill. The coalition armies boasted more soldiers to climb it.

The bronze and green dragons hovered over their armies, waiting for the silver and watching the troops. A rider perched as a companion to all three dragons.

The bronze knight pulled out a mirror and flashed it at the ground. Three flashes, pause, two more flashes.

Flash, pause, flash responded from below. A block of soldiers started to throw their weight and swords toward the thinnest point of the hill's defenders. More soldiers swelled up, bolstering the coalition.

The silver launched itself toward the thickening knot of warriors. Fire and lightning exploded from its mouth, and in the space of a heartbeat, vaporized over two hundred soldiers.

Remnants of lightning sizzled across the armor hiding the burned flesh of the soldiers on the radius of the silver's attack.

Even more wounded casualties screamed along the edges of the dragon's path. The green dragon stretched out its neck, roaring and charging across the sky. The bronze echoed its thundering roar and joined the lunge. Their riders could do nothing but hunker down against their saddles.

The silver, as fast as a snake, whipped around toward them. Lightning spiked between its fangs as it snarled.

Kelin and Alluvius twisted their necks back to watch the dragons. On either side of them, soldiers boasted the maroon garb of Zine's Order. Kelin and the former dragoon had had to run to join Zine's ranks since the dragoons denied them permission to march with them.

Cacilin shouldered his way through his ranks. "Kelin! Kelin!"

"Sir?" he shouted back.

"Where's Der?"

Kelin dropped back down to earth. He checked to his shoulder, and then behind himself. "I don't know! She was right there! Maybe she's off with Jakkobb and the dragoons?"

"Too late now! Get ready!"

The men and women of Zine's order pressed tighter around him, and the roar of battle overtook his ears.

Above, the silver dragged its talons across the bronze's wings. Scales popped off like a flock of escaping birds. Neither dragon seemed to regard its rider.

The bronze roared and flung flame at the silver. The silver laid flat its wings, making itself as small as possible, and dove down underneath the stream of fire.

The green dragon blocked its dive. It flamed and kept flaming as its fires ricocheted off the silver's scales. The green continued its charge straight at the silver's underside until its teeth collided. It drove its jaws as hard as it could into the other dragon's belly, and flamed again.

The silver threw back its head and roared in agony. It savagely kicked with all four legs at the green dragon below.

Meanwhile, the bronze flapped its wings, each beat a thunderclap. Blood seeped through the scales of its stricken wing, and the motion scattered the precious fluid into the air. Despite its effort, gravity began to take hold.

Soldiers behind Kelin pushed him forward. He forced his feet to remain in step beside Alluvius. He'd never had the same formal training, but survival demanded that they remain together, just like on the sea floor.

The soldier's prayer leapt into his mind. He'd never been taught it, no one had, but they all knew the words. Oh gods, please let me kill these sons of bitches before they kill me.

An enemy's round shield popped up before him. His body just reacted, and his mind hoped that Alluvius was as good as the Silver Dawn's reputation. He crashed his curved sword as hard as he could against one side of the shield, right where the enemy's arm should have been.

His sword pulsed a dim green light from an ancient spell that didn't seem to do much except glow. But, it made it a magical weapon, and those lived by their own rules, and he knew he'd been able to hurt were-creatures with it. Alas, like blacksmithing, that was another future lost to the winds.

Thumping the shield worked. His opponent cringed as the wooden shield scraped splinters into his arm, and in doing so, tilted his shield forward.

Kelin didn't have an angle of attack, but beside him, Alluvius didn't miss the opening. The man went down silently. Together, they marched one step forward.

The silver dragon swiped at the green below and they twirled together in the air like colliding meteors. The silver's claws ripped across the green's face, leaving sudden tears of scales and blood.

The two giants circled away from each other. The silver bent double, feeling the massive tear and burns on its chest. The green dragon pawed at its face, trying to dig the blood out from its eyes.

Below, the bronze fought to keep its wings pumping. It stretched out its neck and snapped at the silver's wingtip.

The silver was faster. It jerked its wing clear of the closing jaws and opened its own maw.

Lightning and fire flared like a sudden volcano. The bronze took most of the inferno to its face and neck. Lightning cracked like a thousand whips and coruscated down the dragon's spine.

The dragoon knight rider yelled at the approaching white death. He scrambled to undo the hooks and ties that bound him to his saddle. Lightning whipped down the scales. And then it was over for him. His armor melted into the saddle that he'd been tied into, and the leather erupted into its fire.

The bronze's wings beat one more time, and then the dragon's muscles surrendered. The world seemed to pause as the magnificent creature plummeted.

Dirt and screams shot up from the earth as the dragon crashed on its side over a squadron of Tallor's army. The bronze rolled over, moaning like the stones of a collapsing castle.

The green dragon continued to swipe at its own face. Its knight yelled and yelled uselessly against the wind. The silver dove toward it from above, opening its jaws, aiming straight for the base of the green's skull.

Formation. Always stay together. Especially against spears, Kelin gulped. Where the hell had their enemy gotten spears? He hadn't seen them coming! Then again, it was hard to see anything but the enemy exactly in front of him.

"Can do this!" Alluvius shouted. "Just get past the tip, then they can't do anything!"

"Don't charge!" Cacilin's voice rolled across his unit of fighters. But their blood was pounding in their ears and across their eyes, and several of them jumped ahead of the line.

The spearmen overlapped their spears, creating a wooden barrier. The newly formed latticework caught the charging warriors' feet, and they spilled up onto the spears. A few spearmen broke free from the web and stabbed down across the backs of their unprotected necks.

More soldiers from Zine's order stepped up and their formation was whole again. Their swords rattled against the spear-points.

Tallor's soldiers on the ends of the spear line didn't attack; they just defended against the swords and left the aggression to those in the center, exposing none of them to an opening.

The press of the greater numbers of the coalition pushed Alluvius and Kelin forward. They hammered their swords against the spear tips. A tip swooped too close to Kelin's belly, and he barely sucked in his gut in time. He looked up at his enemy.

The boy couldn't have been older than fifteen. He waved the spear in front of Kelin, and Kelin parried it as far to the side as he could. The boy didn't let his body turn with the weapon and he twisted his ankle and collapsed down to a knee. The spear popped out of his hands, and the boy gaped up at Kelin. Absolute terror spilled across his face.

Kelin charged past the spear tip. His body just reacted, and did what Thistle, Jakkobb and even Der long ago in Riversbridge had trained into him. To win. To not giving his enemy a fighting chance, not on the battlefield. No, it wasn't fair, and may not even have been honorable, but survival was a far more ancient force than honor.

He drove his glowing sword through the boy's gut. In that moment, he'd taken a life, but he'd also saved the lives of many of his own army. He'd created a wedge and more soldiers filled in behind him. They'd broken the spearmen's line.

The roars of the dragons finally sliced through his concentration. He spared a glance to the sky.

He gulped. The bronze dragon was down, and in only seconds the silver was going to triumph over the green dragon flier. After that, the Blackhound's dragon would turn on their coalition and it would be over.

Then, from out of the other side of the horizon, he saw the gold dragon rising like a new sun.

Der laughed. She had to laugh, in spite of the death and chaos. The wind, the shifting of Goldie's muscle, and the view overrode the horrors below. She checked her grip on the homemade rope and leather harness and smiled at the sun shimmering in the clouds. Of course, there had barely been enough rope to rig up something that attached to the base of his neck and the top of his legs, and

still, even that was *all* the rope Zine's order had brought. There hadn't been enough to try to fit around his chest.

She looked back at the clouds. The sky had just as much topography as the ground. The distant thunderheads boasted plateaus, buttes and mesas too.

Her smile wilted. The bronze dragon had fallen, was possibly dead, and it looked like the green was next.

Below, the war stopped. Everyone lifted their eyes to the sky as the new player on the field encompassed their entire vision. Even the silver dragon froze in its attack.

Goldie flapped his wings once, and tornado force winds swirled out behind him. He reached his neck forward and shot out toward the battling dragons.

"Excuse me?" Tallor resisted the urge to rub his own eyes. He suddenly felt the damp weight of sweat underneath his black silk armor and his bulky backpack. He wasn't wearing a helmet.

His breath hissed between his teeth. That was the biggest damn dragon he could have imagined.

Impossible! Nothing that size could have just sneaked up to the battlefield! And it was gold! Of all the colors it had to be disgusting gold!

He leaned forward into the creaking leather of his own harness and squinted. Was that dot a rider? He straightened his shoulders and a small smirk danced across his face. So, a chance to take down the biggest dragon in the world...

The silver dived after the green dragon and pure lightning exploded from its mouth. Better to have one less opponent.

The gold dragon flamed even though he was still so far away. The fire streamed across the air and cut the sky between the falling green dragon and the lunging silver.

The silver arched straight up toward the clouds, and swung its head to the gold dragon.

The golden dragon was suddenly there. It was so big that the mile distance must have been like a step to it. Tallor still stared at the gold's size; he and the silver could be swatted like bees. Then again, bees were hideously hard to squash as long as they moved. And bees stung.

The silver lurched beneath him, hunching forward to hide its torn underbelly. It flapped its wings and started to circle the mammoth attacker. The gold completely dwarfed the silver, as the silver started to orbit like a moon.

"I think green's getting away alright!" Der shouted. She didn't know if Goldie could hear her, but she still had to say it. She shaded her eyes and stared at the silver's rider. Was that him?

The weight of history caused her vision to wobble. She blinked rapidly. Her hand crawled for her sword. It was all she could think about. And if it was truly the Blackhound, he would know why the chemmen had this sword, wouldn't he?

Both he and the chemmen had been enemies of the Empire, and they'd obviously had dealings with each other or his flag wouldn't be desecrated in their trophy room. Was that how the chemmen had Pallens artifacts like her sword?

Alright, she thought, the flag really didn't prove a connection between her sword and the chemmen, in fact, it brought up more questions than it answered.

She heard her heart beating faster and she couldn't help another grin. A chance to take down the Blackhound. The stainless light reflected golden and blue as she drew the Pallens sword.

Kelin's tongue dried as he stared upward, and he could only imagine the oaths spewing from Jakkobb's mouth. Suddenly, in the surge of battle, he felt oddly helpless.

"This way!" Alluvius shouted in his ear. He pointed with his bloody sword after the running spearmen, who were curving around the side of the hill. The attackers had fared great gains up it so far.

Kelin nodded and then skidded in his first step, staring. He thought he'd seen something...

Alluvius was running after the spearmen with the others, but the human remained glued to the ground. He shouldered his way through the rush of Zine's fighters.

He scowled. But there it was again, the sun shining off something silver by the smoking canvas of the tent. He sprinted over, checking behind his shoulder the whole way. Zine's army was charging the enemy around the side of the hill, and it looked like all the enemy had regrouped over there. No soldiers, friend or foe remained nearby.

He inched closer. Was it a cocoon? He reached out and poked it with his sword, which sent up green sparks from where it touched the scales.

One emerald eye stared up at him from a break in the scales.

Tom! What the hell had happened?

He glanced up at the spinning dragons. "Oh, Der, I know you don't know what you're doing!"

His fingers unwound from his sword's handle and he dropped to the ground and started to paw at the cocoon. The vampire's corpse remained deathly still.

Goldie flamed. The silver flamed, combined with a web of lightning. The streams crashed together and bloomed into a massive white chrysanthemum, churning in the sky like the angry ocean.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Hot! Hot!" Der shielded her face with her arms. She peered through her arms to see blisters beginning to bubble on her forearms. Her knee hissed against his scales as she squeezed it against Goldie's back.

She tried to remember her dragoon training. Well, what she'd overheard about dragons anyway. They were mostly immune to fire, obviously, and they could pass the heat through their scales to even it out across their entire bodies or something like that.

She kept her arms out to shield herself, and the Pallens sword was slippery with sweat in her hand. The metal remained oddly cool though. She didn't waste a thought wondering why.

Ahead of her, the rope around the base of Goldie's neck ignited. She gasped. "Oh, no no no!"

With her free hand, she clutched and clutched again the rope holding her in place. The fire ate its way up the fragile harness toward her. She tried to look ahead, to stare into the heart of the crashing flames, but the light was too bright and the flames too hot.

And this fight was just warming up.

Chapter Twenty Five

When Darkness Calls

“That girl better survive so I can kill her myself!” Jakkobb roared. He waved his bloody axe at the golden form that filled the entire horizon. This wasn’t how it was done! Not outside of a stupid song! This was how people died. Hideously.

Around him, Silver Dawn advanced like a glacier: not fast, steady, carving out valleys in the landscape of soldiers, and entirely unstoppable.

The Blackhound’s army wasn’t the handful of armed thugs that the knight-captain had originally hoped to encounter. They were trained, and they still boasted more of the high ground than the coalition did. They also fought like they believed in their cause.

That thought caused his throat to burn. What did that soldier on the bottom of the ocean mean when he claimed to be a soldier of Pallens? Did all of these other fighters share that delusion?

He’s young. The silver’s voice appeared in Tallor’s mind without any hint of strain. The flames and lightning continued to gush from its mouth. *We’ve done this before.*

“Anchorfare? I’ve tried to forget!” But a smile curved across his mouth. He pulled his sword free of its scabbard and leaned forward, like a rider on a galloping horse.

Now! The silver, still flaming, pivoted in the air and slammed its broadside against Goldie’s flank.

Meanwhile, Der gripped what was left of her harness as the silver collided. The rope she’d been gathering slipped against her fingers and she shoved all of her weight forward to keep her balance.

“Goldie! Stay strong!” She wiped the waterfall of sweat on her sleeve.

He’d never fought another dragon before, not as far as she knew. He’d spent the year with others of his kind at Horizon, but had he ever done any sparring?

Goldie hesitated to beat his wings. His movements were too big, too slow. The silver dragon snapped its head up like a striking snake, all fangs, and bit down into the middle of Goldie’s neck. It kicked up its hind legs and started to rake its claws against Goldie’s chest.

Scales shredded and blood flew free as wounds erupted like fissures in Goldie’s hide. The huge dragon’s wings started beating faster and faster. He was flying for all of them. The silver continued to shove all its fangs as deep as it could and kept gnawing deeper.

Tallor edged his way along the shoulder of the silver dragon and jumped onto Goldie’s neck, sailing far above the battlefield below. Immediately, he flipped his sword so that he was holding it upside down and dug one of the quillions into the scales. He leaned his weight against his sword as Goldie bucked his neck like an angry serpent.

Tallor freed his folding knife and dug up the edges of one of Goldie’s massive scales. He plunged his right hand into the bloody handhold. He folded the knife back up with his hand on his teeth. Then, he freed his sword with his other hand. It wasn’t going to be too long for this next part.

The silver continued to tear rents in Goldie’s hide. The larger dragon roared and whipped his head around to snap.

The silver yanked back and ducked. Goldie continued swinging his head around and he turned his gigantic maw straight into Tallor's sword. The dragon's head was almost as big as the silver dragon's torso. Tallor didn't even aim; he just held out his blade and braced with his handhold. Teeth, taller than he was, hesitated over his head.

It was a sudden pinprick, but Goldie reeled away in surprise, just like a beginning swordsman from the tiniest cut.

The Blackhound brought his sword back to the dragon's neck and began to saw. There were precious bones and arteries deep enough down there.

Goldie screamed, not roared, as the silver dragon continued to heave its claws deeper and deeper into his flesh. His wings beat heavily but unevenly, and the entire dragon started to tilt.

Tallor laughed as he continued to saw into Goldie's neck. He still had so far to go; this was cutting down a sequoia with a sword! The silver might get the kill on this one after all!

The silver drew back its head and shook like a dog, spraying golden scales off of its snout. It opened its mouth for the killing blow, and the blood gleamed off the rows of fangs.

Then, a hard leather ball tied to the end of a rope stuck between two of its teeth. Nearby, on the top of Goldie's shoulder, Der fell over backward heaving on the rope. The silver's head moved only an inch, and that was probably out of surprise.

Der bounced back to her feet and heaved again.

Tallor slowed his sawing, and glanced at the dragon to see why it had paused. He turned over his shoulder to see a girl leaning all her weight against a rope. He blinked, and followed the rope back to the silver dragon's mouth. The silver's ruby eyes had nearly swelled out of its skull in surprise.

Tallor shrugged impatiently at the silver when the dragon glanced back at him. In one gesture, he managed to work in irritation and the absolute amazement at the sheer stupidity, nay, ridiculousness of the girl. He jerked a thumb at her, and started to saw at Goldie's neck again.

The silver slowly aimed its nostrils at her.

Der tugged on the rope, the other end still stuck in the silver's mouth, and took a running jump. She leapt over hundreds of feet between her and the ground, and she saw the distant horizon as the ocean curved away. She felt the wind cooling her blisters. The line swung taut and the rope pulled her in its arc toward the other dragon.

Halfway through her swing, the silver dragon snorted and vaporized the rope in its mouth.

Der started to yell as her fulcrum disappeared above her head, but fortunately, momentum had tossed her far enough. Her shoulder collided with the muscles of one of the silver's front legs. She grappled for a grip. Her expression never flickered from someone figuring sums rather than someone flinging her hands against slick scales to keep from falling off a dragon.

She planted her feet on one of the silver's talons and straightened up.

The silver's face hadn't moved since Der had tried to haul it. Tallor waved at his dragon in annoyance, waiting for the silver to deal with it. The silver dragon just blinked, still stunned. Meanwhile, Der wrapped both her arms around the beer barrel of a leg.

The dragon shook its leg as if trying to shake off a loose leaf. Der clung on.

A laugh rang out. Tallor grinned. "You're insane!"

Der grunted and knotted her hands together. "It's only insane if it doesn't work! I intend to be heroic!"

He stared at her, cocked his head, and then finally his eyebrows shot up.

Beneath him, Goldie whined, and his whimper thundered down from the sky. Der's glare solidified against the Blackhound. Her gaze trailed down to the open rents in Goldie's flesh. How deep were his vitals? Had the silver dug down enough? Would he just bleed out?

"Never fear," Tallor called. "A hero's death is yours!"

The silver curled its head around to face her, obscuring her view of anything but scales and teeth and thick black smoke. Der, holding on to its leg with one hand, pulled at her toothpick of a sword. The Pallens sword nearly blinded her with its reflection.

Lightning slithered and popped in between the silver's fangs. Der considered her current choices.

The silver opened its maw wider, just as Goldie screamed again. The giant dragon suddenly surged downward just as lightning ripped out of the silver dragon's mouth straight at her.

Goldie rolled in the air, still racing toward the battle on the ground. Tallor scrambled to keep his hand in the ripped up scales. But the blood was too slick and he slipped free of the crashing dragon and into the sky.

At the same time, the silver dragon shot lightning at Der, still standing on his foot. She brought up the Pallens sword, and the entire world flashed white.

Tallor kicked against the air and flipped his chest toward the ground. He took the time to carefully replace his sword into his scabbard and then reached up and yanked a cord hanging off his shoulder. From out of the backpack, a canopy unfolded overhead.

As his descent slowed, he looked down at the battle. He sneered; both sides were a mess. In fact, the only clusters of organization were the dragoons, and the other armies fell in behind their wedge.

The green dragon even covered their left flank. A squad of his soldiers tried to sneak up to its side, and the dragon opened his mouth. The fire was so hot that it wouldn't even hurt. In under a second, there was just a smoking row of ash.

And most of those in the battle froze at the sight of the crashing gold dragon. His blood rained down on the troops. He was big enough to end this war if he landed wrong. He would take out both sides.

The wings started pumping. Massive feet punched against the ground and Goldie heaved himself back into the sky.

"Shit," Tallor said calmly. Until he stopped falling out of the clouds, there was nothing he could do.

The silver dragon blinked the blindness from its eyes. The lightning crackled out of existence, leaving behind on a small thunderclap. It beat its own wings and swiveled its head to see the giant gold arcing back up into the sky.

It folded back its wings, preparing to dive like a hawk.

Its ruby eyes crossed as an oversized needle pricked its armpit. The dragon stopped in the air and fluttered its wings like a hummingbird trying not to lose its balance.

Der stretched her arm to slice at the beast again. The silver dragon turned its head upside down and peered at her. Lightning streamed from its mouth again.

She raised the Pallens sword and the lightning disappeared. The blade shone brighter, almost glowing. Hints of electricity snapped along the edges. She reached up and stabbed the dragon again.

“Should’ve gone with fire, lizard.”

That sword!

Der stumbled for balance against the weight of the silver’s voice inside of her mind. Her knees trembled and her grip on her sword almost slipped in her sweaty hand.

It shoved its nose closer at her, still upside down. *Where did you get that sword, human?!*

Der blinked. “Killing chemmen. Why?”

The dragon roared. It was more than any ancient war cry; she’d been around dragons long enough to know that was unabashed anger.

The silver opened its mouth and Der saw down its throat. She saw the furnace, glowing like the heart of a star. Orange curled out from a white ring surrounding a core too bright to see.

She swallowed. The Pallens sword would protect her! The Pallens sword would protect her! Wouldn’t it? It had only saved her from lightning before, but she couldn’t have beaten the lightning to die by fire!

The silver’s jaws opened wider, and the fiery colors swirled toward its fangs.

From below, Goldie’s paw and claws, larger than most of the silver dragon’s body, snatched the silver dragon’s tail from behind. He raised his other front paw to swat the silver dragon.

“Hey! I’m still here, hey!” Der hollered, clutching the silver dragon’s leg. But the larger dragon’s attacks were purely animal.

The silver dragon jerked and strained against the other dragon’s grip and tried to shoot straight up into the sky. Its shaking rattled Der’s hold loose. She sucked in her breath and stuck out her foot behind her. There was no floor or ground to catch her. She was falling.

Above her, and still too big to look smaller even as she plummeted away, Goldie brought down his paw like the hammer of the gods. The silver dragon roared and flamed while reeling from the blow. Goldie held it like a doll.

Goldie raised his paw again and sent it whistling through the air at the silver again. This time, the silver craned its neck and shot fire directly into Goldie’s wounded neck. The larger dragon hunched over and dropped the other.

They both started to fall, like balls that had reached the top of their arcs, slowly at first but picking up speed as they closed in on the earth and ocean below. The silver twisted away from the gold and started to flap its wings.

Der tried to turn as the silver passed her. It looked like an entire building. Finally, she managed to flip on to her stomach to see a sudden sail up here in the sky, and then it folded up around her. She kicked uselessly against the cloth.

“What the hell?!” The wind suddenly screamed louder in Tallor’s ears. He twisted his neck. “Godsdamnit!”

Something had fallen into his canopy and collapsed it. His descent instantly sped up to a deadly velocity again. Overhead, the canopy balled in upon itself at the end of its ropes.

“Damn, damn, damn and blast!” He opened his mouth to shout at the silver dragon. He’d never known how the beast managed it, but he could always hear him. Even if they were miles away, if he could see the creature, then he could be heard.

The dragon spiraled toward the ground almost directly beneath him. One of its wings extended at a wrong angle. Tallor tried to glance at the gold dragon, also plummeting from the clouds. “I hate gold dragons!” he hollered to the world.

He reached his hands back over his shoulders and heaved on the ropes. He pulled himself up a foot, then reached out his other hand and continued to climb. He’d just have to remove it himself. Below, the ground was already large enough that he could make out individual soldiers.

Der wrenched her shoulders back and forth against the cloth. She couldn’t breathe! She elbowed enough space to tip her sword down and plunge the tip into the sail. The wind swallowed any ripping sound as she worked a slice into the cloth.

She kicked through the hole and used her legs to pry it open to see where she was falling. Tallor’s face snapped into surprise as they stared at each other through the hole. He pulled himself closer on the cords to the canopy.

“Bravo!” he yelled above the wind. “Now you’ve killed both of us!”

Der eyed the silver dragon through the hole; it was circling lower below. Its wings shuddered, one of them clearly broken, but it was fighting for height. “No, I’m still trying to kill both of you!” Then, she shoved a handful of the canopy down into the hole and kicked herself free.

And she was almost flying again. Flying in one direction certainly.

Tallor let go of the rope. The canopy opened like a sail again and seemed to hold his weight. More air forced the tear wider and his descent accelerated again.

The silver dragon, flapping its wings out of sync, circled higher and faster. It suddenly nosedived at the dragoon wedge into its army. They weren’t going to lose this battle! One strafe and they could win it! It just had to manage one strafe. Not even the dragoons had ever developed anything that could withstand dragonfire. Nor had they brought any weapons against this dragon, since they had two of their own.

Just as it started its dive, Der bounced against the back of its skull. She ricocheted back into the air, and then onto the skull again. She thrust the Pallens sword down and held on. The blade only penetrated a couple of inches into the scales before it hit what felt like stone.

The silver dragon snarled. Der stuck a hand into one of the bony ridges above the beast’s ear and squeezed for a grip. The dragon shook his head. Der tightened her grip. She could barely hold on, let alone attack the thing!

Fine! The dragon’s voice screamed inside her mind. *Have an excellent view to the death of everyone below! You can’t defend them from lightning!*

The dragon circled again and suddenly arrowed directly at the Silver Dawn dragoons. Their green dragon defender raised up its head and tried to stand. Its knees wobbled and the battlefield trembled as it collapsed again.

Two thousand soldiers threw their shields between themselves and the silver missile. Except Jakkobb. He knew it wouldn't matter.

Sparks flared along its teeth as the silver opened its mouth. Pure white electricity coalesced into existence between those hideous fangs. Balls of lightning dripped like saliva.

"No!" Der roared. The hair along her arms and even her head was standing on end.

The lightning exploded out of the silver's mouth.

Soldiers below screamed.

Der leapt and slid down the dragon's snout on her rear, leaned over the dragon's lip and plunged her sword into the beam.

The lightning broke in twain and arced across the air, streaking toward the clouds. Some of it just simply disappeared. Little rivers of electricity dove to the earth, grounding themselves.

The silver dragon finished its swoop over the troops and began to head out to the sea. All two thousand soldiers remained staring.

Der pulled the sword up and turned over her shoulder to see the dragon's ruby eyes as round as the moon. She pulled up the Pallens sword. Blue and gold lightning played like a halo along the blade.

Without a word, she stood up on the flying dragon's nose and marched the three steps to its still wide eyes.

The dragon pivoted and rolled onto its back, but it was too late. Der drove the sword home through its left eye, all the way up to the hilt. Smoke from the sword's electricity curled out of the silver's ears.

"Oh dear gods, Derora, what have you done this time?" Kelin breathed. The body of the silver dragon screamed past overhead. The wind in its wake kicked up the dirt and embers from the burnt tent.

Beyond the canvas, taking up both land and sea, Goldie lay like a mountain. His chest wasn't heaving.

A shadow passed directly overhead. Kelin brought his sword on guard. A lean man, cussing and snarling like a rabid bear, came crashing out of the sky toward what was left of the summit's tent. Fabric ripped as the hole in the man's canopy opened wider.

Kelin gulped and focused on Tom. He stuck his fingers in between the silver scales and tore at them. They seemed to tear off easier than moments ago. "I really, truly do not want to have to carry you out of here! That's just not right, man!" He glanced around the battlefield. The Blackhound's army was still barely defending the hill. "Of course, there ain't much that is right at the moment, but just wake up!"

Kelin squatted, braced his knees, and tugged on the cocoon's scales.

Der watched the ocean get much bigger. White knuckles clenched the sword. Well, hanging on to it wasn't going to work, so she let go of the weapon. She thrust her arm through the other eye socket as the dragon's body started to skim the water. Her feet flew up behind her.

The dragon's body impacted the sea surface and skipped like a stone. White ocean fountained up all around her and stung as it sliced across her skin. The neck bounced up and down when the body crashed across the water.

The silver skipped four more times, and finally started to sink. Der opened her eyes. She pushed her soaked hair from out of her face. Water curled up around her legs as the body touched down on the sandy seafloor.

The shoulders and wings remained mostly above the surface. Der coughed and pulled herself to her knees, trembling, coughing and spitting. She wasn't sure if she'd soiled herself or not.

Trembling, she reached over and yanked out her sword. She blinked the dripping blood out of her eye and wondered if it was hers. She hadn't remembered being splattered or being hit in the head.

Her nostrils flared at the smoke in her nose. Was that smoldering blob on that hill the tent? She squinted. The canopy holding up the Blackhound was fast crashing down on the fire.

She tossed herself off of the dragon's body and into the water. She flailed and kicked so hard that white water erupted up around her as she tried to swim.

Tom blinked one eye. Then the other.

"Tom!" Kelin shouted an inch from the vampire's nose. "Get up, getupgetupgetup!"

The vampire gritted his teeth and squirmed. "Sun..." he moaned.

"Doesn't kill you, now come on!" He hauled up at Tom's shoulders, but the vampire just fell back down. Tom's head rolled to the side and Kelin saw a hole in his head. A literal hole behind his ear with beige and gray matter behind it.

The human hissed and had already jerked away before he stopped himself. Didn't Tom heal instantly for most injuries? Then again, he'd seen how the wounds left by Der's sword had taken their lazy time. And this was an absolutely fatal wound for a human, so how long might this take for Tom to recover from?

Tom's eyes rolled up into his head and he moaned. He sniffed, smelling changes in the air. "Hind you..."

Kelin whirled. The Blackhound kicked a piece of burning tent canvas off of his boot. He limped toward them and wrenched his already bloody sword out of its scabbard.

Kelin felt a whimper huddle and die in the back of his throat. Cold sweat laced his skin. There was the Blackhound and he was weaponless!

Tallor's upper lip curled back. He nodded to Kelin's sword on the ground. "Pick it up."

Der kicked and literally tried to throw the water out of her way. Was Goldie still alive? Would he recover? What about Kelin and Jakkobb and the others? Had she saved them?

Another coughing fit attacked her. She stumbled through the waves and onto the sand, which sucked at her boots with every step. Several soldiers, she didn't know whose, had sprinted toward the shore as the dragon had flown overhead.

Her gaze barely bounced off of them; it was nailed to two silhouettes up on the hill. She could recognize Kelin by shadow, and she had seen the canopy crash down there, and if anyone in history could survive that fall...

The shouts of the nearby soldiers didn't even enter her ears. One of them stepped in her path, waving his sword. She raised the Pallens sword in return and never broke stride.

Kelin's sword flashed. His feet slid backward toward Tom's cocoon. Oh, why was he here? Facing the Blackhound! But he already knew his answer. He had to save Chloe, to save the continent apparently, and even to save Tom too. Somebody had to.

He was so very thankful that the Blackhound had been injured in his fall, or this would have already been over. His head was inches above this enemy, but Tallor had long arms and thus the reach of a taller man. He also fought left-handed, and Kelin found himself parrying almost too short on his right side. He felt as if he were fighting a mirror.

The Blackhound's sword slipped around his hilt and the tip seared down his palm. Kelin yelped. His grip became instantly hot and slick, but he refused to drop his weapon.

And yet Tallor's move had put his blade low enough. Kelin circled his point around the other sword and sliced at Tallor's arm.

There! It was only a small cut, but it was a victory.

His own arm stung. He spared a flicker down to his arm where an identical cut was blossoming on his own. He looked back at the Blackhound. There wasn't even any blood on his sleeve! The cloth was sliced, but not his skin. Kelin had felt the pressure on his sword; he knew he'd cut flesh!

"Not bad," Tallor commented. He limped a little closer and suddenly forced his blade to slide all the way down Kelin's curved one and trapped Kelin's sword in between the quillions and blade. He twisted.

The adamantis quillions bent the steel of Kelin's sword. Metal shrieked and the curved blade shattered. The pieces caught the sunlight like mirrors as they spread into the air. Kelin barely had time to gasp.

Then Tallor thrust.

Kelin didn't even feel the sword slide between his ribs and jump sideways, but he felt every heartbeat in that moment as its own thunderclap.

The Blackhound withdrew his blade. Kelin staggered back, wide eyed and staring. He inhaled as much air as he could as his knees seemed to disappear beneath him. He held his breath as he gripped his chest. His hand crawled and his fingers dipped into the cut. He felt his heartbeat trembling with his fingertips. Tom stared at him, and he couldn't make out any expression in those emerald eyes. He was also trapped to his fate.

Kelin continued to hold in his last breath, but he couldn't hold it forever. He exhaled and he was gone.

"No! NO!"

He's just wounded! He's just wounded! Der felt a sob biting her throat more fiercely than the dragon's flame. Her legs pumped numbly up the hill.

She climbed as if she were flying. She didn't even notice the ground beneath her feet or feel the distance. All she saw was the Blackhound.

He brought his sword on guard. She hurtled over a silver cocoon. It was starting to struggle on its own. She didn't even notice what it was. She swung the Pallens sword with all of her strength.

Tallor parried, and failed to riposte. "That sword!"

She didn't hear him, and attacked again. The swords flashed in the light as they danced together. She threw all of her weight behind the Pallens blade.

Der felt her sword already falling behind the beat. It was the same sensation as when she sparred Strival; she was outclassed.

She didn't care. She would jump that wall.

The Blackhound beat her back, and her feet left grooves in the dirt as she fought not to retreat. Her back foot nudged Kelin's body. Behind that, something was fighting to shed its cocoon.

The tip of Tallor's sword suddenly dipped and bit at her knee. Der tripped and crashed down, face to face with Kelin. His face was blank. Empty.

The sword seemed to drag her arm over her head, or maybe it was ancient, animal instincts that caused her to parry. Tallor's blade impacted hers, but Der barely noticed. She stared at her best friend's vacant face.

He heaved his sword savagely against hers again. The impact reverberated through both their arms. Again and again, the Blackhound threw his sword down on Der's. She held hers up over her head in strength defiant of his savage blows.

He raised his sword up to his chest with both hands and readied to bring it down again.

Der lashed out, and the Pallens sword sliced across his shin. He hissed and his balance wavered for half a second. Blood soaked through his trouser leg.

He thrust down anyway. Der blocked his blow again, but he yanked her sword out wide, and since his sword was on the inside, there was now nothing between her and it. He swung the blade back at her.

A white hand suddenly shoved the blade back. Tom brought his hand back and wrapped it around Der's waist. He leapt up into the air like a firework.

Der coughed and tried to grab at Kelin as they rose. "No! We can't leave him!"

Tom's face twitched. He tried to open his mouth and then snapped it shut. Anger and confusion flared across his features. "K-K-Chloe!"

"Not here! Oh gods, Kelin, no! Goldie!" She pointed at the gigantic golden mountain. "Be alive, be alive! Oh gods please!" The Pallens sword nearly slipped from her grasp as she struggled against Tom.

Goldie reared up his head. He trembled to hold up the weight of his own skull. His massive heart raced with a thunder and a fury of ten thousand wild stallions. His stomach burned like a wild fire. A hunger was erupting inside of him that he had never known before.

His body moved without consulting his mind. He roared with the power of a thousand hurricanes and his claws squeezed into the body of the silver dragon. With one paw, he brought up the still warm meat to his massive jaws.

He never saw both armies fleeing in all directions at the sight of him.

Chapter Twenty Six

Injured

That sword! That fucking sword! And a gold dragon! Out of nowhere!

Tallor's white fingers curled around the corners of the massive mahogany desk. It had taken four men with bent knees and backs to totter it inside his tent.

He flipped it over with his fingers. The storm roaring through him gave him the strength. Maps and battle plans scattered into the air as the desk tipped.

The Blackhound spun on his good leg and limped over to his own furious expression, glaring right back at him. A muddy puddle might have been a better mirror than the one hanging off the tent pole. The surface had bubbled. His nose looked squashed and twice as large in the reflection. This mirror was a three-legged pygmy goat to the royal stallion on the *Maelstrom Fury*.

His blue eyes, wide and furious, met their squinted and oblong reflections. "If you're having a nightmare, wake the hell up."

Suddenly, he wrenched it off the pole and smashed it against his knee. He didn't even flinch as some of the glass fragments shot up in the direction of his face.

Little mirror pieces reflected silver in the light of many candles. Shattered silver...

The silver dragon was dead!

He ground his teeth and turned away from the mirror fragments. How could this have happened?

They'd been working together since the beginning. As long as he could remember! He couldn't have done most of the things history had credited solely to him without that dragon.

And they'd done everything right too! They had known exactly how to defeat the dragons the dragoons had sent. They knew they could step on the army that the coastal kingdoms had thrown together.

They'd planned for everything except some ridiculously insane girl with the largest dragon in the entire world!

Sure, he'd heard the stories of Derora Saxen of Riversbridge, the same as everyone else. And just like everyone else, he figured they'd either been exaggerated or, more likely, made up in a pub somewhere. And he had had a spy right there who had wrote about her more than he'd cared to read!

He'd never even heard of Riversbridge, and he'd damn well studied this continent before launching an army onto it.

Tallor slumped down and leaned his back against the pole. Fire spread across the wound on his shin. He'd been cut, and with that sword!

Coda poked his nose around the corner of the bedroom. With his tail between his legs, he skirted around the tipped up desk. The dog buried his snout against Tallor's thigh.

"You're still here." But he didn't pet the dog. Instead, he glared dully at the mess of maps and battle plans strewn across the ground.

The papers were nothing but fire-starters without the silver. He shook his head again. It was a depth he couldn't fathom. It was as if the moon had suddenly vanished and the tides were attacking the coasts.

“Master!” Axon plowed into the room, trying to balance a tray of food in his trembling hands.

“What the hell are you doing, Axon?” Tallor growled. Coda jumped up and shrank back, nearly tripping over his own tail.

The Blackhound could see it in Axon’s terrified expression. He could see the faces of his entire army, every single one of them, in this man’s face. A girl and a gold dragon from nowhere had suddenly built a dam in the path of their flood. Suddenly, they weren’t so sure.

He could only pray that his men had seen how grievously beaten the gold was. With any luck, it’d die licking his wounds.

The lieutenant gulped. “Muh— more men have gone to ground, lord. Left in packs of ten or sometimes a score.”

Tallor ignored him. He knew he could still win. She was no longer an unexpected variable and if he could bait her into pulling a similar stunt again, she’d be dead. But did his soldiers know that? He was only as strong as they were.

“We need that child, Axon.”

The food tray clattered to the floor. “You want to try and recruit Derora Saxen?”

“What? No! The child. The one with the magic neutralizing power.”

“Oh, we don’t know where she is. But at least we know where our enemy’s army is going, though.”

“Do we still guard the tree paths?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tallor sighed and closed his eyes. “Then they’re going to fall back to Silver Dawn’s Horizon.”

Axon hastily bowed.

“Whoever holds that citadel holds the continent.” He opened up his eyes and glared resolutely at the canvas wall. “And they are not going to stop me from spreading my empire, my Pallens.”

He tried to imagine what the citadel looked like. Did clouds form around it because it was so elevated? He’d only seen it through his spy’s eyes. Had that girl had that sword there the whole time? Had Firth failed to report such a thing?

He’d banished it to Darkreign. Although, banished probably wasn’t the right word, even though everything banished in history seemed to be banished there. It had been a joke. He’d thrown that sword at the chemmen as, well, a consolation prize.

They’d found him. A few who had escaped the first banishment. He’d needed their help to overthrow the last ruler of the Empire, and they’d thirsted for vengeance on the Empire and the elves like a vampire thirsts for blood. They’d promised him immortality for aiding them, and Tallor had to betray them first. He had watched how they treated those who weren’t chemmen. He knew they would never honor such a promise. So, he’d thrown in the sword as their trophy against the fall of Midan.

Those tavern stories, they said that this girl had led an invasion into Darkreign and returned. That was against Darkreign’s single rule: no one comes back. And yet she was here with the sword, and the preposterous idea of voluntarily charging into that realm reconciled easily with the girl who’d tried to lasso a dragon. How was she still alive, exactly?

Because of her, he'd lost the battle. The coalition had lost too, but they hadn't promised their men an easy and undeniable victory. They hadn't promised serfs raised up from hovels the pledge of restoring a beautiful and bountiful civilization. And now some bitch had made him a liar.

He rubbed his face, and Axon's ugly maw was still staring down at him. He said, "We need to make sure they don't fall back to Horizon, not in force."

"Right, lord. Uh, but if they fall back and we're not there, can't we just continue claiming our lands for Pallens?"

"We'd never be able to hold them, not until we've broken the backs of the dragoon armies. And we can't do that if they retreat to Horizon. If they believe they can hunt us down, they'll stay away from there. So, we need them to believe that they can."

"Is that what we're doing, lord? Just leading them away? Not retre..."

"Yes," Tallor cut in sharply, "And right now, they're sending riders to gather an army that can kill us. All the kingdoms, Tenmar, Urael, Thealith, and perhaps even Quon. Not to mention the might of Silver Dawn, the Blue Farers and Steel Eagle. All of them, this time, and not just whoever was nearby in the coastal kingdoms." He sighed again. "Whoever holds that fortress will win this war. Hence, we have to keep them out of it."

"So why don't they just fall back there for the winter and let us go?"

A bitter laugh escaped Tallor's throat. "Because then we could do much more damage while they take their time to rally. Their weakness is that they're warriors who don't like folks gettin' killed," he said, mimicking the local country dialect. "It'll be simple enough to keep them away."

"But why can't we just run up and take Horizon while they're after us?"

"Because it's Horizon. Centum Wars survivors, who built it on the mistakes and paranoia from those wars. Nothing can puncture those walls or smash those gates. I'm not even mentioning its magical defenses."

A smile trembled on Axon's lips. "Then it's a good thing that Silver Dawn kicked that Saxon woman out, eh?"

Tallor just stared ahead.

"I mean, my lord, she's just a youth."

"She's old enough to kill a dragon." His eyes unfocused and he balled his fists. "Let me tell you, Axon, youth is nothing but disillusion, full of hope and what you so desperately want to believe is love and truth and all that shit. The sooner you say farewell to youth, the sooner you see the world as it truly is."

"You said that you didn't even remember yours, lord."

"Exactly, and I'm better for it. Youth is a time for dreams, and this Derora Saxon will have to realize that's all she is."

Der poked herself in the broken ribs. More broken ribs, great. She had no idea when they had given up on her. She looked around the interior of the wagon and thought: brown. The canvas was brown, the wood was brown, the blankets someone had rolled around her were brown. And the view of the world outside through a small line where the frame didn't quite meet the canvas revealed mud, also brown.

She pushed up the canvas. Outside, it looked like the whole of the army was limping down the road. Snow spiraled down from the sky and was starting to stick to the soldiers' cloaks.

She dropped the canvas back in place and tried to jerk it tight against the wind. Beside her, the Pallens sword lay propped up against the interior wall of the wagon. Next to that, Goldie had been buried in a ball of blankets. He'd fallen asleep whimpering. All of his wounds were now as miniature as the rest of him, and just as deep. She was surprised he'd survived this far, and was worried he wouldn't make it through the day.

And then there was Tom, sans blanket. A large white bandage had been stuck up behind his ear.

She frowned. There were recent memories of Jakkobb yelling at her until his face was as red as his armor. She wondered if that had just been a dream though.

Tom met her gaze. "The gold beast will be fine," he slurred. "Some interesting dragoons have been leaning over him."

She sniffed. "Still smells bad."

He tried to wrinkle his nose, and then gave up. "But they say it'll take him years to heal."

Der slouched and tried to push thoughts of Goldie out of her mind. She glanced over at Tom. "Why can't you speak?"

He just glared.

"What, exactly, did the Blackhound do to you?"

His emerald gaze heated up. "Not sure." He stared up at the wagon's canvas ceiling. "Can't really move left side; and some memories aren't there."

"If you can't remember them, how do you know they're missing?"

"Because." He tried to roll his head over to hide the bandage. "It'll heal. Just the way it was."

"Oh. Well. In that case, I never ran you through on my Pallens sword, and any conflicting memories that surface are lies you're telling yourself."

The look he shot her was as flat as the surface of a pond.

"It really was him." Her words dropped into the world. "The Blackhound."

"Still not dead." Tom stared into nothing.

"But, the chemmen recipe, I mean, you have to kill—"

Tom rolled his eyes. "I doubt murdering an extra hundred or so people would have been a hindrance to him, considering the millions that died in the fall of Pallens. Of course, now we have the secret of immortality if anyone else ever needs it and doesn't mind being a murderer."

Der imagined that diary burning. Written like a bread recipe!

"How do you think he wrested that from the chemmen?" the vampire drawled, still slurring.

She shrugged. Beneath them, the wheels of the wagon rolled along the freezing mud. "Where are we going?"

"Silver's Dawn big fortress place."

"You mean Horizon?"

"Yes. Couldn't recall the name. You know, I've never been there." He twisted on his side. "And I can't. I can't go near those wards, not with the heart. And Chloe can't either."

Der frowned. "She's in Arbourn. Elloan. In fact, I'd thought that we'd be going there instead of Horizon."

Tom's emerald eyes exploded wide and he jerked up into a sitting position. "No! We can't! I can't go ba— I'm not going to Arborn!" He forced a laugh. "A vampire in the elven kingdom? Do you know what magical alarms and traps I'd set off on those borders?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Well, I figured if the chemmen could sneak around those so could you."

"Never," he said firmly, and then immediately added, "I'm not surprised at all that you tried to fight the Blackhound one on one. The only dark paladin in history."

"Great. Just another follower of Sennha. I think we've pissed this god off."

"I was under the impression he was already pissed off. Permanently."

"So is the Blackhound, apparently," she replied.

"He had the stroke, Der, he was going to kill you. So you owe me your life, again."

"And you owe yours to—"

The thought that she'd been refusing to think bubbled up and grabbed her from behind. Sobs burst out of her throat. "He was my best friend! My best friend! He should've never been on that hill!"

Tom's white hand pressed lightly on her arm. "He saved me, Derora."

She snarled. He jerked his hand back as if a friendly dog had just snapped at him. "You can take care of yourself!" Tears stung against her skin in the freezing air.

Anger spread like a bruise across Tom's face. He exhaled and the expression along with it. He said more gently, "No, apparently not." He snorted and turned his head away. "Do you think I shot myself in the head? I shot him!" He pulled his arms up to his chest. "He cheats."

Der scowled at him. "Oh, and you're the shining example of civilized fisticuffs?" She turned away and clawed at her tears, to wipe them off her face entirely. "What do you mean, he cheats?"

"I shot him. I remember that, but I got the wound. Saw it with your man too; Kelin landed a neat slice on the bastard's arm, but the wound showed up on his arm instead." His frown dug itself deeper into his face. "If I'd known, I could've tried to use the heart."

"Would that work?"

He glared harder. "I don't know."

"But I cut him." Der tried to swallow her sobs, to push them back down, to not think about Kelin. "I—" She gulped. "I landed a touch on his shin." She reached down up, wincing at her ribs, and rolled up her trouser leg. "No wound."

Tom glowered. "Then why do you get to hurt him and I don't?" His emerald eyes fell to the Pallens sword. History condensed in the air. "...And he ordered that all Pallens weapons be destroyed..."

Der turned her face away. "So? It's not like I can beat him anyway."

"What!" Tom sat bolt upright for the second time. "You're the girl who pokes vampires in their fangs! You're the girl who stabbed a dragon in the eye while flying! You're the girl who led a raid into Darkreign and returned!"

She didn't look at him and scratched at her tears. "He was already injured, and I couldn't do it."

Tom paused. "Then who can?"

She shrugged. "Strival, I guess."

The vampire shook his head. "Who doesn't have a Pallens weapon."

Der heaved herself out of her seat, looking away from Tom and her sword. She slipped out over the tailgate and dropped onto the freezing mud. She pulled her hood up and became just another soldier limping through the thickening snow.

The warriors huddled together in groups of two or ten. They didn't march; they shuffled. Der looked at their boots. Snowflakes sparkled against the darkened mud and blood stains.

How many others had lost their best friends? How many others were wondering what should have been?

She remembered when she and Kelin had toddled across the bridge in their village. It was just a little stone arch bridge with no railings to boast. She was falling off when Kelin, just as much of a toddler, had yanked her back on. They'd been too small to recall the incident, but their parents had joked about it so much that they'd invented the memories.

And now... And now... She'd failed to catch him.

"Told they're retreating back to Alscane," a voice with gravel for tonsils muttered. A consenting murmur echoed back through his mates. She slowed down and the nearest knot of soldiers slowly gained on her. She listened.

"Don't know if we'll even make it to Tenmar's border, not if the winter takes a swipe at us," a second voice added.

"Worst of the wounded a-goin' to Horizon," the first voice spat. "Lucky bastards."

"And the rest of us need to go back and storm Alscane," the second voice said. "We can't let him dig in!"

"Alscane?" a new voice yelped. Der glanced over her shoulder to see a very short soldier, with worry deeply embedded into his face jogging to catch up from behind. "You have news of there? My daughters—"

The soldier with gravel in his throat whirled on the small man. The little man flinched. He wasn't a soldier, Der noted. He carried a sword, but the man looked like a banker. Of course, dragoons were bankers too, so she mentally revised his description to merchant.

"Traitor!" the second soldier roared. "You're one of them that fought with the Blackhound!"

The little man threw up his hands up in front of his face. "They made me, they made me! I ran away as soon as I could!"

Der opened her mouth and then stopped. Snow drifted in front her eyes. Why bother? This was probably happening a hundred times over throughout this army. Besides, she was already injured. And was it prudent to argue with her allies?

Her breath seemed to stick in the air and freeze.

The first soldier loomed. The merchant shrank even closer to the ground. "I had to! I was just trying to survive! I ran away as soon as I got the chance!"

"Yeah, and yer gonna hang for killin' our mates!"

"I didn't kill anyone, sir, please!" The little man dropped to his knees, still waving his hands above his face.

"Alright, alright! Enough!" Der skittered to the side and pulled her cloak's hood over her face as another warrior marched up from behind her. The Blue Farer named Edwin, she recognized the scar on his face, shouldered past her toward the soldiers.

The dragoon clapped his hands. "He said he didn't kill anyone."

"Yeah?" the first soldier snarled. "And who says he ain't lying?"

Edwin stepped between the merchant and the soldiers. "Does he look like he could've killed anyone?"

All of the soldiers except the first let their gazes fall. The original speaker continued to glare hot enough to melt the snow that was digging into the well worn wrinkles around his eyes. He looked Edwin up and down and finally snorted as he turned away. The other soldiers hurried after him.

"Thank you," the merchant breathed. He bowed to the dragoon. "Thank you. I've never been a warrior, sir, and I didn't want to be, but they were going to kill me! Never been so scared in my life – my trousers are still filthy! When that silver dragon strafed by overhead and shot lightning! With someone on its nose! Was it true about Derora Saxen?"

She flinched at her own name. Killing the silver seemed years ago already. She trudged along behind them and limped. Well, she didn't have to fake the limp at least.

"Yeah," Edwin agreed. "That's what the Silver Dawn captain said."

"And I saw that gold dragon ate that dead silver one! Ate him, sir! It was terrible! I'm thankful that beast disappeared too!"

Der dropped her head and kept on limping. She listened to the shouts and creaking of wagon wheels as the wounded going to Tenmar City and those going to Horizon began to split into two different caravans.

The merchant hesitated, "Sir, are we going to lose this war? We are... It's hopeless. I mean, not even Derora Saxen or you dragoons could kill him."

Edwin shrugged. "Just one battle with no victor. War's just starting." He dragged his hand through his hair. "Hey, at least there haven't been any more weird earth events."

The merchant bobbed his head. "Of course. I'm going to Tenmar City. Do you think you can help me find my daughters?" He twisted his fingers together. "I just, I just, where are my daughters and why am I not with them?"

Der clenched her fists. Why wasn't I there for my best friend?

"I can't do anything for them!" the little man wailed. Edwin gripped his shoulder. The man continued, "The judicar from the order of Zine said they'll help when we get to Tenmar City, but is there truly anything they can do?"

The dragoon tried to smile and failed. "I don't know. Hopefully."

Around them, the wagon trains set apart in two different directions.

Der limped faster. She'd had the chance to join Zine's order, and she should've taken it. Maybe Cacilin had been right and she could've become a judicar and gotten god-granted powers. Then she could've used those powers to kill Tallor while they were both falling from that canopy thing; and then maybe Kelin needn't have died!

"It doesn't work in that fashion."

She whirled. The rumble of the wagons and walking soldiers dimmed as she stared up and up at the warrior suddenly beside her. He was tall, even taller than Jakkobb. Dark hair framed a face that looked as mobile as stone. The man's jaw was set. A hint of sympathy sang in his brown eyes. His

armor was flawless and without any hint of decorative trim. The light bouncing off the snow didn't shine as brightly as the light that radiated from his armor.

"Your friend was where he needed to be. Tom couldn't have saved you if Kelin hadn't saved him. He knew that someone had to stand between the Blackhound and the continent. He was a hero."

Her brow bunched up. "How do you know...?"

"I saw it all."

She looked him up and down. "You were in the battle."

"Yes. I couldn't have done anything to save your friend, but we are very thankful he saved you."

Der squirmed. The stranger's gaze was as heavy as a mountain.

"You know the Blackhound claims to be the king of Pallens, an appellation he most certainly has not earned. This isn't what Pallens is, and you know that."

Her fingers reached for the Pallens sword only to grasp at an empty belt. She looked away. "Doesn't matter. It's just a name. The real one's long gone." She looked back up to the man, and didn't even try to hide her tears. "I lost my best friend to an undead empire! I wasn't there to protect him, and that's why we— that's why I'm doing all of this! I don't care if I die; it's everyone else I'm supposed to save!"

"And you think if you'd been a judicar that you would just be given the power to save everyone? In the entire world?"

She blinked in confusion and then shook her head. "No. But maybe more than I did today!"

"You saved the lives of almost the entire army today. They would have been the silver dragon's toys if not for you."

The thought finally caught up to her. "How do you know about the judicar thing? Have you been talking to Cacilin?"

The man smiled stiffly.

Her eyebrows shot up.

The man's smile vanished. "You will never be a judicar, Derora Saxen."

Her feet shuffled to a stop. She sighed and watched the resulting fog. "I know."

"You never wanted that. You never wanted to belong to a god, I believe you said."

"No, that's true. How do you know that?" She looked him up and down.

"But judicars don't belong to their god. It's a mutually agreed arrangement. It takes some of the mystery and romance out of it, I know, but that's what it is. There is no servitude or selling of souls as people believe. The god asks tasks of his champions and the people ask for powers in return."

She frowned. "I thought it wasn't that simple."

"It's not, but you're looking for the simple answers."

"And I thought that each judicar or avatar or whomever got different powers. You mean they get to choose?"

"Sometimes, other times not."

"Well, I'd wish for lightning. I could've toasted the Blackhound and it would be over."

"It's not about wishing, Derora, it's about asking. And that's the power to kill, how would lightning ever protect anyone?"

Her eyes creased in pain. "But I could've killed the Blackhound and protected Kelin!"

“Kelin was a warrior too. You know that you won’t die in bed either. It was a good and honorable death.”

“Tom said that Kelin even got a touch on the Blackhound, and that he got the wound instead! That was anything but honorable!”

The warrior continued to walk in silence for a moment. “And this is why we thank Kelin for saving you. The Blackhound has a power called reflection. It’s not so much forbidden as never written in the mortal world.”

“What? Then how does he have it? Was it lost in the fall of Pallens or something?”

“No. It is also a gods-granted power. And not from any god you’d call upon.”

“How do you know this? You’re a judicar too, right?”

The man smiled and shook his head. “Well, no, and neither are you because you didn’t want to be bound by my order. I heard you.”

The gulp froze in her throat. She suddenly didn’t know what to think, or do, or say. “Zine,” she managed to gasp. And then all the awe evaporated as her rage came flooding back. “Why not help me before? Why did Kelin have to die?”

He replied calmly but in a voice as stern as steel, “We tried. You didn’t listen. Anyone else who just knew the holy language would have sought out why. You had the opportunity in Alscane to join us, and yes, I understand that you didn’t comprehend it. We sent Cacilin to meet you. We led you to King Midan’s sword. But you never came to us.”

The color of her face faded to the color of the falling snow. “I, uh, Midan’s. You mean I could have stopped...”

“His death is only the Blackhound’s fault, Der. You did what you could. However, we are down to our last chance before Solquin becomes part of the undead empire, as you so eloquently stated.”

“You’re desperate,” she said flatly.

“We are not, but you are.” The god of war smiled sadly. “There is only one paladin in the world, and his empire will not be King Midan’s.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

Second Blow

Der pushed her boot through the snow and let it fall until it crunched against the frozen soil below. She repeated with the other foot. Again and again. She left grooves in the snow behind her. Spike walked as if hobbled trying to keep pace next to her.

Jakkobb exhaled as he approached the unicorn and woman. “Der, you’re supposed to be riding in the wagon.”

She stared dully ahead. “Tom’s talking too much.” She dragged her feet along. “You know, for a taciturn, stealthy creature, he rants a lot.”

The knight fell into the unhurried step with them. “I think you just bring that out in people.” They trudged slowly onward. “And you’re being quiet.”

She shrugged.

Spike raised and tilted his head at Jakkobb. The knight ceased walking. “Der, we’re soldiers. We all know this pain. I lost my best friend too once. You know, the earth warlock I was telling you about when we first arrive at Horizon. I gave you his compass.”

Her head bobbed up, and then guilt attacked. She hadn’t been dwelling on Kelin’s death. She’d been worrying about the Blackhound and what Zine had said. There were just too many things happening! And she hadn’t been thinking of her best friend!

The tears mounted their assault on her eyes. She hadn’t been thinking about her best friend! The sobs and shoulder-quaking, energized by the tears’ success, hastened their own attack.

Spike bumped her shoulder with his nose, but gently. Jakkobb said, “Everyone who has ever fought him has died. We never knew how skilled he actually was, but we know who he was better than.”

“Oh. So you’re saying that Kelin was a dead man no matter what?”

Jakkobb paused. “Yes, the moment he was against the Blackhound, he was. I wish it never happened, but it was a good death, Der.”

“It was a needless death. He didn’t have to be there. I failed to take care of the threat when I— I tried, sir, I tried! But I wasn’t good enough either! I mean I killed a dragon, a dragon! And I still couldn’t beat him! How good does one have to be?”

No one person can best him, Der. History has proven that, Spike said. For now, it’s about improving our chances, together.

“Yeah, well, we’re playing one man down!”

They walked on through the ever-deepening snow.

Spike pawed at the ice below. *What I’m curious about is how he found the chemmen’s secret.*

“What about your friend, Jakkobb?” Der snapped. “What did he do to become immortal?”

Jakkobb inhaled sharply. “You didn’t know him, Der, and you’re hurting, so I’ll leave this one behind. But Rowan was the most stupidly honorable man I’ve ever known, and that’s not the chemmen way.”

“Neither is spreading your own empire!” Der burst. “He’s not killing everyone like they do, no, he’s making them work for him. And why now? Why now? Why when we’re alive? Oh wait, Kelin’s not anymore!”

Jakkobb sighed. “I don’t know, Der. I guess he’s been hiding in the Expanse, which is worse than the Wild Lands.”

“No,” she spat. “He’s taken over Pallens. And we didn’t know. No one goes there. It’s, it’s like a graveyard! We hail the dead, but we don’t actually visit them. We could’ve known!”

“And we didn’t, Der. That’s how it happens.” He quickened his pace.

Ahead of them, Alluvius, pale and shaking, stumbled toward them with wide eyes.

“What happened?” Jakkobb demanded.

The part human pointed further down the wagon train. “I just, I just. There was this corporal, and he was fine, completely fine, and, and... He said that he’d taken a hit on his helmet the other day, but he was fine, and then all of a sudden he just grabbed his head and started screaming. I tried to help him, but he was dead before a surgeon arrived.”

“Blood pooled in his brain,” Jakkobb said flatly. “It happens.”

“But he was fine...”

Spike bobbed his nose up toward the sky. *And we’re about not to be.*

Der held up her hands against the blowing snow as they arched their necks backward to stare up at the low hanging clouds and saw a shadow darker than the surrounding aerial mists. It had looked like the form of a dragon without a body.

Something colder than a winter storm gripped her spine. Did dragons have ghosts too? She gazed up into the gray as high as she could see.

The shadow swooped through the clouds again. This time, the edges of its wings and claws were sharp and well defined. A hint of crimson splashed through the snow.

“Uh, Der.” Alluvius tugged on her sleeve.

“Don’t look to me. I got the last one, and I’m not sure what can be done against an undead dragon ghost.”

Jakkobb blinked. “What are you talking about? That’s Strival!”

The red dragon floated out of the clouds. Ahead of them, a small cheer began to rise into the blowing storm. The snow had thinned enough for them to see a smaller, more efficient wagon train, and the ranks of almost all of the Silver Dawn army marching in step.

The army split like a moving river, without breaking step, to allow the wounded train to keep their path in the center of the road.

Der and Alluvius kept their attention on the red dragon. The beast wore a harness that boasted a rider in gold armor. With the air and ease of a hunting hawk, the dragon landed.

Strival swung off the saddle, and his boots kicked up sparks against the dragon’s scales as he slid down the rope. His armor sparkled, even in the muted light of the snowstorm. He marched toward them like an entire army all by himself.

Der sagged. The last time they’d met, he’d banned her from his order. But Spike was standing behind her and slinking away would probably draw more attention.

Jakkobb saluted. Alluvius too. Der just stared ahead. Jakkobb barked, "Good to see you in good health, sir!"

"Aye, you too." Strival's gaze barely flickered across Der. "Your word arrived safely. So, it truly is the Blackhound."

"Yes, sir!"

Strival's face darkened. The red dragon's expression mirrored the knight-commander's as much as possible. The commander said, "Well, we'll have to ponder how such a thing is possible after we've solved this problem. I want every unwounded dragoon warrior in your ranks to march with us, no matter what order."

The knight-captain swallowed. "Sir, um, if you're here, who is in command of Horizon?"

"You are," Strival replied calmly. "I suggest you get there."

Jakkobb saluted again. "Yes, sir!"

Alluvius nudged the snow in front of him with his boot. "What's going to happen now, sir?"

"Now..." Strival rolled his gaze over his shoulder toward his army. "Now, all the dragoon armies, and the proper armies of the kingdoms of this continent, including the other races, are going to end it."

"Alscane," Jakkobb said. "That's where his army has retreated to."

"Thanks to you we know that. Also, I have my agents verifying. Too bad they've saturated their ranks with so many hostages or this could already be over." He bent his neck to look up at the red dragon, who snorted a blossom of fire.

Der let her shoulders slouch and she walked away. The knights and Alluvius stepped out of her way.

Strival sighed. "We know. Now," his voice sharpened, "I've left a small crew at Horizon, mostly our new soldiers from last year's candidates. Gratefully, all this mess started before we took in this year's candidate class."

Jakkobb inflated. "Sir, I strongly disagree with charging me with Horizon."

The commander raised his eyebrows. The other knight froze. Strival said, "Who else is there? It's been quite some time since there was an enemy dangerous enough for me to leave Horizon. You're the most senior captain left alive."

"Sir, I—"

"It's an order, captain, I give those out. Now, mount up on Spike and you fly to my citadel, right now."

Jakkobb and Spike exchanged a glance. "Yes, sir," the knight replied.

Der watched the wounded train drive deeper into Silver Dawn's split ranks. The dragoon soldiers saluted, and many in the train half-heartedly saluted back.

She let her legs give out beneath her and thumped her rear down into the snow. She looked around; no more gods seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. A few days ago, she would've said yes before they could finish their request. Now, doubts captured her voice every time she tried to open her mouth.

It wasn't fair! Why did Kelin have to die before they asked? Or had she just been too thick-skulled?

“We heard,” a voice that made the snow glow whiter twirled out of the storm. Der looked up. It wasn’t a god, it was just the king of the elves.

Edillon offered a small smile as he sat down beside her. “Poor Thalon and Chloe haven’t stopped bawling since we heard. Where’s Alluvius? Has something happened to him as well?”

Der blinked. She shook her head. “No, he’s fine. Around here somewhere. But why are you here?”

“Couldn’t get to a tree path. All the nearby ones are guarded. He must have a map from the Pallens library or something, I don’t know. Anyway, the safest place turns out to be Horizon since we can’t get to Arborn.”

“No, why are you here? Surely, there’s another way.”

He shrugged. “Still looking for it. Both my knights died when we tried to take a tree path.” His face briefly pinched and then he shook his head. “I never thought there would be a day I could say anything about death without a tear.”

She watched his stern features for a moment. “I’m sorry. Too bad, Long Range Palace has got to be safer. For you and for Chloe.”

“We were going to Elloan, remember?” He shrugged. “Even though I am legally allowed to do whatever I damn well want, I can’t bring other races to the palace. My people would doubt me even more than they do now. I have to ask, what would they do if they knew I just tried to sneak Thistle, Thalon and Chloe to a tree path into the kingdom? Thistle’s chemmen for the gods’ sakes.”

Der snorted. “In some ways, you’re more like the chemmen than you’d want to admit.”

Edillon hissed and then sighed. “In small ways. I’m working on it, but it’s going to take more time than I can imagine. I’m still hearing stories about how Lady Evelyn changed her name when she married a human, and the scandal that was. They talk about it like it happened last month and the poor man’s been dead since the Fall.” He shrugged. “However, with the return of the Blackhound, I suppose old wounds from that war are aching again.”

Der found it easier not to think about it. She persisted, “Yes, but why are you here? Could’ve probably found a better hiding hole.”

“Because you were there for me.” He pressed a fur-lined glove against her shoulder.

And that was it. Huge, ugly sobs, bubbling with tears and snot, burst out of her lungs. Der hadn’t cried, not actually cried because of anything other than physical pain in years. Tears brought on by physical pain were different. She didn’t know how to truly cry until Kelin’s death.

As she wailed, the armies around them marched onward, the snow continued to play toss with the wind, and the world continued to turn.

Edillon leaned back. “I remember what Kelin told me once. There isn’t any advice that I can give you that you won’t learn for yourself. Death becomes a bittersweet memory.”

She gulped. “Pain’s not gonna fade and I don’t want it to! I don’t want to forget our friendship!”

The king tried to smile. “I don’t think you ever will. You know, in the end, he was standing right where you would be. He was a hero.”

“That’s just it! Will he be remembered as one? Everyone is just going to remember him as just another in the vast number of those killed by the Blackhound. Nobody’s going to know that he made us laugh, or that he was a damn good blacksmith. The fact that he never bothered to shave or his smile. He’s just another number!”

“Not to us,” the king soothed. “We will remember him.”

“Was his body recovered?”

“What?”

“Was his body recovered?” she repeated. “We need to send him home. He’d promised he’d go, and he’s not going to be an oathbreaker.”

“Uncle?” Chloe pulled her chin up over the tailgate. “Are you in this one?”

Tom tried to raise his head, and only managed to pull up one side of his face. “Chloe? What in the corners of hell are you doing here?” He dropped his weight, and his skull bounced up against the blanket that was the only shield he had between his skin and the dreaded wood of the wagon.

She heaved herself up over the tailgate, kicking against the wood in order to clear the last few inches. It was then that he noticed that she was crying.

She rubbed her eyes and crawled up next to the vampire. “Kelin’s dead, Uncle!” She collapsed next to him.

He tried to lift his arm. He could only stiffly wave it a few inches from his body. “I know.”

She wailed louder and dug her face into his chest. “He was always nice to us! He saved me!”

“He saved me too, Chloe. I’m so sorry.”

She curled up next to him, sobbing. He tried to throw an arm over her shoulders, but just gave up trying to move. He lacked enough control to do anything but accidentally swat her.

Thalon suddenly scrambled over the tailgate. The boy rolled up next to Chloe, biting his tongue and hiding his face in the rough blanket. Thistle followed behind the wagon silently.

“Why are you here?” Tom managed.

The chemman’s face remained blank. “Because this is the road to Horizon.”

Tom pushed his tongue up against his teeth. “Chloe and I can’t go there! Not with its magic!”

“She was there before,” Thistle replied evenly. “Lady’s Evelyn’s silverseed protected her. You know this.”

“You told me that she was watching from a distance! What happens if—”

“Doubtful. Looks like we’re going to miss the end of this one.”

Tom stopped. Just forcing himself to think was agony! His thoughts weren’t chasing through the rapids anymore. No, he’d somehow landed his mind in a fat lake, where he couldn’t streamline them all together.

He cleared his throat. “Right. Because they’re retreating to Alscane. Fine. I shouldn’t be here anyway. I still have a promise to stay away.”

“No!” Chloe barked, breaking through her sobs. “No, everyone stays together! We’re a family!”

Behind her, Thistle rolled his eyes. “Speaking of, here come our criminally mental sister and spoiled dandy brother who got into politics because of his father.”

“Der?” Thalon pulled himself off of the wagon’s bed.

Der trudged up to the tailgate and climbed inside without a word. Her tears had frozen in two streams down her cheeks. Edillon trailed behind the wagon, beside the chemman.

“Der,” Thistle said, “That judicar was looking for you.”

“Cacilin?” Tom said. “He survived too?”

“He’s not weak,” Thistle replied and nodded to the prone vampire.

The vampire sneered. “I was shot in the head by my own arrow!”

“Bolt,” Der corrected dryly. “Crossbows shoot bolts, not arrows.”

“Whatever!”

Thalon rested his head on Der’s knee. She patted his pale brown hair. “Are we going to be alright? I mean, what if the Blackhound wins? Chloe will never be safe.”

“Shh,” Der said, without conviction. “Strival’s here and he brought the best army in the world.”

“We don’t know if he can hurt the Blackhound,” Tom snapped, glaring at the wagon’s canvas roof.

She looked at her weapon, still propped up against the board. “Well, he can have the Pallens sword then. It’s not mine away, it was Midan’s apparently.”

The creaking of turning wagon wheels was the only sound. Tom narrowed his emerald eyes.

“Midan’s? Who told you to dream that one up?”

“Zine.”

He stopped, blinked, and then spittle erupted up from between his fangs. Thistle and Edillon froze where they were, while the driver, out of earshot and occupied with the two horses, kept the wagon going.

Tom tried to wave an accusing finger. “You’re lying!”

She slouched. “I don’t think I am.”

Thistle lengthened his stride quickly. “All the horrible things that she might be, Tom, a liar isn’t one of those.”

“I know, but!” Tom kicked himself away from her. He brought up his hand and made a warding sign with his fingers. “No more holy events!”

Thalon mimicked the sign. His fingers sizzled. “Ouch!”

Thistle sighed. “Don’t make unholy warding signs, Thalon,” he said, as if he’d just told his son not to hoard the cheese at the dinner table.

“I think it’s wonderful, Der!” Chloe suddenly smiled. “That means you can defeat him!”

Der stared ahead. She didn’t even blink.

Edillon chuckled. “You truly are a ball of sunshine, Chloe.”

Tom squeezed his eyes closed. “Bad analogy.”

“For you,” Thistle said.

Der eased her knee out from under Thalon’s head and scooted toward the tailgate.

“No, Der!” Chloe grabbed at her. “Where are you going?”

“I…” Der swallowed. “I just need to stretch.”

Tom snorted. “You’re as beaten as I am.”

“Don’t go!” Chloe wailed.

“I’ll be right here. Just…not.” She forced down the tailgate with her heel and slipped over the back edge. Thistle stood by to let her pass while Edillon raised his hand, but then wordlessly lowered it.

Der pressed her chin down against her chest as far as she could. The snow and the wind stung her skin, which felt paper thin and brittle. She walked against the wind and flow of the wounded train.

The last of Silver Dawn’s soldiers marched around her and formed back up into their ranks.

She stamped her boots against the snowy ground. The army marched east, the wounded train rolled west, and here she was, stopped in between. The snowstorm had paused overhead, but one look told that it was just regaining its breath for another onslaught. The snow was still falling thickly over Silver Dawn's ranks.

"You look as if you don't know which way to go," Cacilin said from behind her.

She whirled to see the judicar approaching.

"My condolences, Derora. We are without a great warrior now."

She started to trudge back to the west. "He wasn't a great warrior."

Cacilin matched her slow pace. "I say he was."

"Well, he wasn't. He was just a good fighter who did what no one else wanted to do."

The judicar nodded. "And yet it had to be done. I believe that makes him a great warrior."

Der shrugged and kept trudging.

Cacilin quickened his pace to keep up. "And I'm also aware of a rather non-traditional... request, shall we say? You're so lucky. Everyone else I've ever heard of, judicar or avatar, has had to work their way in their respective orders and prove—"

Der gulped and stared flatly at him. "Alright. I didn't tell anyone."

Cacilin grinned. "There were two, ah, beings in that conversation. The other one informed me."

"Oh. Well, he is your patron after all. But he also said that I'd never be a judicar, so you were wrong. Besides, I ain't changing myself to follow any god. I told you that."

His smile only stretched. "You see, this is why you should join the order. That way, you might learn that one chooses to follow a god because that god is what one chose to stand for."

"Er, what?"

"You're a good person, I know that. So, you follow the good gods. You're a warrior, so you might choose to honor the god of war. Understand?"

She shrugged and nodded at the same time.

"You do good because you are a good person. You don't need the gods for that."

She exhaled. "Caci, I honestly don't want a sermon."

He smirked, causing creases in his laugh lines. "Sorry. It just comes so normally to me now. What I'm trying to say is that you'll always be you, no matter what gods are in your life. That you can be sure of."

"Eh."

They walked at the end of the wounded train. Limping soldiers gave them passing glances and then concentrated back again on marching through the thickening snow.

She continued to press her chin against her chest. "So, why try to recruit me if Zine says I can't be a judicar? It don't make sense."

Cacilin hummed to himself as they walked. Finally, he asked, "Do you know the difference between judicars and paladins?"

She shook her head.

"Paladins represented the pantheon of good gods, not just one like Zine's judicars or Ahtome's avatars."

"And they don't exist anymore," she spat. "Everyone knows that one."

“There is one, apparently. Of course, the only dark paladin in history seems to play by his own rules.”

Der just shrugged again. She looked over her shoulder. Silver Dawn’s army had been completely swallowed by the storm.

She pushed her boots ahead through the blowing snow. Cacilin smiled and walked on ahead, leaving her to trail behind. She needed to ponder, but all she was thinking about was soft, fluffy snow. Ahead, the storm was already throwing down bucketfuls of snow and any moment, it would be here, too.

She feared what might happen to the wounded if they were trapped here on the long, lonely road to Horizon. She had no idea how many hours she lagged behind, but either the sun was going down or the clouds were thickening up tremendously. Shadows threw their blankets across the plain. She couldn’t even recall how many days they’d been on the march.

A couple of hustling soldiers accidentally pushed her from behind. They ran on by. Der turned and walked backward. She raised her hands up to her eyes and squinted. There was no one there. She was sure she was at the end of the train though.

Her fingers tugged toward the Pallens sword. Which wasn’t there! It wasn’t there! Her hand grasped at her empty belt. She whirled and hobbled to catch up to her wagon.

But which wagon was it? There were over twenty in the train!

Before her foot could land its next stride, explosions lit up walls of fire on the sides of the road and wooden shrapnel shredded snowflakes as they expanded out from the rising black smoke.

Der threw her hands over her head and sprinted. She hadn’t heard the thunder, but now she couldn’t hear anything except a high pitched drone. She knew it had been deafening, but she couldn’t remember hearing it.

Was this another earth event? Were they on a volcano or something? She’d never seen a volcano, but the answer didn’t feel right. The acrid smoke cut through the snow and lay like a saw blade across her nose. No, this was more like when the old mill had exploded in Riversbridge and nearly killed Kelin’s father.

All she knew for certain was that she had to get her sword.

Behind the wall of smoke, Tallor laughed. “Saltpeter, charcoal and sulfur! Works every time!”

Axon’s hand shook as he drew his sword and started to climb over the fiery chunks of wood, which had been barrels full of his master’s recipe not a minute ago.

The Blackhound chuckled. “Well, as long as it’s kept dry anyway. And the snow hid us from Silver Dawn, sure enough.” He let another laugh slip through his guard.

Axon’s knees clanged together beneath his ill fitting armor. “Where did you learn such magic?”

Tallor dropped the point of his sword. He exhaled. “It’s not magic, stupid. Ugh.” He flipped the tip of his blade sideways and thrust. Axon’s heart shredded before his eyes could widen.

He collapsed into the snow. Tallor rolled his eyes. “There has got to be more educated help on this continent somewhere.” He lifted his sword and his voice, “Attack!”

Cacilin shoved Edillon toward the wagon’s tailgate. “Must hide you too, Highness!”

The elf king looked around in bewilderment. "Who's doing this?"

"Don't know, but I can guess. You need to hide!"

Edillon nodded and hoisted himself over the tailgate and nearly landed on the propped up Pallens sword. Inside, Chloe clung to Tom's shoulder. The vampire was failing to sit up despite his angry efforts. Thalon had drawn both his long knives and crouched by the back.

Through the canvas, battle cries erupted like the howls of a starving wolf pack.

Outside, Thistle ran to the front of the wagon. The driver, an unwounded soldier from the battle, gasped in shock at the sight of Thistle's uncovered eyes. To the side of the chemman's head, he saw more soldiers clearing the burning lines of the explosions.

The chemman didn't waste time. He jumped up on the driver's seat and punted the man right off into the snow. Before the soldier had landed, Thistle had gathered and cracked the reins. The wagon jolted forward, leaving behind deep grooves of snow.

"That's the one!" Tallor leveled his bloody sword at the wagon wheeling dangerously fast through the snow. In fact, many wagons were speeding forward while his men rose around them like a pack of predators.

However, for someone to throw off the driver and lurch ahead like that... In that wagon was something to protect. He reached down with his free right hand and aimed the handheld firework ahead down the road.

Thistle watched a red light fly past the wagon. Ha! Someone had missed! He beat the reins again, and the already panicked horses neared as close to a gallop as they could. The wheels didn't completely turn at times, and the horses just dragged the frozen wagon forward. He bounced several inches off of the driver's seat. Behind him, he heard the shouts and swords clashing together.

What he didn't hear was Der shouting, "Wait!" as she sprinted to catch up to the wagon.

She cursed and continued her rapid limp through the snow. Two of Tallor's soldiers loomed in her path. She ground her teeth, ducked under a sword swing, rose up and just shoved one into the other.

She ran ahead before they regained their balance, but they were already gone from her attention. Her only focus was on reaching that wagon.

She inhaled sharply as she saw something silver flashing ahead of the wagon, rising up from the ground.

Thistle saw it too, and it was too late. He heaved on the reins, but the two panicked horses just plowed on ahead directly into the barbed razor wire. They screamed as it sliced into their legs.

Six men, three on either side, jerked the wire taut. The momentum of the two horses dragged the soldiers forward, leaving their boots to hollow out lines in the snow.

The steeds' momentum also dragged the razor wire deeper into their bodies, severing their front legs and rising higher through their chests and finally drew to a stop in their stomachs.

The wagon pushed on ahead and slammed into the dying bodies of the horses.

Thistle snatched the wagon frame. *His* momentum hadn't stopped and his body tried to fly forward as the wagon suddenly froze in its snowy grooves.

Inside the wagon, Tom yelled as the handle of the Pallens sword bounced off his forehead and back against the board it had been resting. His pale skin sizzled, creating a brief wave of heat.

Edillon and Chloe flew forward and ricocheted off the front wall of the wagon. Goldie, still wrapped in a bushel of blankets, sobbed in pain beneath the shields of cloth.

Der sprinted to catch up. The snow blinded her vision, but not enough. She could see soldiers closing in on the wagon from both sides. All her focus was on getting the Pallens sword. Then everything would be alright.

On the driver's seat, Thistle had his jet black sword halfway out of its sheath when the six men raised crossbows at him. With exaggerated slowness he raised his hands, but dropped his face to lower his hood further over his orange eyes.

Inside, they could hear boots crunching against the snow. Tom heaved himself up into a sitting position. "Chloe, behind me." The left side of his body still refused to do anything but remain slack.

The back canvas rustled over the tailgate, and Tallor the Blackhound ripped back the flap. He smirked, and his blue eyes blazed as coldly as the blizzard.

Chloe closed her eyes, brought her hands up to her ears and screamed. Edillon gasped and froze. Thalón's long knives fell from his limp fingers. Tom bristled and snarled, showing his fangs, but that was about all he could manage.

Tallor's smile widened. He braced one foot on the tailgate when two more boots crunched the snow behind him. He looked over his shoulder. Der's red face clashed against the blinding snow. Her empty hands were entirely naked.

"Ah. Derora Saxen. No stunt this time?" He climbed up on to the tailgate. "And next time, tell the gods not to send a child after me."

He batted Tom's arm down and pulled Chloe out by her yellow hair.

"No!" Tom screamed. He lunged with his useless arm and knocked over the Pallens sword. Funny, he thought in a detached sort of way, no one had ever even been able to move the thing except Der, and he'd just knocked it over.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Chloe clawed at his steel hand against her hair.

Tom floundered for the tailgate, like a mermaid caught on a hillside. He clawed his way forward with his a barely functioning arm. "N-No!"

He pushed the Pallens sword out of his way as he crawled across the blanketed floor. Its metal hummed against the motion, and Tom entirely failed to notice. Tallor yanked Chloe further away from the wagon. Tom heaved his corpse forward. He wasn't going to make it! He saw Der standing behind Tallor, unarmed and also useless.

His emerald eyes slipped sideways.

He grabbed at the hilt of the Pallens sword with his hand, muscles firing into action by desperation, and he hurled it out of the wagon and over Tallor's shoulder. His hand smoked where the metal had burned his skin.

Der dove for the weapon. She yanked it out of its sheath while she jumped forward, and then froze.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Tallor pressed his sword against Chloe’s chest. “She doesn’t have to be whole.” He spared a glance back at Tom and then looked back to Der. “Alright, I really must know, why are you working with a vampire?”

Whatever barbed comeback she might have had died in her throat. The taste of metal saturated her mouth, and that metal weighed down her tongue. The back of her mind thought, so this is what freezing in fear feels like, and it was doubly cold with the snowstorm. Was this what Kelin felt right before he died?

Tallor, watching Der, cut the cord holding Lady Evelyn’s silverseed from Chloe’s neck with the tip of his sword, his actions as precise as a surgeon. The seed bounced off the snow, and a barrage of flakes immediately buried it.

Der’s fingers turned white around the handle of her sword, and that was all she could do.

Tallor turned into the snowstorm, dragging Chloe behind him. His soldiers immediately fell into a line, shielding him and girl from the wagon.

Der hopped forward a step, still baring the sword out in front of her. The space between her and the Blackhound opened wider.

She couldn’t remember a time when she hadn’t charged. It was what she did. But her feet wouldn’t lift. She imagined this was what trying to jump a canyon felt like. She could never close the distance! Not without losing someone else!

The Blackhound smirked again and turned. A single sword barred his path.

“I may not have a Pallens sword,” Cacilin said calmly, “But I am not afraid to try my skill.”

The Blackhound saluted with his blade and shoved Chloe into the huge, armored hands of one of his soldiers. “I really don’t have the time, but I just can’t refuse a bout.”

Cacilin feinted and then thrust. Tallor parried and his sword, faster than the light reflecting from the blade, drove home through the judicar’s chest.

And that was it. Cacilin folded up and fell down. His heart stopped beating before he hit the snow.

Tallor stepped over his body and marched on into the blizzard. Chloe, crying and screaming, kicked uselessly against her captors as they vanished into the swirling snow.

“NO!” Tom collapsed over the tailgate on to the ground. He dragged his body across the freezing ground with his one functional hand. Elvish curses cut out of his mouth like the armies of hell.

Der blundered into the storm. She dashed ahead, and her foot tripped over Tallor’s most recent kill. Cacilin’s face even looked surprised, and she remember how easily Cacilin had beaten her in sparring.

No time for that! She jerked her head back up.

The snow stung her eyes. There were so many tracks from the initial assault. Which ones were theirs? She looked up and could see nothing beyond the blinding snow. The wind blew, filling all the tracks with fresh snow.

The coldness welling up in her chest was more frigid than the storm. Zine had said it was their last chance, and she had fumbled it!

Chapter Twenty Eight

Answering Destiny

Wood popped against the flames of the campfire. Steam hissed softly and curled up from the cloaks and clothing set up to dry by it. The wounded train had stopped. So had the snow.

Der stared at the fire. They were burning pieces of one of the wagons. The wounded it had been carrying didn't need it anymore; they'd died in the ambush.

Edillon almost dozed beside her. Who knew where Alluvius was? Goldie was curled up in his blankets as close to the heat as possible. He was too wounded to even lift his head.

Thistle had taken the screaming Thalon off somewhere, and Tom paced like a hunting cat that had just been denied its prey. Well, more limping and lurching than pacing, but Der didn't bring it up, especially not with the way his normally emerald eyes were glowing cherry red.

His pale fingers had turned blue from the cold. He apparently failed to notice.

Der had expected him to chase. She guessed his wounds were too great. She tossed part of a wheel spoke into the fire. "Good thing he didn't know you. How did he know we were here?"

Edillon blinked his eyes back open. "Huh? Oh. I guess he sent some of his army to march in our ranks. All they had to do was complain about being a coastal kingdom dweller who was press ganged into the Blackhound's service."

"Press ganged is for sailors."

"Eh." The king shrugged. "I'm not always excellent with Common slang, but you know what I mean. They could easily have kept an eye out for Chloe that way." He dropped his gaze. "We should have done a better job hiding her. That is our fault. I didn't even think about it." He bunched a fist.

Der just nodded her head. "Why do they want her? That's been a closed scroll to us for over a year now."

"I don't know." The king sighed. "At least you hurt them enough to force the army back toward the sea. Then again, since all the armies on Solquin are joining hands to crush him in Alscane, we may never know."

"Yeah. Or they could find out there." Der glanced around the wounded soldiers. "Everyone except us will know. 'Cause we're stuck here in the snow."

"No, we are *not* going to find out!" Tom's voice shredded the air. "Because we are going to save her!" A string of curses in several languages chased after his declaration.

Edillon sat up a little straighter. "Why are you cussing in elvish?"

Tom paused and glared. He lifted his upper lip and snarled.

Der jerked her thumb over her shoulder toward him. "You didn't know? He's half elf."

"What!"

"Gods damn you, Derora!" Tom yelled from outside the ring of firelight. "Learn to keep your mouth shut!"

She glared hotly at the fire. "Well, if you don't want anyone to know, don't tell people your secrets."

"I didn't tell you! You found out!"

Edillon gasped again. "But he— were you— Was your parent from Arbourn?"

Tom snapped his blue fingers. "It's none of your concern since your reign isn't over the dead."

"But that parent is still probably alive!" the king shot back.

The vampire rolled his eyes. "Oh, and I bet that homecoming would be such a party. I'd rather not be slain by my own family, thank you very much. You're an elf, how would you react?"

The king's golden voice stumbled. "I, ah..." He sighed. "Your secret is sealed here, and I will not search out any more information."

"Thank you," Tom said primly. He continued to lurch in silence, tearing open a circle through the snow to reveal frozen mud below.

"You know what?" Der said. "I bet there are still spies in our ranks. Probably gloating right now too."

Edillon shrugged. "Probably."

Tom's body snapped to attention. Without a word, he lurched entirely into the darkness.

The blowing snow clung to the tip of Tallor's black boot. The white made the depthless black leather seem even darker. Winter had driven in its icy fangs deep this year. In fact, that's why he'd chosen winter for his campaign. All the kingdoms' armies had already kicked off their boots for the season.

Of course, that meant waging a war in the snow. He narrowed his crystal blue eyes at the snow white landscape. Spring seemed too far buried to be of any hope to his mood now.

He watched several soldiers push siege engines through the snow. They were meant to be pulled by auroch or oxen, but they hadn't stolen enough of those yet. They hadn't had extra space on the ships for both the siege engines and cattle.

Some of the weapons appeared to be massive ballistae, with levers pulling ropes against gears. Others were battering rams with pyramid shaped beams and covered with iron plates.

And they were stuck in the blasted snow! With any hope, he wouldn't need them.

He hadn't bothered with the creation of covered towers that could be rolled forward. There wouldn't be a point to those.

There were more soldiers than yesterday too; he'd been recovering many of his troops that had gone to ground.

He'd already executed three potential spies, too. He was surprised they'd found anyone out here in this lonely stretch of forest. At least the dragoons knew to watch their backs and play the game well. He wondered how loudly the spies' lack of voice would shout. Were the dragoons too frantic and too stretched to be able to find out before it was too late for them?

The Blackhound sighed and watched the resulting fog. He turned around to the tent, which had one wall rolled up to the open air. A bright, smoky fire crackled and popped in the open side.

The child kicked her legs under the table. Her chair was far too high for her feet to touch the ground. Coda was a ball of fur underneath the chair. The girl, Chloe he'd been informed, glared fiercely at the food in front of her. Two guards stood silently behind her.

He stepped around the fire. "I am not a torture hungry barbarian. The food is just food."

Beneath the chair, Coda perked his ears and wagged his fluffy tail. Tallor took the chair opposite the girl.

“I have a question. Why is Derora Saxen in league with a vampire? Seems to be a paradox, doesn't it?”

Chloe continued to glare at her meal.

He continued, “I have never heard of it. The paladins even routed a massive band of vampires in Dosmar once. No one on this continent was desperate enough to ally with their enemy before I arrived. Thus, I was hoping you could help me piece together this paradoxical puzzle.”

“What's paradox?” she finally whispered.

“Contradictory.”

She closed her eyes and wailed, “But we're a family!”

Tallor leaned back and frowned critically. “Then I would like to watch your 'family' for Candlebright feast.”

She hurled her plate at him, which he dodged easily. “And they're gonna come for me! And not even you can stop them!”

He pretended to think about it, and then shook his head. “But I've already beaten every one of them.”

“Oh yeah? Then why didn't you just kill them at the wagon?”

He hinted at a smirk. “Because the objective there was you, sans heavy losses to my own troops. I'll need all of them for what I'm about to do. I'll credit your *family* enough to be dangerous to my own men. But not to me.” Underneath the table, the cut across his shin twinged.

“And you killed Kelin!”

He shrugged. “Killed a lot of people. It doesn't matter what they were called.”

Sobs burst out of the girl's mouth, her nose and even her ears it seemed. Coda jerked and scrambled out from under the chair. He shoved his front paws in her lap and pressed his forehead against her chest.

“Oh, do shut up, child.”

The girl wailed louder.

He raised his voice, “You're safe. For now.” He waited until her sobs had dwindled enough. “In fact, you're going to be the most protected person in the world for the moment.”

Chloe clung to the dog's neck.

Tallor's new lieutenant rounded the corner of the tent from the outside and tripped on the ice beneath the snow and kept his balance only by landing his other boot in the fire. The red-haired man shrieked. The flames bit into the leather of his boot and the lieutenant backtracked into the snow to put it out.

He staggered back forward and bowed. “My lord!”

Other than a tightening of the muscles around his mouth, Tallor's face remained blank.

The red head's back must've frozen. He didn't rise from his bow. Instead, he fumbled the crumbled paper out of his pocket and squinted at the letters. His master had made most of his ranking soldiers learn to read and write, and now he desperately wish he'd actually tried to learn. “Uh, more troops have arrived, with hostages. All in bits and pieces, but coming together, lord!”

“How many?” the Blackhound prompted.

“Uh, uh.” The paper rumbled and his sweaty fingers smudged the pencil. “Twenty two thousand, lord.”

“Excuse me? I didn’t think we were that efficient.”

“Uh... Uh...”

Tallor snatched the paper out of his hands with snake speed. “Two hundred and two. Well, I guess it’ll have to do.” The lieutenant darted away like a kicked hound.

Chloe suddenly looked up from the dog. “You’re taking hostages to Alscane!”

Tallor allowed a small smile. “My dear, you and I are not going to Alscane.” He let the paper slide off his fingers and onto the table.

She grabbed at it and read over the numbers. She scowled in confusion. “But, but, your army.”

“Oh, much of what we, ah, *recruited* when we arrived is going to Alscane, certainly. Going home, in fact.” He frowned, but pensively. “So, you’re good with the written word then? As you see, I am needing a new lieutenant who can hold a stylus without breaking it. The job is yours, if you survive that is.”

The morning sunshine made the snow on the mountains drastically pink. Significantly pink, Der mused. Pink with periwinkle blue where the sun hadn’t reached. She hadn’t known they were in country with mountains until the clouds had cleared this morning.

More in the wounded train hadn’t lasted the night. The cold had sapped whatever strength they were nurturing in their injured bodies and they’d just drifted off with the night.

The snow buried the plain in front of her, with sprays rising up like ghosts in the wind. Her breath stung as she inhaled. She didn’t know how many more they might lose by trying toward Horizon today, versus how many they might lose if they tried to camp until more help arrived. The others were looking to her to make the decision, too.

And she didn’t want to. All of the decisions she’d made in the last year had obviously led people down the wrong roads. Horizon. Kelin. Not accepting Zine’s offer fast enough.

Now it was too late. Perhaps she did deserve to freeze out here on the plain.

A male voice with icicles hanging off of it cut through the air, “Get over it.”

She whirled. Tom was there, and standing upright. His jaw was set. He flexed his fingers on both hands.

Der looked him from foot to head. Her face bunched up.

“No, you’re not dreaming.” He squeezed her arm and pulled.

She bounced along after his long strides. “But, then, you had to... You wouldn’t...”

He brushed some excess snow off of his sleeve. “It’s best if you don’t think about it.”

She pushed her heels down into the snow. He dragged her along regardless. The sunlight broke through the mountain barrier and flooded the plain.

Tom hissed against the growing golden light. He whipped his face away and grabbed Der in a bear hug. She watched the world drop away from their feet. The freezing air stung all the harder the higher and faster they flew. The mountains seem to gain altitude and size as the pair drew closer to them.

The vampire released her on to a narrow stone shelf. Her boots slipped against the frozen stone and she threw her body weight toward the frozen wall. Her fingers clawed uselessly against the slick

ice coating the rocks, and her toes stuck out over the lip of stone. "Tom! Tom, I can't stay here! I'll freeze in minutes!"

He stood a few feet away on the air and crossed his arms. He had to shout above the wind. "If you fail, then yes!"

"Fail?" she repeated, and probably would have heard the echo of her own voice if not for the wind. "Tom, I'm sorry I didn't save Chloe! We tried!"

He sneered.

"I'll die up here! Look, Tom, I know you, and this isn't you!"

"No, this is me when I'm angry!" He stepped closer to her, still hovering in the air. "And if you're not who I believe you to be, and you can't help me save my little girl, then you deserve to die on this mountain!"

Der's jaw fell open.

He tapped his chest. "Heart of stone, remember?"

Her toes scattered ice over the edge. She heard her heartbeat thundering in her own ears and her face was already numb. Of course, if she lost her balance, freezing might not get its chance.

She gulped for air. "What do you want me to do?"

"Be a paladin."

Der's raw fingers flailed against the ice. Her entire body was shaking and she wasn't sure if it was from cold or fear. "But that's impossible!"

He shoved her shoulders against the stone. "No! You're the impossible one!" He threw up his arms and laughed as coldly as the ice around them. "No one just knows the holy language. No one has a Pallens weapon. You're one of the few people that I can't hypnotize! And the gods don't show up in person to ask for your loyalty!" Suddenly, he shoved his sneering, fanged face into hers. "So, you either answer your damn destiny or I will push you off this mountain myself!"

She opened her mouth to retort, or at least push out as much anger as she could across her rapidly numbing tongue, but her mind was suddenly ablaze.

This had been her persistent, intransigent, and above all, secret dream. This is what kept her from falling asleep, even if the dream was impossible. It had been her path all along, and she was the last one to realize it.

All she had to do was call out and ask.

And yet, her tongue was completely numb now.

Tom floated away from her. The hairs along his arms and back of his neck were rising. There was a metallic tinge to the air now, as if he might be struck by lightning, and if she really did call on holy entities, then that very well could be the case.

"Tom!" Der's fingers slipped off the smooth ice of the rock wall. "Tom, I can't do this. I'll make another mistake and someone else's best friend will die."

He snarled. "And Chloe will die if you don't!"

"I can't!" So you just let me die on this mountain if you truly have a heart of stone!" Tears leaked from her eyes and instantly froze to her cheeks. "I can't do this! I'm not who I was a week ago!"

The vampire lunged. He dug his claw-strong fingernails into her shoulder and slammed his other hand against her throat. He rammed her back against the rock wall. Her eyes bulged open and the gasp barely squeezed out.

He dropped her and stepped back into the air. She scrambled for balance.

Tom sneered, revealing one of his fangs. He lifted up his hands and crimson fire sparked along his fingernails. "During this happy year we spent apart, I've been unlocking a few secrets of the heart."

"Tom..." She scratched her fingernails against the ice, but she couldn't even feel her hands anymore. "The inscription said it was a demon heart." She tried to wiggle her fingers; at least they didn't feel cold anymore.

"Yes, and I work nicely with unholy powers. Imagine it." Suddenly, he raked his fiery fingernails across her shoulder. Der half-heartedly raised her hands. The crimson fire burned in her skin in the rents that he had torn open. She banged her shoulder against the rock and the wind from her motion caused the flames to dance higher.

And she finally felt pain, red-hot against the frozen world.

Tom raised his hand again. The crimson fire arched across his knuckles. "Defend yourself!"

Der coughed. The blood bubbled up on her shoulder from beneath the fading crimson flames. At least it was warm. She tried to back away from him, but her shoulders were already against the wall of the tiny ledge.

His mouth curved up into a fanged rictus.

"Please," she mouthed and shook her head.

He lunged again and swiped his claws down the side of her face and down her neck.

Der raised her frozen fingers above her head and slid down against the ice. Her broken ribs also blazed with as much fire as whatever unholy magic flames he was using.

"Stop!" she croaked.

He kicked her ribs. "And you're supposed to be this wonderful, stellar *warrior*!" Sarcasm saturated his voice. "You're not even worth the effort the dragoons deigned to train you!"

He hammered his foot home again. "If you truly are a paladin, little girl, you can stop me." Kick! "I'm an unholy bastard of the night!" Kick!

She coughed again. More blood dotted the ice forming on her lips. "Tom, I can't--"

He smashed his burning fist across her jaw. She heard the crunches of bones shattering, but couldn't feel a damn thing.

"You don't get to talk like that!" He kicked her in the gut again, and her body ricocheted against the mountain.

Her shoulder blade cut into the ice. The crack webbed out from the point of impact. Creaking, vine-looking lines spread their tendrils up the ice-coated wall of the little ledge. Tom's eyes traced it up until it stretched up into the lip of overhanging snow.

His eyes widened. "Oh shit."

The snow trembled and ice crystals rained down on their shoulders. The little ledge couldn't hold back the weight of the snow any longer. Snow, ice and boulders started sliding. Suddenly, the entire mountainside rumbled into a frenzy.

Tom dived. He shoved aside a boulder more than twice his weight. “Der!” He thrust his hands against the rock wall. “*Der!*” He dove like a swimmer into the falling avalanche. “Der, where are you?”

He wrenched aside snow and the falling ice chunks cut into his hands. The vampire didn’t notice. All-enveloping white rapidly swallowed the other colors of the world. He switched to heat vision, and the world was the same uniform shade of ice. There wasn’t even a heat trail where her body had passed.

“Where are you?!”

A rock nicked Der’s ear as it bounced off her head. What was one more cut anyway? It didn’t matter at this point, did it?

The world was white. Suffocatingly white, in fact. She didn’t think that ‘suffocatingly’ was a word, but making up a word at the last moment probably wasn’t going to be held against her. The world would be silly otherwise.

She didn’t realize that her mind was also as white and fluffy as the world around her. Of course, in reality, the snow was frozen and rock hard. She wanted to think of it as fluffy though.

Her eyes closed. There was no reason to keep them open. Her cheeks warmed as if the sun shone on her face. Was this what freezing to death felt like? Would she freeze before she finished her fall?

Red and orange glowed across the inside of her eyelids. She imagined herself back in the meadow outside Riversbridge, in a time and a place where dreams were harmless.

Her body landed in the soft grass. She smiled and savored the imagination, even though she knew reality would come crashing back any moment.

But the grass failed to turn back into snow and rocks. Der stuck out her hands and her eyes shot open. She had fallen into a sun soaked meadow with luxuriant green grass. It felt like a cool summer day.

She threaded her fingers through the soft stems. Her digits flexed just fine and felt normal. She tapped her jaw. As good as always, even though it still popped from that one time she got kicked by an irate eagle. Her ribs were sturdy again, too.

She sat up. “I’m dead.”

“You could be. Or, you could just be passing through.”

Der whirled. Kelin grinned and threw out his arms.

She gasped and stared. She raised her arms as if to hug him and then she collapsed back into the grass. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

He sat down beside her and smiled. “Sorry for what? You didn’t stab me.”

“But!” The sobs attacked from behind her eyes. “If I hadn’t tried to kill that dragon all by myself, I would’ve been there with you.” Her tears, as powerful as the avalanche, toppled over the peaks of her cheeks and chin.

He set a warm hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “And we both would’ve been killed. Der, I’m not angry with you. We both knew this would happen when we took up the sword.”

She wept into her hands. “But it shouldn’t have been you! I’m the one who dragged you away from Riversbridge! I’m so sorry!”

Her sobs drowned out the silence between them.

He smiled sadly and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I can't forgive you, Der, because it's not your fault. I didn't have to leave home. They were my choices, and I made them. I'm glad I got to make such a difference in the world. I'm thankful for that chance, but I don't want to hold you back any longer." He sniffed at his own tears and grabbed his friend in a hug. "You'll always be my sister and I love you!"

She hugged him back as tight as she could. "I love you too!"

"This isn't farewell, Der. This is, until we meet again."

And he was gone. Only the memory of the pressure of his arms and a few tears on her shoulder remained. Der scrambled forward, clawing at the grass...

...Which wasn't grass anymore. Her fingers dug through river-smoothed pebbles. She raised her head.

She was kneeling in a circular ring of tall cottonwood trees, which arched to make a perfect dome. Diamonds of stained glass of all colors fit in every space between the branches and leaves, creating the ceiling. Soft chimes played somewhere up in its heights.

A small breeze nudged the trees, and everything moved in harmony. Tinkling chimes sweetened the air. She looked back down to see the glass causing multiple colored lights to chase each other over the pebbles.

"You should hear it when it rains in here."

She jumped to her feet with a nimbleness she hadn't felt since before Alscane. A young man with curly golden hair smiled at her. He wore a simple tunic and carried a worn walking staff.

She swallowed. "I'm so confused."

His grin spread. "Well, I am Amiery, and you are Derora Saxen. Covers it, no?"

She blinked, and then blinked again. "The god of travel?"

"And commerce and messages and more."

Her heels dug into the pebbles. "And, um, what am I doing here?"

He leaned a shoulder against a tree. His grin persisted. "Plugging your ears and ignoring us. Ah, here are the others."

White lights swirled overhead and descended toward the floor. The lights coalesced into glowing forms. Zine, Der remembered. The woman holding the book next to him outshone Lady Evelyn by leagues must be Ahtome, she decided. The goddess's long, dark wavy hair sparkled as if it were embedded with emeralds and diamonds. The third, a lithe and spritely boyish god, waved a wine bottle at her. She tried to apply a name.

"Ambarval," he chuckled, taking a drink and bowing. "Drinks, theater and fun."

Der imagined sweat on her tongue. She licked her lips. "Er, um, no disrespect, but why are you here?"

"What? You don't like to have fun?" He smirked. "And there are already plays out there about you, you know?"

She shook her head dumbly.

"Ah, well, the next time you pass through Tenmar City, you need to find a man called Augusto."

"Um, alright. Sir. Majesty. Holiness." She knotted her trembling hands together behind her back.

Ahtome smiled like a mother. “Derora, there is no need for you to be anything other than yourself.”

“I...” But she had to admit the truth. She couldn’t lie to herself in this place, much less to them. “I’m not worthy.”

“Worthy or not,” Zine said in a voice of thunder and steel, “There is only you. It has been a long time since paladins walked the world, but the world is in need again. No, there is no temple, no training, but you will have the support of my order.”

The word ‘but’ froze in the back of her throat. “What can I do?”

“What you can do.”

“We have faith in you,” Ahtome said.

Der gulped, suddenly feeling a thousandfold heavier. A person was supposed to have faith in gods. But did gods ever need faith in a person? She wasn’t sure if she wanted that answer, but it was too late.

“All you have to do is call on us and ask,” Amiery stated. “We will do what is within our power.”

“That does not mean that we can fight for you,” Zine said. “We cannot guarantee victory, only the chance to protect those you can. Many will be lost no matter what you do.”

She dropped her gaze. How many other Kelins would die?

Ahtome’s voice rang of bells and harps. “This is a chance to save more than may be lost. To protect those you can. It is your choice, Derora Saxen.”

Thalon looked up at Tom through red-ringed eyes. “Where’s Der? Dad says the train’s moving out toward Horizon today.”

Tom stared blankly ahead. “She’s checking on the other wagons, making sure the wounded are alright.”

“Oh. Good. I was afraid the Blackhound had come back.”

The vampire slouched forward. He spun around and dragged his feet through the snow. The sound of the wagon wheels rolling and the curses of the wounded as they pulled themselves down the road faded behind him.

The wind tried to steal whatever warmth his body would have produced if he’d been alive. Instead, it thrust an icicle of true chill straight through his bones.

Finally, he folded up and collapsed. His hands disappeared up to his wrists into the snow. He bent forward and pressed his forehead against the white layer. “I don’t have anyone I can pray to!”

The wind rolled across the frozen plain. Nothing but ice and rock – lifeless.

He might as well just disappear back into the night now. Neither of them would have been ripped away from him if he’d just kept his promise and stayed away! He never would have known what happened to them, and he wouldn’t have to lie to himself now about the pain of it all.

He closed his emerald eyes and turned his face up to the sky. Daylight stung through the shifting clouds. He eased one eye open, and for the first time he could remember, he looked at the sun. It was flashing, even teasing him from behind the clouds. Pain also flashed up throughout his entire skull, but he didn’t care.

Those clouds really did resemble a mountain slope up to the shrouded sun. He couldn't quite make out the daytime orb from here, thankfully, but the clouds looked very much like he could make that climb. After all, the sky was no different than land to him.

He could do it. He'd probably fry, well, like the vampire in the sun myth. His body rose off the ground on its own floating balance. Maybe it wasn't a myth after all, continued exposure would certainly starve him, and vampires could perish from starvation. How long could he last if he flew straight at it?

He hovered a few feet above the snow, staring at the sun.

"And then he was struck by lightning, for this wicked creature was cursed and not allowed to imagine the divine."

Tom whipped his head around to find the speaker, and then realized that his own cynicism had said it.

He sank back to earth and stared down at the lifeless plain. The wasteland, that's what he had.

The shadow of a person suddenly darkened the snow around him. He gulped in sudden surprise. The mystery person lifted up a leg and kicked him in the jaw. Hard.

Tom fell away, rolling over one shoulder and onto his back. He flipped right back up into a runner's starting position, still staring at the ground.

Yeah, that was about right. He'd dared to hope, so he got kicked in the face. That was his life after death.

"And that's for letting me fall off a mountain!"

His head snapped up. Der was there, fists balled. A new winter cloak and clothes hugged her body, and boots so new that the leather squeaked and shone in the weak sunlight. He looked her up and down again. The hunter green, fur-lined cloak was stylish even, so he knew she hadn't picked it out herself.

And he didn't care. He launched himself up and wrestled her into an embrace. "How?" He looked back up to the sun, winking through the clouds.

She hugged him back. "You're scared."

He shook his head, still holding on to her shoulders. "No. I'm supposed to scare you; you're not supposed to scare me!"

Her grip slackened, but the vampire wasn't letting go. She asked, "Then why are you feeling guilty?"

His expression instantly melted into complete impassiveness. "What makes you think I'd feel guilty?" He finally pulled away and dropped his arms to his side. He looked at her through his entirely blank features.

"I don't know." She pointed at him. "But you're guilty and terrified and confused." She closed her eyes and tilted her head, as if trying to listen to something barely out of earshot. She shook her head as if dislodging a headache. "Weird."

She cocked a grin at him, as if he'd never even let her fall off a mountain.

"Damn it all." He eyed her warily and folded his arms. "Some night, one night, you will be my undoing. I know this." He grabbed her arm and started to pull her into the snow. "For now though, we're going to Alscane."

“And do what?” She jogged along after him.

He bunched a fist so tightly that blood stained the snow where he walked. “What do you think I plan to do?”

She watched the blood and noticed that it didn’t melt the snow around it at all. It was already cold. “Nothing good.”

“We’ll have to fly.”

“Fine, but Tom, you couldn’t hurt him.”

He snapped, “You couldn’t defeat him either! Besides, we’re going to rescue Chloe. Then he can’t do whatever the hell he’s planning, so we win.”

“A victory, but not the war.”

“Then we’ll do it together. I can get you close enough and you stab him in the back.”

She arched an eyebrow as she dropped her foot in front of her just as the world started to quake. A rumble rose up through her boots, vibrating up her legs and into her chest.

POP! CRACK!

A sudden fountain of mud and snow shot up from the ground behind her. Muddy water splattered across her shiny new clothes. Der hardly noticed. More cracks tore open through the surrounding snow.

Why was it so hot? She scowled as the world around it started to tear itself apart.

More geysers erupted in a line to either side of her. Mud and snow shot up from the ground like a flock of startled birds.

The ground beneath her feet started to bubble up, and the rumbling sounded like it was sprinting for her from hell below.

“Ah-hem.” Tom, standing a few feet in the air above her, offered down his hand. Still staring at the ground, she took it and stepped on his boot like a stair.

They drifted higher, and they could finally see the biggest of the rents. The ground where they had been standing exploded into another geyser.

The plain ripped in half like one of those cheap cloth napkins at a tavern. The fissure pushed up and overturned the snow for miles and cut the earth like a knife across skin.

Der yelled above the rumbling. “If this is the gods warning us, I wish they’d be more subtle!”

Tom instantly looked as bored as ever. “Well, then you wouldn’t be able to understand it.”

“But they cut us off—”

This wasn’t us, Ahtome’s face appeared in Der’s mind. *This is how the earth speaks.*

To Tom’s surprise, Der suddenly burst, “But why would the earth try to stop us?”

Good question. The voice of the goddess vanished. Der blinked. “We’re not supposed to go to Alscane!”

“What? Who are you talking to?”

She struggled against him, as if she were on the ground and trying to run the opposite direction. “It’s like what we did at the Battle of Gladioli Fields! He’s tricking us somehow! And Strival and Silver Dawn and all them have gone to Alscane!”

“Well then, where are we supposed to go?” But the answer was already in his mind. Where was the only other place worth fighting for on this continent?

A groan echoed in his throat. Der met his eyes, and he knew she was thinking the same thing. She licked her lips. "You can't go there. Magical wards."

"No," he snarled. "I said that I didn't want to be noticed. They'd notice if all those wards suddenly failed."

Chapter Twenty Nine

The Approach

The walls that cupped the city of Alscane remained resolute. The Blackhound's initial assault had come from the sea and gutted the city, but left most of its land-facing defenses intact. Until the last minute, hammers had pounded against the rapidly created barricade where the front gate had fallen. It was no more than boards and dining room tables nailed together, but it bulged out of the holes left by the explosion.

Suddenly, there was no more time.

Splinters gushed up like teeth out of a fighter's mouth. The barricade resisted at first, but the moment couldn't last. The momentum of the soldiers and oxen shoving the battering ram ripped through the wood and nails, tearing the barricade apart like a dry leaf.

Strival pushed his diamond-edged sword through bits of wood still clinging to the barricade's frame. Behind him, the Silver Dawn charged like a new day rising. Overhead, four dragons of Steel Eagle erupted out of the swamp and roared as angry thunder and stormed toward the city.

Dragoon soldiers and knights poured through the gates, like a flood through a broken ice dam. Fast, too huge to stop, and with enough momentum to sweep everything out all the way to the sea.

And on that sea, Blue Farer ships dotted the ocean's flat horizon. They carried their own warriors and sailors and also soldiers from all the other kingdoms on the continent of Solquin.

At Alscane's gates, Strival's stern face didn't flinch as his sword flashed. It severed his first opponent's sword at its hilt and drove home through his body without a break in the stroke.

Other warriors of the Blackhound skittered and bunched together in knots against the onslaught. They poked their swords out at the attackers while trying to squeeze backward into alleys.

Too late for you lads, Strival thought as he raised his sword again. But what plans would their enemy have for this assault? This day could not possibly end this simply.

This day could end simply enough. Just a few more... few more hundred steps. Thalon's foot couldn't take another nigh vertical step. He wasn't dizzy, but he felt as if he should be. A chuckle drifted down on his shoulders.

Der grinned and chuckled again. "The approach is not that bad. I used to have to run this every day." The wounded train slowly wound up the switchbacks to Silver Dawn's Horizon.

"Oh, it's worse!" the boy wheezed. In front of them, Thistle narrowed his eyes and scowled.

Der looked up and up at the citadel. For months she had dreaded the potential of returning here, or dreaded meeting any dragoon really. Now, there was just a mild concern that some of the fighters who had never held a sword until they'd been conscripted a few weeks ago might fall off the switchbacks.

They were worried about it too. She could taste their fear as clearly as smoke in the air.

It was hard to fault them, and even harder to see with the sunlight. The sunlight amplified against the snow – and there was so much of the plain to see at this height! Most of them had tied cloth around their faces or pulled their hoods down low.

Tom just simmered beneath his hood and glared at the smooth rock wall of the approach.

“Der! Hey Der!”

She looked up to see a couple of soldiers waving down from the outer wall. She squinted, and their excitement flashed into her mind. She grabbed her head, and her shoulder bounced against the wall as she stumbled for balance. Feeling their excitement and nerves on top of her own was too much!

“Hey lads!” Alluvius yelled back up.

Ander kept waving. “We heard it all!”

Sesquin leaned through the battlements. “Yeah, we’re surprised Der’s not at the battle trying to kill him!”

She exhaled and looked back up. “I tried.”

Their smiles froze on their faces and quickly receded. She didn’t even need to watch that. She felt their doubt suddenly shivering. Just like she had with Tom, she knew exactly what they were feeling.

Sesquin squirmed. “Well, you know, Strival’s the best. Hey, we’ll get the gate for you!”

“Still got a ways to the gate,” Tom muttered.

“Gates, actually, well, they’re really not even proper gates – they’re portcullises really,” Der said, remembering the way. Up through the switchbacks, sharp turn, walk through the funnel, sharp turn again and then left facing six adamantis gates.

Ander and Sesquin ran over to the walkways in front of the gates, about twenty feet above the entryway. Five of the six gates were already open, and many in the wounded train were dragging themselves closer to the heart of the citadel. Spike, looking like just a massive warhorse, suspiciously eyed each of the newcomers as they passed.

Ahead of them, the final gate was closed. Dragoon soldiers, many faces she recognized, were asking sharp questions to the arriving soldiers while others started to search through the wagons.

Ander called down, “Sorry, but it’s Sir Jakkobb’s orders, but I’m sure he’ll let you through without bothering.”

Alluvius scowled. “It is just you lads? Where’s everyone else?”

“At the battle, *obviously*,” Ander shouted back as if Alluvius had just asked him where the sky was.

Tom nudged Der’s shoulder blade from behind. He hissed, “Those dragoons can’t talk to me. Or Thistle.”

Der pointed. “Well, there’s Spike.”

And such an open hearted greeting too. The unicorn snorted and bobbed his head. He stared at Derora. She stared right back, and realized that the equine had a much larger face and absolutely huge eyes. It was a hard gaze to match.

I sense powers in you, child.

She shrugged and tried to grin. “Well, uh, can you tell me what they are?”

“You don’t know?” Tom growled.

She shrugged again. “I was in a hurry. But, um, I think I’m feeling others’ emotions now.”

Empathy, Spike said. You’re an empath now. What more?

“I guess I didn’t ask.”

Figures. The old legends said each was dependent upon the individual.

“Ask whom?” Thistle cut in sharply.

“What’s an empath?” Thalon tilted his head.

Tom exploded, “She’s a paladin! A bleeding paladin! Apparently, she doesn’t care that they don’t exist!”

“Didn’t you throw me off a mountain—” Der started but Alluvius’ gasp cut across her words, “Is it true?”

Thalon tugged her cloak. “So you can pray for anything? And get it?”

She hummed to herself for a moment. “No, sorry. I understand it now. I’m not supposed to ask the gods for things that are within my own power, like well, since we’re back here, doing well on those stupid mathematics lessons. If I want to do well at math, I need to study. I think it’s to help me with things that are beyond my abilities.”

Very good. Spike bobbed his head. *Now you need to learn what those abilities may now be.*

“Hey, Der, Alluvius!” Ander shouted from the walkway over their heads. A bucket banged against the wall, splashing out some steaming liquid. He was lowering it on a rope. “It’s hops and lemonbalm tea. Bitter as hell, but it’s supposed to prevent sunburn and dehydration.”

“Thanks,” Der said, studying the bucket. “Uh, could you toss down some mugs too?”

“Not a bother— What’s that?” Ander shaded his eyes and looked back toward the plain.

They all spun around, but their view was obscured by the walled funnel approach. “What do you see?” Thistle barked up to the dragoon.

He squinted. “I, uh,” He licked his lips. “I think the army’s back already.”

The Silver Dawn army bit its jaws deeper into Alscane. Strival’s diamond-edged sword led the charge. They’d broken the back of the Blackhound’s army, but the vertebrae scattered like seeds in the wind into the alleys of the city.

Strival threw his gaze down across the boulevards all the way down to the sea, trying to see anything unusual. Where was he hiding? Where was the trick this time?

A young man, no older than seventeen, yelped as he twisted around a corner and came sword to sword with the knight-commander.

He dropped his blade and threw up his hands. His long black hair was a tangle in front of his suddenly very wide black eyes. “Dragoons! I surrender! I surrender!” Coughing sobs burst out of the man’s chest like a hurricane and he didn’t dare look at the sword pointed at his heart.

“Where is he?” Strival’s voice was as sharp as his diamond-edged weapon.

The teenager’s legs folded up underneath him. The boy’s mouth worked like a dying fish.

The dragoon commander pressed his sword tip against the boy’s tunic. “Where is the Blackhound?”

“What?” the youth finally gasped. “We— We thought you were his army! Come to finish us off!”

Strival’s face flickered.

The boy plunged ahead, “We got conscripted – we’re from here – we didn’t want to fight for him! And so, we all ran away after the battle at the summit! We ran away from that snake, my lord! He said that those who were still willing to fight could come with him, but that the rest of us would be killed if we refused! So we ran! And we thought you were him, coming to make good on his word!”

“And we thought you were he,” the commander whispered.

How had he, Strival, the hero of the Battle of the Bridge fallen for this? Had his edge dulled so much since the end of the Wars?

He stepped back and pulled a small whistle from his belt. The enchanted sound bounced and amplified off of every wall, every street, and every surface.

Silver Dawn dragoons suddenly stopped their swords halfway through their thrusts and slices. Dozens of frightened Alscane fighters scrambled back away from what had been inevitable death. The dragons of Steel Eagle paused up in the clouds from where they had been directing the combat.

How evil is this man? Strival wondered. He made us do evil. How many innocent people have we killed today that we thought we were protecting?

He eased the tip of his sword toward the ground.

Those that had scattered from his ranks on the road – he had assumed that those were the conscripted citizens. They'd left in groups no larger than a score! Even though there'd been at least a thousand of them! The thought that those were the Blackhound's loyal troops had never even been considered.

These people had fled back home and boarded up the windows and walls, and, on the road, they looked exactly like a retreating army.

There had been undeniable signs in the retreat to Alscane that was the Blackhound's army, and certainly there were those in the city now who had left that trail.

The people of Alscane had readied themselves for an invasion, and Strival had provided it. Only, both sides fought the wrong enemy.

He heard shouts and swords against shields somewhere a few streets away. Some of the Alscane citizens must have rallied together and attacked. Urgency and agony rapidly overcame the tone in their battle cries. The dragoons were allowed to defend themselves. He needed to get his army outside the gates, and only then could he truly stop this battle. Until then, men would die on his blades.

"Gave us a speech, sir, he did," the youth quavered, bringing Strival's mind back down to street level. "All this talk of spreading the Empire. That's like spreading a plague and calling it bread and honey."

"Not my honey," Strival replied absently. So, if the deserters were here, then where was the loyal part of his army?

"What, lord?" But the commander's attention had vanished from him.

Reality, like a mountain river's rising rapids, flowed across Strival's inner vision. There was no way to stand against it and no way to fight back upstream. He knew his mouth screamed, and he felt the words burning in his throat. And yet, his mind remained oddly clear: no matter how fast the dragons flew or what magic he employed, they would be too late.

"Ha ha!" Ander grinned. "I heard that you lot are gonna be put up in our old candidate barracks." He straightened his gray soldier's tunic. "At least we've moved up in rank."

"Der!" Willard called, running up. "Heard you were back! And Alluvius! You lot have been in trouble." He nearly ran into Sesquin's back as all of them walked on Horizon's innermost wall.

"Yeah," Der replied distantly. Her eyes watered so hard that they stung. She tried to make out any detail of the dark blob on the horizon, but the sun and the snow simply shone too strongly. However, she was guessing, it looked at least eight times larger than the hundred or so warriors they had.

Alluvius grinned. "And you're true dragoons now. I suppose our congratulations are a bit belated."

"Yeah," Ander said. "We thought you were joining the order of Zine or something?"

Alluvius tried not to glance at Der. "I don't know. I might."

"Der, what about you?" Willard demanded. "That sounds like you."

She shook her head. "No, my path is a little, um, little um..."

"More unorthodox," the part human supplied.

She nodded. "Yeah, whatever that means."

They continued to stare at the approaching mass.

"They're not ours, are they?" Ander eventually asked.

"No," Der said.

He shifted his feet. "Uh, Der, we've never been in a battle."

"You're about to be," Jakkobb's voice cracked like a whip behind them. Sesquin, Ander and Willard squeaked and saluted. The captain barked, "To your posts!"

"Yes, sir!" they blurted in unison and scattered.

Der grinned. "Jakkobb! I'm glad you're doing well."

"Ask me at the end of the day," he drawled and eyed her critically. "A paladin, eh? Well, I wish I was surprised due to the fact that it's impossible, but it's *you*, Der."

He started to walk along the wall and Alluvius and Der fell into step. The knight continued, "Wish I'd been there on the road. Cacilin was a good man."

Der's brow furrowed. She rubbed her arms together for warmth against the wind. "But you didn't like him."

"He was a good man," Jakkobb replied crisply. "Now come along, I need to counsel with people who actually know what's happening."

King Edillon carried the grievously injured golden dragon in both arms. A little hiss of agony escaped the dragon's mouth with every breath the little creature took. Thalon hovered behind his father's cloak. And the vampire skulked away from all of them.

Spike walked along the wall like any patrolling soldier, and started to march toward them. Jakkobb, Der and Alluvius quickly followed.

The king smiled as they approached. "I suppose we are the pariahs here."

"And you're the only one not used to it," Der said, and images of doors slamming closed in Riversbridge flashed in her mind.

The king smirked. "I suppose."

Jakkobb cut in, "Well, *I suppose* you tell me why there's an army at my citadel, and fast."

Thistle said mildly, "It's Der's fault."

"Hey!" she fired back. "I didn't invite them!"

"There's suddenly an insurmountable wave of trouble and you're here. There always is around you."

Spike sniggered. *He does have an argument, Der.*

“Shut it, the both of you.” She scowled and spun her face around to watch the army. Hunger and hatred, and indefatigable determination, hit her like a hammer. Here were men who sincerely had the confidence to steal the sun from the sky.

She staggered around, and found herself thinking, I have got to find a way to shut the door on these emotions! I can't even concentrate on my own!

Jakkobb reached down and steadied her shoulder. “Der, you alright?”

A ragged sigh tore through her throat, and after a moment, she nodded. “Yes, sir. But that's him.” She leaned forward and rested her hands against her knees as if she'd been running.

She stared at the stone beneath her feet, and the world suddenly grew much colder as she realized something. There was no escape from Horizon. The walls that were renowned for protection suddenly felt like the walls of a prison. Win or die. It wasn't a joke like last time. Then again, she wasn't the same person.

Tom smiled a little too cheerfully. “And all we got are squeaky new dragoon soldiers.”

“Well, there's the wounded too,” Alluvius added, pointing in the general direction of the gate where most of them still awaited questioning.

Edillon scowled. “Some of them are his agents.” His eyes barely darted in Tom's direction.

The vampire smirked. “Oh yes. Sir Jakkobb, I ask permission for Thistle and I to relieve your men of questioning the wounded. You need to prepare for battle.”

“What are you going to do?” The knight folded his arms and raised an eyebrow.

Tom's eyes swirled between emerald and cherry red. “Throw the bastards off the wall.”

Jakkobb shook his head. “I don't like it.”

“And I don't like having someone open the gates from the inside.”

Jakkobb visibly winced, but looked back to approaching army.

Spike nudged the captain's shoulder. *No time for half measures. We need everyone on the inside to help us and we can't waste time guessing loyalties.*

Tom raised a hand. “I'll do it without your permission if that'll help you feel better.”

The knight ground his teeth. “No. Do it.” He ran his armored fingers over the part of his face exposed through his visor as Tom and Thistle detached themselves from the party.

The knight breathed out. “Alright. Not even the Blackhound can get in here, not unless we do something incredibly stupid. Strival and the others will be here to break the siege soon. And we have enough food and water without resorting to eating the horses.”

Spike lifted his front hoof and kicked. It clanged against Jakkobb's leg.

“What! I said *without* eating the horses! Come on, the wards alone are—”

“Chloe!” Edillon suddenly paled.

Chloe dug her fingers deeper into Coda's silky fur. The dog walked along, occasionally glancing back at the girl and wagging his tail. She tried to look up at Horizon as she walked, still holding onto the canine. It was too hard to see any difference between the clouds and the silver stone of the citadel.

She flinched as she heard the wheels, wrapped in chains, squeaking and jingling along in the snow behind her. She didn't know what the large harpoon looking things were for, but the ballista bolts had rope or something coiled down under blankets attached to them.

She also didn't know what the metal covered flat panels were for, possibly some sort of shield from arrows to cover several soldiers at once. Those weren't on any wheels; they were carried by hostages.

These people weren't forced to be soldiers like the people of Alscane; they were slaves. Fear shone out of their eyes like lamps in the dark as they carried long, thick wooden platforms through the snow.

She tried to ignore the crunch of snow underfoot as she drew ever closer to Horizon. Her captor strolled along beside her, whistling like it was a sunny day.

"You'll never get close!" she erupted. Her fingernails scraped too deep against the dog's back. Coda yelped and suddenly lay down in the snow.

"Mind the dog!" Tallor knelt and rubbed the dog's shoulder.

"Sorry!" she squeaked and held up her hands. Then she stood up straight and smoothed out her dress. "But you won't get there!"

Coda rose back to his feet and started to trot alongside his master. His pale fur was strikingly golden against the snow. The Blackhound resumed his stride. "Of course I will." He chuckled. "I told Axon that Silver Dawn's Horizon had no weaknesses for an invader on the approach. But people do."

"But it can fly!"

"It won't, dear. Because you're here. If they try, you'll disrupt it enough, and if they don't have the heart to try, well then, you might just survive this after all."

Chloe gulped. Tallor didn't seem to notice. "All your armies have united against me, so I need a new home." He ground his molars together. "Of course, without the silver dragon, getting supplies in and out will prove to be a little more difficult. Alas, we humans are nothing if not inventive."

The girl shrank so much that she tried to squeeze her shoulders together. "My uncle and Der will save me," she whispered.

Tallor exhaled. "That girl is trouble. She and her little band of friends have caused me several headaches already. For this battle, I was going to have a dragon, the wizard Alcomm, and that boy necromancer. She stole my ship with my diary and mirror, as well as injured me in combat! And for some inconceivable reason she is friends with a vampire! Has the world truly changed so much or is that girl just that strange?"

Chloe blinked back tears. She sniffed. "Uncle goes on about her like that too."

The Blackhound snorted. "And against all their best efforts, I'm still on the cusp of victory."

"That's why he wanted Chloe – her power will cancel the wards!" Der gripped the stone of the battlements as dizziness shot its arrow through her head. It all made sense to her now; he'd need a way to overcome those. He was immortal too, so all these years, he could've been searching and waiting for a way to appear!

Edillon covered his hand with his mouth. "But we can't give him the citadel!"

“Even the blasted Scholar’s gone with Strival,” Jakkobb muttered. “But you, Der, you know the holy language that the wards use.”

She took a step back, shaking her head.

“Hostages!” Edillon pressed his eye so hard against the telescope that it left a mark. “They’re bringing hostages!”

“Anyone we know?” Thistle asked casually, as he and Tom approached the small party. Alluvius edged away from them.

“What? No!” the king fired back.

Tom shrugged. “Well, everyone inside doesn’t want the Blackhound to win, and we kept the others’ screams down.”

“Their wounds suddenly overcame them,” Thistle said plainly.

“Right,” Tom agreed. “Also, none of them found out that they were working with a vampire or a chemman. Good thing, too, because some folk just seem to think that we’re always the enemy just because we always have been.”

Thistle looked at Jakkobb. “Most of your wounded aren’t dragoon.”

“I know,” the knight replied.

“Too many of them aren’t even warriors.”

“They’ll learn quick enough.”

Alluvius held his breath. “There they are.”

Out of the snow filling the upside down mountains, a black dragon extended its wings into the sky. A deeply purple dragon spiraled out of the snow as graceful as a hunting cat. Their homes had been destroyed when the mountains collapsed, but the Silver Dawn dragons had remained.

“I wish the gold dragon was better,” Edillon whispered. “Alas, he is too wounded, and the others have gone with Strival or to find new homes.”

Der ripped her gaze away from the magnificent beasts. “Jakkobb! They strafe! They can’t just take out Tallor and his crew without—”

“Chloe!” Tom stiffened. “She’s still alive down there! Call off your damn dragons!”

Jakkobb growled and set his jaw. “I couldn’t stand them down even if I wanted.”

“I’m getting my girl!” Tom hopped up on top of one of the battlements.

Der lunged and grabbed his ankle. “Tom, you can’t hurt him!”

“I won’t! I’m just going to get Chloe.” He eyed the dragons on their approach to the Blackhound’s forces. “I guess we’ll find out who is faster.”

Coda bumped his nose against his master’s leg. He stepped back, wagged his tail and then bumped again. Tallor reached down to massage the dog’s head. With his other hand, he pointed at a soldier. “You, attention!”

The soldier gulped and tripped over his own feet. “Y-Yes, lord?”

“You are guarding this dog. Remain back here for the duration of the combat.” He suddenly smiled. “And if anything should happen to this sweet creature, you’ll die. Starting with me slicing off your heels and making you run.”

The man paled and reached down to pet the dog before jerking his hand back. He eyed the dog like it was fanged death.

"Oh," Tallor added, "He'll never snap at you. I'm the one who'll do that." With that, he reached down and stroked Coda a final time before turning his back to them both.

Ahead, Horizon waited as serenely as a mountain. His desideratum. With this, he and his Pallens would have both continents under his boot. Then the armies of the world could crash against it and break like waves.

Of course, he had to conquer it first.

He had needed them to build such a fortress before he could spread his Empire. He could never create the like with his own slaves and resources, not without being noticed. He needed his enemies to build it for him.

He'd seen its flaw. He'd been studying the sketches, and like twisting a prism in the sunlight to find the rainbow, he'd found it. It was so simple. All he had to do was draw out their army, so that only a few defenders remained. It was the only way this would work.

And he was confident he was the only one who knew the secret. He also was aware of how to fix it when it was his. However, the wards were still stronger than his army. Thus, he'd had to wait for something like Chloe to ensure victory before the battle.

A smirk slithered across his face. "I need you to help me to conquer it, so that I may hold off the armies of the world."

He heard the shouts in his ranks. Chloe clapped her hands over her mouth to hide her screams. Unfortunately for the Blackhound's ears, the other hostages didn't.

The two dragons shot fire across the sky, lighting up the snowy plain in a rainbow of red, white and orange, outlined by belching black clouds. Tallor didn't even squint. Well, this was finally getting exciting.

He clapped his hands. "We've practiced for this! Dragons! Form up for dragons!"

His army shoved the hostages into a central ring and the rest of his troops spread out. The black and the purple couldn't strafe everyone.

The men pushing the ballistae, brought all the way from Dosmar to Horizon, dropped their ropes and ran behind the massive crossbow style weapons. Supports dropped to the ground from the frames of the weapons so that they wouldn't roll when used.

Chloe watched as they placed the giant bolts into the weapons. Next, a couple of soldiers dragged a bundle of what looked like covered rope between the ballistae.

The dual roar of the dragons shook the ground underneath her boots. She slapped her hands over her ears again and backed right into the legs of her captor.

Tallor smirked. "Dragons always believe they are the advantage. When will they learn that I can think ahead too—"

And then there was Tom.

The next moment happened so fast that Chloe hadn't had time to realize the man snatching her up was her uncle. Tom wrapped her arms around her waist and launched them both off the ground.

Tallor drew his sword and thrust. The sword bit into Tom's upper thigh and upward into his hip, anchoring the vampire to the weapon.

“Uncle!” Chloe yelled, inhaling for the first time since he’d grabbed her.

“Shouldn’t be that fast,” Tom murmured, as if dazed. He squeezed his emerald eyes closed.

On the ground, Tallor frowned. “Are idiots all you’ve learned how to interact with?”

Tom grimaced.

Tallor reached toward his belt with his right hand. “Oh, I’ve encountered a vampire with a strange connection to this child. I failed to slay him at the encounter, which I must admit, was surprising. Hm, do you think that I’ve angered him in some fashion? Hm, do you think he might act on that anger?” He twisted the sword in Tom’s leg and hip.

The blood freely streamed down the blade. Tom didn’t whimper or wince. He twisted his body between Tallor and Chloe.

The Blackhound pulled a golden, glowing vial from his belt. “You think I didn’t prepare for this?” He wagged the little vial back and forth. “Distilled sunlight, in a liquid. I have no idea how the magician did it, but at least he did it at no cost.” He twisted the sword.

“The heart…” Tom murmured and tried to focus. Sparks of red fire spread across his face, outlining his eyes.

Tallor wrenched the sword back the other way, still inside Tom’s leg and hip. “Ah, ah. No concentration.” He twisted it again. Tom ground his molars in agony. The crimson fires died.

With a fingernail, he popped the cork free. In that same moment, he jerked the vampire on his sword down closer and shoved the bottle up into his wound.

Smoke and fire flared up at the entry point of the wound. Tom dropped Chloe. His scream burned from his leg, tunneled up the sword into his gut and erupted like a volcano out of his mouth.

Tallor raised his free hand to block the heat radiating from the vampire’s wound. Then he grabbed his sword in both hands and smashed Tom down on to one of the wooden platforms.

The reinforced wooden sheet folded up around the weight of the vampire. The thin metal layer folded around him. New, spiked edges and splinters ripped through Tom’s clothing and tore at his skin. He broke through it to the ground.

Tom flopped over on his back just in time to see the Blackhound drive his sword home through his chest. The sword tip scratched against the heart and ricocheted up into his clavicle. He felt another roar of agony surging up from his gut but only a whisper of a whimper escaped his throat.

Tom’s fingers crawled across his chest to the hole and then fell limp. His entire body slackened. His emerald eyes stared blankly up at the sky. Just another corpse on the battlefield.

If a magical weapon was powerful enough, it could do the work of a wooden stake.

Tallor scowled and shook his sword. “Felt like I hit a rock.”

“My lord!” The Blackhound’s red haired lieutenant dropped to his knees and pointed overhead. “The dragons!”

“There’s always dragons,” Tallor sighed. He looked up to see both the black and the purple dragons skimming just above the ground. They opened their mouths to reveal the fiery pits. Fear rippled across the faces of the Blackhound’s army. Tallor pointed his bloody sword up to the sky. “Form up! Wait for my order, you bastards!”

Meanwhile, Chloe crawled across the broken boards to Tom's corpse. Tears dropped on to his face from her nose. "Uncle." She shook his body. "Uncle, you have to get up. I've seen you get up from worse." She sniffed back the snot and tears. "Uncle, please."

Overhead, the dragons raced at them. Any moment, they would flame and strafe. Maybe a wave of heat, and then it would be over. It was inevitable, and there was nowhere to run.

The Blackhound stood where he was, body in balance and shoulders straight. He looked like a man enjoying a healthy sparring match.

"Aim for the wings!" He pointed his sword at the dragons. "Loose bolts!"

The men behind the ballistae kicked out their levers and four massive bolts, meant for breaking through gates, shot up into the sky. They towed hundreds of feet of not rope, like Chloe had expected, but metal wire with thousands of barbs and razors cut out of it.

Both dragons flamed, aiming their bursts at the flying razor wire rather than the Blackhound's army. The fire sizzled and immediately melted the wire, raining molten steel on some soldiers below. They screamed and threw up their shields.

But enough of the wire wasn't in the line of the fiery bursts, and most of it survived to claw at the dragons' wings and, with the momentum of the bolts, entangle their bodies.

The dragons tried to flap and the wires bound their wings and bit deeper as they struggled to use them. They weren't flying at the army any more, they were crashing straight toward it.

"And down they come," Tallor chuckled. "Just because this attack has worked for thousands of years doesn't mean it will this time. It means I know what you were going to do."

The black dragon glided four yards above his head, twisting upside down in an effort to free itself. The Blackhound didn't flinch.

The shadows from both dragons extended across the soldiers, expanding wider and growing darker as the dragons skimmed lower toward the earth. And then they crashed down through Tallor's ranks, squashing his men as their bodies dug furrows into the snow and frozen ground. They squirmed to roll over and flamed helplessly across the plain.

Tallor scratched his chin. "Not as flawless as I'd hoped, but I'll take it." He whistled and waved with his sword. The remaining soldiers of his army threw themselves at the downed beasts. Their massive claws raked away snow, rocks and made corpses as they kicked against their foes.

The purple opened its mouth and flamed. It swung his neck in all directions it could manage, but there were too many soldiers on too many sides of its body.

Still wielding his sword, Tallor snatched Chloe's arm with his right hand. He yanked the wailing girl away from Tom's unmoving body. They continued on his stroll toward Horizon against the roars of the dying dragons as soldiers swarmed over them like ants.

Chloe let her feet hang limply as he tugged her along.

"I will have you tied to a horse and dragged if you're going to do that."

She bit her lip and started to trot after him.

"Shields up, boys!" he thundered as they passed through the opening of the first set of gigantic rock rings. Beyond, the field was stacked with short, sharp rocks that would slice a running man's legs to pieces. It didn't matter. He marched down the center of the road.

“Two dragons barely slowed him!” Edillon gripped his chest. “Two more immortal deaths! Just like that!”

“What can we do against that?” Thalon rose up on his tiptoes to peek through the battlements.

Alluvius had ducked behind one of the battlements, sliding down the stone until he sat on the wall. “I’m loathe to suggest it, but there are always the wards.”

“No!” Der barked. “Tom and Chloe are down there. And all those hostages.”

Thistle shook his head. “Those people are dead no matter what we do.” He nodded to Thalon. “Listen to me this time, you go into the hidden room in the stable with the gold dragon and you remain in hiding.”

“But, Dad—” The boy looked up at Der for support. She shook her head.

“It’s your job to protect the dragon,” Edillon declared. “He needs a strong, brave warrior.”

“Oh, I can do that!” Thalon straightened up and grinned. He saluted and started to run to the stable.

“Hide your eyes on the way!” His father called after him.

“Who knows what Chloe can do if she’s close enough?” Jakkobb muttered.

“Or Tom,” Der added. “But I won’t do it.”

Thistle bunched his fist slowly. “Derora, we cannot save those people. Not if we want to live too, and especially if we do not want to give up the heart of power to the Blackhound!”

Jakkobb dropped his gaze. “He’s right.” He looked down off the wall, where all the dragoons and the wounded that were able to stand were starting to gather.

Der looked out across the plain. “We can still fight.” She inhaled deeply. “Look, this isn’t about my quest for revenge for Kelin’s death. It’s about saving the world from thinking of Pallens as a wicked place.”

The knight-captain sighed. “Very well. We’ll fight. However, if we fail in this fight, you do it. You activate the wards. We might all die, but I’ll see this as a useless hovering rock first. It can be his prison.”

She offered a small smile and nodded.

Thistle scowled. “Why are your plans the ones where none of us die or everyone does?”

“They’ve worked fine so far!” The knight held up his palms. “We-ll, for a loose definition of fine.”

Alluvius asked, “But what if Chloe’s power cancels Horizon’s? Won’t he just win?”

“No, not if Horizon falls and lands on him. Then we all lose.” He turned around to face the residents of Horizon bunching up together below the wall. He whistled, and the sound bounced off the walls of the citadel’s baileys and buildings. “I want everyone here to get crossbows and bows and a sword. We’ve got enough that everyone can have at least thirty of each.”

The dragoon soldiers watched as the wounded fighters from the various coalition armies slouched more and dropped their gazes. They swayed uselessly back and forth.

“Lads!” Jakkobb dropped his gaze for half a heartbeat. He sighed and looked back up. “Lads, listen to me.” The faces of the dragoons and coalition soldiers slowly drifted up to him. The knight swallowed. “This will not be pleasant, and I know some of you didn’t even choose a soldier’s life, but soldiers we are. Look at the citadel you’re in. This is Horizon. This monster was constructed to withstand the War of Hell on Earth. And now, look! A relic from those Centum Wars is here, and we

will show him who is mightier! This is our chance, our one chance, to be sung in history for killing the Blackhound!”

The dragoon soldiers took up the shout first. The soldiers from Tenmar, Galaka, Urael, Thealith and more joined the chorus. Finally, those bakers and butchers conscripted in Alscane opened their throats.

Up on the wall, Alluvius threw up his hands and joined the yell. Beside him, Der remained silent and watched the approaching army. She shoved her trembling fingers in her pocket. He'd beaten her so easily last time!

Jakkobb leaned over her head and whispered, “That was all just a lie. It is down to you and that sword now.”

Chapter Thirty

Battle on the Horizon

“They can’t take Horizon! No one can!” Ander waved his bow above his head. The arrows in his quiver knocked together as he moved. “Yeah!”

“And Pallens could never fall,” Willard retorted.

Ander ignored him and continued to jump up and down behind the battlements of the outermost of the three walls, in full view of the army beginning to mount Horizon’s switchbacks. “They’ll never take us alive!”

“They’re not trying to,” Willard drawled.

Ander sagged. “Why do you always have to rain on my comments? I’m just trying to getting my fighting spirit going.”

Willard sniffed. “Pardon me for touching on the truth.”

Sesquin, Alluvius and Der listened to the verbal fencing match. Der glanced up at the sky in time to see more clouds crowding around the sun and the shadow sweeping across Horizon. She felt Willard’s fear. She was afraid too, but she was definitely tasting his fear, not hers. She sensed it in everyone, the cancerous and electric fear.

Sesquin’s own shoulders dropped and he turned his face away from the approach. “What a way to celebrate Candlebright.”

“True,” Der sighed. “No costumes for us this year, only uniforms.” She tried to smile, and said, as if trying to be polite after eating a bad meal, “At least with less people our food stores will last longer.” She let her eyes fall to the runners on the approach.

“Oh,” Willard moaned, “Why couldn’t we have just turned on the wards and waited for Strival?”

Alluvius frowned. “Because the Blackhound’s got plans in case of that, alright?”

“But I heard that you killed his magicians!”

She and Alluvius exchanged a glance. She said, “And aren’t you glad they’re not here now too?”

“Well, yeah.” Willard shuffled his feet.

Der gasped and whirled as someone tapped on her shoulder. “Edillon! What in the corners of hell are you doing here?”

The king smiled briefly. “I would like a bow please.” He slid into elvish smoothly, “What? Because I’m a king, I can’t be useful? My head is set to roll here too.”

“Arrows, go!” a dragoon shouted from near the gate.

“Arrows, go!” Sesquin roared, carrying the message down the line.

Der kicked up a spare bow from the stone floor of the battlements and tossed at Edillon with her foot. He caught it and notched an arrow in one sharp, fluid motion.

In unison, they drew back their bows. All along the wall, everyone raised their bows, and turned the entire face of the manmade mountain into a waterfall of arrows.

“Raise up those ramps!” a fat soldier barked at the hostages. They shambled under the weight of the platforms on the approach’s dramatic ascent. He lifted his own round shield over his head.

Tallor shoved Chloe past the soldier and underneath the nearest platform. The smell of sweat from the hostages clung to her skin. Even in this cold, they sweated to hold up the heavy wood above their heads.

She looked at it for the first time and saw that it wasn't just a wooden shield. It had raised planks and also notches, as if it was supposed to fit into something. She wondered what it could possibly be for.

The Blackhound retrieved a shield from a soldier behind him and held it up over his own head. "You keep going! If someone in front of you falls, you shove them off this blasted hill and you keep going!"

Arrows whistled. Chloe always thought it was just a line in old soldiers' songs, but she listened and they really did whistle. The shrill notes all combined to sound like some sort of river with odd wooden beats when the arrows clattered together in the air.

Then they struck like lightning rain. Each was a nail with its own hammer. Chloe collapsed to her knees and yelped. The wails of the hostages overtook her own and the wooden platform shuddered against their hands.

A couple of arrowheads punched through and sliced into the hands of the hostages. A young man, with glowing blond hair, fell down next to Chloe. She reached out toward him. His face shone out like a pale moon and he held up a palm. Blood pumped up from a cut across it.

Chloe pushed his shoulder. "Get up, you have to get up or they'll kill you."

Sweat streamed off his nose. He finally swallowed and forced himself back up. He pressed his bloody palm up the platform and continued to stumble up the approach.

Behind them, the fat soldier dropped to one knee, shield still over his head. His opposite foot sprouted an arrow.

The Blackhound snorted. "Are you still useful?"

The soldier leapt up back up. "Yes, my lord!" He wrenched another step up the ascent, arrow still stuck in his boot. He hissed and wheezed as he marched and didn't dare look his master in the eye.

Up on the wall, the constant releasing of the bowstrings sang like silk in the wind. Spike's hooves beat out drumbeats as Jakkobb rode the unicorn behind the archers.

The unicorn's horn glowed in the light, despite the sun fading behind the thickening clouds. *He has to win quickly. That is why they fly up the approach so fast. He knows Strival and Steel Eagle will be running as fast as they can.*

"He's certainly flying up the approach!" Jakkobb raised his voice, "This line, man the gates! Get your arrows and get up to the walkways over the gates!"

Six adamantis gates with archers. Seems like a suicide run, the unicorn said. How would you break through?

"I'm working on that!" the knight shouted back. "And the arrows aren't taking down enough!"

No, he seems to have thought of that. What about fire arrows?

"He seems to have considered that because their shields are covered with metal!"

Dump boiling oil on them.

“Yes, Spike, that’s a wonderful idea. Too bad our boilers was designed for a team of thirty to operate. The pots are taller than the two of us, and I didn’t have thirty men to spare at any time today to even start the fires!”

This is Horizon, we must be able to do something. Spike glanced down at the large wooden platforms and their madly rapid ascent.

“No one can breach these gates,” Jakkobb growled. “Not even the Blackhound.”

Thalon pressed his ear against the ventilation hole. He couldn’t decipher any of the shouts. Goldie rolled on his side in his sleep. The poor creature hadn’t woken for days. Thalon had checked his blanket and it was already spotted dark crimson. The tiny creature’s breath was steady though.

The boy kicked the stone wall. “Why did he tell me to stay here? I’m big! I’m tough!”

The room was stocked with its own water and food supply – if he wanted to call hard biscuits and honey food.

“You’re not fair, Dad! I don’t want to miss this battle either!”

The arrow in Sesquin’s bow trembled. He and Edillon waited shoulder to shoulder on the walkways overlooking the funnel in front of the gates. Thistle stood like a statue behind the king.

The human licked his lips. “Can’t do it, man. They’re hostages!”

“I know,” the king whispered, notching an arrow.

“They’re already dead,” Thistle said softly behind them. He pulled his hood lower so that Sesquin wouldn’t see his orange orbs.

The dragoon shook his head. “Can’t just watch them be slaughtered! And I can’t kill them!”

Thistle frowned. “Then why not just throw open the gates and let them in? There is no saving them, whether it’s your arrow or their swords. Understand that, it’ll make this easier.”

“But no! They’re innocent!”

“Many of them are probably his army in disguise,” the chemman pointed out. “Hesitating is what he wants. It’s why he chose victims to do this chore.”

“But…”

“Save me from heroes.” The chemman sighed in disgust. “Will you feel better if the Blackhound kills us all together?”

Edillon nodded in sympathy to Sesquin, who gulped. Together, they turned their gazes to the sharp corner and waited. Shadows and shouts slipped forward ahead of the army.

Hostages, carrying the wooden platforms in front of them like shields, sprinted around the final corner to face the six gates. Soldiers kicked them from behind. Each of the platforms looked like an arrow garden.

Behind the soldiers, Tallor pushed Chloe into a corner of the walled corridor. “Do not move!”

He spun toward the six portcullises to see soldiers aiming bows at them from the walkways in front of the first gate.

The defenders loosed their arrows at the first row hostages, adding to their arrow gardens.

The second row of hostages braced their feet, while the row in front of them held up their platforms against the arrows. Those in the second row snapped their platforms together and locked them in place to create ramps three times as tall as a man.

Driven by fear and the swords at their backs, the hostages carried through with their orders. They'd been forced to practice them on the road in the snow while the soldiers laughed at and urinated on them.

They shoved the wooden platforms up to the walls and slammed them against the edge of the walkways, creating several ramps. Each was steep but reinforced with extra planks to give both strength and footholds.

Then the hostages kicked each other to hide beneath the ramps. Arrows shot at them and the soldiers from the walkways overhead.

The Blackhound grinned as more ramps slapped against the walls. Around him, his soldiers' swords bit into the backs of the hostages. He didn't even hear their dying shouts.

No one and no siege weapon could smash through those adamantis portcullises. So why bother? Especially when he could just go over them.

Tallor was already in the air, leaping onto the nearest ramp and sprinting up it. This was Horizon's flaw – if one had the panache to pull it off.

On the wall, a dragoon soldier lowered the aim of his bow and released. Tallor cut the arrow down with his sword and never missed a step up the ramp.

Before the archer had time to grasp another arrow, the Blackhound's sword sliced through the bowstrings and severed each of his four fingers. The dragoon's eyes widened in horror for just half a heartbeat before Tallor's sword slammed into his chest. He folded over the blade. Tallor crested the wall.

The Blackhound sliced his sword out in a half circle in front of the other defenders, creating space. Behind him, his soldiers jumped and slipped and clambered up the ramps onto the defenders' walkways.

The dragoons lowered the aim of their bows and continued to fire. Arrows vibrated out of the hands of some of the other soldiers in surprise and gut-wrenching fear.

Dozens of Tallor's soldiers simultaneously leapt up all of the ramps on either side of the gates, and hundreds pushed up behind them.

The bows of the nearest defenders didn't hit the stone floors before their wielders died. Roars of triumph echoed from the gates below and his soldiers continued to scramble up all the ramps. The line of his warriors still running up the approach was so long that it curved around the funnel.

On the walkway, Tallor grinned as an Uraelian soldier collapsed under his blade. A space opened up in front of him as the defenders pressed their shoulders together as they bunched up, creating more space for him. His soldiers immediately flowed into it.

Along the walkways, the defenders' pot was cracking from too much boiling. They only numbered about a hundred of fighting strength, and that number was shrinking by the sword stroke. They kicked their feet against the stone in an effort to scramble away from the attackers. They had no choice.

Tallor smirked as he watched more of his men climb onto the walkways above the gates. One of the soldiers raised his banner: two parallel swords intertwined by the symbol of the god who had given him his powers.

His smile faded. Horizon was several fortresses within the larger citadel. All the defenders had to do was hold on to one and wait for their friends. He had to win this, now.

The wall scraped against Chloe's back as she tried to push herself further against it. Boots thundered as the Blackhound's fighters charged toward the ramps. They were still coming! Arrows from blind shots bounced off the open air corridor all around her.

Her tears overran her vision. The colors of the battle mixed together as if she were staring at it through a waterfall.

Fat fingers suddenly twisted into her hair and wrenched her head back. She shrieked.

A voice, dripping with acid, said, "Well, well. Heard he was keeping a girl. Didn't think you'd be so pretty."

Chloe blinked away her tears enough to stare up into the scarred face of a soldier missing more teeth than he had. The huge man grinned anyway. "Or at least, have kept that pretty face around him. But you're all alone now."

She tried to back into the wall. The soldier jerked her hair again. She stared up with eyes as huge as a rabbit. She couldn't move. She couldn't even make herself breathe!

Tom would save her! Tom would save her!

And then the memory of Tallor breaking the vampire's body against the wooden platform exploded across her mind.

But Der or Jakkobb or Thistle or Spike, they were all here! One of them would save her!

She started to sob again as the soldier twisted her around and rammed her forehead against the stone wall. Her sobs cut off as if sliced by a knife.

Abruptly, a soft thunk echoed between the surrounding stone, and the soldier behind her sighed. She turned her head enough to see his body collapsing with a profoundly surprised expression, and a gushing hole in the center of his forehead.

She strained her neck to see the bottom of a man's boots standing on top of the open aired corridor and shaking the excess blood off his sword. Was it Tom? Had he gotten up? She knew he'd save her! But wait, Tom never used a sword!

The Blackhound jumped down beside her. A malignant scowl curved across his face as he glared at his own dead soldier. "I can't always find the most civilized soldiers. I'm sorry that he had to die quickly."

Chloe folded up and collapsed on to the stone tiles.

Tallor snorted. "I'm surprised your 'uncle' hasn't taught you how to hit properly – or did he always do that for you?" He knelt beside her. "Kick the mean boys in the shins, child. Easy target, hurts like hell."

"Wha... What?" Chloe squeaked.

Tallor rose and offered down his hand. "Now stay close to me. I can't have you dying just yet."

She shook her head and her hands crawled up the wall for support, trying to lean as far away from him as she could.

A battle cry like a lion's rage shouted into the sky ahead of them. Soldiers waved their swords over their heads and roared.

Tallor's smile slithered across his features. "The gates are ours."

Der flinched at the triumphal ululation. She backpedaled across the courtyard and released another arrow. A warrior, sword over his head, leaning back in his yell, never saw his death approaching. The shaft cut into his throat and he crumpled in the peak of his glory.

Other dragoons and coalition soldiers loosed their arrows and felled more of the Blackhound's fighters in their premature victory. Despite their arrows, more warriors of Tallor's army charged up onto the gates, doubling the number that the defenders felled.

"I can't see him!" Der screamed to no one. "I can't see him!" She let fly another arrow.

"Barracks! To the candidate barracks!" The shout carried down the line of dragoons. The defenders scrambled and limped across the courtyard to the old home of the candidates.

Spike leaned down and gripped the shoulder of a man cut in the leg and dragged him toward the barracks by his teeth.

Thistle ran past the unicorn and toward the stables. His black sword ate up all sound as he swung it at the Blackhound's soldiers between him and the room hiding his son.

Inside the candidate barracks' tiny courtyard, Der didn't even have to fight to squeeze down the narrow entry. The press of all the bodies forcing their way through the hole was stronger than a flash flood. She had to fight to keep from drowning.

"Upstairs, upstairs!" Jakkobb's voice roared above the flood. "More arrows than bows, use 'em! Upstairs!"

Edillon, beside Jakkobb, waved to Der above the surf of warriors. She pushed the shoulders of the man in front of her and tried to dive to the side. But the flow kept moving her forward. Alluvius stuck out his hand and she grasped it like a branch. The part human yanked her aside toward their small party.

The king chewed on his lower lip to hide its trembling, and shook his head.

Der shoved the hair out of her face and raised her chin at Jakkobb. "Why here? Why not the keep?"

"Upstairs!" Jakkobb yelled again. "Because we don't have enough men to defend it, Der."

"Wait!" Edillon shouted. "Where's Thistle?"

Der held up her hands helplessly.

"Doesn't matter." Jakkobb pointed at Alluvius. "You, guard Edillon. Use Spike to escape if you have to."

Alluvius' face paled even more. "But, I, I'm not— He's the king!"

"You were trained as a dragoon! Do it!" the knight-captain shot back. "You too, Der"

"No, sir," Der said quietly.

Jakkobb's face solidified. The roar of the passing soldiers seemed to intensify at first and then dim. The knight blinked. "Excuse me, Derora? That was an order."

She straightened her shoulders and met his gaze. "And Strival booted me out of the dragoons, sir."

"I don't care! Paladin or not, you're still my godsdamn recruit, Der! Now come on! We have the barracks to defend!" He cupped his hands. "Everyone still downstairs, you are to defend this door! And fill it with their bodies if you can – makes a good block!"

Edillon saluted with his sword. "We'll make this secure as we can, and we'll run upstairs when we must."

Jakkobb nodded. "Don't have the time to argue. Alright then." He pointed. "Sesquin! Ander! You guard him too! Don't ask why!" The dragoons snapped to attention and marched over.

Der nodded to Edillon. "Who'd have ever thought we'd make it this far?"

He grinned. "Let's hope we make it just a little bit farther too." He watched her back as she and Jakkobb jogged across the open floor to the stairwell in the back.

Suddenly, a black sword, marred by red along its edges, thrust through the doorway. Thistle's head and shoulders popped through, followed by a smaller figure carrying an even smaller bundle. Somewhere in the fighting, his hood had slipped back and his orange eyes burned like fire.

"Chemman!"

Alluvius whirled to see Willard, gaping and pointing. Sesquin was raising his bow.

Edillon smashed his sword down across the tip of Sesquin's arrow. "No!"

The dragoon reeled away from him. Alluvius jumped in between Willard and Edillon, just as Willard's sword reflexively went up.

The king held out his hands and pointed his sword tip toward the floor. "We are not your adversary."

Another dragoon pointed. "But he's chemmen! And, and, you're an elf!"

Sesquin burst, "They say that's how the Blackhound–"

"Not my dad!" Thalon yelled from around his father's waist.

"Not this one." Edillon stared directly at Sesquin. "Now close up this door! We got real enemies to fight!"

Der hesitated at the closet door that had been her bedroom for a year. She glanced back down the curving stairs. "Back to throwing buckets of water?"

"Yeah, Der," Jakkobb said. "Hit the Blackhound with a pillow."

They ran out onto the candidate barracks' battlements. Most of the second story was just a flat roof, arched ever so slightly to trap any rainwater.

Der's mouth and throat dried out as she looked across the baileys of Horizon. His soldiers spread out over the citadel like ants at a picnic. It was at least a thousand to one hundred, probably closer to sixty on their side now. Most of the remaining defenders kept doggedly loosing their arrows over the edge at the shields of the attackers.

Over a hundred of them thundered into the space in front of the candidate barracks. Several of them hoisted up the ramps used at the gates, but the defenders were ready this time. Ander and another dragoon kicked the first down, and never removed their fingers from their bows.

Spike trotted over to Jakkobb, whinnying. *They're already in the keep.* He nodded. Soldiers hauled open the unguarded gate of the central tower.

Jakkobb pointed. "I'm more worried about the fact that they're still coming through the gate."

Der's head jerked toward the stairwell as a long black sword came out first. She relaxed as Thistle and Thalon carrying Goldie ducked into the room.

The chemman shook his head. "They're politely knocking on our door already. Less time than I assumed."

Jakkobb snorted. "I now see how Pallens was able to fall."

Thistle grabbed Thalon underneath the boy's arms and hoisted him onto Spike's back. The unicorn bent his knees a little bit so Thistle could reach.

Der whipped her head back and forth. "I need a bow! They'll fall apart if we can kill him!"

Jakkobb reached out and placed his armored fingers on her shoulder. He shook his head. "Thistle, you get everyone up here." He whistled and then yelled, "Ander! You start getting those boards from the closet and build us a bridge to the wall!"

The dragoon soldier nodded and broke off from the ranks of archers. Two other soldiers fell into step behind him.

"Why, sir?" Der asked.

"So we can get off this place, to the wall, maybe run to another part of the citadel. Survive as long as we can so we will kill as many of them as possible before we die."

"Yes, sir. What can I do?"

He exhaled, but didn't drop his eyes. "Derora, I need you to say it."

Realization took its time to fight through her ears. She gasped and threw his hand off her shoulder. "No, Jakkobb! Chloe is—"

"Der!" His voice cut across her sudden tears like thunder. "He can't have this citadel! Raise the wards!"

"Der, no!" Thalon shouted from Spike's back.

Der barely heard him, and she barely saw Edillon, Sesquin, Willard and the others streaming out of the staircase. She dug her heels down against the stone roof and backed away from Jakkobb. "I won't!"

The knight gripped his axe at his side. Der felt her feet slide into a fighting crouch. She didn't think about it, her body just did it. Jakkobb's voice was as sharp as steel. "You are not sacrificing any life that isn't already lost. We are all already dead. Do it."

All sound evaporated from her world as if Thistle was waving his sword behind her. They were dead.

They were dead. She couldn't deny it. If all was already lost, then there truly was nothing left to lose. Not even a precious life.

It was a freedom, of sorts. Freedom to do whatever because the worst had already happened. Was there going to be any guilt for this? Would the gods judge her for this? She didn't know, but hey, if she were already dead, what was there to lose?

She closed her eyes. “Chloe, I’m sorry.” She opened her gaze and sought out a figure standing above the sixth and final gate. She didn’t know who it was, he was too far, but she knew who she imagined it was.

“Defend the horizon.”

The wind suddenly picked up around her. It scattered the defenders’ arrows in the air sideways, and they clattered together like broken branches.

Steam exploded fiercely out from the mountain’s base. A red blush grew from within the rock. Those in Tallor’s army still climbing the approach dropped to their hands and huddled against the wall as the entire citadel rumbled.

In the middle of the courtyard, Tallor’s feet slid as he jerked to a halt. The girl had fallen to the ground behind him. “What? Why now?” He whirled toward Chloe. “They mean to trap me!”

Chloe’s eyes disappeared up in her sockets. She began to convulse faster than the mountain. Sweat bubbled up across her face and spread down her arms. Her skin paled and then swelled back into an apple red. A shriek opened up her throat and bounced off the walls of the baileys.

Tallor paused and tilted his head to the side. Which would win? The girl or the citadel?

Chapter Thirty One

The Cusp of Victory

The grinding of stones in turmoil rolled across the plain ahead of the wind. The air currents followed. They curved and curled around the corpse lying between the broken boards and nails of the ramp and flipped over the ripped skin on its chest, exposing a black stone heart.

The organ began to drum. Convulsions seized the body. Its white skin scraped against the boards. A hand jerked over the chest, and mashed the skin back into place. The wound instantly sealed.

Tom's emerald eyes blazed open.

A pale yellow Staghorn retriever watched him, ears out and head cocked. A soldier, who was supposedly with the dog, was sprinting away and waving his hands over his head.

The dog extended a white paw toward him and twitched his tail. He had the saddest brown eyes that Tom could ever remember; and the shiniest fur, too. Whoever kept that dog obviously fed him better than most people ate.

Tom pressed a hand over his heart. This thing always ached so badly when it beat! But why was it beating?

Alright, he'd jumped down and snatched up—
"Chloe!"

His head swung toward Silver Dawn's Horizon at the same time he slammed his eyes shut. He didn't want to see. She couldn't survive that much magic!

A silver, gossamer glow hovered around the top of the central tower like a cloud and bucked like the sea in a storm. Electricity flared up and exploded many of the rocks surrounding the fortress. The lava at the base of the citadel was beginning to separate.

"Chloe!" He ran and leapt into the air, like he had thousands of times in thousands of years.

This time, however, he plummeted right back down and skidded into a groove in the snow.

The retriever cantered up to him and firmly pressed his nose in Tom's arse. Then he stepped back and wagged his tail.

Tom's emerald eyes narrowed. He spat out a mouthful of snow. "Go away, cur!"

Was he absorbing the magic of Horizon too? Was that it? He felt the energy pulsing all around like as if he was standing in a river.

He heaved himself away the ground and ran. He pushed his leg muscles to match the speeding rhythm of the heart.

Der wouldn't do this, he thought. Not unless Chloe was already... No! It wasn't too late! He had to get in there time!

The dog galloped along beside him, tongue hanging out and obviously enjoying the run.

Chloe beat her palms on her chest over her heart as if trying to force it to keep beating. The moist air around her feverish skin began to steam. The girl rolled to and fro against the stone.

The Blackhound stood above her, watching. Not a hint of compassion quirked in his eyebrows, and only a slight frown weighed on his face.

Convulsions once again overtook the girl at his feet. He glanced up. The gossamer veil grew out from the keep, expanding rapidly. Underneath, he felt the entire citadel shutter as it started to rise.

He dropped his gaze. The child's chest collapsed as she exhaled, and it failed to rise again. He poked her with the tip of his boot; she didn't respond.

A curse slipped out from underneath his breath. He stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled. "Rally! Don't kill any more of them!" His boots echoed as he started to march toward the candidate barracks. He growled, "If one of them can raise the wards, then he can cancel them too."

Ander twirled his arms for balance as the citadel lurched beneath the thin boards under his feet. "Ahh! Ahh!" His feet propelled him back toward the roof of the candidate barracks.

Sesquin grabbed his arm and hauled him onto the security of the stone. Ander paled and ran his fingers over his face. "That bridge is gonna shake apart before three people can cross it."

"Don't think we'll get the chance to use it anyway," his friend replied.

"They've stopped!" Alluvius shouted from the other side of the roof shouted.

Near the stairwell, Der wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Horizon was stronger."

"No!" Thalon yelled from Spike's back. "Not Chloe! Not after all we've done! She's a fighter like me and Dad! She's not dead! She's not!"

Spike shifted his weight and bowed his head.

Jakkobb grunted. "What we had to do."

Der felt her own rage surge down her arm and her fingers ball into a fist ready to strike at the captain, but then she saw the shimmer of a tear in the knight's own eye. She shook her fingers free and listened to Jakkobb's emotions.

Guilt, duty, regret and fear most of all. She felt his hesitation every time he barked an order. He didn't want any of this. He knew Strival wasn't going to arrive in time to stop Tallor's victory. He had to give those orders, and she felt that flash of self-hatred.

"They're backing off?" Edillon's voice cut into her thoughts. Down below, the attackers were slowing in their assault.

She blinked. "What?"

"No," the knight-captain said. "They're waiting. Spike, you get Thalon and the king out of here the moment you can."

The disguised unicorn bobbed his head.

"What happened to your horn?" Der asked.

Spike shrugged. *Do you want the Blackhound to know everything?*

The citadel shuddered again. Der had forgotten about its ascent in the midst of the other crises. They watched the horizon sink against the land, but the change in elevation didn't seem nearly as dramatic as last time.

Slower ascent than it should be, Spike mused. *Perhaps because Tom is nearby?*

"Probably dead too," Thistle said. "Well, more than usual."

Der closed her eyes and tried to listen to what everyone was feeling. It wasn't listening at all, she knew, but she wasn't going to waste time thinking of another way to express it.

She felt him. Rage and hatred and steadfast determination marching through the ranks like a shark through a school of fish. The sensation was so powerful that she could guess where he was physically standing at the moment.

“He’s here.”

Tallor wrenched aside soldiers standing in his path to the door of the candidate barracks. A corridor made of people split wide in front of him and fell in after him. He didn’t acknowledge it. He didn’t slow down as he approached the wooden door to the barracks. He just raised his foot and smashed his heel against where the hinges hid on the inside.

The door jumped in its frame and splinters showered up from under his boot.

“Release!” a voice boomed above. Dozens of arrows flew from the battlement encircled roof. His soldiers raised their shields. At this distance, the arrows punched right through them. Men dropped with arrows pinning their arms to their own faces.

“Yeah,” Tallor muttered as he lifted his foot again. “Hit me, get your own head wound.” He stamped again and pulled his boot aside to see if the hinge had been exposed.

He roared and kicked one more time. The door bounced, and enough wood had broken to reveal the metal of the hinge. He smirked. Their little training fortress wasn’t as well defended as the rest of the place, now was it?

Another volley of arrows raced over the edge of the battlements. More soldiers shrieked and fell to the ground.

Tallor called out over his shoulder, “Maybe you idiots ought not to stand so close!”

He thrust his sword into the hole he’d made. Metal screamed and sparked as his sword prevailed over the hinge. The door slumped forward against its remaining hinge.

A third round surged over the walls and even more of his soldiers joined the dead and dying.

“Stay back where your shields will work, damn you!” He levered his sword’s hilt up toward the second hinge and pushed his shoulder against the wood.

The adamantis quillions scraped against the steel of the hinge. He pushed his hilt in deeper and the hinge bowed to the stronger metal. It popped into several pieces with barely a squeak. He leaned back and kicked the door again. This time, the door fell over like a plank.

Ha! The fools didn’t even have a bar for their candidate fortress!

Tallor dashed through, buoyed by the triumphant shouts behind him. He hardly even glanced around the barracks’ great hall. He focused his gaze on the stairwell and ran. He heard the rumble of boots as his army chased after him.

A dragoon soldier, standing on the fifth stair, thrust his sword down at the Blackhound. Tallor dodged and the soldier met Tallor’s sword right where the mail covering his chest didn’t quite meet the mail covering his legs.

The stairwell was designed like all castles, with narrow, twisting stairs for the attackers to charge, and on the assumption that they were all right-handed. That way, the curve pressed the attackers’ swords against the wall and offered them no room to swing, whereas the defenders would have space.

The design also gave space for left-handed attackers to wield their weapons. Tallor shoved another dying dragoon out of his path and ran up the remaining steps.

He burst into a small room and immediately, a couple of survivors of the summit battle lunged at him. He parried both blades with ease, and riposted. He pushed through the arching door out into the cloudy light of the roof before the bodies of his most recent kills had keeled over.

Thistle shoved Der behind Spike's bulk just before Tallor flew out of the doorway. The chemman hissed, "Sneak up and do it fast!"

"Dad!" Thalon yelped from the disguised unicorn's back.

And then the Blackhound was there. Willard whirled and released his arrow. Tallor swung his sword and cut the shaft in half before it struck. He rolled his face toward the dragoon. "You can't hurt me. You must know that by now." He turned his gaze to the remaining defenders, and blinked at Spike.

"Alright, how did you fit that horse up the stairwell?"

No one answered. Not a defender moved, or even dared to breath.

Tallor met Jakkobb's gaze and drawled, "You can't kill me. I've won."

Behind him, his banner began to catch in the wind on Horizon's keep from where his soldiers had raised it. Tallor stood in front of it. A heartfelt groan escaped the lips of the defenders, and the points of their swords dipped. Beneath all of them, Horizon continued its slow ascent into the sky.

The Blackhound's smile glowed on his face. "Now, put Horizon back on the ground."

Thistle scoffed, and pointed his blade. "We're bright enough to kill the person who knew the holy language. We know we're all already dead." His orange eyes blazed beneath his hood.

Tallor cocked his head. "A chemman! And I thought today would be free of surprises." His gaze passed on to Thalon on Spike's back, and especially the boy's oblong ears typical of half-elves. "Who is siding with the elves? Or is this one your horrible experimentations?" Anger quickly overcame the confusion on his taut features. "Have things honestly changed so much? First, it's that girl working with the vampire who cares about a child and now the dragoons are allying themselves with chemmen?" He shook his head, as if waking from a nightmare. "I'm thankful that I am going to restore the world, because apparently, it's gone insane."

"No," Thistle replied, "It's all that one girl's fault."

"Hey!" Der erupted from behind Spike.

The unicorn exhaled, dropped his head and clip clopped out of her way.

"Ah, Derora Saxen." Tallor raised his sword at her. "I'd sent you an invitation to Alscane, but oh well. Now put the citadel back to earth or I will ask what your imagination thinks the most horrible thing that I can do to you is, and then do something worse."

Her fingers curled around the handle of the Pallens blade. "How'd you know it was me that did it?"

The Blackhound chuckled. "Well, judging by everything else I've learned about you, I'm starting to just assume it will be your fault. Also, the story of you raising the wards during your little attempted coup has gotten around. I wouldn't recommend a repeat." He raised his sword. The mountain continued to creep higher into the air beneath them. "Now, how are all of your friends going to die?"

Chloe blinked open her eyes. She smoothed out the skirt of her dress and tried to focus. She'd been on the citadel, and now...

She gasped. She was standing on the summit of a rocky mountain, at the mouth of a long cave. Her skirt drifted over the rocks beneath her feet as she stepped closer to the sunlight. Ahead was a staircase made of clouds. The sun must have been on the top of the clouds, because they radiated with its light.

She reached out with her boot and tested the cloud. It held her weight like the stone. She hiked her skirt and backpedaled toward the cave mouth.

What magic was this? And why wasn't she dead? There had been too much magic, and it had been choking her.

She narrowed her eyes and stared. It wasn't a cave; it was a tunnel. Down there, she thought she could see herself, face down in a courtyard.

The light from the clouds expanded, stretching its fingers toward the tunnel entrance. Chloe clapped her hands over her face and turned her back to the light. Tears fountained up from under her fingers.

She ran back toward the tunnel. Lightning sparkled across her path and the thunder boomed like an explosion. The shock vibrated her off of her feet and threw her away from the tunnel. Crying, she pushed herself to her knees. She pushed her hands against the wall and began to inch toward the tunnel again.

Lightning flashed. She leaned against the wall as the thunder drummed directly into her ears. She put another foot down and slipped another step forward.

The electricity spread out into a spider web across the whole circle of the tunnel.

Chloe forced herself to take another step. A tiny tendril of lightning snaked out of the web, and stung the tears on her nose.

"No!" she screamed at large. Uncle had believed in her! The lady had believed in her! Her family was down there and in danger, so she wasn't going to leave them!

The swirling lightning snapped at her like an attack dog suddenly off its chain. Her world went white and then the pain also went white-hot. No heat trembled through her body, at least none that she felt, but the pain was alive.

She collapsed. The pain faded and blackness was swelling up and up in her vision. A sob dried out in her throat as the lightning ebbed, and took with it the last of her strength.

A final tear welled up in her eye. What was it Kelin had said? That a person has one drop of eternal life in them, and when they died, that drop carried over to another life. She tried to blink the tear back, but didn't even have the power to move her eyelid.

"Chloe?" a voice drifted down to her ears. The thunder suddenly sounded distant.

The weight against her eyes was leaden, but she knew that voice. "Uncle?" she managed in a ghost of a whisper.

She heard footsteps and the lightning vanished. Someone slid his hands underneath her shoulders and her legs and lifted.

"Of course," Tom replied.

“I knew you’d come!” Finally, her eyelids broke free to reveal her brown eyes. “I knew you’d find me.”

A dead space surrounded him. The lightning stabbed at them, and melted away just as rapidly. She never thought to ask him how he was here in this place, trapped between the living and the dead.

A smile graced her lips. “Will you teach me to kick the mean boys in the shins?”

“What?” He started to carry her down the tunnel. “Yes.” All the while lightning shimmered into a web to block their path, but fizzled as Tom stepped closer.

“I want to see Thalon and Der, and my grandfather, and the lady, and—”

“Let’s just get home first.” The walls of the tunnel flashed by faster, as if he was running, despite that he maintained an even walking pace.

The walls started to blur together. Chloe tried to curl into a ball in her uncle’s hands. She squeezed her eyes closed and buried her face in his chest.

The shouts of command and the arrows whirring through the air cut into her ears. And then the magic of Horizon’s wards lunged against her just as it had done before. She felt its physical pressure against all points of her body like she was experiencing gravity for the very first time.

Horizon’s magic also brought swords, thrusting at her heart.

No! she screamed to herself. She didn’t come back all the way for it to best her again!

Tom took her hand. She felt his own power stand up beside hers. Together, they could ride this wave all the way to the shore.

The power crackled and thrust at their own magic canceling abilities like the lightning had in the tunnel. All the magic of the wards turned on them, despite what it was intended to do, like metal drawn to magnets. Both powers irresistible to each other.

However, she and her uncle were strong enough to deny. They could push the magic out of their bodies. They could push it out further, away from the tower, where it could disperse and evaporate.

Panting, Chloe opened her eyes and looked around. “We did it, Uncle, we did it!” Behind his head, she saw the gossamer veil pulse once and vanish. Below, the lightning between the rock rings shot up into the sky and died like fireworks.

And then, Silver Dawn’s Horizon started its plummet back down to earth.

“Oh shit,” Thalon moaned. He leaned closer to the unicorn’s mane as they watched the gossamer veil blink out of existence.

Child, mind that tongue! Spike failed to put the thunder into his voice. That thunder was supplied when the lightning arrowed up into the sky and exploded.

“But, Chloe! Chloooo-eee!” The boy slapped his hands against Spike’s neck. “She’s here! We gotta help her!”

Spike kept his gaze nailed on the Blackhound. So did Jakkobb, Edillon, Der and everyone else.

Der shifted her weight behind her feet. The roof felt like it was slipping. Surprise rippled across the expression of the fighters. Even the Blackhound’s eyebrows shot up a fraction.

Edillon shifted closer to Jakkobb. He licked his lips. “Horizon has a plan for everything, right?”

The roof beneath them began to sink, and their feet along with it.

“Not for falling out the sky, no,” Jakkobb said. “Majesty, I’d advise you to mount up on Spike now. Please.”

“But we’re not all that high up—”

“We’re high enough!”

The wind picked up around them as their descent accelerated. The unicorn leaned forward to allow the king to place both hands on his back and jump.

“Dad!” Thalon yelled and reached with one hand. The other hand still clutched the unconscious gold dragon to his chest.

Thistle reached out and patted his son’s knee; he never looked away from the enemy.

Jakkobb raised up his hand. “On my order, *jump!*”

“Won’t work,” Thistle said quietly. Behind him, the dragoons drifted closer into a bunch and bent their knees. The wind’s whistle erupted into a scream around them.

Spike rose up just an inch over the roof.

Tallor raised his sword and barked over his shoulder, “On *my* order, jump!” He turned his attention back to the dragoons, with a brief glance to his soldiers still in the courtyards and the keep and those still spilling through the gates.

Down in front of the gates, Tom held Chloe to his chest.

He lifted one leg into the air and kicked up with his other. His bones and muscles felt like they had been stretched to the point of snapping. He hissed as they hopped into the air. Chloe tightened her grip around his neck.

Tom wheezed and tried to hover, but felt his body falling in tandem with the citadel.

Horizon crashed. The manmade mountain smashed down on its base with all the force of millions of tons of fused stone falling out of the sky brought. The thunder raced out across the plain in all directions.

The yellow dog, Coda, whined and then threw back his head and howled. He spun around and tried to run away from it, but the noise saturated the entire world.

Inside the citadel, the armory shook itself apart. Dust erupted in a cloud as the building collapsed.

The walls holding the keep together bucked and swayed. The wallpaper weaves designed to hold the rocks no matter what crackled and twisted and shredded. The crash continued on.

Chapter Thirty Two

The Sword of Pallens

Der landed, and immediately the vibrations shattered her balance. The earthquake carried throughout the rock of Horizon. Cracks spread out across the roof of the barracks and she exhaled, and didn't dare inhale in case the extra weight caused a collapse.

But she had to cough. So much dust was exploding into the air.

Finally, the shaking slowed and she rubbed her eyes and tried to assess. Too many, on both sides, had jumped too early, or worse, too late. They were supposed to jump a slight second before the citadel crashed. That way, they would be in the air and miss the impact, and be only moderately to severely injured when they landed. That was the idea, anyway.

Bodies, jaws and eyes wide with shock, lay splattered across the barracks' roof. Below, in the courtyard, some had been crushed by pieces of the building shaking loose. Others had just seemed to have shaken apart. And yet, some had their thighs driven up inside their torsos by the impact.

And more had accidentally driven their unsheathed swords home in their own bodies. She could hear men screaming all around her.

The crash had taken down more of Tallor's troops on the roof and collapsed the stairwell.

Der blinked. The thin bridge made of boards from the barracks to the outer wall was still there, and that hadn't been anchored by anything. Directly behind it was one of the proper metal bridges leading to the second wall.

A white daisy petal drifted across her vision. She sat up. More daisies fell. She held out her hand, and they were cold. Oh, it was starting to snow.

Spike whinnied overhead, breaking through her reverie. The unicorn touched down his hooves. Edillon leaned over. "Der? Der!"

She forced herself to inhale. "Kaleb?"

"Dad! Dad!" Thalon yelled, bending the other way off of Spike's back.

Thistle nodded as he pushed himself to his feet. He turned and offered a hand down to Jakkobb. The red knight's armor was laden with pieces of the barracks' battlements. He rose up next to the chemman.

Tallor the Blackhound, still standing, raised his sword and dusted his trousers with his right hand. "Alright, *now* kill them all."

Around him, his surviving soldiers heaved themselves to their feet. Tallor snarled and pointed to the rest of his still standing soldiers in the courtyard below. "And somebody get some rope and get your arses up here!"

Ahead of him, Ander pulled Willard by his arms behind Jakkobb. Willard, with both his legs pointing in opposite directions, groaned and thankfully fainted. Other dragoons pulled the wounded behind the front line and formed up in front of them.

"Forward!" Tallor commanded. His soldiers slipped on their sprained and shattered ankles. But they had to go forward. He'd made them believe it. They had to always move forward or they'd be betraying Pallens.

Both sides, grimacing in agony, limped toward each other. They were going to finish this.

Der tried to charge; she was the only one, and she immediately skidded on the thin layer of feathery snow. She felt like the crash was shaking in her feet still, and she fumbled for balance. Dragoons and the remaining coalition soldiers marched past her.

Thistle and Jakkobb anchored the line of defenders. There seemed to be only a score of them left standing.

The dragoons slammed their swords harder against the Blackhound's men. Their line inched a step ahead. The cracked stone underneath their feet groaned louder than their clashing blades.

Der shoved at the backs of the defenders in front of her. It wouldn't matter if they killed all of Tallor's men! They couldn't cut *him*! As long as he could swing a blade, he would win!

The Pallens sword felt heavy in her hand.

The pressure of the defenders in front of her suddenly pushed back. He must be there! The line wouldn't buckle otherwise! She dug down her shoulder and pushed forward against the retreating line.

She slipped through, and barely raised her sword in time to block his overhand swing.

A moment hung around just as hers and the Blackhound's gazes snapped together. Der lifted the Pallens sword to an en garde position. "You have to kill me for this to end."

"To my enjoyment!" Tallor struck with serpent speed. Der barely had time to shove the Pallens sword between herself and his weapon.

Immediately, she found her footwork retreating from his bladed onslaught. She grunted, but didn't have the time to glance at the sky in prayer for whatever the gods had planned. All of her focus was on her sword.

She didn't even notice how Jakkobb and Thistle and all the other fighters on the rooftop slowed their attacks and watched. Their battle no longer mattered.

Tallor kept pressing forward. Der's back scraped against the barracks' battlements. She fainted right and dodged left. His sword stabbed the wall an inch from her skin.

She thrust, he parried, riposted and disengaged, circling his blade up and over hers. She jerked up the Pallens sword and suddenly could not give any more ground and couldn't survive on blade-work alone.

The board! The bridge Ander had made!

She fainted and then jumped the other way onto the bouncing board and inched out over the canyon between the barracks and Horizon's first wall. She trusted her feet and ignored them. All her life was in her sword.

Tallor never slowed or hesitated as he followed up to the edge of the battlements, still relentlessly attacking.

What had Jakkobb said about reacting and not attacking? All of her moves were becoming defensive. All of them pure reaction. That was a loser's song.

Tallor jumped up on to the board, and it bounced like a gangplank. Their swords cut and crashed against each other in a blur of steel.

Der sprang higher than he, and the board bowed again, and he was suddenly standing well over her. She retreated as quickly as she dared in order to get off the bridge. Their swords never ceased crashing or slowed their tempo as they moved.

Her heels clicked against stone and she hopped down onto Horizon's first wall, right ahead of a metal bridge to the second wall. He sprinted and landed on the wall just half a heartbeat after she had.

Der tried to dodge sideways, but his sword blocked her path and chipped off a sliver of stone. She flung herself the other way. Tallor again blocked her path.

She threw her sword against his, and took the only choice. She backed onto the thin metal bridge uniting the first and second walls. Her feet skidded on the metal. It would be deathly slick in a few minutes if the snow kept coming. Then she turned and sprinted.

It wasn't supposed to be this way! She re-wrapped her fingers around the handle of the Pallens sword. The gods were supposed to help her!

But not fight for me, a reasonable thought cut in. If you want to be a better warrior, you have to train for it.

Might be too late for that now, the part of herself that reminded her of Tom's lazy drawl said.

Zine had said it was down to their last chance, and she hadn't done anything until after that! Oh gods, it probably was too late!

She glanced behind her shoulder. He was a faster runner too! She wiped the sweat glistening on her forehead. Now would be a good time to have a plan, she thought, I really need to start benefiting from those.

Tallor's boots crunched across the gathering snow on the metal bridge. He didn't slip or hesitate, and his sword came down at her before he'd even leapt off the metal.

She ducked and scrambled out of range of his slice. Shrieks and chimes wailed up from their swords. He thrust lower and lower and all of her moves were parries. She was ready when he suddenly struck high at her throat, and made a large circular parry.

But she wasn't ready for him to immediately strike low. He had used the momentum from her parry to continue the circle. The tip of his blade tore across the top of her thigh.

A hiss ripped out from her lips, but there wasn't time for pain. His onslaught didn't stop, and she could not pause to acknowledge the cut.

Another cut licked through her defense along her forearm. She tried to thrust when his sword was still extended, because he shouldn't have time to parry.

He did. Effortlessly. And immediately sent a new attack at her.

Tallor hammered his sword against hers. "The last man to use that sword at least knew how!"

She didn't have the breath to reply. All her strength poured into deflecting his strikes. And even then, she could only turn aside his killing thrusts. Smaller flicks of his blade sliced through her guard. The icy air set her lungs on fire, and the cold stung as loudly as the cuts from his sword.

His tip struck another cut on her forearm. She parried the strike to the side, but he had just lifted his wrist and the tip drove down at her skin.

She'd heard somewhere about bards saying that masters like Strival had turned swordplay into an art. Up until now, she had thought that line of the song was repeated too often and was stupid. Now,

she understood. And yet, it was more than that. His weapon was as much of a part of him as his arm or his wrist.

Her own wrist sagged beneath the weight of the Pallens sword. It wasn't just the weight of history that was heavy anymore, and until that moment, the blade had been the lightest metal on earth. Their weapons blurred together, too fast to see. She only reacted on instinct and training, not sight.

She suddenly dropped her point and thrust at his leg. It was a perilous and entirely outrageous move since it left her head exposed. On the other side of the coin, he probably wasn't expecting it.

Tallor swept his leg out of reach, and thrust his sword at her heart. Der dodged the fatal stab. The tip of his sword dragged across her breast. Her thin mail pushed away the cut, but not what would bloom into an awesome bruise. Again, no time to bother with pain. Panting, she brought her sword back on guard. Her back foot slipped against the snowy slush.

He lunged again. She threw herself backward. Her feet spun her around, without consulting her, and she was sprinting down the wall.

Plan! What was that about planning ahead? Her mind's eye saw his sword arcing toward her exposed back. She swung the Pallens sword over her shoulder. The clash of blades vibrated up her arm and through her chest.

Ahead of her, the metal plank between the second wall and the outermost wall winked brightly against the falling snow. Oh well, a bad plan was still a plan.

She parried over her shoulder again, and then abruptly jumped up onto the walkway. She kicked out her back leg straight behind her. Yes! She'd tripped him up as he lunged after her. He immediately regained his balance with only a heartbeat's hesitation and thrust.

She spun as she riposted, only to have her own strike denied. But, as she pulled her sword back, she was already dashing toward the other metal plank.

Despite the slick snow, she jumped on to the little bridge and accelerated. Her left foot slipped off the bridge and over the abyss between the walls. She recovered and didn't even have time to be scared or to think about what could have happened.

The snow on the metal deteriorated instantly into slush as she scrambled across the plank. She skidded and bounced down the length of the span and her momentum threw her off onto Horizon's third wall. She crashed against the battlements and suddenly found herself staring down and down as her head hung over the edge. Her eyes flickered. She couldn't even see the ground because of the obfuscating snow.

Behind her, she heard footsteps running across metal.

She shoved herself away from the battlements and hurled her body at the base of the plank. Tallor's sneer bore down on her and he lowered his sword as he charged across the bridge. Her fingers dug underneath the bridge and tugged a petite lever.

She would die right here if it was frozen. She yanked at it, and the lever twisted around underneath her fingers. Cables slipped underneath the metal and the bolts anchoring the ramp on both sides slid free.

The Blackhound never even shifted his feet as the bridge started to fall away underneath his feet as he was only three quarters across. He took two more running steps and leapt. The bridge clattered away into the pit between walls.

Der held her breath.

His arc hit its zenith too early. He was too far. He started to curve down toward the pit between the walls.

Tallor flipped his sword around in his hand, so that he held it with the blade pointing straight down. He reached out and rammed the one of the adamantis quillions into the lip of the wall. The heavenly metal bit deeply into the stone and arrested his fall.

But he kept his body moving the entire time. Using his velocity, he kicked his feet against the wall and pulled himself up on his sword, almost as if he was flying. He landed on top of the wall in front of Der in harmonious balance. All in a couple of smooth, fluid motions, as if he had practiced that exact move for years.

He was also fast enough to parry her blow. The staccato rhythm of their swords resumed.

Der's muscles burned in an effort to keep speed with him. Her body had reached the point where it was just easier to keep going. It would take more effort to stop, even though she knew this couldn't go on.

And then her sword suddenly froze in her hand. She tried to jerk it back. It did not move. The tip of the blade was caught between the quillions and his cross-guard. He had twisted his wrist to lock it there.

Then he flipped his wrist in the other direction and the Pallens sword broke free from her hand. The blade reflected its blue and gold light against the light as it sailed over the battlements before disappearing into the blowing snow.

Der backpedaled away, staring at her empty hand. She flexed her fingers. Nothing was there!

And that was the only thing that could hurt him!

Tallor thrust immediately, and she slapped the palm of her hand against the flat of his sword and shoved. She hadn't even thought about it!

He lunged again. This time, she jumped backward beyond the weapon's length.

"Not bad." He smirked. "Well, better than your friend anyway."

He thrust again.

Her boots squeaked against the snow rapidly freezing to ice along the wall. Panting, she looked up at his satisfied smirk. Standing in front of a break between the battlements, he looked more like a silhouette than a man. More like a thing from a nightmare.

If only she'd asked the gods sooner! She would've had time to learn how to be a paladin! She would've learned her powers, and maybe, she would've have had a chance.

Her entire chest had to roll like ocean waves to get enough air in and out. Blood dripped off her arms and legs and soaked into her clothing. Each bead of sweat stung when it flowed into a cut. She heaved for breath, disarmed and defeated.

Still smirking, he leveled his sword at her throat.

She gulped for even more air. So this was it. She slid her feet back into a running position. Well, if she was going to meet eternity, then so was he.

Der charged.

She ducked underneath his thrust and hit his chest. She heard his back thump against the wall between the battlements, and then, together, they plummeted over the edge.

"We can't leave them!" Edillon's fist rebounded off of Spike's shoulder. He looked down, past the unicorn's floating hooves to the barracks' roof.

"I don't even see Der!" Thalon shouted. "Where'd she go?" Below, his father brought the black chemmen sword to the throat of the last of Tallor's troops on the rooftop.

Thalon hammered the king's shoulder. "Look! The rest of 'em have got ropes! They're gonna climb!" He pointed down at Tallor's troops, many swinging ropes and hastily constructed grapnels.

I can't believe so many of them are left standing, Spike murmured.

"Too many of them," the elf replied. "I—" He jerked straight. A moan escaped his lips and all color escaped his face. "Oh no! This, *this* must be what she was warning us about! It's coming!"

"What? What's coming?" Thalon twitched his head back and forth below, trying to see something new.

Earth event, the unicorn said.

Chloe drove her foot into the soldier's shin. Tom stood to her back, tearing the skin off of three more warriors. He was like a rock in a river, and the flow of battle broke around him. But the vampire couldn't be everywhere, so Chloe had hiked up her skirt and kicked the soldier in front of her.

Tom spun, and the soldier was already hopping back on one foot when the vampire's fingernails shredded his face.

"I did it, Uncle, I did it!" Chloe bounced from foot to foot.

"I am impress..." His smirk shrank and faded.

The citadel lurched.

The stone beneath their feet started to tilt.

Ander sliced another rope free of the battlements. They were even tying ropes to rocks to anchor their climb. He started to saw at another rope when one of the Blackhound's soldiers sprang up from yet another line, swinging a cudgel.

He couldn't move fast enough. The cudgel rang like a gong on his helmet, twisting the metal sideways.

Thistle stepped over as Ander went down, all sound deadened by his sword, and spit the soldier. Horizon lurched. And then the citadel started to tilt toward the approach.

Spike galloped through the air over the six adamantis gates. He dipped lower toward the approach. Edillon gripped his mane with both hands. "The base, it's spreading up from the base!"

The rocks of Horizon's base and along the front face were unraveling into dust. Heat, from the rapid disintegration of the rocks or from the earth herself, was turning the new dust and the dirt at the citadel's ground into mud.

Beyond the dust and mud, most of Horizon remained stone. Heavy stone, in fact, and it was starting to tip up and sink into the mud.

Tallor eyed the groove in the stone left by his adamantis quillion that he used to catch his fall. He hung by his sword stuck in the mountain face. He reached out with his other hand, but the manmade precipice was too smooth for handholds. And too vertical to slide down.

The citadel lurched.

“You broke it!”

Why does everyone always blame me? Der wondered. She concentrated on asserting her grip on his boot with her fingertips. She glanced down past her dangling feet. It was quite a view. The sharpened rocks waited below like hungry monster’s teeth.

He lifted his other leg and stamped down on her head. He felt his boot slide lower on his ankle.

She groaned and dug her fingernails underneath his trousers and clawed into his leg. His skin curled up underneath her nails, leaving claw marks in his calf.

She ground her teeth against the red-hot surge left in the wake of his kick and then stared at his leg. He lifted his free foot again and she continued to stare. She knew there was something about that, but she couldn’t figure it out!

He kicked again.

She reeled and bright colors shot fireworks across her vision. She ignored that as best she could and felt along the scratches on his calf. The answer was right there! But it was like it was written in a foreign language and she just couldn’t remember the word!

He growled, “Why don’t you fall?”

“I have a hard head,” she muttered. Next, she suddenly grabbed his other foot with her free hand and wrapped both arms around his ankles and hugged them together as tightly as she could. He bucked his knees, trying to shake her loose.

Horizon shuddered again, and started to lean toward the approach and away from them.

Their leader had vanished. In battle, that meant that someone had killed him or he’d fled. Tallor’s army knew their leader, leaving only one answer. And now the damn citadel was starting to tip. They had to run uphill at the barracks now and it was still moving. Dust was rising up from somewhere over the gates.

Their footfalls slowed in their attack.

Many more squeezed together near the gates. The last of the army was up and through. Horizon was tipping over, and the gates were suddenly tilting toward the ground. Anyone left on the approach would learn how to fall from a fatal height.

Rocks ground all up and down the front face of Horizon, and the base of the approach disappeared below the ground.

The entire approach shattered apart. The cracks and tears in the rock streamed upward along the face. The gates started to rattle in their tracks.

The remainder of Tallor’s army charged toward the three walls on the other side of the candidate barracks. They couldn’t escape down the approach now, and it was too dangerous to remain here. They kicked themselves through cracks in the walls, trying to escape toward the slanted backside of the citadel.

Up on the barracks, the defenders braced their feet against the battlements as Horizon continued to lean toward the approach.

The citadel finally stopped its tilt. Der stuck her foot out against the wall. It took her weight and she relaxed her grip on Tallor's ankles. The slope was still incredibly steep, but no longer vertical. Her sword was somewhere down there! There was a chance!

Metal chimed against the rock as Tallor yanked his sword free.

Der dropped her grasp on him and started to slide down the smooth face.

Her boots separated and kicked up the thickening snow. She tried to think. Now, at the base, how much distance was there between Horizon's wall and the rock field? Was it enough not to be fatal?

The broken base of the citadel was getting bigger faster than she'd expected. There was also a good break where the base of the citadel had ripped up out of the ground. That lip could launch her straight into the rock field. And she hadn't had time to see her sword yet! It was down here somewhere and, she prayed, not buried in snow.

Der didn't even try to slow down. Instead, she dug down her hands and pushed herself up to her feet and continued a jumping run over the broken base and into the rock field.

She sailed through the air, cutting through the aerial snowflakes for twenty feet. She landed on the ground and kept running. She had too much momentum to try to stop at once. Snow mixed with sweat and stung her eyes as she pushed her hair out of her face. It had to be here!

She barely dodged Tallor's sword. She hadn't even realized he was behind her until an ancient, animal instinct made her duck.

He'd followed!

Der didn't have time to turn or gasp. Instead, she jumped ahead into the rock field designed to shred a running man's legs. She hopped forward, more jumping than running.

She couldn't miss a single step or she would lose everything. She was still falling, a staggering continual fall, indefinitely postponed by the landing of another heavy foot forward. And another foot, again setting back the collapse.

Tallor lashed out with his sword again, slicing at the back of her shirt. He tested the top of one of the stones with his boot. It was sharp, certainly, but how far would he have to run?

He launched himself into the chase, from rock top to rock top. The stones shredded the soles of his boots, but he was gaining. He brought his sword level with the back of her head.

Der scooped up a loose stone, twice the size of her fist. She whirled and barely managed to parry. Sparks leapt up into the snow from the sword on stone.

She chucked the rock at him and sped deeper into the field. Her eyes scanned for the sword. It had to be here! Oh gods, it had to be here!

She spared her eyes for the rocks too. She couldn't fall. Tripping would mean if not instant death, then severe maiming followed by death on sword. She looked around, holding her breath. She couldn't see it!

"The last person to use that sword at least held it when he died!" Tallor took another swipe at her. "But I still beat Midan! This sword is faster!"

Der bent double, stuck her hand on one of the sharpened rocks to steady her balance. The edge sliced into her palm and she didn't even feel the pain. She felt her blood heating the rock, but not the pain. Finally, she turned back to look at him.

He didn't smirk or snarl; he just concentrated on his thrust.

Der braced herself to move and tried to dodge. Too slow. His sword cut into her upper right arm just beneath her shoulder, and she felt the bones and tendons and veins just separate from her body. Again, no pain.

But she didn't stop moving, even when she saw her own arm landing on the ground. She kept plunging at him. In the back of her mind, she knew that no one else would have charged. They would have recoiled and saved what they could.

Tallor's crystal blue eyes widened at her charge. He started to bring his sword up. Too late, she was already inside his reach and driving her left shoulder into his chest.

He was lighter than she'd expected. She felt his feet leave the rocks he was balancing on for the briefest of seconds. She pivoted so her back was to his chest and reached out with her left arm, now in line with his left, and grabbed his sword by the hilt.

He was still so surprised by being thrown back that her grip on the blade was stronger. She flipped it around in her hand and shoved it back behind her with all her remaining spirit.

The pressure of the sword piercing flesh stiffened along the blade. His entire body tensed behind her. The warm air from his gasp burned the back of her neck.

Finally she turned, and saw that she'd stuck the sword through his stomach. She pushed it as deep as she could. She coughed and mustered, "Then I guess this sword has killed both kings of Pallens."

The sword trembled in time with his heart. The vibrations tingled all the way up her remaining arm. Tallor coughed and looked surprised at the blood staining the snow between them. In fact, he looked confused.

He stumbled back away from her. She let go. All her strength had gone into using that sword, and when she released her fingers, she released whatever strength she had.

She watched him. One of his fingers traced down the blade until the digit stuck his own belly.

They stumbled away from each other and crashed into the snow at the same time.

Spike's hooves clattered against the stone roof as he landed. Or rather, landed on the wall which slanted almost enough to be a roof.

Thalon jumped off his back and scrambled to the leaning wall. "Chloe!" he shouted as the girl's head crested the rooftop. Tom followed up the rope.

Thistle trailed after the boy, who tried to hug him, Chloe and Tom all at once.

Edillon silently slipped off the unicorn's back. Spike leaned forward and nudged Jakkobb's armored shoulder.

The knight blinked, and looked around, as if surprised by the devastation. "Well, we broke Horizon."

May I suggest we resign and take up freelancing? Before Strival condemns us to cleaning the approach with our tongues?

“There is no approach left,” Thistle said.

Jakkobb ignored the chemman. “Yeah, good idea. Maybe it’d be better if the Blackhound had killed us. Better than death by being yelled at.”

Behind them, Ander stuck out his questing fingers and blindly staggered into Alluvius. “Hey, who’s that?”

The part human whirled and raised an eyebrow. “Ander?” The dragoon’s helmet had been twisted halfway around his head, leaving the nose-guard covering his ear.

“It’s stuck,” Ander said.

“It’s alright, man.” Sesquin, coming up to them, tried to bite down a laugh. “We’ll just cut it off.”

“Get away from me!” Ander pointed his foot in a random direction and lurched off that way.

Thalon and Chloe giggled as the Ander-monster blundered by them. Chloe looked around and the laughter evaporated. “Wait, where’s Der?”

Cold. Cold and white suffused any other thoughts. Der managed to open one eye, but then wasn’t sure that it was open. A layer of snow had formed a ledge on her eyelid.

Men. Desperate. Scrambling.

She tried to watch.

Four men shouted at each other. Each of them tugged at one of the Blackhound’s limbs, in all four directions. The sword still stuck up from his gut.

“Don’t touch the sword! It’s—”

“We gotta go!”

“What about her?”

“She’s dead, now we gotta go! They’re gonna find us!”

No, I’m not, she thought mildly. But I don’t seem to be able to move.

She let her eye drift shut again. She didn’t know how long it had continued to snow, but there suddenly was a warm, wet nose sniffing at her ear. After a moment, she forced her eye open again to meet a pink tongue.

A dog. Friendly.

The yellow dog turned away from her, thrust his nose to the ground and darted between the stones to where Tallor had fallen. He whined and padded along the bloody trail.

Overhead, pieces of the brewery shifted and spat out a boulder. It sounded like thunder as it crashed down the slope of Horizon.

The dog shivered and flinched at the noise. He trotted back to Der and curled up next to her chest, trembling. She inhaled a mouthful of blond fur. At least it was warm.

Someone shouted nearby. “See? I told you! Follow the dog! Der, oh my gods, Der! Are you still alive?”

Epilogue

“Der? Der?”

The paladin surfaced to consciousness from deep inside the well of blankets. She blinked to see a blurry vision of Chloe leaning over her face. Heat tickled her cheeks, and she twisted her neck to see Goldie sharing her pillow. She glanced up to a tent ceiling overhead. She sniffed; there was a fire inside somewhere.

“Der!” Chloe tapped her shoulder.

She stared dumbly at the girl. Behind her, she made out the silhouetted form of Tom. She tried to sit up, but the yellow dog’s weight trapped her inside the blankets.

Her head dropped back on to the pillow. When she closed her eyes, her body still felt like she was plummeting over the edge of Horizon. Endlessly falling.

She tried to pull back a blanket. Her hand wasn’t responding. A dazzling, bright splinter of memory pounced. She saw his sword flashing!

Oh gods! She reached out with her left hand, failing to notice a small red cord attached to it, and jerked away the covers. She didn’t hear the indrawn chorus of hisses surrounding her.

A tourniquet bit into her upper right arm. Beneath, there was nothing. Her arm ended in a stub.

Colors seized her vision and a wave of dizziness crashed on the surf of her mind. Panic sparked throughout her body.

She blinked and saw the worried faces of Alluvius, Edillon and Jakkobb floating over her. Thalon and Thistle waited behind them.

Edillon patted down the air with his hands. “Der, you’re alright. Please, don’t panic.”

She tried to part her lips to speak. She wagged the stump of her arm. The moment passed and she exhaled.

She gulped. “I guess it was worth it, but it certainly doesn’t feel like it.”

In fact, everything felt like a dream. Everything now and everything that had happened. It was so easy to think that she’d been asleep for it all. She would wake up in her parents’ cabin in the room she shared with her sister, and then after breakfast, she’d go bother Kelin down at the blacksmith’s.

Reality chilled her mind like the cold fingers of winter. “Kelin!”

Edillon nodded. “He died a hero, Der.”

She sniffed back a wave of tears, but she had already cried for him. “Even though we still won, we still lost a little.” She wagged the stump again. “Lost a lot.”

The king allowed a small smile. “That’s where you’re lucky to have elven friends.”

“Er, what?”

He tapped her other arm. She hadn’t even noticed it. A small hose ran to what looked something akin to a tattooing needle and into her arm. She couldn’t even see what it was attached to on the other end. Her muscles instantly clenched.

“You lost too much blood, Der,” Jakkobb explained. “And we’re giving you some back.”

She stared in total incomprehension. “I don’t..”

“You’re like me.” Tom’s mouth curved up in either a snarl or a grin. “You need someone else’s blood to survive.”

Edillon shifted his weight. "Um, yes. It's very verboten, but, well, it's how we saved your life. And because it's elven blood, it's very likely that you'll have a new arm again." He tried to grin. "In a few months." He shrugged helplessly.

She tried to scoot away from the hose attached to her arm. "But whose blood is it?"

"Jakkobb's," Tom said. "Don't worry, I made sure to smell out who was compatible with your blood. Yes, I can smell if it is."

"I..." She gave up. She didn't understand.

The knight tried to smile. Der eyed him suspiciously. Finally, she asked, "How did you survive the Centum Wars if they were all like this?"

"At some point, in impossible situations, impossible things happen," Jakkobb answered.

"So you were lucky."

"Damn straight. Don't have a chance, but got a prayer."

After a moment, she said in general, "I lost the Pallens sword. I didn't kill him with it. I mean, I killed him, but with his own sword."

Edillon leaned over her. "What was the sword, Der?"

"It's this metal stick with—"

"I mean who. *Who* was the sword of Pallens?"

"Oh." She glanced between the gold dragon and the yellow retriever. "When did we get a dog?"

"He's nice!" Chloe snuggled the dog with her cheek. "His name's Coda and he doesn't have a master anymore. He doesn't seem to like loud noises though."

Der tried to imagine whose dog he was. But any images wavered like fog and drifted away. "They carried his body off."

"Some escaped," Thistle said. "They ran down the side you fell from."

"But why?"

"Would you leave your king's body on the field?" Alluvius asked.

"I've never met the king of Thealith."

"You wouldn't leave me there," Edillon stated. "If you had the chance. There must have been respect underneath their fear. Thankfully, now, it's over."

Jakkobb added, "Strival has ordered agents to hunt his body down."

"And no one is chasing me anymore!" Chloe piped up.

"Yes, little one," the king replied. "And I have received word from my kingdom, and I hereby give the lady of Elloan permission to train you to your abilities, be what they may. But only if she chooses to accept another student. You'll be an honorary elf, little lady."

Behind Chloe's shining eyes, only Thistle saw Tom briefly stiffen. But he let the suspicion fade. It made sense. He couldn't follow her there.

Thalon wiggled a finger in his ear. "At least there are no more earth events. That last one was—"

The dog suddenly whined and squeezed his body closer to Der's.

As one, the party turned their eyes to the open tent door. Outside, the snow had changed from white to black and orange. It sizzled when it landed on the layer of snow on the ground and the tent ceiling.

“It’s ash,” Alluvius whispered. Each ember was as perfectly formed and intricate and unique as a snowflake. Their edges burned to black as they fell from the clouds, and the burning ash flakes stretched as far as they could see across the plain.