



The Blue Flame

Barbara M. Hodges

The Blue Flame [Book 1 of the Daradawn Series]
by Barbara M. Hodges

Tigress Press

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Books by Barbara M. Hodges

The Blue Flame

The Emerald Dagger

The Silver Ange

The Sword and the Flame

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DARADAWN



* * * *

Chapter 1

Queen's-commander Kelsey Cafferty stood on the dark overhang, head bowed, shoulders shaking. In the valley below, flames leapt, incinerating the mounded dead. Acrid black smoke billowed upward. After a moment, she drew her shoulders back and with head held high stepped into the choking cloud.

Through burning eyes, she watched the myriad pinhead-specks of light and waited. Drawn to her glow of life, they floated toward her, surrounded her. Their touch tickled, spider silk against bare skin. She cocked her head, straining to hear the ethereal whispers. They spoke of anger, sadness, and hatred of Dirkk and his Ru'taha, but above all they whispered of fear of what lay beyond the beckoning white light. In none of the voices did she detect bitterness or hate directed toward her. No one blamed Kelsey Cafferty for their deaths, no one except Kelsey Cafferty. Had she been wrong to attack Dirkk's evil with an army of farmers and merchants that had more courage than experience?

Coughs wracked her body and she stumbled back out of the smoke. Shivering, she hugged herself and stared upward at the pale moon. Here in Daradawn it was known as Kayla, not Luna.

She freed the sword from its sheath and saluted the glowing orb. "I honor you, my fallen! May you at last find peace."

Behind her, a branch cracked. She whirled. Gripping the sword waist-high in front of her, she searched the dark warily.

Three pale nude figures slipped from the shadows into the moon's glow. Ru'taha. Each clutched a chain mace. Midnight-black almond-shaped eyes stared at her from chiseled faces of alabaster perfection. Kelsey stood six feet tall, but these creatures dwarfed her. Towering above her, they circled first left, then right, silently. They glanced at each other, then back at her, and paced three steps forward in unison. She shadowed them, sword held steady, wondering how they moved as one without speech.

She drew in a shuddering breath. Three of the Ru'taha, and any one a match for six warriors more seasoned than herself. She smiled grimly. For once she should have listened to Angus and not slipped away from her royal guards. She was going to die. Well, so be it.

With a defiant scream she sprang forward and buried her sword up to its jeweled hilt in the chest of the nearest Ru'taha. Its knees buckled. She jerked her sword free, ducked and rolled, feeling the kiss of wind as a mace narrowly missed her cheek. She leaped to her feet and backed away.

The Ru'taha advanced, trampling over the still-thrashing body of their comrade. They swung their maces. Kelsey blocked with her sword, the shock of iron striking steel vibrating up her arm. The Ru'taha swung again and two lengths of chain whipped around her blade. With numbing fingers, Kelsey tightened her two-fisted hold on the hilt, but she knew it was useless.

The Ru'taha jerked their maces back. The sword flew from her nerveless fingers, and she screamed as white-hot fire arced through her right shoulder.

She dove to the left, rolled, and came up on one knee. Her chest heaving, her right arm dangling useless, she scrambled to her feet. With a feral grin, she beckoned them. What would they do if she kicked them in their jewels? One thing was certain; she'd make them cut her to pieces. There would be nothing left of her body to be formed into one of them. No soldier could look into the eyes of a Ru'taha and not wonder if what had once been a friend looked back.

"Come on. Fight, you refugees from hell!"

The Ru'taha lurched forward.

"Nak'iha auk Ras'pota." The words, more growl than yell, grated in the night air. Kelsey jerked her head to the right. An axe-wielding blur charged from the darkness. With the axe's first pass, a Ru'taha's pale head sailed, the neck-stump spouting blood before the knees hit the ground.

"Girl, drop."

Kelsey did, feeling the deadly breeze as the battle axe swept within inches of her head. She rolled, screaming as her arm struck the ground. Teeth clenched, she levered herself to a sitting position with her left arm. The Ru'taha, its guts trailing like rope sausages, towered above her. It raised its mace.

Kelsey caught another movement out of the corner of her eye as the Ru'taha's arm was separated from its shoulder. The monster swayed, stumbled backward, then toppled toward her. She dug in her heels and crab-walked to the

right. The Ru'taha landed with its head at her right hip. Against her will, her eyes sought its face, seeking but fearing recognition.

"Is it your arm again?" Angus Bladeheart asked, unspoken reprimand sharpening his voice.

Flat on her butt, her eyes were on the same level as the dwarf's. His gleamed, like newly minted shekels, with disapproving rage.

She refused to look away; she was his commander now, not his student. "Thank you, friend."

He ripped a length of cloth from his tunic and silently bound her arm to her side. Then he moved to her left and waited. Bracing herself for the wash of pain, Kelsey placed her left hand on his shoulder and pushed upward. She gasped, her vision graying at the edges.

"Lean on me. We will go to Helena."

Kelsey breathed deep. "Peter is to meet us here. A few more minutes will make no difference."

Angus swore beneath his breath. He wiped the blood from her sword with the tail of his tunic, then presented it to her hilt-first. She took it from him and he spun on his heels and strode to the butte's edge.

Staring at his rigid back, Kelsey pulled her dented helm from her head. Honey-blond hair cascaded to graze the top of knee-high, scuffed leather boots. The wind grabbed her hair, whipping it into her eyes. With a soft curse, she pulled the curls together and stuffed them beneath the neckline of her chain mail vest.

"I have decided that you will go for Regan tonight instead of in the morning," she told the dwarf.

Silence stretched and her lips tightened.

"If agreeable to Peter, I will go," Angus said at last.

"No. You will go, no matter what Peter decides."

The dwarf whipped around to face her. She met his gaze, unflinching.

"I obey, Queen's-Commander."

He made the title sound like an insult, and Kelsey felt hot blood flood her cheeks. The dwarf saluted, bowed from the waist mockingly, then presented his back to her.

"Angus."

The jangle of harness stopped her angry words. Peter Canterville, High Mage to Queen Tessa, rode into the clearing astride his white stallion Skylar.

The mage looked from Kelsey's face to the dead Ru'taha, then back again. His left eyebrow rose in question. She started to shrug, but knifing pain rushing through her shoulder changed her mind. Peter sighed, shaking his head as he slid from Skylar's back. They stepped over the dead Ru'taha and walked to stand beside Angus.

Peter on her right, Angus on her left. How many times had they stood shoulder to shoulder and counted burning mounds? Kelsey closed her eyes as smoke and embers drifted toward the stars. "So many dead, Peter, so many."

"Yes, many. But perhaps all of Daradawn, if not for you."

She opened her eyes and faced him. Her gaze shifted to his left cheek. She saw it clearly in the moonlight—the one-inch blue flame. The mark the Power seared into the skin of

its chosen at birth. "But with Regan it would've been less," she murmured. "So what's your decision?"

He avoided her eyes. "Dirkk will send more Ru'taha and Black Vipers against us at daybreak. You will need every man."

Kelsey motioned across the valley with her good arm. "Look what today's victory cost! More than ever we'll need..." Her voice cracked and she swallowed before continuing. "Your power isn't enough, but combined with Regan's..."

"If she will not come? What then? You have been missing for seven years. You must know your sister thinks you are dead."

Kelsey winced, imagining the pain Regan had been living with all that time. If she'd been able to prevent it, she would have.

She reached beneath her chain mail, jerking a milk-white pendant free and pulling it over her head. Her hand clutched the stone for a moment before she handed the pendant to Peter. "Show her this. She'll come."

"And Jack? From what you said, he has no love for you and will attempt to stop her."

Kelsey stared out over the valley, a bitter smile curving her lips. "I didn't even stick around for their wedding. If I'd turned down that photo assignment..."

"We would still be bottled up behind the walls of Raya starving to death," Peter finished.

Kelsey's gaze returned to the pendant. It had not left her neck since her mother had given it to her. She felt naked,

vulnerable, without its comforting presence. "Regan will know it's from me."

Peter shook his head. "Too many Ru'taha still prowl. Tomorrow is soon enough."

Kelsey drew herself up to her full height and stepped away from Peter. She had feared it would come to this. "No. For seven years I've been trapped here, waiting for the rift to re-open. At sunrise, Angus will be at the Mountain of the Devil to go through. If not with you then with someone else."

A muscle jumped in Peter's jaw.

She held out her hand. "If you're not going, then give me the map I drew to Regan's house. I'll give it to Angus."

He stared at her outstretched hand. "No one knows the area as I do." He turned his back on her. "I will go."

Kelsey touched Peter's arm. "Bring my sister to me. We need her."

"Why do you not go through the rift yourself?" Peter demanded. "Our world is not yours."

Kelsey stiffened. "I promised Queen Tessa. A Cafferty does not go back on her word." And how could she ever leave Rourk, she added to herself. She turned away from Peter, afraid to say more.

Angus still stood with his back toward them. He held his battle axe before him, his gaze sweeping the area.

"Angus," she said. He turned toward her. "Guard the rift well, friend."

The dwarf nodded. "You will seek Helena now, then your tent and find rest."

"Helena, yes, but rest? What's rest?" Kelsey picked up her helm. She stared at Peter for a moment, turned to walk away, hesitated. "Peter, does Rourk live?"

"I left him only moments ago with the horses."

She forced a smile. "See, I have Rourk. All will be fine until you and Regan return. Now go."

For a long moment, Peter stared down into Kelsey's eyes, then he reached out and pulled her close. His shirt smelled of sweat and smoke. The coarse weave chafed her forehead.

"Take care, my friend," he whispered into her hair.

She rested against his chest for a moment, then pushed away.

To their right, the brush shook and Angus jumped forward. Three soldiers burst into the clearing. Seeing the dead Ru'taha and Angus's glowering face, they skidded to a halt.

The tallest stepped forward. "Forgive me, Lord Angus," he said. "She gave us the slip again." The man cast a quick accusing glance at Kelsey.

Angus glared, then marched silently through the middle of them. The man paled.

"It was my fault, Richard," Kelsey said. "It's me Angus is angry with, not you."

"As you say, Queen's-Commander," Richard replied, "but stick to you like honey we three do from this moment on."

And after tonight I just might let you. She turned to Peter. "Safe journey."

Kelsey watched as he swung up onto Skylar's back, then followed Angus into the dark. She waited until she could see

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him no more, then looked east toward the Mountain of the Devil.

"Regan, listen to Peter with your heart, not your mind," she whispered. "Come to me."

Chapter 2

PETER STOOD IN the center of the lot, surrounded by rusted cans and empty brown bottles, staring at a red-and-white metal sign. "Coming soon, another Safeway to serve your neighborhood." His shoulders slumped.

"What now?" He looked eastward toward the Mountain of the Devil. "Kelsey, I have failed."

"You looking for Regan? Or that no-good ex-husband of hers?" a voice shouted at him.

Peter's eyes snapped open and he turned. Across the street, a tiny wisp of a lady leaned against a weathered fence post, a fluorescent orange and yellow shawl wrapped around her.

"I seek Regan."

She beckoned him, throwing a quick glance over her shoulder. "Well, get over here. I don't plan to tell the whole world where Regan lives. I might not even tell you."

He walked over to her. When he was still three feet away, she held up both her hands and stepped back.

"Just who are you?" she demanded, pulling the shawl closer.

"A cousin. Regan and I have never met. I am from far off."

"Mother Reynaldo, who are you talking to?" a feminine voice asked from inside the house.

"No one," she snapped, not taking her eyes from Peter. She cocked her head sideways and eyed him up and down. Her gaze paused at the waist-length tail of hair that hung

over his shoulder, then lifted to the mark on his cheek. "Are you one of those throw-back hippie types?"

"Hippie?"

"You know, free love, save the animals, that kinda stuff."

"Save the animals? Yes, very much so."

Then she smiled. "Well, I like your eyes. The eyes are windows to the soul, you know. Wait here. I'll get you Regan's new address."

She darted toward her house. From inside he heard a sharp question, and a sharper response, then she returned with a piece of paper.

* * * *

Peter sighed. He had wasted an entire day walking hilly streets crowded with smoke-belching steel wagons, jostled and pushed by hordes of people, constantly accosted by beggars, and breathing noxious air that burned his lungs, even in the dampness. He shook his head. What had his grandfather seen in this city to speak of it with so much passion? Of all the rifts his grandfather traveled, why the yearning for this San Francisco?

Now at the new address, he stared at the house, pulling his tunic closer around his neck. White fog ebbed and flowed around him. In the wan glow of a streetlight, he shivered as frigid drops trickled down his neck. For a moment, the haze shifted. He strained to see the house numbers lit by the oval porch light, then glanced down at the piece of paper he gripped. A light came on in an upstairs window, and a curtain was drawn aside. He stepped back into the shadows.

* * * *

The upstairs Bay window of the Victorian house opened onto a balcony decorated with scallops and miniature spindles. Regan Cafferty stared down through the lace curtains into the darkness, wiping a pane clear of fog with her palm. She thought she had seen a figure step back into the shadows. She opened the window an inch. "Jack, that better not be you, or I'm calling the police." She waited, but no response came. Damn him. Why couldn't he leave her alone?

Turning, Regan pried pins from her swept-up hair. Sighing with pleasure, she combed her fingers through it as she crossed to the dressing table.

Frowning at her reflection, she loosely braided the auburn mass and then rummaged among the silk scarves and perfume bottles until she found a hot-pink elastic band. She stuck her tongue out at her reflection, then grinned at her silliness. She should get it cut, but decided it suited her. She'd been born way too late, she thought. She should have been a medieval princess with a score of knights begging for her hand, after slaying dragons and winning tournaments, of course. Then the most handsome would take her in his arms and whirl her around the dance floor.

She curtsied to an imaginary suitor and waltzed around the room, dipping and swirling, faster and faster, until she toppled onto the unmade bed. The movement jarred the nightstand, and sent a stack of unopened mail onto the floor. It snapped her mood. Why did reality always have to get in the way of her fun?

Undoing the top button of her suit jacket, Regan stepped over the mail. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed her alarm clock and turned to glare at its illuminated face. It was still thirty minutes slow.

"You're the reason I missed my meeting," she accused. "I worked weeks on that presentation, and who knows when Mr. Taki will be in San Francisco again." Still glaring at the clock, she shrugged out of her jacket, tossed it on the bed, and reached for her jeans.

* * * *

Wearing jeans and a pink T-shirt emblazoned with Garth Brooks' cherub-cheeked face, Regan smoothed the last wrinkle from a pale-green comforter. "I don't care what Mama would say." She punched a lace-edged pillow into shape. "Making it now is stupid. I'll just be messing it up again in a few hours."

"Are you decent?" a voice called from the other side of the bedroom door.

"Come on in, Ben."

A tall black man stooped to get through the door. Regan smiled. He'd finally remembered to duck after banging his head on it three or four times.

Ben Samson. What would she have done without him these past years? She'd come to think of him and his basset hound Maggie as family, the only family she'd had since Kelsey's disappearance. She remembered the storm that had brought them together.

* * * *

It was the third week of constant rain, of her stepping around buckets that caught the persistent plop-plops coming from the ceiling. This morning a new drip had showed up, and she had used her last bucket.

The doorbell chimed. Regan propped the mop against the stairs and skirted the puddle. "That better be someone from the homeless shelter, or Reverend Joab or not, I'm calling a roofer."

She opened the door. A tall black man stood there. Water dripped off the brim of his fedora hat.

I already like him, she thought.

"Ma'am." He raked the hat from his head. "My name's Ben. Reverend Joab sent me." His hair was steel-wool wiry, salt-and-pepper gray. Her heart sank. He's too old to be climbing around on my roof. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but he smiled and looked at her with dark, hopeful eyes, and she was lost.

* * * *

"Left in a hurry this morning, didn't you?" Ben said, and the memory evaporated.

Regan poked the pillow one last time and tossed it on the bed. "It was the stupid blackout."

"Saw it in the paper. Something to do with Mount Diablo, along with last week's heat wave and today's pea soup fog."

"Did they say what caused it?"

"They're 'investigating the source of the disturbance.' That's what they're doing."

They grinned at each other. "In other words, they don't have a clue, as usual," Regan said.

From the backyard a low baying sounded and her grin changed to a frown. "Sounds like Maggie has Duchess treed again."

"I better go corral her," Ben said. "Last time Maggie chased her cat, Mrs. Claude said she was going to call animal control." He backed through the door, then stopped. "I almost forgot. I've got a surprise for you in the garden."

"You finished the wall."

Ben nodded.

"I'll be right down."

* * * *

Passing the kitchen table, Regan glanced at the oatmeal-encrusted bowl still waiting there.

"I know, Mama. It's Grandma's good china, but I just didn't have time. Why can't I get organized? Kelsey always was." She shrugged and walked out onto the enclosed sun porch that Ben and Maggie called home.

As always, she glanced with a smile at April's photo of frolicking calico kittens on Ben's "Puppies and Kittens" calendar. As the date registered, she frowned. April tenth? Where had the ninth gone? She couldn't believe it. It had happened, just like the platitudes everyone mouthed at her. She'd finally gotten through an April ninth without all the aching memories and stomach-knotting fits of frustration. Maybe I am starting to accept that Kelsey is gone, she thought, and that I'm never going to see her again. Her eyes

filled with tears. How could someone go on a photo shoot and just disappear? Seven years. Seven long, heart-breaking years. Shaking her head, she blinked the tears away. Kelsey's gone and I have to accept it. Tomorrow I'll call Reverend Joab and arrange for them to come get her clothes. She nodded her head. This time I'll really do it.

She stared out the long narrow windows of the porch. Ben, with the floppy-eared basset hound at his heels, crossed the backyard and perched on the last of the porch's flagstone steps. He motioned for Maggie to sit, and for once she did. Ben shook his finger in front of Maggie's nose. Regan couldn't hear what he was saying, but it was probably along the line of "love thy neighbor," even if it was a cat.

Regan opened the screen door. "Hey, Mags." The basset hound gave a loud bay and scrambled up the two steps to the porch door.

Laughing, Regan knelt and began their greeting routine; first a good ear scratch, then a flip to the back and a long tummy rub.

"I hope you like it," Ben said, framed by the open screen door.

"The rose garden wall?" Regan patted Maggie one last time and stood.

"Yes."

"Let's go take a look at it."

"You really can't see much right now."

"I'll let my fingers do the looking. Hey, maybe we should take a bottle of champagne and christen it." Regan stopped beside him and shivered. "God, what's with this crazy

weather? It must be ten degrees colder then it was two hours ago."

He shrugged as they started across the back yard. Halfway across, she heard the musical notes of the front door's chimes. "Are you expecting anyone?"

Ben shook his head.

She glanced in the direction of the rose garden and hesitated. The bells chimed again. "Damn. It's probably a salesman, but I'd better check."

Frowning in annoyance, Regan went to the front door and looked through the oval pane of glass. A tall man stood in profile in the frosted scone's light.

Sudden waves of emotion flooded her; happiness, anger, and despair. She felt her eyes fill with tears and in stunned surprise she wiped them away. What was wrong with her? She didn't even know this guy.

In his dark pants and green tunic, he looked like a wandering troubadour. Probably some down-on-his-luck thespian. Then he turned to face her, and Regan gasped at the birthmark on his cheek. Her hand crept to her shoulder and she shivered. She took a step back, shaking her head as she rubbed her goose-fleshed arms.

So their birthmarks resembled each other's. It meant nothing. Resembled, a voice inside her head parroted with amusement. They're identical.

Taking a deep breath, she unlatched the door and opened it only as far as the chain allowed. The man's eyes widened.

"Thea?" he whispered. "No, it cannot be."

"What?"

"I am sorry. For a moment, I thought I knew you."

Regan shook her head. "No, we've never met," she said, ignoring the surging emotions inside her. He stepped closer, tripping on her welcome mat in the process and grasping the door jamb to remain upright.

"Are you all right?"

He took a deep breath and straightened, his gaze never leaving Regan's face. "Fine, thank you."

"Okay. Well, tell Reverend Joab I sent the check yesterday."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I sent the check I promised yesterday. You're from the homeless shelter, right?" She added at the blank expression on the man's face.

"I am not."

"Then what do you want?" she said abruptly.

"Regan Cafferty?"

She frowned. He knew her name. "Who wants to know?"

"I am Peter Canterville. I have come to take you to your sister, Kelsey."

Chapter 3

"UH-HUM, UH-HUM, UH-HUM." The sound, like the buzz of a persistent fly, penetrated Kelsey's consciousness. She glanced up from the map-strewn table. "Enter."

The recruit was young, no more than sixteen. Kelsey's eyes flicked over his washed-out blue woolen shirt and trousers. Some uniform, she grimaced. Well, at least they're all the same color. The recruit snapped a salute and her grimace turned into a frown. He should be home thinking of girls and dates, not standing sentry at a battlefield's edge. Am I the only one in this world to think this is wrong?

He stiffened at her frown. "One has returned, Queen's-Commander."

Only one? "Show him in."

"I must aid him."

"Aid him? Then why are you standing there?"

The young man flushed and scurried from the tent. When he returned, his arm encircled the waist of another. Sweat matted the man's gray hair and beard. One sleeve hung from his shoulder by a thread. Dried blood stained his tunic and trousers.

"Nigel." Kelsey jumped to her feet.

He motioned with his hand. "Do not fret," he said, "it's not all my blood."

"Take my chair." Kelsey pushed it forward. The young recruit turned toward the chair, but the grizzled soldier pulled away from him. "I'll not sit while my commander stands."

Kelsey saw that only his will and pride kept the old soldier upright, and she swore beneath her breath. "You old fool. Get us another chair, lad."

They watched in silence as the boy hurried from the tent.

"He will make a good warrior someday," Nigel said.

She scowled. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

The tent flap flew open and the recruit entered carrying a folding chair.

"Here, across from me," Kelsey said.

"Queen's-Commander." He snapped another salute, bobbed the chair, and it crashed to the floor. Red suffused his face.

Behind the boy, Nigel grinned. "Enough. Report to your post." Then his face paled.

"Sir." The boy squeaked out the single word, then he pivoted and fled through the tent's opening.

"Now sit and tell me what you discovered."

Nigel hobbled to the chair and settled into it. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "I am the only runner left, and I couldn't get through."

"I sent six. Are you sure?"

A muscle twitched in his jaw as he opened his eyes. "I saw their bodies in a Ru'taha camp."

"Then we can expect no help," Kelsey said.

Nigel raked his fingers through his hair. "Dirkk masses more Ru'taha and Black Vipers at the throat of the valley."

Kelsey's hands clenched into fists. "Damn. Why now?"

"Can he know?"

"About Regan? No, unless..." She saw Nigel shift in his chair, then wince. "Enough. Go to Helena. We'll talk more once she's tended you and you've rested."

Nigel levered himself from the chair. "I am sorry my news wasn't better."

Kelsey laid her hand on his trembling arm. "I'm happy you're here to give it to me."

She watched the old soldier limp from the tent, his dirt-caked boots leaving a trail behind. She walked to the open flap and beckoned her adjutant. "Find Rourk for me."

* * * *

Rourk Bannion hesitated outside Kelsey's tent. His left hand tightened around the silver helm he held against his side. Would he find commander or lover inside? Considering their parting this morning, he preferred commander. He took a deep breath and entered. "You sent for me?"

Kelsey glanced up from the table. "Nigel's back." He wanted her to come to him, to take him in her arms. But she'd drawn the lines, and made it clear that, while on duty, she was his commander, nothing more.

"I heard," he said, waiting.

"Damn. There's just no way." She flipped the map over, resisting the urge to wad it into a ball. "He didn't get through. No one did."

"We are on our own."

"There's more." She stood, walked to the tent's flap, jerked it open and stared outside. "Dirkk is massing Ru'taha and Black Vipers at the mouth of the valley."

"He means an all-out assault?"

"It looks that way."

"Then he must know about Regan."

"If he does, it confirms our fears."

"It's Thomas who's the traitor. I feel it."

She faced him. "I have to know for sure. Find out."

He nodded. "How long can we last?"

She turned away. "Regan and Peter should arrive soon. Tonight may be our last night alone."

"By the horns of the Dark One!" Rourk placed his helm on the table. "Do not dance around my question. You will slip away this very eve. You know what Dirkk will do to you if you're captured." His jaw tensed.

She shook her head. "We settled that this morning."

"Nothing was settled." Rourk grabbed her by the shoulders. "Damn you. I've lost one child and love. I'll not lose you."

Kelsey leaned her forehead against his chest. "With Regan's power..."

"Enough of Regan. You don't know if Peter found her, or even if she will come."

Kelsey twisted away from him. "She'll come. We promised each other."

"Your sister believes you are dead."

She stiffened. "Even if she doesn't come, we fight, win, and fight again. One thing I know, Dirkk won't take even one more of us to form into Ru'taha with his filthy magic."

Rourk closed his eyes. "I will take your life myself before I let him touch you."

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The tent flap was pulled aside and her adjutant stuck his head in. "Queen's-Commander, the outlying forces are under attack." Fear undercoated each word.

Rourk's eyes snapped open. Without a word, he grabbed his helm and pushed by the man.

"Sound the call," Kelsey ordered.

"Yes, Queen's-Commander." His voice faltered, but he sprinted away.

The tent flap dropped and she was alone. She reached for her pendant, frowned when she found nothing and clenched her empty hand. "So it begins. Don't let me down, Regan."

Chapter 4

FOR A MOMENT, Regan could not breathe and she seemed to be viewing the stranger from the end of a long tunnel. Then she drew a deep shuddering breath and whispered.

"What did you say?"

"I have come to take you to Kelsey."

"My God." Regan's stomach rolled and dipped. "Did Jack put you up to this? Is this sick joke pay back?"

The man frowned. "I do not joke."

"Get away..." Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat and finished. "...from my door before I call the police."

The man rubbed his right temple. "Listen, Miss Cafferty, I do not have much time. The rift will close soon. May I enter?"

"A rift?"

"Regan, Kelsey needs your help. Hellfire, we all need your help. You must come with me. You have no choice if you love your sister. How do I make you...?" He broke off and laughed shortly. "Of course." He reached into his pocket. His hand came out in a closed fist. He thrust it toward the door and she jumped back.

He stared at her for a moment through the narrow opening, then frowned. "You have no reason to fear me. I am just running out of time and patience. Do you recognize this? Kelsey said you would."

He stretched his hand toward her. A pendant and gold chain lay in his palm. The pendant's milk-white stone shimmered rainbow colors in the porch's light.

"Turn it over," Regan said, her voice just above a whisper.

"What?"

She swallowed, licked her lips, and then spoke louder.

"Turn the pendant over."

He did.

Etched in the gold setting of the back was a heart with the initials C.M. & D.M. entwined. They stood for Catherine and Daniel Morrison, her maternal great-grandmother and great-grandfather. Their mother had willed Kelsey the pendant and Regan the matching earrings.

"Where did you get this?"

"Kelsey said you would understand. Now, may I enter?"

"Regan, are you all right?" Ben asked from behind her.

She turned. He leaned against the kitchen doorjamb with Maggie at his side. "How much did you hear?"

"Just the part about the pendant. Is it your sister's?"

"Kelsey always wore it."

"Maggie, stay."

Ben moved to stand next to Regan. He looked the stranger over. Their gazes locked, then Ben nodded. "I think you should at least hear him out. I'll deck him if he tries anything."

Regan hesitated. "All right." She shut the door, then removed the chain. "Come in."

"Thank you, Regan," he stopped his face coloring, "I mean, Miss Cafferty. It seems I already know you. Kelsey speaks of you all the time."

"Where did you see my sister?"

"Daradawn. She entered through a rift and has been trapped there for seven years."

Regan stared at him for a moment, then turned and met Ben's eyes. Ben frowned and shrugged. Regan turned back. "Mr. Canterville. You did say your name was Peter Canterville?"

He nodded.

"You're not making any sense. Your world. Daradawn. A rift. Just tell me where you found my sister's pendant."

"I told you. Kelsey gave it to me." He grabbed her arm. "Come, gather your spells. The walk to the Mountain of the Devil is far."

Regan jerked her arm free. "Don't."

Ben stepped between her and Peter, while Maggie growled deep in her chest.

Peter dropped his hand to his side. His lips tightened. "Kelsey said the pendant would bring you."

"Tell me where you found it. I'll turn the whole thing over to a PI."

"A PI?"

"Private investigator." She faced Ben. "I know it doesn't prove she's still alive, but do you think the police will re-open the case?"

"Kelsey is not dead, but she may be, she and many others, if you do not come with me."

Regan swung back to face Peter. "Blackmail. That's what this is, isn't it?"

Peter frowned at her. "Blackmail?"

"How much do you want? If you've hurt her..."

Peter's face flushed. "Hurt her? Kelsey is my friend."

"Your friend? Just who the hell are you, and where is this Daradawn? Is it in the Middle East somewhere? Is Kelsey stuck in some harem, or..."

"I do not know what you mean," Peter said, his voice rising. "I do not know where the East of Middle is, and Kelsey is in no ... harem. She leads my people in a fight for their very existence..."

"Okay, that's enough," Ben broke in. "You're a loony-bird. We should never have let you in. What we need to do now is call the cops."

Peter looked perplexed. "Loony-bird?"

"Cracked, crazy, addled."

Peter drew himself up to his full height. He stared coldly, first at Ben, then at her. "I am not addled. I am a mage. A wielder of magic. I have the mark of the Power's chosen." He touched the blue birthmark on his cheek. "You do too, Regan. Kelsey told me of the mark on your shoulder."

Ben grabbed the man's arm. "Regan, dial 911."

Peter stiffened. He dropped his gaze to the hand that gripped his arm, then raised it and stared into Ben's eyes. "Release me."

For a moment, their eyes locked. Then Ben let go. Peter turned to the door. "So be it."

"Wait," Regan said. "You're not going anywhere, not until I have some answers."

He stopped, his frame going stiff at the command in her voice.

Regan closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Please. Just give us a minute."

Peter nodded.

"Ben, can I talk to you in the kitchen?"

She felt Peter's searching appraisal on her back as they left the room.

"What do you think?" she whispered while she watched the stranger through the cracked door. He didn't move from where he stood, but she saw his gaze sweep the room.

Ben shrugged. "I don't know. He seems to believe what he's saying."

"I know, and that scares me," Regan said. "We can still call the cops. But what if he has Kelsey, or at least knows who does? They could kill her if he doesn't come back."

"Regan, it's been seven years. Who would hold someone that long?"

Regan shrugged. "Maybe she's had amnesia or something."

"You're sure that's Kelsey's pendant?"

"It's Kelsey's," she said, a quiver in her voice.

Ben looked into her eyes. "What does your gut instinct tell you?"

"That's what's crazy. I know I can trust him." She rubbed at her temples. "But I can't know. How can I? And all that drivel about rifts and other worlds? It isn't possible—is it?"

Ben said nothing. Regan took a deep breath. "Okay, we'll play along until he leads us to Kelsey, then ... well, we'll just have to see." She opened the kitchen door and motioned to Peter. "We'll listen, but I don't promise anything."

* * * *

The four sat in the kitchen around a white tile table, Maggie at Ben's feet, her brown gaze fixed on the stranger. Regan faced Peter across a wicker basket filled with rose potpourri. "You have fifteen minutes."

He arched an eyebrow. "Fifteen minutes? You are very gracious."

Regan ignored his sarcasm. "You're wasting time."

"May I have the pendant?" She handed it to him. He dangled the pendant from its chain before them, and she felt a twinge of unease. Was he going to try to hypnotize them or something?

"Daradawn is a different world from yours. It's a land of innocence and dreams, or at least it was." His eyes focused on the swaying pendant. "You have both been there, but only in peaceful sleep. First as children, when you could still believe." He raised the pendant higher. "It is a magic land, where a pendant like this channels power, both good and evil."

He leaned toward Regan. "A land where an elf may greet you as you enter an enchanted glade. Where dwarves still work the mines, and a dragon rules the mountain peaks."

"That's crazy." Regan interrupted. She pushed her chair back and stood. "I've had dreams of magical lands and make-believe. All children do, but that's all it is. It isn't real."

Peter sat back in his chair. "Daradawn is real, and Kelsey is there."

She shook her head. "If you came here, why couldn't she?"

"Kelsey has sworn allegiance to Queen Tessa. She will not journey home until Dirkk is defeated."

"That sounds like Kelsey," she murmured. "She'd never break a promise, even if it meant missing a chance to come home." She frowned and shook her head. "What am I thinking? I don't believe any of this stuff. And who's Dirkk?" she asked.

"Dirkk is Baron of Cornith. He deals with the Dark One."

She shook her head again. "You need help."

"Yes, I need help ... yours."

Regan placed her palms flat on the table and leaned toward him. "Okay. I've listened to your story and I'm not buying it. Here's how it's going to play out. You give me my sister's pendant, tell us where she is, and we let you walk away."

He stared into Regan's eyes for a moment, then shook his head. "Kelsey was wrong. We will do fine without you." Peter pushed back his chair and stood.

Regan's lips tightened as she held out her hand. "I want the pendant."

Peter closed his fist around the stone. "I may not be taking you, but I am taking Kelsey's talisman back."

Regan felt a chill travel the length of her backbone. "You're not leaving here without telling me where my sister is."

"I have told you, but you will not listen. I have no more time to waste on you. So, yes, I am leaving."

"I'll have you arrested before you've gone a mile."

Peter touched the blue flame on his cheek. "Nothing will stop me from returning to my world."

Regan felt an urge to laugh. What did he think he could do against bullets? Peter turned toward the door and she reached for the phone. I guess we're going to find out, she decided.

"Regan," Ben said, grabbing her hand. "Wait. Earlier he mentioned the Mountain of the Devil, Mount Diablo. Crazy things have been going on up there."

"Oh, come on," she said, pulling her hand from his. "You're not buying into his story?"

"But the fog and the cold. They don't know what's causing it." He leaned toward her as he spoke.

Regan drew back and frowned, then turned back to Peter. "Just how long have you been here?"

"I came through yesterday. That's why I must hurry. The rift will remain open for seven days, and then it closes again for seven years."

Regan frowned. "All this weirdness with the weather started yesterday and there was that blackout this morning. Could your so-called rift be causing it?"

"There are seven rifts into your world. Was there unusual weather in as many places seven years ago?"

The weather? How the hell could she remember the weather? It was all she could do to get through the pain of each day. Wait, she did remember something. "We had lots of rain. The American River nearly flooded, then in a week it all just stopped."

"The quakes," Ben said, "Regan, remember the quakes. Seven of them, worldwide, along with those volcano eruptions."

"I'd forgotten them."

Regan looked at the pendant, and all of a sudden it became so easy. She had only one choice. If he had Kelsey, it didn't matter if he was crazy or not. And you've trusted him with your life before, a little voice at the back of her memory said. She ignored it; it had nothing to do with her decision. He had Kelsey, and Regan wanted her back. "I'm going with him. Will you take care of things until I get back, Ben?"

He looked from Peter to Regan. "No, we can't stay here."

"This is your home."

"No," Ben said. "Maggie and I are coming with you."

Sudden tears flooded Regan's eyes. "Why?" she asked in a choked voice. "You don't even know Kelsey."

"No, but I've seen you sit and stare at her photo. If I can help bring your sister home, I will."

She swallowed. "I appreciate it, but I can't let you. What if it's dangerous?"

"Dangerous? But you are going." Ben pointed at Peter. "He tells you he knows where your sister is and you drop everything and go. Why?"

Regan touched the pendant in Peter's hand. "He has this."

"He could have gotten it anywhere. Even off her dead body."

Regan gasped and drew back.

"I'm sorry, but it could be the truth. So why are you going with him?"

She shot a quick glance at Peter. "You know why. I told you earlier."

"I know what you told me, but there's more."

Regan frowned at Ben. "I don't know what you mean?"

"You trust this man. Why?"

"I don't know why," she snapped.

Ben reached for the pendant. "May I?" Peter hesitated, then handed the pendant to him.

Ben took Regan's clenched hand, opened it, and dropped the pendant into her palm. He closed her hand around the stone, then drew it up to rest against his heart. "We're going with him because in here we still believe in magic. It was magic that brought us together, and it's magic that will take us to your sister."

Regan twisted her hand in Ben's grip. "I don't believe in magic."

"Don't you?"

Regan stared into Ben's dark eyes, the question echoing in her. Do I? she wondered.

"Then you will come?" Peter asked.

Regan looked at Ben. He nodded, his eyes urging her to do the same. She took a deep breath. "We'll come."

At their nods, Peter relaxed back in his chair for a moment, then surged to his feet. "Then we must hurry. Regan, get your power spells and the milk-stone ear drops."

Regan stared at him. "I've no power spells."

"You have a small leather book full of them. Kelsey told me of it."

"I have a book of jingles, but..."

"Jingles. Yes, that is what Kelsey said. Please fetch them."

Shaking her head, Regan pulled her hand from Ben's. "What's a little more craziness?" she said as she dashed from the kitchen.

Peter looked at Ben.

"What?"

"You and the animal I had not planned on." Peter eyed Maggie. "What kind of dog is that?"

"Maggie's a basset hound. She's the only breed of her kind that's a true dwarf." Ben patted Maggie's head.

"A dwarf?" Peter leaned closer to peer at Maggie. "It is a sign. Yes, the two of you must accompany us."

* * * *

Regan hesitated at the top of the stairs and stared at the pendant she still held. "Kelsey, I don't know where you are, or who this Peter is, but this is yours. Just hold on. No matter what world you're in, I'm coming."

Chapter 5

An avalanche of rocks and dirt rolled and bounced down the bank on Kelsey's left. Her sword double-gripped in her hand, she whipped around and searched the cloud of dust. A form stumbled toward her, its hand reaching out. She twisted away, raising her sword high. The figure lifted its head and Kelsey looked into startling blue eyes wide with anguish. Blue eyes? Ru'taha only have black eyes, she thought. She lowered her sword and lunged forward as the form crumpled.

Her knees buckled under the soldier's weight. Cursing, she squirmed from beneath the body, then heaved the man onto his back. She glanced around warily, but the main battle was on the rise above them. She laid her sword aside, felt for a heartbeat, and found one, slight and irregular. With a trembling hand, she wiped dirt from his face. Oh, God. It was the young recruit of last night.

Tears threatened, and she shook her head as she blinked them away. Why tears for him? His is just one more face that will haunt me.

His blood-caked hand fumbled for hers. He sat up and reached to touch her cheek. "Mama?" he whispered, then went rigid, fell back, and was still.

Kelsey gathered his body to her breast and rocked him back and forth. "I didn't get the chance to end your soldiering," she whispered. "Damn you, Dirkk."

Above her, a horn sounded charge. She longed to stay there, to say to hell with it all and just hold him, but the

battle's outcome was still questionable and her concern had to be for the living, not the dead.

Kelsey stood and dragged his body beneath a shaggy bush, making note of where it lay. "They won't have you. I'll come back. I promise."

She picked up her sword, and sprinted toward the rise.

* * * *

Kelsey collapsed into the chair. She stared, unseeing across the tent. They had bested Dirkk yet again, but the cost was much, too damn much. Someone scratched at the tent flap. "Enter."

Her adjutant pushed the flap aside. "I've brought Helena."
"Has she seen to the others?"

A smooth-faced woman pushed aside the young man and walked in. Her dark green gown was splotted with dried blood. Her silver hair had escaped its tight braid and hung in damp, limp strands against her forehead and cheeks. Helena shook her head at the sight of Kelsey. "Again you've been in the midst of things."

Kelsey stood, then grabbed for a table as the world tilted. Helena and the adjutant leapt forward. Gripping Kelsey's elbows, they led her to the cot and forced her to sit. Kelsey winced as Helena's knowing hands moved over her body.

"Someday I will not be able to heal you." Helena's voice was ripe with censure.

"Is this the day?" Kelsey said.

She groaned as Helena probed a knee joint more roughly than usual before answering. "You will mend." She turned to

the adjutant who hovered at the tent's flap. "Bring my bag and be quick about it." She turned back to Kelsey. "Does that young man have a name?"

Kelsey lifted a startled gaze to her. "Of course. Why?"

"You never call him by such."

Kelsey frowned. "His name is Michael," she said, ignoring Helena's sharp gaze.

"Avoiding his name will not keep him alive. And the pain, if he dies, will be just as strong."

The tent flap opened and the adjutant entered with a green creased bag.

"Thank you, Michael," Kelsey said.

The young man stared at her a moment in surprise, then smiled. "You are welcome, Queen's-Commander. Will that be all?"

Kelsey waved him away.

She turned and caught Helena's satisfied smile just before the healer ducked her head and reached for the bag. "We will deal with the pain first."

* * * *

Thirty minutes later Kelsey blinked and knuckled her eyes. "What did that witch give me?"

Rourk stuck his head through the tent flap. "We have to talk."

Kelsey yawned and waved him inside.

He hesitated. "You need your rest."

"I will rest." She yawned again. "Helena has given me no choice."

Rourk entered and moved to where she sat at the table. He reached out to draw her close, then drew back and lowered his arms. "They don't stop coming," he said bitterly. "For every Ru'taha or Black Viper we kill, two more take their place."

She sighed. She wanted his arms around her, if only for a moment. "Do we still hold the valley?"

"We've been pushed into its wide heart."

Kelsey's fingers curled tightly around the quill pen. "Put every man on the line."

"Even those who sleep?"

"All, or our sleep may be for eternity."

Rourk turned on his heel. "Yes, Queen's-Commander." He strode from the tent.

Kelsey stared at the swaying tent flap. Her heavy eyelids drifted shut. She snapped them open, but knew it was a losing battle. "Damn you, Helena."

She lowered her head to the table. "Hurry, Regan."

Chapter 6

Regan loosened the red-velvet bag's drawstring and poured her great-grandmother's opal earrings into her hand. The milk-white stones flashed sparks of color where the Tiffany lamp's light touched. How many times had she and Kelsey perched on the edge of their mother's bed and watched as she sat at this same dressing table and put the earrings on. Then, her reflection smiling, she would reach for the pendant and ask whose turn it was to fasten the clasp.

A knot formed in Regan's throat and she swallowed hard. She put the earrings back into the bag and added the pendant.

What do you pack if you don't know where you're going? she mused. What does one wear to meet an elf or dwarf? She grabbed her pocket notebook and flipped to the last sketched-on page, frowning at the date written there. Thirty days. Had it been that long since she'd added something new? Shaking her head, she grabbed a baggy denim jacket and shoved the notebook and the velvet bag into the pockets.

At the top of the stairs Regan leaned over the oak banister and looked down. Peter, Ben and Maggie huddled together in the foyer.

Peter glanced up and motioned to her. "Hurry, the walk is far."

Regan jogged down the stairs, brushed by them and headed toward the kitchen. "We're not walking."

As she passed the front door, the bell chimed. "Now who's here?" she said, back-stepping. Looking through the round window, she groaned.

"Who is it?" Ben asked.

"Jack."

"Do you want me to get rid of him?"

Regan hesitated, then sighed. "No. I'll handle him."

She opened the door. "What are you pulling, Jack? You're not supposed to be within a mile of me."

Her ex-husband ran fingers through his shaggy black mane. The dampness caused his hair to wave along his forehead. Regan reached to brush the curls into place, then jerked her hand back.

Jack smiled knowingly and she felt her face heat. "Can I come in?" he asked.

"Are you nuts? I could have you arrested."

He stepped closer, towering over her. "But you won't. I brought you another check."

"You're supposed to mail it."

Jack peered over her shoulder into the hall. His body stiffened. "Who's the hippie?"

"None of your business."

"One of your handyman's friends?" He sneered the question.

Regan reached out her hand. "Give me the check, but this is the last time you will deliver it in person. Is that understood?"

In the light from the sconce she saw Jack's face flush. A muscle twitched along his jaw line, and fear tingled through her.

"Regan, you okay?" Ben asked.

"Mind your own business, old man," Jack said.

"The check," Regan said. She watched him take a deep breath, fight for control.

"Right, the check. I need to talk to you about that. Business has been slow this month."

Regan flinched as she heard the whine enter his voice. Not again, she thought. "Whatever you can spare is fine," she said, still holding out her hand.

Jack took a step back from her. "I'll just bring it by tomorrow, so we can talk about it."

Didn't he understand what a restraining order was? Regan lowered her hand. "Jack..." she stopped and smiled. "Okay, bring it by tomorrow. Now it's late."

He motioned with his head. "He spending the night?"

"I don't answer to you anymore, remember?"

He leaned forward. "I'd watch that smart mouth of yours, Regan," he said, his voice just above a whisper. She stepped back and closed the door.

"Yeah? Well, I'll see you tomorrow, early," he yelled through the closed door.

Hand trembling on the doorknob, Regan watched him cross the street. At the streetlight, he stopped, leaned against it, and lit a cigarette.

"Let's get out of here," she said.

FOG SHROUDED THE back yard. Regan shivered. This is a night for popcorn and fireplaces, not late night jaunts, she thought.

She led them to the side gate. To the left, through a tunnel of overgrown oleanders, a dark narrow driveway stretched.

The garage was a pale square in the blackness at the end of the tunnel. She bent, grabbed the garage door's rust-pitted handle, twisted and pulled. The door screeched up on ancient hinges, then settled overhead with a dull clank. She felt around for the light switch.

Wan light filtered through a bug-spotted bulb hanging from the ceiling by a twisted, frayed wire. Beneath the dangling fire hazard, a blue Honda Civic waited.

"It'll be a tight fit, but it's better than walking," she said.

Regan unlocked the passenger door. Pulling the seat forward, she said, "Maggie, wanna go for a ride?" Maggie scrambled in. Turning, the dog gave a yip in Ben's direction and Regan laughed. "Hear that, Ben? Sounded like a command to get moving didn't it?"

"It sure did." Ben climbed in and settled next to Maggie.

Regan walked around to the driver's side and started the car. She twisted a knob and headlights caught Peter in their bright beam. He stood frozen, like a pillar of salt, his wide eyes fastened on the car.

"What's the problem?" Regan said.

"You wish me to get into that?"

"Yes, and now."

"It is a devil machine. See how it smokes."

"It smokes because it needs a tune-up. Now get in."

"I will meet you there." He turned away.

Regan counted to ten. "Peter, it's a car. It won't hurt you."

"Not hurt me? I saw what happened to two of them that came together."

"That was them, not me. Come on, get in. You were the one who said we had to hurry. I can get us to Mount Diablo in thirty minutes. How long will it take you to walk?"

Peter shook his head and Regan took a slow, deep breath. "Look, you're the only person who can lead me to my sister. Do you think I'd let anything happen to you?"

Peter stared at her for a long moment, then he walked to the passenger door and looked in. Closing his eyes, he muttered words that sounded like Latin and climbed into the car.

Regan reached over and fastened the seat belt around him. "Relax."

She pushed in the clutch and put the Honda in reverse.

"Why do you secure me in place if it is so safe?" Peter asked.

"It's the law, and I don't want a ticket." She backed the Honda out of the garage and down the narrow driveway. She hid a grin as she saw Peter's white-knuckled grip on the dash.

On Laguna Street, she turned left and headed for the Bay Bridge.

Chapter 7

THEY LEFT THE fog behind along with the Bay Bridge and took the 580 interchange, then Highway 24 toward Orinda. A full white moon floated above them.

Regan's stomach grumbled and she realized it was hours since she'd eaten. She gave Peter a quick glance.

"Something's bothering me. If you're from another world, how do you speak our language?"

"I do not understand what you mean."

"You speak English. Why don't you speak Daradawnian or something?"

"I speak Ancient Speech."

She glanced at him again. "Ancient speech?"

"There is only one language for all."

"You're saying that everyone in your world speaks the same language?" Regan leaned forward and swiped a terrycloth towel across the fogging windshield.

"It has been that way since my grandfather's grandfather. Some words of Old Elvish and Ancient Dwarven are still known, mostly curses against the Dark One, but Ancient Speech is what all speak now. Your world has different languages?"

"Lots of different ones." She tossed the towel to Peter. "Here, do your side."

He wiped the windshield clear. "Then how do you understand each other?"

Regan grinned. "We don't."

He settled back in the seat, shaking his head. "Your world is very strange."

"Yeah, I guess in a lot of ways it is." She changed lanes and accelerated by a Shell gasoline truck. "What can we expect when we get there?"

"The rift is not easily seen. It is more of a feeling. Your senses tingle and the hair on your body rises."

Regan slowed, checked the rearview mirror, then slid into the right lane and passed a crawling Volkswagen van. "No, I mean the area around Mount Diablo. There are going to be reporters and government big shots up the wazoo after today's paper."

"Wa-zoo? Is that a local name for the mountain?"

Regan grinned straight ahead. "Just means lots of people."

"Interesting word. The area was empty yesterday."

"Well, you can bet it won't be now. We need some kind of plan. They're not just gonna let us drive through."

"We will get by."

"Yeah, right." Regan switched lanes and accelerated by a flat-bedded truck that hauled cattle, from the odor that blasted from the vents into her face.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Peter face her. "You do not understand. The closer I get to the mountain and the rift, the stronger the Power becomes. You must stop resisting and let the Power be free within you."

Regan cast a quick glance at him. "Well, if you don't mind, I'd like a back-up plan." She saw Peter stiffen at her sarcastic tone and shrugged mentally. "Ben, you're quiet back there. What do you think?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. We play it by ear, I guess."

A green sign that read "Alamo, 3 Miles," flashed by. "That's as good as we have time for."

* * * *

Regan exited at Alamo, rounded a curve, and swore under her breath as she stomped the brake to the floorboard. The car's back tires squealed before catching and coming to a halt.

At the end of the off-ramp, the red-lighted intersection was daylight-bright with tall portable lights. A crowd of people moved in and out of the light like scurrying ants. She heard clipped orders of direction through the rolled-up windows of the car.

Regan pulled the Civic over to the shoulder. "So now what?"

"Give me a moment, then go through them."

"Say what?"

Peter closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and stared straight ahead. "Go. Now."

"Sure, why not? If they stop us, this insanity's over."

Regan pressed her foot down slowly on the accelerator and the Civic crept forward. They inched toward a petite blonde-haired woman in a powder-blue suit. She waved a microphone like a baton and shouted orders at a man with a video camera.

"Hey, isn't that the lady from Channel 3?" Ben said. "She looks better on TV."

The woman turned and glared in their direction.

"Uh-oh, this is where you-know-what hits the fan," Ben said, slouching in his seat.

The woman continued her tirade at the camera operator, oblivious to the passing Honda.

"Well, I'll be damned," Ben said.

Beyond the news van, men in army fatigue uniforms hurried. Each carried a black box covered with glowing dials. To the left, a state police car blocked the entrance to the park.

"Regan," Peter said, his voice a forced whisper. "I am weak. You have to help."

Regan jerked her head around and glared at him. "Help? How? Don't you dare dump this on me. You brought us..."

"Be still," Peter said. "The rift is close; you have to feel the Power. Empty your mind; find your center of peace. That's where the Power is."

"How many times do I have to say it? I don't have any power." She stopped the car. "I'll just back up and get us out of here. By morning maybe they'll have cleared out. Then we can give it another try."

"No," Peter said. "We cannot waste the time. If you will not help, I will try to get us to the top of the mountain." Peter's hands, pressing against the dash of the car, trembled. The trembling moved up his arms until his whole upper body vibrated. She looked at the police car. The officer's head was turned away from them, but for how long?

"Damn," she said, then filled her mind with images of Kelsey. Kelsey as a child, riding her bike. Kelsey as a teenager, getting her first camera. Kelsey as she had last

seen her, laughing and waving as she boarded an airplane. A small circle of warmth built in the pit of her stomach and spread upwards.

"That is it. Now give me your hand and feed it to me," Peter's voice said from far away. And then someone was shaking her shoulder.

"All right, all right, I'm awake." she said, thrusting the hand aside and opening her eyes. She blinked. Where in the hell were they? The car sat on the side of the road beneath two oak trees. Far below, lights lit the night. "B-b-but how?"

"You used the Power," Peter said.

She turned in her seat and met Ben's wide-eyed gaze. He nodded his head. Maggie wiggled out of his arms to nuzzle Regan with a cold nose.

"I don't remember anything. I was thinking of Kelsey, then someone was shaking my shoulder."

Peter fumbled with the belt that held him in place. "Come, we have no time to waste. The rift is just beyond the trees." He cursed under his breath, then dropped the metal buckle back into his lap. "Will someone free me?"

Ben leaned over, released the seat belt, and opened the car door. Peter scrambled out as if he thought the car would try to hold him hostage. He looked across the Civic's bucket seat to where Regan still sat.

"Regan?"

She stared at her hands that clasped the steering wheel, then raised her gaze to Peter. "I can't move them."

"It is a reaction from the use of the Power. Without the Power you gave me, I would not be able to stand for an hour.

Your strength will return soon, and as you become stronger the after-effects will lessen."

Peter circled to the driver's side. "Let me help." He reached in, gently unclasped her hands from the wheel, then rubbed her numbed fingers. "Is the life returning?"

"Yes, they seem almost normal."

Ben and Maggie climbed out of the car and walked to stand at Peter's side.

"Time's a wasting," Regan said. She pivoted in her seat and placed her feet on the ground.

"Regan, wait!" Peter cried as she stood, then pitched forward into his arms. "Legs always take a little longer," he said, his warm breath stirring the hair at her temple.

She flushed. "Jeez, I'm sorry."

"Here, I'll take her," Ben said.

"Of course." Peter handed her to him.

"I don't need to be 'taken' by anybody," she said. "Just give me a minute."

"You will need more than a minute and we need to keep moving," Peter said. "I do not know how long the spell will work on those below."

Ben swung Regan up into his arms.

"Hey, come on, I'm too heavy," she said, pushing against his chest.

"I've carried sacks of groceries heavier than you." He looked at Peter. "Lead on."

With Maggie at his heels, Peter set off at a quick pace through the darkness.

Regan watched them walk away. "Do you think Kelsey is up here?"

"I don't know. Do we follow?"

"My head says get in the car and go home."

Ben looked down into her eyes. "The two of you used something to get us through those people and by the cop car. What's it to be?"

Regan stared into the dark. "We stick with him."

Ben turned and followed Peter.

Regan's senses came alive in the night. The air was ripe with the scent of damp grass and mud. Every hair on her body quivered. A tingle itched the soles of her feet. "Do you feel it?"

"Yes," Ben replied.

Maggie raced back to them and skidded to a stop in a splash of moonlight. Her tail wagged so hard her body shook.

"Maggie feels it too," Ben said.

They crested the hill and ahead of them, in a stretch of pale light, Peter waited. He motioned them to follow, then walked into a wall of solid black and vanished.

"My God," Regan gasped.

"Step through," Peter's voice called from inside the dark wall. Ben looked a question at Regan. Swallowing, she nodded, and he stepped into the darkness. For the space of two heartbeats they existed in a senseless void. Then they were stepping out into a field filled with sun and swaying blue flowers.

Peter stood a few feet away from them, and he was not alone. A short, compact man, dressed in shades of autumn,

stood next to him. The stranger turned to face them, and Regan saw that he had a bristling white beard. The beard stopped just short of a wide, silver-linked belt that circled his ample middle. A double-bladed axe rested on the ground in front of him. The axe's polished head reached as high as his waist.

"Ben, do you know what he is?"

"If my picture books were right, a dwarf."

"A real dwarf," Regan said.

Peter looked up, saw them standing wide-eyed with their mouths hanging open and smiled. "Regan, Ben, let me introduce you to Angus."

Ben lowered Regan to her feet and the two of them, with Maggie at their heels, walked forward.

Silver eyes surrounded by pale, creased skin scrutinized them. Bushy white eyebrows rose as he pointed at Maggie.

"What in the queen's name is that?"

"A dwarf from the other side," Peter said.

"A dwarf dog?" Angus walked around Maggie and examined her from every angle. Maggie stood frozen as he circled her, her tail ramrod straight. He stopped in front of her, nodded, and laid his hand on her head. "She's a credit to her ancestors."

Ben stepped forward and thrust his hand down to Angus. The dwarf tipped his head back to meet the black man's eyes.

"My boy, where did you find this dark giant?"

"It was destiny. He and the dwarf dog were at the apprentice's dwelling when I arrived."

"The apprentice." His silvery gaze turned to Regan. "Is she as strong as Kelsey said?"

"Strong, but untrained, and we have little time."

"Excuse me," Regan said, looking from one to the other with a slight frown, "but I don't like being spoken of as if I'm not here."

"Forgive my rudeness. Angus, this is Regan Cafferty, Kelsey's sister."

"Aye, I can tell. Wait until Darrian sees her. He still hasn't forgiven Kelsey for turning down his proposal."

"Darrian is a fool. His father would never allow an alliance with a human. It is only because of Dirkk and Margeaux that they deign to join with us at all."

"I know that, but he is young and randy as a goat and he will want this one, too. What will...?"

"Wait," Regan said, "Who's this Darrian, and what does he have to do with Kelsey?"

"Darrian is an elven princeling with an eye for beauty," Peter said.

She laughed. "But I'm not beautiful."

Angus's gaze swept over Regan. "I think it's the odd clothes they wear. Why do you wear a man's face on your chest? Is he your God?"

"What?" Regan glanced down at Garth Brooks' face as Ben snorted loudly. "I guess he is to some, but no, he isn't mine."

"I have the apprentice's garb and a robe Ben is welcome to," Peter said. "The little dog is a bigger problem."

"You are a mage," Angus said, "just tell anyone who asks that she is a spell gone wrong."

Regan knelt beside the basset hound and pulled her close. "Don't you talk that way about her." She glared at the dwarf. "Are you a screwed-up spell?"

Angus opened his mouth, but no words came.

Regan stood. "Now, what about my sister? I want to see her, now."

Angus's jaw dropped and Ben grinned down at his feet.

"D-d-do you know who you're making demands of, woman?" the dwarf said. "This is Peter Canterville, High Mage to Queen Tessa."

Regan looked the dwarf straight in the eye. "I don't care if he's the Pope."

Angus's gaze swiveled to Peter. "The what?"

Peter shrugged. "As you can see, she has Kelsey's fire."

Regan cut in. "Just where is my sister? I thought she'd be here to meet us."

Angus and Peter exchanged a quick glance. "You will see her soon," Peter said, "that is, if you will allow us to lead you to her?" Without a word, Peter turned and walked away from her. Ben winked at Regan and grinned, then followed Peter.

She watched their retreating backs, then glanced at Angus. The dwarf stared after Peter and Ben, then back to her. He slowly stroked his beard. With a shake of his head, he hoisted his axe.

"I guard Peter's back and, as long as you travel with us, I guard yours, too," he said, then stood and stared at her.

"What?" she asked when he did not move.

He jerked his head in the direction of Peter and Ben.

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by Barbara M. Hodges

Regan opened her mouth, then snapped it shut and started after the others, slapping her hand against her leg for Maggie to follow. The basset hound whined and Regan stopped and looked back. Maggie still sat at Angus's feet.

Angus looked down at the dog. "Can I keep Maggie with me?"

"Why not?" Regan said, with a shrug.

Angus reached down with his hand and scratched behind Maggie's ear. "Aye, me girl, we dwarves must stick together."

Chapter 8

REGAN PAUSED AND wiped her face with her T-shirt, then glanced up into the sky. From where the sun rode, it looked to be an hour or so until dusk. Look how blue that sky is, she mused, just like the sky in the High Sierras after a spring rain. She shaded her eyes and stared toward the heat-blurred line of trees in the distance. They had been crossing the field for at least an hour and they still seemed no closer.

Ben stopped beside her.

"Did you notice these flowers?" Regan asked. "They look like California poppies, but they're a pale pink." She reached out and brushed her fingers across a velvet petal. "They almost feel like skin." The flowers rose hip-high on green stalks that were the diameter of her middle finger. Their centers were dark, like the pupil of an eye, and they seemed to sway and follow her as she passed.

Regan glanced across the sea of flowers. As she watched, a ripple formed in the center of the field and moved toward them. She suddenly shivered and jerked her fingers back from the petals.

"It's the grass that freaks me," Ben said. "I've never seen red grass before, and it's weird the way it parts in front of us, like Moses and the Red Sea."

Ahead, Peter and Angus had stopped also. Peter's gaze swept across the field, and the man and dwarf exchanged a quick look before Peter called back to her. "Would you join me please?" She moved to stand next to him.

He looked around again. "Do you feel it?"

Regan shivered. "I feel something. I just don't know what it is."

"They stalk us." Peter's gaze shifted from side to side. "I need to use your Power again, but it will be different this time. I must have full control."

Regan's stomach churned. "What do you mean?"

"Until I release you, your body will be nothing but a walking shell."

She glanced around. The ripples were oncoming waves, and it became clear the little group was their destination. "Okay."

"Give me your hand and your trust. I must have both."

She placed her hand in his. Her light blue eyes rose to lock with his hazel ones. She felt a quick jerk in the pit of her stomach. The world around her wavered, and she fell into the glittering depths of Peter's eyes.

Her awareness returned, and with it the sight of her own slack face seen through another's vision. "Where am I?" she screamed mentally.

Peter's calm voice spoke to her, mind to mind. "Your consciousness is with mine. Relax. Is that not what you said to me about the blue devil-machine?"

"But..."

"I trusted you in your world; now you must trust me in mine."

Regan laughed. "You've got my soul. How could I trust you more?"

"Then become one with me. I promise you shall be returned."

Through Peter's eyes, Regan saw his hands move in a graceful dance. The white sunlight surrounding them suddenly fragmented into a rainbow of color. The colors followed the flowing movements of Peter's hands, twining and weaving until a pulsating wall encircled them. From the flowers a raspy sigh rose, grating on her—no, his—ears, like fingernails scratching down a blackboard.

Arms extended, palms facing up, Peter marched forward, Regan's soulless body a stringless puppet at his side. The raspy keen rose higher.

From the flesh-colored flowers in front of them, a nightmare creature rose and balanced on a thick black tail. A swaying, scaled, triangular head towered above Peter. Through the swirling colors of the wall, cold reptilian eyes bored down into his.

Out of the corner of Peter's eyes, she saw Angus rush forward. "Can you stop them?"

"With Regan's help I can hold them off."

All around them flowers rustled, and more of the snake creatures rose, their slit eyes black and hungry.

The wall pulsed, vibrant with power, then arced in a flash as one of the monsters sprang against it. The snake rebounded with an enraged hiss, smoke rising from its singed coils.

Then as if one mind ruled all, they sprang. The wall crackled and arced. The smell of ozone filled the air as they

sprang again, and then again. Their repelled bodies fell, charred and writhing, among the now trampled flowers.

The pulsing wall shielding them, the party pushed on. The dying snakes, writhing in a death dance, were brushed to the side and out of their path by their advance.

Suddenly Peter stumbled and Regan felt his body begin to tremble.

"God, no. There's still at least fifty of them left. What can I do? Tell me!" she said.

"You are doing what can be done," Peter said. "Angus..."

"Hold on, boy, we're almost there," the dwarf yelled.

"Almost there?" Regan heard the panic in her own thoughts. "The trees are no closer."

"Illusion, only illusion." Peter stumbled again, and the wall wavered.

"We're going to die."

"No, we are not. I can take more from you, but it will leave your body immobile."

"Do it."

Peter reached and clasped her hand. "Ben, grab Regan as she falls."

Regan winced as she saw her body stumble. Then Ben leaped forward and, for the second time that day, he swept her body up into his arms.

The wall surrounding them pulsed brighter for a moment, but then, with Peter's eyes, she watched the world dim. My power wasn't enough, she thought. We're not going to make it.

The hissing rose angrily, then abruptly all was silent.

The Blue Flame [Book 1 of the Daradawn Series]
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"We are safe. Regan, you may return."

Then she was looking from her own eyes once more.

Chapter 9

BEN STILL GRIPPED her in his arms just inside a shaded glade of oaks. "Regan, are you all right? Can you hear me?" The lower, gnarled limbs spread and entwined to form a living wall around them. On the far side of the glade, Peter sat on the ground with his back propped against a tree, Angus kneeling beside him. The dwarf used his left arm to hold the mage's head up, and with his other hand held a silver canteen to Peter's lips. Maggie lay at Peter's side, her head resting on his thigh.

Regan turned her gaze to Ben. "I'm fine."

"Do you think you can stand?"

"Of course and, by the way, thanks for the lift."

Ben groaned. A shaky laugh escaped Regan as he lowered her. "Sorry, but becoming a zombie and fearing for my life makes me stupid." As her feet touched the ground, it gave beneath them. She looked down, then shifted her weight from side to side. The ground squished. It was as if they stood on a water-soaked green sponge.

Ben released her arms and stepped back, but he looked coiled, ready to spring if she stumbled. "Did he use your power again?"

"He had to or those things would have gotten beyond the wall." Regan shuddered. "What do you think they were?"

He shook his head. "Never seen or even read of anything like them."

Regan's gaze drifted back to Peter. "It was the strangest feeling. I looked out from his eyes, felt his fear and rage at the evil he fights, and his hatred of this Dirkk. Do you think he's okay?"

Ben glanced toward Peter and Angus. "I know he's weak. He stumbled over there as soon as he put you back."

She drew a deep breath. "Well, I seem to be okay. I think I'll go and make sure he's all right."

She crossed to where Peter sat and knelt next to Angus. The cool damp moss immediately soaked the knees of her jeans. "Is he okay?"

Angus twisted a stopper into the canteen, then glanced at her. "He needs rest. We will travel no more today."

Peter sat up, away from the tree's support. "But Kelsey?"

Angus shook his head. "She needs you in good health. You are no use to anyone ill." He placed his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Look, the sun is setting. Sleep. We will start early tomorrow."

Peter settled back against the tree with a sigh. "As usual, you are the voice of reason. The horses..."

"Are safe in the cave." Angus glanced at Ben. "But we are one short."

"Regan can ride with me. Skylar can carry two with ease."

The dwarf nodded, then stood. "There's no longer a need to skulk like thieves so I will see to firewood."

"Would you like a hand?" Ben asked.

Angus looked up at the man towering over him. His thick eyebrows rose towards his hairline. "You wish to give me your hand?"

Ben's white teeth flashed in a smile. "Would you like some help getting the wood?"

The dwarf turned away. "Do as you wish."

Regan watched Angus and Ben walk toward the forest. Angus glanced up and said something to Ben. The tall man bent to catch his words, then his rich laughter flooded the glade. Maggie's ears perked. She rose, stretched her long body, and trotted after them.

Regan shifted to a sitting position at Peter's side. He moved a little to the right. "Would you care to share my tree?"

She scooted closer and rested her back against the broad trunk.

The shadows joined to form one dark pool around them. Outside the glade, the sky turned into a streaked palette of orange, yellow and reddish-violet.

"Sunsets are the same in your world as in mine," she said.

"All living creatures enjoy beauty."

The field of flowers deepened to a coral pink. A breeze lifted Regan's hair and teased her nose with a sweet scent, like pink jasmine, but headier. "What's that?"

Peter glanced at her. "What?"

"That smell."

"The Tika flowers. They hold their perfume all day and release it as the sun sets."

Regan inhaled deeply and tilted her head back to look at the leaf-covered branches entwined above. She lifted her hand and stifled a yawn. It's so peaceful, she thought, so different from just a few minutes ago. She sat up and turned

so she could see Peter's face. "Those things that attacked us earlier, what were they?"

"Black Vipers, one of Dirkks hell-spawn."

"I felt your hate for him. He's responsible for those monsters? But why?"

Peter rubbed the back of his neck. "Why? Hate, revenge—the usual reasons. He was once betrothed to Queen Tessa. He was always wild, a troublemaker from the time he could toddle."

"You knew him as a child?"

"He, the queen, and I grew up together in the castle." A lopsided smile curved Peter's lips, then they tightened. "One night, arrogant with too much mead and angered by the ribbing he was taking about his inability to bed the queen, he accepted a childish challenge and climbed the wall into the queen's private forest."

"The Queen's Forester heard a unicorn's enraged death scream and ran to see why. When he arrived, he saw the baron and the unicorn. Both of them lay in a pool of blood. The unicorn was dead, a hunting arrow jutting from its neck. Dirkk still lived, and in his hand he gripped a bloody unicorn horn." Peter paused and stared into the dark.

"The baron got his horn but he paid dearly. When the forester turned him over, he saw Dirkk's face was slashed into raw ribbons of flesh by the unicorn's hoofs."

"My God."

Peter picked up a short narrow branch and rolled it between his palms. "The baron's action enraged Tessa. She broke their engagement and banished him from the kingdom."

Dirkk would not admit his guilt. He said if Tessa had not refused him her bed, it would never have happened, and he swore the broken betrothal and banishment was because he was no longer easy to look upon. He promised revenge." A sharp crack made Regan jump. Peter looked down at the broken limb in his hands. "Sorry."

"So what happened to the baron?"

"He lives in Crag Castle with a face of puckered scars, his handsome features only a bitter memory. With a black soul, scarred worse than his face, he shapes hell's creatures and terrorizes the countryside." With a harsh curse, Peter threw the two sticks across the glade.

Regan hesitated, then reached out and touched his shoulder. His eyes met hers. Regan dropped her hand from his shoulder, her heart doubling its beat at the hate that blazed in them.

His voice was harsh with controlled anger as he continued. "The Black Vipers and Ru'taha ravage the night. Ru'taha is Ancient Dwarven for death angel. Dirkk sculpts them from human flesh. At first he used his own people, but now whole villages have disappeared. Some of the field troops say that, if you look deep, you will see the eyes of a friend peering from a Ru'taha's dead orbs."

The hair on Regan's arms rose and she rubbed them with her hands. "How does he do it?"

"No one knows for certain, but we know the Dark One is involved." He stared over her head into the darkness. "Black Vipers were once mountain snakes; now they exist to kill."

"Everyone has come to the castle, farms and villages abandoned." Peter lifted his hands, stared at them, then wiped them against his trouser leg. "I protect the castle with the Power, but we are proud and imprisonment chafes us."

"How do Kelsey and I figure into this?"

"Kelsey is both leader and warrior. She showed us the way to strike fast and deadly and gave us back our pride."

Regan shook her head. "From photo journalist to warrior?"

"It did not happen overnight, but Kelsey will explain."

"And me?"

Peter touched the blue flame on his cheek. "You have the mark of the Power. All born with the blue flame are magic wielders."

"Maybe in this world, but not in mine."

Peter studied Regan's face. "Kelsey says that even in your world your words weave powerful spells of magic and persuade people to do your will."

"That's not magic," she grinned. "That's advertising."

"It is the same. You bespell those to do your bidding, to buy what they do not need, to do what they do not want."

A branch snapped and she felt Peter's body tense, then relax as Angus's voice drifted to them.

"The working of silver is a talent passed from father to son." The dwarf strode into the clearing with Ben behind him, both with arms piled with wood.

"But what of mother to daughter?" Ben said.

"Mother to daughter? Well, woman things."

"Such as?"

"The making of this knapsack and this shirt and trousers."

"Oh—women things—I see," Ben said, then smiled.

"What amuses you?" Angus said.

"I was just thinking of you in my world. They have a name for men like you."

"What?"

"Chauvinistic."

"Chauvinistic? What is chauvinistic?"

"If you're lucky, you'll never know."

Ben dropped his wood to the ground. "Where do you want the fire?"

Angus pointed to his left "There's a pit over there."

Ben crossed to the spot, knelt and began to pile twigs in a tee-pee shape in the middle of a shallow depression; a grin still curved his lips.

Angus scowled. "What does he find so amusing?" He dropped his wood next to Ben's and, still scowling, tromped to his backpack, rummaged inside and pulled out two white cloth-wrapped packages. He untied the string, opened them and handed Regan and Peter each a dried square of meat and a flat piece of bread, then turned and walked toward Ben.

"What's this?" Regan asked Peter.

"It is trail food. Chew the meat slowly to soften it. I will get us some water to wash it down."

Regan bit into the brown square and gnawed a piece free. She chewed, then chewed some more. It tasted a bit like venison and blackberries. Pemmican. She and Kelsey tried some on a backpacking trip through the Sierras. Peter returned and handed her a silver cup filled with water. "Is everything you have here made of silver?"

"Angus's people are miners of the silver, and he is generous with his friends." Peter sat beside her and bit off a piece of his brown square.

"So what of tomorrow?"

He chewed, swallowed, and took a long drink from the silver cup. "Tomorrow we journey to the cave where the horses are hidden, then ride to join Kelsey."

"Hidden from Ru'taha and Black Vipers?"

"No, from Zara. Although Angus says he saw her feeding yesterday."

"Zara?"

"The Guardian Dragon of the Mountain of the Devil."

Regan stared at him for a moment, then burst into laughter. Ben and Angus glanced in her direction, then turned back to the fire. She looked into Peter's stunned face and her laughter trailed off. "You can't be serious."

"You do not believe in dragons?"

"Of course not."

Peter glanced pointedly at Angus. "Did you believe in dwarfs?"

She got his point. "Well, I..."

"Perhaps tomorrow you will believe in dragons."

Regan felt her cheeks grow warm. So what if she'd never seen a dwarf before? He'd never seen a basset hound before. Maggie. Where was Maggie?

"Ben, where's Maggie?"

"I don't know. She was right behind us." Ben whistled.

Regan stood and walked to the glade's edge. "Maggie, here Maggie."

"I'm sure she's okay," Peter said, coming up behind her. Angus stood and picked up his battle axe. "I'll just go make sure."

A panicked howl ripped through the night.

"Maggie," Ben said, scrambling to his feet.

"Something's got her," Regan said.

The underbrush behind Ben shook and Angus turned to face it, his battle axe held high.

A howling basset hound charged into their midst. A small figure bounced on her neck, just behind her ears. "Whoa, steed, whoa," it cried, grabbing handfuls of Maggie's loose skin. Maggie yowled again and came to a trembling halt.

"What the hell! Get off of her." Regan grabbed a limb and advanced on the yowling dog and its unwelcome rider.

"No, wait," Peter said, grabbing Regan's arm. "Talix, you will desist—now."

The tiny figure glared at Peter, then stood on the quivering dog's back and launched itself. It flew upward to hover with silver wings near Peter's face.

"What is that nasty creature?" it sniffed disdainfully.

"That is Maggie, part of our company."

Talix turned his small head, raking them with disdainful eyes. "Father allowed you the safety of our glade, Mage Peter, not this riffraff."

Maggie made a beeline to Ben's side. He knelt, stroked her head, and whispered softly into her ear. Regan still burned with anger. Her palm itched to squash the little bug.

Angus set his battle axe aside. "Fairie-s-s-s-s." He spit at the ground in front of Peter, then turned and stalked to the far side of the glade.

"Your father promised a safe haven for all who flee the Black Vipers," Peter said.

The fairy flew to float before Regan, and she saw he was nude and very much male. "So who is this?" He darted around her and then halted at eye level.

"Kelsey's sister, Regan—and you have forgotten your manners."

The silver brows of the fairy came together in a straight line. "You are most welcome to this haven of safety, weary traveler," he sing-songed in a bored monotone voice.

Regan frowned at the tiny winged form. "Thank you for such a ... warm greeting."

He shrugged. "It is expected." He flew to Peter's shoulder, lighted and turned his back on Regan. "You will be joining us this eve?"

"Not tonight."

"Father will be disappointed." He circled down and backwinged near Maggie's nose. "You never did say what this was." He extended his hand and tweaked Maggie's white chin whisker. Maggie pressed back closer to Ben, then rumbled low in her throat and snorted into the fairy's face.

The blast of breath sent Talix spinning backwards head over heels. Regan gulped in surprise, then doubled over in a coughing spasm. Angus snorted laughter as he strode to Regan and thumped her on the back. Gasping for air, Regan

straightened. Wiping tears from her eyes, she saw Peter's lips tremble as he fought to keep an impassive face.

Talix regained his balance and flew to land in Peter's hand. She saw his tiny body quiver with rage. His face screwed into an ugly mask. "Did you see what that monster did to me? I demand you kill it right now!"

"You deserved it for your rude behavior," Peter said.

The fairy threw his head back and glared at the mage. "I will report this to father."

"I do not think so. Your actions would be an embarrassment to him."

Talix flew upward to hover in front of Peter's nose. "I'll not forget this."

"I am sure you will not, but for now I think you should leave."

"You are dismissing, me?" Talix said.

"It has been a long day and we need our rest."

Talix pirouetted slowly in the air, his gaze traveling over the figures that ringed the fire. He stopped and stared into Angus's smirking face. "Yes, enjoy your peaceful slumber. It may be your last for many nights." He turned and flew into the darkness.

Regan watched the dot of light until it vanished. "So that's a fairy. Not quite the way they're portrayed in children's books."

"Talix is spoiled, but his father is a good ruler and has always been faithful to Queen Tessa," Peter said.

Angus threw a branch into the fire. "Fairies are fools. Their heads are always in the clouds. You need to get into the

bowels of the Earth Mother to know what true life is all about. Deep in the caves you feel her heartbeat all around you."

Peter smiled. "You, my friend, are of the ground, and they are of the air. You will never agree. It is enough that we all continue to fight Dirkk together." He yawned. "Come, it is late. Everyone to sleep, for tomorrow we have a hard ride."

Regan watched Peter pull a blanket from Angus's backpack and cross to the far side of the fire pit. He kneeled, scooped a pile of dried leaves into a long narrow mound, then laid the blanket over them. "Here, this is for you."

"Where will you sleep?"

"There are blankets for three, enough for all, since I will take the first watch."

Regan frowned. "Watch? I thought this was a safe place?"

Peter shrugged "It always has been, but things change."

Angus circled the fire to where Peter stood and stared up into his face. "You are not setting wards?" When the mage said nothing, the dwarf frowned. "Then you are still weak. I will take the first watch."

"I'll take the second," Ben said.

"And then me," Regan said. "I'm too excited to sleep."

"Enough, none of us will sleep," Peter met each of their unwavering gazes. "I can set wards, but I will need Regan's help."

Regan thought of the field where she had looked out through Peter's eyes, and half of her ached for the feeling of closeness; the other feared the helplessness.

Peter saw her hesitation. "It will not be like the field, but like the approach to the rift."

She swallowed, then nodded. It was quicker this time. She thought only once of Kelsey before warmth filled her stomach and spread upwards. Heat coursed down her arm to where her hand gripped Peter's.

Her eyes drifted shut and Peter's grip tightened. "Keep them open. It is time you witnessed your Power."

The tree trunks that surrounded the glade began to glow like the phosphorescent walls she had seen in a New Mexico cave. The warmth spread and she gasped as every nerve in her body tingled with pleasure.

"Regan," Peter's voice held an undercurrent of fear. "Stop the flow. I cannot control it."

He tried to pull his hand from hers, but she laced her fingers through his and gripped tighter. The pleasure rippling through her body intensified and the tree trunks glowed brighter. Peter yanked his hand free.

The moss around the bottom of the trees began to steam. "Look, I'm doing it without you."

"Yes, you are," Peter said. "Now draw it back before you incinerate the trees, and us along with them."

Regan turned to stare at him. "Draw it back? I don't know how."

"Reverse the flow; bring it into you."

"It will burn me up."

"Control the Power, Regan, or it will consume you," Peter said.

The tree trunks began to smoke. "How? Tell me how."

"Close your eyes. Look inward and you will see it. Then picture little streams of Power trickling from your stomach to your legs, arms—your entire body."

Regan closed her eyes. The Power was a brilliant pulsing mass of light stretching from the top of her thighs to her shoulders, growing brighter with each second. She took a deep breath, then reached into the glowing mass with her mind and separated it into glowing strands. She sent five strands down her arms and into each hand, then another five down her legs. The last of the mass she formed into a shining halo and sent it upward toward her head and hair. She felt her body vibrate and sway as she absorbed the power. She waited until the glow was nothing but an ember, then opened her eyes.

The trees surrounding them had blackened trunks. The once vibrant green moss looked pale and dry, as if a good breeze would crumble it into powder and send it sailing.

"Did I do that?"

Peter wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve. "You are strong even without your words of power."

Regan looked across the campfire to Ben and Angus's pale strained faces.

"You'd best train her and soon," Angus said, and stomped off to the farthest edge of the glade. He scooped leaves into a pile and threw a blanket over them.

"I'm sorry," she whispered in Angus's direction.

Peter touched her arm. "It was my fault. You have grown stronger since you entered Daradawn. I could not control the

Power in you as before. I will not try again until you have had training. Now go to bed. The wards are set."

She walked to her blanket and stretched out. She turned on her back and waited for the earlier weakness to come. It didn't. She gazed at the stars glittering through the oaks' leaves and sought a familiar constellation, but there was no North Star, no Big Dipper. Was this even Earth? My God, what had she gotten herself into?

A wet nose thrust under her hand and Regan smiled in the dark as she stroked Maggie's head. She found Ben's solid figure in the fire's light. At least she wasn't alone. She turned on her side and hugged Maggie close.

* * * *

Regan dreamed. She stood on a grass-covered mound. Looking down through a shroud of mist, she sought the blurred form of the temple. Two hands clasped her upper arms, and she turned and buried her face in silken cloth. Lips touched her hair.

"Mina, I must go. The Royal Companions await me."

"No. I have seen it in the mirror. If you go, I will lose you."

"Look below. What do you see?"

Beneath the banner of a blue flame, men waited in phalanxes. The formation spread outward and filled the valley. A callused hand reached to tuck an auburn curl behind her ear.

"It is only a small battle. I will return by nightfall," he said.

"No, Cassius. The Seeing Mirror never lies. I will lose you."

"I will never be lost to you, my love. I would search through time to be at your side."

"Will you swear to me that not even time can separate us?"

Cassius brought her hand to his lips. "I swear by all that is holy, no matter where you are I will find you. Now I must leave."

Mina watched him stride down the hill. "Good bye, my love," she whispered. "Remember your promise and seek me."

Chapter 10

THE SMELL OF cinnamon and hazelnut laced with brewing coffee teased Regan to consciousness. Eyes still closed, she yawned and stretched like a cat. Ben's up early, she thought. What a sweetheart. This is my Saturday to make coffee and waffles. She rolled onto her side, then winced as something jabbed her ribs. A cool breeze brushed her cheeks and Regan's eyes flew open. They widened as she stared at the man who stood at the edge of a campfire, his back toward her. "What the hell?" Then it all flooded back.

Peter turned at her words. "Good morning. Coffee?"

"It wasn't a dream?"

She watched as he poured a cup, then carried it in her direction. Her leaf bed rustled as she sat up and reached for the cup.

"It is hot."

She wrapped the end of the blanket around the cup's handle and took it from him. She blew into the coffee, then took a small sip. It was black and strong. She glanced around the empty camp. "Ben and Maggie are here too, right?"

"At the river with Angus."

Regan's gaze flicked across, then back to a charred tree trunk. She still couldn't believe she had done that. One minute more and they would have all been toast.

"Angus still ticked at me?"

"Ticked?"

"You know—upset."

"Angus's anger is short-lived." Peter grinned. "I know." He crossed to the fire and stirred it with a thin branch. Sparks jumped skyward. He gestured toward a pail sitting among the coals. "There is warm water for you to wash. I will join Ben and Angus."

Regan watched him walk to the glade's edge. "Peter."

He turned. An eyebrow rose in question.

"I appreciate the warm water, but you don't have to go to all that trouble. I've washed with cold water before."

His body stiffened. "As you wish."

Regan's cheeks heated. "It's just that I'm not one of those helpless female types that..."

"It was a simple courtesy but, if it offends you, it will not happen again."

Regan watched him walk from the glade without looking back. "Good way to put your foot in it, Cafferty."

Shaking her head, she scrambled to her feet and padded over to the warm water. She knelt beside the bucket and, settling back on her heels, she gnawed her bottom lip and looked around. She'd like to take the T-shirt off so she wouldn't get it wet. It wasn't as if she'd brought a lot of clothes with her. Peter said they were all at the river, but he and Angus were strangers to her. What if they were peeking at her from behind a tree? She laughed at herself. Now that was a stupid fear; besides, Ben wouldn't let them. She pulled the T-shirt over her head. Glancing down at her lace-trimmed bra, she shrugged. "No big deal. It covers more than most swimsuits." She mopped her face with the shirt and then walked to a nearby branch and draped it over the middle.

With goosebumps erupting on her skin, she sprinted to her blanket, grabbed it, and leaped for a patch of sun. Wrapped mummy-style, she leaned back against a sun-warmed rock. When her shivering subsided to an occasional twinge, she let the blanket fall to her waist and reached for her braid.

Regan winced as she worked her fingers through the tangled mess. "I can't believe I didn't bring a comb or even a toothbrush. Just how dumb is that?"

A branch snapped behind her. She jumped to her feet and spun around. A low-hanging branch snagged the blanket and pulled it from her grasp.

Peter stood just inside the clearing, a wrapped bundle in his arms. Regan saw his gaze flick across her bra, then move to the blue flame birthmark partially hidden by her right bra strap.

His gaze rose to her face and he held the bundle out to her. "It would be best if you wore these. It is standard apprentice garb. I do not know if Dirkk will have heard of you. But in case he has, a simple apprentice will not be noticed. A shirt is on top. Call us when you are ready."

Wordlessly Regan took the bundle from him. He turned and walked into the trees. After he was gone, she set the bundle on the rock.

He didn't seem at all affected by your displayed charms, a little voice nagged nastily in her head. Much more interested in your little birthmark, it seemed.

Regan picked up the blanket and shook it out petulantly. The sun glittered on a silver, round-toothed comb in the

center of the promised shirt. She whooped with joy and pounced on it.

* * * *

Regan fastened the band around her braid, then picked up the shirt. It was identical to the one Peter wore. She stuck her head through the shirt's opening and let it fall, then took off her jeans and tossed them aside. Trousers lay beneath the shirt, and she pulled them on. The shirt grazed the top of her knees and was easily large enough for two more of her size. The trouser legs bunched into folds and covered her toes. She propped her foot on a boulder and rolled up first one trouser leg, then the other. Picking up her jeans, she pulled her leather belt free and fastened it around her waist. "That's better," she said, running her hands along her hips.

Two items remained in the center of the blanket. One was a long silver stick with small brushes at the end. Must be a toothbrush, she thought. If not it's going to be. She searched for toothpaste, then shrugged. "Well, it's better than nothing."

The last was something square wrapped in a piece of roughly woven cloth. She unwrapped it. A smile curved her lips. It was a sliver of soap. She held it to her nose and breathed in the scent of Tika flowers. Wish I'd had this earlier, she thought, carefully rewrapping it.

She straightened and looked around for her tennis shoes. They were by last night's pile-of-leaves bed. She fished out her dirty socks from inside. Her nose wrinkling, she pulled them on and then the shoes.

She'd wadded her jacket into a mound for a pillow. She reached in its pocket and removed the red velvet bag and her book of jingles. Staring at the velvet bag for a long moment, she picked it up, took out Kelsey's pendant, and placed it around her neck. She tossed the bag and book on top of the soap, then added her jeans and T-shirt. Everything rewrapped, she tied it with a square knot.

Regan strode to the glade's edge and called into the trees. "I'm ready when you are."

In minutes Maggie bounded into the clearing, trailed by the three men. At the sight of her, Angus stopped in mid-stride. His forehead creased.

"It's not going to work, Peter," he grumbled, "Darrian will want her still. Maybe if we cut her hair, and take off the belt?"

Regan raised her hand to her hair.

Regan saw Peter look at the swell of her breast. "Some things cannot be altered. Darrian will have to accept no as an answer." He turned and walked away.

Regan heard a soft chuckle and turned. Ben stared at her in amusement. "What?" she snapped.

He grinned. "What do you think of my new garb?" He minced a slow circle in front of her, his right hand on his hip. The robe he wore was dark gray and hit his leg at mid-thigh. A hood hung loosely down his back. Flat sandals, leather laces criss-crossed upward to below his knees, completed the outfit. "It's a little short isn't it?" she teased.

Ben winked. "Shows off my legs real nice."

Regan fought against her smile. "For some crazy reason it suits you."

"It's not as flattering as yours, but I like it, and call me Brother Ben."

"Brother Ben? And who am I to be?"

"You are simply my apprentice," Peter said from behind her. "We should meet no one, but if we do, I will address you as such, and you will address me as Master."

Regan's right eyebrow rose. "I see."

"Enough talk." Angus growled. "Let us be off to the horses."

* * * *

Regan stepped from the glade into the shadows of the oaks. She glanced back and her eyes widened. The glade was gone. The oak trees now spread their gnarled branches over a dense, yellow-flowered thicket.

"It will appear again when needed," Peter said at her side.

A sudden chill raced along her skin, and goose bumps erupted on her arms. I'm never going to see it again. The thought startled her with its certainty. She shivered and pushed the thought away before turning her back on the here-again, gone-again glade. "How far is it to the cave?"

"Four hours, five at the most."

"And to where Kelsey is?"

"Another six of hard riding."

"Then I won't see her today?" Regan couldn't keep the disappointment out of her voice.

"Yes. We have to push on. Time grows short and the rift will close in five days," Peter said.

Regan shook her head and smiled. "And you really believe we can save your world and get Kelsey and me home in five days?"

Peter stiffened. "We will save Daradawn. We have no choice. As for you and Kelsey..." He shrugged, then pushed by her and walked to join Angus.

Regan frowned. I see where his priorities lie. Well, he can see to Daradawn and I'll see to getting Kelsey and me home. She glanced over and saw Ben watching her. "What?"

"Was that necessary?"

She shrugged. "I thought he needed a reality check."

"This is their world. Do you expect them to give it away without a fight? Would you if it were yours?"

"But it isn't," she said.

"What if it's Kelsey's? She's been here seven years. What if she doesn't want to go back?"

Regan shot Ben a sharp look. "Of course she'll want to go home."

He stared at her for a moment and then shook his head. "Whatever you say." He walked by her and joined Peter and Angus. Regan heard the three men exchange muffled words. They turned, looked at her, then continued on down the path.

"I still think he's dreaming," she muttered and hurried to catch them.

* * * *

Angus led them along the edge of a ravine. The oak trees were far below now. Regan poked Ben in the back. He turned to face her.

"I need a break," she said.

A few feet ahead of them Peter and Angus halted. They turned and looked at her. "You go on. I'll catch up," she called.

"Time is important," Peter said.

Shifting her weight from foot to foot, Regan heaved a sigh of disgust. "All I have to do is follow the path, right? I just need a few minutes." She saw understanding dawn on Peter's face. He moved by Angus and continued onward. "We will slow our pace."

"Women," Angus grumbled, following.

"Would you like Maggie and me to wait?" Ben asked.

"No," Regan said, scanning the mountainside for a concealing rock.

Ben hesitated.

"I'll be fine," she insisted. "Well, in a few minutes I will be."

He turned away and Regan scrambled toward a rock.

* * * *

Regan rounded another switchback. Still no sign of the men. "Just how far ahead are they?" She wiped sweat from her face. The path had grown steeper in the last half-mile or so. Sudden pain knifed through her calf. She yelped, grabbed the knotting muscle and hobbled to a flat rock. Groaning, she rubbed the charley horse. A small avalanche of rocks and dust bounced around her and she looked up.

Peter slid into her view. "Taking another break?"

"I..."

"Time is important, Regan."

She pressed her lips together and stood. "I'm coming."

"We are two curves ahead and will wait." Peter turned and disappeared around the curve.

"Arrogant asshole." Regan took a step and winced. "I'll catch up if it kills me." Ignoring the pain, she climbed after Peter.

The trail circled a jutting rock. The rock, riddled with fissures, had broken away in large chunks. Gaze on the ground, Regan picked her way through the rubble. From the other side of the rock she heard a muffled curse and then Angus's raised voice. "By the Horned One, what is taking the woman so long?"

She glared in the direction of the voice. They all can just go to hell, she thought defiantly. With her next step, the stone beneath her foot turned. With a small yelp, she grabbed at the branch of a scrubby, pink-flowered bush. Pain raced up her arm like liquid fire; in a heartbeat, numbness replaced the stinging. Blinking back tears, she jerked her hand back. Red welts ran in uneven lines across her palm.

She heard the scramble of feet and looked up to see Maggie bound around the rock toward her. The basset hound halted at Regan's feet.

"Regan, are you coming?" Peter called.

"I'm right on the other side of the rock," she yelled. "You go on ahead."

"The cave is around the next bend. We will wait for you there."

The numbness had worked its way up into her shoulder. Cradling her lifeless right arm against her body, Regan climbed to her feet. "Hope they can tell me how long this numbness is going to last."

Suddenly, Maggie howled and dropped to the ground in submissive terror. A shadow covered them. "What the..." Regan glanced up. A huge golden body flew between her and the sun. "A dragon, an honest-to-God dragon," she muttered as her heart doubled its beat. She grabbed Maggie's collar and looked around for a place to hide.

"Do not move," Peter said from above her.

Regan froze and watched as the dragon dipped a wing and glided closer.

"You are a rock to her as long as you remain still."

Maggie trembled beneath Regan's hand. "Easy, girl, easy."

The sun glinted off gold scales, blinding her. She squeezed her eyes together. Please, I don't want to die. A musky wind lifted her hair and she cringed, waiting for the feel of ripping talons. Instead she felt the heat of the sun on her head again. She opened her eyes and watched Peter scramble to her side in a cloud of dust and sliding rocks.

"Your hand," he said, reaching for her right hand.

Regan stared at him, her arm hanging useless at her side.

"Regan."

"I can't. It won't move."

"Damnation, then give me your other hand."

Of course. My other hand. Now why didn't I think of that?

She released Maggie's collar. The basset hound scrambled to her feet and vanished around the rock.

Peter half-pulled, half-dragged Regan up beside him. "Run." He pushed her forward.

Regan lurched around the rock and stumbled to a halt in front of a dark hole. From the darkness came the smell of dampness, horses, and hay. A shadow again covered the mountainside and Peter pressed her body against the cliff with his. Regan closed her eyes and buried her face against his chest.

After what seemed an eternity, Peter whispered into her ear. "She is gone."

She opened her eyes, stared into his, and her heart beat fast at the love and desire blazing in them. Questions formed in her head, but before she could voice them, his eyes became remote and he pulled away.

She must have been mistaken. How could he care for her? They didn't know each other. Regan's body quaked with sudden shudders.

"I'm-I'm sorry," she whispered, then reached out in panic as the world tilted. Her vision grayed at the edges and she shook her head willing it away.

"Regan?"

She felt Peter grab her as the gray became black, and she slid into oblivion.

* * * *

Pricks of fire jabbed her hand. She winced, then gasped as the burning raced up to her shoulder. She opened her eyes and saw three worried faces clustered above her, four counting Maggie. Peter knelt beside her, a silver cup in his

hand. He placed an arm behind her neck. "Drink this," he said holding the cup to her lips.

She stared at the pea-green concoction that smelled like slime from the top of a cesspool. "You want me to drink that?"

"Every drop."

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"It will strengthen you," Peter said.

"I'll be fine." She struggled to sit up.

"Yes, in a day or two you will be fine, but we cannot wait." Peter tipped the cup toward her mouth. "Now drink."

Regan clamped her lips tightly.

"Kelsey needs us both, and now," Peter said.

She took a deep breath and took a sip. The taste was a cross between ginseng tea and spearmint. She drank all of it.

He helped her to a sitting position. "What happened?" she said.

Peter took the cup from her hand. "You grabbed a firebush. A few hours more, and the paralysis would have been permanent."

Angus scowled, then reached out and softly touched her shoulder. "Stupid woman," he said, then turned away. "I will saddle the horses."

"Horses?" Ben said. "Regan needs at least an hour's rest."

"Yes," Peter agreed, "but she can not have it. Zara knows we are here."

Zara. An image of golden scales and curved talons flickered through Regan's mind. "About Zara, I apologize," she said. "That's one dragon that very much exists."

Peter stared into her eyes. "There is much in our world that no longer exists in yours."

Regan's return stare was incredulous. "Are you saying that dragons once lived in my world?"

"Dragons once ruled both worlds. Do you not know your history?"

"History was my major in college, but Dragon 101 wasn't part of the curriculum."

Ben placed a hand on Regan's shoulder. "This is not the place for a historical debate."

Regan nodded. "More hysterical than historical. So, how do we escape a dragon?"

"By going underground," Peter said. "We will use Murkel cavern. It will shorten our riding time."

"If it's shorter why didn't you use it before?"

"The distance is shorter, but the danger is great." Peter bent and picked up a carved wooden box. "Give me your hand. I want to rub more salve into it."

"Salve? I would have thought you'd use a magic spell to heal me," she said, holding her hand out to him.

"Nature is better than man for healing her own poisons."

Ben stood. "Well, if we're going to ride, I'd better go see if I can make friends with a horse," he said.

Regan kept her gaze on her hand as Peter turned it over and spread a thin film of green across her palm. The salve was pungent, smelling of mint and pine. It melted into her skin, soothing the pain to a dull ache. "You have gentle hands."

His fingers hesitated. "I wanted to be a healer, not a mage. For a long time I fought my destiny, but Dirkk's evil and Daradawn's need forced me to acknowledge the Power."

"You would have made a good healer."

His hand tightened on hers and Regan winced. "Instead I use them to kill." He released her hand and placed the top back on the salve.

Regan stared at him, but Peter's expression discouraged further conversation. Beside her, Maggie whined and nosed her elbow. Regan turned away from Peter and wrapped both arms around the basset hound's neck. "How's it feel not to be a dragon snack?"

Peter dropped the salve into her lap. "Here, you will need to rub this in once a day for the next five days."

"Five days? I hope it travels well," she said.

"I am sure it will. It is made by elven healers."

"That's not what I meant. In five days I will be going home."

He traced the blue flame mark on his cheek. "Yes, and we have much to accomplish before you leave."

"And we will get nothing done with you just sitting there," Angus said from behind her. "I have saddled the horses."

Regan looked beyond Peter's shoulder and saw Ben standing at the head of a roan mare. She scrambled to her feet. "So where is this cavern?"

"Halfway down the mountain."

"How will we avoid Zara to get there?"

"We play statues."

Regan frowned. "Statues?"

"We walk, leading the horses. If Zara flies over, we freeze."

"Won't the horses spook?"

"The horses are elven stock," he said. "They will remain calm as long as we do."

"And if I move?" she asked, knowing the answer in her heart.

"You die," he said simply.

Regan looked into Angus's face, a flippant remark on her lips. His steady silver gaze challenged hers, and she swallowed the biting comment. "Well, Maggie and I are ready," she said. She strode by Peter and crossed to Ben with Maggie at her heels. "Did you hear?"

Ben nodded. "This is Gilda," he said, stroking the mare's nose.

Maggie sniffed the horse's hoof. Gilda lowered her head and nosed the basset hound's ear. Maggie shook her ears, then turned and touched her nose to the horse's.

"I think they like each other," Ben said.

"It appears so." Regan reached up and scratched between the mare's white-tipped ears. "Do you think she could carry two?"

"No," Peter said from behind her. "You will ride Skylar with me."

Regan stiffened. He's as free with his orders as Jack was, she fumed. "And if I choose not to?"

Peter studied her face for a moment. "Then you can walk, but I do not recommend it. Come, we have wasted enough time."

"Why don't you just say, 'heel'?" she said hotly.

"What?"

"Never mind. You wouldn't get it."

A horse snorted behind them. Regan turned and saw Angus walking toward them. Behind him trailed a coal black gelding. The horse's head towered above the dwarf. Knowing his love for silver, she had expected to see a fancy bridle, but the horse's neck was bare.

Angus walked by with a curt nod of his head.

Peter faced Regan. "Angus rides Zax."

"No bridle?"

"Dwarves do not believe in the ownership of animals. Zax chooses to carry him or Angus would walk."

"How does Zax know where to go?"

"Angus tells him."

"Of course, why didn't I think of that?" Regan asked, her voice tinged with sarcasm.

"It is understandable." Peter said, walking to the head of a white stallion. He whispered in the horse's ear. That must be Skylar, she decided. "The dashing hero on his white stallion," she muttered. "How cliché."

"We go," Angus called, then lifted an arm and impatiently waved them forward.

Ben led Gilda by Regan, Maggie trotting at the mare's side. Regan glanced at the cave's entrance and then the sunlight beyond. "What if that dragon is waiting out there for us to stick our heads out?"

"It will be all right. We will protect you," Peter said from beside her. "Now we must go. Kelsey needs us."

* * * *

Outside the cave, the sun rode high in the blue sky. Far below, the oak trees looked like a green patchwork quilt. Angus turned and started up the mountainside. "I thought the cavern was down," Regan said.

The dwarf turned. His white eyebrows drew together in a solid line. "No talking."

Regan nodded curtly and fastened her eyes on Gilda's rump.

* * * *

The mountain path grew steep, winding through sharp, jagged outcroppings of red rock. Pale, spindly grass forced its way out of crevices and brushed Regan's calves. A cold breeze sprang up and plastered her thin shirt against her body. She shivered; from fear or cold, she wasn't sure. She found that her gaze constantly strayed upwards.

"You should watch the ground," Peter warned softly. "This is not a good place for a twisted ankle."

Ahead of them Angus halted in front of a huge boulder. The dwarf walked back and spoke to Ben. Ben nodded. Angus retraced his steps, then disappeared behind the boulder with Zax close at his heels.

Ben moved to Regan and Peter. He leaned close and whispered. "Angus wants us to remain here for a few minutes."

"We are almost at the summit," Peter said, his voice even lower. "Just ahead is Zara's cave. Angus goes to check."

Regan stared at him in disbelief. "We've walked to the dragon's front door?"

"Zara does not hunt close to home; therefore, her lair is the safest place to pass."

"And if she's finished hunting?"

"Then she will be asleep. Either way we are safe."

"I hope you're..."

A roar shattered the mid-afternoon silence and drowned out the rest of Regan's words, and for a third time that day a black shadow coated the mountainside.

"Do not move," Peter ordered.

Her stomach knotting, Regan gazed upward at the creature of myth that soared above. The dragon was as big as a 747 jumbo jet. My God, you could easily fit six seats across that back, she mused in amazement. A gilded wing dipped and the dragon spiraled downward.

"It is okay. She is headed to her lair and has not seen us," Peter said.

Maggie whined low in her throat. Regan stretched her left hand down and rested it on the quivering dog's head. "Take it easy, girl. We've been through this before."

"Keep her still," Peter said. "Zara is circling back. The wind will hide our voices, but she has the eyes of a falcon." Peter's gaze dropped to the basset hound and he frowned. "Talk to Maggie. She needs your voice. If she bolts we are all dead."

"We're just fine, aren't we, Maggie?" she said. "We live in San Francisco. No big lizard's gonna scare us." Maggie whimpered and Regan felt the little dog's compact body tighten like a coiled spring.

"Listen to me, girl." Regan licked her dry lips. "The waves play themselves out on a beach of coral sand. A gentle breeze kisses a feathery frond of green. Sip from my glass of peace, relaxed in the golden sun of Mother Nature." Beneath her hand, Maggie's body relaxed.

"It is good to see that Kelsey was right about your words of power." Peter said, then glanced up. "Zara comes again and very low. Do not move."

Regan looked up and gulped. Low wasn't the word. Only a few feet above her head, golden scales as big as dinner plates encased the enormous length of a sinuous tail. From each scale. Regan's pale, wide-eyed face reflected back to her. Her images went on and on as the dragon sailed over her head. I could touch her. What does a dragon feel like? Her hand drifted upward.

"What are you doing?" Peter demanded in a harsh whisper.

"Just a little higher," she whispered. Then her fingertips grazed a warm, slick surface and a tingle raced along her arm, banishing the pricks of fire earlier dulled by Peter's salve. Magic. The thought raced through her head. This is what real magic feels like, and I just touched it. Then the sun was beating against the top of her head again. Holding her breath, Regan watched the dragon crest the mountain and disappear.

A hand grabbed her shoulder and jerked her around. Air rushed from her lungs in an angry whoosh. "What the ... let go of me."

Peter glared down at her. "You could have gotten us killed."

Regan glared back. "She felt nothing."

"If you wish to take foolish chances, do so with your own life."

She pressed her lips together and raised her chin. "If I had the chance I'd do it again."

"Then you are a fool, for this is not your world, and you know nothing of its dangers."

Regan saw Ben watching the two of them and felt a rush of blood come to her cheeks. "You're a hypocrite," she snapped, "we both know if you had the chance to touch a creature of myth in my world you would."

"Not if it endangered the rest of the company I traveled with." He spat the words at her angrily.

"The rest of the company? Or is it that my death ruins your plans?"

He stared at her, then turned away. "If you believe such, you do not know me at all."

"You're right. I don't know you, and I don't think I want to." She regretted the childish words and wished them back as soon as they had left her lips.

"If that is what you want, then so be it. When we reach camp, I will turn you over to Thomas. He will teach you what you need to know."

"Whatever," Regan said with a shrug. She pushed by him and walked to where Ben stood.

"Regan, why do you treat him like that? He's not Jack. Anything he says is for your own good," Ben said.

Regan flashed him a look of irritation. "For my own good?" she mimicked. "That's what Jack always said, too. No man will ever control me again."

"Not even if it saves your life?" Ben asked, stroking Maggie's ears.

Regan ignored the question. "I think we should be looking for Angus, don't you?" She sidestepped around Gilda and walked toward the rock where Angus and Zax had disappeared.

"You will wait for us," Peter ordered.

Regan stopped, but kept her back to them.

"Ben, you will lead, then Regan. I will take the rear. Follow the path. Angus will wait for us on the other side of the mountain's crag."

Regan stepped to the side to let Ben pass, then followed him.

Why did Peter bring out her worst behavior? She wasn't a childish, argumentative brat. She sighed. Ben was right. Peter wasn't Jack, and this wasn't San Francisco, but it was going to be hard to trust again.

* * * *

An hour or so later, there was still no sign of Angus and Zax. The trail had narrowed so the horses' sides brushed the mountain's rough granite walls. Regan kept her gaze on her feet. The tall grass hid rocks that had a way of reaching out and grabbing her toes. She hadn't seen any firebushes, but God only knew what other nasty surprises this world had in store.

She rounded another crag, then stopped, her mouth dropping open in wonder. With wide eyes she gazed across an enormous valley. Forest, broken up by fields dotted with Tika flowers, stretched as far as she could see. A silver ribbon of a river wound its way through the valley floor and disappeared between two large peaks.

"This is the Valley of the Unicorns," Peter said. "It was the first place Dirkk turned the Ru'taha loose."

Regan blotted sweat from her forehead with her shirtsleeve. "A unicorn. Do you think we'll see one?"

"Perhaps."

She laughed shortly. "Who am I kidding? I was married. No unicorn's going to approach me."

Peter looked at her questioningly, then smiled in sudden understanding. "A myth," he chuckled. "Unicorns respond to purity of spirit, not body."

"So I have a chance?"

"Yes, and Ben, too."

"Ben? Another myth bites the dust."

Peter pointed to the east. "Do you see that peak to your left?"

Regan's gaze followed his pointing finger and she nodded.

"Between there and the Queen's river is where Kelsey and Queen Tessa's troops wait."

"It doesn't look that far. Why don't we just ride straight there and forget the cavern?"

"Because between us and them are about five thousand Ru'taha, and twice as many Black Vipers."

"Fifteen thousand? How can Kelsey hold off that many?"

"She has Rourk with her, and two thousand of the queen's troops."

"Two thousand against fifteen..."

"She has done it before."

Regan shook her head. "I find it so hard to believe. Kelsey the commander of an army?" She lifted her hand to shade her eyes and looked in the direction of Kelsey's camp. "What are we standing here for? My sister needs me."

"We still have to pass Zara's lair," Peter reminded her.

The hair on Regan's arms rose and in her mind she saw the huge, golden form curled in a ball, her scaled sides gently rising and falling. "We've nothing to worry about. Zara is asleep."

Peter and Ben both turned and stared at her.

"How do you know that?" Peter asked.

She gazed at the path that led down the mountain. "I just do. She's sitting on some eggs, you know, three of them."

Peter looked at Regan thoughtfully, then nodded. "You have mind-linked with Zara."

"I've what?"

"When you touched her, you mind-linked with her. That is why you know her thoughts."

"That's crazy! I don't know yours or Ben's and I've touched both of you."

"Ben has no power and mine is minimal compared to Zara's." Peter paused. "I wonder how far the connection reaches and if Zara will respond to your thoughts?"

"She can feel mine?"

"Mind links are usually both ways."

"Have you ever felt one?"

"No."

"Then how do you know?" she asked.

"I was told." His eyes took on a distant look again.

"Mind-linking. Does it happen a lot here?"

"It is rare. Thea was the only one to ever mind-link with a dragon."

"Who was Thea?"

"It is a long story, best left for another time."

Regan nodded. "Back at the cave you said Zax talked to Angus. Is mind-linking what you meant?"

"Yes, Angus feels the magic with horses," Peter said.

"Then there are two of us in such a small group?"

He nodded. "We have been twice blessed, but Dirkk must not find out of your ability."

"What would he do?"

"He would either use your power or destroy it, but enough of this. You are sure Zara sleeps?"

Regan closed her eyes, then opened them wide. "No, she's awake," she said, then grinned. "But she's too busy to mess with us. Her first egg is hatching."

Ben and Peter grinned too. Maggie nuzzled her hand and Regan absently stroked her head. "I can't believe I was scared of her," Regan continued. "She's really quite gentle." The smile faded from her face.

"What's wrong?" Ben asked.

"She says she would never eat me, and that I should know better. Besides, I am too small."

"Zara says?" Peter asked.

Regan nodded. "But why should I know better?"

"Who knows a dragon's reasoning? Assure her we mean no harm," Peter said.

"She doesn't fear us, but the horses look tasty." Regan grinned mischievously.

Peter reached up to stroke Skylar's nose, trying unsuccessfully to hide a grin of his own. "We should move before she changes her mind."

"She wishes us a speedy journey," Regan said.

Peter swung up onto Skylar's back and reached a hand down to Regan. "Come, we no longer have a reason to walk."

"What about Maggie? She can't keep up with horses," Regan said.

"I almost forgot," Peter said. Maggie looked up at him, her brown eyes reproachful.

"I am sorry, little one," Peter apologized, reaching down to pet the dog, "but a lot has happened. Angus thought of you, though. He gave Ben his spare backpack. All we have to do is get you into it."

Peter held the knapsack open. Ben patted Maggie's head and gave reassurances, then picked her up and placed her, back feet first, into the brown knapsack. Peter, with Regan's help, lifted the bagged dog and guided Ben's arms through the wide straps.

The drawstring top ended just under Maggie's front legs. After they had her strapped onto Ben's back, she placed her front paws on top of his shoulders and laid her head against his neck.

"Now that's not too bad is it?" Regan asked, scratching behind Maggie's ear.

She balanced Maggie while Ben placed his foot into Gilda's stirrup.

"Ready, everyone?" Ben asked, then pulled himself upward. Halfway up, his thigh began to tremble. Regan looked for a way to help, then shrugged, placed both palms against Ben's backside and pushed. Maggie tilted forward over Ben's head and let out a frightened yip. Peter leaped, grabbed the back of the backpack, and held on until Ben righted himself in the saddle. Ben reached a hand over his shoulder and patted Maggie on the head. She responded with a lick to his ear.

"Did you see that?" Ben said. "Gilda didn't move a muscle. She's a great horse. Well, we're ready. How about the two of you?"

Peter mounted Skylar and reached a hand down to Regan. She grasped it and swung up into the saddle behind him. "Put your arms around my waist," he said. "It will make it more comfortable for both of us."

Regan hugged him around the middle and laced her fingers in front. Peter nudged Skylar in the ribs with his heel and the stallion started down the path at an easy pace.

Regan hadn't ridden in years, but easily fell back into the swaying motion of the saddle. She glanced back over her shoulder and laughed. Ben looked like he'd been born in a saddle, but Maggie was a sight to see, her front paws draped over Ben's shoulders, her black nose sniffing the air.

"Why are you laughing?" Peter asked.

"It's Maggie. She was born to ride."

The path curved right and headed downward at a sharp angle. The warm sun and the rhythmic motion of the horse soothed, and slowly Regan's eyes closed and her head drooped forward until her cheek rested against Peter's spine.

* * * *

A hand shook her shoulder. Regan opened her eyes to the nude figure of Kelsey sitting beside her on a gray rock. "Oh, hi, sis," she mumbled, then bolted straight up to a sitting position. She looked around. They sat in a wide grassy valley.

"You're sure taking your time to rescue me," her sister said.

"Kelsey? But how...? I don't understand."

"Don't look at me," Kelsey said. "It's your dream-calling, not mine."

"Aren't you cold?"

"How about you?"

Regan glanced down, and saw that she was naked as well. She felt her face heat. "My God."

"Relax. I'm sure you're still dressed in the waking world and, by the way, just where are you?"

"We're riding down the Mountain of the Devil to some cavern that Angus knows about."

"Murkel cavern. Yes, I know it," said Kelsey, "but when you wake up suggest Vilsathor instead."

Kelsey wavered before Regan's eyes. "You're fading on me. What's Vilsathor?"

"Peter knows." Kelsey faded again, then returned. "I must make this quick. Dirkk has sent more Ru'taha. It's as if he knows you're coming and why. We can hold them off for another day, but after that..."

"We'll be there soon."

"Hurry, Regan." Kelsey's voice faded completely. Then a hand was on her arm and Ben's voice spoke into her ear. "Regan. Regan, wake up. We're here."

Regan opened her eyes and stared into a round dark hole in the side of the mountain. Her cheek rested against something hard and warm. A horse snorted. She remembered where she was and, with a quick glance down at her body, straightened. Sighing with relief, she slid into Ben's outstretched arms. "I saw Kelsey."

Peter twisted in Skylar's saddle and looked down at her. "You saw Kelsey?"

"Yes. She said it was a dream-calling. It was..."

Peter cut her off. "What did she say?"

"Dirkk has sent more Ru'taha. She said it's as if he knew we were coming..."

"Can they hold out?"

Regan glanced at him in irritation. "One more day and..."

"Damnation! How could he have known?"

"It's my fault."

"What?"

"We're taking so long to get to them," Regan said.

"It is Dirkk's fault, no one else's."

Regan avoided Peter's eyes and examined the dark hole that led into the mountainside. "So where's Angus?" she asked.

"Here." Angus stepped from inside the black hole.

"Angus, it's good to see you. I was afraid you'd had trouble with Zara."

"We have no time for this." Peter interrupted, then turned to Angus. "Did you hear?"

Angus nodded. "It is the cavern then. We have no choice."

"Wait," Regan said. "Kelsey said Vilsathor."

Peter and Angus exchanged a quick glance. "She must have spoken to Margeaux," Peter said. "We will go through Vilsathor."

Angus glanced at Regan. "What about Darrian?"

"We will avoid him." Peter reached his hand down for Regan.

Chapter 11

THE GROUND LEVELED and they rode into a forest. In minutes the path disappeared beneath thick trailing vines that spread before them like an emerald ocean. Beneath the trees not one limb swayed or leaf rustled. It was as if the wind held its breath. Regan leaned forward and whispered into Peter's ear. "Is this Vilsathor?"

"Why are you whispering?" he asked.

"I don't know. It just seemed right." She waited a minute or two for Peter's response and, when none came, she leaned forward again. "So are you going to tell me what Vilsathor is?"

Peter did not turn or in any way acknowledge her question. She frowned and counted slowly to ten and then took a deep breath.

"So what is it? A big secret?" The silence stretched on. Finally, she jabbed him between his shoulder blades with her index finger. "Are you going to answer me or not?"

Peter turned to look at her, right eyebrow cocked in surprise. Regan looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Not a secret, but people tend to avoid it," he said.

Regan smirked. "Why? Is it haunted or something?"

"Not all of it." He turned his back on her again. She stared at the broad expanse of his back, then she heard a soft laugh and leaned forward. If he's making fun of me...

"Vilsathor is elven land. Prince Darrian and his archers jealously patrol its borders."

"Darrian? Kelsey's Darrian?"

"The same," Peter said. "If we are lucky and quick we will not see..." He stopped in mid-sentence and turned away from her.

"What's going on?" She stretched to look over his head.

Angus had halted Zax and now turned back to them.

"We're being watched."

From the trees to the side of the dwarf, a tall form emerged. The elf walked toward Zax and stopped inches from the gelding's muzzle. Strapped across his back was a long bow. A quiver of arrows, within easy reach, rode his right shoulder. The elf lifted a hand and from all around figures melted from the shadows beneath the trees. Soon silent, staring forms ringed them. There were women as well as men and all wore green clothing, some with jaunty caps a la Robin Hood.

The man who stood in front of Angus silently motioned, then turned, and walked into the trees. Over Peter's shoulder Regan saw Angus stiffen.

If he was a cat, she decided, his ears would be laid back and his tail twitching.

Peter kned Skylar up beside Zax. "Follow."

Angus, stony-faced, hesitated and Regan saw the elves inch in closer.

"Now is not the time," Peter said.

The dwarf mumbled under his breath, then bent over Zax's neck and whispered in the gelding's ear. The horse started forward.

On the other side of the curtain of trees an open field spread before them. The tall elf waited just inside the clearing. He strode to Peter.

"You may dismount, but you will wait here," he said in a high, singsong voice.

Peter nodded and slid from Skylar's back. The rest of them followed his lead. Angus removed the backpack from Ben's back and released Maggie. The basset hound stalked, stiff-legged, to the nearest elf. The woman glanced down at the dog, then across to the tall elf. He nodded and she knelt and offered Maggie her hand. Maggie sniffed the woman's hand, and then wagged her tail.

Well, they couldn't be all that bad, not if Maggie liked this one. Regan started to say so to Peter, but he was looking behind her and she saw his jaw clench. She turned, and her gaze rose upwards over a sea-green shirt and shimmering silver vest to a pale face and marine-blue eyes.

"Darrian, how nice it is for you to provide us with an escort," Peter said.

The elf assessed Regan boldly with almond-shaped eyes before he answered. "We patrolled close by, Mage. Who is this?"

"Regan, Kelsey's sister."

"She has the same look." The elf made her a sweeping bow. "I am Darrian Silverthorne, at your service, Lady Regan."

Regan reached up and smoothed damp hair away from her forehead. "Thank you." The elven prince's gaze followed the

movement of her hand. She felt her cheeks warm as she lowered it.

"May I offer you something cool to drink?" he asked.

"That would be wonderful."

"Come, I have a blanket in the shade." He held his hand out to her. She hesitated, glancing at Peter. Peter held her gaze for a moment, then shrugged and looked away. Regan laid her hand in Darrian's.

"Regan, we cannot stay too long. Kelsey waits." Peter said.

Darrian's full lips tightened, then he smiled again. "Surely she has time for a drink—all of you, of course."

"One drink." Peter was unbending.

Darrian turned his back on the mage and pulled Regan toward a green-woven blanket. She dropped onto its softness, then accepted a silver-edged cup from a hovering elf.

The elven prince leaned close. "It's Silverthorne wine. It will warm and relax you."

Regan sipped from the cup, swallowed, and felt liquid velvet run down her throat. As warmth spread through her stomach, she smiled.

Darrian reached forward and, before she could pull back, brushed a wisp of hair from her cheek with his fingertips. "You're even more beautiful than Kelsey. You must let me show you my kingdom."

"When Dirkk is no more we will have time for social calls," Peter said from behind her.

"Dirkk?" Darrian glanced up and laughed. "He fears us. His Ru'taha and vipers flee at our sight. For sport we must go

further and further from Vilsathor to hunt them. We have slain at least a hundred."

"For the hundred you slay, two hundred take their place. All stolen from the villages of man and dwarf."

Darrian shrugged his shoulders. "So you say." He reached across and grasped Regan's hand. "Say you will come to see my land?"

"I don't know if I'll have the time..."

His hand tightened around hers. "No, I have just found you. Don't talk of leaving me."

"Regan, finish your wine," Peter said. "We must be off."

Darrian glared at Peter. "There is plenty of time. I will have my archers show you a shorter way through the forest."

Peter bowed from the waist in a perfect imitation of the bow Darrian had given Regan. "We accept your kind offer, but still we must leave, now. Kelsey and Rourk need our help."

The elf's grip on her hand tightened and Regan winced. "Rourk. How is Kelsey's ah ... farmer?" Darrian sneered the last word.

"When last I saw him he was fine, and very happy."

Angus tramped toward them, with Maggie at his heels.

"By-the-bark-of-the-Holy-Tree, what manner of beast is that?" the elven prince said, backing away from the tail-wagging hound.

Regan frowned, pulled her hand from Darrian's, and wrapped her arms around Maggie's neck. She leaned over and kissed the top of the basset hound's head. "This is Maggie."

"Ugly dwarfish thing, isn't it?"

Regan hugged Maggie close for a moment. "Not in the least," she said, drawing away from the elf.

Angus accepted a cup of wine and swallowed it in one long draught. He wiped his mouth with an offered napkin, then said. "Is Margeaux around?"

"In the forest gathering herbs."

"We need more of her salve..."

"I don't know if we can spare any," Darrian cut in.

"It is for Regan's hand," the dwarf said, smiling sardonically.

Regan opened her mouth to object, but clamped it shut at Angus's quick glare in her direction.

"For Regan? Then of course," Darrian said, looking at her as if she were tonight's dessert.

"It would make no difference if it was for the woman or that delightful animal. When I have it, you're welcome to it," a musical voice said from behind Peter.

Regan glanced up to see a smooth, ageless face with eyes of quicksilver.

"Margeaux, you are as generous as you are beautiful," Peter said as he turned and reached to take the lady's hand.

Like a young girl she hid both hands behind her back. "Don't you even think of it," she said, laughing. "At least not until I've washed away the first layer of dirt."

Peter reached behind her and drew her slim, dirt-smudged hands to his lips and kissed each palm. "Brown as the earth, they are still the gentle hands of a healer," he said, then released them and looked up. Margeaux smiled into his eyes.

"There's no need for flattery, Peter. I'll give you more salve."

"No flattery, just truth."

The elven healer reached out and tweaked the mage's nose. "Your tongue is even more honey-coated than usual." Her gaze went over Regan's head and a strange expression flitted across her face. "Who is this?"

Regan turned and saw Ben walking toward them.

"My lady," Peter said. "Allow me to introduce Brother Ben, who is Regan's protector and Maggie's master."

Regan watched in surprise as Ben's gaze fastened on the elven lady. A look of wonder spread across his face. In bemused silence, he walked by Regan and extended his hand to Margeaux. She laid her hand in his, her gaze never leaving his face.

"I knew you'd be a cleric or a healer," she said. "There was always such gentleness in your soul."

"My Lady ... I can't believe you're real."

"Then you know me also? I thought maybe the dream was mine alone."

Ben smiled. "No, you've made me eager for sleep for the past year and a half."

"I have waited so long for you—a lifetime, it seems."

Darrian glared at his aunt. His winged brows pulled together in a frown. "What are you blathering about?"

"The prophecy, foolish boy."

"What prophecy?" Darrian demanded.

Margeaux closed her eyes. "When the man dark as the night comes, all will be united. Man and fairy shall walk arm

in arm with dwarf and elf and all of Daradawn shall be as one."

Darrian's face filled with color. "Equal? Never."

Angus snorted. "Dwarves walking hand in hand with fairies? Not while I breathe."

Margeaux reached her hand out and touched Ben's cheek. "It must and it will. Ben, you will stay with me as the dreams foretold?"

Ben nodded. "At least for awhile."

"But, Ben," Regan said.

Ben faced her. "I must stay. I feel it."

Margeaux smiled at Regan. "Don't worry, magic-wielder. You will be together again soon. I have seen it."

"But what about Maggie and Kelsey?" Regan said, and me, she silently added.

"I give Maggie to you until my return and Kelsey has you," Ben knelt and stroked the dog's head. "Guard Regan well, Maggie."

"And I will guard Maggie," Angus said. "She will ride my back, black giant, until she's safely back on yours."

"And ride we must," Peter said. "'Until we meet again, healers."

"God go with you," Margeaux said. She reached into the pocket of her sea-green robe and handed Peter a leaf-wrapped ball.

He took it gratefully. "Thank you, gentle lady."

"Nonsense," Darrian said. "All nonsense." He stood, then reached down for Regan's hand. "I will reveal to you the

shortcut. Would you honor me by accepting my escort to the river crossing?"

Regan sought Peter's gaze, but he had turned his back to her. "I'm sure we would all be happy for an escort," she said and grasped Darrian's hand. He pulled her to her feet and then pressed a kiss into each of her palms. "You will not see us, but you will be surrounded in a circle of protection."

"Why do we need protection here? I thought only your magic existed in Vilsathor?" Regan asked.

"Elven magic is just as deadly as Dirkk's. Our forest is full of surprises for those who stumble off the path."

"But we had made it just fine..."

"Only because you were watched and recognized. If by a slight chance you had slipped by unseen..." he let his voice trail off.

"I see."

"Do not worry. Just stay on the path." Darrian pointed to dense underbrush. Regan looked from the thick wall of green, and back to him. "What path?"

The elven prince laughed. "It's only the fog that affects the minds of those who are not elven." He reached forward and swept his fingertips across her temple. The underbrush vanished. A tree-flanked path appeared, wide enough for two horses to travel side by side.

"Until the river, sweet lady." Darrian bowed to her, and sauntered toward the woods. The call of a whippoorwill sounded and one by one the elves vanished into the trees.

Margeaux smiled and shook her head. "You must forgive my nephew. It seems he forgot to remove the fog from the

rest of you." The elven lady moved from person to person and touched their temples, bending last to touch Maggie's nose. She returned and cupped Regan's cheeks with her palms. "Ride quickly. Much more than Kelsey's life depends on you."

Regan drew back. "What do you mean?"

"All will become known in its right time." Margeaux turned and walked into the forest. "Come, Healer Ben," she said over her shoulder. "We have much to discuss."

"Until we meet again, fellow travelers." Ben smiled at them, then turned to follow Margeaux.

Peter and Angus raised hands in farewell. "God be with you."

Regan took a step in Ben's direction, then stopped. "Take care of yourself, Ben. Maggie and I will be waiting for you." She watched until he disappeared into the forest. "He didn't even look back," she whispered. "She'd better not let anything happen to him."

Looking from Regan to Angus, Maggie whined and took a step in Ben's direction. Angus scooped the dog up. "No, Maggie. You must stay and guard Regan."

Peter turned and walked to Skylar. "Come, let us ride."

Regan moved to Gilda's side. "We each have a horse now. I'm sure you'll be glad to have Skylar all to yourself."

Peter glanced at her, but said nothing. He lifted Maggie into the backpack and helped Angus adjust the straps over his shoulders.

"Just a little longer, Maggie," Regan promised the pleading brown eyes and then mounted Gilda and waited for Peter and Angus.

Peter turned Skylar eastward. "The river is an hour's ride and Kelsey's camp an hour beyond that. With Darrian's archers we should encounter no problems until the river. After that, be on your guard. I will take the lead and Angus, you will protect our backs." As the three of them rode from the clearing, a whippoorwill called.

They rode through a world of green, the silence broken only by the crackling of dried oak leaves beneath the horses' hooves and the occasional scolding of a blue jay. Tall lacy ferns grew thick along the edge of the path. Clusters of pale-yellow berries hung from vines twisting up, around, and through the ferns. Regan inhaled rain-fresh air and then smiled as a gray squirrel scurried to the end of a limb and chattered its displeasure at their intrusion.

The sun reached its zenith as they rode, and pools of darkness formed beneath the spreading oaks. Their path skirted an open field, and Regan recognized the pink faces of Tika flowers. Her heartbeat quickened and she scanned the flowers.

Angus rode Zax up alongside her. "I know what you look for, but you'll not see any here in Vilsathor. The elves' ancient magic prevents it."

"If Ru'taha and Black Vipers can't come here, why have the elves joined in the fight against Dirkk?"

"Margeaux. Darrian was against involvement, but Margeaux convinced her brother, King Timothias, that it would be deadly to ignore Dirkk. If Dirkk succeeds they will be prisoners in Vilsathor." The dwarf's eyes surveyed the forest. "A beautiful prison, but a prison still."

Peter rode a few feet ahead of them. He had not glanced her way since they had left Darrian. Regan watched him sway in the saddle and a small smile curved her lips. He sits a good seat, she thought, almost as if he and the horse are one.

As if he felt her eyes, Peter shifted in his saddle and then turned and met her gaze. She broadened her smile, but his expression remained remote as he turned away. "Tell me about him."

"Peter? I've known him since he was a babe. His father was my best friend, and his mother stole my heart the first time she smiled at me."

"Was his father a mage also?"

"William was a soldier. One of King Bernard's royal guards."

"King Bernard?"

"Queen Tessa's father. Peter's mother, Elizabeth, was the daughter of Tobias, High Mage to King Bernard; it was from her that Peter inherited his power."

"His mother was a sorceress?"

"Elizabeth? No, she had no power." Angus's voice grew harsh. "If it had been so, she and William would still be alive."

Regan remained silent and waited for Angus to continue.

"After Dirkk's banishment, Tobias became his first concern. Revenge wasn't possible with a High Mage in the castle. Peter was young, still learning from his grandfather, and posed no threat.

"King Bernard fell ill. Tobias tried everything, but the king was dying. In desperation he turned his nursing over to Tessa and made plans to visit Vilsathor and consult with Margeaux,

just as Dirkk knew he would. With the High Mage away, the wards protecting the castle weakened." Angus's voice broke. He raked his white beard with shaking fingers, then continued.

"There's no way we could have known of Dirkk's hellspawn. He'd been silent such a long time. We thought he'd accepted Tessa's decision. That he..." Angus's voice faded. He reached for the silver canteen that dangled at his side, twisted the top off, and poured a long draught down his throat. Silently he replaced the top and let the canteen drop back into place.

"They swarmed the castle that eve, both Ru'taha and Black Vipers. Then we didn't know what they were called, but we knew they were evil." Angus closed his eyes and when he opened them he stared straight ahead. Regan wondered what he was seeing.

"Peter and I were in the stables. Skylar's mate, Misty, had foaled. Peter was rubbing the birth fluid from the little fellow when Skylar threw up his head and trumpeted a challenge. With lightning reflexes, Peter wove a protection wall. The same wall you saw earlier in the field of Tika flowers.

"Then we sat back and watched the black snake-like things bounce off it." Angus paused, licked his lips before going on. "Then a Ru'taha came into the stable. In one hand it gripped a spike-riddled mace. The other was wound tight in the blonde curls of the severed head of Peter's mother."

"Oh, my God," Regan said in a strangled whisper.

Angus went on, not even glancing her way. "It sniffed the air and turned in our direction." He frowned. "Somehow, it

knew who Peter was. When it met Peter's eyes, it held Elizabeth's head high and smiled."

"No."

"Peter screamed. I'll never forget the sound. It was the cry of a wounded animal in a killing rage. Even now my skin crawls at the memory." The dwarf shuddered.

"The Ru'taha dropped Elizabeth's head just outside the wall and kicked it across the floor. Peter snarled and leapt forward. The Ru'taha, its eyes on Peter, raised its mace. I knew that Peter was no match for the beast facing us, and as he charged by me I grabbed both his arms." Angus straightened in his saddle. "He fought like a crazed man, leaving me no choice. I made a fist and sent him to sleep."

Angus met her gaze. "I sat there for hours with his head cradled in my lap. Peter slept the sleep of deep shock. Once in awhile he'd toss and whimper. I was glad he slept and was spared the night of continuous screams. It was only as dawn lightened the sky that all quieted."

"But the wall? How did it remain while Peter slept?"

Angus shrugged his wide shoulders. "I don't know. It seemed that even in his sleep Peter knew danger surrounded us."

"What happened?"

"At last I laid Peter aside and ventured out." Angus fumbled for his flask. He took a long drink and replaced the lid.

"Blood soaked the ground. It smelled like a slaughter yard. Across the training arena a stable boy lay. I thought he wore a breastplate of black but, as I neared, a swarm of flies rose

and I saw his ripped-open chest. At the door to the kitchen a scullery maid sprawled, her body covered with puncture marks, her face black and swollen.

"I walked through the silent tomb of death the castle had become, hoping for some sign of life. Twice I turned over the fallen, but one look at a slashed chest, or a battered face..."

He cleared his throat. "Upstairs, at the entrance to King Bernard's chambers, I discovered William, his body half-buried by dead Ru'taha. He had fought hard for his king." Angus's voice broke.

Regan leaned across and touched his arm. "You don't have to go on..."

"No, I want to. This is the first time I've spoken of that night and the morning after. Inside the chamber I found the only ray of hope for the day, a white-faced Tessa. She stood rigid, staring down at the body of her father. She raised her glazed eyes to me as I entered and in a quaking voice told me what had happened.

"She and Elizabeth had heard fighting outside the door. Tessa ran toward the door, but Elizabeth grabbed her, pushed her inside a closet and then slammed the door. Tessa said she screamed and pounded on the door, but over the din coming from the room she wasn't heard. She tried to open the door, but something held it closed. It wasn't until later she discovered it was Elizabeth's headless body." Angus growled low in his throat and spit into the bushes along the path.

Regan's eyes shifted to the man riding ahead of them and she asked. "And when Peter woke?"

Angus frowned. "He hated me for a long time. He couldn't admit there was nothing he could have done. That was eight years ago. For one of those years we were prisoners in Raya while Ru'taha and vipers roamed the countryside. Then Kelsey came."

"I still have a hard time with that one," Regan said.

"Wait, you shall see."

Peter reined in Skylar and waited for them. "The river crossing is just ahead." From behind them a whippoorwill called and was answered. Peter's mouth tightened. "Your protector is still with us."

Regan took a deep breath before answering. "He's not 'my' protector."

"I doubt he would have shared this shortcut if not for you. For that we thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I give you the honor of going first."

Regan stiffened. "Fine with me." She kned Gilda forward, then winced as a branch grabbed her braid. Peter leaned from his saddle and untangled her hair. With a stiffer "Thank you" she rode on.

The Queen's River was wide and flowed lazily around gray rocks that jutted from its middle. Regan rode to the river's edge and looked down through clear water to where silver fingerling fish darted in and out of mossy crevices. Suddenly, Gilda snorted and laid her ears back. Regan turned as Darrian and his elves emerged from the forest.

The elven prince sauntered to Gilda's side and stared up at Regan. "The river is lowest here for crossing, my lady, but you will still get wet."

Regan heard Peter and Angus approach. She slid from Gilda's back and smiled her brightest smile into Darrian's eyes. "Thank you for your concern, but I've been wet before."

"She will remove her trousers," Angus said from behind her.

"Do what?" Regan said.

"Remove your trousers. It is what we always do." With Peter's help, the dwarf dismounted with Maggie. "Here, hold Maggie's pack away from me so I can loosen mine."

Regan's mouth dropped open.

"What's wrong with you, woman? Help me, then get out of your own trousers. Do you want to catch sick?" Angus said.

"I ... uh..."

"It is different in her world, Angus. Kelsey has told me. They go to great pains not see each other unclothed," Peter said with a wry smile. He turned to her. "There is nothing to be embarrassed about. Your shirt will fall to below your knees. If you wish, you may go into the trees to remove them. We will wait."

Peter unbuckled the belt at his waist. With cheeks on fire, Regan watched as his pants slid to his ankles. His shirt hit him mid-thigh. He glanced at her, a clear challenge shining in his eyes.

Regan removed her belt and let her trousers fall. She heard a sharp intake of breath and saw Peter's eyes shift to a point beyond her. A frown creased his forehead. She kicked

the pants from around her ankles and turned to see what his problem was. Darrian stood there, his gaze fastened on her bare calves. His look traveled upward to her face. Men, she thought with a slight smile and a shake of her head.

The elven prince returned her smile and started forward. Oh no, she thought, that wasn't an invitation. She glanced at Peter. He looked from her to Darrian and then turned and walked away, his retreating back stiff and unyielding. She took a step in his direction, but Darrian grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

"Promise me you will return once you've seen your sister."

"I don't know. So much can happen," she said, her eyes still watching Peter's back. Darrian's grip tightened on her arm. "Promise me or I will not let you go."

Regan looked at the elven archers surrounding them. Could he force her to stay? Would he? And what about Peter and Angus if they tried to stop him? She squeezed a laugh through stiff lips. "Of course I promise."

The grip on her arm relaxed. "Then allow me to assist you into the saddle." Seething, Regan followed him to Gilda's side and then stepped into his laced fingers. With an upward thrust, she was in the saddle. Darrian placed a slim hand on her bare thigh. "Until we meet again, beautiful lady."

"Good-bye, Darrian," she said, then rode to Angus's side.

The dwarf stood at Zax's head, his stout hairy legs bare from the knee down. Regan patted Maggie, who slobbered wet kisses all over her hand. "How are you doing, girl?"

Angus rolled his shoulders and grumbled. "We'd both be doing better if she'd quit wiggling."

"Maybe she needs to pee."

"She just went an hour ago."

"Then she probably just wants out of the pack."

"Well, if we get moving she'll be able to get out sooner."

Have you said your good-byes to his royalness?"

"I've said all I intend to, ever."

Angus patted her hand. "Smart girl." He grabbed a hand full of Zax's mane and swung up onto the horse's back. Regan winced and touched her own swinging braid. "I would never cause Zax or any other living creature pain," Angus said. As if in agreement the gelding turned his head and nipped Angus's shirtsleeve.

"But ... never mind."

"What?"

"I was going to ask how you would know, but you really would know if you caused pain, at least where horses are concerned."

Angus nodded. "Peter told you."

"He says I've mind-linked with Zara." She told the dwarf of her impressions as Zara slept, and hearing the dragon in her head.

Angus gazed across at her for a long minute. "Then you understand."

"I'm beginning to."

Peter led Skylar to where they stood. "Angus, let me take Maggie for awhile and give your back a respite."

"No, she's fine," the dwarf said.

Regan's gaze dropped to Peter's long legs, bared from mid-thigh down. Long, lean muscles corded them. A

swimmer's legs. Peter placed his foot in Skylar's stirrup and his thigh muscles tensed as he swung the other leg over Skylar's back.

"We have only an hour until the camp, but we must ride with caution." Peter said. "Regan, are you listening to me?"

Regan started. Her gaze met his. Then she flushed and looked away. "Yes, I heard you."

"Let us be off."

Chapter 12

THE RIVER LAPPED against Regan's bare knees and goose pimples blossomed on her thighs. Peter rode well ahead of her and Angus. "I'm glad that we're crossing this river in summer instead of winter," she said over her shoulder to the dwarf.

"The Queen's River is fed by high mountain snow," Angus said.

From the bank behind them, a jay squawked. Regan turned as the bird launched from the fork of an oak's overhanging branch. With a smooth even beat of its wings, the jay flew high, then soared above them in the warm thermals. It swooped near, crying out its disdain for the ground-bound creatures. Regan shook her head, laughing at the aerial display. "It seems to prefer its mode of travel."

Gilda's ears twitched at the laughter, and Regan reached between them and wound her fingers in Gilda's white-streaked forelock. "That sassy bird may have the freedom of the skies, but it'll never know the caress of a hand."

Gilda snorted and Regan tugged playfully on the tuft of hair. "Now watch your manners," she said, then unwound her fingers and settled back into the warm leather of the saddle.

The mare suddenly came to a standstill in the river. Regan nudged Gilda in the ribs with her heels, but the horse shook her mane and refused to budge. Regan leaned over Gilda's neck and looked down into the water's clear depth. "What's wrong, lady?"

Angus and Zax came up beside her.

Regan glanced at Angus. "What's Gilda's problem?"

The dwarf reached across and rested his hand just above Gilda's nose. His eyes unfocused for a moment and then he withdrew his hand and nodded. "The girth has loosened," he said. "If we ride hard you will fall."

"God, how stupid. I felt it slip a little when we entered the river but didn't think anything about it." Regan glanced at Zax. "These horses aren't normal, are they?"

"Why do you ask?"

"An ordinary horse wouldn't notice, or care, if its girth were loose."

"They're elven stock," Angus said.

"You said so earlier, but why does that make them different?"

"You were just in Vilsathor. Every inch of it teems with magic. The trees, grass, soil ... everything that grows, or feeds on what grows, is touched by magic."

"Oh," Regan said. "Well, tell her thank you for me."

"I think you should tell her."

Regan gaped at him. "Me? But you're the one who mind-links with horses. Mine is with dragons, or is it just with Zara?"

"If you can mind-speak Zara then you can mind-speak all creatures of magic."

"Is there a problem?" Peter called to them from halfway across the river.

Angus waved his arm over his head. "Everything is fine. I was just showing Regan a red-velvet turtle."

"The wildlife lesson can wait. We must reach Kelsey before dark." Peter replied, then rode on.

Regan cocked an eyebrow at Angus. "Red-velvet turtle?"

The dwarf pointed. "See. Right by Zax's back leg—a red-velvet turtle."

Regan looked down. It wasn't very big, about the size of her palm, but it was a turtle, and it was very red. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Another citizen of Vilsathor." He reached across and touched Regan's arm. "Are you willing to give it a try? To open your mind to Gilda?"

The mare turned and met Regan's eyes. "Sure, why not? Just tell me what to do."

"Just open your senses to her, and wait."

The yellow that circled the horse's pupils deepened and glowed, but that was all.

"Nothing," Regan said. "Now can we go before Peter comes back and gets us?"

"A little more. Be patient."

Regan sighed, but looked into Gilda's eyes again. Warm affection flowed over her, then, "Hello, Regan," floated into her mind. Regan gasped and jerked back.

The dwarf whooped. "Great Earth Mother. Zax was right. You do have the power to mind-link with horses. Zax caught your thoughts back on the far bank when you touched him." Angus paused and looked at her strangely.

Regan glanced down at her body. "What? Did I just turn green?"

"I was wondering what it was Zax heard?"

Regan frowned at the gelding. "Why? What did he tell you?"

The gelding snorted and Angus winked at her. "He doesn't tell tales, but whatever it was he found funny."

Regan looked up at the still circling jay. "Dragons and horses. Do you think I can mind-link with more? Maybe that jay?"

Angus took the hint and nodded. "Perhaps. Try with Maggie."

Regan touched the basset hound's nose. "Hello, Maggie," she sent.

"It's about time," Maggie returned.

Regan slowly shook her head. "It works with her, too."

Angus stared at her, an expression of awe crossing his face. "You are as Thea was."

"What do you mean?"

"You can mind-speak all animals."

"We don't know that." She turned toward Peter. He had reached the far bank and stood waiting. She could almost feel his disapproval radiating out to them. "Can we keep this between us?"

Angus frowned. "You don't want Peter to know?"

"Not just yet. I need time to think about this."

"I don't lie to him, but if he doesn't ask..." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Perhaps it is best. The less who know, the better chance we have of keeping it from Dirkk."

Dirkk. Regan shuddered. She remembered Peter's earlier words about Zara. "...he would use your power or destroy it."

Angus glanced across at the mare. "Speak to Gilda."

"How?"

"You already are in flesh-to-flesh contact; just talk."

Regan scratched the mare's left ear. Gilda swished her tail.

"Thank you, beautiful lady," Regan sent.

The mare blew softly through her nose, then lowered her muzzle into the swirling water. "She didn't answer me."

"Didn't she? Body communication sometimes is still the best."

Regan's brow wrinkled, then she said. "Is skin contact necessary ... to speak to animals?"

"For those creatures of non-magic."

A sense of dread filled her and Regan shivered. "What about Ru'taha and Black Vipers? They're magic. Can I link with them?"

"I don't know, but it's likely. That is why Dirkk must not find out. He would not welcome another who could control his pets."

Regan shuddered, then smiled with stiff lips. "Do you think I could have a drink from your flask?"

Angus's eyes widened. He hesitated, then reached inside his shirt and withdrew the flask. "It's strong," he said, handing it across to her.

Regan unscrewed the stopper and sniffed. It was odorless. She tipped the flask and took a small sip. Numbing cold coated her throat, followed by searing fire. She gasped and bent over in a spasm of coughing.

Angus grinned. "I told you it was strong,"

When she could speak, she said, "What's in it?"

"Fire and Ice is a Dwarven secret. Men have been killed trying to discover its making."

Regan swallowed to soothe her scorched throat. "Well, they can keep it. I'll stick to a nice mellow Cabernet wine."

Angus grinned. "Come. We must ride. I feel daggers from Peter's eyes."

Regan watched Angus mind-speak Zax and the two of them rode on. Gilda chose that moment to raise her head from the water and prance sideways. Her high-stepping hooves splashed water head-high and drenched Regan with wet rainbows. Regan gasped at the stinging cold, then reached behind her and lightly slapped Gilda's rump. "Enough of that. We're going." She started to press her heel into the mare's side, then stopped. "I guess I don't need to do that anymore," she sent instead. The mare neighed and surged forward.

They reached the far side of the river and Gilda scrambled up the steep bank. Shivering in her damp shirt, Regan reined in beside Peter and Angus. Trees towered over them. A brooding silence hung in the still air. The trees watch and wait, but for what? Regan tilted her head and looked up their gnarled length. Were they silent guardians of a more peaceful time? A wind stirred the uppermost branches and a sigh seemed to float to where she sat. When, it moaned, when?

"What is this place?" she asked. "It's silent as a tomb." The hair on her arms and bare legs rose. "I feel eyes on me."

Peter shook his head and smiled at her. "It is only Kelsey's sentries you feel. We are close to camp now."

Regan felt irritation rise at his condescending tone. "Why don't they come out?"

The mage shrugged. "Following Kelsey's orders I would guess. Let us find your sister."

"I'd like to put my pants on."

Peter frowned at her. "You cannot wait until camp?"

Regan slid from Gilda's back, then grabbed her pants from the front of the saddle horn and shook them out. She looked at Peter and Angus. "No, and will you turn your heads?"

The dwarf and mage exchanged glances and rolled their eyes before looking away. Regan stepped into the pants, pulled them over her hips and tied the drawstring. "Aren't you guys going to get dressed?" she said, fastening her belt around her waist.

"When in minutes I can be wearing trousers that are both clean and dry? Does it bother you?" Peter asked.

"Don't be silly. Catch a cold if you want," she said, mounting Gilda.

"Then let us ride."

Regan turned and saw Angus looking over Peter's shoulder into the grove of trees. He frowned and his hand crept to his battle axe. "I will ride a little behind."

Gilda side-stepped restively. "Angus fears," entered Regan's mind.

"What does he fear?"

Gilda tossed her head, then answered. "Blackness, evil, Ru'taha."

Peter leaned toward her. "Why are you sitting there? Your sister waits."

Regan started. "Lead on."

Peter stared at her a moment, a searching expression on his face, then he turned and nudged Skylar in the ribs. Regan urged Gilda forward with a silent request. She glanced at Angus as she rode by, but his eyes were focused on the trees beyond. The skin between her shoulder blades began to crawl. Regan stared at Peter's back. Why doesn't he feel it?

"Peter," she said, "would you show me how you made that wall when the Black Vipers attacked?"

"It will be part of your training."

"I mean, would you show me now?"

He reined Skylar in and waited for her to come abreast.

"What do you fear?"

Regan avoided his eyes. "I didn't say I feared anything."

"There is nothing to be alarmed about. The sentries would let us know."

"Angus fears Ru'taha."

"We all fear Ru'taha."

Regan stared at him. Was he being deliberately obtuse? "I mean, right now."

"Angus said nothing about Ru'taha. Why do you think he fears an attack now?"

"I just know," she murmured.

"I see. Would you feel safer if I called out to the sentries?"

"No, don't do..."

"Warriors, it is High Mage Peter. I have Regan with me."
Peter called into the trees around them.

Behind them pounded galloping hooves. "What in hell's name are you doing, boy?" Angus said, halting beside them.

The thick brush to their left rustled.

Skylar's war cry rang out and Peter's face paled.

"Ride," Angus cried, slapping Gilda on the rump with the palm of his hand.

Gilda leapt ahead. As the mare raced past Peter, Regan saw indecision on his face.

"Not now, boy." She heard Angus cry. "Camp is just beyond. We will make our stand there."

Out of the corner of her eye Regan saw pale forms jerking branches aside. Angus and Zax thundered by her, and she leaned in close to Gilda's neck. The mare's mane whipped backwards. Through streaming eyes, Regan saw the trees change to sheer rock cliffs.

Ahead, Angus swung from Zax's back. He grabbed his battle axe and whipped around to face the narrow canyon entrance.

Gilda raced past, slowed, then skidded to a halt, sides heaving. Sliding from Gilda's back, Regan wiped a shirtsleeve across her eyes and sprinted to where Angus stood.

Still in the backpack, Maggie's short front legs were pressed stiff against Angus's shoulders. The basset hound's head was back, nose pointed upward as she sniffed the air. Regan loosened the drawstring under the dog's legs and pulled her from the pack.

Freed from the dog's weight, Angus rolled his shoulders, never taking his gaze from the narrow entrance. Maggie took a stance beside him. Her upper lip curled back and a low growl rumbled deep in her chest.

Where is Peter? Regan stared at the canyon's entrance. Surely he wouldn't try to fight on his own? In answer to her unspoken question, Skylar charged through the trees at the canyon's opening. Behind them were two white naked figures, and beyond them a horde more. Pale arms rippling with muscles swung studded clubs with whistling chains in circles above horned-helmed heads.

Ru'taha? They look like elves.

A Ru'taha neared Skylar's flank and circled his club faster.

"No," Regan cried. Without conscious thought, words tumbled from her lips. "Round and round she goes; where she stops nobody knows."

A whirlwind formed beside the Ru'taha, then moved over it. It picked the creature up from the ground and whisked it away, spinning like a carnival ride gone berserk.

As Peter and Skylar charged past, Angus severed the head of the second.

Peter whirled Skylar about. He leapt from the horse's back and turned to face the charging horde. With a cry of rage he thrust both palms out toward the Ru'taha. A red ball of flame the size of a baseball flew from his hands. As it streaked from his palms, it expanded. In the seconds it took to reach the charging pack, it grew to the size of a bowling ball. The sphere of fire struck the first Ru'taha head on and exploded in a shower of red flames. Where the fiery shower landed, skin sizzled.

Regan backed from the burning torches of flesh, the smell of charred meat making her gag. Why don't they scream?

She turned to face Angus and Peter. The dwarf still stared at the canyon mouth, his battle axe held ready. Peter met her eyes and took a stumbling step toward her. Regan jumped to meet him and clasped her arms around his waist, her knees buckling as he collapsed against her. "Angus!"

The dwarf laid his battle axe aside, rushed to them, and placed his hands beneath Peter's armpits. With care he lowered the mage to the ground.

"Has he been wounded?" Regan asked, running her gaze over Peter's body.

"No, it's the price the magic demands." Angus looked at her in puzzlement. "Aren't you tired?"

"No, but I didn't use much."

Angus frowned. "Magic is magic."

Peter thrashed his head side to side, then his eyes flew open.

"Rest," Angus ordered. "We are safe now."

Peter sighed and closed his eyes. The dwarf glanced at Regan. "We will give him a few minutes," he said, his eyes daring her to object.

Maggie whined and thrust her nose into Regan's hand. She stroked the dog's head as her gaze moved over the deserted camp.

Lengths of canvas lay trampled, ropes and tethering spikes still attached. A smithing anvil lay tipped on its side. Shafts of charred wood and shattered blades surrounded the anvil. Wagons teetered on broken wheels, their beds splintered mounds of wood. Crusted cooking pots hung from tripods over blackened fire-pits.

Maggie growled low in her throat and Regan glanced at the dog. The basset hound's nose scouted the wind. Her neck ruff bristled. Regan looked up. Circling over the trees to the east was a score of large dark birds. "Buzzards." She shuddered and turned to Angus. "Should we check out what they're circling?"

Angus shook his head. "By the time we get there it will be too late."

"But..."

"The living are more important than the dead," the dwarf said abruptly, then turned away from her.

Regan's gaze raked the area once more. "So where is everybody?"

Peter stirred and opened his eyes. He slowly sat up, then stared at the abandoned canyon. "They could not hold out."

Regan frowned. "What do you mean? Where are they?"

Peter stared at her in silence before dropping his head into his hands.

Glaring, Regan grabbed his shoulder and shook it. "Answer me. Where have they gone?"

"Easy," Angus said, catching her hand.

She jerked it free. "Just tell me where my sister is."

Peter looked up, his eyes dark with pain. He reached out toward her. "There are more Ru'taha than we knew."

Regan turned her back on his outstretched hand. "You think Dirkk has her, don't you?"

Peter shook his head. "She would never let Dirkk take her alive."

She whirled around, her eyes narrowing as she snapped out the words. "Kelsey is not dead. I would know."

Angus stepped between them. "Of course she's not dead. They've just withdrawn into the valley."

"What valley?"

"Fertile Isle Valley. It's just beyond Peaks' Pass," Angus said.

Peter rose unsteadily to his feet. "Of course. They will make their stand there. Kelsey cannot let the Ru'taha and Black Vipers into the valley. It is the only food source that remains. Come, we must hurry. They cannot be that far ahead of us."

* * * *

Peter turned left into a stand of tall oak trees. The wind swayed their upper branches and a shower of leaves drifted to the forest floor to join the crushed mass that already muffled the horses' hooves. They followed no path, picking their way around trees and skirting low growing spiky thickets. After splashing through a small stream, they followed its winding course.

They'd only ridden a short way when Regan heard the sonorous roar of swift water flowing over rocks. The trio of riders exited the trees onto a worn, stone-paved road. Peter reined in Skylar. "This is the King's Road. It will lead us to Raya."

"Where Queen Tessa is?"

"Yes, and the only large city in Daradawn. The rest are hamlets and farms."

The river that rushed beside the road was narrow and fast-flowing, the current surging around half-submerged rocks and kicking white spray into the dimming sky. "Is this still the Queen's River?" Regan asked.

"Yes. It flows fast now until it reaches the sea," Peter said.

Angus turned Zax south along the road. "Ride faster," he said over his shoulder. "The sun is setting." He leaned over Zax's head and the gelding set off at a canter.

Skylar pranced and side-stepped, but Peter held him at bay and turned to her. "Stay close. The pass is not far." He gave Skylar his head and the stallion charged after Angus. Gilda shook her mane and leapt forward in pursuit.

* * * *

Regan craned her neck and gazed up the length of the mountain. The gray pitted rock became lost in the midst of wispy clouds before she spied its top. To the left of the peak a range of mountains stretched. Across the river was the first peak's twin flanked by another stretch of mountains. Between the two was a narrow pass shared by the King's Road and the Queen's River. The far bank of the river flowed against the mountain's base, and over time had cut a deep gorge into its side.

"Peaks' Pass," Angus said. "The only way through to Fertile Isle Valley."

"Do the mountains have a name?"

"They are the Williz Mountains, named for my father William and my mother Elizabeth," Peter said, urging Skylar into the pass. "It will be good to get home."

* * * *

They rode in silence through the shadows of the towering guardians. As the pass narrowed, the dark pools spread to greet each other in the middle. They rounded a curve and ahead Regan saw a black wall at least ten feet high blocking their way. As they neared, Regan saw the barricade was made of giant tree limbs, bound together with brownish-green vines. Each thumb-width vine bristled with one-inch thorns.

Peter reined Skylar in at the barricade's base. Angus halted Zax beside Peter. "Well, someone has made it through or this wouldn't be here. Do you think it is bespelled?" Angus asked.

"If so, it will have been done by Thomas and will prove no challenge to me." Peter swung from Skylar's saddle, then reached for his pants. "Just the same, I will feel safer with something between me and those thorns."

"Good idea, boy," Angus said, sliding from Zax's back. He grabbed his trousers and bent to step into them. Maggie teetered forward over his head and yelped. Off balance, Angus stumbled as Regan scrambled from Gilda's saddle and rushed to help.

"Hold it," she said, grabbing the backpack just below Maggie's neck. "I'll have her out in a minute." She lifted the pack from Angus's shoulders and let it slide through her hands to the ground.

Once free, Maggie scampered in circles, kicking up dirt and dried grass.

Peter stared up at the barricade. "Where do you think the door is today?" The dwarf shrugged his shoulders.

The mage made three circles in the air with his hands, then reached to touch a branch. Before his fingers made contact, a white flame arced across the dividing space. He cried out, jerking his hand back.

Angus frowned. "Strongly warded. Can you counteract it?"
"I do not know. Maybe with Regan's help."

Regan glanced from mage to dwarf and back before shaking her head and sighing. "Why don't you just see if there's anybody on the other side?"

Peter and Angus stared at her.

"You mean ... just ask?" Peter said.

"Yes, like this. Hello!" she yelled, "is anybody there? I'm Regan, Kelsey's sister. I'm with Peter and Angus and we'd like to come in."

"Peter, is that you?" a voice responded from the other side of the barrier.

"Rourk. Where is the doorway?"

"The opening is in front of you. Thomas has it warded. Wait, I will get him."

Angus's gaze met Peter's. "Thomas has improved."

"Remarkably so. I think I shall talk to him, and very soon."

"Master?" A lilting voice called through the thorns.

"Yes, apprentice, it is I."

"One moment. I am lifting the ward now."

A black square formed before them, a spinning vortex of colored light at its center. Regan watched the vortex expand until it pushed against the edges of the black cube that held

it. The revolutions increased in speed and an arched doorway appeared.

On the other side stood a tall man with a mass of red hair. Next to him was a thin, dark-haired boy. The man waved them forward. "Hurry, he can only hold it open for a short while."

Angus, Peter and Regan ran to their horses while Maggie charged through the doorway.

As they cleared the thorns, the dark-haired boy swayed and the red-headed giant reached to grasp his arms. The arch wavered, the black edges spreading and devouring the spinning lights. As the last colored light vanished, the blackness faded and the wall of thorns again became whole.

The boy leaned his head against the giant's arm for a moment, then pushed away and stumbled to a nearby rock.

"Rourk," Peter said, advancing on the big man, "it is good to see you."

Rourk enveloped Peter in his huge arms and thumped him on the back. His gaze went over the mage's head to Regan. "You have brought Regan, I see. Kelsey will be pleased." Maggie approached Rourk and thrust her nose against his leg. "What is this?" he said, bending down.

Angus walked to the three of them and squatted to pet Maggie. "This is Maggie, a member of our company."

Regan felt a tickling on the back of her neck and, as she turned, she caught a half-smile on the lips of the boy—no, on closer inspection, not boy, but man. Noticing her look, the smile left his lips and he dropped his head into his hands. He's pretending his weakness, but why?

"Regan," Peter called. "Come meet Rourk."

Rourk reached to grab her hand. "You share Kelsey's smile."

"Where is my sister?"

"Across the field of grain. Give me a moment with the sentries and I'll take you to her." Rourk turned and whistled toward a black freshly tilled square of earth. The dirt moved. From inside a long trench, three men rose. Each gripped a flat-bladed sword. "They're here to sound the alarm if Ru'taha or vipers break through."

"But the warded barricade?" Regan said.

Rourk shrugged massive shoulders. "Dirkk has magic, too. Come, Kelsey has been waiting seven years to see you."

Rourk led them through a waist-high field of golden grain, then jumped a shallow ditch full of sluggish water. On the other side of the ditch two men rose from the grain, notched arrows stretched taut in their longbows. Seeing Rourk, they lowered the bows and nodded.

Peter's eyebrow rose. "Are you expecting an immediate attack?"

Rourk's gaze flicked over Regan. "Yes."

Peter saw the quick glance. "Dirkk knows of Regan?"

"We think so."

"But how?"

"We don't know yet."

"An informer?" The mage's eyebrows forged a frown.

"It would seem so."

"Whom do you suspect?"

Rourk looked back over his shoulder. "We will talk of it later," he said softly.

They followed Rourk across a packed dirt road and into a wide field planted with rows of corn, beans, and squash. Adjacent to the field was another full of vines with long purple gourds hanging from them. Among the rows of vines, men, women, and children walked, picking and dropping the purple gourds into large woven baskets. At each corner of the field men stood looking out across the valley, bows at ease by their sides.

At the left edge of the field, two roan draft horses stood hitched to a long, wide wagon filled with the purple, green-tipped gourds.

In front of the wagon, a slight figure dressed in a loose, pea-green shirt and trousers stood, head bent over a ledger. A wide-brimmed straw hat shaded the face, but something vaguely familiar made Regan's heart pound.

A gust of wind caught the hat and sent it sailing toward Regan. The figure turned and gave chase, a long, blonde braid bouncing as she ran.

"Kelsey," Regan whispered, then bent and scooped up the fly-away hat. Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "Kelsey," she cried, waving the hat in the air.

Kelsey turned, then ran toward them. She stopped in front of Regan, and they stared at each other for a long moment. Regan handed Kelsey the straw hat. So many words tumbled around inside her head that she didn't know where to start.

Kelsey took the hat and placed it back on her head, then reached out with the ledger and rapped her sister on the right

shoulder. "Took your own sweet time getting here, didn't you?"

Regan touched her sister's sun-bleached braid. "I thought you said you didn't like long hair." For a heart's beat they grinned at each other like idiots, then fell into each other's arms. They rocked back and forth, tears falling unheeded.

Regan heard a high childish voice ask. "Mommy, why is the Queen's-Commander hugging that woman?"

The air filled with the rustle of hushed questions, until somewhere in the middle of the field a cheer started. It rose in volume until the valley vibrated with the sound. Regan pulled away from Kelsey's embrace and frowned. The cheer was a single word, her name over and over. Why?

Rourk stepped to Kelsey's side. "I'll stop it."

Kelsey grabbed his arm. "No, let them. We've had little to celebrate."

Rourk looked down into Kelsey's face and smiled. "As you wish, Queen's-Commander."

Kelsey laced her arm through Regan's. "Come with me. We've lots to catch up on." Cheers echoing at their backs, the sisters turned and walked toward a small tent pitched away from the others.

Chapter 13

KELSEY GLANCED UP from the map-strewn table and grimaced, then slowly rolled her neck. Rourk stood and circled the table. His shoulder brushed a lantern hanging from a pike jammed into a circle of dirt as he passed. The jarred lamp sent shadows dancing across the walls.

Rourk kneaded Kelsey's shoulders and she smiled and sighed without looking up. "It's not if Dirkk will attack, but when," Rourk said.

Peter looked up from the maps. "What makes you think he knows Regan is here?"

"I'm not sure," Rourk said.

"You are having the traitor watched?" Peter said.

Rourk's eyes narrowed for a moment before he answered. "Gunthar says he is in his tent."

"Gunthar? Then it is Thomas?"

Regan rose from the cushioned, hollowed-out stump she was using for a chair and crossed the few feet of dirt that separated her from the four who circled the table. "Who's Gunthar?"

Kelsey glanced at her from across the table. "Gunthar is Thomas's mount."

Regan stared at Rourk. He must mind-speak horses, too.

Kelsey's gaze turned to Peter. "Is the camp still unbreached?"

Regan looked at Peter and felt a slow spreading warmth in her stomach. His eyes were closed and lines of concentration

etched his forehead. What is he doing? From the way my stomach feels, I know it involves the Power. She closed her own eyes and, in the darkness behind them, she saw an electric-blue aura circling the valley. She felt Peter travel the circle, seeking a break in its symmetry. She turned and searched the opposite way. Their minds met at the halfway point and touched briefly.

Regan opened her eyes. Peter opened his seconds later and looked at her. "Thank you," he said, then turned to meet the anxious looks of Kelsey, Angus, and Rourk. "He has not sent a message yet."

Angus jerked the tent's flap aside. "And he won't, either. We should have stopped him before this."

"No, wait," Kelsey said. "It's Dirkk we want, not Thomas. I've got a better way." Angus, halfway out the tent, paused. He turned and looked at his commander.

A mirthless smile stretched Kelsey's lips. "Dirkk seeks information. Fine, he'll get what he wants." She looked at Regan, and Regan felt her stomach knot. She knew the look, and it usually meant trouble. Kelsey faced Peter. "How do you feel about Thomas taking over Regan's training?"

Regan answered for him. "It's what we'd already planned, but that was before he was branded a traitor."

Kelsey nodded. "Can Regan learn to shield?"

"Why?" Peter said, then smiled. "We will turn her over to Thomas so he can teach her to control her power, but..."

"There will be little or no power to control." Kelsey finished for him.

Rourk grinned. "If we make Thomas believe Regan is no threat, that is what he will tell Dirkk."

Angus's eyebrows drew together. He dropped the tent flap and walked back to the table. "Dirkk is no fool. He will try to find out for himself."

Kelsey's eyes glittered like blue ice. "We'll be ready for Dirkk." She turned to Regan. "Will you help?"

Regan opened her mouth, but her tongue refused to form words. She looked from face to face, then back to Peter. "Can I do this?"

"You have the ability. I can show you how to use it."

Regan nodded. Kelsey stood. "Then we will leave you and Peter." She turned to the mage. "But make the lesson quick. I want to spend some private time with my sister." Kelsey waved Angus out of the tent and followed him.

Rourk paused in front of Regan. His green eyes stared down into hers, probing, measuring. Then he nodded and followed Kelsey and Angus.

As the tent flap dropped into place, Regan released a deep breath. "Does he always look at people like that?"

"Rourk cares for Kelsey almost as much as he does for Daradawn," Peter said. "Are you ready to begin?"

She nodded.

"With your strength this will be easy," he told her. He drew two chairs away from the table and set them in the middle of the tent facing each other. "Sit here."

Regan sat.

"When someone violates you with an uninvited probe and you have no shield, you feel a tickling in the back of your mind. All who have some form of power can probe."

"So there's a difference between powers?" she asked.

"Yes. There is Earth, Sea, and Air, but the Power combines all and is the strongest and most rare."

"What does Dirkk have?"

Peter's jaw tightened. "Dirkk's power has no name. It is evil, corrupt, and has been bargained for from the Dark Lord himself."

"Is dark power stronger than the Power?"

Peter looked away from her. "It is stronger than I am alone." His gaze came back to her. "Your lesson. The time grows short."

'Stronger than I am alone.' The words hung in the air between them. Regan wanted to jump up, to run and just keep on running. She shifted on the chair. "Go on."

"To probe without an invitation is forbidden, so most do not. For those who are unscrupulous, a shield will block them. At first you will have to consciously raise it. In time, it will be a natural reflex. In a minute you will feel my probe."

Regan felt a tickle at the nape of her neck. "I feel it, but it's more like an itch."

"In your inner eye, picture a wall between you and the probe. Do you have your wall?"

"Yes."

"Can you still feel my probe?"

Regan frowned and rubbed the back of her neck. "Yes. You're burning me."

"Strengthen your wall."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder," Peter said, then grinned. "Interesting. Does Kelsey know that you envy her and Rourk?"

"What?" Anger coursed through Regan. "Get out of my thoughts."

"Shield them from me and..." The grin left his lips. "No, I am not. I can assure you my mother and father were married."

Regan gasped, then with a low curse lashed out with her mind. Peter flew backward and crashed down onto Kelsey's cot. The cot tipped to the side and Peter rolled across the ground. When he stopped rolling, he was a good five feet away from her.

Shocked, she stood and started toward him and then stopped. He deserved it!

Peter sat up and grinned at her. "Well, you repelled that invasion very well."

Regan fought to keep the smile from her lips, but it was hopeless. Laughter exploded from her and Peter joined in. She laughed until tears poured from her eyes and she gasped for air.

The tent flap thrust aside and a whirlwind on four legs charged in. Regan heard the breath gush out of Peter's mouth as Maggie landed in the middle of his stomach. Wiping tears from her eyes, she crossed to where they lay and pulled Maggie off the mage. Peter gulped in air and rolled to his side.

"You women are going to kill me," he gasped, glancing up to meet two unrepentant gazes.

Getting to his feet he looked at Regan. "Well, shall we try it again—the shielding, that is?"

Regan smiled. "Can you read these thoughts?"

Peter stared at her for a minute. "No, and I think I am glad that I cannot."

"Then lesson number one is complete. Shall I call Kelsey?"

"No, I will tell her and then make sure you are not disturbed."

* * * *

Regan and Kelsey sat face to face on the floor of the tent, legs crossed Indian style, their position of choice for shared confidences for as long as either could remember. Regan took the pendant from her neck. "I believe this is yours."

Kelsey smiled, then leaned forward so Regan could place the gold chain over her head. "Thanks. I've felt naked without it."

Regan flicked a blade of dried grass from her sister's braid. "I can't get over you and that long hair."

The expression on Kelsey's face changed from happy to pensive. "A lot of things have changed in seven years."

"Tell me."

Kelsey shook her head and smiled. "Tell you? Where do I begin?"

"Try starting at the photo shoot in Africa."

"The photo shoot. It was Big Pearl's idea..."

"I went to the airport to pick you up and you weren't there." Regan cut in.

"I know, I..."

Regan grabbed her sister's arm. "Kelsey, I was so scared. I looked everywhere for you. No one knew what had happened. You walked into the jungle and never came back."

Kelsey winced. "I couldn't come back. I..."

"The police gave up on you. I hired private investigators. Jack said I was crazy, that you were playing one of your silly games. He thought you'd show up when you were ready, but I knew something was wrong."

Kelsey grabbed the gripping hand. "Hey, not so hard."

Regan took a deep breath, released Kelsey's arm and sat back. "Sorry."

"Good ol' Jack. So what happened between you and him?" Kelsey said.

Regan grimaced. "You were right. The first year I thought it was cute, how he never wanted me out of his sight. By the second year I'd lost contact with everyone. Even Lisa and Frank..."

"Lisa too? You two were always joined at the hip."

"Very funny," Regan said. "You want me to vise-grip your arm again?" Kelsey threw up her arms in mock horror. Regan grinned, then continued. "The night we celebrated our fifth anniversary I knew I wanted out. All we did was fight..."

"Did you fight about me?"

Regan hesitated. "Yes, but you weren't the reason I divorced him. He hit me."

"Hit you?" Kelsey's face flushed. "The son-of-a-bitch. He'd better be glad I wasn't around. I'd have gelded the bastard." She took a deep breath. "So he just let you have a divorce?"

"No, he fought it. Even threatened me, said I'd never be free of him, but I told him I'd press charges and have him thrown in jail, if he didn't..."

"And we know what happens to pretty boys like him in jail." Kelsey smiled at her thoughts. "Are you free of him?"

Regan's lips twisted wryly. "He still calls once in awhile."

Kelsey frowned. "What about a restraining order?"

Regan grimaced. "I got one. Half the time he ignores it. One good thing about being here, I don't have to put up with his bullshit."

"I'm sorry. I wish I'd been wrong."

Regan shrugged. "It's over. Now, tell me how a photo-journalist becomes a commander in Daradawn? How did you get here?"

"The same way you did. Through a rift, only mine was in a cave." Kelsey shifted on the floor. "It was a week after I said good-bye to you..."

Regan grabbed her sister's hand. "Wait, no offense, but you're a lousy story teller. I have a better way if you're game."

Kelsey pulled her hand from Regan's. "I don't think this story will bore you."

"I'm sure it wasn't boring when it occurred, but now?"

"Rae, you're already doing it."

Regan drew back slightly. "Doing what?"

"Trying to take over. Do you want to know what happened or not?"

"Of course I do."

Kelsey leaned forward and smiled. "Then I guess you'll just have to listen to my fumbling attempt at story telling."

Regan shook her head. "There's another way."

"What other way?" Kelsey said, lifting her thumb to her mouth and chewing at her fingernail.

Uh-oh, Regan thought, she's getting pissed at me. Her nail biting is a sure giveaway. "Mind-linking. Then all you have to do is remember."

Kelsey stared at her for a long moment, then let her hand drop back into her lap. "No way," she said with an abrupt shake of her head.

"We did it before."

"And we both ended up naked."

Regan smiled. "Will you try? I double-dog dare you."

"Rae, we're not children anymore."

Regan looked a challenge at her.

"Oh, what the hell," Kelsey said. "I never could turn down a dare."

"Yeah, I know," Regan grinned as she dodged Kelsey's fist. "Just give me your hand and look into my eyes."

She grasped Kelsey's hand and captured her sister's gaze, feeling warmth build in her stomach. Then Kelsey gasped, and Regan was inside her sister's mind. "Okay, now just remember."

* * * *

Kelsey closed her eyes ... and they were on an airplane. Kelsey watched the seat belt light flash on. It had been a long boring flight, but it was almost over. The plane circled one last time and headed down. Watching the landing strip approach, she smiled wryly. This was her first trip to Cape Town, South Africa, but it could have been Los Angeles, California or Dallas, Texas.

Kelsey exited the boarding ramp and her amused irony doubled. On viewing the airstrip, her hopes for the exotic had dimmed, but she had at least hoped for one or two brightly clad natives, and maybe a tanned "bwana" with sun-bleached hair. Instead she faced an ocean of Caucasians in three-piece suits. So much for Tarzan movies. There were just three people ahead of her in the customs line and soon a bored official was stamping her passport and asking all the usual questions.

"How long will your stay with us be?" she asked, and Kelsey could tell the woman really didn't care about her answer.

"Two weeks at the most."

"Is it business or pleasure that brings you to Cape Town?"

"Both, I hope," Kelsey said, then smiled. The wilted woman in the khaki uniform nodded politely, then slammed Kelsey's passport closed and shoved it toward her.

"Thanks," Kelsey said, but the woman was already looking beyond to the next person. Kelsey picked up her two bags, walked toward a revolving door framed by narrow tinted windows, and stepped out into scorching mid-day heat.

The airport's loading and unloading zone pulsed with life. People scrambled from taxis and limousines. Khaki-dressed porters hustled, whisking bags from overloaded arms.

Before she took two steps, a man jumped from a green-and-white taxi and blocked her way. He wore tan shorts, a black T-shirt, and a San Francisco Giants baseball cap perched back on his head.

"Would the beautiful lady care to see the more colorful side of the city?" he asked with an ingratiating grin.

Do I have dumb tourist tattooed on my forehead, she wondered. "No, I'm being met."

He glanced at her purse and let the crowd push him closer. "But I can show you a side of Cape Town that doesn't exist to much of the world."

Kelsey frowned and tightened the grip on her purse. "I said no."

A black Mercedes pulled to the curb and a young coffee-colored woman in a red sleeveless jumpsuit got out. "Beat it, Sam," she said. "She's Big Pearl's guest."

The man paled. "Sure, Alayna, I didn't know." He took two steps backward, then turned and scurried into the crowd.

The woman turned to Kelsey. "Sorry I'm late, Miss Cafferty. I didn't allow enough time for traffic." She bent and grabbed Kelsey's bags. "Is this all of your luggage?"

Kelsey nodded.

"Big Pearl is waiting for you."

* * * *

Kelsey turned toward the car—and suddenly was in a large, airy bedroom. "Where are we now?" Regan's question popped into Kelsey's thoughts.

"Big Pearl's place."

"So what then?"

Kelsey pushed a rocker with her foot and started it rocking. Closing her eyes, she ran her hands along the curved arms. It was just like the one Nana had when she and Regan were kids. She could almost smell Nana's violet sachet. She opened her eyes and glanced down at the chair's cushion, but this chair had pillows emblazoned with bird of paradise blossoms. A wild mass of the same flowers sat across from her in a shiny black vase that looked like something from the Ming dynasty. A ceiling fan turned lazily overhead stirring the hot air.

Whistling tunelessly, she ran a polishing cloth over the telephoto lens in her lap, then carefully placed it in its black velvet bag. She stood and walked to a set of large windows that opened onto a balcony. The balcony overlooked a small flower garden three stories below. The garden was in full bloom. Blossoms of every hue fought for space in the small square. Their heady fragrance rose to where she leaned over the wrought-iron rail, and she inhaled deeply. With a small smile she turned and walked back into the bedroom.

Mosquito netting shrouded a huge bed in the center of the room and woven reed mats were pale islands scattered across an ocean of polished wood floor. A staccato knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," she called.

Alayna opened the door and entered. She wore a different jumpsuit, this one blue. "Pearl will see you now."

Kelsey followed Alayna down a softly lit hall lined with French impressionist paintings. Small square lights highlighted each painting. She recognized Monets, Renoirs, and one Picasso. They stopped at an open elevator. Alayna waved her in, then followed and pulled a scrolled, wrought iron door closed behind them. She thumbed a button and they descended silently.

On the first floor Alayna stepped out and motioned for Kelsey to follow. They walked down a long hallway and stopped at a wooden door carved with vines and parrots. "Please enter. Pearl waits."

The room Kelsey entered was huge and filled, wall to wall, with books. A large partner desk was a mahogany island in the room's center. A Turkish carpet runner in swirls of red and gold stretched to the claw feet of the desk.

Behind the desk sat a man. He looked up as she entered, and white teeth flashed in an ebony face. Pushing back from the desk, he stood and hurried toward her, his orange caftan swirling about his ankles. Bouncing against his chest was a gold pendant, and in its center rested a huge black pearl.

"Miss Cafferty. I assume you've settled in?"

"Yes, the room is beautiful."

"I'm glad you like it." He walked to a chair the same mahogany color as the desk, then lovingly lifted a pile of books from its leather seat and placed them carefully on the floor.

"Please sit down. We've much to talk about. Would you like tea or coffee? I know you Americans have a passion for coffee."

Kelsey sat in the chair. "Coffee would be great."

"Black, or with cream and sugar?" he asked.

"Black, please."

Pearl walked to the corner of the room and pulled on a gold tassel suspended from a black sash. A melodious gong sounded. He passed in front of her on his way back to the desk and her gaze lingered on the huge black pearl.

Pearl went to the desk and sat on its corner. He wiggled back until his feet cleared the floor, then began to swing his left leg back and forth like a child. "I see you've noticed my pearl."

"Is it the reason they call you Big Pearl?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" His teeth flashed again. "No, my mother christened me with that oddity of a name. I was to be graced with the gift of vision. Pearls of wisdom would drop from my lips, or so that's what an old witch doctor told her." Pearl shrugged. "Instead of fighting my name, I used it."

"Just what do you expect from me?"

"I want you to make my jungle, and me, famous." He paused and stared into her startled face. Pearl laughed. "Yes, my jungle. I plan to turn it into the world's largest game preserve. You will record the progress."

The door opened and Alayna wheeled a tea cart in. "Wonderful. Your coffee is here. Alayna, has Mr. Jones awakened yet?"

"I heard the elevator descend as I entered."

"Good, then we can expect him soon."

"Mr. Jones?" Kelsey asked.

"Sam Jones."

"The author, Samuel Jones?"

"One and the same. He's to write the story to go with your photos." Pearl looked past her and Alayna, then motioned.

"Mr. Jones, do come in. Let me introduce Kelsey Cafferty to you."

Kelsey turned. A tall man stood framed in the door, his shoulders almost brushing the doorjambs. Wire-rim glasses slipped down his beaked nose as he walked forward. "Miss Cafferty, glad to meet you. I'm very fond of your work," he said. He pushed the glasses back up the bridge of his nose, then stuck out his hand. Kelsey's hand was enveloped, and then crushed. She winced.

"Easy, old man," Pearl said. "Don't maim the artist's focusing hand."

The man's ears flushed bright red and he dropped her hand. "Sorry, I don't know my own strength."

"That's quite all right. It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Jones."

"Call me Sam."

"Sam, then," she said. "I've read all of your books. Don't you usually write action adventure?"

"Yes. That's why I'm so excited about this. It will be my first go at non fiction."

"And his crowning glory, if I have anything to say about it," Pearl added. "But enough. Drink your coffee. We've plans to make and a morning departure."

* * * *

Kelsey blinked, and felt a question from Regan again. "I don't know," she sent back. "Somewhere very green and very hot."

Big Pearl was gone and she stood in a world of dense greenness. She pulled her hat from her head and swatted the hundredth fly of the morning. Her short blonde hair lay plastered against her scalp, and sweat trickled down her neck. She stared upward along a narrow path, then turned to the young black man at her side. "It's up there?"

John Smith nodded.

"You sure I can't talk you into coming with me, John Smith? By the way, why do they call you John Smith?"

"The Catholic Fathers gave me that name. They couldn't pronounce my Swahili name. And no, I will not go to the cave with you. I told you back at camp that it was dark magic."

Kelsey shifted the camera on her shoulder. "But you'll wait for me here?"

"Yes, but the rest have already left."

"I didn't expect them to stay. They got what they came for."

"You don't have to go up there. The photos of the last five days are plenty," he said.

"These aren't for Pearl. They're for me."

John Smith sighed. "I will wait for three hours. If you don't return by then I will know the spirits have taken you across."

"Across where?"

"I do not know."

"Yeah, right. Well, wish me luck."

"May the one God go with you."

Kelsey pushed a vine aside and started up the trail.

* * * *

Far below, the jungle spread like a giant green quilt. Behind her a dark hole led into the side of the mountain. Shards of earthenware pottery and bowls, coated with caked-on God knew what, lay before the cave. She sat her camera down and bent closer to a small mound of white sticks. "Bones," she grimaced. "I suppose that's a warning. This is crazy; of course, I'm not going in there." As she turned away from the cave, a scream erupted from inside. I know I'm going to regret this, she thought, sprinting into the dark opening.

For the space of two heartbeats she existed in an airless, black nothingness, then she was racing out into bright sunlight and gusting winds. Just ahead of her, the ledge ended. In a panic she looked for something to stop her headlong dash, then grabbed for a vine as she ran out into the emptiness. The cliff rushed by as she dropped. Then her downward plunge jerked to a halt and she screamed. Her arms felt like they were being ripped from their sockets.

Outstretched like a deer carcass hung up to bleed, she spun in a slow circle. Wind gusted and she swung face

forward into a jagged rock. Sharp pain lanced her cheek and she felt a warm stream trickle. She turned her head and wiped her face against her out-stretched arms. The wind howled again and she spun dizzily. Her grip tightened on the vine and she closed her eyes. Yoga breathing. Remember Yoga breathing. In slowly through the nose, feel the diaphragm fill, then release through the mouth. Relax, absorb the pain, be one with it.

Little by little the pain receded, buried until she had time to deal with it. Blessing her high school boyfriend for getting her into rock climbing, she continued the deep even breathing and searched the mountainside for toeholds.

Finally she heaved herself up and over the cliff's edge, then rolled onto her back. Her arms and shoulders spasmed like saplings in a windstorm. She sucked in large mouthfuls of air, waiting for the shaking to loosen its hold.

When the pain subsided to an occasional twinge, she lifted her hand to the cut on her cheek. The bleeding had stopped, but she felt it pull each time she moved her mouth. She dropped her hand and pushed herself to a sitting position. "What the hell happened?" Her eyes swept the mountainside, but it showed only a smooth rock surface. She stood and walked to the wall of stone. Where was the cave? Kelsey ran her hands across the rock. There was no opening.

A scream cut through the moaning wind. She moved to the far right of the cliff's edge and looked down. About a hundred feet beneath her was a narrow plateau. Lashed to a stunted tree in its center was a man. Fifteen or twenty pale, naked figures danced around him.

As Kelsey watched, a figure shuffled closer to the man and bashed his thigh with a long club. The man's leg buckled and he screamed again. The dancing grew frenzied. The thing—she could tell from its pointy ears it wasn't human—swung its club high overhead and brought it crashing down toward the man's head. The man jerked his head to the side and the club bit into the wood beside his left ear. The dancers leaped and spun in circles, all in marrow-chilling silence.

Kelsey frowned, then squirmed back from the ledge. "Sorry, fella, but I've got my own problems. Just what did you do to get them so pissed?" She rolled her shoulders. They still ached, but the cutting pain was gone. "I could sneak in there easily and have him out in no time," she reasoned with herself, then shook her head in disgust. "No, I've gotta figure out where I am." She glanced at the cliff ledge again. "Aw, shit, face it, Kelsey, you're going to be stupid and try to rescue him."

THE MAN SLUMPED against the tree trunk. One of the things grabbed his head, pulled it back and then let it fall forward.

The brush surrounding the clearing shook. The things backed away from their captive, formed a circle and faced outward. Long black snakes slithered into view. As Kelsey gaped, the snakes rose and balanced on their tails. One of the pale demons swung a club at the closest snake. The snake's head darted to the side and the club missed it by only inches. The snake hissed, then sprang forward and fastened its jaws in the demon's throat. Shiny black coils wrapped around the figure's arms and chest, pinning the club to its side. The club

dropped from the demon's hand, and it screamed, thrashing back and forth, trying to free its hands and arms. The watching demons jumped up and down and shook their clubs soundlessly.

The coils tightened. Suddenly the snake uncoiled from the figure, dropped to the ground, and slithered to the far side of the clearing. The rest of the snake things followed. The demons lowered their arms limply to their sides. All cocked their heads to the side as if listening.

Kelsey rolled onto her back. "Girl, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," she whispered toward the sky, then shivered and glanced at the descending sun. Well, if I'm really going to be stupid and do something, I'd better find a way down from this ledge before it gets dark. She looked over the ledge again. Her gaze followed the plateau. It rose steadily until it met the center of the ledge. Kelsey pushed herself to her knees and then to her feet. Moving to where the ledge and plateau met, she saw a narrow, rocky path leading down.

At the bottom of the path, Kelsey pressed her back against the trunk of the huge oak. The fourth tree ahead supported the man. The demons and snakes were deathly quiet. They seemed to be dozing or awaiting further instructions. She sprinted to the next tree. So what do I do when I get there? I don't have a knife or anything. She darted forward to stand behind the captive.

His bound hands were swollen and bloody. She looked at the knot and frowned. There's no way I can untie that. As she stood staring at the hands, they moved. She leaned in close to the tree. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes." The whisper was hoarse and raspy.

"I can't untie the rope."

"My boot..." The man's voice cracked, replaced by a spasm of coughing. "A knife, in my boot."

Kelsey dropped to her knees, then froze as footsteps approached. She pressed herself against the trunk. A pale hand reached around the tree and yanked on the rope. It cut into the man's skin. Fresh blood flowed and he moaned. The shuffling feet departed and Kelsey released her breath.

She forced her hand down into the man's boot, stopping as her fingers touched a metal handle. She worked it free, and began to saw the ropes.

The fibers parted and the man let his hands drop. "Back up, three trees," he said. "I will follow."

Kelsey backed away from the tree, counting as she went. At the third one she stopped. Her eyes strained into the dark. Did they catch him? No, too quiet. A hand grabbed her shoulder and a second pressed against her mouth. A boot scraped against her heel. She stomped down on the top of her attacker's toes. She heard a sharp intake of breath, but the grip didn't relax. She went limp, trying to pull her attacker off balance.

"Damn, woman, hold still," a voice said into her ear. She froze, hanging in his grip. "Did you free me so you could kill me?"

Kelsey planted her feet beneath her.

"If I release you, will you remain quiet?"

She nodded. The hands withdrew and she turned. As she stared at the man, the moon slid from behind the cloud

covering and shone on the trees and the man in front of her. He was tall and broad shouldered. Dark red hair waved back from a wide forehead and fell to his shoulders.

"Thank you. I am Rourk Bannion. Now let us go."

* * * *

Regan jerked and broke contact. "That's how you met? You saved Rourk's life?"

The tent flap lifted and Rourk poked his head in. "Did I hear my name?" He grinned at Kelsey's quick frown. "Enough catching up for now. Dinner's ready."

"Okay, we'll be right out," Kelsey said.

Rourk winked and withdrew his head.

"Dinner? But I want the rest. Just how did you meet Peter and Queen Tessa?"

Kelsey smirked. "Not so boring huh? I'll tell you the rest after dinner."

Regan's stomach chose that moment to growl in complaint. "All right, after dinner. But I won't forget."

Chapter 14

Under a star-filled sky, they sat around a square metal table. Sweet smoke from the campfire behind them hovered above.

"What's in this? It's fantastic," Regan said as she tilted her silver bowl and scooped up the last potato and carrot with her spoon.

Kelsey glanced at her in amusement. "It's just beef stew."

Peter ladled himself another bowl of stew, then winked across the table at Kelsey. "We introduced her to travel fare last night."

Kelsey rolled her eyes. "That explains it. Pig slop would seem heavenly after that."

"I like trail food," Angus said, breaking off a piece of crusty bread, then spreading it with soft white cheese. Four pairs of eyes looked at him in disbelief. "Well, I do."

"Just proves dwarves have no taste," Rourk said. Angus glowered across the table at him and Rourk grinned.

Regan helped herself to a piece of bread and asked. "Do you always eat this well?"

Kelsey gasped, then bent over in a spasm of coughing. Laughing, Rourk pounded her on the back.

Regan looked at the grinning faces surrounding her. "What?"

"I'm sorry," Kelsey choked out. "But this is the first hot meal we've had in days." Regan felt her face heat. Rourk reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "Forget it."

That's the first laugh I've had in weeks." The smile left his face and he shook his head. "Dirkk has been at us day and night."

Peter looked out across the valley. "How many have we lost?"

Rourk carefully spread cheese on a hunk of bread before he looked up. "It hasn't been that bad ... it could have been worse."

Peter's eyes locked with his. "What do you mean...?"

"Thomas."

Peter's lips thinned. "Let us hope our plan works. If so..."

"No," Kelsey cut in. "No talk of Dirkk, Thomas, or anything dealing with war. Tonight we celebrate the arrival of my sister." She picked up her mug of mint tea. "Join me in raising a glass to Regan."

"To Regan," Peter said. "Even though her power is not what we had hoped for."

Regan, startled, looked across at him, but Peter stared over Kelsey's shoulder and into a dark pool of shadows. Regan's eyes followed his and she saw Thomas step from the darkness and slink away.

"The watcher has left," Peter said.

Kelsey turned on the bench and looked into the dark. "Thomas? He grows bolder. Do you think he heard our plans?"

"I do not know, but he is gone and now I drink to Regan, the beginning of Dirkk's end."

"To Regan," echoed the rest, clinking mugs.

Rourk set his mug down and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Now for dessert." He reached for a bowl of

purple beans in the middle of the table, and scooped a handful onto his plate.

Angus took the bowl from him. "Try these. You'll like them," Angus said, offering the bowl to Regan.

Regan looked at the waxy beans doubtfully. "What are they?"

"A Daradawn delicacy."

"Go ahead. Try them," Kelsey urged. "They taste like cantaloupe."

"Cante ... what?" Angus said.

"A California delicacy," Kelsey said.

Regan popped a bean into her mouth and chewed. Its juice was sweet and cool. "You're right. It does taste like cantaloupe." She grabbed a handful and faced Peter. "I just remembered. You promised to tell me the story of Thea."

"Thea?" Kelsey asked.

"Rourk has never told you the story of Thea?" Peter said.

"Time is scarce, and when we are alone I have other things on my mind," Rourk said, grinning.

Kelsey's mouth fell open, then she blushed to the roots of her hair. "Rourk!"

"Well, it's the truth."

Angus pushed himself away from the table. "I know the tale of Thea so I'll feed Maggie and see if she'd like to take a walk."

Regan reached down and patted Maggie. The basset hound looked up at her. "I would love a walk." Along with the basset hound's thoughts came a rush of warmth and love. "Maggie would love a walk," Regan told Angus.

"Then we shall have one," the dwarf said. He slapped his leg. Maggie scrambled to her feet and the two of them walked into the dark.

"How did you know that Maggie would like a walk?" Peter asked.

Regan shrugged. "She's a dog. Of course she'd like a walk."

"That's all it was, a guess?"

"What else could it be?" Regan asked innocently.

"For a moment—your eyes..."

"What about my eyes?"

Peter's gaze probed hers, and it was all she could do to keep from looking away. After what seemed an eternity he shook his head. "Nothing."

"So, tell us of Thea," Regan said, eager to change the subject.

Peter pushed back from the table. "Yes. It is time you knew of Thea. Let us move to the fire pit."

Regan looked down at her dirty bowl and cup. "What about the table?"

"One of the soldiers will take care of it," Rourk said.

"We just leave it?"

"I know. It still makes me uncomfortable, but they have a fit if I try to help," Kelsey said.

Rourk bent and kissed the top of Kelsey's head. "You are the Queen's-Commander, and commanders do not clean up after themselves."

Kelsey pushed him away. "Don't do that. What if someone sees you?"

"I have news for you, love. Everyone already knows."

"Well, we don't have to flaunt it. Some of the troops have been away from their loves for a long time."

"I stand rebuked. I'll try to be more discreet," he said, but his boyish grin was unrepentant.

* * * *

The group moved to the pit and seated themselves on fire-warmed rocks. Beyond them Regan heard the low hum of voices and looked over Kelsey's head and across a valley dotted with the red glow of fire pits. A sudden wind sprang up. It whipped her hair and plastered her shirt against her body.

"What the hell," Regan said, springing to her feet. The wind blew beyond her, formed a dust devil and then whirled off into the night.

Kelsey reached, grasped Regan's hand, and pulled her back down onto the rock. "It's nothing to fear. Twyla must be practicing her air magic. She's an apprentice like you, and sometimes her lessons get out of control." She squeezed Regan's hand, then sat back. "Now, how about that story."

Across from Regan, Peter stared into the flames. What does he see there? she wondered. He glanced up and met her look through a haze of smoke. His eyes staring into hers, he began to speak.

"Thea lived one hundred years ago. She was born into a farming family, a baby with one blue and one brown eye.

"Her father, on viewing his daughter for the first time, flew into a rage and accused his wife of fornicating with the Dark

One. After he beat her soundly, he slammed out the door to seek the nearest alehouse. The mother, fearing for her life and that of her child, left the baby on the steps of the Temple of Ogdah.

"An aging priest found the sleeping babe and took her into the Temple. Laying her on the altar, he vowed they would care for the innocent one. More priests arrived and marveled at the beauty of the child's face. Awakened by their voices, the baby opened her eyes.

"The priests gasped and drew back, and making sure their robes did not touch the babe's swaddling clothes, they ordered her returned to where she had been found. But the priest told them of his already made promise to God. Fearing the babe's gaze, but God more, they banished the priest and the babe to his cell with orders to keep her there, out of their sight.

"The next morn the king brought a young man to the temple. At first sight of the man, the priests dropped to their knees and prayed for protection, for the man's skin was as black as the darkest night. He had to be one of Satan's chosen."

"Satan and God?" Regan interrupted. "The people of Daradawn know of God and the Devil?"

Peter stared at her in silence for a moment, then said. "The Dark One is Satan. Who did you think I spoke of?"

"I didn't know. Maybe some bad-ass, like Loki or..."

"I do not know of this Bad-Ass or Loki you speak of, but God is everywhere," Peter said. "Did you really think your world was his only creation?"

"Well, I never really thought about it before."

Peter smiled. "From what I saw of your world, I would say yours was only his first attempt. Now, may I continue?" He paused, ignoring Kelsey's look.

"The king told the priests of the man's arrival in a strange ship made of woven reeds. The ship had been blown off course by a storm. The king believed the storm was no accident but God's will, for at the same time the young princess, swimming, had ventured beyond Mage-controlled water and was caught by a whirlpool.

"The whirlpool was pulling her down when the black man arrived. He jumped in, pulled the princess free, then swam to shore, and placed her in the arms of her ladies-in-waiting. Afterwards he collapsed at their feet.

"The king said he owed the man much, but all the stranger wanted was to serve his Goddess. When the priests heard this they were enraged. There was no Goddess, only the one God, they cried.

"The stranger turned his brown eyes from them, then to the forest and sky. It was the Goddess who caused the sky to weep, watering the ground, and it was she who commanded the sun to shine, he told them. The priests cried blasphemy, but the king demanded the man be accepted and taught the temple's way.

"The priests had no choice, but they put the man in charge of the devil child, saying it was only fair that one of Satan's children should care for the other.

"So the man, Dahlabar, cared for the babe, naming her Thea, which meant nature's child in his tongue. As Thea grew,

Dahlabar taught her of the Goddess and the wonders waiting for her beyond the temple walls.

"When Thea was six summers old, Dahlabar went to the priests and demanded he be given a small woodcutter's cottage he had seen in the forest. The priests agreed and Dahlabar moved Thea into the heart of the woods. Five summers passed.

"One afternoon Dahlabar came upon Thea in the forest. Standing behind an oak tree he watched as she stared into a thicket. Soon a rabbit limped her way. Thea picked it up and gazed into its eyes. 'Where does it hurt, little one,' Dahlabar heard her ask, then she leaned close and nodded her head. 'I see, a thorn in the front pad. We'll have it out in a moment.' Thea bent over the rabbit's foot and pulled the thorn free. The rabbit reached up, patted Thea's cheek, and hopped away.

"Dahlabar stepped from behind the tree.

"'Father, I did not know you were there' she said.

"'I did not want to scare the animal,' Dahlabar said. Then he closed his eyes and spoke to the Goddess. When he opened them, he turned and smiled at the child he considered his daughter. 'It is as I thought,' he said. 'You are chosen and blessed by She Who Is The Mother To Us All. All creatures will heed your voice.'

"As Thea grew into womanhood, her powers grew stronger. Strange animals she had never seen before came to her. Dahlabar told her the shaggy mountain goat with the broken leg, and the large bird of prey with the swollen left eye, were from the high mountains. She healed them all and sent them on their way.

"One morning a snow-white stallion awaited her when she opened the cottage door. Seeing her, the horse approached and butted her shoulder. Placing a hand on each side of the horse's head, Thea looked deep into its eyes, then turned, hurried into the cottage and grabbed her basket of herbs while calling to Dahlabar that someone needed her help.

"The white horse took her deep into the forest, finally stopping at the edge of an open field. In the field a still figure lay on the ground.

"Thea slid from the horse's back and ran to the prone form. The man's leg was broken. Thea splinted his leg with two long narrow pieces of wood from her bag. Tying the last knot, she looked up and saw the man's gaze upon her. For a moment they stared at each other, then the stranger raised a hand toward her mismatched eyes. 'Who are you?' he asked.

"'I am Thea, Daughter of Dahlabar,' she said.

"The man sat up. 'What happened?'

"'Your horse sought me out,' Thea answered and turned, but the horse had vanished.

"'But I have no horse,' he said. He told her his name was Desmond. He attended the mage college in the city. A bear had chased him up a tree and he had fallen trying to get down.

"Their meeting was destined and Desmond became a frequent visitor."

Peter stopped, taking a sip of his drink before he continued. "Years passed and both Thea's and Desmond's powers grew. Desmond became adept at casting spells of

power, and Thea's mind-link with animals became clearer and stronger, as well as her knowledge of healing.

"One night Desmond came to her and asked her to come with him to live in the city. He wanted her to cast her healing aside and concentrate on becoming a woman of power.

"Thea was torn, for she had grown to love Desmond, but healing was her life. She sent him away, with her assurance that she would give his words thought.

"Dahlabar overheard Desmond and was angered by his words. He demanded that Thea no longer see him. Devastated, Thea threw a cloak over her shoulders and ran into the night. Through the night and on through the next five days, she walked. On the sixth morning, she stopped at the base of a tall mountain. Upward she climbed until she stood before a cave entrance. Inside the cave's darkness a light flared. Pulled onward, she followed the beckoning light until she stopped before a sleeping dragon.

"Unafraid and filled with sudden peace, Thea advanced on the curled form. She reached out and caressed the glimmering scales. The dragon's large eyes opened and a voice like liquid honey flowed into Thea's mind. 'Chosen, at last you are here. I am the avatar to the one Goddess. I have a message for you.' The dragon told Thea that she was blessed with the ability to mind-speak all creatures, both mortal and magic, and that the Goddess wished her to use her powers for good and healing, not for war or death."

Peter stopped speaking. A log settled in the fire, sending sparks into the air. "Such is the story of Thea," he said at last. "There has been no other with such an ability."

Regan jumped to her feet. "I'm beat. Where do I sleep?"

Kelsey glanced at Regan, then pointedly said. "What a beautiful tale. Thank you, Peter." And waited.

Regan's face heated. "Yes, beautiful. Thank you," she murmured.

Kelsey nodded, then stood and stretched. "You will share my tent tonight."

"What about Rourk?" Regan said.

Rourk stood and smiled. "I have my own tent. A commander needs her privacy."

"Then I'll say good-night." Kelsey turned and walked away.

"Wait for me," Regan said, and followed.

Chapter 15

REGAN SAT CROSS-LEGGED in the middle of her cot watching Kelsey wash her face. While they had lingered around the firepit someone had brought in a twin to Kelsey's cot and relit the lantern.

Both wore diaphanous flowing robes—Regan's the purple-pink of a summer sunset, and Kelsey's the vibrant yellow of spring daffodils.

Kelsey tossed a small hand towel at Regan. "Your turn, but I warn you. The water's cold."

Regan unfolded her legs and crossed to the basin. She glanced at the soap-filmed water, then at the challenge in Kelsey's eyes. Taking a deep breath, she plunged both her hands into the water, then jerked them back with a yelp.

"I told you it was cold," Kelsey said with a Cheshire cat grin.

"You didn't say it was melted ice," Regan said, reaching for the piece of soap that lay next to the basin. She sniffed the cracked, grayish-white square, then wrinkled her nose.

"What's this made of?"

"Tallow and ash. It's a little harsh, but you get used to it."

"It smells like dirty socks."

"It's all we have," Kelsey said stiffly. "This is a battlefield."

Regan tossed the soap aside and walked to the tent flap.

"Where are you going?" Kelsey said.

"I need my stuff."

"No." Kelsey said. "Someone..."

"I don't need someone else to get it. I can get it myself."

Kelsey pointed to the cot. "Regan, sit down ... and don't stick your upper lip out at me."

Regan glared at her sister, then walked obediently to the cot and perched on its edge. "It seems to me that you've gotten quite used to people waiting on you."

Kelsey's jaw clenched. "Rae, this is a patrolled camp. With Dirkk's latest skirmishes, everyone is extra jumpy. And with the added fear there is a spy amongst us, they might just shoot first and ask questions later."

Regan, staring down at her hands, frowned. "I didn't think about that."

"Besides, your bundle is under the bed."

Regan leaned forward and looked beneath the cot. "Why didn't you just say so?"

"I tried to." Kelsey crossed to Regan. She planted her hands on her hips in the same no-nonsense way Regan had seen their mother do countless times, and stared downward. "Let's get something straight right now. Inside this tent, I'm your sister. Outside, I'm the commander of Queen Tessa's forces. What I say, you do, and without question. Do you understand?"

Regan frowned up at her sister. "You want me to obey without question?"

"If I give you a direct order, yes."

"And if I don't?"

Kelsey's blue-eyed gaze hardened. "I suggest you do." She turned and walked to her cot, then sat down on the far side of it, her ramrod-stiff back to Regan.

Regan stared at her sister's unyielding back, wondering why she was being such a hard ass. What had happened to Kelsey these past seven years? She sighed. Well, she's right about the sentries.

Regan reached beneath the cot and fished out the wrapped bundle. She opened it, searched until she found the sliver of scented soap, then stood and crossed to her sister. Holding out the soap, she grinned. "Peace?"

Kelsey glanced down into her sister's hand, then looked away nonchalantly. Too nonchalantly.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I just didn't think. Truce?" Regan said.

Kelsey met Regan's imploring gaze. "Apology accepted, but Rae, you've got to remember this isn't San Francisco."

"I'll remember. I promise. Now take it. I know you want to."

Kelsey snatched the soap and lifted it to her nose. "It's Tika soap. Where did you get it? Never mind, I don't care. I haven't had a decent wash in days." She walked to the basin, wet her hands, and rubbed the soap between them. "This doesn't do it justice, but it's the best we have." She worked the soap into a lather and spread it up her arms. "You know, sometimes out in the field I'd almost do anything for a bathtub full of warm water."

"How long have you been away from the castle?"

"This campaign? Five weeks."

"You haven't bathed in five weeks?" Regan said, holding her nose.

Kelsey stuck her tongue out. "Of course I've bathed. Whenever we've been near the Queen's River." She rinsed the

soap from her hands and arms, then reached for the towel.

"You know, Rourk hasn't seen me in a dress in months."

"You never liked dresses."

Kelsey smiled wistfully. She lifted her arm to her nose and inhaled. "Occasionally, even I like to feel beautiful."

Regan crossed to her and stared into Kelsey's face. "You love him, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Does he feel the same?"

Kelsey frowned. "I don't know. He loves sleeping with me, but that doesn't mean he loves me. I'm not sure he's over the death of his wife and child."

"Rourk had a family? What happened to them?"

"Ru'taha and Black Vipers murdered them."

"I think it's time I heard the rest of your story."

"Fine, but this time we do it my way. I don't feel like living through it all again." She pointed at Regan. "You, into bed."

Kelsey waited until Regan crawled beneath the covers, then turned the lantern down until it winked out. "Where did we leave off?" she said.

"You'd just rescued Rourk and he'd introduced himself."

Kelsey settled back into her pillows, then took them back to the story, drifting into it where she'd left off.

* * * *

"Where in God's name did you come from?" Rourk asked.

Kelsey pointed toward the ledge, then realized he couldn't see her hand in the dark. "I came down from the ledge."

"How did you get up there?"

"Is that really important?"

He glanced over her head frowning, but all was quiet. "You are right. This is not a place to remain." He turned and, without another word, walked into the darkness.

Stunned, Kelsey watched him disappear. What an ungrateful ass, she had time to think before he reappeared.

"Are you coming, woman, or will you disappear as quickly as you appeared?"

"Somehow I don't think so," she said under her breath.

He turned his back to her. "Lace your fingers in the waist of my trousers so I do not lose you."

Kelsey hesitated for a split second, then inserted her index finger inside the waistband of his pants.

Rourk led her through the trees, weaving first one way, then another, making her wonder if the woods would ever end.

Suddenly he stopped, and she plowed into his back. Jerking her finger from his waistband she took a quick step backward. "Sorry."

He turned to face her, then looked beyond, rubbing his thigh.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"What?"

"Your thigh. I saw what they did."

"It is not broken. That is all that matters for now. I think we are safe here. We will rest until morning." He dropped to the ground, and was soon snoring.

Kelsey sat beside him, staring into the dark. She tried to think, to reason, but her brain refused to cooperate, jumping

from thought to thought, as if each was a red-hot coal. Sighing, she shrugged. In the words of Scarlet O'Hara, she thought, 'I'll think about it tomorrow.' She rolled onto her side and closed her eyes.

* * * *

A rough shake woke her. "We must go," a masculine voice said.

"Right, right, just let me get my camera," she mumbled. Pain lanced through her cheek and she snapped her eyes open. She gasped and then scrambled to her feet, the top of her head butting something hard in the process.

"Hell's fire, woman. What is your problem?" The red-headed giant of a man stared at her, rubbing his chin.

Memory flowed and she looked around. "My God, it's true. It actually happened." The side of her face flared pain with each word.

The man—Rourk, she remembered—backed away from her. "We have to get moving. The King's Road should be close by."

Kelsey touched her face with her fingers.

"Yes, it is bad," he said. "But an elven healer can fix it so there will be no scar."

Elven healer? Biting her lip against the pain, she asked. "Would you mind telling me just where I am?"

"Right now we are where we should not be. We must go." Rourk turned away from her and limped into the lead.

* * * *

They stepped from the middle of the trees and out onto the bank of a river.

Rourk looked at the river and nodded. "At last we are in Vilsathor. Margeaux will help us."

"Vilsathor? Margeaux? Just where the hell are we?"

Rourk looked down at her. "You do not know of Vilsathor? Just where are you from?"

She turned away from him and murmured under her breath. "I think I may be from a world away." She turned back to him. "Last night, where was it we slept?"

"The wrong part of Daradawn," Rourk said, "although there are very few parts that are right now." A whippoorwill trilled. Rourk turned and looked across the paved road. "It is Darrian."

From the trees across from them a figure stepped into view. He walked toward them, then stopped and stared at Kelsey.

"Darrian, it is good to see you," Rourk said.

"The news of your troubles reached us last night. We thought you taken by the Ru'taha."

"I was, but this woman rescued me."

Darrian stared at the side of her face. "And paid a price for doing so."

Kelsey stared, blinked, and then stared again. The man had pointed ears. His skin was pale, and long white hair fell past his shoulders. His almond-shaped eyes, with their winged eyebrows, were as blue as a summer's sea. He looked familiar to her, then she realized why and took a quick step

back. "He's one of them," she said. "Why did you bring us here?"

The elf's blue eyes hardened. "I am not Ru'taha. We are nothing alike. Can not even your weak human eyes see the difference?" he said coldly.

"Dirkk formed Ru'taha in the elves' image," Rourk said.

"Inferior imitations, and for that alone he will die," Darrian said, his gaze wandering over Kelsey's body. "But you are new to our land and us, so I will forgive you." He turned to Rourk. "Your woman dresses strangely."

Kelsey glanced down at her jeans and green T-shirt. "Not for where I come from."

"And where are you from?" Darrian said and then stepped forward and touched her short blonde hair. "Do all the women there dress as such and crop their hair?" His gaze fell to the curve of her breasts and lingered. "Not that I do not like it, for it does let one see what is offered."

Kelsey felt anger course through her and took a deep calming breath. "I—offer—nothing," she said, stressing each word.

Kelsey saw Rourk glance at her face and grin. "Darrian, we have need of Margeaux."

"She is with Mage Peter."

"Where?"

"They are across the river, at Peaks' Pass, but please allow me to offer you and your friend the comfort of my home."

"I must decline. I have information that cannot wait."

Darrian frowned, and Kelsey thought for a moment he would insist. "Then at least let me offer you mounts," he said,

snapping his fingers toward the trees. Two men—she refused to think of them as elves—slipped from the trees. Each led a bridled horse. They advanced until they stood before them. "Allow me," Darrian said placing his hands at Kelsey's waist. Kelsey gritted her teeth and let him lift her onto the back of the horse. "Until we meet again," Darrian whispered to her. "And we will. I will see to that."

Rourk swung up onto his borrowed mount. "Thank you, Prince Darrian. I will see the horses are returned," Rourk said, then leaned forward and whispered into the horse's ear. The horse moved toward the river. Kelsey, avoiding the prince's eye, followed.

* * * *

They crossed the river and rode into a grove of trees.

First the demons and snake things, and now elves, Kelsey thought. Just where in the hell am I? Or am I anywhere? Did I fall and hit my head in that cave? Am I still lying there? I know it's been more than three hours and John Smith has long since gone. She looked at Rourk's broad back. He seems real and I've never dreamed of a man like him before. She thought back to her headlong dash into the cave and the dark void she had passed through. If it was some kind of gate to another world, then it's no wonder no one ever returned after they entered the cave.

With a sharp intake of breath, she sat up straight on the horse and pulled back on the reins. Her face paled and a shiver shook her body. No one ever returned? No, if I came through, I can go back, but how? When I turned around, the

mountain was solid rock. I don't even know where the cave is. It was dark, and we've been traveling away from it for hours.

The man riding ahead of her stopped and turned in the saddle to face her. "Why have you stopped, woman?"

She jerked her gaze to his. "It's Kelsey. Don't call me 'woman' again."

"Sorry, Kelsey, but we must keep moving," he said, facing forward again.

"I'm going back to the mountain."

Rourk's back stiffened. "No, you are not. Darrian would have you before you traveled one mile. Did you not see the lust in his eyes?"

Kelsey scowled. "I can handle Darrian."

"Can you also handle Ru'taha and Black Vipers?"

Kelsey's chin trembled and she bit her bottom lip to control it. "But if I don't go back now, I'll never find my way again."

"Without help you wouldn't find the ledge."

"Then you will take me."

"I will not. I have to find the mage. Just come with me. Peter will know how to help you."

"Peter, mages. Are you crazy?"

"Lives depend on what I have to tell Peter. You are just one of many. Ride with me now, and you have my promise that I will do all I can to get you home."

Kelsey's gaze rose to the trees that surrounded her. She'd never find her way back to the ledge and mountain by herself. "Ride on."

* * * *

Questioning eyes lit by flickering flames followed them as they rode through the quiet camp. "Why aren't there any guards?" Kelsey said. "Anyone could ride in upon them."

"Peter has wards set."

"What are wards?" she asked.

"Magic boundaries."

"Then why weren't we stopped?"

"We ride elven horses."

"Anyone can steal a horse. They should have sentries posted, at least at the entrance."

Rourk turned and gave her a measuring look. "How do you know so much about camps?"

"Army reserve and ROTC," she said.

"What?"

"Never mind."

Rourk reined his horse in before a scarlet tent. From its peaked top a triangle flag waved. The banner's background was white, and in its center a black unicorn pawed the air. A gold circlet rested between its ears.

"Let me guess. The queen's quarters? Why don't you just paint a black "X" on it?" Kelsey said.

Rourk frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

"Look around you. All the other tents are tan. You're broadcasting to your enemy, whoever that is, that someone of importance is inside this tent."

"But there is. Queen Tessa is inside. That is her banner."

Kelsey stared at him in silence, then slowly shook her head. "You really don't understand, do you?"

The tall man slid from the back of the horse and turned to face her. His green eyes glittered. "I do not know what you mean but, from your tone of voice, I do not think it is a compliment."

"It isn't."

"I think you should know more of our ways before you insult them further," Rourk said. He turned his back on her and walked into the tent.

"Well," Kelsey mumbled, sliding from the horse. "I wonder if I'm supposed to wait until I'm announced or what?" She looked at the flap of the tent. "I don't think so." Pushing it aside she walked in.

Inside, the tent glowed with lantern light. Standing in its center with Rourk were two women and one man. The taller of the two women had her arms around Rourk's shoulder. The other held both his hands in hers.

"I am so sorry," the tall woman with the long silver braids was saying.

"Are you sure?" the other asked.

Rourk nodded. "When I arrived, the Ru'taha had the house surrounded. I saw them come out of the house with Caitlin. She was crying and holding Patrick in her arms. As I watched, one of the hell spawn raised his club." Rourk stopped, his eyes blindly staring through Kelsey. "I screamed and ran toward them, then something slammed against my head and I knew no more until I woke tied to a tree."

The man placed a hand on Rourk's shoulder. "You did not actually see them fall. Perhaps they still live."

Rourk shook his head. "While they had me tied, they taunted me with two fresh bloody hearts, one large and one small, and we know Ru'taha have none..." The big man covered his face with his hands and shuddered.

"Enough," the smaller woman said.

She must be the healer, Kelsey decided. The tall lady has the look of a queen.

From the back of the tent a figure stepped forward and Kelsey gasped. Five pairs of eyes turned to her. The small brown wren-of-a-woman walked toward her.

"You must be the woman who rescued Rourk. How can we ever thank you?" she said. She reached out, circled Kelsey's shoulders with her arm, and drew her into the tent. "Oh, what happened to you?" she asked, as lantern light revealed Kelsey's face. Without stopping for an answer, she continued. "You were right to come to Margeaux." A touch, light as a butterfly's wing, whispered across her cut cheek. "With Margeaux's herbs and Peter's magic, not even a scar will remain."

Kelsey's glance went over the woman's head and fastened on the figure that stood just inside the lantern glow. He was short and compact with a long white beard. Bristling eyebrows framed pale silver penetrating eyes. He was clad in shades of brown from head to toe, and a silver belt circled his middle. His hands rested on a battle axe in front of him, its blade grazing his waist.

"Peter, bring the young woman a chair, for she looks like she's seen a ghost," the tall woman commanded.

"Thank you, your majesty," Kelsey said weakly, then lowered herself into the chair.

Both women started, then the smaller one laughed. "I guess it is a rational assumption, Margeaux. You do look more like a queen than I do." Then she turned and smiled at Kelsey. The gold specks in her brown eyes were bright with amusement.

"Let me introduce my friends and myself. I am Tessa De'Amberville, Queen of Daradawn. This very regal looking lady is Margeaux, my friend and elven healer. Rourk you have already met. Standing next to him is Peter Canterville, High Mage to the court, and over there in the shadows is Angus, protector to the House of De'Amberville. I welcome you, Lady...?"

"Kelsey, Kelsey Cafferty."

"Welcome, Lady Cafferty," Queen Tessa said. "You will have to forgive my rudeness, but Rourk has just brought us heartbreaking news." The queen turned to face the man she had identified as the court mage. "Did you have any idea that Dirkk had shaped so many?"

"No," Peter said, "nor that they had penetrated so far into Unicorn Valley."

"The villages are deserted. I saw that on my way to the farm," Rourk said.

"People will be flocking to Fertile Isle Valley and Raya," the queen said.

"Can the city hold them all?"

"It must and, with your help, Peter, they will be safe. Dirkk will eventually tire of his revenge and leave us in peace."

"What of Vilsathor?" the elven healer said.

"We saw Darrian and all is well. Dirkk cannot penetrate your elven magic."

"Then we have no choice. We must go back to the castle right away," Queen Tessa said.

"We are to run like dogs, with our tails between our legs?" Angus said, his lips curling in distaste.

"I know it galls you, Angus, but we have no choice. I do not have the forces to stand against Dirkk. To face him in battle now would be suicide."

"So we hide behind walls and Peter's magic and hope he will go away?" the dwarf sneered.

"Yes. I will not have my people die needlessly," Queen Tessa said, her look a clear warning for the dwarf to cease his words.

"There's another way," Kelsey said, thinking out loud.

"What?" The queen's brown-eyed gaze turned toward her.

"I said there is another way. A way of fighting that would lessen your enemy, with only minimal losses to you."

Angus crossed the tent to stand in front of Kelsey. "What would you know of warfare?" he asked. His eyes, on the same level as hers, glittered with challenge. Kelsey met them without flinching. "I have been trained in tactical warfare by the best."

The dwarf stepped back and laughed. "You may wear the britches of a man, but you are still a woman, and women know nothing of war."

Queen Tessa turned her bright stare on Angus. "I AM a woman."

Angus's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "You have men to guide you," he said.

The queen cocked an eyebrow at the dwarf, then turned to face Kelsey again. "I will hear what the lady has to say."

Ignoring Angus's glare, Kelsey sat up taller in her chair. "You said you are outnumbered and can't hope to win a face-to-face confrontation?"

Queen Tessa nodded.

"Your forces, do they ride?" Kelsey asked.

"All are horsemen."

Kelsey nodded. "Then choose your best and have them ride in search of your enemy. He won't expect that. Ride in, attack quickly, and leave before he knows what hit him. When he starts expecting this, then hide and wait. When his troops come into your line of fire, ambush them. Little by little you will destroy both his forces and his confidence."

"This method of fighting is new to us," Rourk said.

"It is a coward's way," Angus said with disgust.

"Would you rather hide behind the city's walls?" Queen Tessa said.

Angus turned on his heels and stormed toward the tent flap. "I will see to the horses," he said, then jerked the tent flap aside and walked through.

Peter smiled at the quivering tent flap. "Do not mind him. Non-action makes him irritable. Tell me, Lady Cafferty, how do you come to be among us? Your clothing is strange and there are no villages near the mountain where you found Rourk."

Kelsey's eyebrows drew together in a deep vee. "I'm not sure. One moment I stood in jungle dampness, then I heard a voice scream. I ran into a cave and out onto a ledge, and then I was here."

Peter's hazel gaze probed hers. "What did you feel in the cave?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Queen Tessa turned to Peter. "Another rift? Could it be?"

The mage shook his head. "I do not know. It would make seven. But that would be in keeping with the numeric pattern, seven years, seven days and now seven rifts."

"Was there a seventh mentioned in your grandfather's book?"

"There could be but, with Dirkk's harassment, I have not had the time to translate it all."

Kelsey stood. "Are you saying I stumbled through a time portal of some kind?"

"Not a time portal, but a rift between your world and ours. We have only recently found out about them ourselves," Peter said. "My grandfather used them regularly to visit your world. He left me his journal when he died and it tells of his travels." The mage smiled. "He was especially fond of San Francisco."

"But when I turned around the cave was gone."

"No," Queen Tessa whispered. "Are you sure? Sometimes they are hard to see."

"I'm sure. I ran my hand all along the mountain. There was no opening in the rock wall."

"I am sorry to hear that," Peter said.

Kelsey stared at him with a suddenly dry mouth and pounding heart. "Why? What does it mean?"

Queen Tessa stepped forward and clasped Kelsey's hands. "It means that you will be our guest for the next seven years."

* * * *

"And that's exactly what I have been," Kelsey said.

"But the other six rifts, couldn't one of them let you back through?"

"We were never able to get to any of the others. Dirkk keeps us bottled up here, on this side of the river."

"How did you know the one to San Francisco would be open?"

"Peter's grandfather's book. We just had to get Peter and Angus to the rift."

"And us back to it," Regan said.

Kelsey met her sister's eyes. "Our return journey to the rift will be easy, or there will be no journey at all."

Regan held her sister's gaze. "What do you mean?"

"The next few days will see the end of this war, one way or the other," Kelsey said. "Now sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

Regan turned over on the cot, then reached and pulled the blanket over her shoulder.

* * * *

Regan dreamed. She stood on the lower marble step of The College of Mages, her hands held up in pleading.

"Please, you must understand, it has to be this way. The Goddess has chosen it to be so."

Desmond pulled his gaze from hers and stared coldly over her head. "No, Thea, I don't understand. How can you turn your back on your power?"

"I'm not turning my back on it, just using it in a different way."

Desmond spun on his heels and fastened his gaze on Dahlabar. "This is your fault, old man. You are forcing her to remain a healer."

The tall black man met the younger one's angry appraisal. His own eyes glistened with sad resignation. "No, this is not what I would have wished."

"Enough." Thea snapped. "The decision is mine and it is made." Her eyes unfocused and she nodded. "Yes, I am coming," she added.

"Who are you speaking to?" her father asked.

"To the Goddess's avatar, and I must go."

"You are leaving now?" Desmond said.

Thea nodded.

"Then why did you even come?"

She smiled wistfully. "I wanted to say good-bye. Our paths must part here, but I do love you and will for all time. Perhaps someday in another life we will be together."

Desmond stared at her, his eyes hard and cold. "You know nothing of love, at least not of the love I feel for you."

Thea's eyes filled with tears. She blinked them rapidly and sought her father's face.

Dahlabar stepped forward and placed an arm across her shoulders. "I will miss you, daughter," he said, "but I've known since you were a child that this would come to pass."

Thea's lips curved into a trembling smile. She looked at Desmond again, then sighed. "I must go. The dragon awaits."

Desmond jerked his gaze back to her. "Did you say dragon?"

"Yes."

His laugh was mirthless and bitter. "Now I know you're addled, for no one converses with a dragon." He stepped forward and grasped her shoulders. "Don't worry. I can help you."

Thea twisted away from him. "Let go of me, you fool. You don't understand what you're doing."

"Dahlabar, help me. We will take her to the High Mage. He will cleanse her mind of these delusions."

An angry roar vibrated the air around them. Thea lifted her head and cried into the sky. "No, I am fine. Everything is all right." She lowered her mismatched eyes to Desmond. "Do you want to die?"

"No."

"Then let go of me, now, or the dragon will come."

Desmond met the calm certainty of Thea's eyes, then released her and backed away. "You mind-speak a dragon, but they are of magic." His voice was a harsh whisper, filled with cynical doubt.

"It makes no difference, magic or non-magic I mind-link with all of the Goddess's creatures."

Desmond shook his head. "No, it can't be so. The High Mage says it is not possible."

Thea backed down the marble step, then turned. "Come, I will show you the impossible."

* * * *

The scene changed, and now the three of them stood at the edge of an open field. Wind whipped the calf-high grass, slapping it against trouser legs, but they ignored the discomfort, for all gazes were on the center of the field where a golden dragon stood. "I see, but I don't believe," Desmond said.

"I never thought to see such a sight in my lifetime," Dahlabar said. "You can mind-speak..."

The dragon lifted its head and swung it toward them. Its glittering eyes silenced Dahlabar in mid-sentence.

Thea looked at their stunned faces in satisfaction, then ran to the dragon and caressed its scaled neck.

"We go, now," the dragon commanded.

"Yes, just let me introduce you."

Thea turned to where the two men quivered. "Desmond, Dahlabar, this is Zara."

* * * *

Regan yawned, then opened her eyes. Staring at the canvas ceiling, she thought about the dream. She'd always believed in reincarnation. She'd just never realized prior lives could be lived in alternate worlds. So, she had been Thea in a prior life. It made sense. It explained why she and the dragon

had bonded; Zara had recognized her. "It is also why I can mind-speak other animals."

"Rae, are you awake, or just talking in your sleep again?" Kelsey asked from the other cot.

"I'm half awake," Regan said. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Probably somewhere around five o'clock," Kelsey said.

"You're not getting up, are you?"

Kelsey stood and walked the few steps to the basin.

"Listen. A lot are already up and about. You don't have to get up. Go back to sleep," Kelsey said, pouring water into the silver basin.

Regan groaned and pulled the blanket back over her head. Through the coarse blanket she heard someone scratch the tent's canvas flap as the way of a knock, then Rourk's voice called. "Kelsey? Are you dressed?"

"When has that stopped you?" Kelsey said.

"Since you acquired a chaperone." Their voices dropped to a low murmur, then all became quite.

Did they leave? Regan stuck her head out from under the blanket. When she saw Kelsey and Rourk wrapped in each other's arms, she tried to duck back under.

"Too late," Rourk said, and Regan met his laughing green eyes.

She grinned sheepishly and sat up. "Sorry."

A cold draft tickled the back of her neck and she turned as Peter poked his head into the tent. "Coffee's ready. Anybody want a cup?"

"Me," Regan said. She threw the covers aside, then pulled the gown down that had crept up her thighs as she slept. Lifting her head, she met Peter's eyes and surprised a look of longing on his face. He quickly looked away and backed from the tent.

"Rourk, we should let the ladies get dressed."

Dropping a last kiss on his nose, Kelsey pushed him away.

"Later," he said, his eyes warm with promise. He turned and ducked through the tent's open flap.

Regan stared at the spot where Peter had stood. What did that look mean? "Kelsey."

"Humm?"

"I don't understand men."

"I don't think we're supposed to. Now get dressed."

* * * *

The sun had crested the Williz range when Regan exited the tent. Maggie saw her first and bounded to greet her, tail wagging and ears flopping. Regan knelt and scratched the hound's velvet ears. "Morning, sweetie. How'd you sleep?"

"Angus makes noise when he sleeps," a miffed mind voice answered.

"Maybe tonight you can sleep with me." Regan sent, and Maggie wagged agreement with her tail.

Regan saw the rest of the group standing around the fire pit.

"She's up," Rourk said as she joined them.

"I feel my ears should be burning," Regan said. Rourk and Angus stared at her blankly and she shrugged. "Never mind."

Peter handed her a cup of coffee, avoiding her eyes.

"Peter has spoken to Thomas about your training," Kelsey said.

"And?" Regan asked, blowing into the steaming cup.

"He has agreed," Peter said.

"What did you tell him?"

"Only your powers were not what we hoped, but maybe he could find some latent ones, and I didn't have time to waste on you."

"I see."

Peter's eyebrows rose at her tone of voice. "It was as we agreed. Do you have a problem with it this morning?"

Three heads swung toward her, their attention fixed and tense. "Not with it," Regan mumbled under her breath.

Peter leaned closer. "What?"

"No," she spoke up. "I'm still in agreement." Relief flooded the four faces.

Peter turned away from her and fed another log to the fire. "Good," he said, "I will take you to his cave after breakfast."

Regan nodded. "Speaking of breakfast, when do we eat? I saw no magically laden table when I walked by."

Kelsey shot her a sharp look before she answered. "I thought we would eat with everyone else this morning. They want to meet you."

Regan felt her face grow pale. "I ... I ... won't have to make a speech or anything, will I?" she said. "Kel, you know I can't do that."

Kelsey crossed to her sister and stared into her white, strained face. "I thought you'd outgrown that. How do you make your advertising pitches?"

Regan swallowed. "There's never a crowd, just two or three people. After ten years of therapy, I can speak ten or fifteen words at the most in front of a crowd, but that's it."

"I still can't believe you're letting Jason Wiggs control your life," Kelsey said.

"He's not controlling me."

"What would you call it? You can't do public speaking..."

"Drop it, Kelsey," Regan said.

A man dressed in pale tunic and trousers, dark mud caking his boots, stepped into the clearing. "Queen's-Commander."

"Yes, Luke," Kelsey said.

"I have the monthly crop report. We are holding our own. Even with the many extra months to feed..."

Regan tuned the man out. She was still fuming over her sister's words. Jason Wiggs wasn't controlling her. She had a phobia and had worked hard to even get as far beyond it as she had. Jason Wiggs. She said the name again in her head and felt nausea burn her stomach. How could a stupid boy from high school still make her ill? My God, it had happened ten years ago. She lifted her head and rubbed the back of her neck. But she still remembered it, every humiliating moment, as if it had happened this morning. She was a junior in high school and a candidate for student body vice president. Her opponent was Samantha Cooper. Blonde, beautiful, cheerleader Samantha Cooper. She just happened to be

Jason Wiggs' girlfriend and he planned to have her win, had even warned Regan to bow out. But she hadn't listened.

It was the candidate debate. She'd worked hard on her platform and had felt confident walking to the microphone. Six students had questions for both her and Samantha. She had to admit, Samantha had answered them well. Samantha's knowing smile as they'd passed should have warned her, but it hadn't.

She couldn't remember the first question now. But the second was about her feelings on the length of dresses and skirts. The standing rule was if you knelt and your skirt or dress did not touch the floor, then it was too short, and you were sent home to change it.

She felt the rule was justified, said so, and was giving her reasons when it started. A football player in the front row stood and asked to see her legs. Then another yelled, "I don't think she has any legs. She never shows them." Then Samantha's friend Linda Watson yelled, "Oh, she's got two of them. But so does Daffy Duck."

The crowd roared with laughter and her face flamed. A teacher stood up, placed an arm around her shoulders, pinning her in place as she'd called for quiet. She'd stood there as all of her carefully planned words evaporated from her mind. When all was quiet, and a thousand pairs of eyes were looking at her, she couldn't remember a thing to say. One of the students asked his next question, but she didn't even hear his words over the buzzing in her head. All she saw was a sea of faces. Then someone yelled, "Quack. Quack. Quack." Then other voices picked it up and the teacher was

calling for everyone to quiet down. But the quacking just got louder. And she'd jerked away from the teacher, tearing the sleeve of her blouse in the process. Tears blinding her, and vomit rising into her throat, she ran from the stage. At the auditorium door, she'd run flat into Jason Wiggs. He grabbed her arm as she tried to rush by.

"I warned you," he said. "I told you to bow out. But you wouldn't do it." That was all she heard as she tore away from him and ran into the hall. And she hadn't quit running until she reached home and the comfort of her own bedroom.

"Regan. Regan?" Kelsey's voice pulled her back.

She took a deep breath before saying. "What?"

"I said, addressing the people of Daradawn won't be a problem. I'll work around it. You just stand behind me and nod. I'll do the talking."

Angus pushed a chair to Regan's side. "Sit down. Your face is as white as my beard."

Regan stood where she was, staring off into the distance. Kelsey gave her arm a shake. "Regan?"

Regan looked into her sister's eyes. "No speeches," she whispered.

"No speeches," Kelsey echoed. "Now sit down."

Regan swayed and Kelsey grabbed her arm and guided her to the chair. "Put your head between your knees."

Regan lowered her head and took deep breaths. When her heart stopped pounding, she looked up at the faces surrounding her. "I'm sorry."

Rourk placed an arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry about it. I'm scared to death of snakes myself," he said, then shuddered mightily.

"That's right," Angus grinned. "Last time he saw one he broke the Daradawn record for shinnying up a tree, and it an itty-bitty garden snake."

Regan smiled with trembling lips. "Then you must really hate Black Vipers."

"We all hate the vipers," Peter said, jabbing a stick into the fire and sending embers into the air. "I think we should go to breakfast now. Everyone will be waiting for us."

Regan's cheeks heated. "Of course," she said, standing.

"I meant if you're able, of course?"

Regan walked by him. "I'm fine."

* * * *

Regan heard the low rumble of voices and her trembling knees had her halting beside the tent. Kelsey stopped beside her and squeezed her hand.

"I'll go first," she said. "Just look at my back, and nothing else."

Kelsey stepped around the tent and Regan followed. After three steps she gathered her courage and peered around Kelsey. The tilled field ahead was lined with rows of tables. Long benches, crowded with men, women, and children sat on each side of the tables.

Heads turned at their approach. Then, one by one, the people stood. Somewhere in the middle of the tables a cheer

started and the rest of the crowd picked it up. "Kel ... sey ... Kel ... sey ... Kel ... sey!"

Regan jerked her gaze from the crowd and pasted it on Kelsey's back. Just put one foot in front of the other. Don't think of anything else, she reminded herself.

The cheering broke over them like waves over a boat's bow. Hands reached to touch her shirt as she passed and she cringed. My God, what do they expect from me?

Kelsey stopped before a horizontal table that faced the others. Regan halted behind her. Her sister raised her hands and waited for the cheering to stop. "Good morning," she said.

"Good morning, Queen's-Commander," echoed back.

"Citizens of Daradawn," Kelsey started, then paused. "No, not citizens ... friends."

The cheers roared again and Kelsey stood there smiling until the voices quieted. "Where I came from, we have a holiday known as Christmas. And, if you've been very good, you will get your heart's desire as a gift." Kelsey turned and smiled at Regan. "Well, yesterday was Christmas for me, for I got my heart's desire: my sister Regan."

The cheers broke out again and Kelsey stood, letting the sound flow over her.

My God, Regan thought, she likes this.

"This morning I introduce you to her. Friends of Daradawn, this is my sister, Regan," Kelsey said, drawing Regan forward to stand beside her. Waves of cheering rose and broke over them and Regan raised wide panicked eyes to Kelsey. Kelsey bent and whispered in her ear. "No speeches, I promise. Just

wave." Regan lifted a stiff arm and moved it jerkily over her head. Slowly the roar quieted. "Regan and I spent much time getting caught up last night and she has agreed to help us all she can..."

"But what can she do? Is she a powerful mage?" A voice interrupted from the middle of the farthest table.

"Yes. Is she as powerful in her magic as Dirkk?" another voice cried.

Regan saw Kelsey look over the heads of the seated throng. She followed her gaze and saw Thomas hovering in a tent's shadow.

"We don't know yet, but Thomas has agreed to take on her training," Kelsey said.

"Thomas? Why not Mage Peter?"

Peter stepped to Kelsey's other side. "I have other things I must do," he said. "Thomas will know what to do."

A murmur of voices circled the tables.

"Enough." Kelsey said. "Eat. We have much to do today." She pulled the bench from the table and sat, motioning Regan and the rest to join her.

Regan stepped jerkily forward, then sat beside her sister and mechanically took the bowl that was passed to her. The bowl overflowed with purple beans she recognized from last night. She scooped some on her plate, wondering how she would swallow with the huge lump in her throat.

* * * *

Regan walked beside Peter. It was only moments before her scheduled time with Thomas, and the purple beans in her stomach churned with her breakfast coffee.

The sun, at its zenith, caressed the top of her bare head. Ahead of them a field full of people weeded. They turned their heads and smiled as she and Peter neared, their hands never ceasing their movement.

A little girl with blonde pigtails sat in the outside row sifting dirt through her chubby fingers. She looked up as Regan and Peter walked by and waved a grimy hand. Regan grinned and waved back. The woman who knelt beside the child straightened, then cupped her daughter's chin in her hand and guided her eyes back to the waving rows of narrow green stalks.

"Peter, why don't you just imprison Thomas?"

"It is Dirkk we want, not the likes of Thomas. If we take Thomas, Dirkk will only turn to another. It is better to know which enemy to watch."

Peter led Regan past the fields. Eventually he stopped at the base of one of the mountains circling the valley.

Regan stared at the mountain's slick obsidian sides and glanced at Peter. "Here?"

"Thomas's new home," Peter said. "He desires more privacy."

"How does he get up there, fly?"

Peter shot Regan a quick glance. "A joke, right?" He turned away before she could answer and walked along the base of the mountain. "There is a path, but he has a befuddling spell on it."

"Why, when he knows we are coming?"

"Showing off," Peter said with a shrug. "He is watching us right now." The air surrounding the mountain shimmered and Peter smiled. "He has lifted the spell. The path is to your right."

Regan looked to the side of the mountain. "You mean that thing that looks like a brown, winding piece of ribbon?"

"Yes."

Regan shook her head. "Peter, we have feet, not hoofs."

Peter just shook his head. "It is wider then it appears. It is clouded with illusion. Thomas is still playing games."

He started the ascent. Regan groaned and then followed.

* * * *

The path ended at a wide ledge. She rubbed the back of her aching calves, then walked to the edge and looked down.

Fertile Isle Valley stretched below, the base of the mountain in easy view of any who stood here.

She turned and looked for Peter. The mage stood a few feet away from her, staring into a small cave. Even from this distance Regan felt magic tingle her skin. "The entrance is warded?"

Peter smiled and shook his head. "It is a minor spell. I could easily breach it, but will not. Is your block up?"

"Yes."

"Thomas," Peter called. "I have brought your apprentice."

From the dim cave entrance Thomas stepped into view so quickly she knew he had been waiting just inside the opening. His slight figure was draped in a flowing robe, and his pale

face seemed to float between the darkness of the cave's opening and the black gown. "Peter, I have been awaiting you."

He didn't call him Master. Regan looked a question at Peter, who shook his head slightly.

"One moment and I'll remove the ward," Thomas said.

"What do you ward against?" Peter said.

Thomas's gaze clashed with Peter's, then he looked past the elder mage's shoulder to Regan. "I do it to protect the people. I've been practicing some new magic, and I wouldn't want them to stumble upon it while I wasn't here."

Peter glanced out across the valley, then at the steep winding path that ended at the ledge. He turned back to Thomas and cocked his left eyebrow. "I see. You will have to show me this new magic ... soon."

Thomas's face tightened with anger, then it smoothed and he smiled. "Of course." He waved his hand, then took a step backwards. "In time, but for now, please enter."

Regan and Peter stepped into the cave, then watched in silence as Thomas reset the wards.

The cave was round and small, its walls glossy and smooth. Lit by glowing orbs that hovered every few feet, they shimmered a silvery gray, "This isn't a natural cave, is it?" Regan said.

Thomas's lips curved in a small smile. "Of course it is. Rock shaping is prohibited within Fertile Isle Valley," he said, glancing at Peter.

Peter crossed to one of the hovering orbs. "I see you have perfected the light spell."

Thomas sighed. "Yes, but only after much practice."

"It no longer drains you?"

The younger mage lowered his gaze. "Not as much."

Regan crossed to a brazier in the center of the cave.

Inside, coals still glowed. "Did we interrupt you?"

The young mage started. "No. I was just about to make some tea. May I offer you some?" he said in a rush of words.

Regan met his green-specked eyes. "No. I'm eager to start my training."

"How long will this first session last?" Peter asked.

"Until the new apprentice tires," Thomas said with a slight curve of his lips.

Regan smiled back "Perhaps you will tire first."

His mouth tightened. "We shall see. Peter, you may leave."

Anger stirred in Regan at Thomas's casual dismissal of his master, but Peter only smiled. "You will both let me know how it goes," he said, then turned.

"Wait," Thomas said. "I'll remove the barrier."

Peter walked to the cave's entrance, flicked his fingers, and stepped through. He turned, met Thomas's eyes, and with a small bow walked away. Thomas's face flushed.

Turning her back on him, Regan grinned.

A darker spot in the cave's smooth walls caught her eye and she crossed to it.

The cubbyhole in the wall was deep and square, and its edges were beveled smooth as glass. Stacked inside the hole were books. Very old ones, judging from their cracked, stained covers. She reached to pick one up and felt a tickling probe at the base of her neck. The tickling grew more

insistent and turned into a sharp pain. So he likes to play rough. Careful to keep her expression bland, she turned to meet his probing gaze. "Where do we begin?"

"What magic have you seen Peter do?"

"I've seem him use magic twice. Once when we were attacked by Black Vipers, and at the old camp when Ru'taha attacked us."

"What did he do?"

"With the vipers it was some type of shimmering rainbow wall and with the Ru'taha a glowing ball of flame that exploded on contact."

"Did you feel anything while he was doing this?"

Regan grinned. "Besides fear, you mean?" The young mage did not smile and the grin faded from her lips. "I didn't feel anything."

"What about when you came through the doorway?"

"The rift? No. It was like the world no longer existed. I couldn't see or feel anything."

"Show me the blue flame," he said.

"The what?"

"The flame. Peter said you bear the mark."

Regan reached to loosen the drawstring at her neck. Thomas's gaze followed each movement of her hand. His lips parted and he licked them with the tip of his tongue.

Heat rose in Regan's cheeks as she lowered the tunic to bare her shoulders. With his fingernail, he traced the flame-shaped mark and she shivered.

"It is the mark," Thomas said. "You cannot be entirely without power."

"In my world it means nothing," Regan said, quickly pulling her shirt back up over her shoulders.

"Shall we see just what power you do have?"

"It's what I'm here for," Regan answered, then felt another quick probe at the block she held steady. She inwardly smiled. "How do you go about it?"

"It is really quite simple. I have a crystal, and with it we will discover the extent of your power. That is, if you have any."

Regan frowned. "A crystal?"

"All you have to do is hold it. Its color change will reveal all." He crossed the cave, reached into another alcove, then returned to her, a rune-carved box in his hands.

Regan watched, suddenly dry-mouthed as he opened the box and removed a large diamond-shaped crystal. He looked straight into her eyes, smiled, and tossed it to her. She reacted without thought, reaching up and out for the crystal. Her hands closed around it and she drew it in close against her body.

The crystal was ice cold against her skin. Slowly it warmed, absorbing her heat. Regan stared down into its rainbow surface. Inside the crystal, a tiny light flickered. It danced from facet to facet and her gaze followed. The speck of light moved faster and faster, then suddenly flared. Intense pain shot through her body. She screamed as every muscle in her body locked, rigid. The crystal dropped from her immobile fingers and rolled toward Thomas's feet.

His mouth curved in a cruel sneer. "My master does not like to see his baubles treated such." He picked up the crystal

and with an almost gentle smile ran it down the length of her arm. Regan shrieked as pain seared her skin.

"My master is going to ask you questions and when he does you will answer."

"Go to hell," she gasped.

Thomas smiled in delight and held the crystal to her cheek. Regan's head jerked back as waves of agony ripped through her. Her screams filled the cave, ceasing only as she plunged into darkness.

The touch of a hand on her bare skin brought her back to consciousness. She hung from a chain suspended in mid-air, her toes just grazing the floor. Iron bands circled her wrists. She twisted them and then moaned as the bands dug into her skin with the pressure of her weight.

Thomas stood in front of her. Running his hand beneath her tunic, he slowly traced the mark of the blue flame.

Regan jerked her shoulder, then gasped as her muscles screamed in protest. He moved to stand in front of her, then trailed his finger down the length of her cheek. "I can do anything to you I wish." His hand went into his pocket and brought out the crystal.

"No," Regan moaned. "No."

"If I touch this to your forehead, it will probably drive you insane."

"No, please," she whispered.

Thomas's smile widened. "Yes, beg, and once my master is finished with you, I might let you live." He sighed and turned away. "But for now I must let him know you are here,

although I do not see why. You are no threat to us. Your Power is fit for only kitchen magic."

Thomas walked to the center of the cave and knelt. He drew a half-circle out from the wall and inside it traced a rune of black soot. "Peter is a weak fool. I have a real master now, one who knows how to use his power."

"Who?" Regan whispered, fearing she already knew the answer.

Thomas raised his head and smiled. "Soon you shall know." Turning his back on her, he continued drawing on the stone.

He stood and backed from the circle. Regan felt frigid wind stir her hair. In the rune-carved circle, the air churned and wavered. The cave wall rippled, and then she was looking beyond it and into a fire-lit room. A man stood on the other side. He stepped through the wall and it solidified behind him.

A black leather mask covered his face from his eyes to just above his mouth. From behind the mask, his green eyes flicked over her and he frowned. "What is this?" His voice was soft and warm.

"I sought to make her more—pliable," Thomas said with a quivering voice.

Regan saw the man's gaze go to the crystal Thomas still gripped. "You used the crystal on her?"

The blood drained from Thomas's face and he fell to his knees in front of the man. "Only a little, master."

The masked-man's full lips curved into a small smile. "How many times must you be told? Your pleasures must wait until I have mine."

"Yes, Master," Thomas whined.

"You know what you must do."

Whimpering, Thomas slowly lifted the crystal and held it against his left arm. His screams cut through the cave. Satisfaction rippled through Regan, followed by a cold sickness at her pleased gloating.

Thomas's screams continued as the man stared down at him with a small smile. Finally he said. "Enough."

Thomas dropped the crystal and collapsed onto his side.

"Try to remember." With a swirl of his black cape the man faced Regan. He waved his hand. The iron bands fell to the floor, and took her with them. Sprawled on the floor, Regan stared up at him.

"I do hate such barbaric treatment, but Thomas must have his fun," he said.

Regan pushed herself up to a sitting position, then slowly twisted her wrists inside the bands. "How about taking these off?"

He pointed at the bands. They fell and landed in her lap.

"Yes, we don't want you marred."

Regan looked down at her wrists and then rubbed them. She felt his fingers under her chin and her eyes were forced up, over black boots and trousers. Her gaze rose to his face, but she refused to meet his eyes, and instead focused on the ornate clasp holding the cape closed at his throat. It was an eagle with piercing, green-jeweled eyes. She heard him chuckle dryly.

"You are Regan." It wasn't a question, but a statement. "You have spirit, which is good, but do not anger me. I am Dirkk, Baron of Cornith."

"I figured as much," Regan said.

"So, Kelsey's sister Regan, what am I to do about you?"

Thomas limped to stand at Dirkk's side. "Her minimal power is no threat to us. I've probed her," he said.

"Minimal power?" Dirkk fixed his green stare on Thomas.

Thomas quailed beneath that look. "Yes, master."

Dirkk laughed. "What a fool you are. I can feel her power from here. She is shielded. They have let you see only what they choose to reveal. Isn't that right, my love?"

Regan pressed her lips together. Dirkk reached out and gripped Thomas's arm. "She's not under a compulsion spell?"

"There hasn't been time," Thomas whined.

"Time for your tricks, but no time for a compulsion spell."

"I'm sorry. I'll do it now."

"Never mind, I will do it."

Dirkk reached for her and Regan tried to scramble backwards, but her numb legs refused to obey. He placed his hands on each side of her head and closed his eyes. The runes on the stone floor glowed and pain stabbed through her head. She fought to keep the wall in place, but it crumbled, and Dirkk glided in.

He opened his eyes, smiled, and took a step back from her. "This is going to be quite fun. Shall we begin?"

For the next hour he fired question after question at her, and against her will her lips formed the answers he sought.

The mage leaned close as she talked of Zara and her mind-linking with all creatures. "Can you link with my pets?"

"I don't know," Regan said.

"But Angus thinks it is likely?"

"Yes," Regan said through stiff lips, angry tears of frustration running down her cheeks. "Why do you ask me these questions? You could easily find the answers in my mind."

Dirkk leaned forward and licked a tear from her cheek. "But it's more fun this way." Regan's skin crawled at his touch. "Have plans been made to test your powers?"

Regan closed her eyes and clamped her lips together.

"Regan," Dirkk said softly. "You have to answer. The pain gives you no choice." He waved his hand in front of her face, and inside her head white-hot agony speared each cell.

God! Peter, help me, she silently cried. She opened her mouth and screamed. Through a red haze she saw Dirkk wave his hand again, and the pain subsided as quickly as it came.

Dirkk watched her, a feral cat playing with a mouse. A small smile curved his mouth. "I admire your fortitude, and it would be interesting to see how long you could last, but alas, I don't have the time," he said, turning his back on her.

"Thomas, you need practice. Strengthen the spell."

"It may damage her mind."

Dirkk shrugged. "So be it."

Regan's stomach rolled. "No," she blurted.

"No what?"

"No plans have been made to test my ability."

"And why is that?" Dirkk asked.

"Because, besides Angus, no one knows."

Dirkk leaned close and stared into her face. "Why are you keeping it a secret? Do you and the dwarf have your own plans?"

Regan glared at him. "Of course not. I just wasn't ready to tell Peter."

Dirkk laughed. "You have feelings for that upstart mage. Does he feel the same?"

"No," Regan whispered. "He cares nothing for me."

Dirkk turned, his cape swirling around his feet. "I know you tell the truth; you have no choice. What a pity. I could have used you against him." He crossed to stare down into the glowing coals of the brazier. "Never mind that he doesn't know, for he will, and quite soon."

"What do you mean?"

Dirkk faced her. "This is what you will do..."

"I will do nothing to help you," Regan cut in.

Dirkk and Thomas exchanged looks and smiled. "You will, for you have no choice," he repeated.

"I will tell them of this."

Dirkk, Baron of Cornith, crossed to Regan and traced her cheekbone with his fingernail and then smiled. "You can't tell what you don't remember."

Chapter 16

REGAN FELT A breeze stir the hair on the nape of her neck and turned. Peter stood in the tent entrance. His body was a dark elongated shadow framed against the brightness of the afternoon sun.

"How did it go?" he said.

"Fine. Thomas tried a few tricks, but I believe he thinks I've little or no power."

"Good. Then that is what Dirkk will think. Did Thomas say he needed to work with you again?"

Regan grinned. "He didn't ask for a repeat performance."

"A rider arrived from the castle while you were with Thomas. Tessa will see you today."

"Queen Tessa?"

"It is the only Tessa I know," Peter said. "Be ready to leave in ten minutes."

Her mouth dropped open. "Ten minutes? But I don't have anything to wear."

Peter smiled with a shake of his head. "Why do women always say that?"

Regan bristled. "I can't speak for all women," she emphasized the word, "but for me it's the truth."

"Kelsey will see to your needs once we are at the castle." He stepped back and dropped the tent flap.

Ten minutes isn't even enough time to rebraid my hair. Regan flopped onto her cot. So, I'm going to a castle for to meet a queen, just like "Puss In Boots." What does one do

when one meets a queen? Do I bow? No. Wait. In "The Three Musketeers," all the ladies curtsied.

She scrambled to her feet and faced the stump holding the silver basin. Grabbing both sides of an imaginary skirt, she placed her right foot behind her left ankle and bent her knees. "So happy to meet you, Your Majesty," she said, then frowned. "So do I look her in the eye, or lower my head?"

"Shaking her hand will do just fine." Peter's voice said from behind her. "After all, she has known Kelsey these past seven years."

Regan whirled and faced him, blood rushing into her cheeks. "Have you ever heard of knocking?"

"It is a little hard to knock on a tent's flap," he said.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

"I forgot to remind you to wear the moonstone ear drops."

She glanced down at her pants and shirt. "They really don't go with my outfit."

Peter's gaze flicked over her. "Just wear them, please." He stepped backwards into the sunlight and dropped the flap again.

Regan found the velvet bag and poured the earrings into her palm. Staring down at the milk-white stones she wondered why they were so important to Peter. As she raked everything back into the middle of the blanket, her notebook of jingles popped into view. She picked it up and flipped through the first pages, laughing at her first smudged sketches and the silly verses printed beside them. "God, was I really that bad? I'm surprised I ever got hired at all." She continued to skim her earlier work and halfway through the

book her laughter changed to a warm feeling of pride and accomplishment. "I am good!" she said, then closed the notebook and tossed it back into the middle of the pile.

When the notebook landed, it opened and a sudden breeze fanned the pages. They stopped at a drawing of a basset hound. She looked closer at the advertisement. It was one of her first, for a doggie deodorant called Canine Sublime. She picked up the notebook and carried it to the light pouring through the open tent flap. The drawing was dated five years ago, but it looked like Maggie. She had even taken the time to color it in with pencils, something she rarely did. A shiver ran the length of her backbone and she slammed the notebook shut. Okay, so it's a basset hound. No biggie; there are lots of basset hounds out there ... but basset hounds with a sprinkling of black freckles on a white nose and one white paw? She stared down at the notebook in her hand, then shrugged and stuck it in the pants pocket.

Regan walked back to the cot, retied the bundle, and pushed it back under the cot with her foot.

"Rae, are you coming?" Kelsey asked from behind her.

Regan turned. Her sister stood just inside the tent's entrance. Regan sat down on the edge of the cot. "Do you think I'd pass up a chance to meet a queen? Just let me get these dang earrings in." She tossed her braid over her shoulder, then pulled the back off one of the earrings.

"Here, let me help," Kelsey said, crossing to her. She took the earring and held it up to the sun's rays. "I'd forgotten how beautiful they are." She tilted Regan's head and inserted the first earring.

"How could you forget? You're always wearing the pendant." She turned her head so Kelsey could get to the other ear.

Kelsey inserted the other earring, then sat back on her heels. "Yes, but I haven't taken the time to really look at it in years."

Over Kelsey's shoulder, Regan saw Rourk poke his head inside the tent. "Are you ladies ready? It is not nice to keep the queen waiting."

Regan's eyebrows shot upwards. "Is she waiting for us right now?"

Kelsey scowled over her shoulder at Rourk. "No. Our meeting isn't until this afternoon."

Rourk grinned. "Oops, sorry. I didn't realize Regan would be nervous."

Regan stuck her nose in the air and waved a hand regally in his direction. "Me, nervous? No way. Why, I meet royalty all the time. Just last week I dined with a duchess."

Rourk's grin widened. "A duchess? I'm impressed." Then he stage-whispered to Kelsey. "What's a duchess?"

Regan and Kelsey laughed. "Well, in this case, Duchess is my neighbor's cat," Regan said in between laughs.

"Can I be let in on the source of amusement?" Peter asked from behind Rourk.

The sisters just giggled louder.

"Angus has the horses saddled if you are ready," Peter said.

Rourk stepped aside and swept them a grand bow. "After you, ladies."

Still smothering laughter, Kelsey and Regan exited the tent.

REGAN SWAYED IN the saddle, keeping time with Gilda's rolling gait. Peter glanced back at her and she waved lazily in his direction.

She turned in her saddle. Kelsey and Rourk rode abreast, their legs almost touching. Over Rourk's shoulder, a pointed white nose with black freckles scouted the wind. Kelsey glanced up, met her sister's eyes, smiled and waved.

"Maggie told me she wanted to come, so I told Angus," Gilda mind-sent to Regan.

"I didn't know horses could talk to dogs." Regan was surprised.

"It is sometimes difficult, but possible if you really listen." Gilda said smugly.

Regan leaned forward and scratched between Gilda's ears. "How far is it to Raya?"

The mare shook her mane. "I don't know. I've never been there. Shall I ask Skylar?"

"No. I don't really care. This is the most peace I've felt since coming through the rift."

Camp was a mile behind them and they were climbing. The planted fields gave way to a trellis of vines. Regan turned to Angus who rode beside her. "Are those grapes?"

"Wine grapes," the dwarf nodded. "The Rayan monks make a good vintage, although I prefer mead myself."

Regan grinned. "I can picture you sitting before a roaring fire, a pipe in one hand and a mug of mead in the other."

Angus scowled. "It has been a long time. Too long."

"Tell me about Raya." she said.

"Raya is the only civilized city in Daradawn," he told her. "It was founded some 200 years ago by Ivor De'Amberville and his followers. Ivor was Queen Tessa's grandfather's grandfather."

"There were no people here?"

Angus snorted. "Oh, there were people, but they were a backward lot. Where Raya is, there was a city, if you could call it such. My Da' told me of his father visiting it when he was ten or twelve summers old. There were no paved streets, just tramped aisles of mud with wide ditches on each side. The ditches were flowing sewers, cache pots for everyone's garbage. My Da' said chamber pots were dumped from windows and tossed from open doors with no care as to if their contents reached the ditches or not.

"In the spring, when the rains fell, the ditches overflowed into the streets and became the feeding and breeding ground for rats. In the summer the flies were so thick you had to cover your face to breathe."

"Didn't they have a king?"

He frowned again. "Yes, but he cared only for his own pleasures. There wasn't a comely maid safe in the whole of Daradawn and, if the rumors are true, lad either."

"So Ivor De'Amberville was a conqueror?"

He shrugged. "It depends on whom you ask. When he and his men entered the city, they met with no resistance, just vacant stares. He marched into the castle, roused the king from some serving wench's bed and demanded his surrender." Angus chuckled. "The only skirmish he had was

with the old king's daughter. She met him at the head of the stairs, carrying a broad-sword as tall as she. With her first thrust she lost her balance, fell into his arms and into his heart. Her name was Raya."

"Raya," Regan repeated softly. "So, what's it like now?"

"It prospered and all of Daradawn with it ... until seven years ago."

"Dirkk?"

Angus nodded.

"Do a lot of people live in Raya?" she asked.

"Seven years ago there were people, but not overly so, except on market days. Today it is overrun with those who've been chased from their homes by Ru'taha and Black Vipers. The bailey around the castle is a city of tents. The extra stalls in the stables house entire families. Every inn is full, even the small spaces below the rafters."

She shook her head. "How do they feed and clothe them all?"

"By special decree of the queen," he chuckled, "and the fat-bellied merchants hate it. The queen's own bankers keep track of the purchases and needs of each family. Tessa promised to reimburse each merchant with the product's cost." His grin spread to a full-fledged smile. "But not after the merchants have padded it to assure themselves a tidy profit."

She returned his smile. "I can see that would cause problems."

"Most merchants are fine. They understand that we must pull together until Dirkk's defeat, but with each weekly

audience the grumbling grows louder. The townspeople want the country people back on their farms and out of the streets."

Angus halted Zax. "Look." He pointed. "Just beyond those clouds, you can see the ten towers of the castle."

She followed his pointing finger with her gaze. Through the wispy clouds she saw ten gray turrets rising into the sky. A pennant waved in the air above each.

"See where Peter waits upon the next rise?"

She nodded.

"From there you can see the gates of Raya."

AS THEY NEARED the top of the rise, Regan saw Peter dismount and walk toward a rock outcropping. He climbed to its flat top and stared eastward.

Angus halted Zax next to Skylar, but Regan rode Gilda to the edge of the precipice and looked down into a spreading, green valley. "Is this a different valley?"

"Just an extension of Fertile Isle," Angus said.

The valley was the shape of a half-moon tipped on its side and surrounded by sheer cliffs. Beyond the cliffs, the sun glistened on a sapphire sea.

In the middle of the valley was Raya. A high wall started at the sea's cliff on one end of the city and curved until it reached the cliff on the other side.

The city was laid out like a large wagon wheel, with connecting streets making up its spokes. In the hub of the wheel was a castle.

Angus rode Zax up beside her. "The outer circle is the marketplace, as well as the inns and taverns. The streets

connecting it with the next circle are lined with merchants. In the next circle, the nobility have their town dwellings. In the center is the castle and its grounds." He pointed to the area below the castle itself. "See the tan area that surrounds the castle?" She nodded. "Those are tents."

"It looks like one solid tent," she said. "How do they walk between them?"

"There's enough room, as long as you walk single file and not abreast," Angus said.

Regan looked up at Peter. He stood, eyes closed, his head and arms raised to the sky. As she watched, he bent, scooped a handful of dirt, then stood and tossed it into the air. A wind sprang up, grabbed the dirt, and swirled it around him in an aerial dance.

"What is he doing?" she asked.

"He gives thanks to have returned to Raya in good health," Angus answered, then frowned. "There are many who haven't."

Kelsey and Rourk rode up beside Skylar and slid from their horses. Kelsey pulled Maggie from Rourk's backpack. In silence they climbed to join Peter, Maggie trailing behind.

"Would you like to join them?" Angus asked.

"Yes, I would."

Regan and Angus dismounted and climbed to where the other three stood. Peter met Regan's eyes as she reached the top. He reached for her hand and Kelsey took her other. They linked hands with Rourk and Angus. Maggie sat between Regan and Kelsey. Her brown gaze rested first on one face and then the other. Regan smiled at the dog, then closed her

eyes as Peter had done. She felt the hands she clasped raise hers into the air. All was quiet, except for the whistling wind, but from deep inside she felt their thanks go skyward; in return a feeling of peace came over her. A wondering smile curved her lips. She opened her eyes and saw the same smile on each face. Still in silence, they dropped their hands and descended to the horses.

RAYA'S CITY GATE loomed before them. Peter's gaze flicked over a tall cylindrical tower to the left of the gate. He frowned. "There does not seem to be anyone in the gate tower. I knew it was a mistake to trust the merchants' guild."

Angus snorted. "Whose ever turn it is probably had a shop crisis."

"Well, do you at least think they are barred?"

Angus shrugged. "I'll check." He dismounted, strode to the wooden gate, and pushed. The two large halves separated an inch, then swung back together. Angus faced them. "By the devil god's horns! It isn't even secured!"

Peter's jaw clenched. "Just a minute and we will help."

They dismounted and joined Angus at the gate. Kelsey helped Rourk slip from the backpack's straps, then set it on the ground and freed Maggie.

Rourk, Peter, and Angus placed their backs against the gate, while Regan and Kelsey leaned in and pressed their palms against the sun-warmed wood.

"On the count of three," Angus said. "One ... two ... three."

They pushed and the gate inched opened.

Regan pushed in the center where the gates joined. As the gap widened, she heard the bleating of lambs and the squawking of chickens. The gate slowly reached the halfway mark and Regan saw a wide square of trampled dirt. Wagons, wooden carts with bright-striped tops and makeshift cages filled with every farm animal imaginable crowded the area. The odor of animal dung, ripe fruits, and cooking meats assailed her and she lifted one hand from the gate and pressed the back of it against her nose. Men and women stood on the seats and backs of wagons, shouting the glory of their wares to a milling throng. One woman turned her head their way and her mouth opened. Regan couldn't hear her scream, but the look of fear on her face was clear. She pointed and a crowd of faces turned in their direction.

A man standing on the wagon next to the woman saw them and smiled. He turned and shook his fist at his wailing wife. Ten or twenty men surged forward to help with the gate and separated Regan and Kelsey from the others.

Kelsey shouted into Regan's ear. "I'll get the horses."

Regan nodded. She turned, coaxed Maggie to a relatively quiet corner and knelt beside her. Stroking the basset hound's head, Regan whispered into her ear. "Everything's fine, baby." Maggie's body started to quiver and Regan looked up to find staring women and children circling them.

"What kind of dog is that?" a little boy cried, then squatted to meet Maggie's eyes. Maggie's tail beat a rapid greeting on the packed dirt.

"Can I touch him?" a little girl with bright-blue eyes asked.

"One question at a time," Regan said. "First, Maggie is a basset hound, and he's a she." She raised her eyes to the women surrounding her. "And she'd loved to be petted if it's all right with your mothers."

"Mama, please?" a chorus of children's voices begged.

The women exchanged unsure glances, then a lady with blonde braids tied back with a red scarf slowly nodded. The blue-eyed little girl knelt at Maggie's head and laid a chubby hand between the dog's ears. The dog's brown gaze met hers and, quick as a wink, her tongue came out and lapped the child's cheek.

"Maggie, no!" Regan said, "I'm so sorry." She looked up and was surprised to see each woman's mouth curved in a smile.

"It's fine, Miss," the blonde woman said. "It's not the first doggie kiss my Anna has received. I am Caroline Witherspoon," she added, then extended her hand. As if it was a signal of acceptance, names and hands were extended. Regan shook hand after hand, and soon gave up trying to remember names. In the circle of children Maggie turned over and presented her tummy for rubs. The children laughed with glee.

"Hey! Hey, I say. You can't just come in here." Regan heard from behind her, and turned to see a short figure waddling her way at a fast pace.

The man jiggled to a halt in front of Regan and placed both hands on his hips. "Who are you?" he puffed. Not waiting for an answer, he wheezed on. "I'm in charge of the gate today, and I didn't okay your entrance."

Regan opened her mouth to answer just as Peter crossed to stand behind the portly man.

"Yes, Merchant Rastley," he said. "You did not okay our entrance. That would be quite impossible, since you were not at the gate."

Merchant Rastley whipped around. "High Mage, I didn't know it was you," he said with a quick bend from the waist.

Peter crossed his arms and looked pointedly at the gate's guard tower. Regan saw Merchant Rastley's face flush.

"There was a crisis at my shop," he whined, then bowed again.

A disgusted snort sounded from behind the merchant, and he turned on his heels.

"See, I told you," Angus said over his shoulder to Rourk.

Rourk said nothing, just stared at the bobbing merchant.

"Master Angus, Master Rourk," Rastley said, with two more quick bows. "The queen will be pleased to see you. You've good news, I hope?"

Reins jingled and Kelsey walked toward them leading the horses.

"Queen's-Commander," Merchant Rastley said, bowing low and remaining there. "I must tell the queen."

Kelsey frowned. "Yes, and while you're at it you can tell her that no one was at the gate when we arrived," she snapped.

"Anything you say, Queen's-Commander," he said, backing into the crowd, still bending up and down at the waist.

Kelsey watched, her face twisted with disgust as the merchant pivoted, then waddled away. "How can they be so

stupid?" she said into the air, then turned and pointed to two young men. "You and you, take the horses to the Queen's stables."

Regan watched in amazement as two strapping lads jumped forward at her sister's command.

The tableau broken, the crowd began firing questions at Kelsey.

"How goes it, Queen's-Commander? Has Dirkk been routed?"

"Is this your sister, the one who's to be our deliverer?"

Kelsey lifted her arms. "All fair questions," she said, "but the queen awaits, and it's to her I must first report."

"She's right," a voice cried. "Let them through."

A tall giant of a man stepped forward. "I'll clear a path for you, Queen's-Commander."

"Thank you, Jake, but that won't be necessary, will it?" she asked the crowd, then smiled as it parted before them.

"Here, Miss," the woman who had identified herself as Caroline said, handing Regan a length of braided leather. "It's for the dog. I wouldn't want you to become separated."

"Thank you," Regan said, kneeling to place it loosely around Maggie's neck. Flanked by Rourk and Peter, she followed Kelsey toward the castle.

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At the top of a green-covered hill, the castle hovered protectively over Raya.

To the side of the first gate was a square stone structure. Towers rose from each of its four sides. As they approached,

archers stepped from the tower's shadows and looked down, bows held ready. When they saw Kelsey, they relaxed their bows at their sides and bowed. "Queen's-Commander, it is good to see you," the nearest said.

"It's good to be home, Rube," Kelsey said.

The man smiled and turned away. When he turned back he held a square mirror instead of the bow. "I'll signal them to lower the bridge." Three flashes crossed the moat and four returned. Regan heard the creak of chains, and the bridge lowered across the moat.

"How many walls are there?" Regan asked.

"An inner and an outer," Kelsey said.

Regan's footsteps echoed dully on the planks as they crossed a wide moat. The unmistakable smell of fish and seaweed floated up to her from the water below. They moved through the outer gate, and into the first courtyard ... no, bailey, she remembered from her medieval history lessons.

The bailey was a village of tents, and tethered in front of each were goats and cows. Chickens and geese squawked from wooden crates.

Regan's fingers tightened on Maggie's leash as they zig-zagged around firepits. Tripods and black kettles hung over the pits, steam rising upward and bringing the smell of simmering meat and vegetables.

People turned and pointed as they passed. Many waved and shouted, but she couldn't hear their words over the din.

Soon the second wall loomed before them. Two more towers guarded its gate. As they approached, the gate swung

open. As the six of them passed through, Kelsey nodded to the two soldiers who held it open.

The inner bailey was as crowded as the outer. Regan saw a stable as they pushed their way through, as well as a laundry and what looked to be a communal bathing room. In a small open square on the left, young men and boys lunged and parried with wooden swords.

As they climbed the area opened and Regan viewed what gave the hill its green color. Row after row of green vines, purple gourds hanging from them, as well as carrots and corn, terraced the hill. Where the planted rows ended, marble steps led up to polished wooden doors. Red-liveried soldiers stood erect at each of the doors.

Peter leaned close to Regan's ear. "Queen Tessa wishes us to freshen up in our rooms. She will first meet with Kelsey, then us." Regan nodded and Peter led the way up the flight of steps.

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Regan leaned over the waist-high gray stone wall of the tower balcony and looked down. She shook her head at the closely pitched tents. The narrow alleys between them were packed with people. Women stirred kettles and ladled bowls full. Children darted underfoot, in and out of tents. How can they possibly know whose tent is whose? she wondered.

Still shaking her head, she walked the few steps it took to circle to the tower's far side. Wind whipped strands of hair across her face as she looked beyond the city's walls to the stretch of sea. She followed the blue expanse with her eyes

until the sea and sky became one azure line. Filling her nose and lungs with the familiar odors, she licked salt spray from her lips. I wonder how my roses are doing, she thought fleetingly, then laughed. I'm sure they're fine. I've only been gone three days. It just seems so much longer.

She turned and glanced through the glass balcony doors into the empty room. What was taking Kelsey so long? She crossed the balcony and entered the tower room. A four poster bed dominated the room. She smiled down at the two gowns that lay on top of the ivory and pale-green quilt.

Earlier, a red-faced Kelsey had watched her personal maid, Mary-Anne, pull them from among the many hanging in a standing wardrobe. "I have to attend a lot of formal dinners," she'd blurted to Regan. Regan, for once, had kept her mouth shut and just smiled.

The setting sun's gold rays filtered through the balcony door and across the bed. The gowns, one emerald green and the other the exact shade of blue as Kelsey's eyes, shimmered where the bands of light touched. Regan ran fingertips over the pale-blue gown. Wearing this, even I'd feel like royalty.

From across the room someone rapped on the door. "Yes?" Regan said.

"It's Mary-Anne Rastley, miss. I'm ready to prepare your bath."

"Come in."

The door opened and Mary-Anne strode into the room at the head of a troop of scarlet-liveried men. The men toted a bucket of water in each hand. The maid led the way to a

freestanding screen. She pulled it toward her and displayed a small alcove and oval tub. Placing her hands on her hips, the little general tapped her foot and glared at the men. One by one, they hurried to the tub and emptied their pails. Then, with a quick glance at Mary-Anne, they scurried from the room.

Regan watched in amazement as Mary-Anne, apparently satisfied with the men's pace, crossed to examine a table full of crystal bottles. She felt her skin prickle and, looking up, caught the gaze of the last man emptying his buckets. He was young and blonde with a pair of startling blue eyes, eyes that looked at her with unconcealed awe. Regan's cheeks heated under his admiring stare.

From behind her she heard a muffled exclamation of disgust and turned to see Mary-Anne frowning at the young man's appraisal. The maid crossed to him and flapped her apron in his face. The young man jumped and drew back from the flapping apron. His face flushed scarlet and he turned and rushed from the room, the empty buckets bouncing off the sides of his legs. Mary-Anne hurried to the door and closed it behind him with a firm shove.

"They are not too bright," she sniffed, "but they serve their purpose."

The maid returned to the dressing table lined with miniature crystal vases. The liquids inside were all colors of the rainbow.

"Mary-Anne Rastley, you said."

"Yes, Merchant Rastley is my father. Now, miss, you get out of those clothes while I scent your bath."

As Regan skimmed out of her clothes. Mary-Anne picked up each vase. Regan watched as each time she frowned and put the vase back down.

"It just isn't right. For you we need something very special." Then Mary-Anne smiled. "Yes, this is it," she said, pouring a pink liquid into the water. The sweet scent of roses filled the room.

"Roses," Regan said. "My favorite."

"The essence of romance," Mary-Anne said and winked.

"But..."

"Into the water, miss," the maid interrupted, "it's cooling."

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Regan squeezed the sponge and sighed as scented water cascaded down over her knees. "If I died at this moment I'd die a happy woman."

The screen that Mary-Anne pushed back in place as she left pictured a meadow, the field a solid mass of yellow and blue flowers. In its center a unicorn stood, its head lifted to the sun. On a small table next to the tub, Mary-Anne had piled white fluffy towels.

"I won't need those," Regan said, "I'm never getting out of here."

"Well, then, you'd better make room for me," Kelsey said, peeking around the screen. Regan grinned at her sister. "Kel, I didn't hear you come in."

"Of course you didn't. You were too busy talking to yourself."

"So how did it go?"

"I'm not telling you a thing until you get out and let me have my turn. I've gone longer without a real bath than you."

Regan stuck her tongue out at her sister, then stood and reached for a towel. Wrapping the towel around her, she turned and surprised a strange expression on her sister's face. "What's wrong?" she asked, glancing down at her towel-saronged body.

"Nothing," Kelsey said. "I was just wondering why you've so much on top and I've so little."

Regan laughed as she stepped from the tub. "Yes, but you did get all that leg."

"Well, then I guess I'm lucky Rourk's a leg man," Kelsey said, stripping off shirt and pants. Tossing them in a corner, she stepped into the tub and sighed as she sat down and settled back.

"Is it warm enough? I could go get some more hot water," Regan said.

"Mary-Anne's on her way up with some."

"Hope you don't mind the rose scent. Mary-Anne said it was me."

Kelsey squeezed the sponge, trailing water along one arm. "It's fine."

"Okay, now tell about the meeting with the queen," Regan said, toweling off a leg.

Kelsey grimaced. "The merchants are being a pain. They want their town back."

"What did Queen Tessa say?"

Kelsey shrugged her bare shoulders. "What can she say? She understands their frustration. She's feeling it too."

Regan bent at the waist and wrapped her long hair in another towel. "What's the next step?" she asked, straightening.

Kelsey looked up and met her sister's eyes. "You."

Regan held her sister's gaze. "What do you mean?"

"You and Peter are our next step. Isn't that why you're here?"

Regan shook her head. "You know it isn't. I came because of you."

"But you will help, won't you?"

Regan frowned. "What can I do?"

"That's what we're going to find out. Peter and Queen Tessa are waiting for us downstairs."

"Right now?" Regan squeaked.

Kelsey nodded.

"Then why are you lolling around in that tub—and what am I going to wear? That dress on the bed is a little much for a strategy meeting."

"Nothing, including Dirkk himself, was going to keep me from taking a bath," Kelsey said, standing and grabbing a towel.

"Miss," Mary-Anne called from the door. "I've brought you some more hot water."

"Sorry, Mary-Anne. I'm already out. Give it to someone else."

"As you wish, Queen's-Commander."

Regan saw Kelsey smile at the panic she knew showed on her face. "Don't worry, I've got something for you to wear," Kelsey said, wrapping the towel around her and crossing to

the wardrobe. She opened the door and pulled out a simple, straight cut, mint green gown. Regan walked to her side and took the dress from her.

"It's so light. It almost feels like cotton."

"I don't know what it's made from. I found it in the market place." She bent and rummaged in the bottom of the wardrobe, then straightened and tossed something else Regan's way.

Regan automatically reached out and made the catch. She looked down at what Kelsey had tossed. It was a pair of satin slippers the same color as the dress.

"They're definitely in-house wear, so don't do any hiking in them," Kelsey said.

Regan held the dress up to her body. It fell in soft folds to her ankles.

"It's not supposed to be floor length, but it wasn't made for a shrimp," Kelsey said.

"That's okay. We both know it'll be too tight in the bust," Regan responded wickedly. "Mary-Ann took my underwear. So what do I wear underneath?"

Kelsey smiled. "Now that's a good question. They don't have bras here. They've never even heard of one. It hasn't been a problem for me, but you..."

"I've gone braless before..."

"Name one time."

"Stinson Beach, summer of seventy-three."

Kelsey laughed. "I remember that. You were doing tequila shots."

Regan smiled wryly. "The first and last time I did tequila shots." She dropped her towel. "Well, let's try it on."

"Hey, just a minute. We have some type of underclothing."

"If you hand me a corset I'm outta here."

"Not even close." Kelsey walked to a large chest that sat against the far wall. She opened it and pulled out a white garment.

"What's that?" Regan asked.

Kelsey tossed it to her. "It's a chemise."

"It's awfully sheer," Regan said, holding it up to the light.

"It's better than nothing."

Regan pulled the chemise over her head and down across her breasts. The neckline was rounded and low. "I hope the neck on that dress is pretty high," she said, glancing down at the revealed swell of flesh.

"Afraid not. You'll just have to keep your shoulders back."

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Her back hugging the wall and her eyes measuring each step, Regan held her skirt up above her knees with both hands and followed Kelsey down the winding narrow stairs. Reaching the bottom she let out a loud sigh and let the skirt fall to the floor.

Kelsey glanced in her direction and grinned. "It's something else you get used to."

"Right, like a sore tooth," Regan said.

Turning left, Kelsey led the way down a wide hall. Floating globes hovering above lit before them, then winked out as they passed.

Kelsey stopped before a dark wood door and knocked. "This is Queen Tessa's private solar."

"Come in." A lilting voice filtered through the door and Kelsey twisted the knob.

Peter and a small woman Regan recognized from Kelsey's earlier shared memories stood in front of a fireplace. The woman smiled as they entered and beckoned them forward.

Regan swallowed and walked toward the woman. "Your Majesty," she said, still not sure if she should curtsy.

Queen Tessa reached out and grabbed Regan's hands. "At last we meet," she smiled. "Kelsey has told me so much about you in the last seven years. I just wish it were under better circumstances. Come, sit down. Peter, get the ladies a glass of wine."

Regan seated herself on a deep cushioned chair and covertly examined Daradawn's queen.

Queen Tessa De'Amberville was tiny with a cloud of brown hair and gold-flecked brown eyes. She had an upturned nose liberally sprinkled with freckles and a wide mouth. She wore the same style of gown as they, with nothing to brand her a queen, not even a crown. Regan looked up and met the queen's amused smile.

"I do not look much like a storybook queen, do I?"

Regan's mouth fell open. "I'm sorry..."

"It is quite all right. I have always been a bit unconventional."

Peter stopped in front of Regan with a glass of wine, glanced down, then gasped.

Tessa's gaze flew to him. "Are you okay?" she asked, then saw where his eyes lingered. "I see you are just fine." Her smile broadened into a grin.

Regan lifted her hand to rest against her bare neckline. "The gown was made for Kelsey," she murmured.

"Never apologize for God's gifts," Queen Tessa said. "Peter, put your eyes back in your head and sit down. One would think you had never seen a lady's bosom before."

Peter handed Regan the glass of wine and their fingertips touched. A tingling shock traveled up her arm to her shoulder and she quickly dropped her gaze. She heard Peter gulp before he moved on to Kelsey and handed her a glass.

"So what have you decided?" Kelsey asked.

Queen Tessa fixed Regan with a piercing look. "It seems Regan is our secret weapon, now that Thomas believes she has no power."

Regan looked from Peter to the queen. "But what...?"

"Your book of power spells..." Peter cut in.

"But I told you. They're advertising slogans and they'll be of no use here."

"But if you wrote those, then you can write more," Tessa said. "Ones that will work here."

Regan mulled that over for a moment before replying. "I suppose I could, but what would they need to do?"

"Stop Dirkk," Tessa said shortly.

"I'll need some time and a quiet place to work," Regan said.

"The quiet place I can give you," Tessa said. "Time, I'm afraid, is limited."

Peter looked at her. "You have had news?"

Tessa nodded. "Only moments ago. Dirkk has called all the Ru'taha and Black Vipers to him at Castle Crag. I fear he's planning his final assault."

Kelsey stood and walked to the fireplace. "Then we must be ready for him."

Peter turned to Regan. "I sense whatever your power spells do, I must be a part of it."

Regan stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Separate we can be overcome, but together we are invincible."

"How do you know?" Regan said.

"It is not what I know. It is what I feel," he said.

"I'd be happy for any help. We can work on it tonight. How about in..."

The door swung open and crashed against the wall, cutting off Regan's words. Kelsey flung herself in front of Tessa, a knife appearing out of nowhere in her hand. Peter spun to face the door, arms held high, and Regan felt the sudden tingle of the Power being summoned.

"Your Highness," a trembling young page cried, turning ashen at the sight of Kelsey's blade. "The merchants are in the throne room. They've heard the latest rumor of Dirkk, and are demanding that Kelsey's sister address them."

The queen stood. "I was afraid of that. Then we must give them what they want."

Regan paled and sank deeper into the chair.

"What is wrong?" Tessa asked, seeing Regan's white, stricken face. "You only have to say a few words."

"It is not possible." Peter said. "I will talk to them."

Tessa shook her head. "It has to be Regan, for they know of my hopes."

"Regan cannot..."

"I will," Regan interrupted Peter.

"Are you sure?" Kelsey asked.

Regan stood. "I can do it."

Tessa looked from Regan to Kelsey. "Good," she said, "Come with me."

Chapter 17

REGAN FOLLOWED QUEEN Tessa down a hallway tiled with squares of ivory marble. "I can do this," she murmured. "How many merchants can there be? Ten, maybe twelve."

"What?" Kelsey asked.

Regan turned her head and smiled half-heartedly at her sister. "Nothing, just talking to myself."

Kelsey's tense face made Regan's heart start to thud. She doesn't think I can do it. Well, even if I can't, what's the big deal? I'll just let Kelsey step in.

The queen turned left into another hall that ended before an arched door of polished wood.

"She's no more than a child herself," a shrill voice said from the other side of the door. "What can she do against Dirkk?"

Regan's hands began to tremble. She closed her eyes and pressed her palms against her thighs.

"You don't have to do this," Kelsey said. "We can find another way."

From beside her, Regan heard Tessa's quick intake of breath. "I can do it. It's just another sales presentation, but this time I'm selling myself." Squaring her shoulders, she turned to the queen. "What are we waiting for?"

Peter stepped forward and pushed the doors open.

The buzz of conversation stopped. At least forty heads swiveled their way.

Oh God.

Tessa, her head held high and a confident smile on her lips, entered the room. Regan's feet refused to move.

"What's wrong?" Peter asked.

"There's so many of them. I thought with such a small town..."

Kelsey poked Regan in the back. "Move. Just look at Tessa, no one else. You can't back out now."

Regan shook her head. "I can't talk to them. I can't."

Peter hooked his arm through Regan's. "Lean on me. I will get you through them. We will worry about you speaking once we get to the throne."

Tessa glanced back over her shoulder and saw Regan had not moved. She faced forward again, took a few more steps, then halted, and shook a portly lady's hand. Regan fastened her gaze on the small erect figure and started forward.

Merchants bowed or curtsied as she passed, and she saw mixtures of hope and cynicism on their faces. Sweat broke out on her forehead and trickled into her eyes. She blinked, ignoring the sting. Looking down at her feet, she concentrated on making them continue forward.

Peter tugged on her arm and she looked up. Over Tessa's shoulder she saw a polished wood throne. Patterned swirls embedded with gold decorated the throne's arms and back. Tessa turned, met Regan's gaze, and smiled encouragingly. Regan just stared at her, and the queen's brows drew together in a troubled vee. A hand pushed gently into the middle of Regan's back.

The queen turned to the merchants. Regan took a deep breath and turned also. Her stomach immediately twisted

with nausea. The faces before her blurred into one pale mass. Dimly she felt Kelsey and Peter take their places beside her. She jerked her gaze from the crowd and fastened it on Tessa's face.

The queen inclined her head to the crowd, then seated herself on the throne's red velvet cushion. She looked lost in the throne, like a child sitting in her father's chair.

Tessa's first words dispelled the child-like illusion with rapid clarity. "I have heard your concerns about Dirkk's latest foolishness." Her tone held mockery. "It frightened me so much I took time to enjoy a glass of wine with my special guest before coming to you."

The rustle of restless feet filled the room. The queen leaned forward. Her voice changed, becoming terse and commanding. "The hour is late. Tell me of your concerns."

A short round man dressed in scarlet and aglitter with jewels took a step forward. He looked familiar to Regan, then she remembered. He was the man from the marketplace. Rastley. The one who had been charged to guard the gate.

Rastley bent from his non-existent waist, a bow so low the gathered lace on his shirt cuffs brushed the floor. "Your Majesty, we know the hopes you've pinned on the Queen's-Commander's sister and you know we've always supported you..."

"As you did my father before me."

The pudgy little peacock bobbed again. "Yes, as we did your father, but the danger is more now than when your father ruled. Then Dirkk was just a minor irritation. Now he threatens our very lives daily!" He swept his arm in a broad

flourish to indicate the crowd. Murmured agreement followed the movement.

"Again I ask. Tell me what you wish," Queen Tessa said.

The merchant took a deep breath. "We know of your plans. We wish to hear them from the woman you've named our deliverer." He finished in a gush of words.

Deliverer? The word lashed at Regan. I'm no deliverer. What do they expect from me?

"But of course," Queen Tessa said. "Merchants of Raya, let me introduce to you Queen's-Commander Kelsey's sister, Regan."

The weight of a roomful of eyes fixed on Regan. Her heart pounded in her ears. She darted a glance at Kelsey, and then turned and looked at Peter. He frowned and reached toward her. She slowly shook her head, then pushed his hand aside and ran. Around her she heard gasps and then cries of outrage. Tears flooded her eyes.

Through the doors and down the hall she fled. Behind her she heard pursuing footsteps and Kelsey's voice, calling for her to stop.

She saw the Queen's solar and bolted inside. Her gaze scanned the room, then jerked back to a door almost hidden by a tapestry. She ran to it, yanked it open, and slammed it behind her.

Her heart danced a flamenco against her rib cage. Her trembling legs refused to support her, and she dropped to the ground and drew her knees to her chest. Pressing her forehead against them, she shuddered. How could she have been so stupid? She should have asked how many merchants

there were. What must the queen think of her now? She was probably drawing up her terms of surrender. Damn. What was she doing here? She and Kelsey. They should be on their way home. She pressed her lips tightly together. And they would be, just as soon as her legs stopped trembling and she could stand.

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Regan lifted her head from her knees. Before her was a world of green: spring-green grass, yellow-green bushes, and black-green trees that thrust upward toward open blue sky. This must be Tessa's private forest, where the unicorn was slain.

She climbed to her feet and, like a sailor answering a sweet siren's call, entered the greenness. She wandered among the trees. Stopping to touch a moisture-slick leaf, or bury her nose in spikes of fragrant trumpet-shaped blossoms every color of the rainbow, she moved forward until she found her way blocked by a high brick wall. Trailing a hand along its rough coolness, she followed it. The tropical forest ended at a wide, sun-filled meadow.

Shading her eyes against the brightness, she saw the wall joined another at the far side of the meadow. Regan looked down at the lush grass, then back toward where she guessed the door to be. They would be looking for her. Well, let them look. She couldn't face them, not yet. She kicked her feet free of her slippers. She laughed as the blades of grass tickled the curve of her instep. Bending, she picked up her slippers. Swinging them at her side, she walked to where the walls

connected, then pushed her backbone into their sun-baked junction.

She closed her eyes, and again saw Peter's reaching hand. Thoughts flooded her mind. How can I ever face him? He and Kelsey gave me every way out, but I didn't take it. I believed what they said, that because I had some kind of magical power, things would be different here. What a joke. I'm an ad exec with a weird birthmark, nothing more. What about the dragon and the mind-speaking? a voice in her head questioned. She shook her head. It didn't happen. I imagined it. None of this is happening. I'm sick. Probably at home, in bed, running a high temperature.

She opened her eyes and stared at a tall thicket. The thicket's leaves and branches rustled and she wondered with detached curiosity what animal hid there. Maybe it will eat me, and I will not have to face any of them again, she thought, laughing out loud at the absurdity of it all. Then, from the green-leafed wall, a spiraled gold horn emerged. Regan's eyes widened. She blinked and leaned forward, but it was still there.

"Are you well?" a warm thought questioned her. The rest of the unicorn, a male, emerged from the thicket and approached. Regan reached a hand to touch his luminous white mane, then drew her fingers back. The unicorn stepped closer and she stared into his sapphire eyes.

"I'm dreaming."

"No, you are not. I am real. You are real. Daradawn is real."

"Are you well?" he asked again.

"I am well," she sent.

"But your heart is troubled."

Regan's gaze dropped. "I've let my friends down."

The unicorn snorted in derision, and she looked up at him. He tossed his head. "If they are true friends, they will forgive you."

"I don't know how I can face them again."

"You will find a way." He tipped his golden horn in her direction. "I am Da'kar."

"I am Regan."

"There is magic in your soul, Regan, magic and purity."

She grimaced. "I don't know about that."

The unicorn shook his mane again. "I do. You will give us our world back."

Regan shook her head and laughed. "Me? I can't even talk to a group of people!"

"It is within you—Thea."

She drew back in surprise. "Thea? How did you know? I don't even know for sure. Maybe it was just a dream."

"Your dreams are not dreams. They are memories. You know it is so, and it is time you acknowledged your gifts. You will be Dirkk's undoing." Da'kar looked beyond her. "You and Desmond."

"Desmond? What do you mean?"

"He is here, and will explain."

"Who's here?" Regan asked, turning around. Peter stepped from the dense greenness into the sun. Regan watched in silence as he approached, then turned her back to him. "How did you find me?"

"Kelsey saw you enter the queen's room. There was only one place you could be."

"Why didn't she come? Wait, don't answer that. I know why. She didn't want to see her spineless sister." Regan laughed bitterly.

Peter shook his head and said softly. "I asked her to let me find you."

"Why?"

Peter ignored her question, his eyes on the motionless unicorn. "You were speaking to him?"

Regan dug her toes into the grass. "Yes."

"Your mind-link was not just with Zara?"

"No."

"How many animals can you bespeak?"

"All."

Peter turned to face her, their gazes locked. "All?"

Regan clasped her hands in front of her, then nodded.

"Both magic and mortal."

She saw Peter's lips tighten at her response. "How long have you known?"

"Since leaving Darrian. Angus suspected and asked me to try mind-linking with Gilda."

"When were you going to tell me ... You were going to tell me?"

"I think so."

Peter's eyebrows drew together. "You think so?"

Regan looked in the direction of the unicorn. "He's Desmond? Are you sure?"

"He is the one."

"What are you saying to him?" Peter asked, his voice rising with irritation.

Regan frowned at the interruption. "He says you're Desmond."

Peter's face paled. "I've never told anyone of my dream."

Regan stared into his eyes. "Do you dream of Thea and Dahlabar and a dragon..."

"Tell him who you are, Thea," Da'kar said.

Regan turned and answered the unicorn aloud. "I don't know if I should tell him."

"Tell me what?" Peter said.

"Tell him!"

"All right!" She turned to face Peter. "About a dream." The unicorn snorted and she frowned. "Okay, not a dream, a memory. I was—no, I am—Thea." Peter stared at her in silence. "I know it's hard to believe, but do you also dream of Mina, Cassius and the Royal Companions?"

Peter turned his back to her. "Your appearance is different, but my heart recognized you when we first met. I tried to tell myself it could not be true." He turned to face her. "But it is. You have haunted my dreams. And always, at the end, you plead with me to search—to find you."

He took a step toward her, raised a trembling hand, then stopped. "Have I found you? This time you are not a dream?"

"I don't think so." Regan pinched herself, and winced. "I wanted to believe I was dreaming, or hallucinating, but I'm not. You're real." She waved her hand. "All this is real."

"Daradawn's need has called and Thea has returned," Peter said. "Zara remembers you from before. Is Dahlabar once again returned to Daradawn?"

"I think Ben is Dahlabar."

Peter reached out and touched her cheek. "My heart pounds when you are near. I ache to hold you in my arms and kiss you until neither of us can breathe. Thea, Mina, Regan, I have loved you in so many lifetimes."

"I believe in reincarnation. I've always halfway believed the dreams I've had my whole life were true, so why didn't I know you until I was told by the unicorn?" Regan hesitated, then reached up and traced his upper lip with her fingertips. "I've done this a hundred times before." She closed her eyes. "I can't believe I'm finally touching you in the flesh." Her eyes opened and she searched his face. "Kiss me, Peter. I want to know how it feels while awake."

She heard his swift intake of breath, then he reached out and pulled her against the length of his body.

His mouth slid teasingly across hers, soft as a butterfly's touch. She locked her hands behind his neck. The soft press of his lips changed to a hungry demand. His tongue entered her parted lips and fought a heated duel with hers. She moaned, stood on tiptoe, and pressed her body closer to his. He shuddered. His mouth left hers and trailed along her neck. She leaned back in his arms as his mouth traveled downward, then gasped as they moved hotly across the upper curves of her breasts.

"I want you." Peter whispered against her flesh.

"Someone comes," Da'kar sent.

"Peter, someone is coming," she said, twining her fingers in his hair and gently forcing his head up.

Peter looked up. "But how...?"

"The unicorn."

He buried his face between her breasts once more, then straightened and pulled her close against him. "I will release you, but only for now. This time we will not be parted. I promise you."

"I'll hold you to that, my love, but now I must face the music."

Peter's forehead wrinkled. "Music?"

"Queen Tessa."

"What you receive from Tessa will not be musical, but I will be right beside you."

"Regan? Peter?" Kelsey called.

"Over here," Peter answered. He dropped a quick kiss on Regan's lips, then turned and walked toward the queen's solar. Settling her gown across her shoulders, Regan followed.

* * * *

Regan stood in front of the fireplace in Queen Tessa's solar and examined, yet again, the tapestry that hung above. It depicted a rearing unicorn. A gold crown rested between his ears. Could you be Da'kar's sire? I've no idea what the life span of a unicorn is. She darted a glance at the closed door. What is taking her so long? They must be really raking her over the coals for my stupidity.

She felt a hand touch her arm and turned to face Kelsey. "Tessa can handle them."

Regan looked at the door again. "I'm sorry, I should have listened to you."

The door opened and Tessa entered. Her face was drawn and colorless. In silence, she walked to a small round table and poured herself a crystal goblet of red wine. She turned and, staring at a spot above Regan's head, took a sip from the glass. "You should have told me."

Regan flinched. "I know."

"Why didn't you? I would have handled it."

"I thought ... I ... could do it."

Tessa's face flooded with color and she lowered her gaze to Regan's. "This isn't the time for testing your weaknesses. My people and I are fighting for our existence..."

"Tessa..." Peter interrupted.

The queen whipped around to face him. "Your queen is speaking."

Peter's body went rigid. "Yes, your Majesty."

Tessa frowned and turned back to Regan. "I must know if there is a problem. I can't have it dropped in my lap with no planned solution. I am Daradawn's queen. Before my subjects I can show no imperfection, no weakness." She paused and took a deep breath. Her eyes searched Regan's face. "I still believe that you will be Dirkk's downfall, but please, no more surprises. If there is something you can't do, then tell me. Together we will find a way. Do you understand?"

Regan mutely nodded.

"Good. Now I must send a page for Angus. I will return within the hour, then our plans will be made." Queen Tessa Angelique Raya De'Amberville turned and swept from the room.

As the door closed, Regan heard Kelsey chuckle. She faced her sister.

"Well, that went better than I'd hoped," Kelsey said.

Regan stared at her sister in disbelief. "That was better than you hoped?"

Kelsey grinned. "She let you off easy. You should see her when she's really angry."

Regan walked on shaky legs to a chair and plopped into it. "No, thank you."

Peter moved to where Regan sat and placed his hand on her shoulder. "She was unreasonable," he snapped.

Kelsey's eyebrows rose in surprise. "What are you saying? Tessa is right. Daradawn must come first."

"Daradawn is not Regan's problem, nor is it yours any longer."

Kelsey froze. "Not my problem?" she said, her voice rising. "How can you say that to me? I've dedicated the past seven years of my life to destroying Dirkk and the death grip he has on Daradawn, and you stand there and tell me it's not my problem."

Regan saw Peter wince, but he refused to look away from Kelsey's blazing eyes.

"Enough," Regan said, reaching up to cover Peter's hand with her own. "The queen and Kelsey are right and you know it. What happens in Daradawn matters very much to me."

What I did was wrong, but now we must get beyond it." Peter entwined his fingers with hers. Regan glanced up and saw Kelsey staring at their clasped hands.

"So that's it." She turned her back on them and walked to the fireplace. Staring into the flames she spoke. "I wish I could say it makes me happy ... but I can't. Not if it turns the High Mage into a mewling, lovesick jackass."

Regan's hand clenched Peter's. "That's not fair, Kelsey."

Kelsey turned and stared at the two of them. "Perhaps not, but he certainly isn't thinking with the head above his waist."

Regan pulled her hand from Peter's. "Who in the hell do you think you are?"

"I am the commander of Daradawn's forces," Kelsey said, "and we are at war."

"So you've told me before," Regan said.

Kelsey's face paled. "Obviously you were not listening. Where Daradawn's welfare is concerned..."

"Rourk, it seems we've stumbled into a nursery of squabbling brats."

Regan whipped around and saw Angus framed in the doorway with Rourk just behind him. She cringed at the scorn she saw in the dwarf's eyes.

"Yes," Rourk said, picking at a thread on his shirtsleeve. "It seems they need a nap."

Peter grimaced. "Well said and deserved, old friends." He looked at Kelsey. "You do not understand, but this is not the time."

Kelsey nodded stiffly.

"Angus, where's Maggie?" Regan said, turning her back on her sister.

"She's out on the commons playing tag with a group of children."

Regan smiled. "Well, good for her. Queen Tessa was looking for you. Did she find you?"

"Yes, she waits in the war room."

Regan pushed by Kelsey and walked to the door. "Then why are we standing here?"

"Why indeed?" Angus echoed, stepping aside to let her pass.

Regan hesitated in the wide hall. "Uh, just where is the war room?"

Rourk grinned at her, then placed an arm around her shoulders. "I will show you, little one."

Without looking back she walked down the hall at his side.

* * * *

Rourk stopped outside a polished wood door and rapped on it with his knuckles.

"Come in."

He waved Regan forward.

The room was lit mid-day bright with at least twenty mage globes. Square tables, surrounded by green-cushioned, high-backed chairs, filled the room. At a table in the center of the room the queen stood looking down at a large map, a frown creasing her forehead.

Regan stopped beside her. Circles, triangles, and long wavering lines covered its surface. As she watched, the queen

smiled tightly and moved a circle to the base of what Regan guessed to be a mountain.

"He won't be expecting such a ploy," Tessa said with a satisfied nod, then looked up at Regan. "Where are the rest?"

"They were right behind me." Regan glanced over the queen's head to a dented suit of armor that stood in the far left corner of the room. Hanging beside it from silver hooks were an assortment of what she guessed to be weapons. She recognized a mace and a lance, but the rest were foreign to her.

Tessa saw where Regan looked and said. "They are very old. I collect them."

"Oh. I collect magnets myself."

"What are magnets?"

"They stick to metal things. They're souvenirs of places someone's been."

"Souvenirs?" Tessa looked perplexed.

"You know—something you bring home from a trip."

"Oh. Spoils of war."

"Spoils of war? I guess they could be, depending on where you take your vacation."

Their eyes met and the two women laughed.

"What's so funny?" Kelsey asked as she entered the room with Peter and Angus.

"Nothing," Tessa said. "It just felt good to laugh." Kelsey stared at her queen in perplexed silence. The queen motioned with her hand. "Would you close the door?" Rourk did so, and the three of them walked to the table.

"I think I have devised a plan," Tessa said. "Here," she pointed to the circle she had placed at the base of the mountain, "is where I think would be the best place to meet Dirkk."

Angus frowned. "But that's Mount Crag."

"I know. There's no way he would expect us to bring the battle to his front door."

Kelsey shook her head. "It won't work. My guess is that he isn't even there. If the last message was correct, he's massing his troops right here." She pointed to a spot just beyond the two peaks.

"All the better," Tessa said, her voice tinged with annoyance. "We can take his castle and keep him from shaping any more Ru'taha."

"And while we're taking his castle, he may well be taking yours, and a whole new supply of bodies to deform into those monsters," Kelsey said, placing palms flat against the table and leaning toward Tessa.

"And if he only took the valley and not Raya, he could still starve us out," Peter added. "No, my queen, the most defensible area we have is the gateway to Fertile Isle Valley."

"Yes," Angus said, bringing his fist down hard on the table. "If need be we can hold them off until their bodies pile to the top of the peaks."

Queen Tessa frowned. "While within his castle he can still continue to shape. For every Ru'taha or Black Viper we kill, he sends two." She stopped and stared over the tops of their heads. "Every time a Ru'taha is killed, a sliver of my heart dies with it."

Kelsey's lips thinned, but she said nothing.

"There has to be away to stop their mindless advance," Tessa continued. "When one of their own falls, they just walk over it."

"They have no will of their own, only Dirkk's," Peter said.

"I think I know a way," Regan said.

Tessa faced Regan. "What?"

"I may be able to control them."

Kelsey looked at her sister in surprise. "What do you mean, control them?"

Regan turned to Peter. "Do you think Dirkk mind-speaks them?"

"It would seem so."

"Then it's possible they would obey any who mind-spoke them?"

Peter nodded his head. "I see what you mean. Can you do it?"

"Do what?" Kelsey asked.

"Regan mind-speaks all animals, mortal and magic," Peter said.

Tessa frowned. "The Ru'taha are not animals," she snapped.

Peter touched her arm. "Dirkk's magic has made them so."

Angus looked from Peter to Regan. "You told him."

Peter frowned at him. "I saw her mind-speak Da'kar."

"Who have you mind-spoken?" Tessa asked.

"Maggie, all the horses, Zara and Da'kar," Regan said.

Tessa frowned. "But no Ru'taha and Black Vipers?"

"No."

The queen looked from Peter to Angus. "Can it be done?"

"There are stories. My people..." Angus said.

"Stories." Tessa interrupted. "How can I trust stories?"

"And there was Thea..."

"Again, a story," Tessa said. "And even so, Dirkk's pets did not exist when Thea lived. If she ever did."

Regan and Peter exchanged a quick look. "I think I can do it."

Tessa gave her a penetrating stare. "You thought you could talk to the merchants too."

Regan's lips tightened and she looked away from Tessa.

"We can test her first," Peter suggested, "on just a small party of them."

"The outer sentries could find us a small group of Ru'taha or vipers," Kelsey said. "Then we would know for sure."

"Tessa, if it works, we can turn them against each other. They would fight our battle for us," Peter said. "Thanks to Thomas, Dirkk thinks Regan has no power."

Regan stood silent.

The queen sighed. "Very well, we will test her. If she can control them, we will talk again." She turned to Kelsey. "See to it. Now leave me. I wish to think."

Dismissed, they left the small woman who was again bent over the map.

Outside the closed door, Rourk sniffed appreciatively. "Do you smell that? It's fresh-baked bread, and I am starving. Anyone care to join me on a raid of the kitchen?"

"I will," Kelsey said. "If Bess is there you will need someone to guard your back."

"It's to the stables to check on Zax for me," Angus said.

"Would you check on Maggie, too?" Regan said.

"No problem." Angus turned and strode down the hall.

"How about you two?" Rourk asked Regan and Peter.

"Food sounds fantastic, but I need to start working on those jingles ... er, I mean power spells," Regan said.

"And I will be with Regan," Peter said.

Kelsey looked from one to the other. "I'll send Mary-Anne with a tray. Where will you be?" she asked pointedly.

"My notebook is in the tower room," Regan said.

"Then that is where we will be," Peter said.

"I'll send Mary-Anne as soon as I find her. That could be minutes, or hours," Kelsey said.

"Whenever," Regan said, frowning at her sister.

Kelsey grabbed Rourk by the arm. "Come, let's go raid the kitchen."

Peter watched Kelsey and Rourk walk away. "What was that all about?"

"Kelsey doesn't like me having a man in her room," Regan said. "God. She sounded just like our mother then."

"I see," Peter said, then smiled in her direction. "Perhaps she does have something to fear. Maybe I will not be able to keep my hands off you once we are alone."

"Is that a promise?" Regan asked.

"I wish it could be, but..."

"I know. First we must take care of Dirkk. Come on. I'll race you to the tower." Regan grabbed her gown and yanked it above her knees.

"What do I get if I win?" Peter said, his gaze on her bare legs.

"It makes no difference; you won't." Regan stuck her tongue out at him, then turned and raced down the hallway.

* * * *

Regan leapt the last stair and sprinted down the hall. She knew Peter was right on her heels. Her chest heaving, she ignored the stitch in her side, and fumbled with the doorknob to the tower room.

Arms circled her waist from behind and jerked her backward against a hard body.

"No fair," Peter said. "You cheated."

She leaned into him. "I did not."

"How do you expect me keep my mind on my feet with such a fetching sight running just ahead of me?"

She turned in his arms. "Okay, I forfeit. What would the victor like?" she asked, tilting her head back to look into his eyes.

"Just this," he said, lowering his lips to hers. His kiss was soft. Then, as her arms rose to link behind his neck, his mouth pressed harder, parting her lips.

His right hand traveled upward to caress the soft swell straining against the fabric of her gown. She moaned and pressed against his seeking hand. His thumb found her nipple and slowly circled it as he thrust his tongue into her mouth. Regan met his tongue with her own. Peter groaned and then cupped her buttocks and pulled her closer still. His lips left

her mouth and trailed a line of kisses down her throat to the valley between her breasts.

With half-closed eyes, she looked over Peter's head to the dim archway of the stairs. My God, what are we doing? Anyone could stumble upon us. She curled her hands in his hair and pulled his mouth from her flesh. "No," she murmured. "We must stop. What if someone comes?"

Peter raised his head and took a deep shuddering breath. "You are right." He reached behind her, opened the door to Kelsey's room, and swept her up into his arms. Her heart pounding, she laced her hands behind his neck.

Smiling into her eyes, he carried her to the bed.

The two dresses still lay spread on the quilt, a silent reminder of dinner, Kelsey, and the queen. Her notebook lay on the end table next to the bed.

Regan sighed as reason replaced passion in Peter's eyes. Her smile turned wistful. "Put me down."

Emotions flickered across his face. He pulled her close against his chest, then sat her feet on the floor.

"Damn. When will it be our time?" he asked.

She looked up into his eyes, then extended her right hand and traced his lips with her fingertips. "Soon. It has to be. We've waited so long."

He opened his mouth and nipped her finger gently. She trailed her finger down his chin, over his chest and stopped where his tunic tucked into his pants. She entwined her finger in the drawstring at his waist and pulled it teasingly, her eyes looking deep into his.

His hazel eyes darkened and he reached his hand to capture hers. "I think we should do our spell writing in another room, preferably one without a bed."

She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and swallowed. "Yes, I think you're right." She stepped away from him. "Where do you think we'd be safe?"

"There is nowhere you can be totally safe from me." Peter dropped a quick kiss on her mouth. "But for now Tessa's solar should be fine."

Regan averted her eyes from the bed and walked to pick up her book of jingles. "I think we should get out of here right now."

He grinned at her. "You go first. I need a moment to collect myself."

Regan's gaze dropped to below Peter's waist. "I see what you mean." She returned his grin. "I'll wait for you below." Still grinning, she walked out the door.

Chapter 18

"DAMN!" REGAN SHOVED her chair back from the table. Her violent movement rocked a bottle of ink. The opaque bottle toppled and rolled across the table, trailing a spreading blue line. "This isn't working. I'm drawing a complete blank."

Peter rescued the rolling bottle before it landed in his lap, then blotted the ink pool with sheets of discarded paper. "You are trying too hard. Just relax and let the magic flow."

"This isn't what Thea ... I ... am all about. I talk to animals, remember? Thea didn't write spells."

He studied her in silence for a long moment. "But you are more than Thea. You are also marked with the blue flame."

"I've been trying for hours. I can't do it."

"Do you want to quit?"

"Yes ... no ... I don't know what I want."

He pushed his chair back and stood. "Let us take a break. There is something else I would like to try."

She sighed, then reached up and swiped damp tendrils of hair off her forehead. "Maybe a break will help."

He nodded and walked to the door.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"We need Kelsey. I will be right back." he said, then disappeared through the door.

Regan stared at the open door. "Great. That's all I need right now—the grand commander of Daradawn." The muscles in the back of her neck knotted and she grimaced. Rubbing the cramping muscles with her hand, she stood. "God, I feel

like I'm going to explode." She hiked up her skirt, then sat down in the middle of the floor and crossed her legs Indian style. The cool marble felt wonderful against her hot skin. Closing her eyes, she inhaled slowly through her nose to a count of ten and then exhaled through her parted lips, blowing out until her diaphragm hugged her backbone. "Serene thoughts, serene thoughts," she chanted and slowly rolled her neck.

She opened her eyes and looked across at the table. Okay. Maybe Thea couldn't, but I can do this. It's no different from any other ad campaign. I know my audience and what I want to accomplish.

Wrapping fragile calmness like a blanket around her, Regan stood and walked to the table. Still with slow controlled breathing, she sat in the chair, picked up the quill-tipped pen, and dipped its point into the remaining ink. Evil ... Dirkk is pure evil.

Evil is as evil does, she wrote. Evil as evil ever was. She stopped, brought the pen's pale, boned end to her mouth and chewed on it. What do we want to happen ... we want his pets to destroy each other. She dipped the pen again and added, "Pitted one against the other, death to one or the other." She stared down at the words and started to scratch them out, then hesitated and quickly wrote, "All else pales and fades away..." She heard footsteps and voices and looked up.

Peter entered the queen's solar, Kelsey behind him. He crossed to where she sat and looked down at the words she had written.

"You have overcome the barrier?" he asked.

Regan frowned and shrugged. "It's a start."

"We will finish it together, then there is something I must try. I need your moonstone earrings and Kelsey's pendant to attempt it."

"The earrings are upstairs in my pants pocket."

"I'll get them," Kelsey said. "You must finish that spell."

Regan glanced at her sister. "Thanks," she said in a flat voice.

Kelsey turned toward the door. "I'll be right back."

Regan watched in silence as Kelsey walked out the door.

"You are going to have to work this out with your sister. It is important that the two of you are in harmony," Peter said, placing his hand on her shoulder.

Regan frowned at the empty doorway. "We'll work it out later, but right now we have to finish this."

"Let me read it." He picked up her notes. "Evil is as evil does, evil as evil ever was." He glanced at her, then read the rest out loud. "Pitted one against the other, death to one or to each other. All else pales and fades away..."

"It's missing something."

He stared down at the blue words written on the sheet of paper. "What is it we want above all else?" He raised his head and stared into her eyes. "We want peace. We want our land back and most of all, we want our people freed."

"The people Dirkk has changed. Can they be fixed ... put back to the way they were?"

"What he has done to their bodies and minds is permanent." His mouth thinned with anger. "But I would rather see them dead than have to live the way they are."

"Then we will free them."

He stared at her for a moment, then sat down at the table across from her. "The need ... our need ... is to put an end to Dirkk." He took the pen from her and pulled the sheet of paper across to him. Holding the pen above the paper, he closed his eyes. "He Who is All, guide my hand."

His hand began to form words, first with hesitation, then with mounting confidence.

Regan leaned across the table and read the words, "except our need to have our say..." he penned in bold blue flourishes. "The need to fight him to the end, until death claims all, both foe and friend."

Peter's hand began to shake and she saw his face go pale. He shuddered, then laid the pen aside and opened his eyes.

She leaned across the table toward him. "You look totally drained, but I felt no use of the Power."

"I did not use the Power; it used me. He Who is All wrote those words," he said with a wan smile. "What we have created is a spell of great power that..."

"Now we just need to see if I can make it work," she interrupted.

He shook his head. "This must be known only to a few, and used only if your mind-link does not work."

She drew back from him. "Why?"

He ignored her question. "Both of us created it and, to have it work without harm, we must cast it together. When

we do, it will take all the power we have. The casting will leave us drained and possibly ill for hours afterward."

"What if only one has to cast it?"

Peter drew his hand from beneath hers. "That must not happen."

"But if it does?" she persisted.

He refused to meet her eyes. "Peter?"

"It can be cast by one," he finally said.

"But?"

"It would use all the caster's power."

She grimaced. "So we stay tired a little longer, what's the..."

Peter reached out and laid his fingertips against her lips. "You do not understand. I mean all the power available."

She shivered. "You mean if one of us does it alone, they will die."

He nodded.

She closed her eyes. "I want you to promise me that you won't try it without me."

Peter turned away. "I cannot do that. If necessary, I will cast it."

She backed away from him and the words written on the paper. He turned and faced her. "It is not too late. I can take you back to the rift and this will be nothing to you but another ... dream."

"Leave Kelsey ... and you? You won't come with me?" she whispered.

Peter smiled. "You know I cannot, but maybe Kelsey..."

Her face heated in a rush of anger. "Kelsey won't leave, at least not yet, and neither can I. This time you and I will not be parted, one way or the other."

He crossed to her and pulled her into his arms. "My love, my heart," he whispered into her hair.

Behind them the door opened and they separated. Peter turned to face Kelsey. "We've finished the power spell."

"So I see," Kelsey said dryly.

Regan pulled out of Peter's embrace and walked to the back wall. Above a vase of orchids from the queen's forest hung a faded tapestry. "Can I read it?" she heard her sister ask and Peter answer, "Of course."

Regan picked a flower from the bouquet and held it to her nose. The orchid's scent was spicy and sweet. She leaned closer to the tapestry. Nude maidens swam in a round marble pool of crystalline water, their blue-black hair twining around them like inky seaweed. In the background, a white-pillared temple rose toward the sky. On the temple steps stood a red-haired woman. She was gowned in white, a belt of linked gold rings at her waist. Her green eyes stared beyond the swimmers. She waits for something, but what? Regan felt a pang of kindred sadness. She's trapped in time and will wait forever, the same way I've been waiting through lifetime after lifetime, waiting to at last be with Peter.

"Regan. Regan, are you listening?" Kelsey asked.

Regan turned away from the tapestry. "What? Yes, of course I'm listening."

"We've no time for daydreaming."

Regan cringed at the rebuke. "Yes, master," she said, then watched her sister's hands ball into fists at her sides.

"Then answer the question."

Hot blood rushed to Regan's cheeks. "I didn't hear it."

Kelsey smiled, then turned back to Peter. "So, when can we set out tomorrow?"

Peter looked from one sister to the other, then stood and walked to the door.

"Where are you going?" Regan said, disbelief in her words.

He hesitated, his hand on the doorknob. He looked first to one woman and then the other. "The two of you need to work through this childish behavior. I will return shortly." He opened the door, walked through, and then closed it behind him.

Stunned, Regan stared at the closed door.

"Well, that's just great," Kelsey said. "We're in the middle of plans for tomorrow, and he pulls a disappearing act."

Regan's gaze shifted to her sister. "Maybe it was something you said."

Kelsey's lips tightened. "No, he's just not thinking clearly."

"What? Using the wrong head again?"

"Most likely."

"Damn you, Kelsey, I've had just about all your arrogance that I can stand," Regan said.

Kelsey glared at her younger sister. "If you were so hot to have a man between your legs, why couldn't you have chosen someone besides the High Mage of Daradawn?"

Regan's face paled.

"After all," Kelsey continued, "you've only known each other a couple of days. Wouldn't a farm boy do as well?"

"You mean ... like Rourk?"

Kelsey drew back as if she had been slapped. "You never did care about anybody but yourself."

"Then why am I here?"

"How would I know? Maybe you liked Peter's eyes?"

Regan's sight blurred. "No," she said in a choked voice, shaking her head. "I'm not going to do this. For seven years I thought you were dead, and I was sick inside."

She heard Kelsey sigh in exasperation. "I'm sorry, but you get to me quicker than any person alive."

"Hey, what are sisters for?" Regan said. "I guess it's a good thing neither of us holds a grudge."

"Yes. What was it Daddy used to say?"

Regan smiled. "That our anger exploded like a star going nova, then quickly burned out. About Peter..."

"That's none of my business," Kelsey said. "I'm just tired."

"It's your business if our feelings for each other put Daradawn in jeopardy. I promise you we will not let that happen."

Kelsey met her eyes in thoughtful silence. "It's just that I don't understand how it could have happened so quickly. Every woman at court has thrown herself at Peter."

"Kelsey, I know it seems sudden, but it isn't." Regan placed her hand on her sister's arm. "Do you believe in reincarnation, past lives?"

"I'm not sure. Are you saying you and Peter knew each other before?"

Regan nodded. "We've been lovers in many other lifetimes. I've had dreams of Peter in other lives since I hit puberty and discovered boys."

"But how...?"

Regan smiled. "It took a unicorn to point out the obvious. Peter says his heart recognized me on my doorstep."

"My God," Kelsey said.

"It took me a little longer, but I know it's right," Regan said. "But I'll keep my promise. Nothing will happen between us that will hurt Daradawn in any way. I promise."

Behind them the door opened and they turned. A hand thrust through, waving a white handkerchief.

"Is it safe to enter?" Peter asked.

"Yes," the sisters answered in chorus.

Regan tucked the orchid behind her right ear and moved to meet him. She reached out and grasped his hand. "I'm sorry for being such a brat. Will you forgive me?"

Peter dropped a quick kiss on her forehead. "All is forgiven," he said, then winked over her head at Kelsey. "Now let us get to work."

* * * *

Regan stared at the knife's blade. Her hand, resting in Peter's, trembled.

"I'm just going to prick the end of your finger," he said.

With paralyzed fascination, like a mouse with a cobra, she watched Peter bring the knife's point to her finger. With a sudden flick of his wrist, he slid the blade's point across her

middle finger. A fat drop of blood blossomed. Peter turned her hand over and let gravity do its job.

Regan watched the drop of blood fall to the face of the pendant lying next to the earrings on the table. It flowed across the opalescent surface until the white jewel wore a coat of red.

Peter turned to Kelsey. "Your turn."

Face void of expression, Kelsey held out her hand. Regan watched her sister's eyes and felt a stab of irritation when they remained impassive as the cut was made.

She looked down and watched the two drops of blood spread over her great-grandmother's earrings. "Now what?"

Peter reached out and touched each piece of opal jewelry with the tip of a finger. He backed away and closed his eyes. Regan's stomach heated in reaction to the Power being summoned.

"Blood calls to blood," Peter said in a clear ringing voice. "Wherever you are, the other will hear, as long as the amulets are near. Only for known blood will they heed the call. Nothing can hinder their voice; not mountain, not river, not man-made wall."

He stumbled and grasped the table to steady himself.

Regan felt her stomach cool. She saw him stare down at the pendant and earrings and then frown.

They look the same. What were they supposed to do? she wondered.

Peter swore beneath his breath. "The spell did not work."

"Are you sure? How can you tell?"

He glanced at Regan and frowned. "Do you not think I would know if a spell I cast worked?"

"Would you like me to try? Maybe the spell needs a caster whose blood has been used?"

Peter flushed. He pushed away from the table and walked across the room to the fireplace. Frowning, Regan waited for his answer, but he remained silent, staring into the flames. She started to go to him, but Kelsey grabbed her arm and shook her head.

"This is ridiculous. So one spell fizzled," Regan said.

Peter ignored her.

She looked down at the pendant and earrings. The caster needs to be one of the blood offerings. I know it. Why doesn't he?

Regan looked inward and found her spark of power. With a few mental puffs, it flared and warmed her stomach. "Blood calls to blood," she said. She felt, rather than saw, Peter whip around to stare at her. "Wherever you are the other will hear, as long as the bloodstones are near. Only for known blood will they heed the call. Their voice stopped by naught, not mountain, not river, not man-made wall." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Peter and Kelsey cross to the table and look down at the opals.

The gold setting of the pendant glowed. The film of blood melted into the surface. Flecks of color flashed, as if a ray of sun struck them, then the milk white surface returned. She glanced at the earrings. The red stain was gone from them too. "Oh, that's how you know if it worked."

Peter stared at her. "Are you not weakened even a little?"

"No."

He frowned. "Why did you change the words?"

"I didn't know I had."

"You called them bloodstones."

Regan shrugged her shoulders. "Well, that's what you made them."

Peter turned and walked away.

"Couldn't you feel there had to be a blood connection to the opals?" she asked quietly.

He stopped in mid-stride, then continued across the room. "This is ridiculous," she said, then turned and faced Kelsey. "I'm going to take a nap. Wake me for dinner."

"So you are tired." Satisfaction rang in Peter's voice.

Regan stared at him for a long moment. "Tired? No. Just disappointed." Shaking her head and ignoring Peter's remote face, she crossed the room and walked through the open door.

* * * *

Regan flopped in the middle of the bed. It was jealousy, just plain old-fashioned jealousy. Well, he'd just have to get over it.

A breeze drifted over her from the open balcony doors and she yawned. Maybe I should have yawned below; it probably would have made Peter happy. She yawned again. I don't know why I'm lying here, she thought, I'll never be able to sleep. She rolled onto her side and closed her eyes.

A hand on her shoulder shook her gently awake. "Regan," a husky voice whispered. "Wake up."

Eyes still closed; Regan stretched like a cat and smiled. She opened her eyes to a slit, then sat up with a gasp, and drew herself up into a tight ball against the headboard. "What ... but how ... who are you?"

"Close your mouth. You might swallow a fly," The words came from a man sitting on the bed beside her. A man she had never seen before. From behind a black, molded mask, he looked at her with green eyes that glittered with amusement. His lips curling upward, he waved a hand in front of her face. "Now do you remember me?"

Regan clutched a pillow to her stomach as memory of their first encounter surfaced. "Oh, God," she whimpered, "Please don't hurt me."

His smile widened. "So what do you have to tell me?" Regan pressed her trembling lips together and he sighed. "Are we going to have to go through this again?" He reached into the folds of his cape and brought out the crystal. Regan went rigid and he laughed aloud. "Thomas sent it for you ... as a small reminder." He tossed the crystal onto the bed in front of her. "You know I've no need for such baubles." He waved his hand and pain lanced through her temples. Through eyes blurry with tears, she saw his smile broaden and clamped her lips tighter together. The smile left his face and he leaned closer to her. He drew a slow circle in the air in front of her eyes and the pain knifed deeper.

Regan's body jerked and she dropped her head onto the pillow she hugged. "Okay," she said through clenched teeth.

Dirkk's smiled returned. "These little encounters are fun, but you must know you can't win."

Regan lifted her head and glared at him in silence.

"Now tell me, have plans been made to test your mind-link with my pets?"

"Yes."

Their eyes met and locked. Silence stretched between them. "Well?" Dirkk finally asked. Regan stared at him stubbornly. "Regan, do not push me. Today my mood is good. Don't spoil it."

He stood and strolled around the room. Pausing at the nightstand, he picked up a green vase. "It matches my eyes, don't you think?"

Regan watched him warily. He walked to the balcony doors, then turned back toward her. "Well?"

Regan's response was a hot glare of hate. "Can I ask you a question?"

Above his mask his right eyebrow arched. "Why not?"

"Thomas's cave and here. How did you get by the wards?"

His lips twisted. "You disappoint me. Special wards must be set for gateways. Peter does not know of gateway magic?"

Regan frowned.

"The fools should have already removed Thomas, but they think to use him to trap me." Regan saw his eyes darken a moment with pain. "This castle, I know it as I do my own. There isn't one dark corner that Tessa and I did not explore." Then his lips thinned into a tight, white line and with a harsh cry he dropped the vase on the bed next to the crystal. "Soon I will again walk these halls, and as its master. Now answer me."

Regan began to shake. "A test is planned for tomorrow."

"What is it to be?"

"Kelsey will find a small group of Black Vipers or Ru'taha, then they will see if I can link with them."

Dirkk smiled once more. "This is a test we must make sure you pass."

* * * *

Regan stretched and opened her eyes. A green vase lay beside her on the bed. She reached to pick it up and her stomach twisted in fear. Jerking her hand back, she stared at the vase. Frowning, she reached for it again, and her hand started to shake. Her stomach flip-flopped and then rumbled loudly. "Low blood sugar," she murmured. "I need food."

She glanced down at the rumpled bed. Hey, what happened to the dresses? Then she remembered they had not been on the bed when she had stormed in. She stood and walked to the wardrobe. The dresses hung side by side in its middle. Why did Mary-Anne put them away?

"Regan, are you awake?" Kelsey called from the door.

"Come on in."

Kelsey came through the door and walked to Regan. "What are you doing?"

"I was just wondering why Mary-Anne put the dresses away."

"I suppose Tessa told her the formal dinner was postponed."

Kelsey's voice sounded strange and Regan looked at her sister closely. Kelsey's eyes and mouth were drawn and tight. "What's happened?"

Kelsey turned away and walked to the bed. She saw the green vase and turned to her sister, a question in her eyes.

"I don't know how it got there," Regan said.

Kelsey picked up the vase and placed it back on the night stand. "Dirkk left us a present outside the valley barricade."

"What is it?"

"A child ... well, really a baby."

"A baby?"

"It is the grandchild of the one of the merchants."

"But..."

Kelsey's hands clenched into fists. "And a note."

Regan swallowed. "What did it say?"

"The babe was too young. Not enough flesh to work with," Kelsey said.

"Oh, God." Regan fought the urge to retch. "How can someone be such a monster?"

Taking a deep breath, Kelsey relaxed her hands. "The babe's grandmother said her daughter lives in the village of Lrya. I'm riding now to find out the truth." Her voice was devoid of emotion.

"I'm going with you."

"No, just Rourk and I are going."

"But..."

"Regan, you would only be in the way."

Regan stiffened, then turned and walked to the balcony door.

"Sometimes stealth is better than magic. We're not even taking Peter."

"Is that why dinner was canceled?"

Kelsey glanced toward the door. "The merchants demanded another audience with the queen. She's with them now."

Regan grimaced. "Oh."

"I'll see you as soon as I return." Kelsey turned toward the door.

"Kelsey." Her sister stopped, her hand on the doorknob. "Be careful."

Kelsey nodded, then opened the door, and walked out.

Regan stared at the closed door. She'll be okay. She's not the same Kelsey I knew.

She moved across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. Sudden revulsion shook her. Choking with panic, she dropped onto her knees and crawled a few feet from the bed. Gasping for air she turned and stared at it. What was wrong with her? First the vase, now this. Still trembling, she stood, walked to the bed and looked down. Her shuddering increased until her teeth chattered. I'm just hungry. I need to find the kitchen.

Afraid to turn her back on the bed, she walked backwards to the door, fumbled for the knob and opened it. As her hand rested on the doorknob, a vague memory of blackness, evil and emerald green teased, but then vanished.

* * * *

Regan reached the end of the stairs and stepped into the long hall. She looked up and down. "Where is everybody?" Mentally tossing a coin, she turned left.

She soon lost count of the doors and halls that branched off the one she walked. Finally she stopped in defeated disgust. She hadn't seen a soul. Face it, you're never going to find the kitchen.

Across from her she saw a shadowy alcove and stairs leading up. Great. She'd come full circle. I guess the best thing to do is go back and wait in Kelsey's room. Someone's bound to remember me—eventually.

She climbed up and came to a door. Regan opened the door, then stopped in bewilderment. Peter looked up from a table where a large book lay open before him.

"What are you doing in my room?" she demanded.

Peter closed the book and stood. "This is my room."

She glanced around. The walls and furnishings were ice blue and silver. Feeling a complete fool, she muttered, "I'm sorry," under her breath and turned to leave.

"Regan, wait. I would like to talk to you."

She dropped her gaze to the white marble floor. It was polished to so high a gloss it shimmered, reflecting to every inch of the room the light from the mage globes hovering in each corner. "What do we have to say to each other?"

"I would like to apologize. Would you come in and close the door?" Regan's stomach chose that moment to loudly complain of its emptiness. "Mary-Anne is bringing me up some dinner. Would you join me?"

"I do have to eat," she said, taking a couple of steps into the room, "but the door stays open."

"As you wish, my lady."

She glanced at the closed book on the table.

"It belonged to my grandfather," he said. "It tells of his discovery of the rifts, and his journeys through them."

"How many did you say there are?"

"Seven."

Regan crossed to the table and looked down at the book. The cover was dark brown leather. Inside a red circle in its center, a unicorn with a crown of gold like the one upon the pennants pawed the air. Radiating outwards from the circle were thousands of small cracks but, inside the circle of red, the leather remained smooth.

"They say if the cracks ever enter the circle and touch the unicorn, Raya and the House of De'Amberville will fall." Peter picked up the book and walked to a desk in the back. "I keep it here, heavily warded. If Dirkk knew how to travel the rifts, your world would be in extreme danger."

"What do you mean? We came through."

"Anyone can come through. It is impossible to return without the knowledge." He laid the book down, caressing the unicorn's crown with his fingertips before turning to face her.

"I thought Dirkk knew about and controlled the other rifts," Regan said.

"Dirkk knows of them, and yes, he does keep us from getting to them, but he does not know how to use them."

Regan gasped and the room wavered before her eyes.

"Regan, what is wrong? Here, sit down," he said, placing an arm around her shoulders and leading her to his bed.

"Does Dirkk know of the book?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yes, but it is safe here, for he has no idea where it is. How about a small lesson in magic as we wait? I will show you how warding is done."

"No." She scrambled to her feet. "I don't want you to show me."

He stared at her, his face puzzled. "I thought you wanted to know more of warding."

She rubbed her forehead. "I do."

"I do not understand."

She lifted her gaze to his. "I don't either. Does Thomas know where you keep this book?"

"Only Tessa, I, and now you."

Regan shuddered.

He held her look, a frown creasing his forehead. "Has something happened I do not know?"

She blinked, then shook her head. "How could it? I haven't left the castle since we arrived. I'm just tired—tired and hungry. When's Mary-Anne going to get here?"

"I'm here now, Miss." A voice came from behind them.

Regan turned. "Mary-Anne. I hope you've brought enough for two. I'm starving."

The maid sniffed. "If not, there's more where this came from." She entered and placed a white napkin-covered tray on the table. The smell of roasted meat and bread made Regan's mouth water. "Would you like wine or water with your meal?"

"Wine," Peter said.

"Water," Regan said.

Mary-Anne smiled. "I will bring both." She turned and walked out the door.

Regan crossed to the food-laden table. "Do you think wine is a good idea considering what happened earlier in Kelsey's bedroom."

Peter pulled the napkin from the tray and started to pile a plate high with slices of beef, roasted carrots, and potatoes. A bowl of purple beans sat next to a platter of bread, and Regan picked up a bean and popped it into her mouth.

"Considering the way things were when we parted last, I did not think it was anything to worry about." He paused and looked up at her. "I guess this is as good a time as any to apologize."

She swallowed the cool, sweet juice of the bean, then reached out and touched his hand. "Don't. It was as much my fault as yours. Can we just forget about it?"

He grinned. "Consider it forgotten." He handed the mounded plate to her. "Let us eat."

* * * *

Regan watched Peter drink from the chalice, then lower it from his mouth. A burgundy drop of wine clung to his lower lip, and his tongue came out and flicked it inward. Her lower belly tightened in response. You're playing with fire, she told herself. You shouldn't be here. Her gaze wandered to the silver-blue, satin-covered, bed that took up a large part of the room. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

Regan turned her gaze back to him. "Nothing, why?"
"You had a strange look on your face..."

"Just worried about Kelsey."

"You do not have to be. She and Rourk have done this before."

Regan pushed her chair back from the table and stood.

"How much longer do you think they'll be?"

He grinned. "Sometimes they stay away all night."

"But—oh, I see. In that case, I think I should go."

"You could wait here with me."

"But you just said they could be out all night."

He reached across, and she felt his fingertips brush the side of her cheek. "I know," he said.

Her gaze fastened on his mouth. She remembered how it felt pressed against hers. I could stay. No one need know. He cupped her chin and drew her closer.

"Peter!" The name was bellowed from the stairs and Regan jerked back.

"Damn," Peter muttered, then called. "In here, Angus."

"Have you seen Regan?" Angus asked. His bushy brows came together, forming a wing above his eyes when he saw her. "Humph," he snorted. "No time for that now. Kelsey's back. She's waiting downstairs in the Queen's sitting room. She wants us."

"We were just having dinner," Regan said. Angus snickered at the two of them before turning away.

"Great," Regan said, pushing back her chair. "Kelsey's going to think I can't keep my promise more than half a day."

"What promise was that?" Peter asked.

"That we wouldn't do anything to harm Daradawn."

"We have not done anything and, if we had, it would not have harmed Daradawn." She darted an exasperated glance at him. "She seems to think you can't keep your mind on what's important with me around."

"Kelsey is wrong and tomorrow we will prove it. Now come."

* * * *

Kelsey stood in front of the fireplace. She turned as they entered.

"Where's Rourk?" Regan asked.

"He's seeing to the horses. I saw Queen Tessa. She's still mired down with the merchants and said to go ahead without her."

Regan walked closer to her sister and frowned. Kelsey's shirt and trousers were stained and torn. A large bruise marred her left cheekbone.

"How did that happen?" Regan asked, touching the bruise.

Kelsey winced and pulled away from the fingers. "A limb," she said, offering no more. Bells jingled behind them and they all turned.

Maggie pranced in the door wearing a collar of tiny silver bells around her neck.

"Well, look at you," Regan said.

"It's silly," Angus grumbled. "The children decided she looked like a court jester and needed some bells."

Peter knelt beside the dog and lifted her ear. "She was scratching, so I warded the bells against fleas and other unwanted pests. Looks like it worked."

"They're very pretty," Regan said, patting the dog's head.
"Undignified for a dwarf," Angus said.

Rourk walked through the door and crossed to stand by Kelsey. Their eyes met briefly. "It is as we'd feared," Kelsey said. "The village is empty."

Regan saw Peter close his eyes and lean his forehead against Maggie's neck.

"There was one bright spot," Kelsey said. "We came upon a small group of Ru'taha camped just outside the pass. We can use them for Regan's test." Kelsey leaned against Rourk, tiredness showing in her face and shoulders.

"I'm off to bed. I suggest the rest of you do the same. I'd like to start early tomorrow."

"I'll walk with you to the stairs," Rourk said. "Tonight I feel the need to be in the stables. I will have the horses ready tomorrow when you are."

"Would you like some company?" Angus asked. "I feel that sleep will be a stranger to me tonight."

"Fine, friend dwarf. We will see this night through together."

Regan watched in silence as the three of them left the room. She heard a soft curse and turned to face Peter. "He must be stopped."

Regan moved closer to him and touched his arm. "We will stop him, starting tomorrow. Now let's go to bed."

Peter opened his eyes and sat back on his heels. "A tempting proposition, but one I must decline. You go ahead; I must think."

The Blue Flame [Book 1 of the Daradawn Series]
by Barbara M. Hodges

Regan almost said that she hadn't intended for them to share a bed, then stopped. Maybe she had. "Come on, Maggie. How about sharing mine and Kelsey's bed tonight?"
Maggie woofed softly and followed Regan from the room.

Chapter 19

REGAN STRETCHED, THEN winced as her lower back complained about her restless night spent on the floor. She looked with embarrassed irritation toward the bed where Kelsey lay snoring, Maggie curled tight against her. She remembered the hurt look on her sister's face when she had asked for the spare blanket.

"I don't bite," Kelsey said when Regan took the blanket and curled up in front of the fireplace.

"I know. The bed is too soft for my back."

Kelsey knew it was a lie, but she had shrugged and turned away.

Regan stared at the bed with a puzzled frown. First the bed, and then the nightmare.

A black, flying phantom had pursued her across a dark valley crowded with a labyrinth of bare twisted-limb trees and thick low-growing vines. The vines bristled with sharp, thorny fingers that had grabbed at her flowing gown as she ran.

Shivering at the memory, she kicked the blanket aside and scrambled across to the screened chamber pot. Minutes later, standing next to the porcelain bowl, she looked around in chagrin. It doesn't seem right just to leave it here. Oh well, when in Rome.

She rounded the screen and walked to the middle of the room. At the foot of Kelsey's bed, the first fingers of morning sun fell across a pale green-and-rose rug. It looks like a hopscotch pattern. She'd been the hopscotch queen in grade

school. Grinning, she reached for the top of one of the perfume bottles on the vanity. It was diamond shaped, and glistened like a crystal. Sudden fear rippled through her. This is so stupid. What is wrong with me? She reached for the perfume stopper again. As her fingertips brushed the top, her hand started to shake. Clenching her hand into a fist she backed away from the vanity.

Is Kelsey going to sleep all day? She thought briefly of jumping in the middle of the bed and tickling her sister to wakefulness. Instead, she bent, scooped up the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. She walked to the twin balcony doors and stepped outside.

She moved to the parapet and looked down at the commons already crowded with people. Stretching, she inhaled deeply and then sneezed at the smell of smoke from the open fires mixing with the salt tang of the ocean. The damp stone chilled her bare feet and she padded further left, into a patch of sun. Lifting her hand to shade her eyes, she looked out across a smooth sheet of blue ocean. Above the sea a flock of white birds dove and reeled. They looked like gulls. Were they native here, or did they find their way here through a rift? Maybe behind Peter's grandfather?

She felt the blanket hem rise, and a wet nose touched her calf. "Morning, Maggie," she sent.

"Maggie is hungry."

"Maggie is always hungry." Regan felt teeth nip her bare toes. "Okay, okay. Let's see if Kelsey's awake."

"The other you is fighting the covers and making pain noises."

Regan turned and padded back to the balcony door.

Standing just inside she watched Kelsey. Her sister's head tossed side to side on her pillow. She reached upward with a closed fist and flailed against something that only she could see. "No ... no."

Regan walked to the side of the bed. "Kelsey," she said, careful not to touch her sister. She had read somewhere a rude awakening from a nightmare could be hard on both parties.

Kelsey's head continued to thrash on the pillow.

"Kelsey," Regan said louder. "It's time to wake up."

Kelsey dropped her arm to the bed. "You don't have to yell," she mumbled, without opening her eyes.

"You were having a nightmare."

Kelsey opened her eyes and knuckled them as she sat up. "Nightmare, huh? After yesterday, that doesn't surprise me." Her gaze went to the balcony doors and the sun that shone through the glass. "What time is it?" she asked, kicking off her blankets.

"I don't know. Still early. The sun just came up."

"Damn. I told Angus to wake me before dawn."

"Maybe he thought you needed some rest?" Regan said.

Kelsey turned and looked at her sister. "It makes no difference what he thought; I gave him an order."

A loud pounding on the door stopped Regan's response.

"Are you awake in there?" Angus called.

"Enter," Kelsey said.

Angus pushed the door open and rushed in. He met Kelsey's eyes and went rigid. "Sorry I'm late, Queen's-

Commander," he said. "Peter put Rourk and me out with a sleep spell."

Kelsey frowned. "Are you sure?"

Angus's cheeks above his beard flushed. "When we woke he was standing guard over us like we were babies. He admitted it, just as bold as could be, said an hour's later start wouldn't make any difference."

Kelsey sighed. "Well, I guess he's right. Where's Rourk?"

"He's seeing to the horses. He figured you'd want to leave as soon as possible."

"He figured right," Kelsey grumbled.

"I'll tell them, Queen's-Commander." Angus pivoted and then rushed out the door.

"Are you going to ream Peter out?" Regan asked.

Kelsey walked to the old chest, opened it, and tossed a shirt and trousers to Regan. "No," she said.

"Why not? You were plenty pissed a few minutes ago."

"He's my superior. If that was his decision, then I have to live by it."

"Peter is your superior, but you're Queen Tessa's commander."

"And the High Mage answers to none except the queen," Kelsey said. "Why do you think I was so concerned that he wasn't thinking straight?"

Regan pulled the pants up over her hips and tightened the drawstring at her waist. "I didn't realize."

"He's not just any man," Kelsey said, her voice muffled by the tunic that covered her head. She pulled the shirt down

and tucked it in her pants. "The queen expects him to make clear, level-headed decisions for her and Daradawn."

"He has ... he will." Regan tucked in her own tunic. "We both will."

"Good, that's all I ask. Now let's get going."

Regan turned and saw Maggie scratching at her ear. "Just a minute. I've got to get Maggie's bells back on." She moved to the nightstand and picked up the collar. The bells tinkled as she slipped it around Maggie's neck. "Can't have pesky fleas on you. Okay," she told Kelsey. "Let's go."

Kelsey walked toward the door, then stopped. "I almost forgot." She walked back to the bed and scooped yesterday's trousers from the floor. "With your sudden departure yesterday, you forgot your earrings." Grinning, she moved to Regan and laid the velvet bag in her hands.

"Are you wearing the pendant?" Regan said.

Kelsey nodded. "Peter wants them with us all the time."

Regan opened the bag and looked at the opals. They looked no different. "Did he tell you how this was supposed to work?" she asked, putting them in her ears.

"We can call to each other no matter where we are as long as the talismans are touching us."

"Do we verbally do it, or with a mind call?"

Kelsey shrugged. "That I don't know. You'll have to ask."

"And do they act like a homing device? Will I know where you are at all times, or only when I want to?"

Kelsey's eyes widened. "God, I hope it's only when one of us calls. There are going to be times when I don't want you to know where I am or what I'm doing."

"Ditto."

The sisters grinned at each other. "That's something else we better ask Peter," Kelsey said.

Regan linked her arm through her sister's. "I'm starving. How about you?" Maggie woofed affirmative. "Yes, I know you are."

"Breakfast is going to be eaten in the saddle today. I want to get to the place we found last night and be well hidden. I just hope the Ru'taha are still there."

"I think I'll take my notebook and work on some ad jingles as we ride," Regan said.

"You can't ride and write, and this isn't a Sunday outing."

"I know that." Regan squelched rising irritation. "Three quarters of the work is done in my head. I'll write them down—that is, if I come up with anything—when we stop."

Kelsey frowned, but said nothing.

"It's what I do for a living, you know," Regan said, resenting the need to defend herself. "This little jaunt already has me three days behind on a jingle for doggie biscuits. Maybe I'll call them Maggie Snacks." She reached down and patted the dog's head. "By the way, what are your plans when we get home? Going to get your old job back?"

Regan walked to the chest and pulled her notebook from the pocket of her discarded trousers and tucked it into her pocket. She turned and looked at Kelsey. Her sister stood still as a statue, her hand resting on the doorknob. A premonition chilled Regan. We won't be going back together. But will it be because she chooses not to, or for some other reason?

"Kelsey, you haven't answered me," Regan said through suddenly dry lips.

"I haven't given it much thought." Kelsey finally said in a quiet voice. She shook her head and turned to smile at Regan. "We'll talk about it after Dirkk's taken care of. Now let's get moving." Kelsey opened the door and Maggie whisked by. "That's one hungry dog."

Regan tried to laugh, but it came out a hoarse croak. She cleared her throat and said. "She's probably got a hot date with a bunch of kids."

"I'm feeling a little kid-like myself," Kelsey said with an ear-to-ear grin. "How about a race down the stairs?"

"No way," Regan said. "I'd be no good to anybody with a broken leg, or worse."

"I'll give you a head start, or are you—cluck, cluck, cluck?"

Regan stuck out her tongue at her sister. "You've never been able to outrun me. I'll give you the head start."

The grin left Kelsey's mouth. "Things change," she said, "but I'll take the head start." She ran out the door, yelling back. "Eat my dust."

* * * *

Regan followed Kelsey through the common's labyrinth of tents. Everywhere they passed, people halted what they were doing and bowed or bobbed in their direction. They were bombarded with "hellos" and "good mornings." Regan soon tired of answering, and settled with a nod. Still, by the time she sighted the stable, her neck hurt.

The men waited for them in front of a watering trough. Peter held Gilda's reins as well as Skylar's. The mage met Kelsey's eyes and smiled as they approached.

"I understand it was your decision that we start later than I'd planned," Kelsey said.

"It was."

Regan saw Angus and Rourk suddenly find things about their horses that needed their undivided attention.

"Thank you," Kelsey said, "I needed the sleep."

Rourk shot a glance at Kelsey, and Regan saw his eyebrows rise toward his hairline. Angus turned and stared at both of them. Then, mumbling under his breath, he mounted Zax. Peter glanced at the two men, smiled again and then handed Gilda's reins to Regan. She patted the mare's neck and climbed into the saddle.

"You are welcome," Peter said, then swung up onto Skylar's back. "There are coffee and sweet rolls in the side bags. Rourk says the ride is short. We will eat once we are there."

Kelsey nodded agreement and nudged her white-and-black mare in the ribs.

* * * *

The crowd separated before them as they made their way through the narrow aisles. Regan heard tinkling bells, then a whine, and turned to see Maggie heading her way at a fast lope. She reined Gilda in just as Maggie reached the mare's side. "Lady, will you talk to Maggie?"

"Her thoughts are jumbled, but she will understand mine." Gilda responded smugly.

"Then tell her to stay and play. We won't need her today."

Gilda lowered her head and touched the top of Maggie's right ear. Maggie looked at Regan and whined. The mare snorted, then gently lipped the basset hound's head. Maggie drew back, raised her brown eyes to Regan, then turned and walked away.

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her I would protect you today," the mare sent.

Regan patted Gilda's neck. "Thank you. Now let's catch up with the others."

* * * *

They wound their way through the planted fields. Stooping workers straightened and waved as they rode by. A little girl ran from the end of a row of tall vines and reached up toward Rourk with a large purple gourd in both hands. Rourk leaned from his saddle and scooped it from her. "Thanks, little one."

Sentries melted from their posts, saluted, then turned their searching looks outward again.

The protective mountain walls veered in as they neared the throat of the valley. Just ahead, and angling to the right, Regan saw the barricade of massive tree trunks. The morning sun glinted off the dewy green vines weaving in, around, and through the bare branches. She remembered well the thumb-length thorns that jutted along each clinging inch.

Angus pulled Zax to within three feet of the barricade. Peter rode up next to him, lifted his hand to break the ward,

then hesitated. He turned and faced Regan. "Would you like to give it a try?"

Regan's stomach knotted, but she kneeed Gilda forward. "What do I do?"

Behind her, she heard Angus's quick intake of breath, then he forced Zax between her and Peter. "Do you think this is a good idea?"

Startled, Regan faced the dwarf. "Angus, I've learned some control since the fairy glade."

Angus frowned, refusing to meet Regan's eyes.

"It would be easier on me if Regan did it," Peter said. "The magic does not tire her as much." Regan nudged Gilda closer, then reached out and touched Angus's arm. "I know what to expect now. I won't let it get away from me."

Kelsey and Rourk rode up. Kelsey looked from Regan to Angus. "What's the problem?"

Angus gave Regan a piercing stare. "Nothing," he said, then backed Zax from between Regan and Peter.

Regan released a deep breath and faced Peter.

"All you will need is a small tendril of power," he said.

Regan searched inward, found what she was seeking, then nodded.

"You have it?" Peter said.

She closed her eyes. "It's like a warm piece of string curled in my stomach."

"Let it know your will, your command."

Regan frowned in concentration.

"Now, draw it up to your hand," he said.

She pulled the tendril of heat along her arm, then cupped it in her palm. "I have it."

"Open your eyes and raise your arm toward the barricade."

She faced the wall of trees and thorns and lifted her arm.

"Start at the ground and slowly move your hand in an arc until you reach the other side."

Regan brought her hand up and moved her arm in a slow upward curve. The wall of thorns and tree stumps shimmered and then the black void and spinning vortex appeared in the center of the arch.

"Everyone, through," Peter said.

He stood silent beside Regan as the others rode by. "I must leave you," he told her. "When you release the magic, the wall will look as if it has returned, but your magic will let you through. You will feel dizzy when you pass under the arch because you are passing through an extension of yourself. Just give Gilda her head. We will take care of you on the other side."

"Don't worry," Regan said with a tremulous smile. "I've told Gilda the problem and she knows what to do."

Peter reached across and squeezed her hand. "Count to ten, then drop the arch. I will see you on the other side."

Regan's heart started to pound as Peter rode away. What if I can't draw it back? A memory of scorched tree-trunks in the fairy glade surfaced.

Gilda tossed her head. "I was not with you then."

Skylar vanished under the arch. Regan closed her eyes and licked her dry lips. "One ... two ... three ... four..." At the count of ten she lowered her hand and fused the flow of

power. Her arm heated, the skin turning bright red. Regan gritted her teeth. God, it burns. She looked around wildly.

From behind a rock on her right a slight figure emerged.

"Give it to me," Thomas said.

Regan's eyes filled with tears. She glanced down at her arm, half expecting to see her flesh aflame. With a groan, she lifted her arm toward Thomas and opened the channel. A blue flame arced from her fingertips and caught the mage square in the chest. His body arched and shuddered and a wild laugh rang out from him.

Regan leaned over and buried her face in Gilda's mane.

"Oh, my God. What have I done? Now he knows of my power and will tell Dirkk."

"Well done," Thomas said.

She lifted her hot face from Gilda's neck and glared at him. He smiled at her and motioned in the direction of the barricade. "Now you'd better join the rest of your group, or they will wonder at your lateness."

Thomas turned, then hesitated. "I almost forgot." He faced Regan again and waved his hand in her direction. "You and your mount will remember none of this. You will remember only that you absorbed the power into your body. Now ride. I can hold your arch open no longer." The mage turned and disappeared around the rock.

Regan blinked, then looked at her cool arm and the wavering arch. I did it. Well, that's one lesson I did learn in the glade.

Gilda shifted nervously and Regan's gaze went to the wall before her. The wall was already beginning to solidify back

into tree trunks and thorny vines. I can't ride through that; we'll be ripped to shreds.

"We go." Gilda sharply mind sent, then leapt forward.

"No." Regan yanked back on the reins, but Gilda continued her headlong charge.

Regan looked up. The approaching wall was a green-and-brown blur. She screamed, twisted her fingers in Gilda's mane, and pressed her face against the mare's neck. Beneath her she felt the mare tense, and then Regan gasped and jerked straight up in the saddle as every inch of her skin tingled with the touch of her own raw power. It pulsed around and through her, a feeling of intense joy. Tears filled her eyes and ran unheeded down her cheeks. She felt the fleeting touch of scores of hands as soft musical voices whispered words of love and encouragement into her ears. Then they were through, and Gilda was racing toward and then beyond Peter and Skylar.

The trees rushed by in a haze of green. Behind her, Regan heard Peter shout, then the sound of pounding hoofs as he raced Skylar up beside her.

Regan pulled back on Gilda's reins and the mare slowed to a canter and then to a walk. Peter reined Skylar in to match their pace.

"Are you all right?"

Regan stared at him for a moment, then nodded.

Rourk, Kelsey, and Angus galloped up beside them. "Are you okay?" Kelsey's face was pale and her eyes were wide with concern.

Peter waited for Regan to answer.

"Everything's fine. It was just more than I expected," Regan said.

Peter reached across and squeezed her hand. "Did you discover something of yourself in the Power?"

Regan looked over his head, back towards the barrier. "I'm not sure. It was more of a sense of pride and encouragement ... from others."

"Others?" Kelsey said.

Regan faced her. "Spirits."

"Did you feel that they were happy with your choice of action?" Peter said.

"Yes."

Peter smiled. "Right is with us."

"Was there ever any doubt?" Rourk asked, urging his mount forward. "Let's ride." He tossed back over his shoulder. "I'm starving."

* * * *

The jagged exit from Peaks' Pass to the deep woods beyond loomed before them.

Kelsey halted, then slid from her mare's back. She bent, picked up a branch and walked along a line of scrubby bushes. Twice she paused and pushed the stick into spiky leaves. Frowning, she backed up and surveyed the mountainside.

"Can we help?" Regan asked.

Kelsey shook her head and walked closer to the brush line. "It's here. It just looks different during the day."

Gilda sidestepped restively and Regan urged the mare nearer to Kelsey. She peered at the green brush wall. "What are you looking for?"

Kelsey glanced at her sister and then back toward the thicket. She passed by a tall bush with red berries, then stopped and walked back. With a small smile, she leaned toward the bush, sniffed and then touched it with her hand. At her touch, the greenery vanished and a curved opening into a cave appeared. She grinned at Regan. "It's the red berries that gave it away last night. They're elven and don't normally grow outside Vilsathor. Bend closer. Can you smell them?"

Regan guided Gilda closer to the bush. The berries smelled like watermelon. She looked at Kelsey in surprise.

"Watermelon berries. I've had them while visiting Margeaux. They're delicious, but don't try to eat these. I'm willing to bet they're poisoned."

Kelsey grabbed her horse's bridle and led her into the cave, followed by Regan and the others.

The light filtering through the opening revealed glassy-smooth walls. The ceiling arched high overhead. Transparent globes lined the walls. Regan looked down the length of the cave. It rose at a slant into blackness. She glanced at the dark mage globes. "Can you light them?" she asked Peter.

"I do not know. This cave is elven and very old."

"There's a ledge about half way up the mountain," Kelsey said. "Rourk and I hoped the cave led there, but to explore it further we needed light."

"Do they have these globes where Margeaux lives?" Regan said.

"Yes," Kelsey answered.

"How did she light them?"

"She just touched them."

Regan shrugged. "It's worth a try." She rose in her stirrups and reached toward a globe.

Peter grabbed her arm. "Wait. They could be bespelled."

Regan hesitated. "I don't think so. Not against us. The cave did open to Kelsey's touch."

Kelsey looked at Angus and Rourk. "What do you say?"

"This cave is more than likely for elves fleeing Dirkk's pets," Angus said.

"Knowing Margeaux, it's only spelled to keep Ru'taha and Black Vipers out," Rourk added.

"Then we try the globes?" Kelsey said.

"Yes, but I will do it," Peter said. "I know more of elven magic than Regan does." He reached up and touched a globe with the tip of his finger. The sphere remained dark.

"Can I try?" Regan asked.

Peter nodded, lowering his arm to his side.

Regan reached up and touched the globe nearest to her. The sphere remained lightless beneath her hand.

"Maybe if we try together," Peter said.

"No," Angus growled. "It's obvious we need an elf."

Rourk reined his horse closer to the wall and touched one of the globes. From deep inside a speck lit, then spread. Along the length of the cave's wall the globes blossomed into

light. In unison the group turned and stared at Rourk, whose face colored until it was the same flaming shade as his hair.

"There were rumors as I grew," he said with a slight grin. "My grandfather was said to have been an elf." He shrugged. "I guess it was true.

"Lucky for us," Angus said, then reached to clasp Rourk's upper arm. "And don't worry, my friend. I won't hold it against you."

Regan started to laugh at Angus's joke, but then saw the dwarf was not smiling.

"We're wasting time," Kelsey said, and started her horse forward at a slow walk.

* * * *

The lit globes guided them as they wound their way upward in silence. It was almost a reverent quiet, reminding Regan of the time her Mom had taken her to her first Holy Communion. She remembered how she had stared awestruck at the multitude of flickering candles at the statue of the Virgin Mary's feet, and how her lips had trembled when she had opened her mouth for the white tasteless wafer to be placed on her tongue.

Kelsey's whoop startled Regan out of her reverie.

"We were right, but you'll have to leave the horses," Kelsey yelled back to them.

Regan dropped Gilda's reins and patted the mare's neck. "Will you be comfortable here?"

"I will be fine."

"I'll bring you an apple if I can scrounge a spare one."
Regan promised. Gilda snorted approval and then hurried her
along with a head butt. "Greedy, aren't you?"

* * * *

Regan rounded a corner, and almost ran into Kelsey's
mare. She patted the horse's rump as she passed.

The cave narrowed as she climbed. By the time she saw
Kelsey framed in a half circle of light, the ceiling almost
grazed her head. Behind her she heard a dull thud, then a
soft curse. She choked back a laugh.

Kelsey held a finger to her lips as she saw Regan. Regan
made her way to her sister with a question already forming.
Kelsey pointed down. Thirty feet below, fifteen Ru'taha milled.

They walked along the brush line, hunched over, their
noses almost touching the green leaves. Three or four of
them tilted their heads back, sniffed the air, and then began
to run up and down along the mountain's base.

"They've caught our scent," Kelsey whispered.

"But they can't figure out where we are," Angus added.

One of the Ru'taha stopped before the bush of red berries,
sniffed, then grabbed a handful and thrust them into its
mouth. In seconds it dropped to its knees and grabbed its
stomach. One of the Ru'taha walked over to the kneeling one
and poked its shoulder. The bent over Ru'taha looked up,
pitched sideways and writhed on the ground. The standing
Ru'taha brought his club up, then crashed it down on the
stricken Ru'taha's head.

Regan stared at the black pulpy mass that had been the Ru'taha's head, then stumbled back from the opening. Leaning both palms against the cave wall, she gagged. An arm circled her shoulders and she turned her head. Rourk stood beside her.

"The first time's always the worst," he said.

Regan wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her shirt. "My God, how can they be so cruel?"

Rourk shrugged. "They know no other way."

Kelsey walked to where Regan leaned. Her sister's face was void of emotion. "Are you ready to try? They've been longer in one place than normal."

Regan swallowed and ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth. "Do you suppose I could have a drink of water first?"

"Here." Angus thrust his silver canteen at her.

Regan glanced at it skeptically.

"It's just water," the dwarf said.

She took a mouthful of the water, swished it around, spit it out, then took several swallows. Handing the canteen back to Angus, she took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm ready."

She walked to the ledge and stared down at the Ru'taha who circled aimlessly. How do I begin? she wondered. With Gilda, I just think at her, but there's so many of them. Regan shifted her eyes from the Ru'taha to Kelsey and Peter, but they weren't watching her; their gazes were pinned on the Ru'taha. One stood away from the others.

Picking a spot just above its eyes, she concentrated. Something easy first, but what? I've got it. "Your nose

itches." The Ru'taha's hand remained resting on a rock. "Come on. Your nose itches," she muttered. The Ru'taha's hand rose toward his nose.

"Is it working?" Angus asked directly into her ear.

Regan jumped, and the Ru'taha dropped his hand. "Damn, don't do that again," she whispered harshly. "I think so."

Angus smoothed his beard, then backed a few steps into the cave and settled down onto a rock. "Well, let me know when I am needed," he said, then leaned his head back against the cave's wall and closed his eyes.

"If I do it right, I won't have to tell you," Regan said. She turned, looked downward once again, then took a deep breath and reached out and touched the lone Ru'taha's mind. She frowned and withdrew the probe.

"What is wrong?" Peter asked.

"Nothing. It just surprised me. Its mind is empty ... no hate, no fear, nothing."

He nodded. "It awaits its orders."

"Then I guess I'll give it one." She concentrated her mind on the thought. "I want you to kill all the Ru'taha with you and then throw yourself in the river."

The Ru'taha's black-helmeted head came up and it stared at the mountain's base. She saw it turn toward the rest of the Ru'taha, then back to the river. Its hand rose. Regan held her breath. Then its long thin fingers scratched the end of its nose. Regan released her held-in breath with a whoosh and fought an insane urge to laugh.

"This is a waste of time," she heard Angus mutter.

Regan shot him a dirty look, then leaned over the ledge and commanded the Ru'taha again. The Ru'taha stood, stretched, then sauntered over to its closest companion. They stood eye to eye for a moment, then the Ru'taha she had commanded raised its battle club and split the other's head open like a melon.

The savaged Ru'taha dropped to the ground, its legs kicking convulsively. The rest of the Ru'taha turned and looked at the jerking one. One sidled closer and he joined the first. Eleven more times, the commanded Ru'taha's club rose and fell.

"God, why doesn't it run?" Regan said, watching the last Ru'taha stand and await its executioner.

"Because no one told it to," Kelsey said.

The Ru'taha's arm rose and Regan turned away, but the cracking sound rose to her, and she shuddered.

"You can look now," Kelsey said. "It's wading into the river."

Regan looked down in time to see the swift current grab the Ru'taha and sweep its body downstream. She saw it go under, then bob to the surface again. It bounced off a rock, then went under and stayed.

She felt an arm around her shoulders, and looked up blankly into Peter's eyes.

"It is over and we have our answer," he said, guiding her from the ledge.

Regan took three steps, then stumbled, and dropped to her knees. "I think I'm going to be sick," she gasped, just before she bent over and gagged.

Peter held her steady as she retched.

At last she drew in a deep shuddering breath and leaned her hot forehead against the cool cave wall. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

He pulled her into his arms and smoothed damp tendrils of hair away from her cheeks. "No apology is necessary. Death is never easy to watch. Even a hated enemy's."

She looked around. "Where is everyone?"

"They thought you needed a little time. We have all been where you are now."

She closed her eyes. "I would like to be alone for a moment. Do you mind?"

He kissed her forehead. "We will wait for you where we first came in," he said, then backed from the ledge.

She watched until he was out of sight, then stood and walked further into the cave, away from the odorous contents of her stomach.

She sat down, hugged her legs to her chest, and let the hot tears come. God, I don't know if I could ever go through that again, and I know they'll expect me to. What am I going to do? She rested her forehead against the top of her knees. Peter said they'd all been here before. They got beyond this. I guess I will too, but I need some time. Please, God, just a little time. She inhaled a deep shuddering breath, and pushed herself to her feet. Trailing a hand along the cave's wall, she started forward.

She paused where she thought she had left Gilda, but the mare was gone. They must have taken her with them. A sudden breeze from the left lifted her hair and she turned. In

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by Barbara M. Hodges

the cave's wall was a dark oval. I don't remember that. She walked closer and peered into the blackness. It looks like another smaller cave. She felt warm breath on the back of her neck and smiled. "Gilda, how did you get..." Then a hand clamped across her mouth, and she was shoved forward into the black opening.

Chapter 20

IN THE DARKNESS, Regan came up hard against a firm body. Sharp fingernails dug into the skin of her upper arm. "Close it," a husky feminine voice commanded. Regan heard the grind of rock against rock, and with panicked strength twisted out of her assailant's grip. She lunged toward the opening. Behind her she heard a soft curse just before her legs were swept from beneath her. She went down hard, landed flat on her back, the air whooshing from her lungs.

"Don't try that again," the voice snapped. Hands fastened like vises around Regan's arms and jerked her to her feet. She gulped in air and then opened her mouth to scream.

"Now you will scream. It's what you human females do best. Go ahead. No one will hear," the voice mocked.

Regan reached deep inside for the Power. Fear iced her spine at the cold emptiness she found. It was there, but a wall separated her from it. What was wrong? Her right hand convulsed into a fist. She swung out and connected with nothing but air. Soft laughter sounded directly in her ear and she whirled to face it.

"How pathetic. This cave is of Vilsathor. Your pitiful magic will not work here. What does he see in you?"

"Who are you?" Regan asked, her voice tight with anger. From the darkness in front of her, more footsteps approached.

"You have her?" another voice asked.

"As I was commanded." Regan heard bitterness in the reply.

"Then bring her."

Hands jerked her forward, deeper into the dark. Her journey was short. In only minutes Regan saw an oval of light ahead. A sudden breeze blew into her face, lifting a stray wisp of hair from her cheek and bringing the stale scent of newly opened space.

Behind Regan, her captor shoved her roughly between the shoulder blades and she stumbled, wind-milling her arms. She heard a soft, spiteful laugh and the hand shoved again.

With a small cry, Regan pitched forward into the pool of light and landed hard on her hands and knees.

"What are you doing, fools?" she heard a voice snap above her head. "I said she wasn't to be harmed."

"It was an accident." Regan heard the voice return a sullen reply. "She tripped. The clumsy human."

"Away. Retrieve her mount."

"Yes, my prince."

Prince? Regan lifted her head and looked up past green trousers and shirt, dark blue eyes and lingered upon a platinum-haired head. "Darrian?" she whispered.

"I tired of waiting for your promised return," the elven princeling said.

"It's only been two days."

"An eternity. Here, let me help you to your feet." He placed his hands beneath her armpits and heaved her to her feet. "Whew. You reek."

Regan's face grew hot. "I got sick."

"The first thing you must do is bathe." He whistled a whippoorwill call and elves appeared with Gilda.

Regan rubbed her scraped palms on her trousers and shook her head. "I can't go with you. Kelsey is waiting."

Darrian scowled. "Of course you will come with me. I wish it."

Regan took two steps back from him, wincing at the pain in her left knee. "No, I won't."

In the dim light, she saw the elven prince flush. "Then I will leave your friends to die."

"You can't do that!"

"Yes, I can," he said smiling.

"But how?"

He shrugged. "I'll just make sure the cave exit remains solid rock."

"You would leave them to die?"

"No, you will be leaving them to die."

Regan's fingernails dug into the palms of her hands. "Five people will die because you want a romp in the hay with me?"

Darrian's eyebrow rose. "If you mean what I think you do, then yes, but we will roll in something less scratchy. Unless you find hay more compelling?"

Regan fought to keep her voice steady. "You're going to have to rape me. I guarantee you won't like it."

The elven prince grinned. "Force will not be necessary, only a glass or two of a very special wine." He reached out and caressed her cheek. "Don't fight it so. In a couple of weeks I'll no doubt tire of you and then you can go back to Peter. Although I doubt you will still wish to do so."

Regan's knees started to tremble and she reached out toward him. "Two weeks—no, I have to go through the rift in two days."

"Two days? I don't think so. My blood heats just standing this close to you. Two days will never be enough time."

Think, Regan. If you can't get away from him, you and Kelsey will be trapped here for another seven years. But her mind refused to cooperate, her thoughts fluttering like moths around a glowing bulb. She swallowed. "Darrian, listen. Dirkk is planning an attack on Raya and the castle. Queen Tessa needs me. You let me go and I'll come to you afterwards. We can have one night together before I leave for home." She reached up and traced his cheek with her fingertip.

He pulled her close and flattened her curves against the length of his body, then lowered his head and pressed his lips against hers. A questing tongue pried her lips apart and swept around the contours of her mouth. She forced her body to remain pliant, swallowing the bile that rose in her throat. He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. She curved her lips into what she hoped was a promising smile, and felt his response swell against her stomach.

He nipped the lobe of her ear. "I will have you, Regan. Just be glad you smell the way you do, or I would take you right now," he whispered, his breath hot against her ear.

She twisted her shoulders free and stepped back. "No." She spat the word at him. "You will not have me. Some way I will stop you."

He laughed, then reached out a hand and placed it between her breasts. "I feel how your heart races. You want me. All females want me. Some just have to be shown."

The prince turned and snapped his fingers at the elves behind him. "We ride." He turned back to Regan. "Unless you want your friends to die?"

She pushed by him, strode to Gilda's head and swung up onto her back. "I'll go with you, but I'll escape the first chance I get."

"Fair enough. Where I'm taking you there is no escape. But if you can, I will let you go."

She glared at him in frigid silence. He chuckled as he mounted his horse, then reached to grab Gilda's reins. Regan frowned. "I can ride. I don't need to be led."

"And have you bolt as soon as you're free of the cave? I think not."

She gritted her teeth. "How do I know Kelsey and everyone will be able to leave the cave?"

"You may watch from the other side of the river as I release them." He reached over and lifted the braid from across her breast. "Does that please you?"

She slapped his hand away.

He laughed wickedly and kicked his horse in the ribs.

* * * *

Regan felt an itching in the middle of her back and turned in the saddle. A young female elf met her look. Tight hate stretched every line of her angular face. She's the one who pushed me.

"Darrian, who's the woman who rides three horses behind?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Lara. She wishes to be the only one in my bed."

"Sounds good to me," Regan said.

Darrian smiled. "Before I saw Kelsey, and then you, she might have been, but now..." he shrugged and his voice trailed off.

"She's very beautiful."

"And very talented in the art of love."

"I'm not."

"Not what?"

"Very talented in making love."

His eyes swept over her. "You are made for love."

"But I'm not. I don't even like it," she said.

"Perhaps that's because you haven't had the right lover," he said smugly.

She frowned. "I'm just not very exciting. I'm sure Lara's much better."

"Would you like her to join us?"

Regan drew back from him as far as her saddle would permit. "God, no."

"I was hoping you'd prefer us to be alone."

Regan glared down at her saddle horn. She heard him laugh, and glanced up to see he had turned back around in his saddle.

The path they followed narrowed as they rode through tall spindly trees. Thorny vines with large waxy green leaves and purple-clustered flowers grew so close to the packed-dirt trail

the horses' swishing tails lashed the vines, showering everything with a fine mist.

She glanced up at the sun. It looked as if they had been riding for an hour or two, and were heading north.

Darrian had kept his word and released Kelsey and the others from the cave once they had crossed the river into Vilsathor. Regan watched as the four rode out, her heart aching as Peter raced up and back along the mountain's side.

Darrian laughed as he watched. "The cave entrance is no longer there. The bush is gone also. They will think you've been trapped inside."

In seething anger she had reached inward for the Power, aching to blast the smirk off the elven prince's face, but the only thing burning in her stomach was rage.

Gilda turned to meet her eyes, but without magic, Regan could do nothing but stare into the mare's eyes. Another thought struck her. I can't use the opal earrings to let Kelsey know I'm alive.

Darrian stopped at an opening in the brush. He guided his horse through the break, and the rest of the elves followed like obedient sheep. Darrian lead them around a giant oak tree and stopped at the edge of a wide field ablaze with yellow daffodils. A breeze touched Regan's cheek, bringing with it the flowers' sweet scent and the lazy drone of bees.

Darrian turned in his saddle and looked beyond her to the other elves. He raised his hand and pointed. Regan twisted in her saddle and saw the elves silently turn and ride back into the trees, all except Lara. The elven woman remained where she was, glaring at Regan.

Regan glanced at Darrian in time to see him frown, and then point at the trees again. Regan turned back and saw the elven woman ride her horse closer to them, a look of pleading on her face.

"Lara, go. You are an embarrassment and a bore," Darrian said, his voice cold with censure.

Regan saw Lara's eyes sheen with tears, then she viciously whipped her horse around and galloped into the trees. "Did you have to be so cruel?" she said.

The elven prince looked at her in surprise. "Why should you care? She hates you. She would kill you herself if I permitted it."

"Can't you see she has feelings for you?"

Darrian's eyebrow rose. "Off course she does. I am her prince. It is expected." The breeze blew a strand of hair into his face and with a quick swipe of his hand he brushed it away from his cheek. "Enough. Our journey ends just beyond this glade." With a laugh, he pitched Gilda's reins in Regan's direction. "You may run if you wish, but you will never get beyond this glade. It's bespelled with elven magic." Still laughing, he nudged his horse forward, not bothering to see if she followed.

She glanced around, chewing on her upper lip. "Damn you," she said, then urged Gilda to follow.

He rode across the field, then turned into another stand of trees. She followed reluctantly, then suddenly pulled back on Gilda's reins. Her eyes widened. In the middle of a pool of green grass stood a cottage straight out of The Brothers Grimm fairy tales.

The walls were mortared gray stone. Ivy, in variegated shades of green, curled up around doors and framed windows. A red brick chimney poked from a darker gray shake roof. White smoke curled from the chimney's square opening. A deer stood within a few feet of the carved wood door, sedately chewing grass. It looked up, met her eyes and froze, its body quivering. It's scared to death. Why doesn't it run? Regan looked up. At the end of a brown limb, she met the eyes of a gray squirrel, also frozen in place. She cast a quick glance at Darrian. He stared, enraptured, at the scene before them. His smile reminded her of an artist ogling a much slaved-over canvas. As she watched, he urged his horse forward and, with a movement almost too quick to see, flicked his fingers at the deer. The released deer bounded into the trees. Regan looked up in time to see the squirrel's tail disappear among the oak's thick leaves. More elven magic. For a moment, she was impressed by his pretty little picture of serenity.

She watched as he dismounted and moved toward her. She quickly slid from Gilda's back. He froze in mid-step, then spun on his heel and stalked toward the cottage. She watched in silence as he opened the door, walked through, and slammed it behind him. She winced as the ivy twining above the door shook with the impact. If he thinks I'm going to make this easy, he's crazy.

Regan scratched Gilda's nose. "I'd like to think we won't be here long enough to warrant removing your saddle, but I suppose it's wishful thinking." She reached under the saddle's flap, unbuckled the girth and heaved the saddle from the

mare's back. Stumbling with its weight, she back-pedaled a few steps and laid it across a round rock.

She used the long sleeve of her shirt to wipe the sweat spots the saddle had left on Gilda's back and then wrapped the reins loosely around a branch. "There. You need to be brushed, but that'll have to do." She glanced at Darrian's still saddled horse and frowned. Sighing, she crossed to the horse and reached to loosen its girth.

"What are you doing?" Darrian demanded from the cottage door.

She kept her back to the door. "I'm taking the saddle off your horse. What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Leave it. Someone will come for him."

She stilled her hands. Then someone does know of this cottage. She wiped her palms along the leg of her pants before turning to face Darrian. "As you wish."

"Come in. I've drawn a bath for you."

She hesitated, then shrugged and walked toward the cottage. The elf turned, but not before she saw the satisfied smirk on his lips. Regan's lips tightened in response. You may have won the skirmish, but the war is just beginning.

She stopped in the arch of the cottage's doorway and surveyed the scene before her. Her lips parted, and she fought bubbling laughter.

A fire crackled enticingly in a stone fireplace. Lying on the floor in front of the fireplace was a white fur. A tall bottle and two silver goblets sat next to the fur. There were no furnishings in the cottage, just piles and piles of ivory silk

pillows. God, it's a seduction scene right out of Playboy magazine.

A freestanding screen stood at the far right of the room. Regan watched steamy mist rise beyond it. Draped over the screen's top was a ruby-red robe.

Darrian waved his arm with nonchalant grace in the direction of the screen. "Your bath awaits, my lovely. Just toss your clothes to the side. I will have them burned."

Regan walked into the room, and behind her the door slammed shut. She jumped, then turned and looked at it. "I suppose it's locked?"

Darrian laughed. "You're my guest. I can't have you leaving too soon."

From outside Regan heard Gilda neigh. She rushed to the window and saw the mare being led away by two elves. "Where are they taking Gilda?"

"She will be seen to, just as any of my other horses. When you leave she will be brought back to you."

Regan whirled to face him. "If you harm her..."

"Enough," Darrian cut her off. "This game is becoming a bore. Now get out of your clothes, or do you need help?"

Regan raised her chin and swept a cold gaze over him. "I've been undressing myself for years."

"What a pity." He walked to the white fur and stretched out on it. "You've thirty minutes for your bath. If you haven't joined me by then, I'll see what I can do to hurry you along."

Regan turned and stalked behind the screen.

An ivory oval tub filled with steaming water awaited her. Next to the tub was a small vial of pink liquid. Regan held it

to her nose and inhaled. The smell of roses caressed her senses. With a slight smile, she capped the vial and set it aside. "Fat chance," she murmured.

She pulled her shirt over her head, stepped from the trousers and then tossed both reeking garments over the top of the screen. From the other side of the screen she heard a muffled curse and grinned. Serves him right for trying to get a peek.

She stepped into the tub and settled back, smothering a delighted sigh. A round sponge rested next to the perfume vial. She picked up the sponge, dunked it, and then squeezed a stream of water over her shoulder.

"Regan, I'm waiting."

Her fingers dug into the sponge. Somehow I've got to get away from this egotistical lunatic.

Five short minutes later, she stood and stepped from the tub. A large white towel lay folded on the floor. She toweled dry, then reached for the robe; it was soft as silk in her hands. She pulled it over her head and let it drop. The crimson fabric pooled around her feet like glistening blood. Glancing down at the neckline, she scowled. It was shaped in a deep wide vee, the point resting between the valley of her breast. God, if I move wrong it'll fall off. She pulled the shoulder seams up and back so the vee'd point rested just below her neck, kicked her feet free of the bunched up silken mass, then took a deep breath and moved from behind the screen.

Darrian lounged on the fur in front of the fire. The red-gold flames reflected off the silver goblets he held in each hand.

The elven prince had used the time she bathed to change into a robe the mirror image of hers. The deep vee showed her an ivory-skinned chest that looked smooth as silk.

He watched her as she neared. A predatory smile curving his full red lips, he held one of the glasses out toward her. As she took the glass from his hand, their fingertips touched, and she almost dropped the glass of wine in surprise at the heat that radiated from his. The elven prince patted the fur next to him. Regan perched stiffly next to him. Darrian locked his gaze with hers, then lifted the glass to his lips and drank. Regan watched his throat move as he swallowed the wine.

"Try some," he said, motioning toward her glass.

She swirled the purple liquid in her glass. "I'm not thirsty right now."

He pushed himself up on one elbow, then leaned toward her and took the wine from her hand. "Perhaps your appetite yearns for something different?"

I can't let this happen, she thought, but what can I do?

He set the glass aside, then pushed up to a sitting position. She turned her back to him. She felt his arms twine around her waist, and he pulled her back against his chest. The heat from his body singed her skin. Warm lips touched her nape, and teeth nibbled along the back of her neck. Against her will she shivered. She turned her head, her gaze seeking the glass of wine. If I drink it, maybe it wouldn't be so bad? I might even like it. He couldn't be any worse than Jack was.

He trailed his lips along her shoulder, and with a soft moan she closed her eyes. Peter's face floated before her and she snapped her eyes open. "No," she cried twisting away.

She turned to face Darrian and watched the elf's face tighten.

"You wish to do this the hard way?" he said.

"I don't wish to do it at all."

"But I do and so we will." He smiled once again. "You're a witch who's cast a spell over me, and I must have you."

Her mind pounced on the word. A spell. The Power doesn't work in Vilsathor, but what about my spells? My magic isn't of Daradawn. Is Vilsathor guarded against them?

She rapidly pulled, discarded, and then pulled more words together. Please let it work, she silently prayed as she recited to herself.

"No I said and no I meant.

Your overtures I deplore, your attitude I reject.

I wish you softer than before, in a place you don't expect.

Your passions burn high, a fiery ember.

Cool the fire with the chill of December."

As she mentally flung the last words at him, he ran his hand up inside her gown and along her thigh. His robe stretched tight across his groin, and she saw all too clearly the spell had failed.

Her shoulders sagged, and she reached for the glass of wine. The glass rim was at her lips when a hand pounded on the wooden door. She froze.

"Go away," Darrian yelled.

"My Prince, Margeaux is looking for you. She's questioning all of us and Lara has threatened to tell of your captive."

"Damn." Darrian pushed Regan aside and stood. Her gown slid off her right shoulder and bared her breast to its pale-pink nipple. Her cheeks heated. She moved to pull the neckline up and he grabbed her hand. "Leave it. Soon I'll return to remove it from the rest of your body." He squeezed her hand, then stood and walked to the doorway. At the door he turned, smiled at her, and then walked out.

"Damn you," she said to the closed door.

Regan heard the jingle of bridles, then the pounding of hoofs. She scrambled to her feet, ran to the door and twisted the knob. Bepelled glade or not, I'm getting out of here. The door was locked. Why does he lock the door if the glade is spelled? Anger coursed through her. How could I have been so stupid? I could have turned Gilda and ran.

She stalked back to the fireplace and picked up the two glasses of wine. With a cold smile she emptied them, then the bottle of wine, into the flames. Scowling at the white fur she kicked it aside, then piled a bunch of pillows on the floor in its place.

So why didn't the spell work? Was it the wording? Her forehead creased. What did I say? No I said and no I meant. Your attitude is a bore ... no that's not right. I'd better write it down.

She crossed to where her clothing still lay on the floor. Holding the pants with her fingertips, and as far away from her as possible, she removed her notebook from the pocket and padded back to the fireplace.

Sitting Indian style in her nest of pillows, she stared down at the open notebook lying on her knee for a long moment, then pushed it off onto the floor. "I don't have anything to write with." Tears threatened and she angrily blinked them away. "No, he will not win."

She stood and let her gaze wander around the cottage. There has to be a pen here somewhere, but where? The little table next to the tub, she thought, did it have a drawer in it? She ran to the screen and pulled it aside. Below the flat top was a small drawer. Please don't let it be locked, or full of soap. She pulled on the gold ornate knob. The drawer opened. In it lay a flat leather-bound book. She yanked the book out, then searched the drawer with her fingertips. Damn, no pen.

Staring down at the emerald-green book, curiosity overcame her disappointment and she flipped it open.

Inside, in tight cramped writing, was page after page, all detailing Darrian's seductions. Her eyes scanned a few pages and her cheeks heated. "God, what an ass he is. These women meant nothing to him." She flipped to the last entry, then whooped with delight. A feather-tipped quill pen lay trapped in the book's deep vee.

"Ink, I need ink," she murmured walking back to the fireplace. "I suppose I could do like they do in some of those old horror tales and use my own blood, but..." She stared at a pile of ashes that had escaped the fireplace. She knelt beside the pillows, scraped a pile of ash close to her, spat into it, and mixed it with her finger. She dipped the end of the pen into

the gray mess, then opened her notebook and tried a few letters. It was crude but legible.

The words came back to her a little at a time.

"No I said and no I meant.

Your overtures I deplore, your attitude I reject.

I wish you softer than before in places you don't expect.

Your fires burn high, a fiery ember.

Cool the fire with the chill of December."

As she finished writing the word December, the page before her glowed. The black letters flared scarlet, then turned black once again.

Startled, Regan pushed the book from her lap, then stared down at it wide-eyed. "What the hell! That's never happened before." She tentatively touched a letter with her trembling fingertip, but it remained black. So what's different? She laughed shrilly. What isn't? She gulped in two quick breaths. Get a hold of yourself, girl. This isn't the time to lose it.

A sudden thought hit her with the blow of a sucker-punch and, for a moment, she couldn't draw a breath down her dry throat. It's the first time I've written in it since I came through the rift. Do the spells I write have to be written in the book to work here? Oh, God, if that's right, then the one we wrote for Dirkk will fail. A wave of panicky dizziness had her shaking her head to drive it away. No, wait. I can write the spell in now. She picked up the pen and hastily scribbled "Evil is as evil does..."

She finished the last word and stared at the page; no flare of light, no scarlet branded words. What's the problem? Why didn't it work? Then she remembered Peter's bent head and

closed eyes as he wrote the spell's final stanza. "Peter has to write the ending."

She scrambled to her feet and ran to the door. Pounding on it with clenched fists, she yelled. "Let me out of here!" From the other side she heard a chuckle, and Darrian pushed the door open.

"Still eager to leave, I see," he said.

She grabbed his arm. "Darrian, you have to let me go. I have to get back to Peter."

He frowned, then pushed her aside and slammed the door. "You choose Peter over me?"

"I love him."

Darrian's face flooded with scarlet. He grabbed her arm, his fingers digging like knives into her flesh, and jerked her back toward the pile of pillows.

Unable to tear away from his brute strength, Regan raked her fingernails across the back of his hand, leaving stripes of blood. "Let me go!"

He threw her down onto the pile of pillows and dropped on top of her, his left hand holding both of hers captive behind her back. His fingers dipped into the neckline of the gown and ripped it off her right shoulder. Naked to the waist, she struggled to free her hands. Their eyes clashed, his full of hate and passion, before he bent his head and fastened his lips on her nipple.

"No," she cried, jackknifing her body beneath his.

"I will have you now," he panted, forcing his knee between her thighs. He pressed his hips against her and she felt his stiff maleness. "See what you do to me."

Regan went very still. She forced herself to smile. "Yes, I do see." Fighting bile, she moved her hips against him. "It would be better if my hands were free."

"So you've come to your senses," he said, returning her smile.

"Let me show you." She watched doubt cloud his eyes. "What can I do anyway? The glade's bespelled." More rage almost gagged her at the words. Her hands were released, and she heard his gasp as she cupped them around him.

"Yes," he murmured as she stroked his length.

She locked her gaze with his, and slowly smiled as she mentally recited the words of the spell.

Inside her cupped hands, she felt him shrivel. His eyes darkened in shock. He brought his hand up and caressed her bare breast, teasing the nipple with his thumb and forefinger.

In her hands, he remained flaccid, and she gave him a little squeeze. "Is there a problem?" she asked, never taking her gaze from his.

The elven prince rolled from her with a frown. "I don't understand. This has never happened before." Regan raised an eyebrow and his face reddened.

"Perhaps you're trying too hard," she offered.

He stood. "I'm just tired. It's been a long day. I need some rest. I will come back later tonight."

She patted the pillow beside her. "Lie here and rest with me."

He backed toward the door. "No. I'll return shortly." He opened the door, walked through and then shut it behind him.

She smiled spitefully at the closed door for a pleased moment, then fear wiped it from her face and made her heart race. The spell. This time it had worked, she thought, pulling the ripped gown together in front of her. They do have to be written in the book. Oh, God, somehow I've got to get to Peter and warn him.

She rolled from the pillows. The gown wound around her legs and wrapped them in a cocoon of silk. With an exasperated cry she jerked them free and stood.

Kicking the gown out ahead of her with each step, she paced. "The spells I write in Vilsathor work, but how far away could they be heard?" She crossed to the book and pen and picked them up. Gnawing on the pen's end, she nodded. She spit into another mound of scraped-together ash, and then dipped the pen into it and wrote:

"Friend or stranger, hear my plea, save me from his planned destiny.

Trapped within this evil hall, help me please, and heed my call."

At her last written word the page again glowed, the words flashed scarlet, then returned to charcoal grayness. She stared at the page, then closed the book. "Now all I can do is wait."

* * * *

Regan's eyes snapped open and she bolted to a sitting position. "I fell asleep. I can't believe it."

She scrubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. What had woken her? Was Darrian back for another try?" She heard

the tinkle of reins and the whinny of a horse. "Regan, are you in there?" a recognized voice yelled.

"Ben?" She stood and ran to the door. "Get me out. Darrian has the door spelled."

She heard murmuring voices, then a woman answered. "It shouldn't be hard. Darrian only knows the basics of magic." Regan heard words spoken in a language unknown to her and then the door was pushed open. Darrian's Aunt Margeaux entered, a joyous smile lighting her face. "Ben was right. It was your call he heard."

A shadow fell across the threshold and Ben entered. "Regan!" He swept her into his arms protectively. "I couldn't believe it when I heard your call for help." Ben's gaze traveled around the seduction chamber, then back to Regan and the torn gown she held together. They kindled with anger. "Did that young whelp hurt you?"

She pushed herself from his arms. "Darrian is the least of my concerns right now. I have to get beyond Vilsathor so I can contact Kelsey."

Ben frowned. "What has happened?"

"I will tell you as we ride."

He turned toward the door. "After your call I went to the stable and Gilda was there. Margeaux thought she came to me on her own, but I knew better. She's outside."

Regan grabbed her notebook and ran through the door. Gilda stood where she had left her earlier, and Regan spared a moment to scratch between the mare's white-tipped ears. "We must hurry. Queen Tessa expects an attack by Dirkk

anytime now," she said over her shoulder to Ben and Margeaux.

Ben came to stand beside her. "You will freeze in that gown."

"I brought you clothes," Margeaux said, handing Regan a tunic, trousers, and short, leather boots. At Ben's surprised look she shrugged. "I know my nephew's ways."

Regan stripped the gown free and scrambled into the tunic and trousers. "Thanks," she said as she pulled the boots onto her feet and placed her notebook in the shirt's side pocket.

She swung up into the mare's saddle, then nudged Gilda's side and galloped toward the field that waited beyond the trees.

* * * *

Regan gazed across the Queen's River while she answered Ben's question. "Peter doesn't know the spell won't work unless written in the book. And he thinks I'm dead. He won't think twice of casting it on his own, and that would be suicide." She urged Gilda forward. "Once we're on the other side, I can use the earrings to call Kelsey."

"Once you enter the river, you are out of Vilsathor. You can call Kelsey then," Margeaux said.

Gilda jumped into the river, drenching Regan from head to toe. What had Kelsey and Peter been feeling these past hours? she wondered. She bent close over Gilda's neck. "Hurry, my lady, hurry."

* * * *

Peter heard footsteps approach from behind him and stilled himself for still more senseless arguing. He tightened the cinch on Skylar's saddle and circled to the stallion's head.

"You're still determined to go?" Kelsey asked.

"She is not inside there. I know she is not."

She placed her hand on his arm. "Wait for the elven emissary, then we will find out for sure," she said.

"And let whoever has taken her have even more of a head start?" He shook his head. "No, I think not." He shrugged her hand from his arm, walked to Skylar's side and swung up into the saddle.

She gripped his leg. "Peter, don't be a fool. Don't you think I want her to be okay as much as you?"

He said nothing, just turned Skylar's head toward the stable door.

Rourk entered. "The emissary from Vilsathor has arrived. He waits with Queen Tessa and Angus at the castle steps."

"Hear him out, then you can ride for Dirkk's fortress," Kelsey urged.

Peter looked beyond them toward Raya's walls, then nodded brusquely. "I will hear him."

* * * *

Kelsey's face went white. "Then what you're saying is if the cave's entrance was gone, then the cave is gone too. It became solid rock?"

The elf nodded. "The cave exists only if the Nagberry bush is in front of its entrance. Whoever removed the spelled bush unformed the cave."

"And if someone was still inside?" Tessa asked the question on everyone's lips.

The elf shook his head and turned away.

Peter's gaze shifted from the elf to Queen Tessa. He stared into the queen's face for a moment, then turned his back and walked toward Skylar.

"Where are you going?" Tessa asked.

"I am going to find Regan."

Rourk grabbed Peter's arm as he passed. "There was no other way out," the tall bearded man said.

"Regan was not in that cave," Peter said in a calm, sure voice. "I would know if she were dead."

Harsh laughter rang out from behind the two men. "You would know. How would you know? Because of your great love? Days ago you didn't even know my sister, now you think you'd know if she still lived?"

The two men faced Kelsey's colorless, sneering face.

"You do not understand..." Peter began, but Kelsey cut him off.

"No, it is you who won't understand. My sister is dead." Her hands clenched into fists and she took a step toward them, then crumpled like a damp dishrag to the ground. "Oh, God, Regan is dead. This can't be real," she moaned, then cradled her head with her hands. Tessa rushed to her, knelt and pulled Kelsey into her arms. Kelsey pressed her face into Tessa's shoulder, then abruptly jerked away and scrambled to her feet. "I should never have sent for her," she said, shaking her head. "It's my fault."

Tessa reached for her, but Kelsey jumped back and turned to glare in the direction of Dirkk's black fortress. "You should have taken me," she screamed, then ran with a lurching gait toward the stable.

"I will get her and take her to her room," Angus said, following her.

Tessa sought Peter's eyes with a face void of color. "You will not go, not for now," she ordered with a stony voice. "I will not have your death to contend with, too. You are not strong enough to face Dirkk alone. This is an order. Do you understand?"

His face hardened to granite. "I hear, my queen," he said, making the last two words a curse. Then he spun on his heels and strode stiffly away.

* * * *

Peter stood in the queen's private forest in the center of the field where he had only yesterday told Regan of his feelings. "Are they right? Am I fool to believe that you still live?" he said into the dense greenness of the trees. Tears clouded his vision. "You said this time we would not be parted." Pain's hand squeezed his heart and he fought against the sobs that choked his throat.

"Peter," Angus's voice called from the solar door.

Peter rubbed his eyes. "One moment more and I will join you," he called back.

* * * *

Angus stood with his back to Peter, staring into the fireplace. He turned as Peter approached. "A memorial is planned for tomorrow, then you are free to ride for Dirkk's," Angus said, "and I would like to go with you."

"As long as you know I go to rescue Regan, not avenge her," Peter said.

Angus stared at him a long moment, then looked away. "It makes no difference. I will still ride by your side."

"Then you are welcome," Peter said. "How is Kelsey?"

"They've given her something to help her sleep."

"What I give her tomorrow will help her more than any herb," Peter said.

Angus glanced at him. "Perhaps so, but for now she needs rest. How are you?"

"How am I? Angry at being kept on a leash by Tessa, but I will do as she commands."

"Then how about joining me in a mug of ale?"

"Do you think we will both fit?" Peter held up his hands in mock fear at Angus's scowl. "Yes, I know, an old, worn-out joke, but suddenly that is how I feel—old and worn out. I will pass on the ale. It is my room for me."

"I will walk with you," Angus said.

Peter stared into the dwarf's eyes. "You are to watch me?" he said. "Tessa does not trust me?"

The dwarf looked away. "Only until tomorrow."

Peter laughed bitterly. "Then we will both do as our queen commands. Come, good dwarf, I have a fine wine in my room."

* * * *

In the river's cold wash of water, Regan touched an earring and called for her sister. "Kelsey, Kelsey, can you hear me?" Regan's mind touched darkness and drugged pain. What is wrong? Why doesn't she answer? "Kelsey, we've no time! Answer me!"

Small whimpers entered Regan's mind. "Regan, Regan—my fault, all my fault."

"It's Regan. I'm here!"

A portion of the drugged, dull curtain lifted. "Regan?"

"Listen..."

"You are alive?"

An extreme wave of joy almost knocked Regan from Gilda's back, instantly to be replaced by pulsing anger. "Where the hell are you?"

"I'm crossing the Queen's River. Ben and Margeaux are with me."

"I don't understand!"

"It's a long story and now's not the time. Is Peter there?"

"Downstairs. I'll go to him. Tell me what happened."

"Darrian took me."

Kelsey's thoughts stumbled. "Damn him, I'll contact you once I find Peter."

"No. Wait." But Kelsey was gone.

Ben rode up beside Regan. "Did you talk to her?"

Regan nodded as Gilda surged from the river and up the steep bank on the other side. "She went to find Peter."

Margeaux came abreast of them, opened her mouth to speak, then gasped, and grasped her head with both of her hands.

"What's wrong?" Ben said.

Margeaux lifted her head and looked at them with a white face and shadowed eyes. "We are needed. Dirkk's beasts have attacked another village. I am sorry, Regan. Can you find your way from here?"

Regan nodded. "If I can't, I'm sure Gilda can."

"We will join you at Raya as soon as we are finished," Margeaux said. She nudged her horse in the side.

Ben reached across and grasped Regan's hand. "We will be together again soon." He galloped after Margeaux.

Regan watched them disappear among the trees, then urged Gilda forward. "Come, lady, we must hurry."

"It is good to talk with you again."

"It's very good."

Regan leaned close to Gilda's neck, and the mare raced toward Raya, her mane flying behind like a banner, its strands whipping against and tangling around Regan's arms.

The trees flew by in a brown-green blur and Regan soon saw the walls marking the entrance to Kelsey's vacated camp.

Why hasn't Kelsey gotten back to me, she wondered briefly as Gilda broke free of the trees. Ahead, she saw the Queen's River and felt the mare's stride lengthen as she found her footing on the stone of the King's Road.

Regan lifted her head and saw the Williz mountains and the two peaks that marked the entrance to Peaks' Pass. At this rate I'll be at the barricade before Kelsey speaks to me

again. Suddenly, just ahead of them, black shapes leapt into the road. Gilda veered to the right and Regan stiffened in her saddle as she saw the bank of the river rush toward them. She jerked on the reins, and Gilda veered back to the left, straight at the mass of black surging toward them. She felt the mare's muscles tighten. She's going to jump. Regan leaned close and pressed her face against Gilda's neck but, instead of jumping, Gilda screamed and reared. The reins tore free of Regan's hands. Her body jerked back, then flew forward over Gilda's head as the mare came down. She saw a mass of black writhing, then she slammed into the ground.

* * * *

Regan woke to the sway of Gilda's gait. She cracked an eye open and groaned as sunlight stabbed straight to her brain. Every muscle in her body ached.

"Lady, are you okay?" All she received from Gilda was a wild surge of fright. "What is it? Talk to me."

"The snake ones have us," the mare sent, her mind voice trembling.

Regan slowly turned her head to the right and looked down. Squirring along the road beside them was an escort of Black Vipers. She glanced up higher and saw gray-rocked cliffs flanked them. "Gilda, how long was I out?"

"I have walked a long time since you floated onto my back."

"Floated?"

"You rose off the ground and floated onto my back."

"How...? Never mind, I'm afraid I know. Where are they taking us?"

"We climb."

Regan sat up in the saddle. Just ahead of them loomed a dark castle. As she watched, a drawbridge creaked down across a wide, green-slimed moat. At the tallest turret, a banner waved. It was a red griffin on a field of black. Fear gnawed her stomach. She knew who she would find inside those dark walls. Regan touched her earring and screamed for Kelsey. "Regan. I've been trying to reach you for hours."

"Black Vipers have me. They're taking me inside the walls of a black castle."

"Is the banner a red griffin?"

"Yes."

"You're being taken to Crag Castle and Dirkk."

Regan heard Gilda's hooves strike the wood of the lowered bridge. "Kelsey, is Peter with you? I must tell him..." Regan's body tingled from head to foot, then went cold. Kelsey's presence dissolved. "No," she cried.

A green-robed figure awaited her in the courtyard, its face hidden by a black mask. Beneath the mask, green eyes glittered up at her. "Welcome, Regan," Dirkk said. "You have done well."

Regan frowned. "What do you mean?"

Dirkk smiled, then waved his hand and said. "Remember."

Chapter 21

REGAN'S BLANK STARE remained fixed on the man who lounged on the enormous black-and-gold throne. She was careful to blink only when his green eyes strayed from her. She had ceased her moaning and now faked a deep, catatonic shock. She wasn't sure how much longer she could fool him, but every minute gave her more time to plan her escape.

Beneath his molded mask, his probing eyes suddenly swung back to her and she inwardly flinched. Muscles corded along the arm that lay draped with practiced casualness along the throne's back. The fingers of his right hand ceaselessly fondled the head of a golden eagle medallion that lay against his chest. The eagle's eyes were emeralds of glinting green, twins to Dirkk's own piercing orbs.

The chamber's only illumination was a large globe embedded in the floor between them. Dirkk looked away from her again, and Regan's eyes shifted from the man to the circle of light. The light inside the globe ebbed and flowed as if it were alive and trapped, the same as she. It flared and dulled and then, as Regan watched, a miniature army of marching Ru'taha and Black Vipers formed in its center. She gasped and leaned closer, then grimaced as from the throne she heard a dry chuckle. "You give yourself away, Regan."

She abandoned pretense and glared at him in loathing. "Haven't I done enough for you?"

Dirkk shrugged, then unfolded from the throne and walked to where she stood. He glanced down at the globe, then

tapped it with the end of his middle finger. "This little bauble is how I command my pets. Would you like a demonstration?"

"Yes," Regan blurted. She would have agreed to almost anything to keep him from forcing more answers from her. The despair she had felt when Dirkk revealed the memories of their previous encounters rose again. That single word, remember, had sent Regan's head reeling.

THE COURTYARD HAD tilted and she'd gripped Gilda's sides with her thighs. The memory of Thomas's hateful face, the crystal, and the intense pain flooded her mind, and she fought the grayness that threatened to engulf her. Taking a deep, shuddering breath she spoke. "You were in the castle."

Dirkk smiled. "I've been there many times, with Thomas's aid, of course."

"Then the cave and the Ru'taha were a set-up? I controlled nothing?"

"A set up? If you mean planned ahead of time, yes. But you did order the slaughter, and an interesting one it was."

"You were there?"

"No."

"But how...?" She was confused.

"There will be time for me to show you all later ... plenty of time. Now dismount, please. Your accommodations await."

Regan glanced frantically around the courtyard. The only exit was the drawbridge and, as she watched, it settled back into place with a rusty squeal. Her gaze returned to Dirkk and she thrust her chin out. To her chagrin, he laughed.

"We've played this game before, remember." Regan flushed hotly and then flinched as Dirkk raised his hand. "Do you want to play again?"

She quickly shook her head.

"Good. Now come down from the horse," he ordered.

From a large, squat building on their right, a man came running. He skidded to a halt in front of Dirkk. Attempting to brush hay from his shirt and deliver a bow at the same time, a broad-rimmed hat toppled from his head and dropped to cover Dirkk's boot.

Dirkk frowned. "Watch yourself, Nicholas, unless you wish a trip to the lower levels."

The florid face of the man paled to a dead gray. "N ... n ... no, my Lord."

Dirkk kicked the man's hat away. "See to the lady's horse."

"Yes, my Lord." The man walked to where Regan still sat and looked up at her with wide, fear-filled eyes. With a scornful glance in Dirkk's direction, she swung her leg over Gilda's back, then slid into the man's waiting arms. The fear in the stable man's blue eyes turned to pity as he stared into hers, and her blood chilled.

He steadied her on her feet, then scrambled two steps back. Eyes downcast, he looped Gilda's reins around his hand and led her away. "Don't worry, lady. I'll be coming for you soon," Regan sent, knowing it was a useless effort.

"Regan, will you follow without my aid?"

"Yes," she forced between dry lips.

With stilted marionette movements, she followed him across the courtyard. Her eyes darted quick glances around, taking in the drabness surrounding her. Everything was colorless—gray walls, gray castle, even the grass was a drab-spreading mass. She took a deep breath; even the air seemed tainted with listlessness.

The courtyard was empty and eerily silent, so unlike the crowded mayhem around Raya's queen. Where are all the people? A scream shattered the stillness, and she whirled to face the direction from which it still echoed. Her stomach knotted and rolled. She swallowed a burning sourness in her throat as she realized the answer to her question. Ru'taha and shaping—that was the reason no one was about.

Looking past Dirkk's tall frame to the black oval that was the entrance to Castle Crag, she squared her shoulders and shuddered. Am I to join the Ru'taha's ranks?

Dirkk entered before her, then turned and waved her in with a flourish. Head held high, Regan marched through the door, only to freeze in mid-stride as she heard the dull thud as it closed behind her. Irony made her smile. Another prison. Today just isn't my day.

He circled to stand in front of her. "What amuses you?"

She ignored him and looked around her newest prison. They stood in a cavernous chamber, empty except for a black winding staircase starting at the apex of a spiral path. The path began where she stood, circled inwards in ever-tightening spirals and stopped at the first step of the staircase. White-marble squares, pure and unmarred, made up the path. The remaining squares of the floor were black

marble with swirling veins of red. Embedded in the room's walls at even intervals were stone eagles' heads. The top of each predator's head pulsed with a globe of white light.

She looked up. The circling iron steps went on and on, seemingly forever.

Dirkk stepped around her and onto the beginning square of the spiral. He turned and faced her. "Don't stray from the path. The rest of the floor contains nasty surprises."

She swallowed before following.

At the first iron step, he stopped. With his foot hovering just above it, he spoke to her over his shoulder. "When you step from the floor, the lights in this chamber will extinguish. Stay close, for it is not a place to become lost in." He set his foot down and the step he rested it on began to glow.

Dirkk continued upwards. Regan stepped onto the first step and, as her trailing foot left the floor, the room went dark. The only thing she could see was the next step ahead of her and the vague form of Dirkk's ascending back. As she stepped onto the next lighted step, the previous one went dark beneath her foot and the one ahead lit. She glanced back into the pitch-blackness and shuddered. She had no choice but upward—at least not yet.

Step by step, the stairs wound up and with each forward inch, the enveloping darkness grew heavier and pressed closer.

When would this ascent into hell end? She turned and searched the blackness. It had changed. It no longer appeared solid, but seemed to roil with life. What was out there? Nothing from this world, I'll bet.

Suddenly, what felt like frigid, leathery fingers trailed across her cheek. She screamed and swatted at them, then grabbed for the cold railing as her frantic movements caused her to sway backward. In the darkness above her, she heard a soft snicker and gritted her teeth.

She climbed onward. The back of her calves began to ache. She was completely disoriented now in the heavy darkness. Were they still climbing upward, or had they now started to descend?

The blackness ahead seemed to solidify again. She reached out and her fingers grazed cold, slickness. She drew back with a choked cry.

"Foolish woman, it is only me," Dirkk said with a dry chuckle. "We've reached our destination." A door opened and a soft wash of light filtered out.

The room was dim, but had the hollow feeling of immense space. As the door closed behind her, the light went out. In the center of the room, a globe glowed wanly, then brightened. In front of it sat a dark throne. At the edge of the circle of light she saw a wide, empty fire pit. Dirkk walked toward the light and she trailed him, her feet sinking into plush softness. He stopped in front of the globe and motioned her to sit on the floor.

She dropped to the floor, drew her knees to her chest, and began to moan. She began to rock slowly, back and forth, never taking her fixed gaze from Dirkk's face. In the pulsing light, she saw a frown curve his mouth.

"Stop your wailing, or I will send you to the lower levels."
She continued to moan softly, still glaring at him.

"I will give you to my pets." His eyes flicked over her. "You could service them well—for a while, although I've heard their way with females is somewhat bestial."

Regan's keen did not alter or cease. He looked into her eyes for a long moment, then shrugged as he walked to the throne. Seated, he gave her a hard look. "Has this all been to much for you? Or are you faking?"

* * * *

"Regan, I am speaking to you," Dirkk said, drawing her back to the present. He waited until she met his eyes, then bent over the glowing orb. "When I shape the Ru'taha, I must first rid the body of its needless soul." He looked up to savor her reaction. Regan fought to keep the disgust she felt from showing on her face. "Souls are a never-waning source of energy. They glow nicely, don't you think?"

She looked closer at the globe. "These are the souls of all the people who've become Ru'taha?"

"Look close. The newest pulse brightest."

"Can you release them?"

He frowned at her. "Why would I?"

"What happens when they die?"

"The body rots, but the soul remains mine." He glanced at her with annoyance. "Enough questions." His voice reminded her of an impatient, petulant child. She rubbed her suddenly goose-pimpled arms with her hands.

Dirkk was all smiles again as he placed his palms flat against the glowing globe. "Let's see. What shall I make them

do?" His smile widened. "Look, one is limping. He will be of no use in battle." He leaned in closer.

She closed her eyes in sudden fear.

"Watch, or I will kill them all and, if I do, I will only have to form more."

She opened her eyes and looked down into the light.

The small horde stopped. As one, they turned and looked at the limping Ru'taha. Then, in unison, they raised their clubs and advanced toward it.

"No," Regan moaned, unable to turn away.

A club smashed down on the shoulder of the Ru'taha, and from the globe she heard the clear snapping of splintering bone. Again the club rose and then fell, and the Ru'taha's skull cracked like an overripe melon. Blood ran in rivulets down its face and dripped from its chin. Its knees buckled and it fell. The clubs continued on with the slaughter.

"Enough." Dirkk removed his palms from the globe and the Ru'taha army turned and started forward, their feet marching across the body of the fallen Ru'taha.

Regan, swallowing bile, jerked her gaze from the globe.

Dirkk suddenly laughed. "Look, there is the limping Ru'taha. I had them kill the wrong one. What a pity. I'll have to make another. Would you like to watch?"

"No," she said, forcing the word out between stiff lips.

"I can make you watch."

She blinked back frustrated tears. "I know."

He straightened and stretched. "Maybe tomorrow. Come." He turned and walked away from her. She glanced again at the endless line of marching Ru'taha and then followed him

across the room to another door. He stopped and drew a key from his pocket. "This is the room I always have prepared for special guests. I am sure you will find it comfortable." He pushed the door inward and stood aside for her to enter. "I will send Caitlan to you."

Regan walked into the room, wincing as she heard the door close and the key turn in the lock.

* * * *

She stood where she was and looked around. A four-poster bed with a half-moon headboard of glossy wood dominated the room. A leaf-green coverlet draped the bed and a mound of lemon-yellow pillows balanced against the headboard. Next to the bed was a table. A freestanding screen, carved with towering mountains and soaring eagles, enclosed one corner of the room.

Against the right wall stood an armoire. Its door was a large beveled mirror atop three stacked drawers. In the center of each drawer was a handle in the shape of an eagle's head. "He really has a thing for predators."

Curiosity itched, but she ignored the closed drawers and crossed the room toward two glass doors.

They opened onto a small balcony. Without much hope, she pulled up on the latch fastenings and pushed outwards. They swung open with silent ease.

"You are so sure of yourself and this little velvet prison," she said, then with a sigh stepped out into bright sunlight. She closed her eyes, raised her face to the sun, and inhaled deeply. Unlike the air below in the courtyard, this was clean

and cold. A screeching cry rang in her ears and she snapped her eyes open. The cry rang out again and she looked up. An eagle glided above her. Its golden wings dipped as it circled closer, then beat back in a forceful sweep as it landed in an aerie between two jagged crevices across from her. The eagle cocked her head and looked at Regan with green piercing eyes. Regan returned the appraisal until the eagle looked away and began to preen her feathers.

Regan's gaze traveled across the face of the sheer, rusty-red cliff. Above wisps of clouds, she could just make out a snow-covered peak. Above it, like a burning star on top of a snow-flocked Christmas tree, was the sun. There were still hours before dark. How could so much have happened in so little time?

She looked down into the wide chasm separating her from the eagle. Jutting rocks like giant teeth rose upwards, reminding her of a maw she had once seen of a great white shark.

Behind her someone rapped on the door of the bedroom.

Lifting a hand in farewell to the eagle, she entered the room. Stopping only inches from the door she called out, "Yes?"

"I've brought you food, miss," a feminine voice answered.

"Well, if you're expecting me to open the door for you, you've a long wait," Regan said sourly.

"I've a key. Just step back please."

Regan remained silent.

"Have you stepped back?"

Regan still did not answer.

"Escape is not possible," the voice continued with a twinge of exasperation. "You wouldn't be able to find the stairs down. Dirkk has the halls bespelled."

Regan cursed under her breath, then took two steps back. "Okay," she snapped. She heard the key turn in the lock and the door opened. A woman came through and Regan found herself staring in shocked amazement. The woman, whose arms were loaded with a mounded tray, wore not a stitch of clothing. Her cornflower-blue eyes sought Regan's, then her chin tilted up proudly before she looked away. She walked to the table and set her burden down.

Regan cocked an eyebrow. "Do all of Dirkk's servants go about naked?"

The woman looked away. "I am being punished."

"What did you do?" Regan was dumfounded. What could this woman have done that merited such punishment?

She shrugged. "I don't know." She turned away and Regan saw red welts striped her back. "My God! Did Dirkk do that?"

"It's better than going to the lower levels to serve." The woman faced Regan again. "Will there be anything else?"

Regan's gaze shifted to the open door.

"Don't try it, miss. Even if you got out of the castle, you'd never get beyond the moat."

Regan turned her gaze again to the woman. "Who are you?"

"I am Caitlan Bannion."

"Bannion? Rourk..."

The woman's blue gaze dropped. "My husband."

"But you're dead!"

The woman's lips twisted. "I would be better dead."

"Rourk saw them overrun you and his son."

"We were not harmed. Dirkk wanted us."

"But how...?"

"He'd been watching us for some time," she added bitterly.

"How fares my husband?"

Regan stared at Rourk's wife. "You know he still lives?"

Caitlan shrugged. "Dirkk lets me watch battles now and then, hoping I will see Rourk and Kelsey fall." The woman snorted.

Regan dropped her gaze from the woman. "You know about Kelsey?"

"Rourk and I have been parted for seven years. He thinks Patrick and I are dead and, if the truth be known, we are to him."

Regan's gaze jerked back to Caitlan. "What do you mean?"

Caitlan's face hardened with hate. "Dirkk has defiled me. I can never go back to my husband."

"And your son?"

"He was but a babe when Dirkk took us. He doesn't remember his true father."

Regan shivered at Caitlan's words. "His true father?"

Caitlan moved to the door and closed it with a hard push. "Dirkk has taken a liking to the boy. He's shaping him to follow in his footsteps."

"No," Regan whispered.

Caitlan crossed to the food-piled tray and unloaded the plates onto the table. "It hasn't been all that bad. Patrick thinks Dirkk is his father."

"What?"

"It was his command, or we both would have died." Caitlan saw Regan's look of horror. "Don't judge me," she snapped. "I did what I had to do so both of us would survive."

Regan looked away. Who was she to judge? "Of course you did, but that will change now."

Caitlan's smile was mocking. "And how is that?"

"Kelsey will come for me."

The other woman's eyes filled with pity. "Do you really believe that?"

"I do."

She shook her head. "You are stuck here now, the same as I. There's only one escape ... and that is death. I dare not take it and leave my son. What is stopping you?" Caitlan picked up the empty tray and walked to the door.

"Death is the coward's way."

"Stay trapped within these walls for seven years and you will seek any way out." The woman opened the door, walked through and shut it behind her.

Regan sank to her knees, laying her head on the bed as she heard the key again turn in the lock. "I'll not be trapped here. Kelsey will come. I know she will. She has to."

She flopped over onto her back and the impatient movement bounced her notebook against her ribs. She stiffened and her eyes widened. The notebook. I can't let Dirkk get his hands on it.

Fingers clumsy with fright, Regan yanked the notebook from her pocket. Her gaze scanned the room. Where can I

hide it? Her glance passed over the three drawers, then darted back. Why not?

Passing the food-laden table, her stomach rumbled, and she grabbed a piece of cheese and a slice of brown-speckled bread.

The makeshift sandwich tasted strongly of garlic and herbs. A bottle of wine sat next to the cheese. She picked it up and took it with her.

Standing in front of the drawers, she took a long drink, straight from the bottle. The wine was definitely young, tannic and full-bodied. "Must have aged a whole day," she murmured as she pulled the top drawer open. It was empty.

Regan took another bite of her sandwich, washed it down with more wine. She sat back on her heels, then gasped as a wave of dizziness flowed over her. Whew! Take it easy, girl. A little too much wine on an empty stomach? Regan teetered as the room moved again. The wine. Could he have drugged it?

Her vision blurred and she blinked. Her gaze fell across the notebook. No, he couldn't know. She took a step toward it and toppled to her knees, swallowing nausea. "I can't let him find it." Gulping in air, she crawled toward the notebook. Her fingertips just grazing its covering, she fell into blackness.

* * * *

Regan opened her eyes, then snapped them shut again as the world tilted. She ran her tongue across her teeth, swallowed, grimaced at the sour taste. Keeping her eyes closed, she inched upward to a sitting position, then eased

one eye open. The room remained stationary, so she opened the other.

Her eyebrows drew together. Where was she? In her line of vision stood a tall armoire. Her gaze swept the room, pausing on the wine bottle. "The wine," she groaned, remembering. But how had she gotten to the bed? The skin on the back of her neck crawled and she slowly turned her head to the side.

Dirkk sat in a chair beside the bed. Her notebook lay open on his lap. As she watched, he flipped to a new page, frowned at what he read, then raised his gaze to her.

"Interesting, but I don't see what the purpose of this writing is."

Regan's head pounded and she fought to keep from reaching and jerking the book from him. "Regan, what do these verses mean?" His voice was menacing.

Regan ignored his question and asked one of her own instead. "Why did you drug me?"

Dirkk's eyes narrowed. "I don't know what you mean. I came in and found you lying on the floor."

"You're saying that the wine wasn't drugged?"

"I've no need to drug you. You're under a spell of compulsion."

Regan frowned.

"Our wine is strong. Did you by chance gulp it down on an empty stomach?"

Regan felt her face heat, and his winged eyebrows rose.

"You could at least thank me for moving you to the bed."

She pressed her lips together instead.

He shrugged and turned his attention back to the notebook. "So what is this?"

His compulsion spell forced the answer from her mouth. "It's a book of ad jingles I brought with me," she said, digging her fingers into the silk bed covering.

"What are ad jingles?"

"They arouse people's interest in a product so they will buy it."

He turned to stare at her. "But why bring it with you to Daradawn?"

She swallowed, then answered. "I take it everywhere with me. I'm a writer. I write ideas down as they come to me; otherwise I forget them. It's a habit."

He stared at her, his eyes probing. She could feel him weighing her response. Finally he stood, then tucked the notebook under his arm. "Interesting, but I've something else I'd like to show you."

Her gaze fastened on the notebook. "Can I have my book?"

He looked down at her. She saw his green eyes narrow, and cursed her pressing of him. "I want to read a few more of your ads." He paused and searched her face for a reaction.

She bit back the words of protest begging for release. "That's fine. What do you want to show me?"

"Another chamber, one that is farther below us."

She scrambled to her feet. "I don't want to see it."

"But I want you to, so you will."

He turned and walked to the door, She followed like an obedient puppy, fighting rage all the way.

* * * *

They re-entered the throne room, but turned left and approached a shadowy wall instead of the door they had earlier entered. Dirkk reached out with his hand and etched a glowing pattern along its length. As the design faded, a large square section of the wall swung inwards. He waved her forward. Regan stalked past him, then skidded to a stop and stared at stone steps that led down into pitch-blackness. "You don't expect me to go down there?"

He pushed her aside and waved his hand again. A yellow glow bathed the two of them. As she stared, the glow spread down the length of the steps. "A simple illumination spell," he said smugly. "Now you will not fall."

She backed against the side of the wall. "Where are you taking me?"

"I have something I wish you to see. It will show you how foolish your thoughts of besting me are."

She remembered the earlier screams and the not-so-subtle threats he had made. "I'll accept your word; you don't have to show me."

"Not good enough. I want you to see it with your own eyes, then you've no choice but to believe. Now walk."

* * * *

These stairs did not spiral, just led straight down. Twice the steps ended at wide landings with high stone doors, but Dirkk pushed her onward to where they began again. Finally

she came to the last step and a long narrow landing stretched before her. She walked a few paces forward, then halted.

"Why have you stopped?"

She turned to face him. "I thought you'd prefer to lead in case there were booby-traps."

"Booby-traps?"

"You know ... magical barriers."

"Oh, booby-traps." She watched him absorb the strange term and roll it around his tongue. He smiled. "I like your word, but no, no booby-traps. I see no need."

Regan frowned. "So where to now?"

"Walk until you can advance no further. It's there your surprise awaits."

"I never liked surprises," she said under her breath.

"What?"

She smiled up at him. "I was just talking to myself."

"Walk."

Regan saluted, then turned smartly on her heel and marched forward.

The landing ended at a black stone wall. Embedded in its center was an eagle's claw holding a light globe. As they approached, the globe began to glow.

She stepped aside and waited for Dirkk to open the door with another one of his theatrical displays. He approached it and ran his hand along its length, then tossed his head back and raised his arms toward the dimness above.

If he says abracadabra, I'm going to lose it. He clapped his hands together three times. It was too much for her. She burst out laughing.

He spun on her. His eyes narrowed and his face flooded with color. "Stop your insane cackling," he screamed.

She froze in mid-laugh.

He lurched toward her, his arms reaching out, fingers curved into rigid talons. Her gaze darted from his hands to his face. Beneath the mask his eyes glittered, and her stomach rolled in fear. She stumbled back until her spine pressed against the cold stone. Her legs turned to water and she slid along the wall until the floor met her backside.

Dirkk advanced until his black boots touched her shaking feet. She looked up at him, then quickly dropped her gaze at the insanity she saw in his eyes. She felt his hand fasten around her braid, then he jerked her upward until she stood on her tiptoes. "You laugh at me?" he said. Blinking back tears of pain, she opened her mouth, but nothing came out. He released her braid and dug his fingers into her shoulder.

"Well?" At her continued silence, he shook her hard. "Perhaps you can do better?" he said coldly, then dragged her to the door.

"Open it," he ordered. Regan stared at him in numb paralysis. "Open it, or I will kill you right now."

She jerked her gaze from him to the door. Memories of Saturday matinees and scores of haunted house movies flickered through her head. Still in a dazed panic she reached up and pulled down on the eagle's claw. The door swung inward. He grunted and released his hold on her shoulders. She fell to the floor at his feet.

"Well done," she heard a pleasant voice say. She looked up. He smiled down at her, all traces of rage gone from his

face. "Shall we continue the tour?" He reached down and offered her his hand. She grasped his hand and let him pull her to her feet. "Don't anger me again, Regan," he said, then walked ahead of her through the door.

* * * *

Regan stood beside Dirkk in front of a large, black-lacquered chest. Garish red-and-gold demons frolicked across its surface. He reached out and ran his hand along the curved top of the chest. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It's beyond words," she said. "Is this what you wished to show me?"

He smiled. "This is part of what I wished for you to see. The other awaits inside." He bent forward and with both hands heaved the top of the chest upward. Still smiling, he reached in and removed a cloth-wrapped square from the chest's depths. "Come, let's take this to where the light is better."

She followed him across the room in silence. He stopped at a long, wide table of dark wood. In the table's center was a round indentation, and resting in the concave circle was a light globe. As Regan looked down into it, the light inside the globe flared brightly and she raised her hand to shield her eyes.

"Enough," Dirkk said, and she whirled to face him. What had she done now? But his gaze was not upon her, but was instead upon the light globe. She turned her attention back to the globe. The light flared briefly again, then subsided to a gold glow.

"Always she must test me," she heard him mutter.

"What is it?" she said.

"An enslaved demon, my first captive. She was a gift from my master ... the first of many."

She swallowed. "Who is your master?"

He looked at her for a long moment. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

She felt her face grow pale. "I think I already know who owns your soul."

His lips twisted into a mirthless grin. "No one owns my soul. Let's just say I've let someone borrow it, and soon I plan to take it back ... it, plus much more."

She stared at him in open-mouthed shock. "Are you crazy? You can't overpower the devil!"

He laid his bundle on the table. "Can't I?"

With slow care he unwound the cloth from the package. At the last revolution, she frowned and leaned in closer.

"How did you get that?" A leather-bound book lay before her. In its center was a red circle and emblazoned upon the circle was a rearing unicorn.

He whirled to face her. "You know what this is?"

She cursed her stupidity. "I've seen it once before."

"Peter showed it to you?"

"Yes."

Like a striking snake, he grabbed her arm. "What did he tell you about it?"

She fought against the compulsion to answer his question. His hand tightened on her arm. "Don't anger me again," he warned.

"He said it was his grandfather's," she said, angry tears blurring her vision.

"What else? Did he tell you how to use it to travel the rifts?"

"No."

He pushed her away from him. "No matter. I'm close to solving the riddle myself."

She looked again at the book. One of the outlying cracks had entered the red circle and was halfway to the unicorn's back hoof. He is close to solving it and it will be the death of Daradawn. And what of my world? Ru'taha and Black Vipers wandering the streets of San Francisco? "You didn't say how you got the book."

He waved his hand at her and frowned. "Thomas got it for me. How else?"

Her eyes narrowed. Thomas. That man has much to answer for.

Dirkk elbowed her aside and wound the book back up in the cloth. He walked to the chest and tossed the book inside. She winced as she heard it bounce off the chest's side before landing with a dull thud. "Come, I've something else to show you."

She bit her lip against asking him a useless "what," and instead fell meekly in behind him. He led her across the room to another open door. She entered behind him, then stumbled to a halt.

A naked man stood in the center of the room. He lifted dull, resigned eyes to them as they entered. "This will be the

replacement for the Ru'taha disposed of earlier." Dirkk walked toward the man.

Shaking her head, Regan backed toward the door.

"Stop!"

She froze.

"Now come here to me."

Her legs moved her forward.

"You will stay by my side until the shaping is completed."

Rigid with dread, she closed her eyes.

"Open your eyes, Regan, or I will fix them so you will never see again," Dirkk purred into her ear. She forced her eyes open.

"Good. Now first I wish you to take a good look at the man before you. You see he has not been starved, or harmed physically in any way. Only those in the best of health make good pets."

"Oh, God," she moaned.

He snorted derisively. "God does not know this place."

She swayed and felt his fingers dig into her arm.

"Stay with me, or I will prolong this, and his pain."

Deep in the captive man's eyes, a spark lit, then died. Sick inside, she nodded silently.

"It's not that bad," Dirkk continued. "I take good care of all my creations."

He removed the amulet from his neck and approached the man. Smiling, he pressed the head of the eagle into the captive's forehead. The man's body arched, then twisted in Dirkk's hands. His mouth opened wide and Regan braced herself for his scream, but inside, she saw not a tongue, but a

red zigzag of flesh stretching across the back of his throat. Over Dirkk's shoulder, the man's silent pleading gaze locked with hers. She shuddered and turned away in impotent fury from those haunting eyes.

"I must first take his soul," Dirkk said. "Then..."

A pounding on the door drowned out the rest of his sentence. Dirkk jerked the amulet away from the man's forehead and yelled. "Who dares to disturb me?"

She watched the captive crumble to the floor.

"It's I, master," a high, thin voice answered.

Dirkk stalked to the door. "Why are you here?" he cried, yanking it open.

She lifted her gaze from the fallen man and glanced toward the door. She saw a flicker of movement, but Dirkk's body blocked her view of the welcome diversion. "I'm waiting," he said in a voice of iced rage.

"Peter is on his way here with all of Queen Tessa's troops. He knows you have the human woman," the tinkling voice said.

"He is bringing all the troops? He's left the castle unprotected?"

"Yes. I saw them preparing to march before I left to come to you."

Dirkk turned back to face her. "What a fool your lover is," he said scornfully.

The owner of the voice flitted into view. "I knew she would be the end of Daradawn," Talix said.

"You," Regan whispered.

"I told you you would pay for insulting me," the fairy said with a smirk.

"Enough," Dirkk said. "This is what I've been waiting for." He looked beyond Regan to the man who still lay on the floor. "A pity. My fun will have to wait."

"May I have my notebook before you go?" Regan asked.

"What?" Dirkk asked with a frown.

"My notebook."

Dirkk's eyebrows drew together into a deep vee. Then a smile curved his lips. "No, I will keep it with me." He held up a hand in warning as Regan started to speak.

"I know not what it does, but this is the second time you have asked for it. And for that reason alone it will remain with me. Now go. Daradawn awaits its new king."

Chapter 22

THE LOCK ON the bedroom door clicked, and Regan clenched her hands into fists. From the other side of the door, a scornful laugh mocked. "Good-bye, savior of Daradawn. When next we meet, you will call my master King."

She brought her fist to her mouth to smother her angry reply, then turned and walked to the bed. Sprawled in its center, she stared at the cracked ceiling above. Could it be true? Was Peter on his way to free her, leaving Raya defenseless?

She grabbed one of the pillows, punched it viciously, wishing it was Talix's face, and then threw it across the room. "It's a lie," she yelled at the empty room. "Even if Peter has lost his senses, Kelsey would never do something so stupid." Regan flipped from her back to her side and stared out the balcony doors. "Peter, what's your plan?" She closed her eyes, but the vision of the tongueless man who had received only a reprieve, not freedom, floated before her. She rolled to her back and stared at the ceiling again. "We've got to free them. But how?"

She got up from the bed and walked to the door. Staring at the impassive wooden barrier, she shouted, "Let me out of here, damn you."

"What would you do if you were free?" a woman's voice asked from the other side.

"Caitlan?"

Silence and then a low fearful whisper. "Yes."

"Get me out of here and we both can get away from this hell hole."

"Not me, but you will take my son with you."

"Your son? But ... I..."

"If you don't take him, I will not help you."

"You know what I'll be going into the middle of."

"I know there's danger. But here he has no hope."

Regan leaned her forehead against the door. Why was the other woman ready to help? Was it a trap? "Why didn't you ask the others to take you with them?"

"There have never been others," Caitlan said. "You are the first to enter Crag Castle since my son and I were taken."

Regan thought wildly for another way, but there was none. "I'll take both of you with me."

She heard the key in the lock and jerked the door open.

"Come, we must hurry. I will lead you to the stable," Caitlan said, casting a glance behind.

"Where is your son?"

"I sent him to curry his pony. He is angry with me for not letting him ride with Dirkk." Rourk's wife turned and ran through the door.

* * * *

In the middle of the throne room, Regan stopped as she saw the embedded globe of souls "Wait."

"No," Caitlan cried, running back to grab Regan's arm. "We must hurry!"

Regan jerked her arm free and approached the round sphere of glass. She touched it with the tips of her fingers and it began to glow.

Behind her she heard Caitlan gasp. "You are a mage."

Regan turned to face her. "I wish. No, I'm just a stupid beginner at this magic stuff."

"But you have the ability. See how it glows. It only reacts to the touch of magic."

"Entering Dirkk's fortress destroyed what little I had."

"It's dormant," said Caitlan, "not gone."

Regan looked down at the glowing orb. "Then maybe I can free them?"

"No," Caitlan said, her eyes wide. "Dirkk will know that someone tampers with his magic."

Regan turned and looked at Caitlan. "It makes no difference. After this battle, he or I will be victor, and the other slave." Regan saw the blood leave the other woman's face. She turned back to the globe. "How do I free you?"

"Shatter the glass," Caitlan whispered.

"What?"

"Shatter the glass ... it's the only way."

"If I break it, will Dirkk lose his control of the Ru'taha and the Black Vipers?"

Caitlan shook her head. "No, he still wears the amulet."

"But it will free the villagers' souls? So when a Ru'taha dies it will be free?"

Caitlan nodded.

Regan's glance raked the room for something to use to break the globe. Inside the fire-pit she saw a charred faggot

of wood. She crossed to it and grabbed the piece of wood by its charcoal end. "Please be strong enough," she prayed.

She carried it back to the globe and raised the makeshift club over her head. As she looked down into the light, the glow wavered and Dirkk's masked face formed. His green eyes glittered at her in command and her hand hesitated. She gritted her teeth and beads of sweat dampened her forehead as she strained, but her hand refused to descend.

"Damn," she said, stepping back from the globe. "Even from there he controls me." She turned to Caitlan. "You have to help."

"Me?" Caitlan squeaked, "I've no magic!"

"It's the only way," Regan said, "but it will take accurate timing. As you smash the glass, I'll place my hands on top of yours."

Caitlan backed from her. "It will never work."

"We have to try. I'm not leaving here without trying, and if I don't go neither do you or your son." Regan still saw indecision in Caitlan's eyes. "I'm out of the room. Dirkk'll know you helped me."

The woman's shoulders slumped. "What do you want me to do?"

"Come, stand beside me so I can lay my hands over yours as the wood strikes the glass."

Caitlan slowly walked to Regan's side. Her eyes were wide with fear, her entire body tense and poised to flee like a wild doe. Regan handed the length of wood to her. I know just how she feels. I probably look the same to her, she thought, taking a deep breath.

"We will do it on the count of three. Ready?"

Caitlan stiffly nodded.

"One ... two ... three."

Caitlan swung the club downward and, as it smashed into the glass, Regan placed both her hands over the other woman's. The glass globe exploded and showered them in splintered crystal. With a cry Caitlan dropped the piece of wood and stumbled back.

Regan looked down into the shattered globe. Their blow had struck the orb's rounded top. The shattering glass left a sharp, jagged edge around the globe's base. The light inside was still fused into a ball. It began to pulse, as if confused. Then one spark, like the lightning bugs of summer youth, floated upward. It hovered before Regan's face, and from it she felt immense joy. As if it was the keystone of a rock dam, hundreds of sparks floated upwards and surrounded her in a golden shroud of light. Tears flooded her eyes and ran down her cheeks, as wave after wave of happiness pulsed and rolled over her. The sparks whirled, faster and faster, like a miniature tornado then, with a last burst of painfully sweet joy, sailed up through the ceiling and were gone.

Regan stared at the spot where the tornado of light had vanished for a long moment, and then turned and fumbled toward Caitlan in the now pitch-black room. "Caitlan?"

"Here." The woman's voice was thick with awe.

"We can go now." Regan's hand fumbled for and found Caitlan's in the dark.

"This way," Caitlan said.

* * * *

Regan stood behind Caitlan in front of the squat stable. Odors of hay and manure wafted from the open double doors. She heard a soft snort and the restless stirring of hooves. Caitlan stepped through the doors and called softly. "Patrick." A chorus of whinnies answered her. "Where is that boy?" Caitlan walked deeper into the stable and Regan followed.

Caitlan led her down a narrow alley. As they neared each stall a head poked out and Caitlan absently patted each velvet nose as they passed. As they reached the end of the barn, anger heated Regan's blood. Gilda wasn't among the horses. "What did he do with you?"

Caitlan turned toward her in question. "Do with who?"

Hoofs beating against a stall door stopped Regan's answer. "Gilda?" she said and pushed past Caitlan.

Regan jerked open the stall door, but the hooves beating irritably against the wooden wall were not the mare's. Instead, they belonged to a rotund black-and-white pony with flattened-back ears.

"That's Minx," Caitlan said from behind her. "The bad-mannered little rascal belongs to my son." She reached forward and pulled the pony's ear gently. "Behave yourself."

Regan saw a frown flit cross Caitlan's face. "Where is that boy? At least I know he hasn't tried to follow Dirkk on Minx."

Above them, in the hay-stacked rafters, a low thump sounded and straw showered them. Caitlan sneezed, then looked upward, exasperation replacing her frown. "Patrick, you come down this instant." Above them they heard footsteps, then a muffled curse. Caitlan's lips tightened. She

spun on her heel, marched to the end of a ladder, then placed both hands on her hips and waited. Regan, brushing straw from her hair, followed.

The ladder's end disappeared into a square hole in the loft. As Regan watched, a brown pair of adult-sized, scuffed boots extended from the opening and found the first rung of the ladder. Caitlin's hands slid from her hips and she drew back with a frown, as Regan's heart hammered inside her chest and she looked around wildly for a place to hide. The closest place was Minx's stall.

She raced to the box and slid the stall door open. The black pony's head jerked up and he bared his teeth. Regan hesitated, then glared at him and stepped inside. The pony shuffled to the back of the stall and snorted, never removing his gaze from her. Regan made a face at him. "I don't like this any better than you do so just pipe down."

From outside the stall she heard Caitlan gasp. "You? I can't believe it ... but how?"

Then Peter's voice replied. "Caitlan, you are alive."

Regan grabbed for the side of the stall to keep herself on her feet. She turned her back on the pony and peered around the stall's door. "Peter?"

Peter turned at her whispered word, then opened his arms to her. With a small cry, she ran to be enfolded in them. She buried her face in his chest as he crushed her to him.

"I thought I had lost you forever," he whispered into her hair.

She lifted her face from his shirt and looked up at him. "Never ... forever," she answered. Behind her she heard

Caitlan clear her throat and reluctantly backed from his arms. "Come. Let's help Caitlan find Patrick, then get out of this hell hole."

"Patrick lives also? Rourk will be happy," Peter said.

A tiny smile curved Caitlan's lips. "Will he?"

Peter frowned. "Of course he will be happy that you both live."

Caitlan stared hard at him a moment, then turned away.

"We shall see. Right now I must find my son."

Peter turned toward the stable door. "While you seek your son, there is something I must do."

Regan reached and grabbed his arm. "What?"

"I must find a way to stop Dirkk's shaping and free my people's souls."

"The only way to stop Dirkk's shaping lies in what he wears around his neck ... and as for the souls, they've already been freed," she said.

Peter stared down into her face.

"More important," Regan said, "is stopping Dirkk. He has your grandfather's book."

Peter's face paled. "Are you sure?"

"I saw it with my own eyes ... and Peter, a crack has entered the red."

"No. It cannot be." He pulled away from her arm and started toward the stable's door.

"Wait," she said, running to stand in front of him. "We must stop Dirkk first. We can come back for the book."

"But if he escapes us and gets back before we can...?"

"Once free of the wall, you can ward the castle and prevent him from entering. Our first concern has to be Raya and Tessa," Regan urged. But the gateways? a voice protested in her mind. Wards will not stop Dirkk. We will, she silently argued back. Uncertainty flickered across Peter's face. "We promised Kelsey," she threw in for good measure.

Anger flared in Peter's eyes at her reminder of their promise. "We will do it your way—and pray to God that you are right. Now let us get out of here."

"Not without my son," Caitlan said, her tone of voice leaving no room for discussion.

"Of course, Patrick too. Regan, I saw a tack room on your left. See if the boy hides there. Caitlan, check the stalls once more. I will check the loft."

Regan ran to the tack room and opened the door. The aroma of leather, saddle soap and horse sweat greeted her. "Patrick." No sound came from the darkened room. Regan strained her eyes to see into the dim corners. "If you're in here, you'd better answer me," she said in her best non-nonsense voice. From the darkness she thought she heard a muffled giggle.

"Regan, have you found him?" Peter called down to her. She hesitated, listening, then called back, "No."

"Caitlan, how about you?" Peter asked.

"Not a sign."

Above her head, Regan heard Peter's muffled steps. "Meet me at the ladder," he said.

Regan arrived at the ladder just as Peter was stepping from the last rung.

"We can wait no longer," he said. "It will take time to make our way to Raya through the Ru'taha and vipers."

Caitlan walked up behind him. "I won't go without my son."

Peter turned and met her steady gaze. "Then you will have to stay."

"No," Regan said. "She rescued me from Dirkk. I can't leave her alone."

"You will," Caitlan said. "Dirkk's defeat is all that must concern you now. I will stay and find my son. When the battle is over, return for me."

"It is the only way," Peter said.

Regan looked from one face to the other and her shoulders slumped. She reached out and squeezed Caitlan's hand.

"We'll be back. I promise."

Caitlan's lips trembled as she smiled. "Of course you will. Now go."

Peter turned and ran toward the stable doors. Regan hesitated, and Caitlan reached out and gave her a shove. "Go," she said. Biting her lip, Regan turned and raced after Peter.

As Regan ran through the open doors of the stable she heard Caitlan call. "Patrick! Patrick, where are you?"

Peter was already halfway across the open square of dead grass. Just how does he plan on getting that drawbridge down? No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than a rusty squeal filled the air. Regan watched in open-mouthed surprise as the drawbridge lowered and settled to the ground just as Peter reached it. She looked up. Nicholas stood in the

doorway of the gatekeeper's tower. He smiled grimly and waved as she raced across the wood planks just behind Peter. As she left the drawbridge to pound across packed dirt and stone, she felt a familiar tingle and Kelsey's exasperated mind voice rang in her head.

"Regan, damn, where are you? I've been at this for hours."

"I'm here," Regan sent.

"Peter found you. No, don't bother to answer. Just get here as soon as you can."

Then Kelsey was gone.

Peter slid to a stop beside here. "Did you contact Kelsey?"

Regan nodded. "She told us to hurry, then broke contact."

"First I must ward Crag Castle."

"Give me your hand so I can help," Regan said, reaching toward him.

His hand grasped hers. "Let me do the warding and remember, feed me just a thread of your power."

She captured a small tendril of power and coaxed it down her arm into his hand. He crouched and touched the drawbridge. As he withdrew his hand the drawbridge creaked upward, but at a snail's pace.

Regan glanced from the drawbridge to Peter. His face was taut and pallid and the hand that gripped hers trembled. She tightened her hold on his hand and fed him another small stream of power. He gasped, his body jerked, and the bridge jumped skyward and into place with a sharp crack.

"Pull it back," he moaned through twisted lips. Frightened, she abruptly fused the stream of power. Her arm began to

heat and she separated it into tendrils and fed the power throughout her body.

He swayed and stumbled against her. Her arms closed around him, her knees almost buckling at his weight. He's so weak. It will take us forever to get to Raya and Kelsey.

As if he had heard her thoughts, Peter took a deep breath and pushed away from her. He swayed again and Regan reached for him, but he waved her away.

"The horses are tethered in that fissure to your right. We must hurry." He turned, took three faltering steps, then stopped and leaned against a large, jagged boulder. He raised his hand and rubbed his head just above his eyebrows. Regan took a step toward him, then halted as he straightened and pushed away from the boulder, his face grim with determination.

"Horses?" she said.

"Gilda and Skylar."

Regan felt relief flood through her. Gilda was safe. "I'll get them."

Not giving him a chance to reply, she ran into the split in the mountain's wall. The horses neighed when they saw her. Skylar butted her arm as she unwrapped his reins from a scrubby bush. She smiled and scratched between his ears before turning to Gilda. The mare's brown eyes glowed as Regan stole a minute to stare deep into them. Then she loosed the mare's reins and led them both back to Peter.

He still stood with his back pressed into the rock. His face was ashen and his hands trembled as he reached for Skylar's reins. Regan's stomach clenched as she watched him raise his

foot toward the stirrup. His knees buckled and only his grip on the saddle horn kept him from falling. The stallion turned his head and blew softly through his nose at Peter. "I am okay. We have done this before," Peter said.

She watched the muscles in his arms bunch as he pulled himself up. As he lifted his right foot and placed it in the stirrup, his left leg collapsed under him and his body swung hard into Skylar's side. Regan flinched, but the stallion remained still. She started forward, then stopped at Peter's muffled curse. She forced her hands to relax, walked to Gilda and swung up into the mare's saddle. Peter still leaned against Skylar's side. She watched his chest heave and frowned. "Pride be damned," she mumbled under her breath. She reined Gilda to Peter's side.

"Peter will you let me help?" She saw his shoulders stiffen, then he sighed and nodded. Regan leaned from her saddle and wrapped her fingers in the waistband of his trousers. "Ready?" She felt him tense, then he surged upward. She saw his leg swing over the stallion's back, then he settled heavily back and let his head drop forward until it rested against Skylar's mane. His fingers gripping the saddle horn were white. Regan lifted a hand to touch his arm, then lowered it to Gilda's neck instead. "I suppose we go down?" she said.

Peter straightened in the saddle. "With slow care. The Ru'taha are everywhere." He nudged Skylar in the side. Regan held back and let him take the lead.

* * * *

Gilda picked her way around a jagged rock in their path, then snorted. Regan patted her neck sympathetically.

"I know it's slow going, but what else can I do? Skylar refuses to go any quicker." Gilda's response was another snort and a toss of her head.

Ahead, Skylar stopped, then turned from the path and scrambled up the mountainside. Gilda's ear flicked at the miniature avalanche of dirt and stones the stallion's heels dislodged.

"Please, lady, I have to believe they know what they're doing." The mare turned her head and eyed Regan with obvious doubt, then swung her head around and followed Skylar's lead.

Halfway up the slope, Regan's heart lurched into her throat as she watched Skylar stumble and Peter slide sideways out of the saddle and halfway down the stallion's side. Skylar's hooves found solid ground again and the stallion halted. For a long minute, Peter dangled, then slowly he pulled himself upright into the saddle. Air whooshed from Regan's lungs as she urged Gilda forward. Peter turned and smiled at her wanly, then faced forward again. Skylar tossed his head, then continued his scramble upwards.

Straight ahead in their path jutted a large boulder. Regan watched as Skylar neared the rock, then vanished around it. As she and Gilda neared the rock they heard the thud of approaching feet below them on the mountain trail. Gilda surged upward and around the rock.

On the far side of the boulder was a small overhang. Skylar stood at its edge. As she watched, Peter leaned over

the stallion's head and looked down. He turned to Regan and raised his fingers to his lips, signaling caution. Regan reined Gilda in beside them, then looked down.

Yards below marched twenty or thirty Ru'taha.

"We are in plain sight if they choose to look up," she said in a whisper.

"They will not," he answered. "They always march in silence, staring straight ahead." He turned to face her. "Do you know why they do not talk?"

"Yes," she answered. "Dirkk introduced me to a man he'd prepared for shaping."

Peter's drawn face tightened even more. "He made you witness his hell-spawned evil?"

She shuddered. "No, we were interrupted." She looked away from his questioning gaze and watched the last of the Ru'taha march by before turning back to him. "I'll tell you all about it later."

Peter backed Skylar from the overlook in silence.

* * * *

"That was the third time we've had to scramble for cover. At this rate, Raya and Tessa will take hours to reach," Regan said to Gilda as the mare slipped and slid her way down the slope. "There has to be a better way."

"Zara," Gilda suggested.

Regan leaned over the mare's neck. "Zara?"

"Zara could fly you there in minutes."

Regan settled back in the saddle. "Zara, yes, but would she come?"

Gilda turned her head and eyed Regan. "Yes, I know. Give it a try." Regan shrugged. "What do we have to lose?"

Regan closed her eyes and let the power build within her stomach. Then she turned in the direction she thought Zara's cave would be and thrust out a voiceless "Zara, Thea calls."

Dimly she heard Peter's questioning voice from behind her, but tuned it out and concentrated only on reaching the dragon. "Royal Lady, I seek your help." Regan felt a grumbling, sleep-muddled tingle, then a hand grasped her arm and shattered the connection.

"Why didn't you answer me?" Peter said.

She opened her eyes and pulled her arm from beneath his hand. "Because I'm trying to find us a quicker way home," she said.

He drew back from her and frowned. "I will get us there."

"But will you get us there in time?"

Peter gazed over her head. "I do not know, but I do know we are wasting time standing here." He reined Skylar around them and started down the mountain trail.

She hesitated, looking back toward Zara's cave, then at Peter's retreating back. She sighed and reined Gilda to follow the stallion. The mare sidestepped and shook her mane. "I haven't given up," Regan sent sharply. The mare flicked her ears back and trailed after Skylar.

The trail widened and became a small flat ledge. Peter halted Skylar in front of what looked like a jagged slit of black in the mountainside. "This cave used to have a spring at the rear. I am going to check it out." Peter slid from Skylar's back

and guided the horse through the rift, the stallion's sides grazing its edges.

Regan dismounted and led Gilda to the dark opening.

"Do not try to bring Gilda in. It is only big enough for one rider and horse at a time," Peter called back to her.

"Lady, you wait here."

Regan entered the crack. She pressed her back against the cold stone and was just able to slide by Skylar. Peter stood at the horse's head before a small stream that trickled from the mountain wall. He cupped his hands, held them under the stream, and offered the water to Skylar. Gilda whinnied from outside and Regan squeezed back by Skylar and joined her. She patted the mare's head.

"Your turn is coming up." Regan glanced up at the sun that rode only halfway up the horizon, then down at the steeply descending trail. Zara would make it so much easier and faster, she thought. She closed her eyes. "Zara, Thea commands you." Regan's summons met a solid wall of silence. Her lips tightened. "I know you can hear me. You did earlier." Continued silence, but this time with an undercurrent of annoyance. "You will answer me. It is as the Goddess wishes!"

The dragon roared at the mention of the Goddess and a psychic wave of irritation picked Regan up and tossed her against the mountain's side. Cloth ripped and pain seared her thigh as she slid along the mountainside to the ground. Tears of pain sprang into her eyes. Blinking them away, she took a deep breath. "You will speak to me."

"What do you want?" a petulant voice mind-questioned.

"Raya is in danger. I must get there." Zara roared again and Regan winced, bracing herself for another onslaught.

"You disturb me for the death of mere humans?"

"My sister is among them..."

"I care not."

Anger flared hot in Regan. "You will obey me. The Goddess willed it so."

Scornful rebellion blasted Regan's mind.

"I am the Goddess' avatar and you will do my will as before," Regan ordered.

"I have obeyed none in a century," Zara said, then her mind voice changed to sly cajoling. "Prove to me that you are she."

Regan's anger blazed. She pushed herself from the mountain side, scrambled to her feet, and raised her arms toward the sky. She saw a blue aura encase, then shimmer around her. "You know I am Thea. You recognized my soul when we touched on The Mountain of the Devil. Come to me now."

"I come," Zara replied in a surly tone before severing the connection.

The blue aura surrounding Regan evaporated. She lowered her arms and slid down along the mountainside's rough granite until her legs were splayed out before her.

"Were you mind-speaking Zara?" Peter asked.

She looked up and saw him standing just outside the fissure, Skylar at his back. She scowled, then looked down at her ripped pants and raw scraped skin. "Yes, but at first she wasn't in the mood to cooperate."

He smiled slightly. "You forced your will on a dragon?"

She returned the smile. "Not my will ... Thea's."

She stood and walked to where he leaned against Skylar's side. "Is your strength returning?"

He shrugged. "I am better. When will Zara arrive?"

"Soon."

"Then we will no longer need Skylar and Gilda."

He turned and tied Skylar's reins around the saddle horn.

Regan's forehead wrinkled. "I didn't think about them. Will they be safe?"

He scratched between the stallion's ears. "Of course they will."

Still frowning, she turned and walked to where Gilda stood. She laid her hand on the mare's forelock, then looked into her brown eyes and watched as the yellow that circled them glowed.

"We will be fine. I will watch over Skylar."

From behind her, Regan heard Skylar snort with derision and she smiled.

"What did Gilda say?" Peter asked.

"She said she would watch over Skylar," Regan said, looping Gilda's bridle around the saddle horn.

Peter laughed, then backed a few paces from Skylar. "Ride like the wind," he said to the stallion. "I will see you in Raya with a large bag of grain."

Gilda sauntered to Skylar's side, then the two horses shook their manes and raced away.

"Be careful," Regan called to their retreating rumps.

Peter walked to Regan's side. "Now we wait."

"But not for long, I hope," Regan said, then licked dry lips. "I need a drink." Then she froze and a stricken look crossed her face. "I didn't give Gilda a drink."

He circled her shoulders with his arm. "It is all right. I gave her one while you talked with Zara."

"But ... I didn't see..."

"You were a little busy." He grinned down at her. "Do not worry. Gilda was totally saturated before she left."

She smiled and touched his cheek. "Thank you. Now I need a little of that water myself." She turned to walk away and felt his hand pat her backside. Startled, she paused, then smiled. Well, he must be feeling better.

She was on her third cupped palm of water when she heard Peter call. "Zara comes." She slurped the last of the wetness and, wiping her palms against her pants, ran to Peter's side. She looked skyward. A dark shape hovered between them and the waning sun. It cast a premature twilight on the open area where they stood. As they watched, a wing dipped and the form circled closer. Regan saw Peter glance around the open area. "She cannot land. Just how are we to accomplish this?"

Regan's lips twisted wryly. "I didn't think about that. I guess I'd better ask her."

"Zara, how do you wish to do this?" she sent.

"I do as you command," came the dragon's waspish answer.

Regan frowned.

"What is the problem?" Peter asked as the dragon circled closer.

"She will only do as I command." She felt her hair stir in the breeze created by Zara's approach.

"Then command her."

Regan's shirt plastered against her body as the wind stiffened.

"What is your command, Thea?"

The dust rose around Regan and Peter in a miniature cyclone. Small stones and sticks bit into Regan's skin.

"Ouch," Peter yelped.

Regan looked up and saw Zara back wing, then reach into the whirling maelstrom, grab a rock with her right talon and disdainfully toss it toward Peter. The rock crashed to the ground within inches of Peter's toes. He jumped three feet backward, then raised his head and glared at the dragon.

"Your talons ... use your talons to pick us up," Regan mind-sent.

"My talons?" Regan caught a flash of surprise, then smug satisfaction. "If that is your wish."

"With care," Regan quickly added and received a flicker of irritation.

"Stand on the cliff edge. I will make only one pass."

Regan grabbed Peter's arm. "Stand at the edge of the cliff. Zara will scoop us from the ground."

He ran with her to the edge of the cliff. "If she misses we will fall to our deaths."

"It's our only option and she's refused to try more than once."

The wind whipped Regan's hair into her eyes. She raked it away and glanced up. Her vision became limited to

descending blackness and two extended legs ending in reaching claws. Frozen in place, she watched the three talons open and a childhood memory surfaced of the arcade and tri-fingered claws dropping into a Plexiglas enclosed nest of stuffed animals.

"Raise your arms, Regan," Peter yelled.

She snapped her eyes shut in sudden terror and flung her arms high. Something closed around her middle, then slid downward toward her knees. She's going to dangle me by my heels, Regan had time to think before the talons rose once more to fasten around her waist. "That wasn't fun..." Regan started to send, then she was jerked upward.

Her eyes flew open. She was out over the cliff, her feet dangling in mid-air. She looked down, then squealed and wrapped her arms around Zara's scaled skin. The ground fell away further with each sweep of Zara's wings. Around her middle, she felt Zara's talons press tight until they pinched her skin. "You're gripping too tight."

"I don't wish to drop you." Zara replied.

Regan turned her head and saw Peter pulling at the claws that circled his waist. She called to him, but the roaring wind forced the words back into her mouth.

"Loosen them," Regan sent.

The talons released their skin-piercing grip. Then Regan heard a dry mind-chuckle as they opened fully and she found herself twisting in the wind, kept from plummeting only by her arms that hugged the slick scaled skin. She slipped an inch and tasted bitter panic. "Close them," she mind-blasted Zara.

"As you command." The talons closed once more around Regan's waist. They pressed tight, pricking her skin, then eased. Regan twisted to look at Peter. From his ashen face and death-like grip on Zara's legs she knew he had been subjected to the same hair-raising experience. "Zara, that was uncalled for." Regan's anger was white-hot.

"That is exactly what you called for," Zara replied smugly.

Regan seethed. "You will get us to Raya safely. Do you understand?" Zara's answer was a dip of her wings and a stomach-wrenching dive.

"What are you doing?" Regan yelled.

"The town is below," Zara answered innocently. "That is where you wished to go, wasn't it?" Regan sent the dragon a mental glare, then looked down. In the merchants' area, the doors to the shops were closed tight. In the marketplace, wagon seats sat empty, while beneath them bodies lay motionless on the ground, heads cradled on arms. Chicken and geese nested with their heads tucked beneath their wings, while goats and cows lay in shaded corners. Why is everything asleep?

Zara circled the castle. The bailey was empty; no fires burned in the communal pits. The doors to the stable and laundry were ajar, but no one moved about. They skimmed over the guard towers unchallenged and a chill raced up Regan's spine.

Zara winged over the fields and, among the vines and planted rows, Regan saw that shapes crouched and waited—Ru'taha and vipers. She twisted in Zara's grip and sought Peter's eyes. On his face was a sick look of rage and horror.

"There, between the grape vines and the mountains. Put us down right there," Regan commanded as the dragon circled nearer to the ground.

"I will have to drop you. There isn't enough room for me to land."

"I know. Just do it."

"As you wish, Thea."

The talons opened and Regan dropped. She landed with a bone-jarring thud, then tumbled head over heels before coming to rest, face first, in a mound of dirt. Sitting back on her heels and spitting dirt, she glared skyward at Zara.

A lilting laugh entered her mind. "Until we meet again," Zara sent, then winged away.

Regan looked around for Peter. He sprawled a few feet from her. She crawled on her hands and knees to where he lay. "Peter, what has happened? How did they get beyond the wards?"

"The wards are down. The valley is spelled. We..."

A loud wailing howl cut through the air, cutting his words off in mid-sentence.

"That's Maggie," Regan cried.

"It must be the bespelled bells around her neck. The sleep spell did not affect her," Peter said. "Let's hope that her cry rouses them in time."

"God help us. Peter, look."

As one, the Ru'taha and Black Vipers rose and charged through Raya's wide-open gate.

"Maggie's cry should have awakened the gatekeeper. Why didn't he close it?" Regan said.

The Blue Flame [Book 1 of the Daradawn Series]
by Barbara M. Hodges

"There was probably no one there to close it. We have got to keep them from reaching the castle."

Chapter 23

REGAN AND PETER stopped before Raya's towering gate. Through the gray-black arch flowed a bedlam of panicked animals, a fitting background for the human screams of pain and rage.

Pressing a hand against the stitch in her side, Regan panted. "Why are we standing here?"

Peter turned to stare over her head at the high, distant line of mountains. "Dirkk waits back there, not inside the city."

Regan stepped around him. "Can't you hear what's going on beyond these walls?"

Peter continued to stare at the mountains. "I am not deaf, but the mind who guides the slaughter is not inside."

Regan stiffened. "You do as you wish; I'm going to find my sister."

She turned toward the gate, then froze as a movement to her left caught her eye. She turned slowly to face them. Black Vipers, their outstretched bodies undulating across the tilled furrows, were coming straight toward them.

She whipped around and faced Peter. He stood, silent and stiff, his gaze upon the vipers.

"If we run we can get inside the gate before they attack," she said.

He looked into her face, shaking his head. "They will only follow us and more of my people will die." Peter stepped

around her. "I choose to stop them here." He glanced to his right. "Move out of range of the fire."

She reached out to grab his hand. "I'll help."

He stepped away. "You go to Kelsey."

Regan turned to look at the vipers. They had stopped six feet away from Peter and were coiling for attack. Strangling on fear she turned toward the gate, then stopped and looked back.

Peter stared down into his palms. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. Regan's stomach tightened as she waited for the burning to begin in its center.

In his hands she saw a tiny blue ember form and her stomach warmed. The blue dot pulsed, flickered ... then faded.

She glanced at the coiled Black Vipers. "Peter?"

He lifted his drawn face to hers, and then stared back down into his hands. She waited, but felt nothing but a lump of icy fear in the pit of her stomach.

Suddenly Peter groaned, then shuddered and collapsed against the gate. "Run, Regan, save yourself."

She held Peter's haggard gaze. "No, you find Kelsey," she ordered with a grim smile.

He pushed away from the gate. "I am staying."

"And do what?" she demanded.

His face flushed.

"Damn it! Go!"

He glared at her, then turned and stumbled through the gate.

Regan whirled and faced the vipers. She called to the Power and felt it melt the cold lump of fear in her stomach. "Wait, Regan," she whispered. Inside her the power pulsed and grew. I've never let it build this much before. What will it do to me when I release it?

Then the vipers sprang and she thrust her hand upwards, fingers splayed, aimed into their midst. Power raced down her arm and erupted from each fingertip; white bluish bolts caught five of the six vipers in mid-spring. The burning force hurled them to the ground. The blue glow raced their length, engulfing their twisting bodies in azure flames.

Regan jerked her gaze from the burning vipers and fastened it on the remaining one who had already recoiled. Her eyes narrowed, her lips curving mirthlessly as she pointed her hand in its direction. Streams of electric blue arced from her fingers and the coiled viper leapt back. The ground where it had stood exploded upwards.

A red cloud of powdery dust showered Regan, blurring her vision. Blinking her stinging eyes, she looked around. Where was it? A mocking hiss came from behind her and she spun. The snake had recoiled. Their gazes locked for the count of three heartbeats, and then it struck.

She dodged to the right, then dropped to the ground and rolled, feeling its breeze as the viper's spring carried it skimming over her head. She scrambled to her hands and knees and pivoted to meet the viper again.

It was five feet from her in the shadow of a low, trailing grapevine. As she watched, it rose on its black tail until its

eyes were level with hers. It swayed slowly as its mouth opened, and then Dirkk's voice spoke. "Well done, Regan."

She stumbled back. "You've no control over me now. I've broken your spell."

The viper's tongue flicked in her direction. "You fear me. I taste it."

Her chin came up and she jerked her head toward the still smoking mass of charred vipers. "I've already killed five; you're but one more."

The viper stretched higher, its tongue flicking in and out. "They are of no importance. There are always more where they came from."

She took a step forward. "What would happen to you if I killed this viper while you're in it?"

The snake's mouth gaped wide and Dirkk's laugh rolled over her. The skin on the back of her neck rose in response. "You have courage, Regan, courage that is wasted on Peter. Join with me and I will make you my queen."

"Your queen? The thought makes me sick." She spat on the ground in front of the viper. Its red eyes glared at her.

She felt inside for the Power.

Dirkk laughed again. "Good-bye for now, but perhaps your answer will be different when next we meet. That is, if my pet doesn't destroy you first."

Regan screamed in rage and thrust her hand toward the viper. Her shot was wide, and she saw it tense to spring. Cold resignation froze her blood and she closed her eyes, then snapped them open as an "A-r-r-r-o-o-o-o-o..." filled her ears. The howl changed pitch, becoming a rage-filled growl.

To the right of the swaying viper, Regan saw Maggie running toward her at full speed. The dog's chest slammed into the viper's side and the snake toppled. Maggie whipped around, buried her teeth in the viper's tail and shook it back and forth.

Regan circled them, looking for a chance to strike without hurting Maggie. Suddenly, the black viper's body folded back on itself, the black triangular head rising and twisting.

"No," she screamed, plowing her shoulder into the back of the viper's head. The viper's upper body toppled forward and landed within inches of Maggie's nose. The hound yelped and back-pedaled.

"Maggie. Here," Regan said, and the basset hound scrambled to her side.

She felt the Power renew in her stomach and a feral grin curved her lips. "My turn." She pointed her hand at the viper. The snake struck. Blue fire leapt from her fingertips and caught the viper between the eyes.

The snake crashed to the ground, then writhed in a shroud of black smoke. "Take that, you asshole," she said in a high shaky voice. From the charred mass at her feet, Dirkk's laughter rang out as the still smoking viper squirmed toward her, leaving a black trail of burnt flesh in its wake. At a vicious snarl from Maggie, Regan swung her hand down and fired another blast at the devil snake just as it reached her feet. The blue fire hit the reptile's head, which exploded and sprayed her feet and legs with charred flesh and skin. The smoking tail thrashed violently. Maggie barked wildly and lunged forward.

"No," Regan cried, just as a sweeping backward lash caught the basset hound below her rib cage and flung her across the ground. The dog howled, landed with a dull thud, and lay still.

Stunned, Regan stared at Maggie's motionless body for a long moment, and then walked jerkily forward. She knelt and gathered the limp form into her arms. With a trembling hand she caressed the dog's velvety brown ears

"Open your eyes, baby. You've got to be all right." The little hound remained still. Regan stifled a sob, then felt along Maggie's deep, rounded chest. The heartbeat was faint, but there. Regan heard a panicked bleat and looked up. A goat ran through the gates of the city, dragging a ragged rope behind. She stood with Maggie cradled in her arms and stumbled to a row of grapevines. With gentle care, she laid the basset hound beneath the vines. Tears filled her eyes as she stroked Maggie's ears. "I'll be back for you. I promise." Maggie opened one brown eye. Her pink tongue came out and licked Regan's hand. Brushing tears away with the back of her hand, Regan turned and ran toward Raya.

* * * *

Pausing in the arched gate's shadow, she took a deep breath. The coppery smell of blood, intermingling with the sweet earthiness of crushed fruits and trampled vegetables, made her gag. Swallowing convulsively, she stepped from the shadows into the sun, then jumped back as an unarmed farmer and a mace-wielding Ru'taha careened toward her.

Cursing beneath her breath, she called the Power into her hands but, before she could react, the Ru'taha heaved the mace upward and brought it down. The spikes caught the man's head dead center. Blood and pale-pink globs splattered Regan's arms and legs. The man's startled blue eyes met hers, and then he crumpled to the ground.

An agonized scream jerked Regan's gaze up to the seat of a fruit-heaped wagon. A woman swayed there. Ashen-faced, she gripped a beveled shovel. Below her, another Ru'taha raised its club over an outstretched body. The woman plunged the shovel down. The vee'd point smashed into the Ru'taha's helmed head and its knees buckled. "Now, Carl!" the woman shouted.

From behind the wagon, a boy sprang, both hands clasped around the hilt of a rusted sword as tall as he. Beneath the short sleeves of his homespun shirt, his arms quivered as he lifted the sword high and then brought it down. The blade sank deep into the Ru'taha's neck. Black blood flowed from the gash, down the sword, and over the boy's hands. The Ru'taha dropped its mace and reached a hand to its torn neck. It raised its head and its black gaze sought the boy. Regan heard the child sob, then he bared his teeth, jerked the blade free and brought it down again in a hacking motion that severed the Ru'taha's right arm. Blood spurted from the arm's stump into the boy's eyes. He blinked, shook his head, and continued hacking until the white form twitched no longer.

Regan crossed to where the boy stood staring down at the pale mass of flesh. She reached and touched his shoulder. He shuddered and jerked away from her touch.

"Go, mage, I will see to my son," the woman called down from the wagon, her voice void of emotion. "There are more who need your help."

* * * *

Her hands outstretched before her, Regan blazed a path to the center of the marketplace. The hurt and dead lay in uneven rows. Weeping and moans of pain assaulted her ears as she wound her way through women, children and men. Hands reached to grab her legs as she passed, begging for water or release from pain. Her heart aching, she pried their fingers loose and moved on with promises to return with help.

Numb and stumbling, she made her way to the beginning of the merchants' area. Kelsey. I have to get to Kelsey. She repeated the mantra over and over to keep her legs moving. She stumbled from an alley and into a street swarming with Ru'taha and Black Vipers. Scrambling back into the shadows, she watched the marching horde.

They marched, eyes straight ahead, ignoring the closed doors and frightened faces that peeked from shop windows. They've one goal, she decided: to reach the castle and Tessa.

As the last Ru'taha marched by, she crept from the darkened alleyway, then darted across the street and into the dark entrance of another. A voice shrieked from the alley behind her. Regan whipped around. Two figures ran toward her, a woman dragging a child. Behind them, vipers slithered.

The woman and child raced by to a shop's door and pounded upon it.

Regan incinerated the vipers, then turned and sprinted to the woman and child. It was Caroline and Anna Witherspoon.

Caroline grabbed Regan's hand, her wide eyes begging for help. Regan gave the hand a squeeze, then whipped around as the woman's face drained of all color.

The marching Ru'taha had stopped and turned to stare at them.

"No, Dirkk," Regan screamed. "They're no threat." The Ru'taha cocked their heads, and then five turned and shuffled toward them.

"Damn you." Regan beat her fist against the locked shop's door. "For God's sake, let us in!"

Merchant Rastley's round pasty face appeared in the shop's oval window. He stared at Regan with wide eyes.

"Open the door," Regan shouted, twisting the ornate doorknob.

Shaking his head, he backed from them.

In the shadows beyond the shopkeeper's shoulder, Regan saw a black form separate from a dark corner. She pounded harder on the door and pointed beyond the merchant. Rastley continued backing from them, his mouth opening and shutting like a suffocating fish. Behind him, a Ru'taha raised a spiked mace and waited.

He must have seen his fate in Regan's face, for he turned just as the Ru'taha struck. The mace ripped into the merchant's shoulder and he shrieked. The Ru'taha twisted the club free, ripping flesh from bone, and swung it again, this

time at the merchant's round face. Behind Regan, Caroline screamed.

At Caroline's cry, the Ru'taha hesitated, and then turned and looked at the three of them framed in the shop's window. Its empty eyes flared green and Regan saw Dirkk's features flow over those of the Ru'taha. His lips curved upward as the club came down. Through the closed door, Regan heard the sound of Rastley's skull cracking. Anger burning, she pointed at the Ru'taha. The Power slid along her bones and erupted from her fingertips in a solid ball of fire. The fireball slammed into the closed door. The screech of hinges jerking free and the smell of charred wood filled the air. Regan stepped through the smoldering remains of the door and looked for the Ru'taha. It sprawled in a corner. At her approach, it lifted its head, all signs of Dirkk gone. Did I get him this time? She stared down at the Ru'taha's charred body. Its eyes opened and flared green. Dirkk's laugh filled the shop. The Ru'taha's neck muscles corded in a silent scream and its head slammed back against the floor and was still.

Regan faced Caroline. The woman held Anna's face pressed close against her skirt, her gaze locked on the Ru'taha.

"It's dead," Regan said.

She walked to Caroline and pulled the woman and child inside the shop. "Stay here. They want me, not you."

Regan stepped through the doorway. "You want me? Well, come and get me," she shouted, as she turned and ran down the street.

* * * *

Regan flattened her back against a perfume shop's wall. Pressing her hand against the pain in her side, she drew in deep ragged breaths and raked the street with a searching look. It was empty, but she knew they were close. She had cut through alleys and twisted back on her own track again and again, but still they came, like hounds who scented a rabbit.

She pushed away from the storefront and looked toward the castle turrets just visible in the falling darkness.

From down a dark alley she heard feet shuffling and watched a Ru'taha exit into the street. It turned its head unerringly in her direction. "Go away," Regan moaned.

The Ru'taha's mouth opened and from its tongueless depths Dirkk's voice flowed. "Why don't you destroy it?"

"You will only send more."

The Ru'taha grinned. "You know me so well for the short time of our acquaintance."

"You're a monster."

"You wound me, Regan. I'm not without a heart, something you will come to see when I've taken Raya from its traitorous queen."

"Tessa is a good queen."

"Tessa is a fickle harlot," Dirkk said. "Now I tire of our game, so run, my little rabbit. Run to Tessa and tell her to enjoy what time she has left."

The Ru'taha turned away from her and headed toward the castle.

The Blue Flame [Book 1 of the Daradawn Series]
by Barbara M. Hodges

"We'll stop you, Dirkk. I promise you," she screamed after him. Dirkk's laugh drifted back to her.

Chapter 24

REGAN LEANED AGAINST the keep's outer walls and held her breath as a black shadow paused, glanced down, then continued on. She released her breath and, hugging the chilled stone of the wall, inched her way to the downed drawbridge.

On top of each of the barbican's four towers, Queen Tessa's banner still fluttered, but Ru'taha walked the parapet, and the rays of the dying sun glinted off the mailed tunics of soldiers sprawled like limp dolls across the battlements. At the bridge's far end, the portcullis was up and from inside anguished cries and clashing steel flowed.

She pressed her hands against her ears and fought the urge to run in any direction except into that hell. Inside her the Power flared in protest of her thoughts. Yes, you're there, but how much longer without rest? I could leave; no would know. Inside the walls, a soldier's horn sounded a charge and the Power surged again. All right, I'm going.

She rounded a sagging tent held upright by a lone center pole, then dodged to the side as a farmer staggered into her path. In his left hand he wielded a short sword; his right hand he held pressed to the side of his neck. Through his splayed fingers she saw two raw slits still dripping yellow venom. He collapsed to his knees at her feet, the sword slipping from his hand. She bent and scooped it up. "S ... s ... s..." sounded from her right and she twisted to face it.

The Black Viper launched. She leapt to the side. It sailed past and landed just beyond her. Regan swung the sword straight over her head in a clumsy two-handed grip, then brought it down in a sideways slicing motion. The blade caught the viper's neck and slashed through. The severed head fell to the ground and rolled toward Regan, its mouth still snapping. She screamed, kicked at it, then scrambled backwards, her back slamming up against a hard rock surface. A cloud of flies swooped down and buzzed around her eyes. Batting at them, she turned and looked up. Her backward rush had ended against the wall of the gatehouse and from one of its open windows the gatekeeper hung, his face a roiling, featureless black mass. Then the wind gusted and a swarm of flies rose and buzzed angrily before settling again. Regan gagged and turned away. Shut the gate, a corner of her dulled mind commanded.

Her fingers clutched tightly around the hilt of the sword, she staggered up the gatehouse's blood-slick steps. Holding her breath and batting at flies, she skirted the gatekeeper's body.

The door to the gatehouse hung from one hinge. Bread, cheese and a spreading red stain from an overturned jug of wine littered a round wooden table. In the center of the room was a wood-and-steel winch. She staggered toward it.

The winch's handle was a huge crank, like one used for drawing water from a well. Loathe to discard her sword, Regan pulled on the handle with her left hand. The huge wooden spindle creaked, but nothing more. Cursing beneath her breath, she propped her sword against a narrow bed.

Gripping the winch's handle with both hands, she leaned her weight into it. The winch groaned, moved forward an inch, then slipped and settled back.

"Damn!"

Pausing to gulp air, she looked out the far window of the gatehouse. Beyond the barbican, a jagged line of Ru'taha loped toward the castle. Regan inhaled a harsh breath of panic and leaned into the winch again, her straining legs trembling and her arms screaming with pain.

"Move, damn you." As if in response to her command, the winch inched forward, rocked back, inched forward again, and then gave with a rusty groan. She leapt to the side as it rotated wildly and the rattle of descending chain filled the room.

The portcullis' landing vibrated the gatehouse walls.

With a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh, Regan ran to the open window and looked down. The Ru'taha rambled to a halt in the shadows of the barbican. They milled for a moment, and then turned and trotted back toward the center of the city.

"To your side, mistress!" a shrill voice warned and Regan jerked around. A Ru'taha ran toward her along the parapet, its club poised to strike. She dodged, and the spiked club crashed into the stone inches from her face. Splinters of rock exploded and bit into her cheek. She leapt for her sword. Her knee slammed into the bed and sent the sword sliding across the stone floor. Tasting bitter fear, she glanced back over her shoulder. The Ru'taha stood framed in the square of the window. So this was it. It was over. Well, she'd put up a good

fight. As she stared in acceptance, it started toward her. The Ru'taha's body jerked. It pitched forward and fell at her feet. An arrow, buried almost to its feathered shaft, protruded from its back.

"Thank you, whoever you are," she whispered, and then ran for her sword and out the gatehouse's door.

* * * *

Regan leaned against the gate of the inner bailey. Straight ahead was the stable, and just beyond, the castle. She pushed away from the gate and sprinted toward the stable.

Pressed against the stable's open doors, she listened. A rage-filled scream and the shrill neigh of panicked horses launched her onward.

Rourk stood, arms extended, his hands gripping the hilt of a sword that looked to be as long as she was tall. Six Ru'taha circled him, their spike-riddled maces raised above their heads. She let out a deep breath. They stood too close for her to chance using the Power.

As she watched, a Ru'taha sprang and brought its mace down in a whistling arc. Rourk dodged to the left, slashed downward with his sword and separated the Ru'taha's arm from its shoulder. It reeled back, crashed into a stall door and slid to the floor. Rourk's chest heaved as he gulped in air.

She looked around wildly. Next to the stable doors was a water-filled bucket. She grabbed the bucket and threw it into the back legs of the nearest Ru'taha. "Over here, you bastards."

The Ru'taha scattered and, with an ear-splitting yell, Rourk charged.

A Ru'taha jumped to meet him, and with a sideways slash he opened its stomach from side to side.

Out of the corner of her eye, Regan glimpsed movement and whirled, her sword held straight out before her. The charging Ru'taha impaled himself to the hilt, slamming her backwards against the stable wall. Blood spurted and drenched her hands. She crawled from beneath the Ru'taha's dead weight and wrenched her sword free.

The three remaining Ru'taha had Rourk pinned against a stall. Regan watched his blade slip by a descending mace and slash below the eyes of the nearest. Blood flowed, veiling its mouth and chin in blackness. His next blow sliced the Ru'taha's head from its shoulders, and inky blood spurted from the stump as the head bounced and rolled across the floor to thud against Regan's legs. With a wild shudder, she kicked the head away.

The last two Ru'taha charged. Rourk fought back. His hand moving quick as a striking snake, he threatened first one Ru'taha and then the other.

Now she could use the Power. She pulled it from her stomach and out along her arm. "Rourk, get clear."

He glanced her way, then spun to the side and leapt behind a bale of hay.

The Power's blue arc caught the first Ru'taha in the chest. It flew up, then back, and crashed into the second. Fire engulfed them both and they careened out the stable doors, their hands slapping against the wind-whipped blue flames.

She ran to where Rourk sprawled. He turned his bright-green gaze up to her and smiled. "Glad to see you in good health, lady. Now let's be off to the castle and my Kelsey."

* * * *

Rourk and Regan sprinted up the castle's marble steps and he shoved the double doors open. The roar of battle washed over them. Mage globes, hovering close to the castle's ceiling, flared and dulled, first throwing light on the struggling figures, then cloaking them in shadows.

With the clash of steel against steel, the knights in the anteroom fought Ru'taha who towered head-and-shoulders above them. Black Vipers slithered along the marble floor, coiled, and struck to bury their fangs into unprotected skin. Deeper inside the castle, a horn trumpeted a call to arms.

In front of them, a young squire turned to run, only to have his head split like a melon. Beside her, Rourk loosed a battle yell and charged. Swinging his sword, he mowed through Ru'taha and vipers, a scythe harvesting death. Across from her, Regan saw another empty-handed squire surrounded by three coiled vipers. "Hey," she shouted.

The vipers twisted toward her and the boy streaked to freedom. She pulled the Power up into her arm, feeling it sear her bones in response to her rage. Her vision a red haze, she pointed her arm at the swaying black monsters. Blinding, blue-white light shot from her fingertips and flashed across the distance like a bolt of lightning. The vipers exploded into flame.

Still in a frenzy, she whipped around. Frustration burned as hot as her rage at the scene before her. Unless she was willing to kill all, the Power was useless in the compact mass of flesh. She bent, grabbed a discarded sword and, swinging it like a baseball bat, charged into the chaos. All the while, a small voice inside her head screamed, "What in the hell are you doing?"

The first Ru'taha she struck jarred her arm to the bone. It jerked, turned to face her, and the knight it fought removed its head from its neck.

She continued her push across the anteroom to the doors leading into the hall. She sprinted through them and then stopped. Distant shouting and the muted clash of metal came from down the corridor. She turned toward the sound, then shook her head. Kelsey first.

* * * *

Mage globes cast shadows against the stone walls of the narrow passage of spiraling stairs. The strident sound of steel against steel grated against her ears as the raging pain in her side forced her to stop and lean her forehead against the stairway's cool stone. The pain tolerable again, she held her sword before her and continued her headlong dash, taking the steps two at a time.

The clashing grew louder and she heard Kelsey scream, "I'll take you to hell with me."

Regan rounded the last curve in the tower stairwell. Framed in the tower's hall doorway was Kelsey—and between them were ten Ru'taha.

Beneath the mage globes' light, Kelsey's slashing sword glinted like quicksilver. Regan opened her mouth to call her sister's name, but Kelsey leapt backwards into the hall and the Ru'taha surged through after her.

Fear turning her backbone into an icicle, Regan jumped the remaining steps and bolted through the door. Kelsey lunged and parried as the Ru'taha forced her back. Regan smothered the frantic cry of reassurance to her sister. Get inside the bedroom, Kelsey. Give me a chance to use the Power.

Kelsey lunged forward and a Ru'taha fell to the floor. The one behind kicked the fallen form out of its path. The Ru'taha's mace swung up and then down. Kelsey ducked, then sprinted through the tower bedroom's door and slammed it behind her.

Regan pulled the Power up and sent it crackling from her fingertips. The bolt struck the back of the nearest Ru'taha with a blue-white explosion. It dropped its club and reached back with both hands to beat against the blue flames. The flames jumped to its hands, then flowed like liquid death up its arms. The Ru'taha twisted and crashed into another. The fire leapt to it and, like a stack of dominos falling, moved on to the next.

Behind the flaming Ru'tahas, the door caved in with a cracking snap. Through the flickering wall of blue, Regan saw two Ru'taha rush into Kelsey's room. She jumped forward, then stopped as a wave of heat blasted her. Kelsey screamed.

Brandishing her sword, Regan dashed into the flames. They danced around her in a blue aura. Her body glowed with renewed strength, and then she was through. Backed against

the ward-robe stood Kelsey, her shirt just below her breasts bathed in her blood. She lunged forward, and the two remaining Ru'taha dropped back. They separated, and one darted toward her and quickly retreated. Kelsey laughed hoarsely. "Do you think to draw me out so easily?"

Kelsey's gaze flicked over the shoulder of the Ru'taha and met Regan's eyes. Suddenly both Ru'taha charged and Kelsey jumped to the side and rolled across the width of the bed. The Ru'taha maces crashed into marble flooring and tiny cracks snaked toward Regan's feet. She saw Kelsey stagger and catch at the end table to steady herself.

One Ru'taha backed and circled the bed, his head never turning from Kelsey, while the other climbed into its middle, kicking pillows aside as it inched forward. Kelsey fixed her eyes on Regan. Do it. Do it now, they commanded.

Regan concentrated on the Ru'taha in the middle of the bed. Blue arced, catching it in the throat. It flew back against the bed's headboard. The other Ru'taha turned to face Regan, and Kelsey thrust her sword. The Ru'taha jerked, and Regan saw the blade's gleaming end exit the Ru'taha's stomach. Its gaze flickered over Regan, then it dropped, first to its knees, then face forward onto the marbled floor. Looking down, Kelsey smiled, then pitched sideways across the bed.

Regan ran to her. With fumbling fingers, she lifted Kelsey's shirt. She felt the blood leave her face at the red flow coming from the raw gash just below Kelsey's right breast. Cold engulfed her as she used her sword to slash the sheet and wad it against her sister's skin. By the time she ripped another piece free, blood soaked the first. Her body

trembling, she tossed it aside and applied a fresh one.

"Please, God, please." Then hands gripped her shoulders and lifted her aside.

"Let them take her, Regan," Peter said into her ear. "They can do more for her in the healing room."

Regan watched stonily as liveried servants, some as blood-drenched as Kelsey, picked up her sister and hurried with her out the door.

Chapter 25

"REGAN." BEN'S RICH, honeyed voice flowed to where she stood encased in a shroud of gray fog. "Can you hear me? It's time to wake up."

Regan revolved slowly in the thick mist. "Ben? I'm not asleep. Where are you?"

"Let her sleep," a gruff voice ordered.

She whirled and faced the direction it came from. "No, I want to wake up!"

"I wish we could, but we need her," a lilting female voice said.

Why can't they hear me? Regan wondered. She reached out, grabbed a handful of the mist and cupped it in her palm; it was cool, light, and translucent, like the fog that bathed San Francisco almost every night in early spring. Regan inhaled deeply, but there was no salt tang of the sea. She took another breath and frowned. This air contained no smells at all. She heard a soft whimper and felt a cold nose press against the back of her leg. Maggie? She looked down, but the little dog was not there. Tears formed and ran down her cheeks. She reached up and touched her wet face. Why do thoughts of Maggie make me cry?

"She's been out too long. Why doesn't she wake?" It was Ben's worry-filled voice.

I have to find Ben. If only this fog would lift.

Regan moved through the mist. Shadowy figures teased the corners of her eyes, but when she turned there was no

one there. Her trembling knees forced her to halt. Why am I so tired, and where am I? Why can't I remember?

The mist parted and revealed a park bench. She hurried to it before it was enveloped again and plopped down. A break. Just a small one. Then I'll find Ben. Her eyelids drooped, then closed.

"Regan, don't go to sleep. I need you." Kelsey's voice snapped Regan's eyes open. She jumped up from the bench and spun around in a circle, her eyes searching the fog.

"Kelsey, where are you?"

"Find me, Regan, find me soon."

"I don't know which way to go. Give me a hint, like when we were kids." Out of the corner of her eye, Regan saw a blue pulse of light. She faced it, expecting it to vanish, but it remained. She stood and walked toward it.

The gray fog turned wispy as she neared the light. She looked down. She could see a path of closely fitted stones now, their black surfaces glinting with dampness. The path ended at a pulsing, doorway of light.

"Regan, come back to us." Ben's voice urged from the middle of the whiteness. She stepped into the brightness and saw a shadowy figure on the other side of the doorway. Joy coursed through her. "I'm coming Ben. I'm coming."

* * * *

Regan opened her eyes. Ben's drawn face filled her vision. "Ben," she whispered, "thanks for coming for me." He gave her a puzzled smile, then drew back. Behind Ben, Margeaux came into view. "Margeaux, it's so good to see you."

A throat cleared at Regan's side and she turned her head. Angus sat beside her on a stool and on his lap was Maggie, her middle wrapped in bandages from front legs to back. "Maggie, what happened to you?" Then memory burst through the dam of gray fog: scenes of blood, death and Kelsey swamped her. She bolted upright to a sitting position. "Kelsey?" Ben's brown eyes darkened to black.

Margeaux circled Ben and sat on the edge of Regan's bed, her eyes full of pain. "Peter is with your sister."

Regan's voice cracked and she swallowed. "She's all right?"

Ben and Margeaux exchanged a quick glance and icy shock blurred Regan's vision. She blinked and forced her eyes to refocus. "Tell me."

Ben leaned over and clasped Regan's hand. "It's not good."

Her fingers tightened around his. "Is she dead?"

"She still lives."

"But?" Regan said.

He shook his head. "We've done all we can."

"No," Regan cried, kicking her blanket aside. "I'm not going to lose her again so soon! Where is she?"

"Your extended use of the Power almost took you from us. You must regain your strength," Margeaux said, grasping Regan's shoulders.

Regan twisted free of Margeaux's hands. "Take me to my sister. She needs me. She called me."

Margeaux frowned. "It was only a dream. Kelsey hasn't regained consciousness since she was brought to me."

"Take me, or I will find her myself," Regan said calmly.

Margeaux shook her head. "The queen left orders for when you woke. She is to be summoned at once."

Regan glared at Margeaux. "Tell me, healer, if my sister is dying, why aren't you with her?"

She heard Ben's shocked intake of breath. "Margeaux has been by Kelsey's side since she was brought to us. She only left to come check on you."

Regan said nothing, just held Margeaux's gaze for a long moment, then swung her legs from the bed and stood. The room tilted and she dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands. She took one shaky step, then looked beseechingly at Ben.

He sighed, stepped forward and placed an arm around her shoulders. Her eyes mutely thanked him. Ben smiled wryly and steered her toward the door.

Margeaux reached a hand out toward them. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking her to Kelsey."

"But the queen said..."

"Tessa can wait; Kelsey may not."

Regan swayed against him.

* * * *

Ben guided Regan along a hallway of pearl-gray polished stone. Mage globes hovered overhead, bathing the ivory walls with a soft glow. Doors lined each side of the hallway, some ajar. A child's voice cried out in pain as they passed one door. Regan pulled away from Ben's supporting arm and looked in.

In the room, makeshift pallets of straw and blankets stretched from wall to wall. White-clothed figures, male and female alike, scurried down narrow aisles between the rows of cots. At the far end of the room, a large cauldron hung from a tripod. Flames licked the black, rounded bottom of the cauldron, and white clouds of steam drifted upward. The pungent, spicy odor of herbs tickled Regan's nose. More figures pulled lengths of dripping cloth from the herb-steeped water. Juggling them gingerly, they dashed to waiting patients.

Regan turned her gaze to Ben. "How long was I out?"

"It's early morning."

"How many dead?"

"Not as many as could have been, thanks to Maggie's warning."

She frowned. "How many?"

"Two hundred and fifty at last count."

"Women and children too?" she asked. Ben nodded.

"What about the vipers and Ru'taha?"

"All inside the inner gates were destroyed. Somehow the gate closed and they couldn't escape when Dirkk recalled them."

She smiled slightly. "How many remain outside?"

He shrugged. "There's no way to know."

"But enough to still be a threat?"

Ben met her green eyes briefly, then looked away, grabbed her elbow firmly and led her down the hall.

* * * *

They stopped before a closed door. Regan heard Peter's muffled voice coming from inside. She took a deep breath to still the tremor in her stomach, then opened the door and walked in.

Peter leaned over a figure in a bed. All Regan could see was a mound beneath the coverings. She pushed away from Ben and made her way to the bed.

Peter never turned at her approach. She stood behind him for a moment, stilled her racing heart, then touched his shoulder. He straightened with a quick jerk, turned and met her eyes. Her gaze questioned him and he shook his head. She felt her knees start to buckle and reached a hand out blindly. Peter's arm circled her shoulders. He guided her to a chair close to the bed and eased her into its soft cushioned seat.

Kelsey's blonde hair fanned out across a bleached white cotton pillow, her face the same pallid hue except for dark circles that looked like fresh bruises under each eye. Regan reached and took Kelsey's hand in hers; it lay still and lifeless in her palm. I've never seen Kelsey's hands idle. They were always moving, focusing camera lenses, adjusting light sources, or just picking at a loose thread on the hem of her T-shirt.

"Hey, sleepy head, it's time to open those baby blues," Regan whispered into her sister's ear. Kelsey's eyelids twitched. "What demon is chasing you? Just tell me and I'll chase it away. Just like..." Regan's voice broke. "...just like I used to do when we were kids."

Regan felt Peter place his hand on her arm. "Regan, I have been talking to her since they brought her here. Wherever she is, I don't think she can hear us."

Regan closed her hand around Kelsey's. "Of course she can hear us. Can't you, sis? She's just tired. I'll tell you what; you don't have to talk, just squeeze my hand. Can do that?"

Waiting silence filled the room. Regan could feel Ben and Peter's gazes boring into the hand holding Kelsey's. Her sister's long, pale fingers remained still.

Regan leaned toward Kelsey. "Kelsey Emerald, you're not giving up. I won't let you. You're not going to leave me, not again. We're going to walk through that rift together, and I'm going to show you my Victorian, and my rose garden circled by the most beautiful brick wall in the world. Now you wake up or I swear I'll spit into the palm of your hand."

"Kelsey Emerald? Spit?" Regan heard from behind her. She turned in the chair. "She hates her middle name. Promise me you won't tell her I told you when she wakes up."

"Regan..."

"Promise me. Both of you."

Ben and Peter exchanged glances, then nodded.

"She won't hear it from me," Ben said. "What's this about spit?"

Regan smiled. "We played a lot of sports when we were growing up. Always had bets going on about who would win what." Regan paused, stared over their heads for a moment and continued. "Ben, remember how you'd spit in your hand to seal a bet when you were a kid?"

With a small smile, Ben nodded.

"Well, Kelsey would never shake hands with anybody who'd spit in their hand. She really hated it." Regan blinked back tears and turned to face her sister again. "She used to pretend she was asleep all the time when she didn't want to do something. I always threatened to spit in her hand." Regan leaned close to her sister. "I'll do it, Kelsey. I really will."

"You will really do what?"

Regan turned and saw Queen Tessa framed in the doorway.

"It is a family secret," Peter said.

Tessa stared at each face, then shrugged and entered the room. "How is she?"

"She's fine. She just needs a little more sleep," Regan said before Ben or Peter could answer. She saw Peter shake his head and anger rippled through her.

Tessa's eyes closed and a soft sigh escaped her lips. Then she opened them and fastened her brown gaze on Regan. "Weren't you told that we needed to speak as soon as you regained consciousness?"

"I was told."

Tessa frowned. "Then why..."

Regan rose from the chair. "I think that would be obvious."

"What can be done for your sister has been done. Our war with Dirkk is not finished. I need you to..."

Regan stared at the queen. "I don't care what you need. This is not my war, or Kelsey's, and look what it's done to her."

Peter grabbed Regan's arm. "Regan."

Glaring at him, she jerked her arm free. "If my sister dies, it will be because of your war."

Tessa's brown eyes blazed a warning and she straightened to her full height. "Don't you tell me this isn't Kelsey's war. For seven years, she's stood at the burial site of men, held their weeping widows and children in her arms. For seven long years of hell, she's stood in the middle of battlefields surrounded by the dying and fought until her legs gave out from under her."

"And for what? Look what it's gotten her." Regan's tone was bitter.

Tessa drew back as if she had been slapped. The women eyed each other like two just introduced cats. Taut silence stretched between them.

"Regan?"

"What?" Regan snapped, and whirled around.

Kelsey had pushed herself up to a sitting position in the bed. "I wish you'd quit yelling."

Regan stared wide-eyed, then rushed to Kelsey's side. "I knew you wouldn't leave me."

The corner of Kelsey's mouth lifted in a lopsided grin. "I couldn't let you spit in my hand, could I?"

Regan stared dumbfounded at her sister, then buried her face in Kelsey's lap and burst into sobs.

"It's okay," she heard Kelsey say, and felt a hand ruffle her hair. "Would you leave us for a moment?"

Regan dimly heard the movement of feet and the click of the door latching. The caress on her head turned into a sharp

tug on her braid. Regan turned her head in her sister's lap.
"Ouch!"

Kelsey leaned forward from the pillow and glared down at her. "Don't you ever speak like that to Queen Tessa again. She's the best friend I've had for the past seven years."

Startled, Regan lifted her head and pulled back from her sister. "Sorry."

Kelsey fell back against the pillow. Regan jumped to her feet and leaned over her. "Are you okay?"

Kelsey waved her away irritably. "I'm as good as I can expect to be."

"Do you want me to get Margeaux?"

"No, I'm sure she's done nothing but hover over me for hours."

Regan felt her face heat.

"What's the red face for?" Kelsey asked, then shook her head before Regan could speak. "Never mind. I don't think I want to know." Kelsey reached behind her head and fumbled with her pillow.

"Let me." Regan pulled the pillow up higher.

Kelsey grabbed Regan's hand. "I want you to listen to what the queen says and, if it's possible, do as she asks."

"I think we've done enough for Tessa and Daradawn..."

"If it wasn't for Tessa you would have never found me again."

Regan pulled her hand from her sister's and frowned.

"What you do for Daradawn, you do for Peter, Rourk and every person here," Kelsey said.

Regan stared over Kelsey's head, refusing to meet her eyes.

"If you won't do it for Tessa, will you do it for me? I'm going to be stuck in this bed for awhile, and while I am Dirkk will continue to hurt people I love."

Regan's gaze became flat and hard. "He'll pay for what he did to you. He and Thomas both."

Kelsey relaxed back against her pillow. "Then go speak to Tessa. See what she wants from you." Kelsey closed her eyes.

Regan touched her sister's shoulder. "Kelsey?"

"What?"

"You will wake up again, right?"

Her sister's eyes remained closed, but her lips smiled. "Of course I will."

Regan walked to the door, then looked back again before she walked through and closed it behind her.

Peter, Ben and Tessa waited for her in the hall. Their eyes questioned her as she approached. "She's gone back to sleep."

Ben turned away. "I'll tell Margeaux that she's regained consciousness. I'm sure she'll want to see her."

Peter did the same. "I will go with you. Rourk must..."

"Where is Rourk?" Regan said. "I thought he would be here with Kelsey."

"He doesn't know about Kelsey. He rode out in search of Black Viper stragglers," Angus said.

"We will find him and tell him," Peter said.

Regan waited until they were out of sight, then turned to Tessa. "I'm sorry. What I said in there was uncalled for."

"You were frightened for your sister. Will you listen to me now?" Regan opened her mouth to answer, but Tessa continued on, taking her acceptance as fact. "The people know of Kelsey's condition. We tried to keep it from them, but..." The queen's shoulders lifted, then dropped. "Although you've been among us for only a short time, you must be able to see that your sister is the heart of our fight against Dirkk."

The queen paused, searched Regan's face, then went on. "Now they are close to panic. They want their commander back." Tessa frowned and moved to Kelsey's closed door. "Something they cannot have." She glanced at Regan. "So we will give them the next best thing ... her sister."

Regan's stomach tightened. "What do you have planned?"

Tessa turned to face her. "You will speak to them."

Regan's stomach rolled. "How many is 'them?'"

"All of Daradawn."

Regan turned and moved to Kelsey's door. She inched it open and looked at her sleeping sister. I promised you, but this?

"You will not be alone. Peter and I will be beside you."

Regan turned back to Tessa, a wry smile on her lips.

Tessa frowned at the smile. "Yes, I remember what happened before, but this time it will be different." She closed her eyes and rubbed her temple. "It has to be."

"When do you want me to speak?" Regan asked, resignation in her voice.

Tessa opened her eyes. "Now."

"Do I have time to change?"

Tessa laughed hollowly. "Can you change ... enough?"
Regan said nothing and Tessa abruptly silenced her laugh.
"They wait for you outside. I thought it best that you address them from my balcony."

Regan nodded.

"Then come. Let's get this over with." Tessa turned and walked down the hall.

Regan remained where she stood and watched Tessa stride away. Half way down the hall, Tessa stopped. She didn't look back, just waited. Regan glanced at Kelsey's closed door, then forced her feet to follow.

* * * *

Regan stared at the open doors that led onto Queen Tessa's curved balcony. The queen stood on the balcony addressing the crowd below. "Yes, I know your fears," she heard her say, "but giving in to Dirkk is not the answer."

Regan hadn't seen the crowd yet, but she had heard their welcoming cheer when their queen stepped out onto the balcony. Their voices had rolled over her, chilling her to the bone.

"There must be hundreds of people out there. How can I face them?"

"We all do what we must."

She turned and saw Peter standing just inside the queen's sleeping chamber. He walked to her and looked deep into her eyes. "You have faced a dragon, Ru'taha, and Dirkk himself. These are just frightened people."

She swallowed and nodded, not trusting her voice. Through the open doors she heard Tessa mention her name and from the crowd a voice yelled "Regan! Regan!" Another joined the first, then another, until the air rang with the chant of her name.

Peter stepped around her and opened the balcony doors wide. She stepped to the side, but not quick enough. "There. There she is," a woman's voice cried. The chanting grew louder. Peter caught Regan's gaze and waved her forward. She closed her eyes. Kelsey, help me, she prayed.

She stepped out onto the balcony. The chant rose to a crescendo, then slowly faded as Regan stared silently into the new day dawning above their heads.

"Here is Kelsey's sister," Tessa said in a rush, breaking the tense silence. "The same warrior blood flows in her veins. Already she's come up against Dirkk and sent him slinking." She finished with a too-bright smile in Regan's direction.

Regan felt the hand of fear grab her throat and start to squeeze. She darted a glance behind her to the open doors.

"Commander Regan, how will you defeat Dirkk and his hell spawn?" a voice cried from the crowd. She looked down into a sea of faces, her mind a black void of panic.

"Why does she just stare at us?" a shrill voice asked.

"She has no plan," another voice answered the first.

A frightened swell of sound formed in the back of the crowd and surged forward like ocean waves rushing toward a beach. When it reaches me I will drown, she thought.

"I told you we must accept Dirkk as our King. It's the only way we will not all die," a voice cried from the crowd.

Murmurs of acceptance melted into the wave of fright rushing toward her.

In the wave's wake, a woman's strident voice screamed and other voices joined. The scream wasn't one of fear, but of disgust and loathing. The crowd split down the center. A narrow alley formed that ended beneath Tessa's balcony. Curiosity squelched a portion of her fear, and she moved to the balcony's edge and looked down.

The thing lurched along the path between the throng of people. Its black skin moved and flowed, then she realized it wasn't skin, but a horde of buzzing black flies. A breeze kicked up and the rotted stench of spoiled meat floated to where Regan and Queen Tessa stood on the balcony. Tessa raised her hand to cover her mouth and nose.

The flies lifted and Regan saw that what stumbled toward them was a Ru'taha, or what was left of one. Its head listed to the side, almost resting on a shoulder, held on by one thin strip of oozing flesh. Below the shoulder, its arm ended in a black, crusty stump. The other complete arm and hand waved a makeshift flag of ripped cloth. It must have once been white, but now brownish, dried blood covered all but a few splotches.

The Ru'taha shuffled to a halt below the balcony and its head lolled back to look up at Regan. The flesh of the Ru'taha's face blurred and Regan knew what would happen next. Beside her, she felt, rather than saw, Tessa's shock as Dirkk's features and cold green eyes stared up at them.

His soft voice flowed over them. "Tessa, my love. I've come to offer you my terms."

Tessa backed away from the balcony's edge. "Get away from me, demon."

The head lolled to the other side of the Ru'taha's neck and the flies swarmed upward, then alighted again. "Demon? Is that the way to talk to your future consort?"

Regan heard a choking gag from beside her, then Tessa turned and ran from the balcony. From below, a gurgling laugh drifted upwards. "That leaves just me and you, my dear Regan."

Peter stepped forward. "You have forgotten me."

The Ru'taha's body shook and a black cloud of flies lifted and hovered above. "You?" The Ru'taha's hand dropped the stained square of cloth, then reached out and grabbed a handful of buzzing flies. Dirkk's green eyes glittered in the Ru'taha's head as the hand squeezed. The Ru'taha opened its hand and held it out toward Peter and Regan. Oily black coated the palm, along with a few fluttering pieces of gossamer wings. "I will crush you."

The crowd on either side of the Ru'taha knitted closer, widening the gap between them and the walking dead.

Dirkk's eyes probed Regan. "Where is your sister, the powerful Queen's-Commander? Did my pets finally send her to hell where she belongs?"

Regan felt the blood drain from her face, then rage brought it rushing back. She leaned over the balcony and locked her gaze with Dirkk's. "Your pets died last night by the hundreds, and today so will you ... along with the rest."

Dirkk's howling laughter fueled Regan's anger. "Who will destroy me? You and the puny mage who stands at your side?"

Her fingers dug into the railing she gripped. "I will. The same way I shattered your globe of souls."

Dirkk's laughter stilled. "My souls. Yes, I will have to punish you for that." The Ru'taha's cracked lips parted in a smile. "But afterwards I will forgive you, and give you pleasure beyond your wildest dreams, pleasure you will come to crave as you sit by my side throughout eternity."

Beside her, Regan heard Peter's sharp intake of breath. "I thought Tessa was to be your queen?" she said.

"I will have you both."

"I will die before I rule by your side," she said.

The Ru'taha's shoulders rose and then fell. "I said nothing of ruling but, if you wish to die, so be it."

Her glare swept over the crowd that ringed the Ru'taha. "Why do you just stand there with this piece of rot in your midst? You could have already killed the walking shell and Dirkk with it."

A frightened murmur drifted up to her and the crowd drew further back from the Ru'taha. Dirkk's laughter rang out again. "They are but sheep without a shepherd and you a Judas goat that will lead them to their deaths."

Then Caroline Witherspoon stepped from the crowd. "The commander's sister is right. It is but one, and a walking dead one at that."

Regan felt it start to grow, the dangerous blood thirst of crowd mentality. Her glance darted back to the Ru'taha and

saw Dirkk's green eyes darken with fear. He met her eyes and she smiled. His green gaze flared with hate, then vanished.

"Kill it!" someone screamed and as one mass they surged forward. Peter pulled her from the balcony, and then shut the door behind them.

* * * *

Queen Tessa stood in the middle of the room, staring at a tapestry on the far wall. "I'm sorry. I could not face him."

Peter moved to lay his arm across her shoulders. "It is all right, my queen. Not even you must do it all."

Tessa shuddered, then turned to face Regan. "What is to be our next step?"

"We have to get Dirkk's pendant and my notebook," Regan answered.

"Why? We can recite the spell and destroy all of the Ru'taha and vipers," Peter said.

Regan rubbed the back of her neck with her hand. "No, we can't."

Peter and Tessa frowned at her. "What do you mean, we cannot?" Peter asked.

Regan stared out the balcony doors. "The spell has to be written in the notebook to work. I found that out when Darrian held me captive."

Tessa frowned at her. "When you found out, why didn't you write it in the book?"

"I did, but I discovered that Peter must write the portion he created in the notebook himself."

"But how...?"

Regan cut off Tessa's question. "The words I wrote glowed. When I wrote Peter's, they didn't."

"I see, and the pendant?"

"As long as Dirkk wears the pendant, he can shape more Ru'taha and vipers."

"Then we will take both from him," Peter said. "And I know how we will do it."

* * * *

In the Queen's forest, Regan stood beneath dripping trees, her braid still swaying with the vehemence of her refusal.

"You will not do it alone."

Peter bent and touched a yellow and scarlet flower. "What kind of vine do you think this is?"

Regan inhaled rain-scented air and counted to ten. "I don't know."

"Call Da'kar."

"Not until we settle this."

He bent, sniffed the flower, then turned to face her. "It makes no difference if Da'kar will not help."

"It's a good plan, but certain death without me."

"If Da'kar does his part, I will have only Thomas to contend with." He grinned at her. "Do you think I cannot handle him?"

She itched to grab Peter and shake him. "Of course you can handle Thomas, but what if Dirkk returns early?"

His grin faded. "He will not."

"He could." Regan locked her gaze with his and held it. This was a battle of wills she planned to win. She had to.

He turned his back to her. "What could you do if you were there?"

Regan swallowed her quick flare of anger. Nice try, but insulting me won't work. "I can watch from the entrance."

"You will watch only?"

"I won't interfere." Unless I have to, she added silently.

"Then we will both trap the spider in his web."

And hope that neither of us turns out to be a fly, Regan thought, hiding a stab of fear behind a wide smile.

"Now will you call Da'kar?"

"I am here." The silver-tinged thought drifted to Regan.

"How long have you been with us?"

"Since you stepped through the door."

She felt a hand grab her arm. She blinked, then refocused her eyes on Peter's frowning face. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

His frown deepened. "I said, would you call Da'kar?"

"No, he..."

He released her arm and stepped back. "Then I will find him myself."

She flushed. "I don't have to call him. He's already here."

It soothed her temper to see Peter's face turn as red as she knew hers was.

Da'kar approached through the trees. The unicorn stallion stopped inches from them and tipped his gold-spiraled horn. Regan looked at Peter and he cocked an eyebrow at her.

"You knew I was going to call you," she said. "You understand the speech of humans."

"I understand your words, but am unable to speak them."

"Do you know why we wanted to speak to you?"

"You wish my help with Thomas and Dirkk."

Regan met Peter's gaze. He nodded, urging her on. She turned her gaze back to Da'kar. "We wish to use Dirkk's hatred of unicorns to destroy him and all his evil."

Da'kar tossed his white-and-silver streaked mane. "What must I do?"

"What do you want him to do?" she asked Peter.

"If I know Dirkk as I think I do, then showing himself will be enough."

"Dirkk's hatred is that strong? Just seeing a unicorn will draw him out and away?" She heard doubt in her own voice and mentally cringed.

The smile faded from Peter's lips. "Dirkk's hatred has festered for many years."

Regan hurriedly turned back to Da'kar. "You must let Dirkk see you, then lead him away, and keep him away."

"Do you wish me to kill him?"

She felt her face grow pale. She turned her green gaze on Peter and swallowed hard.

He stared into her face. "What is wrong?"

She licked her lips. "He asked if we wanted him to kill Dirkk."

Peter stared at the unicorn. Regan saw Peter's body go very still. Then he shook his head. "No, this may be our only chance. We must be sure it is done right."

She faced Da'kar. "We'll take care of Dirkk and Thomas."

The unicorn tipped his horn. "When?"

Regan glanced at Peter. "Now."

Chapter 26

REGAN REINED GILDA in at the edge of a breeze-rippled field of ripening wheat. Da'kar stopped beside her. She glanced up at Thomas's cave. "He doesn't even have the path illusioned any more."

Peter rode Skylar a few feet beyond them, then looked up also. Regan couldn't see his face, but she knew it was stony with resolve, a resolve that had hardened as they rode through Fertile Isle Valley on their way to this spot.

The condition of the valley had surprised her. She'd expected wanton destruction, but everything looked the same. Yes, the valley was strewn with bloated bodies of Ru'taha, vipers and humans alike, but the crops still waited in the fields for harvesting and the livestock, still secure in their pens, stared at them as they rode by. The serene, everyday sight had chilled her. Dirkk does not destroy what he plans to make his, she had thought with a shudder.

Peter swung down from Skylar's back. "We will walk from here."

She slid off Gilda and moved to stand beside him on the spongy ground.

"Will you tell the horses to wait for us back at the camp?"

She petted Gilda's velvet nose, then twined one finger in the mare's forelock. "Lady, your attention please."

Gilda turned her brown gaze on Regan. "You and Skylar will return to the camp and wait for us." Regan saw the

mare's eyes grow darker. "No arguments. Your presence will endanger us when Dirkk comes."

Gilda tossed her mane, then turned away from Regan and butted Skylar's shoulder with her head. The stallion looked from the mare to Peter, then sidled closer to the mage. Peter placed a hand on each side of the stallion's head, smiled into his eyes and pushed him away. "Go."

Gilda stretched her neck and nipped the stallion in command, then started to walk back toward the camp. Skylar tossed his head, then followed her.

Peter glanced at the unicorn. "Tell Da'kar we are ready."

Regan faced Da'kar. "We're ready."

The unicorn pawed the ground. "I will do my part," he sent, then trotted by them, tail held high.

* * * *

Regan and Peter stood, backs pressed against a lop-sided boulder. By leaning out a little from the rock's shadow, they had a good view of the ledge before Thomas's cave. They watched as Da'kar strutted up to the base of the mountain, then rear and scream defiance. There was a moment of total silence, then even from where Regan and Peter waited they heard Dirkk's bellow of rage.

They looked up as Dirkk charged from the cave's entrance. He came to a halt at the ledge's lip, looked down, then screamed obscenities at the unicorn below. Thomas ran out behind him and grabbed Dirkk's arm. Dirkk whirled and slammed Thomas against the mountainside. Da'kar reared

again, screaming a clear challenge. Dirkk turned and disappeared from their sight.

Regan turned to Peter. "Where did he go? Is he coming down?"

He pointed. "Look."

She saw Dirkk scramble around one of the path's switchbacks. "He took the bait," she said.

Dirkk rounded the last curve. He stumbled, pitched forward, then fell and rolled out onto the valley's floor in a small avalanche of dirt and rocks. Regan's gaze went to the pocket of his robe. No notebook was outlined there. It must be in the cave.

Dirkk tumbled to a halt in a cloud of dust only a few feet from their hiding place. She pressed her back closer against the rock. If he turns his head, she thought, but Dirkk only had eyes for Da'kar as he pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. A wave of contempt from Da'kar blasted into Regan's consciousness.

"Don't get cocky," she warned and then gasped as Dirkk rose up onto his knees, gripped his amulet and pointed his hand in the unicorn's direction. Red fire streamed from his spread fingers and Regan's heart jumped into her throat. Da'kar whirled and ran. The ground just beyond his rear hoofs blasted skyward in grassy chunks. The unicorn retreated only a few yards, then stopped and faced Dirkk again. Dirkk screamed and flung his hand out. Da'kar wheeled to the right and dodged another crackling ball of flame.

That was close, Regan thought, as the acrid smell of singed hair reached her nose. The unicorn and Dirkk stood in

a frozen tableau for a long moment, then Da'kar turned his back and trotted away. Dirkk scrambled to his feet, howling with rage, and charged after the unicorn.

Regan turned her attention to the cave and Thomas. The young mage stood in the shadowy entrance of the cave and watched his master stumble along in pursuit of the unicorn. What do you think of your master now? she thought with a tight smile. Thomas looked down and her heart leapt into her throat; he held her notebook. She grabbed Peter's arm and jerked them both behind the boulder. "He has the notebook."

Peter inhaled sharply. "Then we must take it from him," he said. He inched forward and looked around the boulder.

"He's gone?"

Peter stood. "Now it is our turn."

* * * *

Peter hugged the mountain's side and motioned Regan up close behind him. "The ledge is around the corner."

"How...?"

"I counted them the last time we were here."

She nodded. "Now what?"

"I will go first. Count to fifty, then follow." He stared at her for a moment, then started to walk away. Fear choked her heart with its icy hand. She reached out and grabbed his shoulder. Without turning, he reached up, covered her hand with his and gave it a squeeze. Then he continued on. Regan watched until he rounded the curve, then counted slowly.

"One ... two..."

"Forty-nine ... fifty." She held her breath and listened, but all was silent except for the occasional curse that drifted up from Dirkk.

* * * *

The ledge outside Thomas's cave was vacant. Regan closed her eyes and looked for magical wards, but the entrance was clear. She took a deep breath and walked in.

* * * *

Coals in the brazier glowed red. Regan started toward it, then stopped as a shadow moved. She felt inside, found the Power, and pulled it up and out into the palm of her hand. On trembling legs, she moved forward. Her hip bumped a table and toppled it sideways. It hit the cave's floor with a loud crack and the figure whipped around.

"Peter." She rushed forward. He pulled her close and she laid her ear against his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart.

"He was standing at the door of a gate as I entered. He met my eyes and smiled as he stepped through." Peter's voice held controlled rage. "It closed before I reached it."

She pulled away from him. "Could you tell where he was going?"

"No."

Regan went cold. "Did he take my notebook?"

"His hands were empty."

"We have to find it. A little light would help."

Peter mumbled a few words and a mage globe lit above their heads.

"You'll have to show me how to do that someday," she said. "You search that side of the cave. I'll take this one."

She knelt and looked under a bed. Nothing. Not even a cobweb. She stood and glanced at Peter. He shook his head and her stomach churned. What if Thomas took it with him? Along with those other books ... no, Peter said his hands were empty.

The books ... She ran to the near wall and moved her hands along the smooth surface. "Where?" Her right hand slid into a hole. "Peter, I've found something."

She felt him come up behind her as she fumbled with the top book and drew it out. She glanced at it, then handed it over her shoulder to him.

Her fingers closed around the last of the books and her heart sank. It was too big to be her notebook. She gave it to Peter and then extended her arm in as far as she could reach. Tears filled her eyes as she pulled out her empty hand.

"Let me try. Maybe your arm is not long enough."

She sighed and wiped her hand across her eyes. "Be my guest."

She watched him reach in the hole, then twist his shoulder so he could reach further in still. His mouth tightened and she lowered her head into her hands, fighting tears. She heard the scrape of Peter's boots as he walked toward her.

"It was in the back, pressed flat against the wall. Your arm was not long enough."

She jerked her head up. He held the notebook toward her, smiling. With shaking fingers she opened it to the last page. The words of the spell were still there, faint now that the ash-ink had dried, but still legible.

"Peter, you have to write your words to the spell in the book." She looked around the cave. "Damn, I can't believe I'm without a pen and ink again."

"Thomas is bound to have both here." Peter walked to the tipped-over table and righted it. He opened a small drawer, then turned back to her, holding a small round bottle high.

She scrambled to her feet and ran to him. Trembling, she laid the open book in front of him. "The words are already there. Try tracing over them."

He picked up a quill pen and traced over the words she had written. As he shaped the last word, the pages glowed, the words flared scarlet, and then dulled to black.

"Yes!" She pumped her fist, then wrapped her arms around his neck.

He remained staring down at the words for a long moment, then gently untangled her arms from his neck.

"You're right," she said. "It's too early for a celebration."

"How do we get the pendant from him?"

She looked down at the notebook. "We write another spell."

* * * *

They watched the words fade to black. With a wry smile, she closed the notebook and handed it to him. "I think you should keep it."

He took the small book and tucked it into his trouser pocket. "We have nothing to fear. The spells have been awakened, but only you or I can cast them."

She shrugged and started toward the cave's opening. "I'd just feel better if someone else carried it for awhile."

He followed her. "Now we must find Dirkk and..." Da'kar's trumpeted scream drowned out the rest of his words.

They exchanged a quick gaze. "He's leading him back."

Peter's face tensed. His mouth curved in a cold smile. "This time I will have him."

The two of them rushed through the cave's mouth and out onto the ledge. Dirkk's howls filled their ears.

"I don't see them," she said.

He brushed by her. "They are on the far side of the mountain. We must go down."

* * * *

Peter ran out onto the valley floor and hesitated.

"Which way?" she asked, halting beside him.

The unicorn's shrill scream answered her.

Da'kar and Dirkk faced each other across a field of grass.

"By the Dark God, I will kill you. No more piddling spells of power. I will send you to hell," Dirkk cried, shaking his fist at the unicorn.

Regan and Peter stayed in the mountain's concealing shadow and circled nearer to the screaming man. Glazed green eyes blazed from his black leather mask. Sensuous lips were drawn back into a feral snarl. White spittle sprayed with each curse he shouted at the unicorn. Dirkk's long fingers

gripped the eagle pendant, then released and gripped again. Through his clenching fingers, Regan saw a speck of light appear in the eagle's emerald eyes. The ember grew until the entire green surface glowed.

Her gaze flew to Da'kar and frantically she mind-sent, "Run. Run." The unicorn's head jerked up and he whirled and raced away.

Dirkk fell to his knees. His fists beat into the valley's floor as he wailed. "No ... o ... o ... o ... !"

Peter clasped Regan's hand.

It was time. She stirred the Power that fear had already set asimmer, drew it up along her arm, and out to her palm. She felt Peter jerk as it flowed into him. Together they lifted their entwined hands toward Dirkk, who still knelt. For a moment, Regan felt pity course through her, and then she heard Peter say the first word of the spell and blended her voice with his.

"Against your heart lays evil's tool, to mad darkness you call, for man's mind to rule.

Frozen in time you will remain, until free all are from your tainted stain."

The ranting wail cut off and Dirkk's back arched as if a puppeteer pulled his strings. Regan shot a glance at Peter. He nodded and she pulled the Power back. Peter unlaced his fingers from hers and they circled to face Dirkk.

The spell had paralyzed the mage with the snarl of hate still curling his lips. His green eyes flicked to her and blazed with hot rage. She gasped and stepped back from the force of his rage. Peter yanked the pendant over Dirkk's head.

Dirkk's gaze moved from Regan to the pendant dangling from Peter's fingers. Understanding dawned in his eyes. Peter backed from Dirkk, then walked to a flat rock. He placed the pendant on it, picked up a fist-sized rock, and raised it high over his head.

"No!" Regan yelled.

He froze, the rock still gripped overhead.

"The spell will be broken if you crush the pendant. Ru'taha and vipers first. Then we destroy it."

Peter looked across the wide, empty valley. "And how will you find them?"

"I won't. They'll find me."

"You will call them to us?"

She nodded.

He still hesitated. "We are but two. Can you control them?"

She took a deep breath. "I guess we'll find out."

He lowered the rock. "How will you destroy them?"

Her lips curled in distaste. "From what I've seen, it shouldn't be hard to get them to destroy each other." She walked to Peter and stared down at the pendant. The eagle's eyes stared back at her, challenging, daring. Her stomach heaved and tried to climb into her throat. She swallowed. "I think I have to put it on."

"I will not let this filth touch you."

The eagle's emerald eyes flared and then dulled. Regan stared at them. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"The eagle's eyes, they..." Sudden pain pricked the back of her neck. She whirled and fastened her gaze on Dirkk. His emerald eyes flared briefly, mirroring the eagle's.

"Regan, what is wrong?"

"Is his mind as frozen as his body?"

"Yes."

She frowned, her hand rubbing the back of her neck.

"Nothing ... I guess."

"What were you saying about the eagle's eyes?" he asked.

She glanced again at the pendant. "It's not important." Her look returned to Dirkk. "Peter, I know I have to put that thing around my neck."

He looked skeptical. "How do you know?"

"It's something Dirkk taunted me with at his castle ... about blocking the Ru'taha and Black Vipers' minds from me." She saw Dirkk's eyes flare again. "I've got to break his hold first." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. With trembling fingers, she picked up the pendant and placed the chain over her head. Gripping the eagle pendant in the palm of her hand, she waited. For what she did not know. Maybe for some reaction from the pendant itself. But the eagle remained a piece of cold metal in her cupped hand. Releasing her breath, she let the eagle pendant drop between her breasts.

"Regan?"

"Nothing."

"We can wait no longer. We will have to try another way. Call to the Ru'taha and vipers."

She closed her eyes and gasped. In her mind the chain and eagle pulsed, and surrounding it was a glowing aura of blue. Her eyes snapped open and she looked down at the eagle. It looked the same as before.

"What is wrong?"

"In my head, it's different," she said. "It pulses and it's surrounded by a blue glow."

Peter cursed under his breath. "It is warded. You will have to break the ward."

"But how..."

"Trace it with your mind. Dirkk is paralyzed. The ward has to be weakening."

She closed her eyes again and mentally swept them along the length of chain and the eagle itself. "There's no break in the blue line."

"Look closer," he urged. "Take your time."

She examined the pendant and chain, link by link.

"There's no break. It's solid."

"There is a break ... there has to be."

Temper flared and her eyes flew open. "Then you find it."

"I am not strong enough." He said it reluctantly, as if he did not want to admit it.

She felt pain stab the back of her neck. "Damn it, Thomas. Cut it out." She swatted at the air behind her.

Peter grabbed her arm. "What did you say?"

"I said, damn it..."

"Thomas," he finished for her. "But why?"

"The pain." She rubbed the back of her neck. "It's the same thing he did when I was training with him."

"Wherever Thomas is, he is watching. It is why you cannot find the weak link in the pendant." He stepped away from her and raised his hands over his head. She felt her stomach heat. "That will block him for awhile. Now find the break in the ward."

She closed her eyes and searched the pendant again. There it was, a gold speck in the otherwise blue line, where the eagle joined the chain. "I've found it. I'm going to widen the break." She touched the broken link with her mind and gasped as pain tingled through her. Gritting her teeth she stretched the gold speck to two, then three links.

The pain intensified and she felt sweat bead on her forehead. "You ... will ... not ... win," she ground out between clenched teeth. The blue line wavered. She heard Dirkk's voice shriek defiance in her mind as the blue glow vanished. She opened her eyes and rubbed her temple with a shaking hand. "It's done."

"Now call to the Ru'taha and vipers," Peter said.

"Just a minute." Regan jerked the pendant from her neck and dropped it back onto the slab of rock. She closed her eyes and sent the command. Her thoughts touched red hatred. Defiance flared. She pressed harder—and received grudging acceptance. "I've got the Black Vipers."

She searched with her mind, flittering across a roiling mass of pain and self-loathing. Tears filled her eyes. "I've got the Ru'taha. They're all coming."

He looked at her glistening eyes, but remained silent.

"I can't have them kill each other," she said with a choked voice. "The Ru'taha don't deserve to be viper's prey."

He nodded. "We will make their end honorable."

She glanced at Dirkk. "What will we do with him?"

"Queen Tessa will decide."

"Let's hope she'll be more merciful to him than he planned to be to her." Regan frowned and shuddered. "They're coming."

He reached toward her. "Give me your hand. It will end now."

She stepped back from him. "We haven't changed the spell."

"There is no time." The sound of marching feet grew loud. "My heart aches for them, but I have to think of the living." He reached for her hand again.

She backed from him. "I won't let the Ru'taha die in such a way."

"Look." He pointed across a tilled field. They came in a steady stream, Ru'taha to the left, writhing vipers to the right. Their hate and pain flowed over her.

"God!" Regan lifted her hands and pressed them against her head. She stumbled to the rock, grabbed the pendant and placed it over her head. Fighting waves of emotion, she sought and found the vipers' minds. "Stop." They halted, but hissed and squirmed in impotent rage. The Ru'taha, looking neither right nor left, continued on.

Leaving the command burned into the viper's minds, she faced the Ru'taha. Her stomach clenched as the pain and self-loathing washed over her. "Stop." The solid lines of Ru'taha stumbled to a halt. In the back of her mind, she felt the

vipers pressing the boundaries of her control. She shifted her glance to them and reinforced the command.

"Now what will you do?" Peter said. "You cannot hold them forever."

I don't know, she wanted to scream, but bit back the useless words. Her gaze shifted to Dirkk. Amusement lurked in his eyes and anger flowed through her. She gripped the pendant and crossed to stand in front of him. "You made them." She pointed at the Ru'taha. "How do I release them?"

Dirkk's green eyes flared. She met his stare and leaned closer. Still gripping the pendant in her right hand, she grasped his left hand and joined her mind with his.

Demented laughter rolled over her and she cringed. Through a red haze she saw a black dot flare. She pushed her way through a swirling current of resistance, and stopped before the dark speck. "I know this is what remains unfrozen of your mind." The speck flared and pain like the sharp stings of wasps pierced her mind. "Show me how to release them. One way or the other, they'll be destroyed. Let me give them a death with dignity." The pain fled and the speck dulled. "No. Don't you die before you tell me."

Dirkk's dry voice filled her mind. "If I release them, will you come to me?"

"I'm going home."

Dirkk laughed. "You are mine, Regan. You have been since the first time in the cave. When will you see?"

"If you care for me at all, release them."

"I do not care for you. You are my possession."

"Then you leave me no choice. I will destroy them the only way I know how," Regan sent. She drew back from him.

"Wait. I said ... I need not ... but for you I will." A soft caress touched her mind. "To free them will free me. Do you still wish it?"

She remembered the cascades of sorrow. They bested Dirkk and Thomas once; if need be, they could do it again. "Yes," she hissed.

He laughed softly. "Regan, you will be mine. Together we will rule this world. But for now I give to you the spell of unmaking." A wave rushed over her and pushed her from his mind.

She faced the Ru'taha. Raising a hand, she shouted:
"Your flesh I took, your soul I stole.

Formed to a shape of ivory, ever cold, doing my evil,
forever as told.

Your time is over, and in the Dark Ones' name,
I release you."

"What are you doing?" Peter cried.

Ignoring him, Regan pulled the pendant over her head and placed it on the rock. She picked up another rock. From the corner of her eye, she saw Peter lunge toward her. "No." She brought the rock down hard on the pendant. Green smoke rolled from beneath the rock. Thunder roared above her.

Peter stopped beside her. "What in God's name have you done?"

Dirkk's body reeled and then dropped to the ground. In front of him the air shimmered. Through the doorway, Regan saw a candle-lit room and Thomas. He reached out, grabbed

Dirkk's shoulders and jerked him through. Inside the room, Dirkk turned. For a moment his eyes met hers and he smiled. Thomas stepped in front of him and bowed in her direction. He waved his hand in an arc, and the doorway shimmered and vanished.

"No," Peter screamed.

Beyond Peter, she saw the first of the Ru'taha fall. They hit the ground in wave after wave. In her head she felt the Black Vipers cry in ecstasy at the death of their hated partners. Now it's your turn, she thought.

She looked toward Peter. He still stared at the spot where the doorway had vanished. She crossed to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. He stiffened under her touch.

"It was a trade-off." She waved her hand toward the fallen Ru'taha. "Dirkk and Thomas are beaten. We'll never hear from them again."

He ignored her. She dropped her hand from his shoulder. "It was the only way, and I'd do it again."

He turned, looking over her shoulder at the dead Ru'taha. "I know why you did it," he said, "and if you say it was the only way, I accept that. But if you believe this is the last we will see of Dirkk, then you are a fool."

She stared at him silently.

He looked toward the Black Vipers. "What of them?"

"We use the spell." She reached her hand toward him. He hesitated, but then gripped it with his.

"Evil is as evil does,

Evil as evil ever was.

Pitted one against the other,

Death to one or to each other.
All else pales and fades away,
Except your need to have your say.
The need to fight him to an end,
'Til death calls one or both 'friend'."

As she uttered the last word, the vipers turned, rose up on their black tails and hissed. Then they sprang at each other.

It may have been minutes or hours. She did not know. But finally it was over. She walked to where the vipers lay and, as she stared, they changed, drew in, shrank, and became the size of the garter snakes she had caught as a child. Food for vultures, she thought. It's fitting.

She turned and walked to where the Ru'taha had fallen. Naked men and women lay sprawled. Death had returned them to their original forms. Tears flooded her eyes and ran down her cheeks. "I was right. What I did was right." From behind her she felt an arm circle her waist.

"Only time will tell," Peter said. "Now let us go home."

"But..." Regan waved a hand at the bodies.

"Someone will come for them. They will have the burial they deserve."

Together they turned and walked toward Raya.

Chapter 27

REGAN STOOD IN the doorway and smiled at Kelsey's sleeping face. They had talked for hours while she held her sister's hand. Then Kelsey had drifted off.

It was late. She hoped Rourk still waited for her in the Queen's forest. Her smile fled. "I'm sorry, Kelsey."

* * * *

Regan stood inside Queen Tessa's solar. Her hand rested on the knob of the door that led into the private forest. I could just walk away. He doesn't have to know. Then thoughts of Caitlan's frightened but determined face as they'd shattered the pulsing globe surfaced. "I owe her." Sighing, she turned the knob and entered.

Damp heat enveloped her. She stood motionless for a moment, and let her eyes adjust to the green dimness. Da'kar. Had he returned? She had forgotten to ask.

She followed the twisting path to the edge of the open field. In the shadows of the tall trees, she stopped. Ahead, Rourk stood with his back to her. Half of her trembled with excitement for what she was about to tell him, the other half weighted her down in guilt for what she was doing to her sister.

"Yes, but now she'll have nothing to keep her here," a selfish inner voice whispered to her.

She frowned and shook her head. "I wouldn't care if Kelsey stayed here, as long as she was happy."

Still frowning, she stepped from the trees. Rourk turned. He lifted a hand in greeting, then let it drop as he she neared. "Is everything all right with Kelsey?"

"Everything's fine."

"Then why the frown?" he said teasingly.

"It's nothing."

He searched her face and then gestured around them. "It's been a long time since I've been in here. I'd forgotten its appeal."

She started to reply, but was surprised by a jaw-cracking yawn. "Excuse me."

He grinned down at her. "You've had a busy day."

"Do you think we've seen the last of Dirkk?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps for a while. He'll lay low and lick his wounds, then who knows?"

She looked down at her feet. "When I was at Dirkk's castle, I met somebody."

"More scum, I expect."

"A woman."

"What manner of whore does Dirkk keep at his castle?"

"Not a whore ... a captive. She and her son." Regan felt Rourk grow still. The forest itself seemed to hold its breath. "Her name was Caitlan." Regan waited for the space of two heartbeats, then looked up.

He stared over her head, his green eyes the only points of color in a face gray with shock. As she watched, his lips parted, but instead of speaking he turned away from her and walked to the wall that enclosed the private forest. Regan remained where she was for a long moment, then moved to

him. She lifted a hand to touch his arm and then let it drop to her side.

He leaned his forehead against the brick. His large shoulders shook. "She lives?" he whispered into the wall.

"Yes."

"And my son?"

"I didn't see him, but Caitlan said he was fine."

"Dirkk has had them for the past seven years." It wasn't a question, but a statement delivered in a frigid monotone. He turned to face her. "Is she well? Why didn't she return with you and Peter?"

"She's as well as can be expected. And she didn't come with us because Patrick was hiding from her." Regan decided this wasn't the time to tell Rourk why his son was angry. Instead she said, "We promised to go back for them afterwards."

"She knows I still live?"

"Dirkk had his fun by making her watch while he tried to kill you with his pets."

"I must go to her."

"I know."

"Kelsey..." His voice broke.

She touched his arm. "I'll take care of my sister."

He swallowed. "Caitlan..." He turned eyes dark with pain to Regan. "She's my wife. Tell Kelsey..." His voice stumbled to a halt. Tears tracked down and became lost in his red beard.

Regan blinked hard, swallowed, tried to speak, and then swallowed again. "I understand."

He pulled her close and wrapped her in a bear hug. "Good-bye, Regan." He released her and walked away.

* * * *

Regan hesitated outside Kelsey's door. "Maybe she's still asleep."

"Regan ... is that you? Quit talking to yourself and get in here."

Regan took a deep breath and entered. "How ya doing, sleeping beauty?"

Kelsey grimaced. "I'm doing ... just fine. Now if someone would just convince Margeaux of that."

"You listen to what she says. She's the healer, not you."

Kelsey made a face at her sister. "Right." She squirmed to a setting position in the bed. "So have you seen Rourk? He was supposed to come by for a visit."

"Should you be doing all that wiggling?"

"I still twinge here and there, but Margeaux did a remarkable job. I should be out of here tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? That's great." Regan moved a chair closer and then perched on its edge. "You know tomorrow's the sixth day the rift has been open."

She watched her sister suddenly find the fingernail on her index finger fascinating. "Really? I'd lost count."

Regan stared at her until Kelsey looked up and met her gaze. "You're a liar."

Kelsey's gaze darted away. "Yes, I am."

"Are you coming home with me?"

Regan watched Kelsey's fingers pleat, smooth, and then pleat again the sheet on the bed. "I don't think so."

"Kelsey..."

Kelsey looked up at Regan. "Don't say it. I've thought about it. I can't leave ... and never see Rourk again."

"I know how you feel about him, but..."

"No buts," Kelsey cut in.

Regan stood. She stared down at Kelsey, then frowned and walked to the other side of the room.

"What's wrong? I see it in your face."

"You asked if I'd seen Rourk?"

Kelsey nodded.

"I saw him just now. In Tessa's forest."

"And?"

"I had news to give him." Regan walked back to her sister's bed and sat down in the chair. She sought Kelsey's eyes, then grasped her hand.

Her sister wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Just tell me."

"His wife and child are still alive," Regan said quietly.

Kelsey's hand gripped tight and Regan winced.

"Alive?"

"They've been held captive at Dirkk's castle."

Kelsey dropped Regan's hand. "He went to them?" she asked, then laughed hollowly. "Of course he did."

"Kelsey, I'm so sorry."

Kelsey turned her back to Regan. "I'd like to be alone."

Regan stood to leave, then sat back down again. "I can't leave you like this."

Kelsey turned. Her face colorless with pain, she whispered, "Get out."

"Let me help."

"Let you help?" Kelsey closed her eyes again for a moment. "I think you've helped enough, don't you?"

Regan drew back as if she'd been slapped.

"Can you give me back the man I love?" Kelsey continued.

Regan stared at her in silence. Kelsey's lips trembled. "I didn't think so."

Regan reached out and touched her sister's arm.

Kelsey jerked away. "Not now, Regan. Not now." She slid back down into the bed and turned her back. "I want you to go. Please. I love you, but I can't look at you right now."

Regan pushed back the chair and stood. She started toward the door, then swore under her breath and whirled around. "No, you're not pushing me away." She sat back down on the edge of the bed and pulled her sister up into her arms. Kelsey twisted half-heartedly in her grip, then dissolved in a torrent of tears.

Kelsey's body shook with the force of her sobs. Regan said nothing, just held on and rocked them both.

Finally Kelsey pulled back and looked up. "God, Regan! It hurts. It hurts so much."

Regan pushed tendrils of hair back from Kelsey's damp, flushed face. Kelsey sniffed, looked around, then blew her nose on the corner of the bed sheet.

"That's gross," Regan said.

"Better it than you," Kelsey choked out. She stared over Regan's head, then shuddered and grabbed her sister's hand. "I'll leave with you tomorrow."

Regan squeezed her hand, then released it and stood. "Okay, we will go home tomorrow—both of us."

Kelsey turned away from her sister. "Tomorrow, but for now I'd like to be by myself."

"I'll come back later."

"Fine."

"Kelsey," Regan said.

"What?"

"I love you."

Kelsey turned and gave Regan a small grin. "Yeah. I love me, too. Now get."

Regan shut the door behind her, then leaned back against it and waited. Soon Kelsey's choked sobs penetrated the door. Tears streaking her own cheeks, Regan pushed away from the door and walked down the hall. "Tomorrow this will all be over."

* * * *

Regan stood on the balcony of Kelsey's tower room and looked down. Already the inner bailey was almost vacant. The merchants had gotten their way. Daradawn's people were returning to their farms and villages. As she turned and entered the twin glass balcony doors, someone knocked on the bedroom door. "Yes?"

"May I come in?" Peter said.

"Yes."

He crossed to where she stood.

"I just came from Kelsey."

"Then you know I told her."

"And Rourk?" he asked.

She turned her back on him and walked to the side of the bed. Trailing her fingers along a seam in the silk comforter, she said. "He left to go to Dirkk's castle."

She heard footsteps, then felt his hands on her arms. He pulled her back against his body. "I am sorry."

Regan leaned back into him. "Tomorrow we'll start putting the pieces back together."

Peter's body stiffened, then she felt his lips brush her hair. "You would leave me again?"

"It'll take time, but Kelsey will heal."

"And you?"

Regan tensed against him. "What do you mean?"

"How much time will it take for you to forget me?"

Regan closed her eyes against the pain that twisted in her stomach. She pulled away from him and walked to the balcony doors. Through the glass she saw the glimmer of the first evening star. Taking a deep breath, she faced him. "I have to go, at least for a while."

She heard his quick intake of breath, then in two strides he closed the distance between them. He stopped a hand-span away from her and stared down into her eyes. "For us, 'a while' is seven years."

Regan tried to smile. "Not all that long when you think of the eternity we've already waited."

He shook his head. "I wish to wait no longer. Do not leave. Stay here. Become my wife."

"But Kelsey..."

"She wants your happiness, the same as you want hers."

Regan grew still. "You talked to her about us?"

He nodded. She sighed and massaged her right temple with her hand. "I wish you hadn't done that. She's hurting so bad..."

"Regan, do you love me?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then that is your answer."

She stepped around him and stared at the far wall. A tapestry hung there. It was a wedding scene. Her lips curved in an ironic smile. "It's not that simple. I need time..."

"Do you need another seven years?"

No, she didn't want to wait another seven long years. "But this time I wanted Kelsey to be at my wedding..."

"Then I guess we should be married tomorrow," Peter cut in.

She turned and stared at him with wide eyes. "Tomorrow? Impossible! There's a blood test and a license..."

He smiled, then interrupted. "Perhaps in your world, but not in mine—or is it to be ours?"

"I don't know. I have to talk to Kelsey first."

* * * *

Kelsey's door was ajar. Regan looked in. Propped up in the bed, Kelsey met Regan eyes with eyes that were red in her pale face, but she smiled and waved Regan in.

"Are you here to plan a wedding?" Kelsey asked.

"I don't know. How can I let you go back by yourself? There will be all the questions, and..."

"I can handle that."

"But after what happened..."

"Regan, I could use some time alone." Kelsey's lips trembled, but she looked down and took a deep breath. When she looked up again they were still. "Hey, it's only seven years. You can consider it a long honeymoon."

Regan shook her head. "No. I'm going with you."

Kelsey grabbed her hand. "Regan Louise Cafferty," she said, shaking her hand with each word, "do you love Peter?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll stay and marry him." Kelsey held up her hand and stopped Regan's protest. "It's settled. One of us will be happy."

Tears filled Regan's eyes and she blinked. "I want both of us to be happy," she said in a choked voice.

Kelsey looked away. "I will be, just not for awhile, and not here."

"Kelsey..."

"Get out of here. You need your beauty sleep. After all you're getting married tomorrow." And with that, she scooted down into the bed, turned her back to Regan, and pulled the blanket over her shoulders.

* * * *

Regan opened her eyes, then blinked against the bright sun that shone through the balcony doors. She rolled from

her side onto her back and stretched. Suddenly her eyes widened and she bolted upright in bed. "I'm getting married today."

A sharp rap on the door made her jump.

"It's Meg, miss. I've come to prepare your bath."

Regan pulled the sheet up around her chin and then called, "Come in."

The door opened and a young woman she had never seen before walked in. She bobbed a quick curtsey, then crossed to the tall standing screen that hid the oval tub. The young woman stood with her back to Regan. She turned and gave Regan a wink over her shoulder. "We don't need no prying eyes. Okay. Bring 'em in."

Regan peeked around the young woman and saw the door open to admit a line of red-liveried men. Each hand gripped a steaming bucket. She leaned back against her pillow and, staring at the young woman's red-skirted backside asked, "Where's Mary-Anne this morning?"

Meg turned and stared down at her. Her eyes filled with tears and she blinked furiously. "A viper got her. She's with God now."

Regan sighed. How many families were missing their Mary-Annes this morning? "I'm so sorry."

The young woman swallowed. "We all loved her." She turned and walked to the dressing table with the small crystal bottles. The men had finished and departed. "Would you like the water scented?"

"The pink one with the carved flower top. It's roses."

"Of course, miss. After your bath the Queen's-Commander would like you to join her for breakfast."

"Tell her I'll be down as soon as I'm dressed."

Meg dug in the pocket of her skirt and handed a folded piece of paper to Regan. "The Queen's-Commander gave me this to give you. Now if there's nothing else?"

"No, that'll be fine."

Meg curtsied again, then left.

Regan opened the sheet of paper and read Kelsey's words:
Regan, I'm so happy that you and Peter have found love. I'll miss you but I know the two of you will be happy here. I have been for the past seven years.

Please, let me give you the dress to wear at your wedding. It was really made for you, although I didn't know it at the time. Yes. You guessed it. It's the blue one for the dinner that never was.

Your loving sister,
Kelsey.

Regan kicked the bed coverings aside and ran to the tall wardrobe. Opening the door, she reached inside and removed the pale-blue dress. She held it against her body and waltzed around the room. "With this on, I'll feel like a princess."

She laid the dress flat out on the bed and turned toward the tall screen and oval tub.

* * * *

Regan stood before the long mirror and smoothed the blue dress over her hips. Her eyes strayed to the low oval neckline and she blushed. She twisted her shoulders side to side,

decided the dress's top would remain in place, then turned and walked to the door.

The full skirt of the gown caressed her bare backside as she moved. Maybe there is something to a lack of underwear, she mused. Her cheeks, all four of them, warmed at the thought. Humming "Here Comes the Bride," she walked out the door.

* * * *

"...A beautiful day for a wedding," Regan heard Kelsey say as she stood in the doorway. Her sister's back rested against a mound of propped pillows. Margeaux was taping a large bandage beneath Kelsey's right breast. Queen Tessa stood at the bed's end watching the procedure with an eagle eye. Kelsey glanced up. "Here comes the bride now."

Tessa and Margeaux looked at her and for some stupid reason Regan felt her face heat. "Give me a break."

"Regan, you look beautiful," Tessa said, crossing to take her hand. "I'm so happy that you will be staying with us."

Regan felt her face grow redder. "Thank you." She pulled her hand from the queen's and walked to Kelsey's bed. "Well, how is she?"

Margeaux lowered Kelsey's top, then smiled. "She's just fine. I don't even think she'll be left with a scar to brag about." She winked at Regan, then turned back to Kelsey. "In fact, I don't even know why she's still in bed."

"What?" Kelsey squeaked.

"She always was a lazy one," Tessa grinned.

Regan watched expressions flicker across her sister's face for a moment, then she burst out laughing. Kelsey frowned at her, then kicked the coverings aside and stood. Regan's laughter abruptly stopped as Kelsey took a step, then stumbled. She reached for Kelsey's arm, but her sister waved her away irritably.

"Just give me a second."

Regan gnawed her bottom lip as Kelsey took a deep breath, then another wobbly step. Regan glanced at Margeaux.

The elven healer watched Kelsey take an even shakier step. "Give yourself a moment between each step," she said.

Kelsey shot her a dirty look and took another step.

"Kelsey, listen to Margeaux. You don't have to do it all in one day," Regan said.

Kelsey took three more steps, then turned to her sister. "Yes, I do. I intend to be standing by your side when you're married this afternoon."

"I don't recall asking you to be my Maid of Honor."

"You seem to have forgotten, but I'm going to be anyway. I missed your first wedding. I'm not missing this one." Kelsey had made it all the way to the door. She leaned her head against the door's jamb for a second then, with a grin, turned and walked with slow care back to the bed. "See. No problem."

Regan returned her grin. "Great. And for the record, I'd be honored to have you stand beside me at my wedding."

"Thank you. I accept."

"Weddings," Queen Tessa said with a clap of her hands. "I do love them. And we haven't had one in some time. The last was Rourk and Caitlan's."

Regan looked at Kelsey. Her sister's face had gone white and a sickly little smile curved her lips.

"When and where is mine to be?" Regan said in a rush.

"In the chapel, of course," Tessa said. "I'm having it filled with flowers as we speak."

"Who is to marry us?"

"In Daradawn, it is the Queen who marries you," Kelsey said quietly.

Margeaux turned to Kelsey, frowning slightly. "You've done too much. Back into bed with you."

"My body has healed very well, thank you."

Regan moved to take her sister's arm. "Margeaux's right. There's no sense overdoing it. After all, you want to be healthy to go home, right?"

Kelsey batted Regan's hand away. "Not in the bed—the chair."

"Whatever. Just sit down."

Kelsey walked to the chair and settled into it. "The rift—will you and Peter go with me?"

"I can't speak for Peter, but I'm going with you."

"Enough talk of good-byes. We've a wedding today," Tessa said. "But first, breakfast. I've taken the liberty, and it should be getting here right about now." She turned toward the door just as three serving lads arrived, each balancing a huge silver tray above their heads.

"But how did they know?" Regan said.

"I told them to watch for you, then wait ten minutes and bring the food." The queen looked around the small room. "Where shall we put it?"

"The bed seems the only place," Margeaux said. She bent and smoothed the coverings. "Place it here, lads."

The serving boys glanced at the queen, who nodded. They moved with skilled ease to the bed and set the trays down in its center. They bowed to Tessa and backed from the room.

Queen Tessa walked to the bed and removed the tray's linen napkin coverings. Two of the trays were mounded with pastries and fresh fruit. The third held three pitchers. "Coffee, milk, or juice? I didn't know which you'd prefer." Piled in the center of one tray were rose-colored napkins and small golden plates. "I specifically asked for finger foods. Nothing that needed a knife or fork. Well, don't just stand there. Let's eat." The queen picked up a plate and handed it to Regan. "The bride-to-be will go first."

* * * *

"Ouch," Regan winced.

"Well, quit moving your head," Tessa said. "I'm almost finished."

Regan turned her head an inch, then flinched as Queen Tessa gave a warning tug.

"Regan, sit still," Kelsey said. "Didn't mama teach you anything?"

Out of the corner of her eye Regan saw Margeaux finish winding a red ribbon through Kelsey's braid.

"There." Tessa leaned over Regan's shoulder and handed her an oval mirror. "Would you like to look?"

Regan stared at her face in the mirror, then turned her head to see the intricate braid entwined with blue ribbons. "It's beautiful."

"You're beautiful," Tessa said. Someone rapped on the door.

"It's time, my queen," a young man said.

Tessa, Queen of Daradawn, smiled at Regan. "I'll be waiting for you in the chapel. Kelsey will show you the way." She walked to the young man who bowed deep, then offered his arm. Tessa placed her hand on his arm and sailed out the door.

Regan's knees began to shake. "Oh, God. It's really going to happen." Her stomach dipped and rolled. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"No, you're not," Kelsey said fiercely into her ear. "You're not going to puke all over that dress."

Regan took deep even breaths and swallowed convulsively. "You're right. It'd be a sin to ruin this dress." She smiled wanly. "I'm all right now. Let's do it."

"Just follow your Maid-of-Honor. No ... wait." She walked to stand in front of Margeaux and took her hand. "Make that Maids-of-Honor."

Margeaux tried to pull her hand from Kelsey's. "No, this is Regan's day."

Regan smiled at the healer. "I would be honored to have you both at my side."

"Without your help neither of us would be here," Kelsey said.

Margeaux looked from one to the other, then gave in. "It would make me very happy."

"Then it's settled. Now let's be off. Peter awaits his bride-to-be." Kelsey herded them toward the door.

* * * *

Regan stood on the first of the three steps leading to the carved-wood arch of the chapel door. Soft chords of music filtered to them. "What instrument is it?"

"A harp," Kelsey answered. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"I've never heard one before."

"It's a wedding tradition in Daradawn," Margeaux said.

Kelsey grabbed Regan's arm, pulling her up the last steps. Just inside the chapel's door, Regan's feet refused to go a step further. My God, what am I doing? I've only known this man for six days. I knew Jack for years and look how that turned out. She felt a tug on her arm.

"Regan, are you okay?"

She looked up at her sister. She opened her mouth to speak, but only a croak came out.

Kelsey turned to Margeaux. "We need a minute ... stall."

"Stall?"

"Just walk up there and say something nice about Peter and Regan. Tell them how happy you are. Tell them anything; just give me a moment with my sister."

Margeaux's gaze went from Kelsey to Regan's white face. "Very well, I'll—stall." She stretched her lips into a wide

smile, then walked toward the aisle that ran the length of the chapel.

Gulping in quick shallow breaths, Regan watched Margeaux glide along the scarlet-and-gold carpet runner. The elven lady turned her head side to side and smiled at everyone who caught her glance.

"Who are all these people?" Regan asked. Row after row of marble benches were crowded with them, pressed shoulder to shoulder. "I expected only a handful. How did so many find out?"

Kelsey shrugged. "Somehow the word always gets out."

Margeaux reached the tall scrolled altar and curtsied low to Queen Tessa. "My Queen," Regan heard Margeaux's musical voice clearly. "I ask your indulgence to say a few words on this glorious occasion."

Regan saw the queen look back to where she stood with Kelsey. Then she nodded.

"Thank you, your Majesty." Margeaux turned to face the crowd. "I've known Peter his entire life." She turned her head and smiled at Peter who stood a few feet from her, Angus on one side of him, Ben on the other. Peter returned Margeaux's smile, but Angus turned and looked her way. She tried to smile him reassurance, but her stiff lips refused to cooperate.

Kelsey pinched her arm and jerked Regan's attention back to her. "What's the problem, and would you quit gasping like a suffocating fish," she whispered.

Regan forced herself to take three slow, deep breaths. "Am I making a mistake?"

Kelsey stared at her sister for a second. "Peter's not Jack. Would I be walking with you down the aisle if I thought he was?"

"I haven't even known him for six days..."

"Haven't you, Regan?"

Regan frowned. "Dreams? How can I know they're true?"

"Trust your heart. What does it say?"

Regan took another deep breath. "It says I love him—and always have."

Kelsey took her sister's hand. "Then are you ready?"

Regan nodded, then turned to face Queen Tessa.

The Queen had watched them. As soon as Regan faced her, she smiled down at Margeaux. "All you say is true, dear friend. Now let's all rejoice in the coming together of two perfect souls." Tessa nodded to the green-clad woman who sat with a golden harp resting between her knees. The woman's fingers moved across the strings and music filled the small chapel.

"That's our cue," Kelsey said. She gave Regan's hand a squeeze and then turned and moved along the aisle. Halfway down, a beam of sun filtered through one of the stained-glass windows and circled Kelsey in a halo of gold.

A sudden peace filled Regan as she walked to take her place beside the one man who, in this or any other life, was meant to be her love.

As she stopped at Peter's side, and he reached to take her hand, she heard the tinkling of bells. She turned her head and met a pair of large, brown basset hound eyes, shining from the first pew. Then Regan faced forward and smiled at the

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by Barbara M. Hodges

woman who was now her queen.

Chapter 28

REGAN STROKED GILDA'S velvet nose, then circled to the mare's side and swung up into the saddle. She couldn't stop smiling as she watched the man who was now her husband bow to their queen, then swing up onto Skylar's back.

A breeze tickled the back of her neck and blew the ends of a gold satin ribbon forward to lie across her breasts. The ribbon crisscrossed the length of her braid now, but only moments ago Queen Tessa had held it aloft, intoned God's blessing, then wrapped it around hers and Peter's clasped hands, binding them together for life.

She saw Cook's fretting face in the shadow of the kitchen doorway. No doubt she's still worrying how she's going to keep little fingers from marring that perfect white-frosted, tower of cake.

There had been no time for cake-cutting or bouquet-tossing, things she had dreamed of as a young girl. Those things would wait until she and Peter returned—alone. Pain squeezed Regan's heart. It would be seven years before she saw Kelsey again. She pushed the thought away, then leaned forward and pulled her wedding dress high above her knees. Kelsey had changed to shirt and breeches for their ride, but Regan had adamantly refused. This dress stayed put until her new husband removed it.

She looked back over her shoulder at the crowd still surrounding Kelsey. "If I see one tear, I'm going to lose it,"

she murmured. Gilda shook her mane, then turned her head and nipped Regan's bare calf.

"It's good to feel such love for one of your blood," the mare sent.

"I hate to see her go, but I know she has to."

The mare's feet shifted restively. "Then we go soon?"

"Yes, we've a long ride ahead of us."

Regan watched Peter rein Skylar to Kelsey's side. Kelsey looked up, then nodded. Regan watched her sister glance down and meet Queen Tessa's eyes. Tessa reached up and touched Kelsey's cheek, then turned and walked away. As she passed, Regan saw Tessa's cheeks glistened with tears. The knot in her own throat grew larger, and she blinked rapidly. Had Kelsey told Tessa why she had to leave?

* * * *

Regan guided gilda to where Ben and Angus stood away from the rest of the crowd. She looked down at Ben. "Are you sure?"

Ben nodded. "This is where I want to be. Margeaux and her people need me."

"If you change your mind, you know where we'll be."

Ben smiled and nodded.

Regan looked over at Maggie. "You take care of them until Peter and I get back," she said to the basset hound.

The dwarf snorted, then scowled. "I still say I should be going with you. What if..."

"This is our wedding night," she cut in, not wanting to go over it all again. "Do you really want to be there?"

Angus glared at her, then stalked away. Behind her Regan heard hooves strike cobblestone and turned. Kelsey and Peter reined in at her side.

Kelsey's gaze went to Angus's stiff, retreating back. "Don't worry about him. He has a hard time letting those he loves grow up. Shall we ride?"

* * * *

The three of them rode through the inner gate, receiving a smile and a wave from the guards who stood there. In the outer bailey's center training area, a group of young lads stood before a horse made of wood and straw. A gray-headed mailed knight stood before them talking and gesturing. One boy turned in their direction and grinned. Regan watched as the knight pushed the tail of the straw horse and sent it around. The horse's head caught the grinning boy's shoulder and sent him sprawling.

"Your attention, young master," the knight commanded.

The red-faced boy scrambled to his feet, and Regan quickly averted her head so he would not see her smile.

"Sir Argyle is the best arms master we've had in the past seven years," Kelsey said, riding up beside Regan. "If Dirkk ever bothers us again, we'll be ready..." She stopped, then smiled tightly. "I mean, they'll be ready."

Regan reined in Gilda, then turned and looked her sister full in the face. "Do you still want to leave? You know we'd all be happier if you'd stay here with us."

Kelsey closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them. "Daradawn's second arms master is Rourk."

Regan stared at her sister, then nodded. She glanced at the small wrapped bundle strapped to her mare's back. "Is that all you're taking?"

"It's more than what I came with." Kelsey turned and called to Peter. "How long before we reach the rift?"

Peter rode Skylar up beside them. Regan saw him glance at the sun. "By nightfall."

* * * *

They neared the outer gate and fell back into single file. The guards came to attention as they approached and saluted Kelsey. She returned their salute as they passed through.

Along the streets of the merchants, it seemed business as usual. People strolled the sidewalks and let themselves be persuaded through open doors but, beneath the apparent calm, Regan felt the tension of forced normalcy, a thin, protective shell wrapped tight to preserve sanity.

A shopkeeper turned, waved happily, and Regan felt a twinge of anger, then squelched it. What did she expect? They had kept it from them, that the woman who had played the biggest part in giving them back their lives was leaving.

They rode into the marketplace. How different it was since the last time she had seen it. Now the bodies were gone, the wagons of produce were upright. All seemed normal. Farmers stood on top of their wagons, crying out their wares, but dark patches of bloodstained ground told another story.

* * * *

Raya's town gates opened wide as they approached. They exited into Fertile Isle Valley and Regan's gaze wandered to where she and Peter had been so unceremoniously dropped by Zara. How were the dragon and her babies?

They rode on, winding through planted fields. Soon Regan saw the curling smoke of the camp's cooking fires. They rode into its center and Regan watched the bustle as men and women scurried and dismantled tents.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"If they hurry they can get this land tilled before first frost," Peter said. "The planting will have to wait for spring."

Beyond the camp, her gaze skimmed the gold ripening grain and looked for sentries, but no one hailed them as they rode by.

"Haven't we become a little too trusting?" she asked.

"Maybe, but the people need to feel their lives are back to normal," Peter said.

Regan's gaze strayed to the cave. "But Dirkk and Thomas?"

He shrugged. "People cannot live always in fear. Sometimes you just have to trust in someone more powerful than yourself."

* * * *

They rode in silence through Peaks' Pass and by the small valley where they had withstood the Ru'tahas' attack.

Among the tall trees that banked the Queen's River, they stopped. Regan looked up at their swaying tops and listened. Was that a sigh of peace she heard? Her eyes sought Peter's

and they shared a smile, then his changed to a wicked grin and with a wild whoop he and Skylar leaped into the river. Cold water drenched Regan and Kelsey.

Regan gasped, then shouted. "You'll pay for that. Catch him, Gilda."

Gilda plunged into the river in pursuit. Behind her, Regan heard Kelsey's yelp as she joined in the chase. Skylar made it to the far bank and scrambled free of the water first. Peter reeled the stallion to face them and Regan heard Skylar's ringing challenge. Gilda answered with a lunge forward and scrambled up the bank. As Gilda's hooves found dry land, she stopped and Regan slipped from her back. The mare pranced to where Skylar and Peter waited and then shook like a large dog. Water flew, wetting what little remained dry of Peter. Kelsey rode up next to Regan and the two sisters burst into laughter.

Skylar rushed at Gilda and tried to force her back into the river, but the agile mare dodged him and trotted along the river's bank, her tail held jauntily.

"Enough," Peter said, pulling back on Skylar's reins. "We deserved it."

Gilda sauntered back, and Regan swung back up onto the mare's back. "I'm glad the sun's shining or we'd freeze."

Peter glanced at her sodden dress. "You really should get out of that."

She gave her new husband a little wink. "Later, my love, later."

His face turned red and she heard Kelsey groan, "Give me a break. Let's ride before I get sick." Kelsey rode by Regan and Peter, but not before Regan stuck her tongue out at her.

Vilsathor was quiet. Regan half expected Darrian to accost them, but the lecherous elven prince did not put in an appearance. Yeah, you stay hidden for today, Regan thought, but don't think I've forgotten what you did to me.

"Will we pass Zara's lair?" she said.

Peter nodded. "There is no other way."

* * * *

Regan reined gilda in at the ledge overlooking Unicorn Valley. She reached out tentatively with her mind and touched Zara's sleeping one, then started when she felt three more minds spark with interest. Three, she has three dragonets. Would Zara let her meet them?

"Perhaps, but only you, Thea," came a sleepy response.

Regan laughed, then turned to meet Kelsey and Peter's quizzical looks. "Zara has three babies and she's going to let me meet them. But I'm sorry, only me."

Kelsey and Peter exchanged looks. "That is fine with me," Peter said. "One meeting with Zara is enough to last me a lifetime."

"I've no urge to meet a dragon," Kelsey added.

Grinning, Regan looked back across the valley, then frowned and leaned over Gilda's neck. "Did you see that?"

"What?" Peter asked.

"There in the clearing. The patch of white," Regan said.

Peter looked to where Regan pointed. "I do not believe it," he said. "It is the unicorns; they have returned."

"The unicorns," Kelsey said softly.

"Do you think Da'kar is with them?" Regan asked.

"I do not know, but I hope so," Peter said.

"Thea, if you wish to meet my babes, you must come now," Zara interrupted. "I fly to hunt."

"Hunt," Regan said. Kelsey and Peter looked at her.

"Zara's hungry. I suggest you take the horses on down. I'll join you in just a minute."

"We will wait for you below where the fairy glade used to be," Peter said. Regan looked a question at him. "I do not expect it to be there," he added. "The need is over."

"I'll find you," Regan said, then turned and walked toward Zara's lair.

* * * *

Regan stood just inside the huge cave and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dimness.

"Come forward, Thea. Follow my voice, or do you not trust me?"

"Now why wouldn't I trust you? After all, the last time we met you only dropped me on my head."

"I only did as I was commanded." Zara's mind voice was ripe with innocence.

Regan's eyes adjusted and she walked deeper into the cave. Soon she heard the soft rumble of breathing. Ahead was an opening to the sky. Soft sunlight filtered down and lit a large circle. Inside the circle Zara curled nose to tail. Three

miniature Zaras snuggled close to their mother's stomach. As she neared, their heads came up, each head the size of a fully grown horse. Gold eyes glowed as three minds touched hers. They showed no fear, only curiosity laced with hunger.

"They're beautiful." Regan felt Zara's pleasure.

"I'm very pleased with them." Zara fixed her large eyes on Regan. "You are staying here in my world?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then perhaps you'd care to visit again and watch them as they grow?"

"I'd be honored."

"But no more using me for a ride."

Regan grinned. "I promise nothing."

Regan felt Zara's amusement. "Now go. I must fly to hunt."

Regan turned away. "Thank you for letting me meet them. I'll return soon."

"Good-bye for now, Thea."

* * * *

Regan heard Peter and Kelsey before she saw them. At the sound of her sister's tear-choked voice, she paused.

"Please make him understand why I couldn't stick around to say good bye."

"I will tell him your words."

"I just wouldn't be able to smile prettily at his wife and son..." Kelsey's voice faltered.

"Will Rourk ever see you again? He will want to know."

After a long silence, Kelsey answered. "I don't know."

Regan felt tears clog her own throat. She wanted to make the pain go away, but she knew only time would help. She cleared her throat. "Hey, where are you guys?"

"Straight ahead," Peter called back.

Regan rounded a tree and saw them. They had dismounted and were perched on a fallen log, facing each other. Peter held Kelsey's hands in both of his. Regan stared at their clasped hands, then cocked an eyebrow at her sister. Kelsey blushed and tried to pull her hands from Peter's.

"When I endowed you with all my earthly goods, it didn't include my sister," Regan said.

"What? I am to settle for only one sister?" Peter bent and kissed the tip of Kelsey's nose.

Kelsey turned redder, then jerked her hands free and stood. "And the shrewish sister at that."

Regan laughed. "Me, a shrew? Well, sometimes, but we'll have to let my dear husband discover that on his own."

The sisters turned to look at Peter, who stared at them with his mouth open. "Close your mouth before a fly gets in," Regan said. She crossed to Kelsey and linked her arm with her sister's. "Kelsey, would you accompany me to mother nature's powder room?"

"But of course." The two of them walked to the farthest side of the path. "By the way," Regan said. "Watch out for those bushes with the berries. They're a real pain." Regan looked back and saw Peter still standing in the same spot. She smiled, waved, and turned back to Kelsey.

* * * *

The rift lay before them. Regan pulled back on Gilda's reins and slid from the mare's back. She walked a few feet from the mare, then knelt and brought a Tika flower close to her nose. Peter walked Skylar up beside her, then dismounted from the stallion's back to the ground.

"I just can't believe how they hold their perfume all day," Regan said.

"Regan..."

"How do they grow? Do you think they'd grow in my backyard?"

Peter knelt beside her and removed the flower from her hand. "Putting it off will not make it less painful."

Regan stood and looked over his head to where Kelsey waited. "She doesn't have to go. We have another whole day."

"Kelsey is ready now. Look at her."

Kelsey stood with her back to them, her eyes looking straight ahead to where the rift waited.

"Daradawn offers her nothing but pain now," Peter said.

Regan glanced up at the descending sun. "Look, it's almost sunset. Let's wait for the Tika flowers."

Peter shook his head. "Sunsets and Tika flowers are for lovers."

Regan's eyes filled with tears. "Then it's time?"

"It is time."

Regan wiped a hand across her eyes, then walked to Kelsey. "Hey, promise me you'll take care of my roses."

Kelsey turned. "I don't know a lot about flowers, but I'll do my best."

"And the roof ... Ben patched it this summer, but if it leaks, call Reverend Joab at the homeless shelter. He'll send someone to fix it. Who knows? It might be another Ben."

Kelsey shook her head. "There could never be another Ben."

Regan's lips trembled. "You're right. Ben's one of a kind. Well, you remember where I hid the keys, right?"

Kelsey nodded. "In the back beneath the driver's side mat."

"The biggest one's the house key. The smaller belongs to the car. It should still be there; it's only been six..." Regan's voice broke.

"Take care of yourself, Kelsey," Peter said. "Remember, you always have a home here with us."

"Regan?" she heard Kelsey say, then felt someone grab her hands. She swallowed and looked at Kelsey.

"You know I have to do this, Regan, and seven years isn't that long."

Not trusting her voice, Regan squeezed her sister's hands. She saw Kelsey's eyes fill with tears.

"No tears. We promised," Regan said.

Kelsey's eyes overflowed and tears ran down her cheeks. "I lied," she said, not bothering to wipe them away. Regan pulled Kelsey into her arms and let the tears come. "When I found you, I never thought I'd be saying good-bye so soon."

"This is not good-bye ... it's just so long for awhile. It's not like before. You know where I am and I know where you are."

"Seven years ... so much can happen in seven years," Regan said.

Kelsey pushed away from her sister. "Yes, a lot can happen. When I see you and Peter again I expect to see some nieces and nephews."

"Nieces and nephews?" Regan squeaked.

"Well, at least one or the other."

Regan heard Peter chuckle. "We will see what we can do."

She felt her cheeks grow hot. "A baby? We haven't even had a wedding night."

"You're right, you haven't, and the sooner I'm through the rift, the sooner you can have at it." Kelsey held out her hand to Peter. "So come here and give your sister-in-law a kiss."

He walked to Kelsey and pressed his lips against hers.

Kelsey turned to Regan. "And you, if you can't put a smile on that face, then turn your back and count to ten. I don't want to remember you with red eyes and a runny nose."

"Kelsey, you always were a bossy bit..."

"Ah ... ah ... ah, you don't want Peter to see the true you so soon, do you? Now smile and say good-bye."

Regan smiled. "Good-bye."

Kelsey looked at Peter. "Okay, do what you have to do so I can go through."

Regan felt the Power warm the inside of her stomach, then Kelsey turned, walked into the rift, and was gone.

The wind picked up and brought with it the smell of sweet perfume. Regan blinked, licked a salty tear from the corner of her mouth, and looked up. The sky was ablaze with red, orange and violet streaks. "The Tika flowers." With a swirl of her still damp skirt, she moved to where Peter stood in the gathering shadows. She reached up and cupped his face in

her hands. "You're right, sunsets and Tika flowers are made for lovers. Would you care to become mine?"

"Regan? Here? Now? But..."

She raised her finger and laid it against his lips. "This is where my last journey to you began and making love to you here, right now, is perfect. I feel it." Regan bent and pressed a light kiss on his mouth. "When I think of all the lives we've wasted..."

"It just was not meant to be until now."

She met his eyes and grinned. "Well, we're just going to have to make up for all that wasted time. After all, we did promise Kelsey a niece or nephew."

His eyes darkened. "Yes, that we did," he said, reaching for her.

Regan, smiling, went into his arms.

Epilogue

HOLDING A YELLOW-AND-PINK Peace rose, Kelsey sat on the brick wall that circled the flower garden. Peace, she thought, will I ever feel it again? The clouds parted and a shaft of moonlight fell across her bare feet. I wonder if the moon is full in Daradawn tonight and what Regan and Peter are doing?

She had been in San Francisco for a month now. Tomorrow she started her new job. Photography again, but this time for a small local paper. No more overseas assignments for her.

The weatherman was calling for rain. She guessed she would find out if Regan's—no, her Victorian, leaked.

She stood and walked back to the house and into the kitchen. On the wall nearest the dining room door, seven calendars hung on the wall. The printer had thought her nuts asking for calendars for the next seven years to be made.

Each day it got a little easier to think of Daradawn and Rourk. Who knew? Perhaps in seven years she'd be ready to go back. She turned off the kitchen light and walked toward the stairway just as the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Who's this?" a belligerent voice asked.

"Who are you trying to reach?" Kelsey said.

"Regan Cafferty."

"This is her sister..."

"You're nuts. Regan's sister's dead."

Kelsey drew the phone away from her ear and stared at it for a minute before replacing it. "This is Jack, isn't it?"

Silence from the other end, then, "Yeah, now who's this?"

She smiled. "It's Kelsey, Jack. You were right about me all along. I've been out having a hell of a good time. Ran out of money so I came to visit Regan."

"Always knew I was right about you," Jack's voice sneered. "Now put Regan on the phone."

"Sorry, I can't do that. Regan's out of town."

"Out of town? For how long?"

"I really don't know. I'm watching the house for her indefinitely."

"Where'd she go?"

"Right now I'd say she is probably still on her honeymoon."

"Honeymoon?"

"That's right, Jack. Good-bye." With a huge grin, she hung up the phone and turned toward the stairs and bed.

About the Author

Barbara M. Hodges lives in Nipomo, California, a small town on the central coast. She shares her life with her husband, a sassy cat, and two basset hounds who are her role models for Maggie.

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