

Union of Renegades

The Rys Chronicles Book I

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To Scott

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Union of Renegades

Rising to his knees, Shan cried, “I did not know the power would cause me such wretched temptation!”

The great old trees looming in the darkness absorbed the sound of his tortured voice, but they had little interest in his painful discoveries.

The Rys Chronicles

Union of Renegades

1

In the Service of the Empire

The river crossing would be dangerous. The loss of some men and horses could be expected, but the overwhelming numbers of the Atrophane Horde would prevail. Dreibrand Veta was glad to lead the first wave of soldiers across the water even though officers of his rank did not usually put themselves at the forefront of battle.

But Dreibrand differed from the other lieutenants of the Lord General

Kwan. He needed to try harder. Nothing less than his exploits and bravery would counteract the disgrace that burdened the Veta name.

The breath of horses and men steamed in the predawn chill of the spring night. The water would be cold, but Dreibrand knew he would soon have the heat of battle to keep him warm. He could feel the nervous agitation around him. Although Atrophane soldiers had complete confidence in their abilities, each man knew he would be vulnerable while in the middle of the river.

Their only protection would be the darkness. The blare of trumpets and thunder of drums that usually heralded the onslaught of the Atrophane would not be used tonight. Quiet and darkness would usher the conquerors into the Bosta heartland. The dawn would come, and the Bostas would see their existence as a free people end.

Calmly, Dreibrand gave the order to advance. Lord Kwan had honored him by allowing him to coordinate the crossing and decide the correct moment to start.

The hooves of Starfield, the dappled gray warhorse that Dreibrand rode, plunged first into the flowing water. Dreibrand liked being first. The splashing of hundreds of riders and the snorting of displeased horses warned the Bostas lining the opposite bank that the crossing began.

Dreibrand brought his shield up to his nose because arrows would soon be flying blindly through the dark. In his other hand, his sword was out and ready, waiting only to reach land and seek out the enemy.

Obediently, Starfield surged ahead and the water was soon flowing around Dreibrand's feet. The water jumped over the tops of his boots, and he shivered from the sudden coldness that contrasted to the excited sweat beneath his clothing and armor.

The twang and whistle of countless arrows soon sang through the air. One glanced off Dreibrand's shield and he asked the war god Golan to spare him from lucky shots in the night. A few cries of pain rose from the ranks, and one horse squealed from a terrible wound.

Dreibrand felt as if he was in the middle of the river for hours, although he knew the river was narrow and shallow compared to the greatness it achieved farther south. Finally the agony of anticipation ended, and his horse lurched up the bank. Dreibrand yelled and water splashed in every direction as the soldiers all around him rushed out of the water.

The Bostas swarmed on the shore, hoping to drive back the invaders while they were still in the water. Fighters on horseback and on foot hurled themselves at the Atrophane, and the crash of weapons erupted loudly. The dark made the struggle desperate and difficult, and combatants could barely see with whom they exchanged blows.

Knowing that only enemies could be in front of him, Dreibrand slashed with abandon, cutting down anyone who defied him. His powerful steed trampled and leaped over Bostas, and Dreibrand steadily gained a hold on the muddy bank.

A bleak gray line emerged in the east and lighted a depressing scene for the Bostas. Wherever the river could be forded, Atrophane soldiers pushed across the water on their horses or on rafts, and twenty times as many soldiers waited behind those already in the river. When defenders beheld the very vastness of the Atrophane Horde, their hearts usually quailed, and like those before them, the Bostas sensed the futility of their courage. For decades now the Atrophane had been rolling westward, expanding their Empire, and their reputation for victory was well established.

Despite a certainty of defeat, the Bostas decided that the Atrophane would have to buy their victory with blood. More than able to pay, the Atrophane smashed the valiant resistance and pushed the Bostas back toward their stronghold. The relatively small force of Bosta defenders could not repel the thousands of well-trained and heavily armed Atrophane. As the Bostas retreated to rally at their fortress, Atrophane foot soldiers were tripping over the thick sprawl of bodies on the riverbank.

Assembling the soldiers specifically under his command, Dreibrand charged after the Bostas just long enough to make sure they were serious about their retreat, and then he relented. He had accomplished his mission to win the opposite bank, and now he must secure their position and wait for the rest of the Horde to catch up. The engineers would have to ferry across the battering rams and assemble the siege engines before they could advance on the fortress.

The day had barely begun and bits of fog still lingered along the river. Panting, Dreibrand slung his shield over his back and pulled out a cloth to clean the blood from his sword. The gleam of the expensive steel returned as he wiped away the filth of battle. Nearby a soldier plunged a spear into a wounded Bosta. Seeing his oncoming death, the Bosta had pleaded for

mercy. Dreibrand had come to know the word for mercy in the western tongues.

After confirming that all was well, Dreibrand returned to the riverbank to wait for Lord Kwan to arrive. The Lord General would be pleased with him and the Bostas would soon be conquered.

The next day the fortress of the Bostas was captured and the local lord beheaded. Sometimes the Atrophane maintained local leaders, but here on the frontier, no regime was significant enough to employ.

Dreibrand had not even noticed the name of the town around this Bosta fortress, and he did not care. Compared to the mighty city-states of the east and the rich trading cities of the delta, these back country settlements hardly mattered. The Atrophane had easily crushed the rudimentary facade of civilization that the Bostas considered a fortress. The rams had shattered the gates, and the stone walls had been too low to even challenge the siege towers and ladders.

Enjoying the afternoon sunshine, Dreibrand sat on a campstool and precisely shaved himself while his squire held a small mirror for him. Dreibrand had a serious face with a heavy brow, and his bright blue eyes advertised his intelligence. He had straight sandy hair that fell almost to his shoulders, as was the fashion for Atrophane men.

The squire handed Dreibrand a towel and then dutifully cleaned and put away the razor. After buttoning his shirt, Dreibrand pulled on his quilted silk jacket that padded him beneath his armor. Lord Kwan would be expecting a report soon, and he needed to get himself presentable.

Seeing that his master was ready, the squire grabbed the chestplate of armor. Dreibrand stood up while his servant buckled the armor in place. Like any squire, the youth was from a lower class and seeking access to higher circles by serving important people. This squire always did a good job, and Dreibrand found it unfortunate that his reference would probably hinder the young man more than it would help him.

Maybe in his class his name is mud just like mine, Dreibrand mused.

“Sir, when will we ever go back to Atrophane? I have never felt so far away from anything,” the squire complained and rolled his eyes at the hopelessly rural surroundings.

“The adventure of riding with the Horde should not allow for

homesickness,” Dreibrand scolded with good nature.

“I think the adventure is over, Sir,” the squire said. The squeal of a pig being butchered somewhere in the encampment marked his point.

Dreibrand looked around the sprawl of the army in repose. The red fabric tents of the Lord General and his officers had been put up, and the weathered tan tents of the common soldiers encircled the ruined town. Many soldiers were getting their first bit of rest since entering Bosta territory, and they reclined by campfires. Other men organized the plunder of the Bostas. Although not as exciting as gold and jewels, the foodstuffs, and leather goods, and furs were satisfying and valuable. The soldiers had also divvied any stores of wine and beer that had been discovered, but they would not last long among so many. Captives were being sorted and held inside the remains of the stone fortress. Those that were fit would be sent away to serve the needs of the Empire.

Dreibrand liked the Horde when it was this way, happy and satiated. The drifting smoke from the defeated town marred the blue sky, but it did not damage Dreibrand’s mood. To him the torn town represented the bones of a small feast.

Turning back to his squire, he said, “The adventure is not over. Soon we shall see the Wilderness.”

Politely the servant nodded, but he did not share in Dreibrand’s fascination with the Wilderness.

Ever since Dreibrand had been a boy, the blank place on all maps of Ektren, labeled only as the Wilderness, had captured his imagination. Whenever life in Atrophane had been frustrating or unfair, his mind had often retreated into the possibilities of that mysterious land. Supposedly no one lived there, but he found that difficult to believe. He approached the Wilderness now and he would soon know the unknown.

Tossing on his cape, Dreibrand strode toward Lord Kwan’s tent. He was glad he had a spare pair of boots while the others dried out. When he arrived at the large red tent of the Lord General, he could hear laughter inside and he recognized the voice of Sandin Promentro. Dreibrand frowned when he thought of the senior lieutenant exchanging pleasantries with Lord Kwan. Naturally coveting the favor he received from the Lord General, Dreibrand resented the competition from Lieutenant Sandin, who had served Kwan longer than the other officers.

The guards outside the tent saluted Dreibrand, and then one ducked inside to announce him. A few more jocularities were shared before Dreibrand heard the Lord General dismiss Sandin.

Sandin emerged from the tent bearing a happy expression, but when he saw Dreibrand, he appeared to become even more pleased. Sandin's gray eyes twinkled and he smirked at Dreibrand with his usual arrogance.

"Hey schoolboy," Sandin said, and it was one of his favorite derogatory greetings.

Instantly angry, Dreibrand grabbed Sandin's forearm but the other lieutenant did not flinch. Locking eyes with Dreibrand, Sandin jerked out of the grip. Physically both men were matched, but Sandin had the psychological edge over Dreibrand, and he knew it.

"What are you going to do?" Sandin demanded.

Sick with anger, Dreibrand lowered his hand. He knew better than to react to Sandin's taunts. If he struck a senior officer, Lord Kwan would have to discipline him, and that would only lessen the Lord General's opinion of him, which was Sandin's whole purpose.

"Some day..." Dreibrand growled.

"Some day you will take orders from me," Sandin sneered.

Dreibrand stoically let the sting sink in while Sandin walked away. He had no time for anger now. Composing himself for his meeting with his commander and lord, Dreibrand entered the tent. The sun glowed warmly through the red fabric roof, and he dropped to one knee and kept his eyes focused on the multi-colored rugs.

"Dreibrand, come sit."

The rich and confident voice of the Lord General welcomed his lieutenant, and the tone was friendly. Kwan noticed that Dreibrand sprang to his feet so quickly that he must not have committed much weight to his knee.

This one never really kneels, Kwan thought.

Dreibrand approached the center of the tent where Kwan sat on his cushions. Long white hair flowed from the edges of Kwan's bald head, and the famous Atrophane military leader had a perfect white goatee. His leathery skin was tan, except for a white scar riding his right jawline.

Heavy layers of black and white silk clothed his body, and a plate of armor covered his chest. The design of a winged beast holding two spears was stamped into the black metal of the armor and highlighted with silver tracery. The surreal bird warrior symbolized his ancient clan, the Chenomet.

Casually, Dreibrand settled down among the cushions.

Kwan looked fondly at his officer. Organizing a hostile river crossing was tricky business with thousands of soldiers, and Dreibrand had made it look easy. And of course the lieutenant had led it personally because Dreibrand always led his offensives, but Kwan had already congratulated him for that. He used praise sparingly with Dreibrand after noticing the love the soldiers had for the bold young officer, even those under the command of other lieutenants.

Two years ago Kwan had allowed Dreibrand to purchase a commission in his Horde. When the recent graduate of the Darmar's military academy had approached him seeking to serve, Kwan had been shocked. How could a Veta hope to be accepted by the Empire's most powerful Hordemaster? But the intense young man with his impressive academy record remained in Kwan's mind, and he discreetly investigated the youngest son of the House of Veta. It surprised him to learn that this Veta was not only ambitious but discriminating too. Dreibrand had not sought commissions from any of the lesser generals.

Then Kwan had realized that Dreibrand would have to work harder to sustain his military career because of the beleaguered status of his family. He could demand twice as much from Dreibrand for the privilege of becoming one of his lieutenants, and Kwan would get an especially diligent officer.

Dreibrand, however, had turned out to be a better officer than anyone had thought possible. After two years of campaigning, Kwan had seen in Dreibrand a natural talent for leadership, bravery, intelligence, and drive.

These things reminded Kwan of himself.

After politely greeting his Lord General, Dreibrand gave his report. He detailed the amount of men he had lost or were seriously injured. He reported how many horses had been lost, and how many horses had been captured from the enemy, but he commented that they were of smaller stock. He included amounts of other captured goods and estimated their

value, and he relayed the reports from his scouting parties concerning remaining enemy activity in the hills.

“And the slavers are sorting the captives as we speak,” Dreibrand concluded.

Kwan had listened to the figures and facts, enjoying the thoroughness.

“Excellent, Dreibrand. Everything is going well,” Kwan said.

“And we are almost off the map, my Lord,” Dreibrand said.

Kwan smiled because the Wilderness intrigued him as well. When he had conquered all the rich kingdoms outside Atrophane, his attention had turned to the mysterious lands beyond the known lands of Ektren. If he could take what belonged to any man, he could certainly take what belonged to no man.

“Soon the secrets of the Wilderness in the west will be known in Atrophane,” Kwan predicted confidently. “And the maps will have to be remade.”

“You have remade maps before, my Lord,” Dreibrand said.

Kwan admired how Dreibrand always knew when to add an endearing comment.

“And what will you do with the rest of your day?” Kwan asked.

Dreibrand had wanted to talk about the Wilderness more, but if the Lord General wanted to change the subject, then it had to be that way. Dreibrand considered his answer carefully, knowing Kwan’s question was a test. In these private meetings Kwan often coached his young lieutenant, and Dreibrand appreciated the guidance.

Hoping Kwan would think his activity suitable, Dreibrand replied, “I plan to speak with some of the captives. Learn information about the area, and practice their language.”

With approval Kwan nodded. Dreibrand’s skill with language had often been indispensable because trustworthy interpreters were hard to come by in enemy territory.

“If you learn anything interesting, report back,” Kwan instructed.

“Of course, my Lord,” Dreibrand said. “Do you have any other orders?”

“Not for now. Let the men rest. We will move out soon,” Kwan said.

Dreibrand's eyes lit up with excitement, but before he could raise the subject of the Wilderness again, Kwan dismissed him.

Dreibrand spent the rest of that day examining captives. The courtyard of the ransacked fortress made a gloomy setting in the late day sun. People had been chained and separated by sex into groups. Almost two hundred Bostas had been taken prisoner during the fighting. The others had died or fled west into the hills. Just as many Atrophane soldiers milled around the courtyard, plus the civilian slavers who followed the Horde.

Dreibrand studied the captives at length. He could see that they hated him. The harshness of defeat was still fresh, and none of them would want to talk to him. He would have to find a way to insure a productive conversation.

Dreibrand entered the guardhouse beside the broken gate, stepping over a dramatic splash of blood that stained the threshold. Earlier, he had pointed out his first two captives and instructed his men to bring the man in first.

A tall wiry man was brought inside the front room. Dreibrand sat at a table, and the soldiers pushed the prisoner into a chair across from the Atrophane lieutenant. The chains on his wrists clanged against the table. A plate of food waited in front of the prisoner, but he did not touch it. His skin was dirty and his hands were still trembling after his futile exertions to defend his homeland.

"The food is good," Dreibrand said. He knew the food thing was a simple ploy, but sometimes it worked very well with prisoners. The stubborn vestige of pride left in the glare of this Bosta told Dreibrand that the prisoner was not hungry enough to take the food. Without giving the Bosta time to reconsider, Dreibrand handed the plate to his men, who then passed it around and ate.

Dreibrand asked the man for his name, but he got no response. Leaning back in his chair, Dreibrand took out his ivory handled dagger and saw his captive look nervously at the keen blade.

"I will tell you nothing," the Bosta snarled.

"You do not even know what I want to talk about," Dreibrand said.

"Stop speaking my language. I hate your accent," the captive growled.

Gesturing with his dagger, Dreibrand insinuated, "I know other ways of

communication.”

The Bosta looked down with resignation. Dreibrand signaled to a soldier, who departed to grab the other captive. The cry of a woman came from across the courtyard, followed by a cry of protest from another female. Dreibrand kept his focus on the Bosta man, who squirmed in his chair. He clearly wanted to go to the window, but the two Atrophane standing behind him held him in place.

“Keep a hold of him,” Dreibrand instructed while getting up to open the door.

The crunch of boots on gravel and the scrape of resisting steps approached the door. The Bosta man turned to see the other captive enter. Emotion surged across his face and he strained against the grip of his guards. Dreibrand saw that the man came close to crying out.

Dreibrand seized the chain hanging between the woman’s wrists and pulled her close. Now that the two captives were in the same room, their family resemblance became clear. Dreibrand guessed that she was his sister. Relatives could usually be picked out from a town’s captives, if one tried.

The woman struggled at her bonds and pulled away from Dreibrand.

“I think she likes me,” Dreibrand joked.

The Bosta man became livid. “You are scum!” he cried and spat at Dreibrand’s feet.

One of the Atrophane soldiers restraining the captive swatted him across the face. The woman screamed. Without any orders to stop, the soldiers continued to punch the captive. Dreibrand held the woman back when she lunged to assist her abused relative.

“If dear brother does not talk with me, it will be your turn next,” Dreibrand warned.

The Bosta woman began to sob, and Dreibrand told his men to desist. Sending the female captive back outside, Dreibrand reseated himself at the table.

“You care about your sister. I can see this,” Dreibrand said.

The captive wiped blood away from his upper lip, but he appeared to be listening.

“And I am sure you care about her future,” Dreibrand concluded.

The bloodshot eyes of the captive widened as he considered the implications of this statement.

“I cannot betray my people,” the Bosta whispered half to himself.

“If you refer to your countrymen hiding in the hills, do not be so concerned. They will show themselves soon enough. Now I only want to have a civilized talk,” Dreibrand said.

“Civilized? You are slavers,” the captive sneered, holding up his chains.

“I have seen Bostas selling slaves downriver,” Dreibrand replied coolly.

Dejected, the man said nothing.

Dreibrand continued, “I can see that your sister does not become a slave. She can stay here and live her life.”

The offer tempted the Bosta man, but his shoulders sagged because his conqueror had to be teasing him with a fantasy.

“Your sister has to be worth at least risking that I am honest,” Dreibrand reasoned. “And I give you my word.”

“What do you want to talk about?” the captive mumbled and hung his head.

Grinning happily, Dreibrand answered, “I want to talk about the Wilderness.”

“Is that why you are here?” chuckled the Bosta man.

“We are close, right? Over the next line of hills is the Wilderness.” Dreibrand went straight to business, ignoring the amusement the captive seemed to find in the subject.

Thinking of his sister, the captive hesitated. He told himself that the Atrophane had to be lying, but what if he was not lying?

To goad his thoughts in the right direction Dreibrand said, “I hope your sister is sold to a kind master. Some are cruel and take advantage of the abundance of slaves.”

The Bosta man shut his eyes. “Yes. Over the next line of hills you will see the Wilderness. There is only one more settlement,” he answered.

“And what can you tell me of this place?” Dreibrand asked.

“There is a fortress, a few villages,” the captive said.

Dreibrand stopped him. “Not the settlement. The Wilderness. Tell me about that.”

The Bosta narrowed his eyes and replied, “I should tell you nothing. But because I can see that you will go there, I will tell you this—do not go there. Now, I can have the satisfaction of knowing that you will think of my advice when you die.”

“Why would I die?” Dreibrand wondered.

“Because the Wilderness consumes all men,” explained the captive.

“What peoples live there?” Dreibrand demanded, suspecting that an unknown people defended the land.

Again the Bosta laughed. “No people live there. Any who dare enter never come back. No one lives west of Droxy.”

Dreibrand contemplated this information. He remembered the name of Droxy from the map. It was the farthest outpost of civilization.

“Why can no one live west of Droxy?” he asked.

“The Wilderness is evil. Have not the stories gone all the way east? Beasts and spirits rule the land, and it is not a place for men,” the captive said.

“Go on,” Dreibrand prompted.

Deciding it would not harm his people to talk about it, the Bosta man continued, “Our oldest legends warn us of the evil in the west. It is said that thousands of years ago a war between Gods was fought in the Wilderness, and now their spirits guard the land. Also beasts prowl the forests. I have talked to people from Droxy who claim to have heard the howl of a fenthakrabi.”

“What is that?” Dreibrand demanded while trying to process the new word.

The captive smiled as if he already had his revenge upon the Atrophane. “Like I said, a beast.”

Dreibrand frowned. The man had to be making things up. He had hoped to learn something concrete instead of exaggerated folk tales. For months Dreibrand had been asking these questions as the Horde rolled westward, but the answers only became more cryptic as he approached

the Wilderness.

Weary of the captive, Dreibrand ended the interrogation. As the soldiers yanked him toward the door, the Bosta man cried, “What about my sister?”

Dreibrand pursed his lips in thought. The stricken suspense on the captive’s face did have some sick appeal, but Dreibrand did not have a rotten heart.

“Set her free,” he ordered.

Instead of questioning more prisoners, Dreibrand retired to his tent. It was night now, but he did not feel tired at all. Lying awake, he stared at the light from the small oil lamp flickering on the red fabric. The light pulsed and fluttered like shades at an unholy celebration. Around him Dreibrand heard the noises of the Horde in repose. The mix of sounds from the thousands of soldiers was the only thing that eased his loneliness anymore. Sometimes he brought a female captive to his tent, if he fancied one, but that had ceased to suit him and he had recently lapsed into a strict solitude.

Thoughts of the Wilderness obsessed his mind, and he could almost feel the great land beckoning him from over the hills.

2 Comfort in a Stranger’s Kiss

Bosta refugees brought a new reality to the Droxy settlement. Isolated on the fringe of civilization, the people of the settlement had not concerned themselves with the conquests of the Atrophane Empire. Their general opinion was that the Atrophane, who lived in palaces and built monuments, could not possibly be interested in the crude farming settlements carved out of the edge of the Wilderness.

But this assumption dissolved as weary beaten Bostas plodded toward the Droxy fortress for the second day straight. The refugees passed through the village of Wa Gira on their way and a panic had started. Many villagers were filling carts and planning to abandon their cluster of cottages and seek shelter in the Droxy fortress as well.

In front of a lowly shack at the end of the lane stood a young woman clutching her infant son. The spring breeze blew through her curly light

brown hair, which gently brushed the head of her dark haired child. Her green eyes were wide with fear and uncertainty.

She had spoken with many of the passing Bostas and their reports had been terrifying. The young woman had no idea what to do. She had never experienced a foreign invasion. Occasionally bandits plagued the villages around Droxy or clans skirmished over land disputes, but otherwise life was peaceful around Droxy, except of course for her life.

“Miranda!”

She turned toward the man who bellowed her name. Coming up the road from Droxy, he struggled against the crowd of refugees. He was barrel-chested and thick limbed with a disheveled shock of black hair drooping close to his eyes.

The sight of her master brought Miranda no relief. She considered the arrival of Barlow an enhancement of the crisis. He had been in Droxy for three days, and Miranda had assumed he would stay there. Mostly she hoped he would never come back.

Puffing from his brisk hike back to Wa Gira, Barlow stomped up to her.

“Get inside,” he ordered and pushed her at the door.

She stumbled a bit and her shoulder hit the door. The baby began to cry from the jostling, and Miranda tried to quiet her son as she entered.

“I am sorry, Esseldan,” she murmured.

“Where is Elendra?” Barlow demanded.

“In the back,” Miranda replied, referring to the lean-to portion of the shack where she slept with her children. Barlow stayed in the sturdier front room, but Miranda shunned his bed except when forced.

“Get out here,” Barlow snarled and a six-year-old girl shyly peeked around the doorway. The dazzling dark eyes of the little girl carefully watched her father, but she did not come out.

“She will learn to do as I say no matter how much you let her run wild,” Barlow warned Miranda, who made no comment.

Looking around the sparsely furnished shack, Barlow cried, “And why is nothing packed? I came all the way back here to get you.”

Unimpressed by his concern, Miranda said, “Where are we going?”

His eyes flashed with anger. He despised her questions, but no amount of intimidation ever slowed her sharp tongue for long.

“Droxy, you stupid bitch,” he snapped.

She stowed the pain of his cruel words deep in her heart, and the hurt did not show on her face.

“Why go there? Everyone has said the Atrophane broke through their fortresses, and their walls were larger than Droxy,” Miranda said.

“Do not try and be clever, Miranda, because you are not. Now shut up and pack!” Barlow yelled.

At that moment, the thought of going to Droxy disturbed Miranda as much as the abstract threat of the Atrophane Horde.

“I was not trying anything,” she defended. “Droxy will not save us.”

Barlow seized her arm. Miranda shifted Esseldan into her other arm and held him away from his father.

“We both know why we are going to town,” Barlow hissed.

Miranda glanced at her daughter, who monitored the exchange from a safe distance. Lowering her eyes, Miranda stopped arguing.

When they arrived in Droxy shortly after nightfall, the fortress town was thronged with refugees and local Droxy peasants. Added to the press were the mustering soldiers and the landowning vassals of Lord Doamir.

“Barlow, are you going to join the defense?” Miranda asked sarcastically.

In retaliation he swung at her, but she halted her stride just in time to avoid the back of his hand. Missing her, Barlow contented himself with a vicious scowl.

He had arranged accommodations for Miranda and the children in a stable stall behind a tavern. The miserable shelter did not surprise her, but she contained her comment about not wishing to inconvenience the horses. She would see more of Barlow’s temper soon enough.

Thankfully he departed quickly into the tavern. Exhausted, Miranda plopped down on a bundle of hay and let Esseldan breastfeed. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves after she noticed her hand shaking. That morning she had been planting the crops that would allow her and her children to subsist through another year without any help from Barlow.

Now her small field and garden were abandoned to the Atrophane Horde.

Miranda tried to imagine what the Atrophane invasion would be like. She grasped that it was a much larger thing than the local disputes. All her life she had heard the reports about the Atrophane Empire growing in the east. But the grand stories of conquerors living in opulent cities had never seemed to apply to her life.

“Mama, what is happening?” Elendra finally asked. The little girl could be extraordinarily tolerant of disruption, but the quaver in her voice revealed true fear.

Miranda’s green eyes regarded her daughter sadly. *Even Elendra can tell this is worse than usual*, Miranda thought.

“The Atrophane Horde has come to conquer our land,” Miranda answered bluntly.

Elendra understood this truth less than her mother did and simply said, “When can we go home?”

“I do not know,” Miranda whispered. Normally she would try to comfort her daughter, but Miranda was too overwhelmed to muster any bright words. From her seat in the stable she could look up the alley beside the tavern and see the crowd of refugees in the fortress courtyard. All day she had seen the trauma on the faces of Bostas, and in her heart Miranda knew Droxy was a deathtrap.

“Mama, can I have some food?” Elendra asked.

Gesturing to their bundle of supplies, Miranda answered, “Yes, but remember we have to make it last.”

They ate their meager supper of bread and dried fruit. Miranda wished she was outside the dirty town so she could forage for fresh greens in the woodland and meadows. Years of economic neglect from her master had made Miranda skilled at gleaning food from the land, but there would be nothing to brighten their meal tonight.

Spreading out the blankets, Miranda took some solace in the fact that the straw in the stall was fresh. She tucked her children snugly into the corner, and then stepped out for a moment alone. A chocolate brown mare in the next stall hung her head out and Miranda petted the velvety nose of the good-natured animal. The softness beneath her fingers calmed her thoughts and her mind drifted back to a distant day.

Miranda remembered being a child on a farm south of the Bosta territory and sneaking rides on the work horses. Her father would become angry when he caught her riding, but the exhilaration and freedom of sitting high on the horse had always been worth the risk. After a brief wish to have that feeling again, Miranda pushed away memories of better moments. She belonged to Barlow now.

Miranda patted the horse one more time before joining her children in the stall. Weariness pulled Miranda quickly into sleep, but her fears knew no rest. In her slumber she heard a rumble in the hills, and she imagined a heavy spring thunderstorm heralding the heat of summer.

Suddenly she was in the courtyard of Droxy with her children, and the walls of the fortress loomed around her like a dark and dirty canyon. A booming sound shook the stone walls like pebbles, and Miranda fell screaming to the ground, desperately clutching her children. The screams of people flew around the courtyard like a distressed flock of birds.

Miranda jumped up and started running. Moving was difficult as if weights were tied to her limbs. Each step seemed to take a tortuous amount of time, and after managing a few, Miranda realized she no longer held Elendra's hand.

Horrorified, she looked back and saw soldiers swarming around her shrieking daughter. Black armor clad the strange attackers, who wielded black swords. Blood and sweat streaked their distorted faces. One swung wide with his obsidian blade, felling Elendra. The girl's blood sprayed in an arc as she toppled to the cobbles.

Her little body made one gruesome twitch, and she gurgled one mouthful of blood before her life lifted away from a growing pool of red.

Flames consumed the fortress on all sides, and the apish soldiers seized Miranda when she rushed crazily toward her daughter. Esseldan was torn from her embrace, and a soldier thrust a pike through the tender body of the infant and flung him into a fire.

Screaming, Miranda watched her son sail through the smoky air into the greedy flames. Darkness seeped over the hellish scene and Miranda felt cold air against her skin. The sinister heat of the war flames dissipated and the soldiers released her arms. She sat up screaming, but the fact that it was a nightmare brought her little relief.

Her children stirred next to her, and Miranda lay back down before

they woke up. Sweat cooled on her face in the mild spring night, and it felt blissful after the terrible heat of the flames. But with the noises of the refugee packed town around her, she experienced again the acute emotion of the nightmare. The Atrophane Horde was coming and Droxy would be crushed. The Atrophane were going to kill people in the process, and maybe even her children.

Miranda tightened her arm over her children until they fussed from the grip. Murmuring for them to go back to sleep, she accepted the gravity of the danger. They needed to hide outside Droxy. The fortress would be the target of the Atrophane Horde, and Miranda reasoned that the countryside would be safer.

She hated Barlow for forcing them to come to Droxy. She knew concern for their safety did not motivate him. Bitterly, Miranda hoped that when the Atrophane came they would capture Barlow and make a slave of him.

This pleasant concept almost brought a smile to her lips, but then the back door of the tavern burst open, startling the horses in the stable. As if her hateful thoughts had summoned him, Barlow stood silhouetted in the lamplight of the doorway. The tavern sounds leaked out into the night, and Miranda remembered who was really the slave.

“Miranda!” It was Barlow’s drunken drawl. “Come here.”

Briefly she touched the heads of her children to remind herself that they depended on her utterly. Then she rose to face her master.

“There you are. Wonderful.” He skidded down the steps in a flurry of clumsiness. The luck of the drunken kept him from falling.

“Leave me alone, Barlow,” she snarled.

He grabbed her wrist. “Now, now, my dear. Come along with me.”

“I said leave me alone,” she persisted and struggled to be free of him.

Laughing at her defiance, which he had proved futile many times, Barlow pulled her into the tavern.

“I’ll have none of your attitude tonight,” he warned.

Immediately inside the back door was a stairway and Barlow dragged her up a few steps before she managed to stop him.

“No,” she hissed, while clawing at his hand on her wrist.

He turned and leaned into her face. Miranda could smell the wine on

his breath and see the cold look in his eyes.

Barlow growled, “Now my little girlie, you’re gonna go up into that first room or I’ll beat you to DEATH.”

He had prostituted her before, but Miranda always made it difficult. By making him struggle she gained some satisfaction from the fact that he had to work for the money a little bit.

Barlow clamped a hand around her throat and dragged her roughly up the stairs. On the dark back stair no one noticed his rough treatment of her. No one ever cared how he treated her anyway.

Reaching the top, Barlow pinned her to a wall and whispered, “I mean it, Miranda. You’re gonna do this because it’s what you’re for. Give me trouble one more time, and I’ll sell Elendra.”

Miranda winced. This was the threat that controlled her the most. Barlow pushed her down the hall. The pain in her throat warned her not to lash out at him. Her children needed her healthy and strong, and if she did not obey, Barlow could cripple her. Intoxication always sent his temper into uglier places.

“Get in there,” he barked, drawing back a menacing hand.

Primarily just to get away from him, Miranda darted into the room and slammed the door behind her. The solid wood felt good against her back because it held Barlow out. A candle burned on the windowsill, and she saw a man sitting on the bed. Sometimes the men were rough and nasty, like Barlow, and even when she could control the situation, she was always afraid.

Cautiously the figure on the bed rose and walked up to her. He was a soldier. Miranda recognized the brown uniform of Lord Doamir’s militia. His short sword was still buckled around his waist. The soldier was young, not even Miranda’s age.

Hesitantly he reached out and touched her face with a shy gentleness.

“You are very pretty,” he whispered, leaning closer.

Miranda realized she was trembling and tried to steady herself. She had learned it was best not to show fear.

The soldier took her hand. “Come sit,” he invited, prying her off the door.

Woodenly she moved with him and sat down on the edge of the bed. His kindness disarmed her. He unbuckled his weaponry and slid out of his tunic. He began to untie his shirt collar but stopped because she did not follow his example.

“I do not want to be here,” she confessed.

A puzzled expression crossed his face. Obviously he thought he had purchased the company of a willing woman. Checking his sense of urgency, the soldier sat next to her, and with a tenderness unfamiliar to her, took her by the shoulders.

Softly he said, “I—I go to war tomorrow. I go to face the Atrophane Horde. Give me, lady, a last night of pleasure. I won’t hurt you.”

Miranda now saw the fear in his eyes that mirrored her own. In his features she could see the boy that lingered in the man, and it saddened her that he had to go face death. Suspecting that she may soon have to face death as well, Miranda agreed with his request for pleasure. He at least was going to defend the settlement and he had already shown her more kindness and respect than Barlow ever could.

He happily embraced her and kissed her boldly. Miranda awkwardly accepted his passion and gradually let it take hold of her. Barlow had always forced himself on her from a young age, an ordeal she avoided as much as possible, but this was different. She suddenly desired this stranger, whose young body seethed with excitement.

The young soldier kissed down her neck and between her breasts, loosening clothing as he went. A stray hand pulled away garments until he told Miranda to finish taking off her clothes. He lay back on the bed and removed his remaining garments. The last of the candle light danced on their strong young bodies. Still a little voluptuous from her recent pregnancy, Miranda fell nakedly into his arms, thrilling at the heat of his body. They enjoyed each other several times. Miranda obliged him willingly, thankful to know that there could be pleasures between a man and a woman.

Very late into the night the soldier was satisfied and slipped into a peaceful sleep. He had given her a few more coins in gratitude. Poverty motivated her to accept, but she would have to be careful. Barlow always beat her if he discovered her extra gifts. Miranda lingered by the soldier a moment more to savor the glow of her ecstasy. Such a thing would

probably not happen again for a long time, if ever.

Finally she kissed him and wished that he would not die. She knew it was time to leave. The children had been unattended much too long, and she understood that it was not her place to stay. Despite their primal employment of each other, he was not her lover, only a paying customer. Miranda mostly regretted that Barlow received most of the money instead of her.

Slipping from the bed, Miranda sorted out her clothes in the dark. While she dressed, he did not wake, but that was fine.

What would I say anyway, she thought sadly.

The tavern had grown quiet, and she rushed down the stairs, eager to return to her children. She almost tripped over Barlow, who had passed out on the bottom step. She longed to kick him, but waking him would not be worth it.

Returning to the stable, she was relieved to see the children snuggled in the stall where she had left them. She cursed Barlow for forcing her to neglect them, and she cursed herself for not being capable of resisting Barlow. Drained by the night's events, she sank into the straw. She recalled her brief pleasure with the young soldier, and then tucked away the memory where it would not distract her too often. Her satisfaction tonight had been a lucky accident, and she sternly warned herself never to hope for such things.

A couple hours remained before dawn, and she dropped into a deep sleep. Harsh dreams cruised her mind again. The young soldier approached her, and at first she was glad and felt desire for him.

He held out his arms to her and cried, "Help me! Please help me."

Now a terrible wound opened on his head, and blood ran down his face.

"Mama, what is wrong with him?"

Miranda looked down and saw Elendra holding her infant brother. They both looked small and helpless.

The soldier collapsed and Elendra asked, "Will I die like him?"

A gash opened on Elendra's forehead and blood dripped onto the baby. Unable to bear the horror, Miranda opened her eyes. Convulsively she hugged Elendra and petted her forehead, trying to convince herself that

her daughter was unharmed. The girl murmured and snuggled deeper into her mother's arms.

Miranda knew that Elendra trusted her automatically but feared that her daughter's faith was misguided. The nightmares shattered any hope she might have had in castle walls, and the petrifying images warned her to take her children farther from the Atrophane Horde. Hiding inside a fortress that they would surely attack seemed preposterous.

A cockcrow bounced harshly off the fortress walls as the sun rose with the promise of a hot muggy day. The back door of the tavern banged open and Miranda heard a disturbance that sounded like the barkeep kicking Barlow out. Their arrangement was obviously for him to sleep outside.

Cringing, Miranda considered her problems doubled now that Barlow was up and around. No doubt he would rent her out again tonight, and anger rose inside her like a demon. She jumped up to face him as he came around the corner. His stringy black hair hung over bloodshot eyes, and he smiled at her acidic gaze.

"Up so early, Miranda?" he chuckled. "Better get your rest. We'll need more money."

Miranda's lower lip trembled with bottled rage. Ignoring her, he grabbed their bucket and wandered away to get water. Disgusted that she had been unable to confront Barlow with a single word, Miranda sobbed with emotion. In her despair, she decided something had to change.

It had never happened before, despite years of cruel domination, but this morning murder sprouted in her heart. Tonight she would not let Barlow control her, and he would not profit from making her a whore.

3 ~ Promised Places ~

Even as I await my execution, I can still taste the sweetness of my short-lived success. My ambition has ruined me, but I regret only the future that my family has to face—Baner Veta, grandfather of Dreibrand, excerpt from prison journal

The smoke of five thousand campfires rose from the slopes above the Droxy valley. The Horde had camped early, and it would descend upon the settlement tomorrow. With its famous efficiency, the Atrophane Horde

had rolled into the high hills that separated the Droxy settlement from the river lands. Harassment by scattered Bosta warriors had caused a few skirmishes, but the Atrophane had not been delayed from occupying the road through the wooded hills.

When night came, the fires of the invaders would create a spectacle visible to all residents of Droxy. Dreibrand always imagined this intimidating sight as a constellation of stars shining back at heaven.

With his duties completed punctually, Dreibrand slipped away to the edge of the encampment. Standing on the last ridge above the valley, he surveyed the last state of civilization on the edge of the known world. The fortress of Droxy peeped out from a modest area of fields and pastures. The tiny fortress hardly seemed worthy of the Horde's attention, but the Damar Zemthute II had wished for the Empire to reach all the way to the mysterious Wilderness, and then beyond if possible.

Droxy and the surrounding agricultural villages bored Dreibrand, and tomorrow's conquest seemed more like an errand than a real campaign. There would be little glory, only basic plundering and terror.

Lifting his eyes to the west, he gazed dreamily upon the green folds of virgin forest. Just west of Droxy the land rose abruptly in high cliffs that ran north and south. Beyond the plateau, Dreibrand saw mountains in the glow of the sinking sun.

Dreibrand's blood ran hot as he beheld the wild distances. Very tall were the mountains, and he imagined how much more he could see standing on those unknown heights.

He squinted, trying to see a break in the cliffs, but they formed a sharp barricade to the next level of land.

There must be a way up, Dreibrand thought.

He did not know how anyone could look upon such a rich and available land and then shun it. Dreibrand puzzled over the warnings of evil in the Wilderness, but discounted them as lies meant to discourage the Atrophane. He understood that a vast and wild land would be dangerous. Nature had greater tests to offer him than enemy warriors, but he had faith that he would prevail.

After a long wistful look upon the gateway to the Wilderness, Dreibrand turned to leave. Only one more battle remained before he could explore

the Wilderness, and thereby satisfy his long held dream and add fame to his military career. By entering the unknown world, he hoped to purge the Veta family of its disgrace. Atrophane society might ostracize the House of Veta, but a man who knew the Wilderness would be welcomed and respected. Dreibrand would be one of the men who doubled the size of the Empire.

Dreibrand accepted that this would take a few years, but with the Wilderness in sight, he regarded his future with renewed confidence. Until then, he would continue to be the dutiful lieutenant to Lord Kwan, who had given him the chance to travel this far.

The Horde was settling in comfortably for the night. The usual tension before a major battle was absent. The last valley had fallen efficiently and Droxy had an even lower population. The grim mood of soldiers contemplating death did not descend upon the camp tonight because a pleasant debacle was expected tomorrow.

The smell of food drifted from the cooking fires, and somewhere Dreibrand heard a stringed instrument playing a festive tune. Soldiers saluted him when they looked up from tending their weaponry, and others stepped aside from Dreibrand's path. He enjoyed the respect he received out in the field. Back in the fashionable cities of Atrophane, he was just a young lieutenant from a ruined family, but here, he was surrounded by soldiers who responded to his authority.

Dreibrand arrived at the council tent. The imperial banner of a white horse and chariot on a black field hung outside the tent. Although Darmar Zemthute II did not travel with the Atrophane Horde, the tent was a tribute to imperial authority and all councils were held inside.

The other officers had already arrived, and Dreibrand realized he had pondered the Wilderness longer than he thought. Nervously he glanced at Lord Kwan's tent, dreading that his commander would emerge and catch him in his tardiness. Quickly he straightened his cape and adjusted his tooled leather swordbelt on his hips. The design of waves tooled into the thick leather was inspired by his coastal homeland. Concerned with his image as the son of an impoverished house, Dreibrand tended to dress carefully.

The guards outside the council tent opened the flaps for Dreibrand and he entered. Brass braziers held small fires that lighted the large tent, and

smoke curled out the hole at the top of the fabric roof. A dozen officers filled the tent in rows of six on each side of Kwan's central seat. The lower ranking officers sat nearer the entrance, and places for Kwan's four high lieutenants were next to his seat, two on each side. Dreibrand's position was immediately to the left of Lord Kwan, which was an honor considering he had only served for two years. Success and bravery in battle had won Dreibrand a seat next to his Lord General.

Lieutenant Kelvi sat to the left of Dreibrand. If Kelvi resented being placed second to Dreibrand, he did not show it. Kelvi had only one more of the required ten years to serve before earning estate grants from the Empire, and he did not want to cause problems. His command skills were mediocre, and he knew Dreibrand was the superior officer.

As the second in command, Lieutenant Sandin sat to the right of Lord Kwan. His wavy brown hair was pulled back tight into a ponytail, and his patrician features radiated confidence. On the right of Sandin sat Lieutenant Carfu Anglair, who was a good friend of Sandin. They were both independently wealthy, and Carfu was easy-going and content with his rank.

Noting Dreibrand's abnormally late entrance, Sandin said, "Where have you been?"

Holding his sword back while seating himself in a cross-legged position, Dreibrand ignored Sandin. Before Sandin could comment further, the tent flaps opened wide and Lord Kwan swept inside. A servant struck a small gong hanging behind Kwan's seat, and the rich tone welcomed the Hordemaster.

All the officers moved onto their knees and Lord Kwan strode toward his silk cushion. Upon taking his seat, Kwan instructed his officers to make themselves comfortable.

He plunged immediately into the business of the meeting, detailing his plans for Droxy and the strategy for taking the town. Then Kwan received his final reports from all the officers regarding their preparations and any suggestions for the battle plan. Dreibrand paid careful attention to the discussion and delivered his own report flawlessly.

When the plans for tomorrow's conquest were approved and understood by all, Kwan called for wine. Servants distributed silver drinking cups to the officers, and wine was poured.

Raising his cup, Kwan proposed a toast. “To my officers, I offer my thanks and praise. Your service has brought Atrophane across the known lands of Ektren. Many long bloody years we have spent bringing our civilization to our lesser neighbors, but after tomorrow, a new world awaits the Atrophane. The Empire will replace mystery and myth in the Wilderness.”

Everyone erupted into an enthusiastic cheer, and Dreibrand’s cheer was truly jubilant. Wine drained from the cups and the servants quickly refilled them. The other officers gave their toasts, which were similar in theme to Lord Kwan’s toast.

When it was Dreibrand’s turn to toast, Sandin had already eloquently praised the Lord General, robbing Dreibrand of the chance to do so with impact.

Modestly, Dreibrand thanked the other officers for the pleasure of serving with them and concluded, “May the Wilderness bring us all greater fortunes.”

Once the formal toasts were completed, the gathering settled in for some basic drinking and merriment. Everyone was excited on the eve of conquering the known world. While drinking, Kwan lapsed into recounting glorious battles from the past. The older lieutenants tended not to listen because they had heard their Lord General’s stories before or been present at the battle. However, Dreibrand listened with actual interest, hoping to learn from Kwan’s exploits, but the others considered him a shameless bootlicker.

“Now it was the Pandovelari that scared my face.” Kwan pointed to his trademark scar. “Those were dark years spent warring with them. Believe it or not, but I often despaired that we would never overwhelm them. Just ask Sandin.”

Sandin turned away from his own conversation when he heard his name. Dreibrand disliked Lord Kwan including his second in command in their conversation, but it was a common occurrence that had to be tolerated.

“My Lord, you did not despair,” Sandin corrected politely.

Kwan yielded to his lieutenant’s flattery. “I meant only the despair of a Lord General who did not get a quick victory.”

“But it was worth the wait. Pandovelar brought you fame and greater wealth, my Lord,” Sandin said.

Kwan and Sandin struck their cups together, toasting their shared memory. Dreibrand waited while they finished their drink. He stared at the burgundy reflection of firelight on his wine until Kwan returned to their conversation. Kwan appreciated the restraint and patience Dreibrand displayed. He knew Dreibrand coveted Sandin’s rank and wealth, but everyone had their place in Atrophane society. Advancement required steps of service, and Dreibrand had much more to do.

Yet Kwan liked Dreibrand, and for now he would guide his career to a level appropriate for a Veta.

“It is a shame you were not with us back then, Dreibrand. You would have enjoyed the challenge,” Kwan said with actual sincerity.

“Challenges make me stronger, my Lord,” Dreibrand acknowledged.

“Yes, Pandovelar was a trial ground that made the Atrophane stronger. Now we are about to fulfill the destiny of Atrophane to expand the known world. At last the virgin lands of Ektren are before me.” Kwan sighed with great satisfaction.

Dreibrand nodded. Unable to contain his excitement any longer, he asked quietly, “When, Lord Kwan, do you think our first expeditionary force will depart into the Wilderness?” His widening eyes complemented his eager voice.

Kwan finished his wine before replying. “Well, Dreibrand, there will be many things to do. The Bosta territory will have to be secured and proper fortresses built. Slaves will have to be collected, and the rest of the plunder selected and distributed. Still, I plan to leave on an exploration by midsummer—maybe.”

“Excellent, my Lord,” Dreibrand beamed. “Until then I will personally scout the cliffs for a place our horses can ascend.”

Now Kwan gazed firmly at his young lieutenant. “Dreibrand, I have not selected you for the expeditionary force this year.”

The words were simple and clear, but Dreibrand resisted comprehension. Losing his practiced poise, he stammered, “Lord—Lord Kwan, how has my service displeased you?”

Kwan saw the disappointment on Dreibrand’s face and realized the

young lieutenant burned to explore west just like himself. Sympathy, however, could not alter a Lord General's plans. "Dreibrand, your service pleases me greatly," he explained. "But I have many duties for many people. You shall take the chattel and plunder back to Atrophane. You will be received by the Darmar and enjoy the victory celebrations at the capital. I thought you would enjoy that." Quietly he added, "It is very enjoyable."

Dreibrand's jaw dropped aghast, as if he had just been condemned to slavery in a mine. To see his dream and then be turned back to Atrophane stunned him. It had never occurred to him that he would not be at Lord Kwan's side. He had specifically pursued his commission with Lord Kwan because of the Lord General's desire to foray into the unknown lands.

Dreibrand's heart thudded from the sudden agitation, but he fought the panic. He marshaled his confidence, telling himself he could persuade Lord Kwan to include him.

I am going! his mind dictated.

"Lord Kwan, please reconsider. Anyone can take the chattel back to Atrophane. Have I not proved myself a strong fighter? I will face any enemy. And the languages I have studied. You may need my skills," Dreibrand insisted.

"We are all good fighters. And I have several interpreters," Kwan countered.

"My skills in personal combat are well above average, and no one speaks languages like I can," Dreibrand argued.

Trying not to be stern with his upset lieutenant, Kwan said, "Dreibrand, I have promised the places on this historic mission a long time ago. You are an Atrophaney officer, and you will follow my orders."

Dreibrand faltered, uncertain what to say. How could he dare to protest his Lord General's decision after being reminded of his obligation for obedience? But then he thought of the setting sun on the distant mountains. In the west he had hope. In the east, back in Atrophane, he had only old problems that would not go away and would only get worse.

"Which lieutenant have you chosen?" he blurted.

Kwan frowned at the inquiry, but answered, "Sandin, of course."

By now the other officers had tuned into the conversation. Enjoying

Dreibrand's distress, Sandin remarked, "Ambition does not suit the House of Veta."

Dreibrand narrowed his eyes at the senior officer, and hate bit into his reason.

"Did you really expect to be included on such a historic mission?" Sandin sneered.

"There is no need to be rude, Lieutenant," Kwan rumbled. He rarely intervened in their rivalry, but he did not want Dreibrand goaded, especially after such disappointment.

"And why not include me on a historic mission?" Dreibrand demanded hotly.

"A Veta would sully the triumph of Atrophane acquiring the Wilderness," Sandin stated.

"I will not let you insult my name," Dreibrand yelled.

Hoping to cure the spoiling tempers, Carfu interjected, "Stop getting worked up, Dreibrand. We have all had our turn as chattel master, and it is not so bad. I have to stay in this shitty country and build a fortress. I should be the one getting upset."

When Carfu spoke up, Dreibrand realized every officer was staring at him, and he looked down in shame. Focusing on his clenched fists, Dreibrand knew better than to make a scene. Strict rules of conduct governed Atrophaney behavior in social settings, and the military had extra elements of protocol.

Glad to see Dreibrand getting himself under control, Kwan said, "Dreibrand, it appears you did not expect this assignment, and because of that I will forgive your transgression. I know your family name places a hardship on you, but escorting the chattel back to Atrophane will be good for you. People will see you, and your soldiers will spread stories of your bravery. Returning after a two-year campaign with the Horde will give you glory, and people will respect you. Trust me, you can start building a name for yourself this way."

Dreibrand looked into Kwan's eyes. He could see that his Lord General truly wanted him to succeed and offered good advice, but Dreibrand could not give up on the Wilderness so easily. "I thank you for the opportunity to visit home, my Lord, but I am not homesick. Let me trade with Carfu. I

will stay here and build a fortress,” Dreibrand offered.

Then I can explore the Wilderness from here, he plotted.

Kwan looked at Carfu, who shrugged his shoulders and said, “If it pleases you, my Lord, I would love to go to Atrophane.”

With a shake of his head Kwan dashed Dreibrand’s hopes. “You will be chattel master and present the Darmar with his share. There is no trading of my orders. I see now that I have been too lenient with you, Lieutenant Veta. You overstep your bounds. You will dispute my commands no more, and you will excuse yourself from this meeting,” Kwan announced.

A flicker of shock rustled through the gathered officers. A high lieutenant almost never suffered a reprimand.

Dreibrand meant to obey, but he thought of the lands that no Atrophane had ever seen. The possibilities of the Wilderness tempted him too much, and Dreibrand suddenly accepted that he had to go. Somehow he had to go.

He stood up as if he would quietly exit in his shame, but instead he shouted, “I challenge Lieutenant Sandin Promentro for his command. In the tradition of Galmonlay, I seek advancement through duel.”

Sandin laughed, and the senior officer’s absurd reaction enraged Dreibrand. “Do not threaten me with archaic laws, Veta,” he said.

“Galmonlay tradition is still accepted. If I defeat you in duel, I can have your military rank and your place on the expeditionary force,” Dreibrand said triumphantly. This way he could explore the Wilderness and kill Sandin.

“You idiot!” Sandin exclaimed and sprang to his feet.

The hands of both men flew to their sword handles. But long years and a ruthless life had not made Lord Kwan slow, and he instantly jumped between them.

“Such quarreling on the eve of a battle!” the Lord General cried with wrath. “You would curse the whole Horde with your disregard for taboo.”

“Lord Kwan, give me my challenge!” Dreibrand demanded.

“Silence!” Kwan thundered. “No duel can be fought on the eve of battle—not even by the rules of Galmonlay. I should flog you for even uttering your challenge on this night. This night of all nights.”

“Let me administer the punishment, my Lord,” Sandin requested eagerly. “The Vetas were never punished enough anyway. They should have all been made slaves.”

“I will kill you,” Dreibrand snarled. His rage was so focused on Sandin that he never saw Kwan strike.

The Lord General grabbed Dreibrand’s face and flung him to the ground. It was a rare man who tempted a blow from the hand of the fearsome Hordemaster, and Dreibrand almost fell completely. Pushing himself back to his feet, Dreibrand exited the tent without looking back.

The face of every officer was frozen with astonishment. Excluding Sandin, Dreibrand had obviously been Lord Kwan’s favorite officer and no one had ever expected such a disgraceful episode from Lieutenant Veta, whose conduct had always been impeccable.

Kwan sat back down. He said nothing and his neutral face did not reveal the bitter disappointment churning inside him.

With a smug smile Sandin settled back onto his cushion and gestured for a servant to bring him wine. It had taken him two years, but he had finally gotten Dreibrand to snap. Lord Kwan could never favor the young lieutenant like he had before.

Reeling with shame and hatred, Dreibrand staggered into the night. He hated Sandin so much, and he was ashamed that he had finally allowed his rival to force him into a disastrous outburst. The shame of acting so horribly in front of Lord Kwan sickened Dreibrand. His stupidity at challenging Sandin on the eve of a battle overwhelmed him. After breaking such an important taboo, Dreibrand was certain he could never convince Lord Kwan to include him on the expeditionary force.

If only I had waited until tomorrow to challenge, he lamented. A challenge on the day of battle would not have broken the taboo, and Lord Kwan might have agreed.

The magnitude of his blunder crushed his heart and mind, and Dreibrand gave in to his anger. Lord Kwan was one of the few people in the ruling class who would give him a chance, and he had completely ruined it. Now he would have to beg to keep his commission. Without his military career he was nothing.

Literally moaning with misery, Dreibrand clutched his head as

irrational fury seized his mind. He pulled his sword out and charged his own camp. A fire still burned in front of his tent, and Dreibrand attacked it. The sword slashed through the coals, sending the cooking rack flying in a shower of sparks. Starfield neighed in alarm and pulled at his tether. His squire spun out of his bedroll as if every enemy the Atrophane had ever faced had come back for revenge.

The young man bounded to his feet and watched in terror as his master hacked the campfire into glowing piles.

“May the Gods curse Sandin as they have cursed me!” Dreibrand cried.

With the fire obliterated Dreibrand turned his eyes upon his shield leaning against his other gear. This became the next target of his rage. His sword beat against the polished metal that could not dodge the wild assault.

“I am going to kill that bastard,” he shouted several times.

Assuming he was the intended victim, the squire tried to slip away, but Dreibrand somehow noticed him despite his deranged state.

“Where’s my helmet?” he demanded.

The squire froze as if skewered by the question. Dreibrand made an awful sight in the diminished glow of the scattered coals. His shoulders heaved from ragged breathing and violent emotion fueled the gleam in his eyes.

“Sir, don’t kill me,” the squire squeaked.

“Not you! But it is time I started killing the right people around here,” Dreibrand shouted as he scanned his gear.

The commotion attracted a few soldiers from the surrounding encampment. They rushed up, thinking their officer had been attacked. Dreibrand turned to face the soldiers and his unhinged expression made them halt.

Dreibrand laughed at them. He wished he could give them some reward for their loyalty, but now he had disgraced them all.

“Get out of here! Don’t waste your time on me. I sully the Empire!” He was ranting now and waving his sword. He tore off his cape and threw it as his men.

Forgetting the soldiers, Dreibrand turned back to his squire. “Did you

find it?" he barked.

The squire had not moved at all, and he regretted not fleeing while Dreibrand yelled at the soldiers. The young man cast his eyes over the strewn gear, but he was too flustered to focus on any objects in the twitching light.

"Ah, it should be here," he mumbled and tried to perform his function.

Gesturing wildly with his sword, Dreibrand said, "Forget the helmet. I only need my sword to kill Sandin." His eyes latched onto the flashing steel with affection.

The squire dodged the swinging sword. He really meant to flee right then, but he could not ignore Dreibrand's last statement.

"Sandin? Sir, you cannot kill him," he cried in genuine panic.

"I should have done this two years ago," Dreibrand snarled with deepening conviction.

"Sir, no."

Dreibrand turned away, clearly intending to attack his rival that very minute.

Desperately the squire grabbed Dreibrand's arm.

"Sir, Lord Kwan will execute you," he warned.

Dreibrand blocked out this consequence and shoved his servant away, but the squire held on. "Sir, no. They'll kill me too," he pleaded.

This got through to Dreibrand, who accepted that he was about to commit a crime against his own people. He had no authorization for a duel, and if he were successful, it would be murder.

"Everyone will try and stop you. You might not even reach Sandin," reasoned the squire, who searched for rationality in his master's eyes.

But the very mention of Sandin's name seemed to incense Dreibrand all over again, and he gnashed his teeth with frustration that needed to be vented. Dreibrand knew he could not just sit in his tent while Sandin was so close by.

"Saddle my horse," he commanded.

"Where are you going?" the squire asked suspiciously.

"Saddle my horse!" Dreibrand hollered and swiped at his tent with his

sword. The blade snapped through two tent ropes, and half the shelter collapsed.

Giving up protest and hoping for the best, the squire jumped to comply. Starfield snorted as the servant hastily bridled the spirited warhorse. Tonight the squire was the definition of efficiency. The sooner he had that horse saddled the sooner his master would be gone.

Gods, spare me the blame, he pleaded.

Dreibrand stalked over and finished cinching the saddle himself. He jumped onto Starfield and goaded the horse into an immediate gallop. He tore through the camp and disappeared into the night.

His temper was so intense that Dreibrand knew he would kill Sandin if he stayed in camp. As much as he would have enjoyed this, Dreibrand could not murder his fellow officer. That would truly ruin his life much worse than it was already ruined.

I need to cool down. Then I will put things back together, he told himself.

He rode west.

4~ Decisions in the Night ~

I have always admired the courage and intelligence of my Lieutenant Veta, but it is a shame that the Gods have wasted such ability on a Veta—Kwan Chenomet, journal entry, year 779 Atrophane calendar.

Undaunted by the resistance gathered in the valley below, the Atrophane Horde stirred before the dawn. Despite its ponderous mass, the Horde was mobile and organized. On the day of a battle every member of the Horde had a place in the plan, and the Atrophane could move across a hostile land with strategy and speed.

Lord Kwan's squire, Jesse, attended him at a brisk and excited pace. The Lord General must be ready precisely on time, and Jesse enjoyed the responsibility of accoutering such a great hero of the Empire. He expertly strapped the armor over the black leather and quilted silk garments. Kwan held out a hand and the squire pulled a gauntlet onto it.

When Jesse placed a gauntlet over the other hand, a guard entered the

tent and announced Lieutenant Sandin. Kwan stretched his hands inside the gauntlets as Sandin entered.

The drinking of the night before showed in the gray eyes of the senior lieutenant, but the rest of his body was strong and eager for battle. Holding his jewel-encrusted helmet under his arm, Sandin kneeled to his lord and waited to be addressed.

“Rise,” Kwan said. “I trust all of your men are at the ready?”

Ignoring the question, Sandin sprang up and blurted his news, “Veta is gone!”

Kwan creased his forehead with puzzled concern. He had been trying not to think of Dreibrand’s terrible behavior. The conquest of Droxy was his priority and the discipline for Dreibrand’s indiscretions would be decided later.

“What do you mean gone?” Kwan asked.

Sandin replied, “He is not in the camp. There is no one to lead his forces.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Sandin went to the tent flap and motioned for someone to enter. “I brought Veta’s squire. He saw him last.”

The teenage squire entered the tent hesitantly. His adolescent beard made him look tender as a peach. He was nervous about speaking with the Lord General. Humbly he went down on his knees.

“All right boy, out with it. Where is Veta?” Lord Kwan said.

The squire swallowed. “My Lord, he came back to his tent in a terrible state last night. He stalked up and went berserk on everything, kicking all his stuff around, and waving his sword. Gods protect me, my Lord, but I thought he was gonna kill me in his madness. I had never seen Lieutenant Veta in such a mood. He swore some horrible oaths.” Looking sideways at Sandin, he added, “He said some terrible things.”

“Then what happened?” Kwan asked impatiently.

“He ordered me to saddle his horse and then he rode off,” the squire answered simply.

“There is more than that. Do you think you are the only one I talked to, fool?” Sandin cuffed the squire and added the details for Lord Kwan.

“Soldiers heard Veta tell the squire he was going to kill me.”

Kwan cast a grim scowl upon the young man, who trembled. “Did Veta say this?”

The mouth of the squire flopped as he groped for words, but he knew he was too terrified to lie. “Yes, my-my-Lord,” he stammered.

Sandin drew a dagger. “Death for the traitor’s servant,” he hissed.

“No!” Kwan ordered sharply. “A servant cannot choose his master’s words.”

The squire cowered away from Sandin and thanked his Lord General for his mercy.

“My Lord, he is a traitor,” Sandin insisted. “He knew Veta wanted to murder me.”

“Why did you not tell me last night?” Kwan demanded of the squire. “Atrophane must not speak murder against each other.”

“I thought I had talked him out of it,” explained the squire.

“You couldn’t talk your dick out of your pants,” Sandin snarled and menaced the young man with his dagger.

“Then where is Veta?” Kwan asked with exasperation. His mind still did not accept that he was missing.

“I do not know,” the squire replied.

Thoughtfully, Kwan said, “Lieutenant, you said you talked to soldiers. What soldiers?”

“Veta made quite a scene last night, my Lord. Some of his men heard him threaten my life,” Sandin explained. “I am sure I could find more of them who saw Dreibrand last night. Maybe I can find out which way he went. My Lord, this is clearly desertion.”

Kwan recoiled from the word, and air hissed in his nostrils. The desertion of an Atrophaney officer was unprecedented, and Kwan could not accept it.

Dreibrand’s squire was quick to offer an alternative explanation. “My Lord, I am sure Lieutenant Veta only meant to cool down from whatever had him so upset. He will come back.”

“No one told you to speak,” Sandin snapped.

“That is possible,” Kwan agreed. “Veta lost his temper last night. His ride may have just been to calm him down.”

“My Lord, how can you make excuses for him?” Sandin asked incredulously. “After his behavior last night, he better have deserted.”

“No one deserted me!” Kwan snapped, and the words stabbed Sandin’s ears.

Kwan continued, “Veta may have left to cool down, but stray Bosta warriors may have attacked him. He could be a prisoner.”

Sandin did not dare say any more about desertion. It was humiliating to the Lord General. “I will find him, my Lord,” Sandin said.

“No. Veta’s foolishness cannot delay an Atrophaney conquest. Bring me Hydax and Gennor. I will send them to find Veta,” Kwan decided. He mastered his disappointment and anger by functioning, and the orders flowed from his lips like always. “Lieutenant Sandin, absorb Veta’s forces into your own and incorporate his battle orders. And do not discuss Veta with anyone. I know the men must be curious, but his actions have already given an ill omen to this battle, and I do not want that aggravated by open talk of his...disappearance.”

“Of course, Lord Kwan. I will serve you well,” Sandin said.

“I know. I have no doubts in your abilities, Lieutenant,” Kwan praised. “Now go, before we get behind schedule.”

Sandin saluted his Lord General, acknowledging his orders and dismissal. Turning to the forgotten squire still on his knees, Sandin jerked his thumb toward the tent flap and the boy scrambled out gratefully. Amazed by recent events, Sandin emerged into the thin morning light. The success of his harassment the night before exceeded his hopes. Veta’s anger had been crazy, and Sandin’s position with Lord Kwan was thoroughly reinforced in the aftermath. With his command nearly doubled, Sandin smiled with satisfaction. He had bested his rival, and Dreibrand had lost badly.

Kwan chewed his lip with restrained wrath. In a furtive motion, Jesse handed his lord his helmet then hung back. He had never seen Lord Kwan so upset before.

The episode in the council tent replayed in Kwan’s mind. He had hated to be harsh with Dreibrand. He recognized the ambition that burned in

the young officer's heart. No one recognized ambition better than a Lord General. Dreibrand sought military power, and that was why Sandin made life so difficult for him. That was why Kwan had to send Dreibrand back to Atrophane. He could only give the charismatic Lieutenant Veta so much prestige. He could not offend the sensibilities of the Empire by overfavoring a Veta.

Shutting his eyes against the disgust he felt, Kwan rejected the concept of desertion. He honestly believed that the enemy must have caught Dreibrand when he blundered out of camp in his rage.

I guess all of those Vetas are fools, Kwan thought bitterly.

Even if they did find Dreibrand alive, Sandin would demand that Dreibrand be drummed out of the military. But Kwan would not allow him to make the charge of desertion.

I will give him another chance, Kwan decided. He did not want Dreibrand to fail, even if he was a Veta.

“Bring my horse,” he quietly commanded of Jesse, who complied promptly.

The scouts arrived as Jesse left. Hydax and Gennor assumed their Lord General had a routine mission to assign until they sensed his ugly mood. Dropping to their knees quickly, both of them privately guessed that the incident last night had soured their commander's temper.

Motioning them to their feet, Kwan issued his orders. “Hydax, Gennor, you are my best scouts, and I have a special mission for you. Lieutenant Veta left camp last night and has not been seen since. I fear that our enemy has waylaid him. Go quickly and find his trail before the Horde moves out. If he is a captive, free him or come get soldiers if you need to.” Kwan paused to clear his throat. “If he is dead, bring me his body.”

The scouts longed to ask why Lieutenant Veta had left camp. Rumors of the disruption in the officers' meeting had been flying around camp. The nature of Lieutenant Veta's misconduct was not clearly known, but it was serious. Hydax and Gennor saw that Lord Kwan was obviously upset, torn between righteous anger and terrible worry.

“Quickly now,” Lord Kwan urged.

“Yes, Lord Kwan,” the scouts answered in unison.

Yielding to his anger, Kwan shouted, “Bring him to me!”

Hydax and Gennor saluted and departed intent on their mission.

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Dreibrand meant only to vent his fury when he recklessly galloped out of camp. Riding his horse seemed the only way to focus his temper and avoid committing more rash acts. With the reins in his hands and Starfield's powerful muscles surging beneath him, Dreibrand felt in command again.

The cool forest night eventually slackened his anger to seething resentment. A small measure of reason replaced his vicious thoughts, and Dreibrand realized he was by himself on a road that was technically still enemy territory. Veering into the deep dark of the woodland, he hoped it was not too late to hide from any enemies who might be watching the road.

Pulling Starfield to a halt, he planned to rest in the forest before going back. This sudden solitude cleared his head and he tried to pull himself together. For a while he attempted to convince himself that surely next year he would campaign westward with Lord Kwan. Now he needed to go back to camp and accept his punishment. Among other things he would probably have to publicly apologize to Sandin.

Dreibrand ground his teeth at the thought of that humiliation. But if he did what he had to, he could keep his military career. His tantrum would be forgiven because a warrior was supposed to have violent passions, and he believed Lord Kwan would not dismiss him.

Groaning with frustration, Dreibrand realized his ambition and success had blinded him. He had thought his bond with his commander would overcome the seniority of others and that was why exclusion from the expeditionary force had hurt so much. He understood now that he was not the senior officer, and worse than that, a Veta would not be included on the historic first expedition into the Wilderness. But despite this understanding, his anger rushed back mixed with despair. He felt like a whipped hound who had been shown his place in the pack.

And he remembered how hard he had worked to get to that place. Being accepted at the Darmar's military academy had been difficult, and he had been constantly pressed to obtain the money for his tuition. Then, there had been the struggle to graduate at the top of his class. The social pressure to exclude him had been a constant obstacle. Now it seemed that no matter how far he got from Atrophane, he could not escape the stigma

of his family. He felt ill when he considered that he had helped to make the Empire bigger.

Two years away from the center of Atrophane society and many victories had helped Dreibrand forget his status in the Empire, but tonight he had been thoroughly reminded. The House of Veta was getting to be a joke among the ruling class, and Dreibrand had been born a disgrace thanks to his inept relatives.

Thinking of his family discouraged him most of all. Sometimes he even thought his relatives deserved their imperial chastening. In the desolate night of a foreign land, Dreibrand decided he had deluded himself with dreams of power and wealth, and he could not ignore the reality of his life within Atrophaney society. Assuming he did not die in battle, he would spend years winning a new name and fortune in the military only to have his family demand their imagined share.

Then he thought about Sandin exploring the Wilderness first. He thought about Sandin giving his name to the discovered places on the new maps. Dreibrand hated this with great jealousy. He had based his career goals on accompanying Lord Kwan into the Wilderness, and now that plan was stunted.

Dreibrand cursed at himself for not expecting this to happen. He wondered how he had ever been silly enough to think Lord Kwan wanted him on the expedition. Sandin had served for fifteen years, and been Kwan's second in command for nine years. In time Sandin could become a Lord General, especially with the bounty of the Wilderness available.

And Dreibrand believed the Wilderness had much to offer. Although he had no facts to support this, Dreibrand sensed in his heart with intuitive certainty that something extraordinary lay beyond the bounds of the Atrophane Empire.

Lost in his thoughts, Dreibrand had allowed Starfield to drift into an open grassy area. The small crescent moon had ducked below the horizon hours ago, and only the stars remained to decorate the darkness. Dreibrand looked west. Even unable to see anything, he could feel the vast Wilderness sleeping beyond the cliffs. A watchful quiet emanated from the mysterious region, and it reminded Dreibrand of sensing an ambush just before it happened.

With bitter regret he turned away from the Wilderness that tantalized

him so much. The Horde's camp glittered in the nearby hills, but Dreibrand did not feel welcome. He had tried to play by the rules, but that did not matter in a society that resented your presence. The House of Veta had made its bid for power two generations ago and failed, and the Empire had punished Dreibrand's family with a slow economic death, which was hastened by his overindulgent brother.

Yes, Lord Kwan liked Dreibrand, and would give him a decent career, but the Lord General would not share what Dreibrand really craved—access to substantial wealth and power. Acknowledging this limitation was a harsh lesson for Dreibrand, who had never lost sight of the prize.

“I will not waste my time with you anymore,” Dreibrand announced for only his horse to hear.

A new plan formed in his head. It was crazy and stupid, and in the near future when his life was much worse, Dreibrand would be baffled by his anger that broke the determination of his dreams. If Atrophane society did not want him, he would quit trying to be a part of it. He could still have one dream, and that was the Wilderness.

Suddenly, Dreibrand felt exhausted, spent by his upsetting night. Much against his character, he did not feel like going to war that morning, and he decided not to return to camp.

Why risk my life just so Lord Kwan can send me home? he thought.

He looked down at himself. He had his sword but no shield. He wore his chest armor but not his helmet. Now that he considered running off, it appeared that he had not prepared very well.

But things were easy to obtain. The countryside was in an uproar because of the invasion, and he would raid a few cottages and get some food and supplies. Then he would dive into the Wilderness where no one could find him. He would scout a passage over the cliffs, and then swing to the south and return to civilization. In a large city, probably Phemnalang, he could make a little money and maybe recruit some adventurers to go back to the Wilderness with him. If he could get enough people to follow him, he might be able to claim his own territory before the Empire even realized.

The Wilderness was vast, and in the beginning there would be plenty for anyone willing to brave the elements. Many people throughout the

conquered lands and inside Atrophane itself were dissatisfied with life in the Empire, and Dreibrand anticipated many of them would seek a fresh start in the rich lands to the west, once they were explored.

Of course, he would be a deserter in the eyes of the military, but he could fix that by resigning his commission. He could send a letter to Lord Kwan once he was safely in Phemnalang. Dreibrand could not face his Lord General now. The sight of him would enflame his rage again. It was best to go. He regretted the rudeness after Lord Kwan had given him guidance, unlike his real father, but Dreibrand saw now with bitter clarity that playing by Lord Kwan's rules was futile. Dreibrand assumed that Lord Kwan would be pleased to be rid of his overly ambitious Veta.

The thought of starting a new course independent of the military excited Dreibrand. The military had brought him as far as it could to suit his purposes, and he did not need to keep killing for the Empire to gain new lands when the Wilderness had so much to simply claim.

He hurried west now. It would be dawn soon and he needed to be safely hidden in the woods to avoid the Atrophane and the Bosta defenders of Droxy. He would hide mostly by day and move in the safety of night.

Dreibrand could not resist the possibilities of the Wilderness. Plunging alone into the new world instantly gratified him and he was especially pleased to be the first Atrophaney to go. The House of Veta would not be kept from history so easily.

5~ The Last Beating ~

Miranda heard Barlow coming down the alley. She placed Esseldan over her shoulder and put her breast away. When Barlow arrived at the stable, he put the bucket down with a careless splash and allowed them each one drink before he washed himself. Miranda watched as he poured out the dirtied water. She would have liked the opportunity to wash. The day was muggy and getting hotter.

And her nightmares stuck to her mind like her sweat stuck to her body. Although ignorant of the ways of war, Miranda sensed that her dreams possessed an ominous accuracy and she affirmed her decision to leave Droxy before the Atrophane arrived. However, she still had to think of a way to get out of the town. Despite his negligence and irresponsibility,

Barlow somehow monitored Miranda quite closely, and leaving without his knowledge would be difficult.

But things were no longer a matter of her suffering. This was a life and death situation for herself and the children and she would have to find a way to flee, with or without Barlow.

By now, he had helped himself to a generous portion of their food supply. His thoughtless plundering of their supplies disgusted Miranda but she contained her criticism. While he was occupied with breakfast, she decided to risk speaking her mind.

“Barlow, let us leave Droxy. It is not safe from the war here.”

He snorted derisively. “You do not even know what you’re talking about. When the country turns to war, it is best to be safe inside the castle.” He gestured to the surrounding stone walls as if they were his chorus that would promptly sing in agreement.

Carefully, Miranda continued, “But Droxy is where the Horde will surely attack.”

“You just don’t want to earn us a living for once,” Barlow countered.

Miranda’s mouth dropped open incredulously. “That’s all I ever do!” she cried.

Esseldan fussed in her arms because she had become so upset, and she set him in his basket.

Her voice rose with a touch of hysteria as she insisted, “I am not staying here. I am going to hide in the forest until the war is over.”

Barlow laughed. “You’re crazy. How are you gonna live in the forest? You can’t leave those children anyway.”

“I will take them with me,” she said.

Barlow stopped laughing. Narrowing his dark eyes, he threatened, “Don’t you even think that. Those children are mine.”

Miranda now realized the futility of convincing him to leave. She lapsed into silence in order to stop provoking him. Obviously he would not willingly let her leave with the children. His sense of possession over them was much too precious.

Waiting for him to go away, Miranda went to Elendra and started brushing her hair. The girl winced as the brush drew down with

unfamiliar force. Unfortunately Barlow stayed, and he bedded down in the stall to sleep off his hangover. The horse in the next stall shifted with agitation at his presence.

“Shut up you nag,” he mumbled.

Unable to tolerate his company even if he was asleep, Miranda gathered her son in his basket and prepared to leave.

“Come on, Elendra. I will show you around Droxy,” she said in as pleasant a voice as possible.

Elendra jumped up, happy to be included. They set off down the alley past the tavern and into the main square. Although Droxy was a small town and fortress, people still flooded inside. Miranda could see people throwing their belongings into alleys and along walls, and then huddling around them much like herself. Chances looked high that she would have company in the stable tonight.

In the increasing throng she was careful to hold Elendra’s hand firmly. The vendors’ stalls already looked picked over, and few people wanted to sell what provisions they had. Miranda purchased any food she could with the few coins the soldier had given her in the night. She concealed the food in the baby’s basket.

“Elendra, do not tell...him about this food,” Miranda cautioned.

Raised to keep such secrets, Elendra nodded sincerely.

If Barlow caught Miranda with the food, he would know that she had received money. He did not tolerate her to have any independent funds, and Miranda had paid the price of discovery before.

Miranda loitered the rest of the day in the square, having no desire to return to the vicinity of Barlow. Several times she contemplated simply walking out the gate of the town, but she was afraid. She considered hiding in the edge of the Wilderness until the conquest was over, but the mysterious menace of the west weighed on her mind like it never had before. The legends about fenthakrabi and ghosts were difficult to dismiss while she watched the refugees crowd into Droxy because they would go no farther.

Barlow had brought her to Wa Gira seven years ago, and every day since Miranda had looked upon the Wilderness and never seen anything but rich untouched forest. She had never heard the calls of the mythic beasts

that supposedly prowled there, and she had never felt threatened by the closeness of the Wilderness when she had foraged in the woodland around the village. But the Droxy locals had always warned that anyone who entered the Wilderness would never come back and she half-heartedly believed them.

Tiredly she smiled. Never returning to Droxy had great appeal.

She stared at the open gate. The old oak timbers looked weathered and dubious. Apparently Lord Doamir had invested little in upkeep over the years. The Lord of Droxy expected no trouble. Bandits posed only a nominal threat, and despite the ominous reputation of the Wilderness, no invaders ever came from the west.

Miranda distracted herself by watching the fighters muster to defend the Droxy settlement. The assembling soldiers also fascinated Elendra, who had no experiences outside the tediously agricultural Wa Gira. The landowners who owed allegiance to Lord Doamir looked grand in their armor, high on their horses. Other men were simply peasants hired to fight, or they had volunteered to defend their homeland. Soldiers in the brown uniforms of Lord Doamir's house lined up in smart rows, before marching out. Miranda scanned the many troubled faces, wondering if her companion from the night before was among them, but she did not see him.

Altogether the force of Droxy fighters and stray Bosta warriors did not make an inspiring sight. Miranda stared at the stone walls of the town and remembered the flames that had consumed them in her dream. The terror of her nightmare returned and her mouth felt dry. Sadly she looked at her children. They needed her to protect them, and she had to get them out of the path of marauding invaders.

All of her problems had always been at home. Now she felt assaulted from every direction. Fear hindered her from forming any detailed plan of escape, but she resolved to sneak out before the gates closed.

Pulling Elendra along urgently, Miranda returned to the stable. Hopefully Barlow would be in the tavern by now, and she could pack her things and slip away.

Disappointment assailed her when she saw Barlow sitting on a sack of grain. He was recently arisen from his day of napping, and his usual groggy and surly scowl welcomed her. Quickly, Miranda cast down her

eyes, composing herself. She did not want Barlow to perceive the guilt in her heart.

Miranda gave the baby to Elendra and told her to play quietly. Although Miranda knew it would be wise to leave Barlow alone until he entered the tavern, she decided to try to get more money. She wanted more food, and besides it was really her money anyway. Barlow had to eat too, and she figured there was a chance of talking him into it. Leaving him high and dry seemed just.

“Barlow, we need money to buy food before it runs out,” she announced boldly.

He frowned, displeased by the subject. “Maybe if you’re a really good girl you can have some money tomorrow,” he sneered.

“No, I need it now. The war will be here tomorrow,” she insisted.

He stood up quickly. “Don’t start with me,” he warned.

“Don’t start what?” she mocked.

Miranda knew it was the wrong thing to say, but her temper often got away from her. Barlow struck her savagely across the ear—a painful blow that sent her to the ground. For being a drunk, he could sometimes strike with terrible speed.

“Or how ’bout you go earn more money?” he said. He reached down and seized her long hair, hauling her to her knees.

Miranda cursed herself for speaking to him, but her need for more supplies had seemed worth the risk. Or maybe she had sabotaged her escape because she was afraid to run away.

“Or how ’bout you earn some money from me?” he hollered.

Recovering from the shock of the pain, Miranda struggled to be free, but his fingers were thoroughly entwined in the curls of her hair. He smacked her again and tossed her toward their stall.

“Get back there,” he snarled. “It’s time you relearned who your master is.”

Miranda scrambled to her feet, knowing from experience that she could not let Barlow corner her in the stable. Elendra darted out of the sphere of Barlow’s wrath. She already had a natural instinct for avoiding her father’s attention. Miranda could see her daughter crying fearfully. She made a

hopeless image clinging to her baby brother and watching her mother be abused. The scared children reminded Miranda vividly of her nightmares.

Barlow descended on Miranda, blocking the children from her view. He attacked with extra special viciousness, and Miranda held her arms over her face. When he grabbed one of her arms, she clawed his face mercilessly with her free hand.

Cuts opened on his cheek and Barlow yelled in pain. Shocked by the wound, he released her. Miranda fell back on the gate of a stall, startling the animal inside. Her scratches only made Barlow pause though, and he resumed his attack. Frantically she managed to unhook the gate and swing it toward him. He howled when the gate bottom slammed into his shins, but he slammed the gate back instantly. On the rebound the gate knocked Miranda into the stall.

She landed in the soiled straw and the mare's hooves danced around her. Satisfied that she was trapped, Barlow opened the gate leisurely.

"Miranda, stop fighting me. You know you always lose. I don't want to put more bruises on you," he said.

The horse was intolerant of his intrusion. Although tethered, the horse reared and lashed out with its front feet. A hoof caught Barlow on the forehead. The blow was so wicked, he did not even make a sound as he toppled backwards. Content with the victory, the horse calmed itself and snorted loudly.

In the sudden quiet Miranda picked herself up and lay a thankful hand on the horse's shoulder. Her lucky reprieve from his assault was unbelievable. For a moment she gaped at Barlow's sprawled form. He did not move, and a purple arc had sprouted on his forehead.

Tasting the familiar salt, Miranda wiped the blood from her lips. She must not hesitate now. "Elendra, start packing," she ordered decisively.

The girl stepped into the open. Sniffling noisily, she stared at her father's unmoving body. That her mother was relatively unhurt pleased Elendra, but she did not know what to think of her father. Cautiously she approached him, wondering if he was alive.

"Leave him alone," Miranda snapped. "Do as I say."

Glancing around nervously, Miranda led the horse from the stall. The mare was a handsome animal, chocolate brown with three white stockings

and a white nose. Miranda had never stolen, but she intended to keep that horse.

The mare responded to her attention favorably and gave little protest to being bridled. Miranda knew it was wrong to steal a man's horse and gear, but her necessity exceeded her morals. Hastily she saddled the animal and ran to finish packing. Elendra had achieved little of her assignment. Every moment of preparation cast her in terrible peril. The horse's owner could return, or anybody could see Barlow's body and stop her.

As she flung her few utensils into a pack, her hand closed around the handle of her knife. Miranda's eyes strayed from the shining blade to Barlow.

I should cut his throat, she thought.

A cold desire for retribution chilled her heart, and she might have done it, but the puzzled expression on Elendra's face stopped her. Miranda could not kill him, at least not in front of her daughter. She put the knife into the pack and tied it closed.

An urgent fear of discovery sank teeth into her nerves, and Miranda could not move with enough speed. She grabbed Barlow's ankles and lugged him out of sight into the stall. He did not make a sound, and Miranda wondered if he was dead, but she did not check anything beyond his coin purse.

She loaded their supplies and blankets onto the horse, and then grabbed Elendra.

"Mama, is this our horse?" the little girl asked.

"It is now," Miranda said firmly and placed her daughter in the saddle. Next, she secured Esseldan into his carrying sling and placed him on her back. Trying to mount the horse with such an unwieldy arrangement proved difficult, but luckily the horse did not fight her. Miranda was strong and managed to pull herself up.

The woman and small children were not a heavy load for the horse. Confidently Miranda grasped the reins, as if her last ride had been yesterday, and boldly rode into the square. Actually leaving Droxy would be her most vulnerable time. The owner of the horse could easily chance to see her and raise an alarm.

I will be hard to stop on this good horse, she thought.

The sun had flown west over the cliffs and the dusk would soon be over Droxy. Most of the fighters had departed to take up positions in the countryside, but the gates were still open, allowing the last of the frightened peasantry to enter. Miranda forced herself not to nervously scan the crowd because it made her look guilty. She blended into the tumult of the square and reached the gate without problems.

A young woman with small children leaving the town at sunset made a curious sight to one of the gate guards.

“Young lady,” he called, stepping out to meet her. “Where are you going?”

Miranda shrank inside, fearing her crimes had been discovered, but she was not one to surrender. She tried to mask her guilt with a charming smile, but her swelling lips distorted the effect. In an effort to calm the torrent of anxiety that consumed her body, Miranda told herself that this guard might not know about the stolen horse.

The quick wit of her response surprised even herself as she said, “My sister is supposed to be here. I was just going to ride up the road a bit to see if she is coming.”

The guard did not doubt her words, but he thought of her safety. “It will dark soon, and the gates must close. You may just go out to meet our retreating force,” he said.

“Oh, but I must see. I am terribly worried about her. Maybe she is just up the road and I can meet her,” Miranda insisted swiftly.

“If she has not made it by now, she probably won’t,” the guard said gloomily. “Now turn around. I would hate to see you and your family locked out. You don’t understand how dangerous it is to leave.” He reached for the bridle, but Miranda jerked the reins to make the horse move away. The delay exasperated her when she could see the fields beyond and feel the trouble behind her.

“I am going anyway,” she snapped shrewishly. “Elendra, hang on tightly.”

She rode out quickly, thrilled to have asserted herself. The guard waved a hand after her in disgust, but showed no interest in pursuit.

The gate of Droxy slipped behind her like a great weight dropping off her shoulders. For the first time in two days, she could feel a faint hope.

Now that she had left Droxy, maybe her nightmares could not come true.

The open land away from the town welcomed her as if it had been waiting many years for her arrival. Miranda vowed that Barlow would never touch her again, no matter what happened. She discarded the guilt she felt over stealing the horse. It was a good horse, and it was worth one theft to flee war and slavery.

Streamers of fuchsia light followed the sunset, and a beautiful spring night began. The evening refreshed Miranda after being inside the clammy walls of Droxy. The last few refugees straggled by her on the road, and they looked at her strangely. Their dim questioning faces encouraged Miranda. She saw no hope on those expressions.

As soon as she was alone on the road, she turned off and headed into the fields. In the distance the fields dwindled into pastures, and then the forest began. Approaching the very edge of the Wilderness, Miranda became afraid, feeling the dangerous potential within.

A giant oak stood out before the rest of the trees like a sentinel. The limbs of the oak curved and curled gracefully. A sudden gust of wind rattled the many branches of the watchful tree as they passed beneath, and the horse snorted and shook at the bit.

Miranda shivered with fear when they entered the cool forest and the darkness gathered around. Only a faint lavender light still filtered down between the leaves.

“Where are we going?” Elendra whispered.

“We are going away,” Miranda replied vaguely.

That first night in the forest was the hardest. The primordial terror of the woods at night assailed Miranda with a vengeance. Once the black night settled rapidly over the forest, she considered returning to Droxy. She wanted to be with other people, she wanted shelter, but she remembered Barlow and found the courage to stay away.

She could not see where to go and only gently persuaded the horse to continue, letting the mare find her own way. Eventually, Miranda just stopped, fearing the horse would circle back to Droxy. It was much too dark to gather wood for a fire, so she had to huddle with the children under a large tree.

Elendra clung to her mother and whimpered in fear, until Miranda

soothed her into silence. Thankfully, Esseldan stayed quietly nestled against his mother. Sensing the unseen nightlife around her, Miranda was glad that the children were not making any noises that could attract a predator.

She wrapped the horse's reins around a hand and held on all night. The horse would probably sense danger first, and Miranda did not want the horse getting away if something startled it.

Every puff of breeze through the branches made her clench nervously. Listening intently to every sound, she wondered if anything prowled in the darkness. Through the gaps in the trees she watched the stars crawl across the heavens. Monitoring their slow progress gave her hope that the morning would come. Time passed and a chilly dampness settled over her, making her joints ache.

Despite deep weariness, fear kept her alert the whole night, and Miranda witnessed the first gray of dawn. With the murk falling back from the rising day, she rose with relief. Now the forest felt innocent, verdant and fresh, with only a lingering hint of the sinister possibilities of the night.

All the time praising the mare for being good through the night, Miranda packed Elendra into the saddle. Without breaking their fast, except for Esseldan who was now strategically positioned across her chest, Miranda led the horse onward. Stiff and sore after the stressful night, Miranda needed to stretch her legs.

After a short time they arrived at a creek overhung with willows. She chose to rest in this inviting place. With a short bit of rope she contrived a hobble for the horse. Free of saddle and bit, the horse browsed on the drooping willow shoots. Miranda spread a blanket upon the upper bank and cast herself down to nap. Elendra cozied up next to her mother. Encircled by his mother's arms, Esseldan complained and squirmed, but Miranda had no energy to entertain him.

Her quick deep sleep ended suddenly when distant blasts of trumpet sang through the air and drums rumbled and throbbed. At first she thought it was another nightmare until she realized the war had actually started.

Somewhere across the valley the invading Atrophane had begun to move. Miranda checked the sun, which was still in the east. Her nap had

been short and could continue no longer. If she could hear the war, she wanted to be farther away.

The mare had wandered downstream, and Miranda approached her slowly with the bridle. The horse offered some nominal resistance, but eventually accepted Miranda's will.

Petting the lovely animal, she said, "I name you Freedom."

Soon Miranda was riding west again, following the path of the creek. The land began to rise steeply, and the creek rushed by in rapids. Freedom sweated up the incline, and by early afternoon topped the first western ridge above the valley. Here Miranda turned in the saddle and looked back. A large column of smoke rose from where she figured Wa Gira to be in the landscape. It did not break her heart.

Horn blasts and drums still echoed across the valley, and Miranda imagined the distant screams.

High on the ridge Miranda enjoyed a panoramic view. Many creeks cut down into the green land. Fluffy clouds drifted above, uncaring of the war below. The world seemed so much larger to Miranda suddenly. How she had ever tolerated her bleak world of servitude below she could not now imagine.

She had not been able to enjoy the view when Barlow had brought her through the eastern hills into Droxy. At that time she had been fourteen and new to slavery. For once, she willingly let herself remember that terrifying time. She remembered her feet slogging through the mud and the rain running down her back. She had been too frightened of Barlow to look up at him after the horrors he had inflicted upon her the night before. She was so sore and so alone.

Miranda halted the memories. *My time as a slave is done*, she thought.

With a deep indulgent breath she continued westward. She wanted to make a proper camp before the sun sank. The land leveled out into a forested plateau, and the cliffs looked much closer. With the noise of battle left behind, Miranda relaxed and let the songbirds lull her. Flowers bloomed in the open places, and the forest was a fragrant mix of pine and broadleaf. Even without a road, the travelling was easy in the mature wood. Brush only grew where an ancient master had fallen.

Briefly she enjoyed the tranquility of the lovely forest, reminded only

once of the dangers of the world when an eagle passed silently overhead.

Before the day waned too much, Miranda made a camp beside a large outcropping of rock by the creek. Nearby a tangle of old driftwood provided a supply of firewood. Building a fire made Miranda feel good. The night would not press so close this time.

Excited to be free of the constraints of the saddle, Elendra ran around collecting twigs.

“Stay in my sight,” Miranda called as her daughter flitted about.

“Yes, Mama!”

Esseldan wiggled and kicked on the blanket next to Miranda. While adding wood to the fire, she idly played with his toes. She wished they had more food, but thinking of Barlow with no food or money made her feel better. Looking up, she did not see Elendra.

Fearfully she cried out for her daughter.

The little girl ran out from behind a boulder carrying some useless looking twigs.

“What?” she replied innocently.

With a sigh Miranda put aside her panic. Calmly she instructed, “Elendra, it is very important that you stay in my sight. You understand that we are on our own out here, right?” Miranda gestured at the virgin forest.

Elendra looked around and nodded.

Miranda opened her arms. “Now come here. Let your mother watch out for you.”

Elendra trotted over and embraced her mother, and then sat in her lap. Out of her pack Miranda removed a stringy bundle and carefully unrolled it.

“This is our fishnet,” Miranda explained. “You know, we are going to have to forage for food this summer, and I am going to teach you to help me.”

Her attention pleased Elendra, who was content to watch her mother fix holes in the net. Miranda mended the net until it grew dark. Once the children were sleeping, Miranda stayed awake staring into the comforting flames. In the darkness she could hear the creek gurgle by. Occasionally

she caught the sound of a fish jumping, and this reassured her. Eventually she succumbed to her exhaustion, and she slipped into a deep dreamless sleep, holding her knife across her chest.

With the first twitter of a bird she awoke almost in the same position. When she walked downstream to relieve herself, she saw the tracks of a large cat in the muddy bank. This sight disquieted her, and she decided to move on and make a new camp along the cliffs.

After another day riding westward, Miranda found a cave. At first she hesitated to enter the dark quiet space at the base of the cliffs, fearing a bear or panther might dwell within. But seeing no tracks outside, she mustered her courage and went inside. The cave was tall in the front but tapered to a tight passage that cut deeply into the cliff. It would provide decent shelter from rain, and she could build a fire at the entrance to deter large animals. Only a short hike away was the creek, which met the cliff in a splendid waterfall.

Miranda regarded her situation with more confidence. The cave could prove to be an excellent location to camp at for some time, and no one would look for her there. She had escaped the war, and leaving Barlow had eliminated a mouth to feed. She had experience foraging for food because she had often supplemented her family's diet that way. She worried about getting enough meat to fill out their diet, but she planned to fish in the morning.

Evening gathered early so close to the cliffs, and Miranda built a fire. Elendra wandered the outskirts of camp, climbing on boulders. Eventually she jumped down and joined her mother.

Leaning on Miranda, she asked, "Will that net really catch fish?"

"It has before," Miranda replied.

After a thoughtful pause, Elendra said, "Mama, I saw something."

Miranda stopped tending the fire and looked up. "What child?"

"Smoke in the forest, like maybe from a campfire like ours," she answered.

"Show me," Miranda instructed. She got up quickly and followed her daughter.

Their camp was at about the level of the forest canopy and gave them an excellent vantage point. Elendra pointed southeast over the treetops. A

thin line of smoke rose out of the forest, and it had to be from a campfire.

“Who could it be, Mama?” Elendra wondered.

Watching the cliff shadow consume the lower forest, Miranda shook her head. “I do not know. Maybe it is more people escaping the war. In the morning I will go see who it is. Right now it is getting too dark.”

That night Miranda did not dwell on her fear of being alone in the Wilderness, but rather she feared who was with her in the Wilderness. The next morning she delayed her fishing in order to go examine the nearby camp. Initially she wanted to observe the camp undetected in case the people were hostile. To do this required stealth, and Miranda could not take the children. This decision came to her hard because she dreaded leaving the children, but she had to know who was out there. She hoped they were more refugees and they could all camp together for greater protection.

When Miranda explained that she would depart for a couple hours, Elendra gasped and seized onto her mother’s skirt. Terrified, the girl begged her not to go. Miranda let her throw her fit and then knelt to console her daughter face to face.

Brushing Elendra’s black hair out of her teary face, Miranda said, “I have to go and see. Maybe they will be friends, and we will be better off. I will not be gone long. Now you and Esseldan will hide in the cave until I get back. And I will be back.”

Elendra hugged her miserably. “Mama, I’m so scared,” she cried.

“I know, I know. But you are getting to be a big girl, and you have to watch your brother. Now you can do that, right?” Miranda said.

The girl nodded reluctantly.

“I will be back before noon,” Miranda promised cheerily.

6~ Captured ~

Dreibrand was running now. He had lain low all day, even sleeping a little, but with the dusk he sensed that someone was hunting him. The perturbed chatter of birds warned him. Yesterday he would not have thought about birds. Today he did.

He peered around the tree that he had been laying against. He did not see anything through the bright spring foliage, but he heard someone approaching. Quickly, Dreibrand rose and slipped into the saddle. Riding away, he figured a Bosta pursued him, but he had no desire to stay and fight. Soon the night would cover him, and he would reach the Wilderness.

Dreibrand wished he had more food before entering the wild lands, but finding supplies had proved more difficult than he had anticipated. That morning as he rushed away from his old life, he had steered clear of the villages because the Horde was advancing on the settlements. Outside the villages the land was sparsely populated. The first cottage he found had contained no food whatsoever. Its occupants had been thorough before abandoning their home.

At the next farm Dreibrand had better luck. He found grain and hay that quickly renewed Starfield, and he scrounged an actual meal for himself out of the kitchen. Some foodstuffs lingered in the larder, and he shoved all of it into his saddlebags. Feeling very discouraged, he poked through the few possession that had been left behind. He found a small dull hatchet, but gained nothing else useful.

He felt odd rummaging through the abandoned homes all by himself. Usually soldiers would do this type of thing while he watched. The trumpets and drums of his conquering countrymen blared a few elti away, and Dreibrand keenly felt his separation from them. He had become accustomed to living and working inside the Horde, and outside the Horde he was not sure who he was.

For a moment he doubted himself, and thought about going back. It was frightening to hear the Atrophaney assault and not be a part of it. Sternly he told himself to forget his people. The Horde obviously went on without him, and he would go on without the Horde.

His supplies were meager, only a few days of rations really, but Dreibrand resolved to explore the Wilderness as much as he could. He spent the day dozing while the war raged into the valley. Then the nearby noises in the woods had set him going for the night. Dreibrand moved slowly in the darkness. The typical evening chirps and peeps sang in the forest, and he strained his ears for any more sounds of a rider.

It did not take Dreibrand long to convince himself that he was surrounded by riders. Bending low over his horse's neck, he avoided a

hanging branch in the gloom. Starfield was calm, and Dreibrand decided he had to get a grip on his emotions. He was letting the dark forest spook him.

The land became steeper, and sometimes he had to leave the saddle and lead Starfield around rough patches. In the dark he literally groped around obstacles, but he knew he still headed west. When Dreibrand hit a clear space, he checked his progress by the stars.

Late into the night he stopped to rest. The forest smelled moist and clean, and the aroma intoxicated his senses with its purity. Dreibrand tried to remember if he had ever been so alone. He had grown up in civilization and then traveled with the Horde for two years. He had never experienced such a complete isolation.

Dreibrand slept little that night, and when the dawn came he was thirsty. Casually he searched for water, knowing that a stream or spring could not be far in this green land. His slow progress, that had been so frustrating in the night, had gained him more distance than he thought. He was on a ridge halfway between the valley floor and the cliffs.

I am in the Wilderness, he thought with a thrill.

A beautiful land surrounded him. Each mature tree soared and curved like masterful sculptures, and vines and flowers filled the sunny places. He found water readily and it tasted good. Dreibrand washed his face and his skin tingled with awareness.

Smiling at the charming stream, he decided his paranoia had made him hear someone following him. He nibbled some food, then forced aside his hunger. Without looking back he continued westward. The cliffs loomed ahead like the steep walls of a temple, and they called to him as if he was a believer.

Dreibrand gazed up the slope eagerly, taking in every detail of the land. For a space the trees thinned and he could see quite a distance. At the top of the next rise he swore he saw a rider moving into cover. It was a fleeting image, maybe just a shadow tricking his eyes, but it looked like a rider.

I really did hear someone yesterday, he realized.

His clothing and armor clearly designated him as Atrophane, and Dreibrand reasoned that the rider would try to kill him because he was an invader. Deciding to be more cautious, he moved on but it was too late for

stealth. A second rider broke from cover right behind him, and openly made pursuit. Dreibrand hurried Starfield toward a denser portion of the forest, hoping he could lose his trackers in the thicker growth.

For the rest of the morning Dreibrand avoided them. He would circle back and take another route, but they always picked up his trail again. Just when Dreibrand thought he might have slipped away, he would hear the rustle of a rider just out of sight.

Tired of being hunted, Dreibrand decided to confront them. He would make them pay for chasing him. He doubted any Bosta woodsman could cope with his skillful combat. Planning to engage them individually, Dreibrand tried to trail one of them, but his tracking skills were inadequate, and Dreibrand might have been looking at his own tracks.

Finally he heard a rider closing on his position. Dreibrand was no coward and he would end this game. Drawing his sword, he waited. A tall sleek horse of the Atrophaney breed emerged from the trees bearing a rider clothed in the soft browns and greens of an imperial scout.

Dreibrand felt panic and guilt. He recognized Hydax.

Furrowing his brow with suspicion, Hydax called, "What's going on, Lieutenant?" Sarcasm danced with the words.

Knowing if Hydax was there, Gennor was sure to be nearby, Dreibrand glanced in all directions. "Get out of here," he ordered.

"Sir, you need to come back. Have you forgotten yourself?" Hydax asked, moving closer.

Dreibrand threatened him with his sword, and Hydax arched his eyebrows with surprise. "Just say you never saw me!" Dreibrand shouted.

Raising his hands to calm his comrade, Hydax said reasonably, "Lieutenant, you need to come with me. What are you doing here?"

Dreibrand grimaced and his emotions raged with confusion. He did not want to fight Hydax, and he abandoned his plan to stand his ground. Just as he turned, Gennor rode down the slope toward him. With Gennor almost on top of him, Dreibrand galloped off.

Gennor halted and looked sternly at Hydax. "I told you he was a deserter," Gennor said.

"He is mad. He must have eaten some rotten food," Hydax defended.

“Come on, we still have to bring him back,” Gennor said and wheeled his horse around to resume the pursuit.

It was a clean and clear-cut chase. Dreibrand had no lead, and Hydax and Gennor soon rode along each side of him. When Gennor reached for Starfield’s bridle, Dreibrand lashed out with his sword. Gennor narrowly avoided losing his hand. Dreibrand stopped to engage them, and both scouts drew their swords.

At first Dreibrand drove them back with his skillful assault that alternated between riders, but he did not land a killing blow. Dreibrand did not want to hurt these men. He had lived and worked with them for two years. They had followed his orders, and on occasion ate and drank with him. They were Atrophane.

His hesitation to hurt his countrymen cost him dearly. Recovering from the initial onslaught, the scouts stayed on each side of Dreibrand. Without his shield Dreibrand could not fend off both attacks. The flat of a sword smacked the side of his head, and without a helmet to protect him, his senses reeled from the blow. A cut opened on his temple and extended into his scalp. Blood poured over one eye and he felt himself slumping in the saddle. Gennor seized Dreibrand’s sword arm and punched him in the jaw.

With Dreibrand disabled by Gennor, Hydax jumped onto Dreibrand’s back and tackled him from the saddle. Gennor followed them to the ground and stripped Dreibrand of his sword while Hydax held both arms. Gennor tried to grab the ivory handled dagger but Dreibrand kicked the scout.

“Damnit, keep him still,” Gennor complained while wincing at the pain in his knee.

Dreibrand and Hydax were both strong men, but Dreibrand was taller, and he struggled fiercely. Reaching back, Dreibrand pulled the scout’s hair and almost flipped him over his shoulder. Hydax yelled indignantly but managed to keep his hold.

Laughing with pleasure, Gennor popped the tip of his sword under Dreibrand’s chin, which got his attention.

“Surrender or die,” Gennor promised.

Dreibrand blinked at the blood and sweat running into his eyes, and he

accepted the superiority of the steel at his throat. Gennor removed a leather thong from his gear and held it out to Hydax.

“Don’t try anything, Lieutenant Veta,” warned Gennor.

Dreibrand trembled with the energy for an escape, but Gennor pressed the sword against the vulnerable flesh of the neck, drawing a careful line of blood. Believing that Gennor’s threat was sincere, Dreibrand suffered the indignity of having his hands bound.

Gennor snatched the ivory handled dagger and tossed it by Dreibrand’s confiscated sword.

“You cannot treat me like this,” Dreibrand said.

Gennor put his sword away and abruptly pushed Dreibrand. With his hands tied behind his back, Dreibrand staggered back, off balance, until he stumbled to the ground. Gennor pounced on him and immediately started undoing the buckles to the chestplate armor.

“What are you doing?” Hydax inquired nervously.

“Teaching this excuse for an officer a lesson. I know a deserter when I see one,” Gennor answered while yanking the armor away from Dreibrand’s torso.

“Maybe not,” Hydax said. He had known Dreibrand Veta to be an outstanding officer and he suspected that Dreibrand could have cut him a couple times in the fight, but had restrained himself.

“I’ve watched him skulk around since yesterday. He’s a skulking deserter,” Gennor concluded and punched Dreibrand in the stomach. After slugging Dreibrand a few times, he stepped back.

“Get up,” he ordered.

More out of a hopeless desire for escape than a wish to comply with his captor, Dreibrand lurched awkwardly to his feet. Gennor had a couple quit punches waiting for him just as he achieved some balance. Dreibrand’s head throbbed and he could not see straight.

“Hold him for me,” Gennor suggested.

Hydax hesitated. “Come on Gennor, Veta was always square with us. Everyone likes him. He doesn’t deserve this.”

Dreibrand appreciated hearing such a glowing report on his popularity, but he doubted it could do much for him now.

“I don’t need you,” Gennor said. He charged Dreibrand and pinned him against a tree, landing several punches until he got tired and stepped away.

Gasping for air Dreibrand sagged against the tree. His clenched muscles sang with pain. In his extensive combat training he had learned how to take a few lumps, but the bruises would be deep.

Pleased by the results of his exertions, Gennor said, “Let us make a camp and get some rest.”

~

Although no smoke was rising in the morning, Miranda remembered the location of the camp from the night before. She went on foot because riding Freedom would be too noisy.

Securing her knife in her sash, she trotted into the woods. Once she was alone and surrounded by the trees, a nervous feeling settled over the back of her neck. Without the company of her children and the horse, the forest seemed closer and more aware of her as a newcomer. As she went, Miranda listened carefully for any threatening sounds and often looked back.

A strong warm wind surged up from the south, becoming amplified so close to the cliffs. When Miranda judged that she neared the campsite, she stopped walking openly and stayed near trees and shrubs. After creeping along for a while, she thought maybe she had gone too far. Having no desire to become disoriented, Miranda paused behind a tangle of vines.

The wind pushing through the trees lulled, quieting the leafvoices for a moment and allowing her to hear human voices. Silently she slipped between the vines toward the bright sun of a clearing. Staying in the deep shadow of the overhanging foliage, Miranda crawled up to the edge of the clearing where the grass started. On the other side of the glen she saw the camp.

A freshly killed deer hung from a tree, and a man prepared to clean the carcass. Another man stood nearby with his arms folded. She heard their voices clearly now, but the words were not her language. By their unfamiliar clothing Miranda suspected that they were Atrophane. Her heart sank. These men frightened her and they could offer her no assistance.

Miranda was about to creep away when she heard a third voice. Driven by curiosity, she peeked farther out of the shadows and saw a third man sitting on the ground and apparently tied to a tree. He wore blue clothing and black boots. Even at a distance the quality of the garments was apparent to her.

But the prisoner's fine clothing was dirty and his long hair hung in tangles. Intrigued by the prisoner, she wondered if the bound man was an Atrophane, but that did not make sense. Perhaps he was a wealthy lord from the valley.

He looks richer than anyone around here, she concluded.

Also all three horses were taller and stronger than the local Droxy breed, indicating that they were foreigners. Miranda could not understand why they were there. The war was far behind in the valley, and why would Atrophane have an Atrophane prisoner? Pondering this mystery, she continued to observe them.

~

Dreibrand kicked at the dirt in frustration. His shoulders ached from being in an unnatural position all night tied to a tree, and his skull had turned into a vessel of punishment. Blood had dried on his temple where Gennor had felled him with the flat of his sword.

Hydax and Gennor had performed their duty marvelously. They were expert scouts, and Dreibrand would have sent them on this mission himself. The humiliation of capture stung Dreibrand deeply, but he had not lost hope. They would have to move him eventually, and he would try to escape. He could tell Hydax was sympathetic to him, and maybe he could convince Hydax to let him go. For now he planned to coax some food out of them, so he could get his strength back.

“Can't you hurry up with that deer?” Gennor asked.

Hydax turned from cleaning the animal and laughed. “Oh, stop sweating me. We won't be leaving until tomorrow anyway.”

“I still say we shouldn't have taken time for your pleasure hunt today. Lord Kwan did not send us out here for a holiday,” Gennor maintained.

“Why don't you gather some wood instead of standing there?” Hydax said, annoyed.

“Yes, Gennor, why don't you gather some wood?” Dreibrand interjected.

“I, for one, am looking forward to dinner.”

Gennor turned and said, “Well, look who’s finally talking. How about I knock you around some more? You just shut up and be a nice officer.”

Hydax gestured to Dreibrand with his knife. “I actually feel sorry for you Lieutenant Veta. You’ll think me and Gennor were a basket of flowers after Lord Kwan gets you. He did not look happy about you not showing up to work.”

“I am sure Lord Kwan hardly misses me,” Dreibrand grumbled.

“Oh! Lord Kwan misses you. He was terribly worried about you in fact. I think he wants to give you a promotion,” Gennor joked, and even Hydax had to laugh at that one.

Warming up to his humor, Gennor put a hand across his chest and bowed to Dreibrand. “I would like to thank you, Sir. I never thought I’d get the privilege of smacking up an officer.”

Dreibrand scowled, weary of the ridicule, but he continued, “I had no idea you bore me so much animosity, Gennor.”

Gennor shrugged. “Nothing really personal, Dreibrand. Just all these high-class officers. I risk my life more than the officers, but they get the huge estate grants,” he explained.

“I have never hung back in battle. I take the same risks as my men,” Dreibrand defended proudly.

“Except yesterday,” Gennor said.

Dreibrand truly had nothing to say to this, and he hung his head. He did not hang his head in shame, but in thought. He felt indifferent to the duties he had ignored yesterday and remained loyal to his decision to work for himself outside the strictures of Atrophaney society.

Retreating into his sense of humor, Dreibrand said, “I was so eager to see the Wilderness, I guess Droxy slipped my mind.”

Gennor smirked, undecided on whether he wanted to chuckle.

Stepping back from the gutted deer, Hydax said, “Well it did not slip Lord Kwan’s mind. What are you gonna tell him?”

“What are you going to tell him?” Dreibrand asked and looked both his captors in the eyes.

“Oh, I don’t believe this,” Gennor scoffed. “You want me to lie for you? What could you possibly have to offer me, Veta?”

“Come on Gennor, I have always been good to you guys. All you have to say is you never saw me and let me go,” Dreibrand proposed optimistically.

“Where are you going?” Hydax inquired.

“I am exploring the Wilderness on my own. Lord Kwan wanted to send me back to Atrophane, so I am through with the Horde,” Dreibrand answered, and when he said the words, they sounded absurd.

Hydax frowned with disbelief.

“Come with me, Hydax. I could really use your expertise,” Dreibrand said.

“You are crazy,” Gennor complained. When he noticed Hydax seemed to be considering Dreibrand’s idea, he shouted, “If you run off too, I’ll make sure Lord Kwan gets you back.”

“Think about it, Gennor,” Dreibrand commanded. “You were just complaining about high class officers getting the most land. Well, here is your opportunity. Look at the Wilderness. It is just waiting to be taken. You can have all you can hold.”

For an instant Gennor appeared intrigued, and Dreibrand thought maybe he had convinced him. He would never know.

Suddenly the horses neighed nervously and began to pull at their tethers. The scouts looked around but did not see anything. Panic set in on the horses now, and they were screaming and breaking loose. Gennor ran to the grab the trailing lines of the horses.

A terrible shriek ripped through the forest. Dreibrand felt himself break out in a cold sweat and he tried to stand up by inching his back up the tree. The scream pierced the air again, audibly closer. A terrible danger was coming and Dreibrand started to struggle at his bonds.

A huge beast erupted from the forest and charged Hydax, who stood closest to the hanging deer. The creature had the form of a man but it was taller and had long hulking arms. Dark hair covered its body, and a long golden brown mane flowed from the head and face. The face was not human. Its long snout ended in bared yellow fangs, and its eyes gleamed with bestial intelligence.

Hydax stumbled back from the assault and held his butcher knife out in a futile defense. The beast knocked the knife out of his hand and tackled him. Hydax's scream was the note of pure terror that quickens the blood of every predator. He tried to hold the jaws away from his neck, and the creature sank its teeth into his shoulder. It shook him wildly, and Hydax wailed and beat on its head.

Gennor gave up catching the horses to help his comrade. He charged the back of the beast with his sword raised, but the keen senses of the animal must have warned it of Gennor's onslaught. It threw Hydax down and whirled on Gennor. Without any fear it faced Gennor and craftily dodged the sword, receiving only a small wound. This drawing of blood enraged the beast and it howled with elevated viciousness.

The ugly carnivorous face unnerved Gennor, and he sprinted away. The beast bounded after him, determined to punish the man who had cut it.

Hydax moaned and rolled near Dreibrand's feet. The scout clutched his shoulder and blood poured onto the ground. He tried to gain his feet but fell weakly to his knees.

"Cut me loose," Dreibrand begged. "You have to cut me loose."

Hydax did not respond. Dreibrand trembled in genuine terror and struggled in his bonds. The coarse leather cut hotly into already raw wrists. At this moment he understood completely the trapped animal that could chew its own foot off. In overwhelming consternation Dreibrand fought at his bonds almost to the point of convulsing.

"Hydax! Cut me loose!" he cried desperately. "Don't leave me like this."

Hydax seemed oblivious to his pleas. He crawled toward his gear where his bow and quiver set. From the other side of the clearing Dreibrand heard an agonizing cry and saw Gennor fall fatally beneath the beast's fury. After ravaging Gennor for a few seconds, the beast tossed the body aside and returned to its unfinished victim. Hydax fumbled painfully with his bow, but his wounds disabled him too much. The monster sprang onto the scout and began to chew up his head.

This horrible scene strangled Dreibrand, and he knew he was next. Every spray of blood and flying chunk of hair from the mortal struggle played out for Dreibrand in slow ugly detail. This was nothing like the heat of battle—where screams, and blood, and death abounded—but a ghastly torture for Dreibrand, whose whole instinct demanded that he not be torn

apart by wild animals.

A sharp pain stung his wrist and his hands fell free. Dreibrand brought his hands up and saw the severed bindings hanging and blood dripping from one wrist. Astounded by this reprieve from fate, he jumped up and fled into the forest. His first few steps faltered on his stiff legs, but terror drove the pain of captivity out of his limbs.

He was amazed to see a woman flying ahead of him, her skirt held high over swift feet. Dreibrand ran madly after her, not daring to look back. Both man and woman raced beyond their normal endurances, driven by the terror that the beast pursued them.

Eventually the woman reeled to a stop and looked back. Blood thudded through her body, and gasping for air, she leaned on a tree. Dreibrand stopped beside her and rested too. They spoke no words, trying only to catch their breath. Gradually the rasping sound of their heavy breathing faded, and the songbirds could be heard again in the trees, making a safe sound.

“Thank you,” Dreibrand gasped, reaching out to take her hand.

She recoiled from him, and Dreibrand held his hands back in a gesture of peace.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Staring at him suspiciously, she said nothing and moved away. Abruptly Dreibrand realized she did not understand his language. He tried again in the Bosta speech.

“Thank you. I am Dreibrand Veta.”

The woman comprehended him, but she responded in a slightly different dialect. “Do you think it followed?”

Both of them scanned the forest, which now seemed peaceful.

Dreibrand concluded, “I think it would have caught us by now if it was chasing us. Who are you?”

Her green eyes calculated him. Slowly she replied, “Miranda.”

“Thank you for cutting me loose,” he said while he removed the remnants of his bonds.

Uninterested in his gratitude and perplexed by his presence, Miranda started walking away.

Dreibrand trotted after her. "Where did you come from?"

Without pausing she answered, "I had been watching your camp from a hiding place. I came to see who was here, but you are not my people. You are invaders."

"Then why did you free me?" Dreibrand asked. The images of the rampaging beast burned in his head, and he still could not quite believe he had escaped.

Miranda glanced at him. "It was not right that you would have to suffer and die like that. I took a risk and came to cut your bonds. I did not think you would follow me."

"May I follow you?" he said.

"You are Atrophane?" she demanded.

"Yes."

"You came here to conquer Droxy. You are an enemy," Miranda stated.

"I will not harm you. I owe you my life," Dreibrand said earnestly.

Miranda considered his words, but her hesitant features showed that she made no conclusions. "This is not the place for talk. I have to go," she said.

"To a safer place I hope," Dreibrand said.

He followed her. Even though she had not actually given her consent, Miranda tolerated him. Each of them thought more about the frightening beast they had just encountered than about each other. On a subconscious level both of them welcomed the security of human company.

Miranda hiked straight for the cliffs, and the stony heights soon loomed over the trees. A long rocky slope came down from the cliffs to meet the woodland, and Miranda picked her way up the debris of erosion toward her cave.

Ignoring Dreibrand, she raced the last few steps to the cave and darted inside it. At the back of the cave Elendra clutched her little brother, but the shadows could not dim the relief in her eyes upon seeing her mother. Miranda embraced the children and allowed herself one shaky sob.

"Mama, I heard an awful sound while you were away," Elendra reported.

Miranda nodded absently, trying to cope with the existence of such a creature. She knew she could not defend her family from such a thing.

“It is not safe out there,” she said.

Dreibrand darkened the cave entrance and Elendra screamed. Miranda’s already shredded nerves rattled with the child’s shriek.

“It’s all right. It’s all right,” she soothed. “This is...Dreibrand. He was at the camp I went to see.”

Looking around with dismay, Dreibrand said, “You are alone with two children?” Miranda faced him proudly and explained, “We are hiding in the forest from the Atrophane.”

He could not miss her accusatory tone, and he did not know how to respond to it. Dreibrand was aware that people fled before the Horde, especially desperate women and children. He wanted badly to gain her trust and tell her he was no longer a part of the invading army, but he felt suddenly ashamed of everything about himself.

“I will get your fire going again,” he said and went outside.

Miranda lingered by the cave. The noon sun fell warmly on the cliff, and she watched Dreibrand forage among the abundant brush, gathering wood. She was content to let him do it. At that moment she lacked the courage to go near the forest. She had not expected the warnings about the Wilderness to become so vividly true.

7~ Partnership ~

Dreibrand assembled a mighty supply of wood and intended to keep a hearty blaze going all night. As he set down his last armful of firewood, he almost toppled to the ground.

“I hope that thing is afraid of fire,” he said breathlessly.

Standing in the cave entrance, Miranda observed the smear of dried blood on his head. He did not look well, and she had little hope that he would leave.

“Why is he here?” Elendra whispered.

“I think he needs help,” Miranda whispered back.

“I am scared of him. Make him go away,” Elendra insisted.

Miranda hushed her daughter. Leaving Esseldan in his basket, she shyly approached the new member of her camp.

“Thank you for gathering all that wood,” she said sincerely.

Dreibrand nodded painfully and gingerly touched his temple.

“What was that thing?” he said.

Miranda looked at the forest and the cliff shadow creeping across the trees. “I think it must be a fenthakrabi,” she answered hesitantly as if saying the name of the beast would make it appear.

“How do you live with such a thing?” Dreibrand wondered.

“I have never seen it before. I have heard stories. But I never really believed.” Miranda explained.

“Believe what?” Elendra asked impatiently.

Miranda had not realized the child could overhear and answered carefully, “There was a wild animal in the forest today. I...I did not get a good look at it.” She held back a shudder as she recalled the dreadful creature.

Dreibrand realized Miranda was trying to spare her daughter the gruesome details, and he dropped the subject. His exertions of the past days had caught up with him, leaving him dizzy.

“I heard you say fenthakrabi,” Elendra boldly pressed her mother.

“Say no more. Go sit by your brother,” Miranda ordered.

Elendra pouted and obeyed slowly.

“She’s a strong-willed girl,” Dreibrand commented.

“She wants me to make you go away,” Miranda said abruptly.

Dreibrand did not blame her for that reaction. Although he did not feel threatening, he had come to this country as an invader, and as Miranda had said, he was an enemy. This woman had no reason to help him further. Saving his life had been remarkably generous.

“Yeah, I understand. Let me trouble you no more,” he said and started to haul himself wearily to his feet.

“No, sit down,” Miranda insisted quickly. “I do not obey my daughter.

She obeys me. You need to stay. It will be dark soon.”

Miranda did not need to include the implications of the coming night. Exhausted, hurt, and without a weapon, Dreibrand had little desire to face the forest alone.

“Your wounds need attention,” Miranda noted.

Dreibrand regarded the red lines around his wrists where the bindings had held him tightly for a day and a night. Blood had clotted all over his right wrist, where Miranda had cut him free.

“Sorry I cut you,” Miranda offered.

Tiredly, Dreibrand smiled. “Not a problem,” he said.

“What about your head?” she asked, eyeing the ugly cut.

“I have already lived with that for a day. Trust me, Miranda, it is better than it was,” he said.

“It is not that much better,” Miranda decided firmly.

She rummaged a clean rag from her pack and retrieved her canteen. Wetting the fabric, she began gently washing his cuts. Dreibrand relaxed happily under her ministrations.

“You must be a forest nymph who has carried me away,” he said dreamily. “Or maybe I died back there and this is paradise.”

Sitting back, Miranda rinsed out the rag. “I assure you I am no spirit of the wood and you are very much alive,” she said.

Dreibrand sighed. “You are so kind to help me.”

Miranda made no reply. She did not quite understand her motivations for helping him. She assumed it had to be pure sympathy.

“What are you doing here?” Dreibrand inquired.

“I already told you I hide from the war,” she replied with specific hostility.

Dreibrand tried quickly to restore her good will and corrected his question. “I mean, why are you alone with your children? Where is your husband?”

A savage gleam filled her eyes, and Dreibrand instantly regretted the question, realizing her husband probably fought the Atrophane as they spoke.

But the hate that flared out of her soul was not directed at him. Rigidly she replied, "I have no husband."

Good news, Dreibrand thought and said diplomatically, "That happens."

Discarding the subject, Miranda said, "We need to eat."

More good news for Dreibrand, made evident by the grumblings of his stomach.

She fed her daughter first, before offering Dreibrand his plate. "I have very little food to share. I had hoped to fish today, but I never got to it," she explained.

Dreibrand saw his hand shake when he reached for the plate, and he hated how ragged he felt. With an endearing smile he said, "As hungry as I am, I am glad that you did not go fishing today."

Then he plunged into his food, greedy in his hunger. He realized that to know the Wilderness he would have to become tougher.

About halfway through his meal, Dreibrand realized that Miranda and her daughter were staring at him. A critical curiosity shone from the dark eyes of the little girl. Elendra sucked crumbs off her fingers as she regarded him with an aloof expression that did not quite fit her cute face.

"What is your name?" Dreibrand asked.

Elendra turned her gaze to her mother, who answered, "This is Elendra, and my son is Esseldan."

"I like those names," Dreibrand responded.

"Mama, he talks funny," Elendra declared.

"Do not talk to people like that," Miranda snapped, fearing the comment would anger the man.

Dreibrand chuckled, "I get that all the time. I promise to work on my Bosta, Elendra."

His good-natured reply relaxed Miranda somewhat, and she explained to Elendra, "Our language is not his language."

"Your Bosta sounds a little different than how I learned it," Dreibrand commented.

Miranda shrugged. "I am not a Bosta. I originally lived south of the

Bosta territory in Ciniva.”

Dreibrand recalled the area and nodded with understanding. The dialect in Ciniva lingered in Miranda’s speech.

He finished eating and after thanking Miranda again, he proposed, “Do not worry about the food. Tomorrow I will go back to the camp and scavenge. They had decent supplies and hopefully I can find Hydax’s bow. Then I can hunt for you.”

This plan surprised Miranda. “You would help me like that?” she asked doubtfully.

“Yes, Miranda. You saved me from a horrible death. I want to show my gratitude, and I want to eat also.” Lowering his voice, he glanced at the children. “Anyway, I think maybe you could use help.”

Miranda cast her eyes down in worry. She felt naturally inclined to like Dreibrand, but she never felt inclined to trust anyone.

I am not in a position to turn down help, she admitted to herself.

“But it will be too dangerous. That thing will still be there,” she whispered.

“Probably nearby,” he conceded. “But I have to go back for the food and gear. And my weapons are lying on the ground.” In Atrophaney he moaned, “I pray to Golan I can find Starfield.”

Mixed emotions tore through Miranda. She was afraid of the beast and no longer wanted to be alone. Although she was wary of him, Dreibrand’s presence did comfort her. The thought of supplies from the unfortunate camp had appeal as well.

“I would go now, but I have to rest,” Dreibrand said. He stretched out beside the fire and with a sigh closed his eyes.

As he dozed fitfully, Miranda reassessed her situation. She had not expected to save a strange man’s life, especially an Atrophane. She wondered if Dreibrand really intended to return with scavenged supplies, assuming the fenthakrabi did not kill him. By the quality of his clothing Miranda suspected that he possessed some rank among his people, but the reason for his captivity she could not guess. She resolved to find out later why a wealthy Atrophane would be the prisoner of his own people out in the Wilderness. For now he could rest, but until she knew more, she could not make a reliable judgment of him.

Miranda collected her children and the horse and went to the waterfall. Freedom drank and grazed happily on the fresh vegetation. The water roared down from the high cliff, sending out a cooling spray, and Miranda fished downstream where the water calmed itself briefly into a deep pool. She strained her ears for any sound of the beast, but hoped that it still fed on its earlier victims and would not be hunting.

Elendra sensed the stress in her mother and stayed close. The afternoon faded, and no fish rewarded Miranda's efforts. Discouraged and afraid, Miranda looked at the sun above the cliffs and wished she could be up on that high land. It seemed safer up there.

Dreibrand heard the small family returning to the camp and opened his eyes. His face was in the dirt, and he pushed himself up slowly. The beating from yesterday had matured into a deep and thorough discomfort, but his nap had eased the headache slightly. The dry gravelly taste in his mouth bothered him the most and he felt complete gratefulness when Miranda dangled her canteen over him.

"You save me again," he mumbled and took the water.

Miranda busied herself building up the fire. Dusk passed into night and they ate another small meal. Brooding on his situation, Dreibrand scanned the darkening forest with his blue eyes.

Elendra fell asleep by the fire, and Miranda wrapped a blanket around her. After discreetly feeding her son, she slipped the baby into his basket.

Dreibrand added wood to the fire and gestured for her to sit next to him. Miranda seated herself but not particularly close to him.

Before he could start the conversation, Miranda announced, "I am going to ask you questions now."

"What do you want to know?" he said with a friendly tone.

"Why were you a prisoner?"

Dreibrand kept looking at her but was slow to reply. Finally he answered, "I am—I was an officer in the Atrophaney military. I served Lord General Kwan, who is a powerful Hordemaster. His orders displeased me and I left in a fit of rage. I was stupid."

He shifted his gaze to the flames and shook his head. His narrow escape from death that day made him realize how much he had given up. No army surrounded him now, and his vulnerability in this Wilderness was

total.

“What were your lord’s orders?” Miranda pressed for details.

Dreibrand gave into the urge to confess the rest of his foolishness to this strange woman. She was the closest thing he had to a friend. “After we conquered Droxy, I was to escort the chattel caravan back to Atrophane, present Darmar Zemthute II with his share, and distribute the rest to Lord Kwan’s estates,” he explained. Even now, he did not want to go back to Atrophane.

“You would actually see the Darmar of Atrophane?” Miranda asked in shock.

He nodded modestly, but privately enjoyed the fact that she was impressed.

“And you run away from this honor?” she asked incredulously.

“It is more a chore than an honor, but I suppose it meant Lord Kwan trusted me,” Dreibrand said. “I got upset because I did not want to go back to Atrophane. I wanted to stay here and be with the first Atrophane to explore the Wilderness. But Lord Kwan ordered me back home.”

“Those men that captured you were sent by your Lord Kwan to bring you back,” Miranda concluded.

“Yes. I was ill prepared and could not fight them off,” Dreibrand said. Discussing his capture embarrassed him.

Miranda found his story strange. “Why would you leave? You are obviously a rich lord,” she observed.

This comment made Dreibrand laugh, which made his sides hurt more. That Miranda thought he was a wealthy lord amused him greatly.

His mood much lightened, Dreibrand ended her confusion. “Oh Miranda, I am not a rich lord. The House of Veta is waning and destitute. These nice clothes you see are all I have, except for my horse and sword lost in the forest. My family has only one estate left, and that is mismanaged by my incompetent father.”

“One estate sounds like a lot to me,” Miranda commented.

“Not when your family used to have seventeen,” Dreibrand explained.

Her mouth opened with astonishment. Such wealth Miranda had never really imagined. “How could your family lose so much?” she asked.

The question made Dreibrand uncomfortable and Miranda apologized, “I am sorry. I ask too much.”

“Actually it is nice to meet someone who does not know,” he said. “I might as well tell you.

“Twenty-three years ago my grandfather assassinated the Minister of the Treasury because with the position empty, the Darmar at the time was certain to choose my grandfather as the replacement. The Treasury post is a very important position in the Empire. Back then my family was rich and respected, and the assassination would have been forgotten, except that one of my grandfather’s rivals uncovered the plot.

“Faced with the evidence, the Darmar could not ignore my grandfather’s crimes, and the Darmar had him executed. In addition, nine of our estates were forfeited to the Darmar. Other estates were seized and distributed to other nobles. Since then, the Empire has officially censured the House of Veta for seven generations, and to make matters worse my father has squandered our fortune. I have no inheritance, and our last remaining estate is reserved for my worthless older brother. He is a spoiled failure who wastes money in gambling houses and brothels.”

Now that Dreibrand spoke about his family, he felt better about being stranded in the forest with a dangerous beast.

Miranda found it intriguing that people who had everything could make such problems for themselves, but she could empathize with a bad family life that had no future.

“I have a few questions about the Atrophane Horde,” Miranda continued.

Dreibrand looked at her attentively, and she asked, “If I had stayed in Droxy with my children, would your soldiers have killed us?”

This question caught Dreibrand off guard. He did not want to imagine Miranda at the mercy of marauding soldiers.

“You could have been killed,” he admitted. “But they would have wanted to take you alive. You would be a valuable slave.”

“Is that how you see me?” Miranda demanded angrily.

Dreibrand noted her defensive tone and her presence in the forest suddenly made more sense. War turned people into slaves, but it also gave slaves an opportunity to run away.

“Anyone can be a slave,” Dreibrand said.

“I am not a slave,” Miranda insisted.

Reacting to her sharp tone, he inquired, “Who has been hitting you?”

Miranda parted her lips, but faltered, uncertain what to say.

“Before you deny it, I saw the bruises on the side of your face when you cleaned my wounds, and the cut still shows on your lip,” Dreibrand said.

Her hand strayed to the bruise near her ear. She noted that Dreibrand was a very observant man, and not easily lied to. “I guess you could say I deserted too,” she conceded.

Dreibrand appreciated her subtle admission.

“Enough talk of me,” she declared, taking back control. “Would the Atrophane have killed my children?”

It disturbed Dreibrand to hear her questions. After expanding the Empire for two years, he had seen atrocity. “Sometimes children get killed,” he murmured.

Finally Miranda felt justified in her actions. Fleeing into the Wilderness was perhaps foolish, but it may have saved her children’s lives.

“Do you kill children?” she added coldly.

“No, of course not,” Dreibrand answered quickly as if he had a choice. “I am an honorable warrior, not a mad dog.”

Miranda hoped it was true.

After an awkward silence, Dreibrand complimented her actions. “You were wise to stay out of Droxy, but what is your next step?”

Miranda considered her options. “I saw my village burning when I rode up here, and if my former master saw me again, I think he would kill me, so I suppose I will make my way back to Ciniva,” she replied but with an obvious lack of enthusiasm.

“Back to your family?” he wondered.

Miranda frowned as if she had a bad taste in her mouth. “I have no family, except for my father, who sold me into slavery when I was fourteen. I will fend for myself. I can make money in one of the towns,” she decided. Miranda made this plan as she spoke the words and inwardly accepted the means by which she would support her family.

“It does not sound like you have much to go back to,” Dreibrand noted.

“No. But I will go on,” she whispered.

“I have an idea,” Dreibrand said. “We could find the way up these cliffs while things cool down around Droxy.”

“We?” Miranda repeated.

“Yes. I seriously think we should join forces,” he stated. “I want to explore while I am here, and then I will help you get back to Ciniva.”

“Who says I need your help for that?” Miranda argued.

“You will want to avoid the Atrophane, and the Bosta Territory will be under martial law for at least a year. To do this you must stick to the backcountry, which will be occupied by bandits and other desperate sorts. You will not be safe, but I could protect you.”

Miranda had to admit that he gave good reasons.

He added, “And with that fenthakrabi around, we both need someone to watch our backs.”

This reason carried the most weight. Although reluctant to trust him, she had to be practical and conceded the need for a companion.

“You say you can collect weapons from the camp tomorrow?” she said thoughtfully.

“Unless that thing carries weapons—and I hope it does not—I should get my sword, dagger, a bow, and maybe another sword or two,” he responded.

“If you promise to share these weapons with me, I will accompany you—as long as it pleases me,” she stated her terms.

Dreibrand grinned at her caution, admiring the way she conducted herself like a general. “You can have half of everything. I will even teach you how to use a weapon,” he offered happily.

Learning how to defend herself appealed greatly to Miranda. “You will teach me then.”

“We are agreed?” he urged.

“Yes. We will travel together,” she said.

Dreibrand seemed genuinely pleased, but Miranda remained neutral. She would wait to see if he kept his promises.

Next they agreed to split the watch throughout the night. Miranda let Dreibrand rest first because he was hurt. He buttoned his blue silk jacket while curling up on the bare ground, and made a mental note to find a blanket. Before giving in to his exhaustion, he asked sleepily, “Miranda, how can it be that no one lives west of Droxy?”

Hugging her knees and staring alertly into the night, she said simply, “Because anyone who enters the Wilderness never comes back.”

8~ The Queen Sets Her Price ~

She decided to summon her boatman. She was overdue for a trip across the lake to the tomb of her mate.

It was a windy day in the high mountain valley where her race lived. The sun was bright and hot overhead but the wind was sharp and biting coming down from the icebound peaks that disdained the coming lowland summer.

With a thought, she roused the attention of the loyal servant whose duty it was to ferry her over the water. After brief contact with his mind, she felt him promptly respond and head to the boathouse to ready her skiff.

From the terrace that she stood on, she viewed the city along the lakeshore. Beneath her, the blocky tiers of her dark stone Keep descended like a staircase for giants. Her residence dominated the smaller homes and halls of her city built of blue stone quarried from the surrounding mountains. Down in the streets she could see some of her kind moving about their daily routines. Even when close to her subjects, she always saw them as small as she did now.

She turned and went inside. Her vast royal bedchamber was warm and soft after being on the windy terrace. Thick carpets padded the floor. Their rare expensive dyes mingled in a weave of purple, bright yellow, and iridescent green that shifted colors depending on the angle of viewing. Tapestries made by talented artists long dead covered the walls, and large oval crystals embedded in the stone pillars and ceiling beams glowed with blue light. The bedding of her great four-posted bed was disheveled. Her sleep had been troubled recently, and she had arisen early. But instead of summoning servants to attend her, she had paced her chambers and terrace like an animal caged for a show.

She recognized the feeling that unsettled her. In her dreams, it was as if a barefooted intruder prowled her chamber. And waking, she could almost hear the steps behind her.

But it had been so long, so very long since anyone had entered her land from the east. Perhaps it would feel good to release her minions again, but she would look first this time. She would look because it had been so long and even one who had seen the ages could be curious.

She dressed. Her wardrobe filled three rooms, taking up more space than some of the smaller homes in the city. Racks and shelves and mannequins wearing fine gowns populated the rooms and seemed more like a museum collection than a living wardrobe. She selected a soft lamb's wool dress with aquamarines and blue topaz beads sewn into the seams. Long sleeved, high collared, and with a narrow skirt, the dress enhanced her height. She left her long white hair free and loose, and it tumbled about her shoulders like a frozen waterfall. The white dress matched her hair and the jewels picked up the color of her skin the color of a perfect summer sky.

Her Keep was large and she traveled many halls and descended many wide staircases on her way to the ground level. The occasional servant bowed to her as she went. None of them made eye contact as they murmured a greeting to their Queen.

And she spoke to them not at all. Their respect and subservience were what she required of them and she always got both.

She emerged from her Keep next to the lake where a stone pier connected the building to the lake. The ever-lapping waters murmured melancholy rumors to the rocky shore, and the surface of the deep blue lake rippled and glittered in the bright day. Beyond the waters rose the solitary tower that was her destination. Separate from the city, it had been built long ago, before even her birth. Master builders from another age had erected it, making it strong with both the fitting of stone blocks and the strength of their spells. She had enhanced it with magic of her own, protecting it from time, and protecting it from everything.

Her boatman, Hefshul, awaited her on the pier. The wind tugged at his wispy white hair, and, unlike the other servants, he looked at his Queen with black disinterested eyes. His mouth was a thin-lipped straight line and he did not speak. For many silent centuries, he had served his Queen

on her errands across the water.

The small skiff that he would paddle for her bobbed invitingly in the water. Next to Hefshul stood another figure who the Queen burned with an acid glance when she reached the shore. Hefshul bowed immediately, but the other stood straight and met her eyes with a confidence that wished to be her equal.

“Onja, my Queen, what prompts this trip across the lake today?” he asked.

“Do not question my business, Shan,” Onja said. *He has been watching me*, she thought and regretted her agitated pacing earlier that day. She should not have been so obvious about being disturbed. She did not want him nosing into her affairs.

“Take me with you, my Queen. Let me enter the tomb, so sacred to us all,” Shan proposed.

She had only contempt for his audacity. “It is the tomb of my mate. It is not for you. It is my place to be with him,” Onja said.

“He was the King of us all. I would like to show respect. I am sure that others would too,” Shan persisted.

“Your respect is your obedience to me,” Onja told him.

Hefshul watched their interaction. Their speech was civil but the simmering hiss of their hostility bubbled against his senses.

Anger narrowed the black eyes of Shan ever so slightly, but the fires of his powers were not stirred. At last he dipped his head and his black hair streaked with white fell over his face. “As you have taught me, my Queen,” he said.

Onja brushed past him, haughty and satisfied by his submission. “Begone before you anger me,” she commanded.

He complied, but as he moved away from the shore, Onja felt how his mind lingered over her. He would monitor her, she knew, but he would not see within the tower.

She did not need assistance to board the skiff. Her mighty mind cast tiny spells that stabilized it in the water and prevented it from rocking while she settled into the single passenger seat. Hefshul hopped in nimbly and took up his oar at the rear of the boat. Quietly, he paddled and

conveyed his Queen to the tower.

After grounding the skiff onto the gravel shore, he placed his oar patiently across his knees and prepared to wait. He was forbidden to go ashore, and he was alone among his kind in being allowed so close to the tower. Onja never mentioned how long she would be when visiting the tomb of her long-dead mate. Hefshul was expected to be there for her whether she was inside an hour or a week.

Onja walked up to the tower that none of her living subjects had seen the inside of. The timbers of its doors were as sound as the day they had been cut. Once, many visitors had been welcomed by these doors, but now they were locked against the world and admitted only Onja.

Blue light filled her eyes and she murmured the word of opening that controlled the doors. "Keppaneah," she said.

A blue shimmer spread up the timbers and they slowly glided open on great hinges that did not rust. After she entered, the doors automatically shut behind her. The enforced gloom of the tower yielded to her power and the crystals set in the walls of the vaulted hallway glowed when she neared them. The light drove back some of the ancient darkness as Onja walked down the hall and into the empty throne room. Inside this great circular chamber, memories rushed back to her of a time when she was young. She smiled as she recalled vanquishing all of her enemies and casting out the false lords who had built this tower in her homeland and dared to call it theirs.

The interior chamber was open all the way up to the roof, and every level in between opened onto the hollow center of the tower. High above, the daylight came through skylights.

She ascended to the tower's highest level where her mate was interred in a crystal sarcophagus. Skylights opened the upper level to the sunny sky that cast its golden brilliance upon the sarcophagus, making it shimmer as if it was more a part of the heavens than the living world.

Onja approached the sarcophagus and set her hands on it. The massive crystal block was cool but it began to warm to her touch. Within the translucent quartz, she could see her lover, the King, who had been at her side in rich glorious days that only she remembered. She looked down on the King, whose blue body in silver armor refracted crookedly through the crystal.

The sarcophagus became warmer and blue light radiated from her hands and pushed deeper into the rock. The same blue light emanated from Onja's eyes that ceased to blink or to see her immediate surroundings.

"Dacian, help me see. Help me see as far as we can," she said out loud.

Inside his body there remained power. His great power had once enticed her with its magnificence. His strength had been irresistible, something she had to possess, always.

In her mind, she spoke to him again. "*Dacian, more. I want to see them,*" she commanded.

Onja meditated. Her mind could see far beyond herself and deploy her magic throughout her realm. With her mind's eye she searched eastward, out of her mountain kingdom and onto a rolling prairie where animals roamed and lived without the knowledge of humankind. Then she entered an area shunned by life, where no animals burrowed or grazed or hunted. Sad standing stones dotted the forsaken stretch of prairie. From the stones, the cold breath of thousands of souls called to her. The lifeforce of their mistress had not touched them for over a century, and the dead voices of the damned wailed to her for freedom.

Onja moved over them, ignoring their calls and giving them no commands. As she pushed farther, the land blossomed again beneath her awareness. Crossing such distances in her mind wearied her and she drew deeply upon her inner strength and demanded more of Dacian, who gave.

"*You were always so giving,*" she told him sweetly.

A virgin forest began to encroach upon the prairie as she traveled farther south and east. Old trees grew in a place that knew no axes. This was her gift to the land. She protected it. The filthy refugees who had scrambled from her wrath so long ago like so many rats had never been allowed to scurry back close to her domain.

But they were sniffing their way back again. Eventually humans always came back. She pushed her mind as far as it would go, and to feel her limit sickened her, but she could see whose feet had been treading at the edge of her mind. Struggling to maintain the clarity of her vision, she looked upon fresh green shrubs and grasses flourishing in a place of charred trees. Here, she spied two horses bearing riders – a man with a woman and children.

Children, she thought and focused on their small lifeforces. They were so vibrant, glowing still from the fires of their creation. As she strained against the distance, the children made her feel her age. They beckoned her with their sweet innocent vitality, and she was glad that she had looked.

Greed urged her to grant the intruders mercy, and she chose not to set loose her minions to cleanse her land as she had always done before. The price for entering her land this time would be different from death.

While enjoying the glow of the children's lifeforces, Onja examined the adults. The minds of the man and woman were foreign to her and she had to concentrate to decode their thoughts in languages unknown to her. But their secrets and desires were there to find. After laboring deep in her grueling meditation, her crafty mind set lures in the thoughts of the adults and she would eventually hook them to her will and make them come to her.

"Come, come, just a little farther. So much to see. Nothing for you to go back to," she whispered until her words echoed in the subconscious of each unsuspecting human. Their longings were easy to nudge in her direction. The man wanted to explore and find a new path for his life, and the woman wanted only escape.

"Bring them!"

When her seeds were planted, she extracted her mind from the humans and began the long climb out of her trance. The Wilderness fell away from her inner vision and she flew through darkness as her mind sought to reunite with her body.

Onja was weak when she finally saw through her own eyes again. Blue fires dwindled in her pupils to just flickers. She was on her knees with her torso draped across the sarcophagus. She could not lift her head. The tower was dark except for the pulsing blue light swirling around Dacian in his crystal case. Stars watched them through the skylights.

Onja finally shut her eyes and severed her connection with her entombed mate. The crystal against her face was cooling but she could still feel him inside it. He had given her strength and she had fed on it greedily, but his mind had been silent. She could take much from him, but she had never been able to take his thoughts unless he chose to share them.

She worked on renewing her flesh with long deep breaths. She was tired and would sleep well when she returned to her bedchamber. She had seen who had entered her Wilderness. The tiny wandering family might give her much sport, and she smiled as she anticipated their arrival.

9~ Possibilities in a New Land ~

By night or by day

If from rules you stray

The demons of the wood

Will take you for good

To where no men go

A place only for Gods to know.

—Bosta nursery rhyme

The first day of their partnership began in dispute. When Dreibrand asked to borrow Miranda's knife, she opposed him vehemently.

"I need it to cut down a sapling and sharpen it into a spear. I will give it right back," he explained with exasperation.

Miranda rested her hand protectively on the knife in her sash. "I will not give you my knife and leave myself with nothing," she stated.

"But I must have something before I go. My bare hands are not enough," he argued.

"I will make it then," Miranda offered.

Dreibrand exhaled with frustration and demanded, "Why can't you trust me with the knife? Do you think I will hurt you? You should already trust me. You slept last night during my watch. I could have done anything to you."

"I only had my eyes closed," Miranda corrected.

Reluctantly, Dreibrand abandoned his anger and grinned. *You were sleeping for a little while*, he thought, but respected her bluff.

"Fine. Then can I borrow your horse?" he inquired.

Miranda scowled at the absurdity of his request.

Refusing to accept an impasse, Dreibrand reasoned, “We need to trust each other. Miranda, I know a lot of people are mean, but I will not hurt you. You saved me yesterday.”

Gradually the opposition drained from her defiant gaze, and she held out the knife for him. When he took it, Miranda quickly stepped back. Dreibrand grumbled a thank you and immediately went to hack down some saplings. He sharpened two into crude spears and gleaned some confidence from the pointy sticks.

He returned the knife to Miranda, presenting it handle first. She snatched it back without offering any words of apology for her suspicion.

Taking a deep breath, Dreibrand mentally prepared himself to hike into the forest. The fearsome fenthakrabi had to be in the vicinity and he felt stalked already.

“I will be back as quick as I can,” he said.

Hesitantly, Miranda wished him luck and he started down the rocky slope. Before entering the forest, he turned and waved. Miranda had to admit that he possessed bravery to return to the scene of yesterday’s carnage.

The day dragged and Miranda stayed vigilant, watching the trees and dreading the hellish scream of the beast’s attack. Despite her terror of the beast, they had a pressing need for food, and Miranda had to go fishing. While walking to the creek, Miranda decided she must be practical and warn her daughter of the danger. She explained that a large predator was somewhere in the forest, and if it attacked, Elendra must grab her brother and run.

Elendra took the news well because she had already assumed as much. The little girl was scared but she could cope with the fear because her mother was with her. Hiding in the cave the day before had been much harder.

Today, Miranda had better luck and netted six fish. To her hungry eyes, they looked like a tempting feast and she cleaned them quickly and threw the waste into the moving water.

The fish made an especially delicious lunch after days of old bread and dried fruit. Miranda left two fish in the pan, intending them for Dreibrand, but he had not returned yet.

“Is that man gone for good?” Elendra inquired, obviously hopeful that his departure had been permanent.

With a shrug, Miranda said, “He is supposed to come back.”

The afternoon drifted by, and Miranda worried that he had been killed. With this thought came the realization that she had wanted his company. His presence the night before had been reassuring, and she had enjoyed his willingness to help. Now she had to face being alone in the Wilderness again, and this time she knew the fenthakrabi was there.

Fighting off despair, Miranda buried her stress with tasks for the rest of the day. Returning to the creek, she washed her children and herself. The water was cold and invigorating, and it felt good to be clean. The water poured down from the Wilderness, and Miranda stood naked beneath the waterfall that washed away her old life.

Next, Miranda altered her clothes. Her long skirt did not suit her for riding or moving about the forest, and she sewed it into pants. Every few stitches, she would look up, watching for danger, but she managed to finish the last of the stitching before the daylight faded.

Elendra laughed at her when she put them on, but Miranda was rather pleased with the results. She enjoyed the secure feel of the cloth around her legs and the ease of movement.

After building the fire up big and bright, Miranda took little comfort from it. She found herself pacing and trying to sort out her dilemma. She knew she was defenseless against the creature, but back in Droxy there was war, and worse yet, Barlow.

Finally she sat down by herself away from the fire. As her eyes adjusted to the night, she watched silently. When Freedom nickered, her heart stopped with fear until she realized that the animal did sound afraid. Suddenly flushed with excitement, Miranda ran halfway down the slope just as Dreibrand emerged from the dusky forest. He rode a dappled gray horse, who neighed a reply to Freedom. Tremendous relief massaged Miranda, but now that Dreibrand had actually returned, she reserved her joy from him.

“Sorry I took so long, but I had to track my horse,” Dreibrand patted the thick shoulder of his fine steed. “You did not run all the way back to Atrophane,” he murmured affectionately in his native tongue.

Swinging down from his mount, Dreibrand laid a hand lovingly on the hilt at his hip and said, “By Golan, it is good to have my sword back.”

Miranda noticed he now wore a breastplate of armor and a quiver of arrows was slung over his back. The bow was tied across the bulging saddlebags. Miranda flipped open one of the saddlebags to examine the contents.

Dreibrand was unaccustomed to anyone looking at his things without permission, but he had promised to share and he tolerated her boldness.

“I was able to get most of the supplies the scouts had,” Dreibrand explained. “That beast stuck mostly to the deer, and then it must have dragged off the bodies. But all the gear was untouched.”

“Did you see it?” Miranda whispered fearfully.

“No, thank the Gods.”

“There is food waiting for you. I will tend your horse,” she said, and Dreibrand received the news happily.

He yielded the reins and strode toward the fire, finding his cold fish dinner immediately. Now that he had his gear back and more supplies, Dreibrand felt able to cope with the Wilderness, and it excited him again. He missed the army less and liked Miranda more.

He watched her unsaddle Starfield and tether the horse. She lugged the saddlebags over by the fire and pulled items out so she could look at them in the light.

“Look Elendra, Dreibrand has brought us food,” she said. The girl peeked with interest at the new supplies, but she showed Dreibrand no gratitude. Miranda knew she could not make her daughter like him but the girl would have to learn to tolerate him.

After assessing the foodstuffs, Miranda grabbed the sword that poked out of one of the bags. Dreibrand had wrapped the blade in a couple rags because the scabbard was presumably still attached to Gennor’s missing body. Miranda pulled back some of the cloth and admired the gleam of the blade in the firelight. Holding the weapon made her feel powerful.

“That one is yours,” Dreibrand said.

The quality of the weapon impressed Miranda, who had never possessed anything of value. Next she removed a hatchet and a butcher knife, but

when she found an ivory handled dagger, her eyes lit up.

“I want this too,” she breathed.

Dreibrand gasped slightly and plucked it from her hand before she could react. Tucking the blade into its place on his swordbelt, Dreibrand said, “I did not mean for that to be in there. It is mine”

When Miranda frowned, he snidely added, “You have your own knife.”

She did not reply and thereby conceded the point. Dreibrand had come back and she did not have to be alone. And he had given her a sword. Grinning, she resumed her admiration of the weapon.

“Have you ever shot a bow?” Dreibrand inquired.

Timidly she shook her head.

“I will teach you, but for now I will carry the bow because I will hunt with it,” he said.

“And you will teach me to use this,” she said greedily and held up the sword.

“Sure, but it sounds like you are in a hurry to hurt someone,” he joked.

“I do not want to be defenseless,” she explained.

Dreibrand agreed and added quietly, “I was worried about you all day.”

His soft tone made her feel suddenly shy, and Miranda busied herself with the children. Elendra resisted her mother’s wish to go to sleep and argued against it even as Miranda tucked the blanket around her.

“I am sick of sleeping on the ground,” Elendra complained.

“You will get used to it,” Miranda predicted.

“I want to go home,” the girl whined and Miranda stroked her round cheek with a sympathetic touch. She did not know how to explain that they could not go home. The shack in Wa Gira was probably destroyed, or at least Miranda hoped so.

Miranda hummed a lullaby until her daughter drifted into the peaceful sleep of children. The tender maternal scene intrigued Dreibrand, who had rarely been around such family niceties.

When the girl and baby were asleep, Miranda moved around the campfire to speak with Dreibrand.

“I think we should move from this place. The beast might be very close, and someday soon it will want fresh meat,” she said.

“I agree. And we are still close to Droxy,” Dreibrand reminded.

“So your Lord Kwan will send more men after you?” Miranda asked.

“Maybe in a few days. But he will give Hydax and Gennor a couple more days to report back,” Dreibrand replied.

Miranda eyed his weapons and foreign clothes. Associating herself with a wanted person felt strange, but she supposed runaway slaves who stole horses kept such company.

“So do you know a way over the cliffs?” Dreibrand asked.

Miranda shook her head and appeared dubious about his destination. “Why do you want to go up there?”

“Because it is the Wilderness. You must be curious?” he said with enthusiasm.

Now that she thought about it, she was surprised to find that she was curious.

The firelight bounced up only a tiny portion of the cliff, and Dreibrand stared at the dark rock above. The stars marked the edge of the rocky barrier.

“It does not make sense that this place is uninhabited,” he remarked. “No ocean or desert separates this land from civilization. It is good green land and people should be there.”

“No one has ever come out of the west,” Miranda said.

“But I think people are there,” Dreibrand insisted. “Now that I am seeing for myself how large our world Ektren is, I cannot accept that people only live in one place. I believe more than ever that a great kingdom must be in the west. The Wilderness might be a buffer zone for protection. A frontier without roads or people can be difficult for an army to cross.”

His theory amused Miranda, who had never heard such an idea before. “Or it may just be an empty haunted land, like everyone says,” she suggested, thinking of the fenthakrabi.

Dreibrand frowned because he thought his explanation the most plausible. With clear skepticism he said, “I have also been told that

thousands of years ago, Gods made war in the Wilderness and now they do not let humans live there.”

“I have heard that one too,” Miranda said.

“Well, maybe after all this time, the Gods will let me live there,” he said.

“You really want to be in the Wilderness,” Miranda observed.

“It is my dream,” Dreibrand confessed. “I feel strangled in my homeland, and I want to start a new life for myself. Where better to do so than a new land?”

“Then which way do you want to go?” Miranda asked.

“Well, it is north or south. I feel inclined to look north,” he said.

“Why north?” she wondered.

Dreibrand shrugged. “I just have a feeling, and I have to choose somehow.”

When Miranda considered his decision, she had no preference in direction. The next morning they rode north and Dreibrand’s eagerness to explore was almost contagious to her. His excitement allayed her fear of the fenthakrabi.

It rained that first night away from the cave, and Miranda endured the exposure. She wrapped Esseldan close to her body and managed to keep him dry. Luckily it was only a mild spring shower, but Elendra complained as if it had been a heavy storm.

Except for this, the next three days passed pleasantly, and they saw no sign of the fenthakrabi, although they kept watch every night. One afternoon they rode into an area that had suffered a forest fire in the past year or two. The land was open, providing a wide view, and covered with young vegetation.

Even though a green layer of renewal blessed the land, the blackened bare trunks of trees claimed by the fire haunted the area.

Dropping back beside Miranda, Dreibrand commented, “I still do not understand why none of your people have migrated here. This land is good. Look how quickly the land recovers.”

“People are afraid. They believe they cannot live west of Droxy,” Miranda explained.

“The Wilderness is where demons take bad children,” Elendra piped in.

Miranda chuckled nervously. Old folktales meant to intimidate children no longer seemed like a wise tactic.

After raising an eyebrow at the girl’s disturbing comment, Dreibrand said, “But you are not afraid to explore?”

“Oh, I am very afraid,” Miranda admitted, “But I am more afraid of war.”

“As you should be, Miranda,” he said darkly, remembering all the cities and towns he had razed.

They developed the habit of making a camp by late afternoon, which allowed enough daylight for Miranda’s archery lesson. Dreibrand did not consider himself a master archer, but he was competent with all standard weapons and a capable teacher. Eager to learn, Miranda took her lessons seriously and progressed rapidly. He taught her how to hold the bow and where and when to pull and release the string. Hydax’s old bow was a bit strong for her, but she managed.

With the hatchet Dreibrand hacked a cross into a tree to provide a target. He gently adjusted her stance before she drew back the string, and then he stepped back while she took her aim. His attention on their task faded and his gaze drifted along her shoulder and down her back. He found himself wanting to put a hand on her hip and maybe rub the small of her back with his thumb.

The string rolled off her fingers and the arrow struck the target. Miranda gasped with delight at her first perfect shot, and Dreibrand snapped out of his daydreams.

“Good shot!” he cried.

Miranda grinned with pride as she trotted to retrieve her arrow.

“Be careful taking it out. These arrows need to last as long as possible,” he called.

After archery practice, they sparred with the swords. Dreibrand taught her the basics of swordplay, which she found very awkward at first. Learning to handle the weapon with finesse and balance would take time Miranda realized.

Dreibrand enjoyed the sparring even though it did not challenge his

skills. When he finished Miranda's lesson, he trained on his own. He worked through a regimen of forms, swinging his sword, lunging, and sometimes he would even switch the weapon from hand to hand while the blade spun perilously. His body moved in graceful conjunction with his weapon, and he pushed his body to go longer and faster. Despite the empty country around him, Dreibrand suspected he would need to defend himself sooner or later.

Most days Miranda watched his display of physical skill, and even Elendra was fascinated by his exercises. As the day withdrew behind the omnipresent cliffs, Dreibrand stopped. He was panting a little and wiped sweat from his brow.

"Dreibrand, when you fight in a battle, is that what you do?" Miranda asked curiously. The speed and poise of his movements looked intimidating, but she could not quite imagine such a ballet taking place in a life and death struggle.

"No, not exactly. But as I practice, my body learns the movements, and I will react to attack in the appropriate way without thinking about it," he explained.

"Have you fought in this way much?" she wondered.

For an instant many episodes of killing and mayhem flashed across his memory, but he spoke quietly despite the intense images. "I have fought in many battles."

"How do you keep from being afraid?" Miranda said with genuine interest. Dreibrand had faced great armies of men and survived, but she had never been able to resist Barlow.

"As an Atrophane, I should say that I have no fear, but that is not true," he admitted. "All I can say is accept the fear—it can make you strong when you need it most. Because the fear cannot be avoided, use it to stay alive instead of letting it get you killed. And, well, the more you survive, the more you thrive on the risk."

While she contemplated his answer, Dreibrand decided, "We should rest here tomorrow. I will go hunting. We need fresh food."

"That is fine," Miranda said absently.

That night around the fire Dreibrand bounced Esseldan on his lap and lifted him playfully into the air. Both man and boy seemed intrigued by

each other, and Esseldan cooed happily from Dreibrand's attention.

"At least one of your kids likes me," he said.

Elendra pointedly ignored the comment.

"He is a good baby," Miranda said.

"You must be proud to have such healthy children," Dreibrand remarked.

"I suppose I am," she muttered.

When Esseldan assumed a crankier mood, Dreibrand placed him in his basket, and the baby actually slipped into sleep. Yawning noisily, Dreibrand stretched his arms. Generally he would sleep soon, and Miranda would take the first watch. He unbuckled his chestplate and groaned when he removed the armor.

"Chest armor can sure save your life, but sometimes it just has to come off," he complained.

After carefully placing his armor on top of his other gear, he took off his fine officer's jacket, which left him wearing a white silk shirt ruined by sweatstains. Smacking some of the dust off the jacket, he offered it to Miranda.

"I thought you could use this. Your clothes are all worn out," he said.

"But don't you need it?" she protested, suspicious of the gift but clearly wanting it.

"No, I still have a good shirt. Now wear this," he insisted.

Hesitantly, Miranda reached out and received the garment. The weight of the richly quilted jacket surprised her. Never before possessing anything but homespun, she fingered the fabric and admired the construction. Slipping it on, she began rolling up the sleeves.

"Thank you," she beamed.

Dreibrand laughed, reminded of a party where a naked dancing girl had frolicked drunkenly in an officer's jacket. He did not share the memory with Miranda.

"I promised to share," he said cheerfully. "Of course you deserve clothing for a fine lady, but this will help for now."

When Miranda looked up from the jacket again, Dreibrand still gazed

at her. Their eyes locked for an instant, but she quickly broke the connection. Dreibrand thought she was beautiful. He wanted to tell her, to touch her, but Miranda had not given any indications that she would welcome any advances. Even when she breastfed her son, she was careful that he never glimpsed a bit of breast.

He did not act on his feelings, deciding that it would be a mistake. Miranda had only started being more relaxed around him, and he did not want to disturb that progress with his common lust.

The next day when Dreibrand went hunting, he spent more time scouting than actually hunting. The land was thick with game, and he was confident that he could shoot something on the way back to camp. Despite his family's declining position, he had grown up as a member of the ruling class and had enjoyed many formal hunting parties.

He hiked north and the land became rougher. From the top of a hill he could see that a range of foothills began, and beyond that rose mountains. This pleased him because at some point the cliff should fade into the hills. At that point he could ascend to the next level of land that looked so violently lifted from the earth.

His efforts were rewarded quicker than he hoped. The mighty rock wall of the cliff became lower and lower as he climbed into the hills, and finally he found the weak point. Crumbling beneath the elements, a broken rocky slope bit deeply into the cliff all the way to the top, and a stream came down in many rivulets. They would have to be careful climbing the eroded slope, but he judged that the horses could manage the path.

Dreibrand lingered, staring at the gap in the cliff, his gateway to the heart of the Wilderness. Excited by the possibilities, Dreibrand wondered what fortunes waited for him above. He longed to climb the cliff immediately but he had traveled farther from camp than usual and he still needed to hunt. The thrill of breaching the barrier would have to wait until tomorrow.

On his way back to camp, he amused himself with thoughts of returning to civilization and knowing the path into the Wilderness. His knowledge would be unique and he could solicit wealthy investors to finance an expedition.

His stomach growled, and Dreibrand had to put aside his schemes. He needed to focus on hunting and he did not want to return empty handed.

He spied a small clique of antelope, and they were a type he had never seen before. With a challenging patience he stalked the tawny animals. Several times the antelope noted his presence and he would freeze. Although nervous by nature, the antelope did not directly associate him with danger. Creeping closer, he finally had a shot.

The arrow pierced the intended calf and the animal dropped to the ground, dying quickly. He rushed to claim his prize but the distressed mother threatened him with curled horns. Dreibrand pulled out his sword and swung it at her. Unwilling to abandon her unfortunate offspring, the antelope was only deterred after several pokes.

Glowing in the accomplishment of a successful day, he presented Miranda with the fresh meat. Providing for her gave him an unexpected sense of satisfaction.

While the meat cooked Dreibrand sharpened his sword with a suitable stone he had collected. Now that he had a fresh kill in camp he worried the scent might draw predators, especially the fenthakrabi. He had specifically made a small kill so they could quickly eat it and be done with it. The leftovers would last a couple days, but the odor of the food would not be overwhelming.

Listening to the stone scrape against the steel made Miranda nervous. Dreibrand's preoccupation with the weapon reminded her of the perils of the Wilderness.

"I found a way up the cliff north of here," he said, not pausing from his work.

"Then you still want to go west?" she asked.

"Yes, a little way. Unless you object," he said.

Actually having someone consider her opinion startled her. What she thought or wanted had never counted before, and Miranda realized that she had been following Dreibrand rather meekly. She needed to think about what she was doing and act upon her thoughts. She was free now, and she repeated that fact in her mind like a lesson.

Exploring westward with Dreibrand did not distress her, but she worried about her children. Elendra was sick of living outside, and the children deserved a home. It hurt knowing that she could not give them a home right now. Returning to Droxy was too dangerous for a number of

reasons, and being free of Barlow had too much appeal.

Heading into new lands gave her an incredible sense of possibility. She could reinvent herself now, and no one would ever look upon her as a poor man's abused property.

"I will go west with you," she agreed. "But you must understand that I must return to civilization before winter."

"Of course, Miranda. I have no intention of freezing on some high mountain. We can head south soon. I will help you get to wherever you want to go. It is the least I can do for having my life saved," he said.

"You have helped us so much already, you do not have to worry about that. Just don't get us lost," she warned.

That night a bright half moon illuminated a clear sky, and a silvery magic light was cast upon the forest. Halfway through Miranda's watch wolves began to have their eerie conversation. The pack's song was a low music that cut through sleep straight into instinct, and everyone woke up quickly. Elendra scrambled into her mother's arms, and Esseldan fretted from the vibe of fear.

Failing to sound reassuring, Dreibrand said, "I do not think they are too close. We should be safe." Rising from the blanket he had salvaged from the scouts' camp, he added fuel to the glowing coals.

Miranda held Elendra tight. "See, Dreibrand thinks we will be fine. The fire will keep them away."

"Are we always going to live outside?" Elendra whimpered miserably.

"We will have a home someday," Miranda promised. "But it won't be for a while. I am sorry."

Elendra only sobbed, but not too loudly in her fear.

"Miranda go ahead and get some rest. I can watch now," Dreibrand suggested. Gesturing toward her bedroll, he encouraged, "Do not worry. You are going to hear wolves in the forest."

Mostly for Elendra's sake, Miranda agreed. The wolfsong went on for many more hours, and Miranda started to appreciate the beauty in the mystic music. They sang to the soul of the Wilderness and it made her heart ache.

She awoke to the sounds of Dreibrand packing his gear. The sun was

high and bright, and she had slept late.

“Nothing bad happened,” he reported cheerfully. “But it is high time we started today.”

Miranda heard the eagerness in his voice and rose stiffly from the ground, wondering when she had fallen asleep. And she had slept soundly, which surprised her.

When they arrived at the washout in the cliff, Miranda looked upon it dubiously. In her eyes the slope appeared loose and treacherous. The rocks were sharp and unstable, and half of them were wet and slippery. They could not risk riding, and the horses would have to be led.

“Race you to the top,” Dreibrand joked.

“I don’t know about this. Are you sure?” Miranda worried.

“Yes.” He tried to be emphatic but he sounded like he was still trying to convince himself. With increased conviction, he continued, “We can make it. It is only going to get rougher unless we get up to the plateau. You can see that it turns into mountains north of here.”

Miranda grinned with shock at his bold words. “You don’t know that,” she argued.

“Come on, Miranda. It is not that bad,” he persisted.

“I said I would go last night,” she reminded him.

Adjusting Esseldan in his sling, she dismounted and helped Elendra down. Dreibrand led them but only a short way up both horses halted in mulish protest. It took considerable effort to persuade the horses to continue.

Their progress was slow, and Dreibrand discovered that finding the path up was a much more meticulous task than he had thought. Sometimes they would have to backtrack when the rubble became too sharp or unstable, and try a different route. This procedure proved more difficult than climbing.

Finally as they sweated in the afternoon sunshine, the rim of the great cliff reached down to them, and Dreibrand could see wildflowers in the overhanging turf. They splashed through the gap made by the stream, and a breathtaking view of mountains greeted Dreibrand when he scrambled onto the plateau with the swift water tugging at his heels. The lofty snowy

peaks in the west looked much closer now, and he could almost feel the crisp alpine breeze in the distant glacial valleys. He breathed deeply of the pure air as he beheld the great mountain realm beyond the plateau.

Dreibrand wondered if a man had ever stood at this spot before, and if so, why had he not come back?

Hearing Miranda struggle in the current behind him snapped him out of the trance. Leaving his horse to drink, he rushed back to offer her a steady hand.

Between leading the horse and holding Elendra's hand, Miranda was bogged down with the burden of her infant son strapped to her back.

Dreibrand picked Elendra up out of the water and carried her to dry land. At first he thought the girl would resist his help, but she was too tired after the climb to protest. Miranda thanked him gratefully as she slogged out of the water.

Catching her wind after the labor up the cliff, Miranda said, "It is beautiful. Everything looks different up here. Cleaner somehow."

"Is it not amazing?" Dreibrand breathed. Already he did not want to go back.

They lounged on the grassy bank for a while, cooling down from the exertion of the climb. Dreibrand leaned over the clear water, splashed some onto his face, and ran his wet hands through his long hair. Relaxing, he watched the stream flow by. His daydreaming faded eventually and he walked across the water to investigate something he saw in the mud.

He would not relinquish his excellent mood until he was certain what he saw. For a moment he just stared at the man-shaped footprint pressed into the mud. He could clearly see the heel mark and the clawed toes, but the size was larger than a man, and Dreibrand knew what had recently strode up the bank.

10~ Wolfsong ~

Miranda's face did not reveal her panic when she examined the ominous footprint. But she recalled the evil scream of the fenthakrabi and its vicious attack on the Atrophaney scouts and wondered how she would ever find the courage to face the thing. She glanced at her children,

seeking strength.

“Do you think it is the same one?” she asked.

Dreibrand shrugged. “No way to know really.”

“I guess I have bigger problems than wolves,” Miranda muttered.

“Indeed,” agreed Dreibrand as his eyes roved the landscape. “We should get moving.”

They continued west until dusk and camped in an open place. The sky to the north had turned dark and threatening, and their chances of escaping the storm looked slim. Miranda built a fire even though a stray drop of rain struck her face as the young flames started.

Her tightening stomach banished her hunger as she realized that a dark wet night lay ahead. The beast stalked the land and the fire would not last the night.

Dreibrand had been quiet for some time and his face was troubled. He had vivid memories of the beast as well, and he already felt them sabotaging his courage. When he had been tied down during the fenthakrabi attack, he had known a new level of fear. Dreibrand had thought he had mastered his fears long ago, but the slaving face of abomination had taught him otherwise.

The tapping of rain quickened as a cold front hit the warm moist air from the south. Miranda threw her blanket over her head and Elendra scrambled under the meager protection. Esseldan snuggled inside her new jacket and had it the best of anyone.

The rain commenced to pour, and Miranda struggled hopelessly with the fire. There had been no time for any decent coals to develop, and the fire smoked weakly in departure.

Thunder rumbled angrily overhead, and its strong voice promised an opera. Dreibrand went to stand with the horses and hold them steady through the storm. The last rays of sunlight scurried behind the mountains and the black storm devoured the night. Rain beat on Dreibrand’s head and ran down his hair, soaking him thoroughly, and he hung his head with the horses. Since breaching the cliff barrier, all the signs had been bad and he marveled at his folly. Still, his warrior’s heart simply accepted that he would either survive or perish.

The thunderstorm began to rage with real zeal. Lightning crashed and

lighted the landscape in surreal flashes of clarity, exhilarating Dreibrand with terrible humility. Power surged through his body and his heartbeat felt like a note drawn out on a violin string. Then a horrendous crack split the world with noise and light. An old mossy tree accepted the mighty bolt and flew apart in a thousand electric shards.

The pouring rain consumed the fire and guided the shattered trunk down. In compulsory terror every muscle of Dreibrand's body screwed down tight, and his hands held the reins firmly when the horses jerked away.

In the next flash of lightning, he saw Miranda huddled with her children under the soggy tent of her blanket.

The worst of the storm lingered above them for many punishing minutes. Then reluctantly the thunderheads moved on. The brutal lightning diminished into the south, but the thunder rumbled reproachfully most of the night. The downpour relaxed into a miserable drizzle.

With the quieting of the storm, Esseldan's shocked wail filled the bleak night. Miranda despaired over his helpless cries flying toward unfriendly ears, but she could not soothe him.

"Are you all right?" Dreibrand called.

She replied that they were fine. The sky flashed a gentler blue and she briefly saw him holding the horses.

Taking the horses, Dreibrand moved a little closer so he would not have to shout. "I will watch tonight, Miranda. I could never sleep in this kind of wet anyway," he said.

"Tell me if you need help," she said. "Maybe this storm will keep...it away."

Wincing, Dreibrand wished she had not even mentioned it.

The dawn came bright and sunny, attended by pure white clouds. Green and revitalized, the land was enriched by the storm, except for the blackened remnants of the blasted tree.

Dreibrand opened his eyes and blearily took in the fresh morning. He had been dozing against the neck of Starfield. Wet and exhausted, he was glad to have the night over.

Wrapped in the mud spattered blanket, Miranda and her family had managed to sleep after all. Dreibrand left them to wake on their own and went to gather some of the scorched wood, hoping to coax a fire from it. To dry out and have a decent breakfast after the supperless ordeal of the night would greatly relieve his exhaustion.

Miranda emerged from her unsatisfying slumber. To stand in the sunny morning felt better than to lay in the soaking blanket. Esseldan was cranky and Elendra was positively surly. Miranda shook the water droplets from Esseldan's basket and set him in it in a sunny place.

"That was a scary storm," Miranda said.

Elendra nodded while rummaging in a pack for something to eat. "I don't remember lightning ever being so close before, mama."

"Well, sometimes it hits right close by. I am glad we made it through," Miranda said.

She pulled off her silk jacket, which was heavy with water, and spread it over a bush to dry. All of her clothing felt clingy and damp, and her cheap tattered shoes squished muddily, but the bright morning helped to lift her wet spirits.

Freedom and Starfield were still in their bridles after Dreibrand had held them all night. Fetching their hobbles, Miranda went to unbridle them and let them graze for the morning. As she walked leisurely toward the horses, Starfield lifted his head abruptly and made a sharp warning call. Freedom neighed nervously and they both became agitated.

Instantly, Miranda realized something was wrong, very wrong, and there would not be much time. Dropping the hobbles, she raced toward the gear for the bow and quiver. She screamed for Dreibrand.

Out in a grove of trees Dreibrand heard the horses squeal and Miranda's cry. The wood clattered from his arms, and he sprinted back, prepared for the worst.

The worst was happening. The hideous man-shaped beast strode confidently into their campsite, and the horses scattered in terror. Dreibrand drew his sword and ran toward it, shrieking a battle cry. He intercepted the fenthakrabi before it reached Miranda and the children.

Regarding him with dark remorseless eyes, it bellowed and lunged at Dreibrand with apish arms. He swiped at it with his sword and gave it

several superficial cuts as it tried to reach him. The steel in his nerves surprised him now that he faced the beast. Being a free man wielding a sword helped his courage, but not as much as the desire to defend Miranda and her children. The thought of them being harmed gave him a frenzy of motivation.

The beast tried to grab the sword but howled in pain when it grasped the sharp blade. With the strength of a bear the beast swiped at Dreibrand's midsection, striking him in the torso. His armor spared his organs from the crushing blow, but he still was thrown to the ground and the beast hurled its fearsome bulk on top of him.

The fanged jaws plunged toward his face, but Dreibrand grabbed its mouth with his left hand. The teeth slammed shut, but his thumb was lodged just behind the last molar and escaped being chomped off. Fiercely he squeezed the jaw and held back the slavering fangs. The fenthakrabi shrieked and sprayed him with hot reeking spittle as it pressed down with superior strength. Just before it succeeded in crushing the last of Dreibrand's resistance, the beast stiffened and howled in pain. It tore off of him, and Dreibrand could see an arrow buried in its side.

Seizing the chance, Dreibrand lashed out with his sword, ripping open its guts. Dreibrand lurched to his feet and swung his sword in a high killing blow that half decapitated it. The sinister light faded from the deranged eyes, and it fell back dead.

After taking a few deep breaths to reaffirm that he was actually alive, Dreibrand lifted his sword high and exulted in his victory.

"We can kill you!" he yelled into the silent forest.

Miranda walked up holding the bow and stared at the bizarre beast. The frightful power of the animal was evident even in death. The bloodied form was larger than a man.

"Gods! It is a monster. I really thought it had me," Dreibrand panted.

"Are you hurt?" Miranda asked laying a concerned hand on his arm.

Happy from her touch, he replied, "I am fine thanks to you. That is twice you kept me off that thing's dinner menu. At least I taught you well enough not to hit me." He gestured to the bow.

Miranda looked down guiltily and confessed, "Actually I was more than a little worried I would hit you."

“It was a true shot,” he said kindly while bending over to pull the arrow from the grotesque beast. It had lodged deeply in the ribs and snapped off in Dreibrand’s hand, making him swear in Atrophaney. He begrudged the loss of the arrowhead, but he did not feel inclined to cut into the beast and retrieve it. The animal smelled awful, and was already drawing flies.

“What should we do with it?” Miranda asked. The size and strangeness of the beast mesmerized her. Now she saw in detail what others whispered about in mystery.

Wiping sweat from his forehead, Dreibrand decided, “We leave it right here. If any more of these things are around, maybe they will see this and think twice before attacking us again. Now I will round up the horses so we can get out of here.”

Still in their wet clothes, they quickly left the vicinity of the dead fenthakrabi. By noon they discovered a lovely lake nestled among stately pines. The water was clean and blue, and multitudes of wildflowers bloomed in all the sunny places. The spot was so untainted that they wondered if any human had ever been there before. Beautiful and tranquil, the lake seemed to be a part of Nature’s secret garden hidden away many long ages ago.

Such a perfect place invited them to rest and recover from their recent trials. Dreibrand went to bathe in the lake, which gave Miranda some privacy to dry her and the children’s clothes. He stripped his wet garments and the warm sun felt wonderful on his skin. He wished he had some oil to rub on his armor.

The water was cold beneath the sun-warmed top layer, but the pure water cleansed his body and removed the memory of the beast’s awful smell from his mind. The death of the beast relieved him greatly and he hoped they would not have to face such a thing again.

He heard Miranda enter the water with her children, but foliage and a curve in the shore blocked his view of them. Elendra’s laughter drifted across the water, and Dreibrand attributed some magic power to the waters because they made the sour child laugh.

That afternoon several plump fish landed in Miranda’s net, and her spirits were high. Wounding the beast with her arrow filled her with pride, and she felt strong and in control. Her terror that morning had not condemned her, and she had kept a steady hand and made a true shot.

Having weapons pleased her, and Dreibrand had proved himself a worthy companion.

While cleaning the fish on the lakeshore, she glanced watchfully at Elendra. The girl sat in a patch of flowers and draped daisies over Esseldan's head.

At least for a moment she is happy, Miranda thought.

When she returned to the camp from her fishing spot, she saw Dreibrand's clothes scattered near the fire. He had evidently returned, but Miranda could not see him.

She called to him and his voice answered from nearby. Putting down her pack, she gave her baby to Elendra and then gathered his clothes and walked in the direction of his voice.

As she entered the sunny clearing where she thought his voice came from, Miranda scolded, "Do not play games with me! Where are you?"

Finding her indignation humorous, Dreibrand laughed and sat up, surprising her when he popped up out of the tall grass. He stretched his arms sleepily because he had been napping. His blanket covered him from the waist down, and his skin glowed from an afternoon's worth of sun. Several fine white scars stood out on his shoulders and arms.

Miranda tossed his clothes at his side. "These have been dry for some time," she said.

"Oh, you are no fun," he teased and sheepishly grabbed his shirt.

He saw her looking at his body, just as he wanted her to. Out in the Wilderness, just the two of them, it would seem so natural for her to kneel down beside him and embrace him among the tall sweet grass. He saw on her face that she shared his thought.

Such feelings confused Miranda, and she worried that if she indulged her sudden curiosity, he would stop being nice to her. Barlow had been kind once—for two days. Then came the raping and rutting and beating. Miranda shuddered lightly, forcing the memories back in their cages.

He does not deserve to be compared to Barlow, she thought.

Dreibrand noticed that she was troubled and asked if something was wrong.

"Just get dressed," she ordered. "You can take first watch tonight. I am

tired.”

He nodded and said no more. It was clear that Miranda had retreated behind her defenses, as she often did, and no one was welcome.

That night the weather was clear, and Miranda slept heavily with the children, and enjoyed a little peace of mind. Dreibrand sat away from the glowing coals of the fire, so he could enjoy the coolness of the night. Periodically he tossed some moss onto the coals, making smoke to help against the mosquitoes.

Through a natural gap in the trees, he gazed at the moon reflecting perfectly on black waters. The pines stood watch over the magic pool in patient reverence. The wolves were howling again tonight, singing their most untame melodies to their mistress of the night.

Dreibrand listened to the howling and let his thoughts drift over the land with the mournful wails. The lonely magnitude of the Wilderness descended upon him, but he felt like he belonged to this place, like the power of the land could somehow flow into his own flesh. Belonging to the Atrophane Horde did not compare to this. Here he could be his own man.

The wolfsong cued a memory. A memory of wolves loping out of the hills onto a great battlefield, a battlefield where a dynasty had fallen. It had taken days to dispose of the dead, and every night the wolves would arrive to collect their grisly tribute.

But every soldier lived with such things and his mind moved on. Dreibrand thought of fairer things, and he thought of Miranda. He wondered how long she would be with him. He lusted for her of course, but his feelings were deepening. Sharing a path with her had been a good idea, and Dreibrand trusted her. She had not fled when the beast tackled him.

Suddenly he noticed that the wolves sounded much closer. Focusing his attention, he realized the pack ran through the woods now, singing to the splendorous night while bounding through the silver shade. Concerned but not panicked, Dreibrand woke Miranda.

“I think the wolves are coming near. Please sit up and watch with me,” he said.

Miranda relinquished her deep sleep reluctantly and gently moved Elendra aside.

Dreibrand added wood to the fire and said, "I want us to get prepared just in case. Every wolf in the country is running around tonight...and coming this way."

The rising flames of the campfire and the howling revived Miranda, and she took up her sword. The pack could be heard on the opposite bank of the lake now. Reaching the glistening water, the wolves paused to sing with renewed vigor. Miranda roused Elendra and tucked Esseldan into his sister's arms. Removing her heavy silk jacket, Miranda draped it protectively around her children as a barrier against snapping jaws.

"We are going to be fine," she said. "But you and Esseldan have to stay right by the fire. Mama has a sword and I will protect you. Just hold tight to your brother and stay by the fire."

"Yes, Mama," Elendra whispered. She had faith in her mother after the attack that morning, but she was still afraid.

The wolfsong abruptly ended and the night waited in the foreboding silence. Dreibrand gathered the horses close. The animals were nervous and did not want him to tie them to a tree, but he could not defend them if they ran away. Freedom sweated and squealed in protest. Once the precious horses were secured, Dreibrand stepped back and drew his sword.

Time crawled by quietly, and Miranda imagined soft paws padding through pine needle carpet and sensitive wet snouts smelling their scent. She wondered if the scent of humans was a tantalizing new odor to the wolves.

The horses snorted and stomped, indicating the pack was indeed close by. Then Miranda saw eyes glint in the forest shadow. Long thin slits filled with the moon.

"They are here!" she hissed to warn Dreibrand.

Many wolves appeared on the edge of the firelight, circling the camp and eyeing potential targets. With a soundless rush they leaped into the camp and attacked the horses. Dreibrand was hard pressed to avoid the flailing hooves as he struck wolves with his sword. Yelps of pain sprang from snarling mouths as steel and hooves resisted the manacles of the food chain.

Three wolves braved the glare of the roaring campfire and attacked

Miranda. Drawing a long stick out of the fire that she had prepared for this moment, Miranda swung her sword and the flaming brand in a wide protective arc. This halted their assault, but they stayed close, snarling and looking for a fresh opportunity to pounce.

Filled with protective maternal rage, Miranda brought the battle to them. Her sword struck dirt as a wolf narrowly dodged the blow, and another one cried out when she thrust the red-hot stick into its face. A third wolf entered the fray and sank teeth above her elbow. Terrible strength bowed Miranda's body, and she struggled on the line between survival and death. The pain of the fangs in her flesh did not even register, and she hacked at the wolf's body. A mortal wound opened on the side of the wolf, and it released her and staggered away.

Miranda retreated to her children. Esseldan screamed in constant terror but Elendra trembled silently at her mother's feet.

A painful blow struck Miranda between her shoulder blades and she was thrown on her face. Claws tore across her back and a large white wolf landed beside her. It had apparently jumped over the fire and knocked her down from behind. Scrambling desperately, Miranda lunged between the wolf and her children as the wolf spun around.

Still just on her knees, she leveled her sword at the tall animal's face and felt wholly prepared to give her life defending Elendra and Esseldan. The wolf was entirely silver white and taller than the others. Black lips pulled back from great canines, but Miranda did not flinch from the intimidating grin.

Oddly the animal did not attack and only regarded her with a piercing gaze. The wolf's eyes began to glow with a sapphire light, and Miranda sensed something beyond the wolf's spirit looking at her.

The dark night, and the flashing angry fire, and the snapping wolves retreated from her perception, and she felt very far away. The demonic light in the wolf's eyes pulled her mind over a great distance, but Miranda saw no images.

At some point the white wolf raised its head and called to the brothers and sisters of the pack, and then simply trotted away as if it had never been interested. She saw the flowing white tail disappear into the night like the moon passing behind a cloud.

Miranda got off the ground, expecting another attack, but no wolves

came. Seeing that her children were untouched, she looked for Dreibrand. A great black wolf chomped on his sword arm, but he had a dagger in his other hand and he slit the wolf's throat. Dreibrand gave a triumphant cry and hurled the animal from his bloody arm.

No more wolves attacked and the forest was silent. Miranda sank down by her children and hugged them. "See we made it safe," she murmured to her daughter, but Elendra was already calm.

However, Esseldan bawled terribly and Miranda lifted him into her arms, where he began to relax. Dreibrand staggered toward her, clutching his bleeding wrist. His sword slid from his hand, and he clenched and unclenched his hand, examining his pain.

"The bones were not crushed," he announced breathlessly.

Relieved that his wound was not critical, he looked at Miranda. The arm that cradled her son dripped blood.

"Miranda, how bad is it?" he cried with concern.

"I don't know," she mumbled, only vaguely aware of the wound.

Dreibrand turned her toward the fire, so he could inspect her injury. Blood soaked her sleeve, and when he held back the torn fabric, he saw deep puncture wounds in her biceps. Her arm bled heavily, but Dreibrand knew the blood flow would clean the punctures better than anything else he could do.

"Put Esseldan down and hold your hand over it," Dreibrand instructed.

She obeyed woodenly while Dreibrand cut the sleeves off his shirt to use as bandaging. He hastily wrapped one sleeve around his tattered wrist then started to cut the sleeve off Miranda's wounded arm. He had to gently pry away the bloody fabric where the teeth had driven it into flesh, but Miranda did not even wince. Dreibrand worried that the mayhem of the wolf attack had sent her mind into some kind of shock. She was non-responsive and her eyes were glazed over.

Ignoring the pain of his own injury, he quickly bound the silk sleeve over her wound, and blood oozed into the fabric. Dreibrand had helped to bandage soldiers on many occasions and his dressing applied just the right amount of pressure.

"Hey, Miranda, you did a good job," he complimented, trying to coax some conversation out of her.

When she said nothing, he touched her chin and made her face him. “Miranda, come on, say something.”

His touch revived her attention somewhat, and she blinked several times. “Are the wolves gone?” she whispered.

“Yes. I do not know why, but they are gone,” he answered.

Miranda put her good arm around Elendra and pulled her daughter close. She sat in silence while Dreibrand rigged a sling for her arm. Almost as soon as he was finished she crumpled into her bedroll and went back to sleep as did her children. Dreibrand assumed the stress had gotten the best of her. On occasion he had seen even old veterans overwhelmed after a battle, and he tried not to worry about her.

In the morning Miranda woke suddenly and sat up. She gasped when she saw her arm in a sling and felt the pain. Not until she saw the fresh black wolf skin stretched out to dry and Dreibrand cooking wolf meat in the fire, did she remember the attack.

“Take it easy,” Dreibrand said.

Miranda caught her breath and the disorientation faded from her eyes. Esseldan sat in Dreibrand’s lap because the boy had awoken much earlier, and Dreibrand brought him over to his mother.

“Keep his weight on your good arm. The more you pamper that wound the quicker it will mend,” he instructed.

Miranda accepted her infant gingerly. Her arm hurt and her clothes were splotted with blood. Elendra, who had been snuggled next to her mother, arose with a yawn, but appeared rested despite the turmoil of the night.

“How do you feel?” Dreibrand asked.

“It hurts a lot, but I can take it,” Miranda said.

“Well, we are about to find out what wolf tastes like,” he said cheerfully.

Miranda looked around and clearly saw many wolf tracks all over their camp. Tentatively she said, “Dreibrand, I don’t remember much.”

“You were pretty stunned last night,” he explained. “But we fought them off. Those wolves must have decided to look for easier hunting.”

“You are hurt!” Miranda cried, finally noticing his bandaged wrist.

“I took care of it. It is not that bad,” he said.

Miranda tried to piece together the events of the night. She remembered fighting the wolves, and they had been everywhere. She recalled that she had hurt maybe two of the animals, but many more had circled her. Then in a rush of memory the image of the white wolf jumped back into her mind, and she felt the scratches on her back where the animal had hit her.

The eyes. The blue light! she thought. The unnatural glow in the eyes of the fearsome wolf had transfixed her, and Miranda remembered feeling the presence of another. Something very strange had happened, and she wanted to tell Dreibrand, but she did not know how to explain. Her memories were vague, and when she thought about the blue light, her mind started drifting.

Miranda ate in silence, barely tasting her food. Only when Dreibrand moved closer did she notice the circles under his eyes.

Realizing that she had slept most of the night while he had had no rest, she said, “Take some rest Dreibrand. I will take care of things, and we can ride in the afternoon.”

“Well, I have been thinking about that,” he said. “Maybe we should go back to the Bosta Territory.”

“But I thought you wanted to explore more than anything?” she responded.

“I have seen much already. I know more about this land than any man in civilization. I can go back and start raising money for my own expedition. But most of all my conscience will not allow me to let you and your children be in this dangerous place,” Dreibrand explained.

“We have defended ourselves. And the children have not been hurt at all,” Miranda said.

“I did not expect you to have such a positive attitude,” Dreibrand remarked. “But you must let me help you back to civilization for your own safety.”

“I do not remember being any safer with civilization,” Miranda grumbled bitterly. “Let us ride west just a few more days. I want to see things too. Even if we ride east the wolves will still be there.”

Her willingness to continue surprised Dreibrand. Despite his better

judgement, her proposal to ride farther west appealed to him, and he only half-heartedly argued against it. "But we have been lucky so far. It would be best to turn back."

"You are right. We must do that soon," Miranda conceded. "But not today. I feel drawn to go a little farther." She had no tangible reason behind her statement, but she meant it.

Dreibrand could not resist her enthusiasm to go on. Despite the dangers of the Wilderness, he dreaded delivering his resignation to Lord Kwan. Delaying such uncomfortable business was easy to do.

"Yes. We can head back after a few more days," he decided.

Dreibrand looked at Miranda earnestly now and considered his words carefully, not fully certain of what he wanted to say. Finally, he just spoke his mind. "But when we return to the settled country, what shall you do, Miranda? How will you get by? Do you know where you want to go?"

Miranda frowned suspiciously at his prying questions. Truly she did not know where to go, and as for how she would get by, she had no desire to inform him.

Dreibrand defended his inquiries. "I only ask because I care about what happens to you. I owe you my life and I take that very seriously. I will not just dump you off at the first town."

"I can take care of myself. There is no need to worry yourself about me," Miranda said proudly.

"But you need to worry. I do not really know your circumstances, but without friends or family or a home, you could easily be claimed as a slave. Your children too. You will need someone to attest to your freedom and to defend you from opportunistic slavers," Dreibrand warned.

"And what do you have to offer? You seemed more of a fugitive than me," she scoffed.

Dreibrand grinned awkwardly. "I can sort things out with my people when the time comes," he said confidently although he doubted it would be easy. Convincing Lord Kwan to accept a retroactive resignation had its risks. The Hordemaster could choose to punish him as a deserter despite his nobility. But because Dreibrand's censure forced him to live already in a permanent state of punishment, he decided there was no point in worrying about the risks.

He continued, "I could take you to Phemnalang and set you up with a place to live."

With apprehension Miranda thought about Phemnalang. Of course she had heard about the large city in the south, famed for its wealth and wickedness, but she could not quite imagine what such a place could be like.

Although seriously reluctant to commit to going to Phemnalang with him, she could never dismiss the practical side of her nature. It made sense to accept his offer, at least for now.

Miranda rubbed her forehead, but her mind was not clear enough to make a decision. "I will think about it," she said.

Dreibrand persisted, "I think you would agree that we are friends now, and that we will both need someone we can trust more than ever when we get back to civilization."

"I said I would think about it," Miranda snapped. Despite her muddled mind, she knew agreeing to let Dreibrand provide her with a home would most likely entail more than a polite thank you.

Dreibrand backed off and stretched out to sleep. He knew he would convince her to stay with him eventually.

11~ The Raven's Dream ~

The fairness of the lake convinced them to stay on another night and nurse their wounds. Not one wolf howl called to the moon that night, and the next morning they rode west without discussing their course.

The mature forest began to thin and a grassy open country spread between mountains ranges. Lofty snow-capped peaks dominated the western skyline and another line of mountains filled the northeast, but these were lower and darker. The landscape was wide and beautiful, and Dreibrand liked to imagine that it all belonged to him.

While they rode, he carried Esseldan in order to spare Miranda some stress to her injured arm. Her wound distressed him, and Dreibrand wished that he had been able to defend her better. Dreibrand secured the boy in the saddle in front of him, upright like a little rider. Esseldan, who had received no attention from his real father, thrived in Dreibrand's

strong grasp.

For more than a week, they continued their exploration and Dreibrand had no trouble finding game. With good food and fine weather, life became a pure ideal of existence. There was no civilization to clutter the mind and the land provided generously. All would have been well except that Elendra started sleepwalking. Every night Dreibrand or Miranda caught her rising and trying to wander away. After twelve nights of this in a row, Miranda finally decided to confide in Dreibrand about the white wolf and the glowing eyes.

Being reasonable, Dreibrand said, “The eyes of animals glow in the night. Perhaps that is all it was.”

Miranda wanted to agree with his simple explanation, but her mind was not as foggy as it had been right after the wolf attack, and she regarded her belief with more conviction.

“But it was not the normal glow in an animal’s eyes. The blue light was so strong; I can almost see it now as I saw it then. Someone was looking at me,” Miranda said.

Dreibrand asked her to explain better.

“I cannot explain,” Miranda moaned with frustration. “But I felt it inside. Like when someone is staring at you for a long time before you notice.”

Clearly, Miranda was disturbed, and Dreibrand reasoned stress had made her imagine things. He wanted to discount her story, but he took the time to re-evaluate the night of the wolf attack. At first he had relished their victory and kept the black wolf skin as a practical trophy, but in retrospect, he accepted that the wolves had given up quite easily, and it had been a large pack.

“Why did you not tell me this sooner?” he wondered.

Miranda shrugged uncomfortably. “I did not know how to explain, and I know it sounds silly. But now that Elendra is sleepwalking, I feel more certain of myself. We are not alone. The fenthakrabi was real, what if the other stories about ghosts are true—”

Dreibrand interrupted her because she was upsetting herself. “Did Elendra see this wolf?” he asked.

Calming down, Miranda said that she might have.

“I will go talk to her,” Dreibrand decided.

Elendra sat on the tangled roots of an old gnarled tree with her back to them. Swinging her legs, she hummed pleasantly and ignored Dreibrand’s approach.

“May I speak with you, Elendra?” he asked politely, courting her favor delicately.

She shrugged with disinterest and stared into the distance. Considering this a positive response, Dreibrand proceeded.

“When the wolves attacked did you see a big white one?” He kneeled beside her and waited patiently for a reply.

Elendra looked at him sideways. She had grudgingly accepted Dreibrand’s presence in her family, but her attitude did not go beyond suffering his company. Slowly she decided to answer him, hoping he would leave her alone if she did.

“I saw it. It jumped through the fire at us,” she said.

This corresponded with Miranda’s version of the events, which Dreibrand considered strange because the animal should have been afraid of the flames.

“Can you tell me anything else about it?” he coaxed.

“Blue fire came out of its eyes,” Elendra recalled without emotion.

“Were you afraid?” he whispered.

This question bothered her and she turned startled eyes toward Dreibrand. “No! There is no reason to be afraid,” she answered firmly.

Her tone seemed overly defensive in Dreibrand’s opinion. “Not even a little bit afraid?” he teased.

For a moment Elendra’s expression softened and she was just a sweet frightened six-year-old girl. She mumbled, “At first I was afraid, but then I knew I was safe.”

“How did you know, Elendra?” he pressed carefully.

Despite his soft approach, her hostile demeanor returned, and she stormed across the camp until her privacy was reestablished. Dreibrand walked back to Miranda, who had waited out of earshot.

“I am surprised you got to talk to her that much,” Miranda commented.

“In the end, few can resist my charms,” he said lightly.

Annoyed by his joke, Miranda demanded, “What did she say?”

“The same as you said. Perhaps you are right to worry. I cannot explain what happened, and maybe her sleepwalking is connected,” Dreibrand conceded.

Rubbing her temple with frustration, Miranda muttered, “What could it be? This is worse than wild animals.”

“Hey, maybe we have all been out here a little too long. Let us rest today, and tomorrow we will turn east,” Dreibrand decided but looked around wistfully at the wild land.

There is still so much more to see, he lamented privately.

Again, Miranda felt an urge to argue with him but she resisted it this time. She needed to return to civilization and make a new life for herself. Hiding in the forest had saved her from war, but it was time to stop hiding. She decided that in the morning she would tell Dreibrand that she would go with him to Phemnalang. He was smart and kind to her and she could do far worse.

“Let me check your arm,” Dreibrand suggested.

“Why? We have nothing to make a fresh bandage,” Miranda grumbled.

“Because I want to see how it is doing,” he insisted. He did not want to alarm her but he was watching for signs of infection.

She let him undo the sling and unwrap her arm, which had started to heal nicely. She considered Dreibrand’s concern unnecessary and suspected he fretted over her injury just to sit close to her.

He did enjoy sitting close to her, but the clean healing of the bite pleased him the most at that moment. It was a lucky thing.

“I want you to wear this sling a few more days,” Dreibrand instructed. When he finished tying it over her shoulder, he brushed a few wavy locks of hair behind her ear and touched her cheek tenderly.

Miranda cringed nervously, and he could see that she did not welcome the touch.

“You are beautiful,” he whispered, trying to excuse his action.

Her lips trembled temptingly, and he thought her agitation suited a

virgin more than a mother of two.

Casting her eyes down, Miranda said, "If you knew me better, I am sure I would not suit you."

She seemed to retreat behind some shame, but it did not concern him. He knew that slaves could be ill-used, and he did not hold it against her. "I think you suit me well," he responded.

"You are only interested because I am the only woman out here," she scorned.

What could be a better reason? Dreibrand thought, but he kept that to himself. "Even in the largest city, many men would find you appealing," he said.

"I don't need you to tell me that!" she snapped with disgust and got up.

He let her go and reflected that he could have thought of something better to say. Alone now, Dreibrand checked on the wolf skin stretched out to dry. Flipping it over, he ran his hands through the black fur. Turning back tomorrow would be hard for him, but taking Miranda and the children back was the right thing to do.

What am I doing out here with refugees anyway? he wondered for the first time. But he had no regret for his foray into the Wilderness. Every day he loved the wild land a little more, and he vowed to come back.

It occurred to him that when he did come back, Miranda would not be with him. He meant what he had said about helping her get a place to live, but now he realized he would have to leave her in the Empire. No doubt she would want to stay once she had a home. The thought of parting ways with her bothered him, and he did not want to contemplate never seeing her again.

Dreibrand spent the day lying around the camp. Weariness crept over him as the day passed, and he wondered at his lack of energy. Miranda avoided him all afternoon and foraged nearby for food. However, when she returned to prepare their evening meal, she did not appear angry with him anymore, which Dreibrand considered a good sign. When Miranda was upset, she generally made it plain to see, and he guessed that his touch that morning had not bothered her that much.

After eating, Dreibrand rolled inside his bedroll, feeling unusually tired.

"Miranda, wake me up if anything bothers you," he said with his eyes

already closed.

“Yes, I will,” Miranda replied, but he was asleep.

She let the fire dwindle into coals while watching the moon travel over the treetops. The children slept peacefully next to her. A serene expression blessed Elendra’s cute face, and Miranda hoped that no evil dreams would come to disturb her daughter.

As the night deepened, Elendra continued to sleep normally, and Miranda wondered if she had been frightening herself unnecessarily. The wolf attack must have stressed her daughter and caused a little sleepwalking. This explanation became more and more convincing to Miranda as she thought about it, and she smiled at herself for thinking the wolf’s eyes had been glowing with an unnatural light.

It was only the fire in its eyes, she thought with amusement. Just as the coals are glowing blue right now.

The blue light filled her perception, and this time it was warm and vital. Miranda felt secure, as if she snuggled in a soft bed under fragrant and fluffy covers—something she had never actually known in life. The blue light faded slowly into the black bliss of perfect rest. Then she was dreaming. She heard the swoosh of wind, and the flap of wings beating against it.

Dreibrand became aware but did not open his eyes. The dampness of dew clung to the land, and he was reluctant to give up the warmth of his blanket and the pleasantness of sleep. He wanted his dream to come back because it involved Miranda. Fuzzily he thought that she should be waking him soon. He had the nagging sensation that it was much later than the usual hour when Miranda woke him to take his watch.

With a terrible suspicion Dreibrand opened his eyes and was instantly mortified to see the pink glow of an emerging dawn. Sitting straight up, he saw Miranda sprawled among blankets empty of her children.

He cried out in dismay and sprang out of his bedroll, landing at Miranda’s side. Lifting her head and taking her hand, he called her name. Her eyes opened, but they held a distant vacant look.

Blindly she whispered, “Where am I?”

“Miranda! It is Dreibrand.”

She focused on his face and came back to herself. Gasping with delayed

panic, Miranda saw that her children were gone. A terrible scream escaped her throat as she ripped out of Dreibrand's grasp. She scrambled frantically over her empty blanket. Esseldan's basket was not even present.

"I did not hear anything. I only just woke up. I am sorry, Miranda," Dreibrand said helplessly.

Miranda's eyes darted in every direction, but when she tried to recall her last memories, her mind felt unhinged.

"I don't remember going to sleep. Everything was fine. I was awake!" she wailed.

Again, Miranda threw back her head and screamed, venting her agony. Tears began to flow, and her aching heart reluctantly pumped blood to flesh that no longer desired life. Her grief stricken cry faded into the land but was suddenly answered by a high sharp squeal. Miranda's wet eyes opened and she instantly recognized Esseldan's voice.

Her head turned sharply in the direction of his cry, and the image of Elendra walking that way with her brother flashed into Miranda's memory.

My sleep was not real, Miranda thought and she dashed away to find them.

Dreibrand scooped up his sword and ran after her.

They ran over a rise, and on the other side, a crazy scene greeted them. The children were in the clutches of a giant bird that looked like a raven. A body of glossy black feathers towered over the small children, and inhuman eyes gleamed from the grotesque head, but it was much more than a giant bird. The body and legs, although covered with black feathers, had the shape of a man with huge wings protruding from a mighty back. Most shocking of all were the man-like arms reaching for Elendra.

The winged monster shrieked when it saw the woman and man rushing toward it. The violent threat in that terrible call shook the whole land, and sweet songbirds cowered and did not make one note that day.

The unwholesome sound made Elendra stumble back from the monster. She had been lugging Esseldan in his basket, but he fell from her arms, crying intensely. With the lightness of a bird, the monster hopped toward Elendra on its taloned feet.

Miranda screamed relentlessly as she saw the thing bend over her children. She ran with perilous speed and waved her arms insanely.

An impossible feathered arm reached briefly into the baby basket, but it apparently did nothing to the boy. Shrieking once again at Miranda's approach, the monster seized Elendra with both arms and started to run away. Its path of departure was already chosen, and the monster spread its great wings while running.

Miranda ran past Esseldan. She could only glance at him as she sped by because of her urgency to save Elendra. Dreibrand caught up, and in a mighty effort passed Miranda and closed on the monster.

But the monster had studied the details of the land, and it headed into a clear area where the trees could not hinder its flight. Seeing that the monster would soon gain the air, Dreibrand gave his final effort. Raising his sword high, he leaped toward it as its feet pushed off the ground. The blade of his sword glinted once in the rising sun when it flashed beside the huge wing, but it did not reach far enough.

Dreibrand crashed to the ground. He rolled over and saw above him Elendra held close to the feathered breast of the monster. Her face was calm.

Miranda raced beneath the rising monster and called frantically to her daughter, but Elendra never acknowledged her. Miranda clawed futilely at the air, but the monster rapidly ascended to the sky. Screaming with abandon, she crumbled to her knees in utter defeat. The large black monster quickly became a speck in the sky, heading northwest.

Dreibrand staggered over to Miranda. If he had not known the fenthakrabi, he never would have believed this horror. The smaller the monster became in the high sky, the more acute his failure became. Miranda sobbed in mindless grief. He dropped to one knee and put his arms around her. His tangible human closeness brought Miranda back from her blind insanity of loss.

"She could not hear me. Magic has taken her mind and mine!" Miranda moaned. "I could not stop her. I could only be in my dream."

His whole life, Dreibrand had considered magic to be something that only existed in myths. Even now his rational mind examined the situation carefully. He did not want to give himself over to superstition, but an acceptance stirred inside him. An acceptance that there was much in the

world that he did not understand.

“We have to go back to Esseldan,” he said.

Dreibrand helped Miranda up, and she stumbled beside him in a daze. The cries of Esseldan pleading through the trees roused her from her devastation. Esseldan was where he had been dropped on a bed of tiny white flowers. Miranda clutched the boy to her bosom. It was good to have one child back, but it was terrible not to have both.

When she grabbed the baby, Dreibrand saw something drop out of his wrappings.

“What is this?” He stooped to pick it up. The object was a crystal orb about the size of an acorn, cobalt in color with a deep inner light. Miranda stared at the stone and clutched Esseldan tighter. She had seen that blue light before.

“Where did that come from?” she demanded fearfully.

“It fell out of Esseldan’s clothes. That thing must have left it there,” he explained.

Miranda choked on her sobs, while Dreibrand studied the crystal orb and tried to reason out the mystery. As a military commander, he had learned to be calm in a crisis, and his mind started analyzing everything that had happened. He guessed that the monster possessed some kind of higher intelligence because something that was purely bestial would have mauled the infant. Esseldan was unhurt, and Elendra had not been hurt either and she had willingly gone to the monster. Somehow the flying abductor had lured her away. Most of all he remembered his abnormally heavy sleep, and he knew with all certainty that Miranda would not have allowed her children to slip away. Something had prevented them from watching through the night. If that something was magic, Dreibrand did not know, but he felt inclined to use the term.

Are all the stories about the Wilderness true? he wondered. The physical hardships of the land had not frightened him, but how could a man cope with magic?

The light swirling inside the orb suggested more mysteries than answers. Frustrated he shook the orb at the section of sky where the flying monster had disappeared with Elendra.

“What are you?” he hollered.

After a fashion he received an answer. The light in the orb intensified.

“Elendra is dead. That thing has carried her away to, to...” Miranda trailed off unable to speak the rest of her horrible thoughts.

Dreibrand heard the profound agony in her voice and wished desperately that he could make things right. The sudden increase of light in the orb sparked a theory in his mind and he began to test it by holding the orb in various directions. He turned in a whole circle, and the light only brightened when he held it to the northwest.

Miranda continued to mutter in her grief. “I will never see her again.” Only by accepting the worse could she cope with her loss.

“We must follow it,” Dreibrand decided abruptly.

“How?” Miranda wailed miserably. She searched the empty sky that had consumed her daughter. Already Elendra had to be an impossible distance away, and Miranda cried with increasing hysteria.

Dreibrand sympathized with her grief, and felt some himself. Although Elendra had never made secret her opinion of him, he had truly tried to save the little girl, and he still would try.

The sobbing of mother and son made an awful noise, and Dreibrand gave his attention to soothing them. Wiping the tears from Miranda’s face, he softly told her to stop crying.

“I ca-cannot,” she stammered hopelessly.

“You are strong. Take control of yourself,” he said. His voice had the insistence of an officer, but a genuine kindness as well.

For the sake of her son, Miranda quieted herself so Esseldan could become calmer.

“Look at this,” Dreibrand said, holding up the crystal orb.

Miranda grimaced and cried vehemently, “I don’t want to look at it!”

“You must. This is not something left by a mere beast. Look, it glows brighter when I hold it in the direction that it took Elendra. It was left so that we can follow,” he explained.

Miranda watched him demonstrate the glow in the crystal when it was held to the northwest, but she hated to look at that strange light. She knew it was magic.

“See, we are invited to follow. Whatever power rules in this land, they have taken Elendra to make sure that we will follow. At least that is my best guess,” he admitted.

“It is of no use. Elendra is already so far away,” Miranda said.

“We have to try. We both saw that Elendra was not hurt. Maybe we can save her,” Dreibrand insisted.

Miranda could not dispute him. Of course she would try to save her daughter even if she did not believe it was possible.

Becoming surer of his interpretation of things, Dreibrand was becoming excited to learn who was the master of the flying monster. Something of intelligence and power lived in the Wilderness, and it knew they were there.

Miranda would cling to Dreibrand’s theory that the girl lived and they could find her. Holding her son in a tight grasp, Miranda doubted that the invitation was a friendly one.

“Do you really think she is still alive?” Miranda asked. She just needed to hear Dreibrand say yes, and he did.

He continued to soothe her with reasonable explanations that he could not know with any certainty. “The taking of hostages to get someone’s attention is a very common tactic. We will find Elendra, and then we will see who wants our attention.”

Recalling the presence behind the glowing eyes of the white wolf, Miranda said, “I don’t think we want to know.”

“But know we must. Let us waste no time,” Dreibrand responded.

Before the sun rose much higher, they quit their camp and rode northwest through the lands left silent and stunned by the voice of the winged monster.

12~ Among the Stones ~

The forest diminished wholly into a great rolling plain as they journeyed northwest. Only sky and waving grass surrounded Dreibrand and Miranda, and the mountains loomed higher with every day. Miranda had never seen the world look so huge, and she despaired constantly, thinking

about Elendra lost in this vast and desolate place.

After a week of pursuit, Miranda began to lose faith in Dreibrand's theory that the crystal orb would guide them to Elendra. Miranda's chest ached from the absence of her daughter and she saw her actions as futile.

She carried Esseldan herself now. Her arm had mended and caused her no pain, and she needed the comfort of her remaining child strapped to her back.

Although he never voiced his concern, even Dreibrand wondered if he had chosen the right course. It had seemed so clear to him at first, but when Elendra had been abducted, his mind had been desperate. Now he privately considered that the girl had to be dead, but he could not bring himself to suggest such a thing to Miranda.

When his doubts struck him the hardest, he would remove the crystal orb from his pocket and let the eerie glow reassure him. To his mind this crystal could not be a natural occurrence, and in his estimation their course had changed slightly. Several times each day he checked the brightness of the orb and carefully observed the point at which it gave the most light. Gradually they were being steered more to the north. The mountains were close in the west, and their course now went parallel to the snow-capped barrier.

Even after hard days in the saddle, they seemed to only crawl across the land. Sometimes Miranda convinced Dreibrand to press on into the night and to save more time Dreibrand hunted from the saddle. Abundant game dotted the plains, and they rode through herds of antelope and elk every day, but they veered around ornery cliques of hulking buffaloes. Dreibrand always chose small game though. At some point everyday, a rabbit or prairie chicken came close enough to be shot with an arrow when they needed some meat.

But their relentless riding began to take a toll. By the ninth day after Elendra's disappearance, Dreibrand knew the horses needed rest. The health of their mounts could not be compromised, but he did not know how to tell Miranda that they must stop while Elendra was still lost.

Esseldan made the announcement.

Miranda sagged in her saddle. The sun had tanned her face, but she did not glow with health. Tossing nights riddled with stress and silent hopeless tears had left her dull and tired. Her son whimpered and cried

the whole morning, squirming in the carrying sling, and by afternoon he erupted into a tantrum.

Miranda tried transferring him into Dreibrand's care, but the baby only howled more. Starfield shook at his bit, annoyed by the screaming passenger.

Dreibrand halted the steed and suggested, "Perhaps the little man is telling us to rest. We are both exhausted, and the horses need a break."

Miranda stared at the horizon and thought about her daughter. Except for the strange crystal, they had no sign of Elendra. Miranda would keep searching, but she could not kill her son to save her daughter.

"Yes, we can camp early," she agreed tersely.

Making camp placated Esseldan, and he resumed his usual pleasant behavior. Dreibrand placed the boy on the black wolf hide and entertained him with the fluffy tail. Nearby the horses grazed eagerly, and Dreibrand stretched out his stiff legs.

But Miranda had no thoughts for rest. Atop a rise she had her sword out and practiced a form that Dreibrand had been teaching her. They had not taken time to practice with the weapons since Elendra's abduction, and Dreibrand was surprised to see she had the energy for such things.

Tickling the boy one last time with the tail, Dreibrand stood and went to join Miranda. He drew his sword.

"It has been too long since your last lesson," he remarked.

He decided a little impromptu sparring would help him judge her progress and he attacked without further words.

A new determination fired Miranda's movements. Her fighting skills had improved nicely, but Dreibrand was still the teacher, and when he thought she had enjoyed enough success, he knocked the sword out of her hand.

Her face contorted with indignation at the loss of her weapon. When she moved toward the sword in the grass, Dreibrand scooped her up with his free arm. Thrilled to hold her tight, he laughed as she struggled and smacked him harmlessly on his armor.

"Put me down!" she ordered.

"Make me," he teased.

Miranda did not appreciate his joke and gave him a dark ugly look. Dreibrand recognized that he had upset her too much and set her down. Moodily she stomped away and grabbed her lost weapon.

“Miranda, I am sorry,” he apologized. “I was only playing.”

Her expression softened, and Miranda looked down thoughtfully. She regretted becoming so mad, but being grabbed and feeling his superior strength had panicked her. Seven long years with Barlow would be slow to fade she realized.

“No. I am sorry,” she mumbled reluctantly. “You do not deserve my temper.”

“Do not worry about it,” he said breezily and sheathed his sword.

Now that his weapon was put away, Miranda raised hers with a threatening gesture.

Dreibrand smiled at her cunning and raised his hands in a mock surrender.

“Have you had enough already?” she asked.

“Yes. You win. I am your prisoner,” he said.

Miranda frowned and slid her sword into the crude sheath of animal skin she had made for it.

Putting his hands down, Dreibrand commented, “You are getting better with the sword.”

“When we find Elendra, I intend to win her back,” she said ominously.

“We will,” Dreibrand agreed in a whisper.

With a kinder tone, she added, “I appreciate you keeping your promise and teaching me to use weapons. You have been good to me.”

Dreibrand shrugged off the compliment. “I owe you my life. You were there when I needed you—twice.”

He moved closer, and Miranda eyed him warily. Softly, he said, “Miranda, is it so bad that I want to be near you?”

She leaned away from him slightly. He made her nervous but in a manner unfamiliar to her. Miranda was not afraid of him anymore. Dreibrand had proven himself kind and reliable, but she knew why he wanted to be near her.

“You are near me every day,” she stated defensively, as if his question were ridiculous.

“Exactly. And it would be so natural for a man and a woman, alone in this wild place to...” he trailed off suggestively and put a tentative hand on her shoulder. Miranda shrugged out of his hand, but then he caught her in both arms. Her body became rigid, but she did not really fight his embrace.

Dreibrand continued, “You do not have to suffer alone. Isn’t it better when I hold you? I care about you.”

Miranda put her hands on his chest and felt the sun-warmed metal of his armor. Shaking her head, she pushed and he reluctantly let her go. He saw the confusion in her eyes and knew that to restrain her would upset her.

Free of him, Miranda walked over to her son and picked him up. Dreibrand had not really wanted to let her go, especially when he could glimpse an inkling of willingness in her eyes, but he did not want to scare her.

It was hard to be patient Dreibrand realized. He had grown accustomed to female companionship when he wanted it. A soldier had to win a woman’s favor in an evening and march on the next day. He had been alone with Miranda for weeks now, and her remoteness perplexed him.

The next morning Miranda awoke to Dreibrand sitting by her. She focused on his soft yellow beard and the sunlight glinting in his wind blown hair. His blue eyes sparkled under his serious brow, and he tickled her nose with delicate sprigs of flowers. For a brief moment, Miranda felt lighthearted and enjoyed his attention, but she could not accept the luxury of such feelings.

“I thought these would cheer you. They smell quite nice,” he said.

Miranda sat up and took the flowers and sniffed the fancy blossoms.

“I wouldn’t think an Atrophane officer would pick flowers,” she teased awkwardly.

Encouraged by her genuinely positive reaction, he took her hand. “I was rude to bother you yesterday. I know because of Elendra, you could not have any thoughts for me, so let us go quickly and find your daughter,” he said. During his watch, Dreibrand had accepted that her worry for

Elendra distracted her from him, and rightly so.

Miranda nodded, and although she was thankful for his understanding, she simply accepted his apology. Her feelings for him were confused, and she had no attention to give to sorting them out. Any thoughts for her own pleasure were crushed by the stress of losing Elendra.

For another week they rode north and the summer sun followed them with lengthening days. The lush plain had no shortage of game, and they did not lack for food. No beasts or storms troubled them, yet they constantly maintained their guard. Both of them had become too hardened by Nature, even in summer's bounty, to be lulled into a sense of security in the Wilderness.

As every day slipped by without trace of Elendra, Miranda withdrew into dark brooding. She blamed herself for the abduction of Elendra, inwardly criticizing her every decision over the past several weeks.

Dreibrand could see that she tormented herself, and he comforted her as well as he could.

After checking their course one afternoon, he said, "I think we must be getting closer. The orb feels warm today."

Miranda did not look away from the ears of her horse. She seldom strained her eyes to scan the horizon anymore, and usually just stared listlessly at her horse while riding.

"You just think it is warmer because all of this is so hopeless," she grumbled.

"No. I just noticed it. Here you take it," Dreibrand suggested, offering her the crystal orb.

As always Miranda refused to touch it.

Placing the orb in his front pocket, Dreibrand insisted, "I tell you it feels warm today. It must mean that we are finally getting close."

Although she was too discouraged to really feel any hope, his opinion finally intrigued her. She stayed more attentive that day.

The next morning was cloudy. No thunder rumbled, but they assumed a storm would start eventually. Cheerlessly they continued their trek north until midday when suddenly a dark form broke the northern horizon.

"What is that?" Dreibrand cried.

He and Miranda exchanged curious glances, but they were too far away to determine the exact shape or character of the object. Drawing out the crystal orb, Dreibrand could feel that it had increased in warmth again. It did not burn, but it was hot and he judged the glow to be greater as well.

“This must be something. Come on,” he ordered and urged Starfield ahead.

The object was a large narrow boulder sticking up out of the ground. Taller than a man, the blue rock showed no sign of design or symbol.

They halted to examine the monolith.

“This could be some kind of boundary marker,” Dreibrand exclaimed. He was so excited to have found something.

Miranda did not allow herself any excitement, and thought pessimistically that it was just a boulder. She wandered over a ridge and looked northward. The land sloped down and many more standing stones covered the land for as far as she could see. Some were lone monoliths, and others were arranged in circles or scattered in no particular pattern. The sizes did not vary much, but all of the standing stones were at least as large as a man. The presence of the weighty boulders defied reason.

The wind moaned in places where the stones stood close together, and Miranda felt a distinct foreboding. Esseldan squirmed on her back and began to cry.

She soothed the boy and turned her horse around. Freedom gladly obeyed. She returned to Dreibrand, who still studied the first enigmatic stone.

“There are many more boulders over that ridge. They cover the land completely,” Miranda said.

Dreibrand snapped out of his consideration of the monolith and quickly went to investigate. The forest of standing stones upon the lonely plain made a disquieting sight. Again he hoisted the crystal orb, and the blue light was undeniably stronger. However, when he tried to check their course, the orb gave the same brightness in every direction, dimming only in the direction they had come from.

Miranda witnessed this as she arrived alongside of him. “I do not like this place,” she announced.

“But this must be where this orb intended to lead us,” Dreibrand said.

Miranda scanned the land. There was nothing except the creepy stones, and she was reluctant to proceed.

“We should go back and try again. You have lost our bearing,” she decided.

“But the orb has consistently pointed north. You have seen me check many times. Going back will only waste time,” Dreibrand argued.

Miranda bit her lip. She definitely did not want to waste time, and going back would be counterproductive. There was nothing back there.

“This place is frightening,” she whispered.

Dreibrand agreed, “Yes. I can feel...I do not know.” Something impressed him on a subconscious level. Vaguely he thought of the stunned silence on a finished battlefield covered with dead.

“We should go around this place,” Miranda suggested.

Dreibrand looked at the multitude of stones stretching to the east and west. Despite the sudden loss of guidance from the crystal orb, he believed they needed to continue north.

“We should continue in the same direction. The orb has led us here and we need to keep going,” he reasoned.

Thinking of her daughter, Miranda gathered her courage. This strange place of standing stones was the only aberration in the rolling untouched landscape, and she could not ignore it because she was afraid. With the faintest tinge of hope, she wondered if Elendra might be close.

“Yes, you are right. Going around is foolish. They are only boulders,” Miranda said.

Silently they entered the area of monoliths. A lone vulture circled down from the overcast sky and landed atop a monolith very close to them. Dreibrand drew his sword and hacked at the bird with disgust. It flapped out of his reach and cackled at him boldly. Cold eyes without compassion glared out of its naked head.

Once Dreibrand finished frustrating himself with the nasty bird, they hurried onward. They did not discuss the implications of the vulture’s arrival.

Their spirits brightened when they saw the standing stones clear out up ahead.

“See. No need to ride around,” Dreibrand said, feeling vindicated.

Indeed, Miranda was glad that she had agreed with Dreibrand, and she looked forward to leaving the unsettling stones behind her.

But the clean plains ahead proved to be like a shimmering mirage in the desert. Almost as soon as they saw beyond the land of stones, a heavy mist began to consume the land. The mist seemed to rise out of nothing, and it covered the land as rapidly as a cloudbank moving onto land from a large body of water. An immediate chill slapped the air, and the mist swirled higher.

“Hurry!” Dreibrand urged, focusing on the fading grassland beyond.

The mist soon took all visibility beyond a few paces, and they could not gallop for fear of striking a monolith in the murk.

“Stay closer,” Dreibrand called when he looked back and only saw the dim outline of Miranda on her horse.

“Where are you?” she cried.

He had to let her catch up. When she entered the small sphere of visibility, Dreibrand saw the relief flood her eyes. The mist pressed close now, and they could only see the nearest blue stone monoliths lurking in the haze.

“We must ride side by side. We must not get separated in this,” Dreibrand decided and Miranda heartily agreed.

The cold shroud of mist obscured all sense of direction, and every time they rode around an obstacle, Dreibrand feared that their course became muddled. Before the sudden fog had blocked his view of the clear plains ahead, he had focused on the proper direction, but he no longer had any reference points.

“We should have come out by now,” Miranda observed nervously.

“I know,” Dreibrand admitted.

“We are lost,” Miranda said.

Dreibrand knew they were in trouble, but he would not accept defeat so easily. The edge of the standing stones might only be a few paces away in the seething fog.

“This mist is more magic. No natural mist could rise so quickly and so completely. We are being trapped,” Miranda concluded.

Dreibrand halted their slow blind progress and removed the crystal orb. It shone with a constant blue light in any direction. Bereft of guidance, he put the orb back in his pocket, and the blue glow faded from the pale mist. He had followed the crystal orb diligently, and now he wondered if he had been led to this place to die.

Shaking off the nasty thought, he had no choice but to continue plodding in blindness.

A leaning blue monolith leered out of the mist, and the horses snorted when they passed close to it. It was a larger stone than the others they had seen, reaching over their heads even on horseback. Many standing stones clustered near this great blue hulk, and Dreibrand worried that he had blundered deeper into the place of stones because they had become denser.

Esseldan coughed and whimpered against Miranda's neck. Dreibrand looked over at them with concern and regretted his eagerness to enter the stones.

In a strained silence they tried to find the edge of the stones until the dim daylight receded.

"Dreibrand, I have to stop," Miranda said.

"It will be dark soon. Let us keep going," he pressed.

"I know, but I have to take care of the baby while I can still see. Then we can go," she said.

He agreed and took a break from the saddle himself. Esseldan cried while his mother attended him, and the sobs sounded smothered by the cold mist.

A thick soupy darkness rose from the ground as the light of the distant day retreated. They had nothing to make a fire. Fuel was scarce on the grassland, but the lank turf growing between the standing stones had nothing to offer.

Weeks in the Wilderness had made Dreibrand and Miranda accustomed to the true dark of the night, but nothing could harden them for being lost among the stones clogged with fog. An unsettling silence oppressed the land, and no nocturnal insect sang at all.

"We cannot make any progress in this. We will rest here," Dreibrand decided.

“Must we stop? I want to keep going,” Miranda insisted tiredly.

“I would, Miranda, but in this dark we could find our way out and wander back in, before we knew we left. I don’t like it here either, but it is best to wait for light,” he reasoned.

Out of weariness she relented. Dreibrand took out the blue orb because it was their only means of light. Normally, Miranda disliked the inexplicable glow from the crystal, but tonight in the thick dark, she found some comfort in the light. She sat down on her blanket and nestled Esseldan in her lap. Right in front of her Dreibrand settled down on his own blanket, and the horses stood abnormally close to him. Starfield occasionally muzzled the top of his head, and he patted the intrusive nose.

“Maybe the fog will lift in the morning,” Dreibrand said.

Miranda looked at him doubtfully. She shivered inside her jacket and tucked the wrappings around Esseldan. The night grew colder and the damp was relentless. Even her hair was wet.

Feeling the need to be distracted by idle conversation, she said, “Tell me about Atrophane.”

His nervous mind needed distraction as well, and her suggestion pleased him. But thoughts of his homeland came hard to him. Already that life seemed to belong to a different man.

Dreibrand let his mind float back eastward over the many lands he had traveled and subdued. Finally he saw once again the Lasocosta Sea, whose surf played on the eastern Atrophane coast, and his heart suddenly ached to ride the waves as he had in his adolescence.

Dreibrand shared his memories with Miranda, describing the wide delta of the Phol River that was supposed to be the hand of the Goddess Simosha, who held Atrophane’s most bountiful fields. He told her next of the Outer Coast region where he was from. Splendid pastures filled with prize stock stretched between orchards that overlooked cliffs and sandy beaches.

Miranda had trouble picturing the great palace cities and lavish country estates he described, but she believed that they must be marvelous.

Then Dreibrand told her of darker things, and she had less trouble seeing these aspects of Atrophane. He spoke of slums where criminals of

every creed and philosophy plied their trades in the shadows of gorgeous palaces. He spoke of the mines in the Vartrane Mountains where many unfortunate slaves labored in grim conditions.

“The land of my birth is forever behind me,” he concluded quietly. He cast his blue eyes down with sadness. He had not thought so much of home for a long time.

“Dreibrand!” Miranda hissed.

Instantly his mind snapped back to his immediate reality. The Wilderness had made his senses sharp, and he was on his feet even as the horses squealed. Miranda had seen it first and he only had to raise his eyes to notice.

A cold white light expanded out of the black mist. Miranda stood now and pulled out her sword while clutching Esseldan fiercely to her chest. Spectral forms gathered in the light revealing the skeletal detail of humans. Horrifying fleshless bone coalesced in the glowing mist. The ghosts brandished the remembered spirits of their weapons, which had an ethereal glow. Red eyes flared in vaporous skulls, and Miranda saw the point of her sword shaking in the haunting glow.

Three distinct ghosts formed quickly, and the swirling light promised to make more. These three glided toward Dreibrand and Miranda. One wielded a smoky warhammer and the other two held pikes.

Dreibrand raised his sword, hoping it could fend off the spirits, but when the ghosts seemed about to attack, they shifted directions and drifted by.

“They, they...aren’t attacking,” Miranda stammered.

More spirits developed across the haunted land, casting crazy lights on the standing stones. A frigid wind swept around Dreibrand and Miranda’s ankles and crept up their legs, making them ache and their flesh crawl.

“I don’t understand,” Dreibrand mumbled while watching a tall ghost with long delicate bones drift by.

An ancient long dead army now stalked across the land. Sometimes a spirit would flare brightly or simply fade back into the dark mist. A few more ghosts gathered around the living creatures and circled close, but the specters always moved on.

By now the horses sweated nervously, but the steeds stayed close to

their masters. Sometimes Starfield or Freedom would jump with the intention of bolting when a spirit passed too close, but both horses stayed put as if they were tied down.

Slowly, Dreibrand and Miranda lowered their swords and watched the unholy spectacle of the walking dead. Esseldan cried softly against his mother's chest, too afraid to shriek loudly. Dreibrand put an arm around Miranda as much to steady himself as to comfort her.

It was impossible to judge how long they stared at the multitude of ghosts. Their minds did not think of time when confronted with such an astounding mystery. Gradually, Dreibrand began to imagine the fallen army and guess that the standing stones were extraordinary grave markers. Before the mist, he had seen the stones stretching across the plains, and he calculated that the army must have been a sprawling host, greater than the Horde.

Remembering the tales of Gods making war that he had heard in the east, Dreibrand finally made some sense of the legends.

A mighty civilization was here. Or maybe still is, he thought. Tearing his wide eyes from the unsettling ghosts, he looked down at the crystal orb on his blanket.

"I am going to test a theory," he announced.

Cautiously he approached the edge of the ghost activity, holding his sword defensively.

"What are you doing?" Miranda cried. "Come back here!"

Dreibrand ignored her and left the circle of safety around their camp. Ghosts glided toward him and did not change their course. A daunting spirit lord, with a translucent band of gold around his gleaming skull, flew ahead of his damned brethren and struck at Dreibrand with a misty blade. The mortal sword of Dreibrand parried the blow without effect. The spirit's blade simply passed through the Atrophaney steel and clipped Dreibrand's forearm.

An icy explosion of pain crippled his arm, and he had to seize his sword with his other hand before it fell to the ground. The spirit raised the weapon for another blow, and his musty men-at-arms gathered behind him excited for the victim.

It took all of Dreibrand's courage to run away and not to be paralyzed

with terror. He stumbled back to Miranda and the ghosts thankfully did not pursue. Dreibrand crumpled to the ground and gave into his agony for a moment, clutching his arm. Visibly shaken by his rash actions, Miranda kneeled beside him.

“The crystal orb protects us from these spirits,” he gasped. “If you are not close to it, they attack.”

“Let me see,” Miranda said, trying to pry his good hand away from his injury. The haunted glow from the spirits provided some light, but she saw no visible wound. She touched his stiff cold hand, and he could not contain a cry of pain. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, and he trembled as he tried to tolerate the pain.

In a desperate flash of reasoning, Miranda guessed that the crystal orb might help him if it was their only protection from the ghosts as he said. She scrambled to the orb, but her hand hesitated above the crystal. She was loath to touch the magical item, and the weird light swirling within reminded her vividly of the power behind the white wolf.

Dreibrand moaned and sucked air between his clenched teeth. She grabbed the orb and pressed it into his lifeless hand. He felt an almost instant relief and relaxed.

“That’s better,” he whispered.

With his pain eased, Miranda scolded him. “Dreibrand, you should not take such risks. I was so scared.”

“It was not one of my smarter ideas,” he agreed with a painful chuckle. “But now I know for certain why the ghosts did not attack us.”

Miranda looked around fearfully. “What is this terrible place? How will we ever get out?” She did not voice her worry that little Elendra was held somewhere in the horrible realm.

Dreibrand considered her questions rhetorical and lay in quiet pain, hoping his arm was not crippled. The pins and needles of life crept down his fingers until he could eventually grasp Miranda’s hand that held the orb against his palm. With a tortuous slowness warmth spread up his wrist and forearm, easing the pain.

Grimly he realized he could have just been killed. As a warrior he could face his mortality, but the thought of his eternal spirit trapped among the haunted stones terrified him.

“We will get out of here, Miranda,” he promised.

They sat through the night with no possibility of sleep. The ghosts stalked between the stones, and the fear they inspired nearly maddened the living creatures trapped inside the seething mass of death. An immense cattle market of damned souls surrounded Dreibrand and Miranda, who endured the horror bravely.

After a timeless torment Dreibrand rose painfully to his feet, still holding the crystal orb. “Let us get ready,” he said.

“For what?” Miranda asked miserably.

“It will be dawn soon,” he answered while fumbling to gather his gear. “When the sun breaks in the east, I will get my bearings and know which way is north.”

They climbed into the saddles of their drooping mounts. The horses were exhausted by fear. With a painful slowness the ghosts gradually dissipated, and the inky dark of night returned. Dreibrand waited alertly for the dawn. With every breath he could feel the cold mist, and he knew it would obscure the dawn and dilute the sun. But in the first minutes of daybreak, he would have a chance to detect the east.

When his chance came, he did not miss it. The vermilion glare at the day’s birth cut through the mist, and Dreibrand saw the east. He was appalled how much he had become turned around, and he guessed that his disorientation had not been natural.

“Now!” he said, facing north and urging his tired warhorse.

He pressed on quickly in the mist that had actually become thicker in the night. Leaning out from his saddle, he grabbed the bridle of Miranda’s horse to prevent losing her in his rush. While the sun burned clearly in the east, he pushed on recklessly, trusting Starfield to avoid obstacles as best a beast could. When the land started to rise, his heart thudded with hope.

The mist thinned ahead and he could see green grass unmarked by stones. He pushed Starfield into a feeble gallop. Both horses climbed the slope eagerly now despite their weariness, until they finally emerged above the mist. The sun bathed Dreibrand and Miranda with warmth and the clean high plains unfolded before them. On a higher hill in front of them stood another mighty monolith as a guardian over the haunted land.

It was Miranda’s inclination to give it a wide berth, and Dreibrand

would have agreed except that this monolith was of a different character. Its edges were sharper and straighter as if it might have once had a stonemason's attention.

They approached it cautiously, and Miranda trailed in the rear. She kept an eye on the mist in the lower lands in case it rose to follow them.

"I see writing!" Dreibrand gasped and jumped from his saddle.

He stood before the blue stone and the rising sun illuminated the ancient script carved in the surface. Time had made once sharp letters smooth and round, but a lengthy paragraph still stood out from the stone. Unfortunately, Dreibrand could not read it at all.

As if waiting for divine intervention to show him the meaning of the words, he stared at the writing.

"Do you know what it says?" Miranda finally asked. She certainly knew she could not read it.

Vaguely he shook his head, too overwhelmed to answer. Removing the crystal orb from his pocket, Dreibrand checked to see if it would guide him again. Like before, the orb flared brightest in a particular direction, but this time it was not north but west.

Dreibrand looked across the plains that rose into foothills, and his eyes climbed the mountains. One deep gap between peaks appeared in the snow-capped barrier, and he wondered if it might be a pass.

They rode a good distance away from the mist shrouded land of standing stones before turning west as the orb directed them. By noon they had to stop. They ate the last of their food, but after their ordeal neither had the energy to search for food. Spreading their bedrolls, both lay down to sleep.

"The orb is guiding us again, and I think we shall be with whoever took Elendra soon. They probably live in the mountains," Dreibrand said.

Miranda heard his words and was glad that he was encouraged. "We are never going back are we?" she said.

Dreibrand rolled across the grass to lie beside her. They had crossed too many elti not to be honest with each other. He answered, "No. I don't think so. Miranda, I am sorry. I never thought anything like this would happen."

“Do not apologize. You offered to turn back and I declined. But I think then that my mind was not my own. Some kind of magic drew me farther west until Elendra was taken. I wish I could have listened to you,” Miranda sighed.

“I should have turned back anyway,” he lamented.

“But I did not really want to go,” Miranda recalled. “If I never see the east again, I do not care. I just want to see Elendra again.”

13~ Into the City of the Rys ~

Loose stones rolled from beneath Dreibrand’s boots, bouncing and rattling down a steep slope. The mountain sheep he stalked looked up alertly at the noise and moved to even higher ground. Dreibrand pressed himself against the rocks, trying to conceal himself from the wary sheep and also in fear of his crumbly footing.

Dreibrand was spending the day hunting while Miranda tended her son at their camp. They had been traveling west after leaving the terrible spirits behind them, and the orb had guided them into a high pass flanked by colossal peaks. But Miranda had halted their journey because Esseldan was sick. He had not been well since their ordeal among the haunted stones.

Today, Dreibrand hunted with a special purpose. He had been eyeing the ram of the herd, imagining his soft summer fleece as a fine gift for Miranda. Briefly he pictured her lying on the soft snowy wool, but the thought was too distracting to sustain. He had no wish to miss his footing and fall down the precarious slope.

At this high elevation the sun blazed hotly on his bare arms, but the wind blew down from frosty heights. He stayed still until the sheep resumed their nibbling of the tenacious vegetation on the mountainside. Carefully he crept farther up the rocky slope until he reached the spine of the ridge, and he bent low using the land to conceal him.

Higher up the ridge the ram regarded him suspiciously. This summer Dreibrand had hunted for food, not sport, and hunger had taught him a cunning patience. Slowly he continued along the ridge, sometimes stopping to rest nonchalantly as if nothing on the mountain could possibly

interest him.

The herd remained unspooked and Dreibrand eventually closed to a suitable distance. Gently he eased out one of his best remaining arrows and set it to the bow. Rising fluidly to draw his shot, he focused on the target but his peripheral vision caught an anomaly on the landscape.

Awestruck, he stood up to his full height and gaped at the vista beyond. The sheep scrambled to unattainable perches, forgotten. The ridge Dreibrand stood on was the top of the pass, and he looked down into a valley adorned with an incredible alpine lake, and beside this, he saw buildings. A city of blue stone buildings hugged the lakeshore and on the opposite shore stood a tower. Sleek and black, the tower reflected on the lake and pointed at the city. It was a fine city, and only the great mountains could humble its architecture.

At last he had found a civilization. The anticipation of the new adventure exhilarated him. Recklessly he ran down the slope, flying on before he could fall.

Miranda must hear the news, he thought.

~

Esseldan dozed fitfully in Miranda's arms, and she wiped his nose when necessary. Miranda sat in the natural shelter of an outcropping of rock that blocked the wind from three directions. The sun warmed the protected place, and Miranda hoped that it would help Esseldan.

Humming softly, Miranda absorbed herself in her concern for him. She desperately wanted him to get better. It was torture to see him sick and not have Elendra.

By mid afternoon she began to feel unsettled. Long weeks in the Wilderness had made her keenly aware of her solitude, and suddenly she did not feel alone.

Sword at her side, Miranda walked away from the rock outcropping. The alpine forest appeared empty, but her intuition was distinctly bothered and she scanned the area. Wind whistled through pine needles and shook birch leaves.

Soft thuds sounded behind her, and she whirled to see three figures standing in her camp. They had apparently dropped from the rocks above, and they were unlike any beings Miranda had ever seen before. Their skin

was blue and the features of their faces had a chiseled appearance. Most striking of all were their dark piercing eyes that regarded her with unknown intentions. But they were not beasts. Soft suede clothes and boots covered their bodies, and they held long thin knives.

Shifting Esseldan onto one arm, Miranda drew her sword, terrified of them.

One of the blue beings blew into a small silver whistle and the beating of horse hooves soon responded. Miranda looked over her shoulder and saw more of them riding out of the forest on white horses. Turning back to the three intruders, Miranda saw one approach, holding up his hand as if to calm her.

Miranda shrank away from the strange being, shocked by the existence of such a different race. She was about to flee in total panic when he said the one word that would make her stay.

“Elendra.”

Frozen with fear and exhilaration, Miranda repeated her daughter’s name, checking if she had heard him correctly.

“Elendra,” the blue being said again, and nodded with encouragement.

Torn between disbelief and joy, Miranda was not sure what to think. Hearing her daughter’s name did not mean Elendra was alive, but his thing had at least heard the name and that gave Miranda hope. The riders arrived on all sides of her, and Miranda knew any defense she made would be futile and destructive. She would surrender herself and maybe join Elendra.

The blue being that spoke to her seemed to sense her decision before she indicated it, and he put away his knife. Glancing at the dozen riders with long spears, Miranda followed his example and lowered her weapon.

The blue being tried to speak to her in a strange tongue. He soon understood that she had no comprehension of his language and simply gestured to her horses and saddles. Miranda guessed that he wanted her to saddle her horse and ride with them, but she shook her head. If she just left, Dreibrand might never find her.

Impatiently the blue being gestured toward the horses again. With her own language and simple but strong gestures, she emphasized the fact that there were two horses. Eventually he saw her point that she had a

companion. He had known as much and still indicated that she should come with them.

“I will,” Miranda said with frustration. She wanted to see Elendra, but she did not want to lose Dreibrand either. Again she gestured that she needed to wait for him.

The blue being considered her with dark eyes and finally shrugged. He spoke to the others, apparently giving orders, and the riders withdrew back to the cover of the trees. The original three intruders sat down in her camp. Smiling, the one who spoke invited her to sit by her own fire and wait with them.

Keeping her distance, Miranda edged back into the sheltered camp for the sake of Esseldan, but she did not sit. The baby sniffled and coughed, and she could see the blue beings eyeing her son, which made her more nervous.

These strange beings were not like the beasts she had encountered in the Wilderness. They were like people, except that they were not human. Miranda did not need to entertain the thought that maybe they were humans who just looked radically different, because as a human she could innately see that these beings were not humans.

Looking upon their vital blue skin and peeking at their dreamy eyes, Miranda saw the world all over again. Anything she knew before this moment became insignificant. In all the days of her small suffering life, she had never imagined seeing such wonders.

But she was afraid.

Did they take my daughter?

A whistle sounded from the concealed riders, and the three beings rose together in one fluid movement. The leader grasped Miranda’s arm and moved her into the open.

Eager to report his discovery, Dreibrand emerged from the woods without caution and took in the scene of the occupied camp too late. He saw Miranda in the custody of a strange figure and white horses galloping toward him. Dreibrand put an arrow to his bow, but shock slowed his movements. He saw that they were not human, and he was amazed. But Dreibrand was a warrior and he would not waver before his foe.

He pulled back on his bow.

“Dreibrand!” Miranda screamed. “Dreibrand don’t fight them. Don’t! They have Elendra. I have given myself up.”

The riders swarmed around Dreibrand, and she pleaded, “Don’t fight.”

Her words traveled clearly in the high mountain air, but Dreibrand did not want to surrender. He knew he could slay maybe two or three of the riders before succumbing to their numbers.

Then Miranda would be alone, he thought.

Dreibrand looked at Miranda and she appeared unharmed. The riders circled him and leveled their spears at him, and he knew he had no chance against so many, and even if he did, all he could do was run away, and that would not help Miranda. Reluctantly he put away his arrow, and the shining spears lifted skyward and the riders stopped.

The strange beings completely intrigued him, and he studied them a moment. They were tall and slender with blue skin and hair ranging from black to white. Never before had he heard of such beings, not even in the wildest tale he had been told, and he marveled at their existence.

Eyes as deep and dark as the night sky looked back at Dreibrand from fine blue faces. The riders who had so recently threatened him now sat in patient silence, and Dreibrand found their character impossible to judge. Cautiously he walked toward Miranda, and the riders flanked him as he went but took no other action.

“Are you all right?” he asked Miranda.

“Yes, Dreibrand, we are fine. I do not think they wish to hurt us, but we have to go with them. I think they have Elendra,” she explained.

Shifting his attention to the blue leader, Dreibrand cast a displeased look at the hand on Miranda’s arm. Diplomatically the blue leader removed his hand, knowing how possessive human males could be.

Dreibrand extended a hand to Miranda and took her close to him. Now he felt able to introduce himself. “Dreibrand Veta.”

There was a tense silence before the blue leader reacted. His smile revealed perfect pearly teeth, and pointing at himself he said, “Taf Ila.”

Politely, Dreibrand bowed his head, impressed by the intelligence and civility of the strange being. But enough formalities had taken place for Taf Ila, who had a job to do. He gave orders in his language, and two blue

beings went to saddle the humans' horses.

"We have to go," Miranda said.

Never really taking his eyes off Taf Ila, Dreibrand whispered, "I saw a city beyond the pass."

Miranda gasped, "That must be where Elendra is."

"Let us hope so," he grumbled, watching his horse being brought to him.

Although the blue beings allowed him the dignity of keeping his weapons, Dreibrand had the distinct impression that he was a prisoner.

Soon they departed, surrounded on all sides by the watchful riders. Expecting to enter the city, Dreibrand draped his wolfhide over his shoulders to lend strength to his appearance.

When they topped the pass, Miranda cried out with wonder at the sight of the lakeshore city. In her limited urban experiences, she had never beheld such a fine and beautiful city, and it shocked her even more after so long in the vast trackless wilds. Descending into the valley woodland, the party came upon the remnant of an ancient overgrown road that suffered from long disuse. Apparently the blue beings rarely went east of their city.

The faded road entered the valley in a series of switchbacks. At the lower elevations the trees grew taller and sometimes blocked the view of the city from the road. After a long ride down, the woodland gave way to the lakeshore city. By now the sun was sinking quickly, casting a vermilion glow upon the snow-capped peaks and sparkling on the lake, making it look like a masterfully cut sapphire. The copper roofs of the buildings had long since been stained green by the elements and the city appeared as a natural extension of the valley.

On the other side of the lake, the tower looked out of place and menacing, black against the fiery sunset, like a giant dead tree that refused to fall.

No walls protected the city, and the riders followed a cobblestone thoroughfare into the heart of the city. Dreibrand and Miranda soon suspected that their destination was the many-tiered stronghold looming over the rooftops ahead of them. One modest tower rose from a corner of the huge blocky building, and the sparkling lake cast golden highlights

upon its walls.

The bronze street lamps contained large star-shaped crystals that were starting to glow along the clean streets of the city. The few beings who were seen by Dreibrand and Miranda were all richly dressed in leather and furs and bright intricate fabrics. As Taf Ila's party neared the massive stronghold by the lake, the traffic thinned. High wrought iron gates, filled with intricate bird designs, barred the entrance to the stronghold. Without a word of command or the touch of a hand, the gates parted.

When they entered, Dreibrand and Miranda exchanged disturbed glances. High walls enclosed the courtyard and the gates slipped shut behind them. Panic prowled on the faces of both humans, but there was nothing either one could say to each other. The moment overwhelmed them. The stone city was as magnificent as it was ominous.

Taf Ila halted the party and indicated that Miranda should dismount. Ignored by the blue leader, Dreibrand looked around warily and decided to include himself without being invited. He helped Miranda down from her horse. As she adjusted Esseldan, she saw Dreibrand's inner distress and surmised that he did not want to be in the custody of these beings.

"Maybe they will let you leave," Miranda whispered. "They did not want me to wait for you anyway, and I do not think this is a good place."

"I am staying with you," he said firmly. Although she appeared reasonably calm, Dreibrand had come to know her well enough to see her terror below the surface. He respected her courageous demeanor and reminded himself to do the same.

Taf Ila said something which apparently meant for them to be quiet and start moving. They complied and entered the stronghold with their armed escort. Walking upon glossy granite floors, they passed through wide halls filled with columns and they ascended steps at regular intervals. Where the roof of each level formed a tier on the outside, glass skylights were in place, but only the tired glow of a deepening dusk drifted down from the high windows. To combat the gloom, flaming braziers flanked each flight of steps, and thick candles burned atop golden stands. Crystals were set in the walls in lines and clusters, and the candlelight played on their facets, making the walls glitter with energy.

A massive set of carved wood doors waited ahead of them, and two guards dressed in green suede studded with silver attended the doors.

When Taf Ila's group arrived, the door wardens heaved open the great doors, and one struck his staff to the floor with a ceremonial thud.

A dazzle of brightness lay beyond the doors, and Miranda squinted at the splendor of the revealed throne room. Floors of fine white marble gleamed inside, and mosaics of crystals covered the walls, depicting the lakes and mountains of the encompassing land. Crystals of every imaginable hue reflected the myriad candles and filled the chamber with light.

Four smooth crystal orbs mounted on thick marble pedestals radiated a swirling blue light. Placed in each corner of the chamber, the orbs were almost as large as a human's head, and except for their largeness, they were identical to the small orb that Dreibrand carried.

This marvelous room exceeded anything Miranda had ever thought possible. The place was a dream become reality, and the surreal light of the throne room caressed her senses like a gentle spring dawn waking her out of a terrible nightmare. She wanted to be lulled by the magnificent power around her. It was so far above her difficult life of poverty, that if she embraced it, she thought that she would never go back.

But she could not trust this power. She recognized the power and remembered that it had taken Elendra.

The guards urged the humans forward, and Taf Ila strode toward the dais at the far end. Dreibrand's thick-booted footsteps thudded loudly in the calm chamber that seemed too outside of the world to be disturbed by the mundane noise.

At the base of the dais stood a tall blue being with bold streaks of white shot through his black hair. With folded arms, he regarded the humans with intense interest. The humans glanced at him briefly, as they took in all the strange sights, but both of their gazes quickly rose toward the figure high on the throne.

A female of the blue race lounged upon the golden throne. Her features were softer and rounder than the other beings present and pure white hair flowed around her shoulders. A wondrous cloak of ermine pelts fell over her simple black gown, and great diamonds dangled from the black tail of each animal skin.

She was both beautiful and terrible. Power radiated from her like heat from a fire. Bowing to his wondrous monarch, Taf Ila stepped aside

without a word.

The knowing gaze of the blue female drilled into Miranda for a long spell, and Esseldan squirmed. Finally, the blue female spoke in the halting words of an unfamiliar language.

“I am Queen Onja.”

Her voice drifted around Miranda’s mind like a memory. Slowly she found her tongue and asked weakly, “Where is Elendra?”

The Queen did not reply, but a door beside the dais clicked open. Miranda looked to the door in an agony of hope, and Elendra actually ran out toward her. The little girl stretched out her arms happily and cried out a joyous greeting to her mother.

Miranda crumpled to her knees to receive the embrace of her daughter. They joined in a tight hug, and relief and happiness spilled tears down Miranda’s face. The little girl beamed with pleasure and had never looked healthier. Elendra wore a black dress with lovely silver embroidery. Her black hair shimmered, and she looked like a dark princess inside the twinkling light of the throne room.

Swallowing a sob of joy, Miranda asked, “Elendra, did that flying monster bring you all the way here?”

Matter of factly, Elendra replied, “Yes. It is the Tatatook.”

Puzzlement twisted Miranda’s expression. In this bright magical place everything seemed like nonsense.

Elendra continued, “Oh Mama, I am so glad you made it. And Esseldan too! It is so wonderful here. You will love it.”

Miranda squeezed her daughter thankfully. The torment of seeing her daughter carried off by the flying monster finally released her body, and she could feel joy.

The return of Elendra relieved Dreibrand as well, but he was not distracted by maternal joy. The Queen had spoken in Miranda’s language, and he wanted some answers.

“Queen Onja, why did you take a daughter from a mother?” he asked.

The azure Queen, who had been intent on the little girl with her mother, turned unfriendly eyes upon the human male. She contemplated him briefly and decided not to speak with him. In her own language, she

apparently gave orders because the guards moved toward Dreibrand.

The tall blue being with white-streaked hair suddenly spoke up, making the guards hesitate. He turned and seemed to engage the Queen in a very brief argument, which she ended quickly with short stern words. The guards resumed their mission, and Dreibrand stepped back to draw his sword.

Taf Ila pulled a small peculiar weapon from his jacket. Its handle curved down to be cradled in his palm and his forefinger curled around a trigger device. A spring-loaded snap sounded and Dreibrand felt a sting. A small dart lodged in Dreibrand's arm when his blade was only halfway out of his scabbard.

Dreibrand's look of surprise turned to dismay as his hand fumbled uselessly with the sword. A paralysis spread rapidly through his body. He tried to grab the dart with his other hand, but that hand did not work, and he fell over helpless.

"Dreibrand!" Miranda screamed. She wanted to rush to his side, but she did not want to let go of her daughter. Two guards decided to restrain her anyway.

Elendra tapped her shoulder, trying to get her mother's attention. "Do not worry about him, Mama," she said.

Blue guards grabbed Dreibrand under his arms and started hauling him away. He tried to protest but only managed a pathetic gurgle.

Now struggling against her guards, Miranda begged on his behalf, "Stop. Do not hurt him!"

"Mama, you stop yelling," Elendra hissed.

The girl's impudent words shocked Miranda, who paused to gape at her daughter. The tall being who had argued with the Queen approached Miranda and set a hand on her shoulder. At first Miranda flinched from his touch, expecting the same treatment Dreibrand was receiving, but she quickly sensed a compassion within this being and his eyes were comforting and sincere.

Quietly he said, "Be calm. I will help him."

Miranda had no chance to ask him what was happening because he hurried after the guards removing Dreibrand.

The Queen watched the tall being rush out of the throne room, annoyed by his presumptiveness. After a final scowl, Onja returned her attention to Miranda. Rising from her throne, Onja gracefully descended the steps.

She dismissed the guards who held Miranda and said, “The man will not be hurt. He did not have permission to speak and had to be taken away.”

Miranda wanted to protest more on Dreibrand’s behalf, but she dare not speak. Onja was close to her now, and the beauty and power of the female was staggering. Miranda quavered before the gleaming onyx eyes of the Queen that twinkled with inhuman thoughts.

“Rooms have been prepared for you,” Onja said. “Elendra will take you.”

The Queen pointed a slender blue hand toward the door Elendra had come out of, and it opened again.

“Everything is fine,” Elendra said.

Miranda looked down into her daughter’s happy face and wanted to believe her, but she could not forget Dreibrand. She did not know how she could help him though, and she doubted the Queen would let her look for him. Reluctantly, Miranda placed her hope in the kind being who had said he would help Dreibrand.

I will stay with my children and find him later, she decided.

She let Elendra guide her through the door, and the regular lighting seemed dull after the brilliance of the throne room. Ascending another level, Elendra took her mother to a magnificent suite. Beautiful stained glass doors opened onto a terrace overlooking the lake. A cool wind flowed in the open doors, filling the richly furnished room with fresh mountain air.

A female servant received the human guests and led Miranda into an adjacent room where a steaming bath in a large marble tub waited. Miranda stared at the sumptuous suite with disbelief.

How can this be? she thought.

Elendra splashed some water at her mother to knock her out of her trance. “See Mama, everything is wonderful here. Give me Esseldan while you wash. The Queen will be here soon.”

“She is coming here?” Miranda asked.

“Yes. The Queen does you a great honor,” Elendra said as she reached up to take her baby brother.

More servants entered the suite and began to set a table for dinner. Elendra withdrew from the bathroom. “Hurry,” she urged.

“Don’t go,” Miranda said.

Elendra smiled sweetly. “I will be right here.” She slipped out and shut the door.

Too stunned by her surroundings and her daughter’s bossy personality to think of a reaction, Miranda allowed the servant to remove her clothes. To her surprise the servant tossed the clothes in a nearby fireplace, and Miranda narrowly saved the silk jacket Dreibrand had given her.

Puzzled by the human’s attachment to the tattered clothes, the servant pointed to a lovely robe on a bench. Seeing that she could have new clothes, Miranda agreed to let her other rags burn, except the jacket.

Miranda lowered herself into the bath and marveled at the luxury. The hot water blessed her body with a relaxation she had never known, and she yielded to the care of the blue servant. She washed Miranda’s hair with fragrant soap and massaged her head, neck, and shoulders. The blue hands were strong and soothed muscles that had known only a lifetime of toil.

When Miranda heard someone enter the suite, she knew it was the Queen. The servant glanced at the bathroom door and reached for a towel. If Miranda could have been certain of the expressions on the faces of this blue race, she would have decided she saw fear on the servant’s face.

Draped in the flowing robe, Miranda left the bathroom. Onja sat on a couch with Elendra and Esseldan, and a table set with candles and a great variety of foods on silver dishes had been placed in front of them. As Miranda entered, Elendra handed her brother away to a servant, who took him into one of the bedrooms.

Miranda’s eyes followed her son, who coughed in the arms of the blue servant.

Before Miranda could express her concern, Onja said, “I have sent for a physician for the baby.”

“You can help him?” Miranda whispered hopefully.

“Mama, you must address Queen Onja as my Queen,” Elendra noted with exasperation.

Onja smiled and ran an adoring hand over the girl’s black hair. “We will give the boy medicine and keep him warm. He will be well in a few days,” Onja said.

“Thank you—my Queen,” Miranda said.

Onja hand fed a wedge of fruit to Elendra and wiped the girl’s chin afterward. “Your baby is so wonderful. I am pleased you brought him to Jingtun for me to see,” the Queen commented to Miranda without looking at her.

Watching her daughter chew the food, Miranda asked, “This place is called Jingtun?”

“Yes. Eat now, Miranda,” Onja insisted, and a servant automatically pushed an upholstered chair up to the table.

The many tempting roasts and salads and breads made Miranda realize how hungry she was. She had never seen food look so beautiful, and she obediently began to fill her plate. After the uncivilized fare of the Wilderness, the variety of food delighted her.

The delicious dishes made her senses reel, but the fine food did not slow her down. Miranda made sure to satisfy her hunger because she did not quite expect the Queen’s generosity to last. While eating, she watched Onja absolutely fawn over Elendra, and Miranda suddenly realized she had a serious competitor for the girl’s affection.

Trying to cloak her mistrust, Miranda inquired, “My Queen, how did Elendra get here?”

“The Tatatook fetched me,” Elendra explained again.

Miranda asked for clarification. “The flying monster is a tatatook?”

“THE Tatatook,” the Queen corrected. “He is a servant of mine, and I sent him to bring Elendra out of danger.”

“I was protecting my daughter just fine,” Miranda stated, forgetting her place.

Onja radiated displeasure, and Miranda regretted her tone.

“I removed Elendra from danger. And without the warding crystal I gave you, you would not have survived. You should thank me for guiding

you and your children to safety,” Onja explained.

Dejected, Miranda looked down at her plate. She resented Elendra’s abduction, but she sensed that pressing the issue would only worsen her position.

Changing the subject, Miranda asked, “My Queen, you are the ruler of the Wilderness?”

Onja nodded and explained, “I rule the Wilderness, the Rysamand, and the human domains in the west.”

The mention of humans in the west intrigued Miranda, but Elendra yawned and immediately distracted the Queen.

“We bore the little girl,” Onja said. “I will leave, so she can rest.”

The Queen rose, her diamonds sparkling in the candlelight, and departed with all of the servants. Abruptly alone with her daughter, Miranda moved onto the couch and wrapped her arms around Elendra.

“I was so worried about you,” she murmured.

Elendra hugged her back and remembered how good her mother’s arms could be. Now that her mother was in Jington, she could live in luxury and be happy. Elendra was so proud that she was worthy enough for the Queen to give them this wonderful place to live.

“Do you know where Dreibrand is?” Miranda asked softly.

Elendra shook her head and snuggled deeper into her mother’s arms. Miranda felt torn between her children and finding him, but she did not even know where to begin in the vast building. Miranda felt responsible for what had happened to him. In retrospect she thought she should not have waited for him when Taf Ila found her. Then he would still be free.

Elendra dozed now, and Miranda put her in the bedroom with Esseldan. Then she took up her sword and resolved to look for Dreibrand. She opened the door with the intention of quietly sneaking out, but a blue being stood in the doorway, and she gasped with alarm. The blue male held a small bag, and after a few simple gestures, he indicated that he was there to see the baby. Realizing that he was the physician, Miranda tried to conceal her guilt and casually set her sword down.

As she invited him inside, she purposefully looked into the hall. At both ends of the corridor, she saw guards in green suede uniforms.

Discouraged, Miranda stayed while the physician examined her son and gave him medicine.

I am not going anywhere, she realized.

14~ Escape in Their Pleasure ~

The squad of blue beings dragged Dreibrand into the bowels of the building. *They seem to know the way quite well,* he observed.

After being stripped of his armor and weapons, Dreibrand was deposited in a lightless cell hewn from bedrock. His captors had specifically checked his pockets and taken the crystal orb, which made him wonder what powers the orb might have.

Dreibrand's paralysis did not prevent him from experiencing the discomfort of the cold stone beneath him. Gradually the use of his body returned, much to his relief, and he wiped some drool from his beard.

At least I know where Elendra is, he thought in a sarcastic attempt to cheer himself.

Weakly he sat up as control returned to his muscles. He flexed his legs a few times and prepared to stand up when he heard the creak of the door opening at the top of the cellblock. Soft suede boots made hardly any sound on the stony floor, but Dreibrand saw the flicker of torchlight through the tiny barred window in his cell door. Certain that someone was coming, he lay down again.

The workings of the lock groaned and the door scraped open. The torchlight hurt Dreibrand's eyes, and he squinted at the lone figure. He saw that it was the one with the white streaks in his hair, who had protested his mistreatment.

The blue being squatted beside Dreibrand. When he set the torch on the floor, dry rat turds snapped in the flame. The blue being put his hands on Dreibrand's shoulders and helped him sit up. Dreibrand held back on his plan to grapple the being by surprise. This one seemed different, and Dreibrand wanted a chance to learn something.

"What are you?" he croaked.

"We are rys," the blue being replied. "I am Shan."

“You speak Miranda’s language?” Dreibrand said.

Shan explained, “Onja and I have learned from Elendra.” He removed a small flask from his jacket. “Drink.”

Dreibrand’s reactions were too slow to push away the flask, and Shan poured a swig into his mouth. The fluid went down his throat like a cold blast, but it was refreshing. Dreibrand immediately felt vitality return to his body.

Dreibrand thanked him for the remedy and said, “I am Dreibrand Veta from Atrophane. What happened to me?”

“The sho dart drugged you. Sho darts work quite well on humans,” Shan said.

Running his fingers through his hair, Dreibrand muttered, “I will have to get one of those.”

Shan chuckled, which was a musical sound, and it put Dreibrand at ease.

“Why am I a prisoner?” Dreibrand asked.

“Not anymore,” Shan announced happily and helped the human to his feet. “Onja has no interest in you, and she would throw a human aside like an apple core. I am not that way.”

When leaving the cell, which Dreibrand was eager to do, he became dizzy and had to lean on Shan for a moment. He hated this feebleness in front of the rys.

“Will not your Queen be displeased with you for letting me out?” Dreibrand wondered.

Shan’s dark eyes gleamed mischievously in the torchlight and he quietly replied, “My Queen is often displeased with me.”

A curious comment, Dreibrand thought.

He followed Shan out of the cellblock into an empty guardroom. Shan opened a cabinet, and Dreibrand saw his armor and weapons inside. He pulled out his scabbard and gratefully buckled the belt around his waist. The ivory handled dagger lay on a shelf, which pleased Dreibrand immensely because he had feared the guards would filch such a thing. He considered the return of his gear an act of friendship, and Shan even helped him put his armor on.

Although eager to end his incarceration, Dreibrand paused to look in the back of the cabinet, but it was empty.

“I had a crystal orb. Do you know where it is?” Dreibrand asked.

“They did not leave it here,” Shan said. “But come to my tower and I will give you another.”

Dreibrand looked in the cabinet again to make sure. “Will it be the same as the one the guards took?” he asked doubtfully.

“It will be better because it will be mine and not Onja’s,” Shan said cheerfully. “Come, Dreibrand Veta, the Keep has better places than the dungeon.”

They left the dark low places of woe and returned to the finer levels of the Keep. Firelight danced on the crystal decorated walls, but Dreibrand noticed that some crystals glowed when Shan walked by. At first Dreibrand thought it was a trick of the light, but after seeing the phenomenon several times, he had to accept it.

They walked outside onto a tier of the Keep and followed a walkway along the top of the courtyard wall, which lead to the tower on the corner of the Keep.

“Shan, is the woman I was with in that tower?” Dreibrand asked.

“No, she is with the Queen,” Shan replied.

Stopping, Dreibrand said, “I must find her. Tell me where she is.”

“She is with Onja, and the Queen does not want to see us. That I know,” Shan said.

“I don’t care. I have to see Miranda,” insisted Dreibrand, who started away on his own.

Shan sprang in his path to gently restrain him. “I am your friend if you will just let me prove it. Trust me and stay away from Onja. You will only get yourself put in the dungeon again—at best.”

The rys pointed to lighted windows a couple tiers up and said, “She is in there with both of her children. Later, when I am sure the Queen is gone, I will take you to see her. I promise.”

“But they are not safe,” Dreibrand protested.

“They are fine. Onja is treating them well,” Shan said.

Thinking of the children, Dreibrand said, “Why did you abduct Elendra?”

“I did not abduct her. The day she arrived was the first I knew about it,” Shan defended.

With suspicion, Dreibrand pressed, “But you did nothing to give her back to us.”

Calmly Shan said, “Once Elendra was here what could I do? The Tatatook is Onja’s servant, and it does not obey me. I can do many things, but I cannot fly. Onja assured me that her mother was being guided here, and I confirmed that for myself, so I just waited for you to arrive. It was not my doing to have the Tatatook snatch her from you.”

Dreibrand studied Shan, searching for sincerity. His inclination was to believe Shan, but the chiseled features of the blue face were hard to interpret. Longingly Dreibrand looked up to the suite that supposedly held Miranda.

“I promise to take you to her later. But we cannot disturb Onja’s meeting. The Queen will ignore my insubordination for letting you out, but I have to stay out of her sight for a while,” Shan said. “This tower is my private residence. Come and refresh yourself, please.”

Dreibrand hesitated.

“Remember you wanted a new crystal orb,” Shan coaxed.

Nodding, Dreibrand went with Shan into the tower.

Inside Shan’s residence, thick tapestries covered the walls, and each level had at least one balcony. Four levels up, they entered a furnished apartment that was slightly cluttered and apparently Shan’s living area. Three servants hustled out to greet them, and Shan sent one for food and drink. The other two he instructed to see to Dreibrand’s needs.

Dreibrand did not feel comfortable around the rys servants, but he allowed them to draw him a bath. He watched the water steam after it had been poured into the tub, and he wondered at this trick. Suspiciously, he tested the water, which was perfect, and he decided it would be good to be clean.

Once in the tub, he tried to talk to the servants, but they did not understand Miranda’s language or any other he tried. Resorting to signs, Dreibrand indicated he needed a razor to shave himself, and they seemed

to understand.

However, when the rys servants returned with the razor, he adamantly refused to let them touch him. He saw no facial hair on any of the rys, and he would not trust them with the task. Shooing them out, he tended to his own needs.

A robe had been left for him, and Dreibrand appreciated Shan's generosity, but he did not want to wear such a casual flimsy thing. He put his dirty clothes and gear back on because he wanted to be ready to move on a moment's notice. Shan, so far, had been a friend, but he did not like the Queen's hospitality.

When Dreibrand returned to Shan's living area, the rys laughed at him.

"You look like a baby," Shan remarked.

Dreibrand rubbed his now-smooth cheek and said, "I prefer to look this way."

Composing himself, Shan said, "Forgive me, Dreibrand. Your appearance surprised me. Here, have some wine."

Dreibrand accepted the goblet and looked thoughtfully at the red fluid within it.

"It is safe," Shan encouraged and held his goblet up for a toast. The golden cups clinked together, and Shan said, "To my new friend."

They drank. Although the foreign wine was new to Dreibrand's palate, the sensations brought back memories. He had last drunk wine with Lord Kwan.

The alcohol felt warm and soothing in his body, but Dreibrand did not want to relax and he would not drink more than one cup.

"Do you always make friends so quickly?" Dreibrand inquired.

Shan shrugged. "Usually. I can tell if I will like somebody."

"Are you magic?" Dreibrand blurted.

A smile lighted Shan's face. "Yes, that is the best word for it. I have powers. All rys have powers," he replied.

Dreibrand looked Shan up and down, as if trying to see what made him magic.

"What can you do?" Dreibrand whispered.

“Many things. More than most,” Shan said with a timid pride. “But I will explain things to you and Miranda together. That way I know you both will understand.”

“Can we go to her now?” Dreibrand asked urgently, setting down his goblet.

Shan’s black eyes glazed over briefly with a distant look. Satisfied with whatever had occupied his mind, he said, “We may go see your woman and children. Onja has left them for the night. But before I forget, let me get you a warding crystal.”

Shan opened a velvet-lined case on his desk and removed a glowing blue crystal orb. It was very like the one Dreibrand had found in the Wilderness.

Dreibrand shyly took the orb, and its light lessened when it left the rys’s hand.

Shan said, “This is properly called a warding crystal. It will protect you from spells from all rys, except the most powerful.”

“What kind of spells?” Dreibrand asked.

“Heat spells, sleep spells, mindreading, there are many spells. In time you will understand better,” Shan replied.

Confusion and fear vied for Dreibrand’s expression, and Shan commented, “It must be hard for you to understand us when no rys live on your side of the world. The humans in the west grow up knowing about rys.”

Dreibrand blinked. “Did you say humans?” he said and tucked away the warding crystal.

Shan nodded. “Yes. They live to the west. My kind live in these mountains, which are called the Rysamand.”

Stowing this useful information, Dreibrand reminded Shan that he wanted to see Miranda. On their trip across the Keep they encountered the occasional guard, but no one questioned Shan. Dreibrand wondered what rank Shan possessed. If he had not known about the Queen, he would have guessed that Shan was in charge.

More guards were placed in the halls near Miranda’s suite, and Dreibrand eyed them carefully as he walked by them.

Why do they want Miranda and her children? he thought.

Arriving at the doors of the guest suite, Shan knocked on them softly. When no response came, Dreibrand fidgeted with distress. Shan knocked again, and finally someone could be heard fumbling with the latch. The door opened partially and Miranda peered out sleepily. She brightened immediately upon seeing Dreibrand.

“You are safe,” she cried, opening the door all the way. Miranda rushed to Dreibrand and took his hands. “Did they hurt you?”

“Only my pride,” he grumbled, but it pleased him to have her close and feel her touch. He squeezed her hands warmly and let his eyes gaze upon her for an indulgent moment. Her freshly bathed body smelled good and her clean hair looked fluffy and inviting. She looked back at him, obviously noticing the loss of his beard.

Shan quietly shut the door and bolted it.

Seeing that it was the tall rys who had spoken to her before, Miranda thanked him.

Shan accepted her gratitude gracefully and said, “I try to keep the dungeon empty. Onja is too quick to dislike someone. I often make friends where she makes enemies.”

“When I saw that I was trapped in here, you were my only hope. What is your name?” Miranda said.

“Shan,” he answered simply and bowed politely. Miranda had never really received such manners from anyone, and she liked the way it made her feel.

“Are the children here?” Dreibrand asked.

“They are sleeping. A healer gave medicine to Esseldan, and he is sleeping soundly,” she reported. “It is so wonderful to have Elendra back. She seems so happy, but...”

“What is it?” Dreibrand pressed, recognizing her troubled mood.

Miranda frowned, clearly resisting her own thoughts. Wandering to the couch and sitting, she murmured, “Onja seems so possessive of Elendra. I just cannot trust her.”

“Well I certainly don’t!” Dreibrand cried, seating himself beside her.

Shan laughed, still charmed by their ignorance of the world they had

entered. “No one trusts Onja. Her wants and whims have no reason or loyalty.”

“Why was Elendra brought here? And why am I guarded?” Miranda demanded.

Shan enjoyed her forthright manner and took a seat. Humans were seldom so bold with a rys.

“My best guess is that the Queen is infatuated with your daughter. Onja’s mind is closed to me, but she clearly enjoys the company of the little girl. Small human children are never in Jingtun, and Onja must have seen Elendra in the Wilderness and become interested. A desire to indulge Elendra is the only reason I can think of why Onja let you survive,” Shan concluded.

“Let us survive. What do you mean?” Dreibrand asked.

Shan lifted his fine eyebrows while considering his answer. He realized he had never had to explain this profound matter to anyone before.

They have no idea how powerful Onja really is, he thought and decided to tell it to them plainly.

With a sigh, he said, “No humans from the east have ever been allowed to approach Jingtun. The Wilderness is Onja’s domain, and she has killed anyone who strayed too far into her land.”

Thinking of the mysterious emptiness of the Wilderness, Dreibrand said, “How long has this been going on? Have the rulers before Onja always defended that land?”

Shan studied the light-haired human from the east, who had spoken out of turn with the Queen of Jingtun. The rys knew that Dreibrand’s boldness had been exercised out of ignorance, and he wondered if Dreibrand would be so bold once he was not ignorant.

“There is something you need to know,” Shan announced. He looked to Miranda next and felt an ominous concern. Onja treated Elendra’s mother well for now, but he had doubts that Onja’s goodwill would last.

Miranda and Dreibrand waited expectantly for his revelation.

“The rulers before Onja did not keep the Wilderness as it is now, but Onja has been the Queen for twenty-two centuries, and in that time, the Wilderness has been empty,” Shan explained.

For a long moment Dreibrand and Miranda were dumbfounded as the statement sunk in. Confused, Miranda said, “I don’t understand. Twenty-two centuries? Dreibrand, that is over two thousand years, right?”

He nodded to her in vague confirmation, and asked Shan, “Do you mean Onja has been alive for thousands of years?”

Knowing this information was difficult for the foreigners, Shan patiently confirmed his statement.

“How old are you?” Miranda suddenly demanded.

“I am five hundred forty—no,” he looked up thinking, “five hundred forty one.”

“I cannot believe this,” Miranda protested.

“Dear Miranda,” Shan said. “Do you think all life is measured on your hasty human scale? All rys live for centuries, but Onja IS uncommonly powerful and long lived.”

“And are you her heir?” Dreibrand inquired, thinking he had guessed the reason for Shan’s apparent authority.

Shan chuckled and looked down modestly as if embarrassed. Shyly he said, “I would like to think so, but Onja has made me pay for such thoughts.”

“Do you have any claim to the throne?” Dreibrand said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Shan straightened his shoulders with an automatic pride, but his meek words did not match his body language. “I must not speak of such things,” he said.

“You act like this Onja is listening at the door,” Dreibrand observed, hoping to goad answers from the rys. In his estimation, Shan came across as a rival of the Queen, and after his treatment that day, Dreibrand was interested in enemies of the Queen.

“But she is,” Shan corrected. “It is a power of rys to see and hear over distances. We need to concentrate, and it is not the easiest magic, but the perception of rys is far beyond that of humans. And of course, Onja is extremely powerful, and has been watching you in the Wilderness for many weeks. I still am not certain why she let you live. You must understand that you are the first humans ever to reach Jingtun from the

east for over two thousand years.”

This information was staggering and disturbing, but it allowed Miranda to make more sense of her experiences.

“Could Onja control my mind?” she asked.

“Onja can communicate over great distances, and her communications are often controlling. Sometimes her suggestion is enough to affect behavior,” Shan replied.

Despite her troubled heart, Miranda was excited to actually hear explanations for the strange things that had happened to her.

“Just before Elendra was taken, I felt like someone was looking at me. And when Elendra was stolen, Dreibrand and I slept with an unnatural heaviness. Did Onja cause these things?” Miranda asked in a hurry for information.

“By the way you describe it, I would say yes. But I am not sure what she did. I did not notice her plots until your daughter arrived in Jingtun. I rarely look to the east. The Deamedron are frightening and they make my very soul shudder,” Shan said.

“What did you say? Dea-Deamedron?” Dreibrand said, struggling with the accent.

“Deamedron. That is the name for the spirits you saw on the Quinsanomar, which means final battlefield. I pleaded with Onja to guide you around that awful place, but the terror it caused you amused her, and she would not listen to me. I can imagine how terrible it was for you. No one, ryls or human, goes to the Quinsanomar. You would have died if you did not have the warding crystal to protect you,” Shan explained.

“Yeah, I figured that out,” Dreibrand said wearily, and he rubbed his arm.

Shan continued, “Onja controls the Deamedron. They are her creation, and it is her great spell that binds their souls to this world. When she wants to, she can release the Deamedron from the confines of the Quinsanomar and loose them upon any who enter the Wilderness. Without a warding crystal there is no protection from them. That is why the Wilderness is empty.”

“But the Deamedron did not kill us,” Miranda said.

“No. Instead of sending the warrior spirits to kill you, she sent you a warding crystal and led you to Jingtēn,” Shan said.

“Not that I am complaining, but why didn’t she kill us?” Dreibrand wondered. “You said everyone before has been killed. What prompted this mercy?”

“I would not use the word mercy in connection with Onja,” Shan warned.

“Nor would I,” Miranda agreed. “She abducted Elendra, and I will never forgive her for that.”

“Of course not. But why did she let us live?” Dreibrand said.

Shan squirmed in his chair. He did not like to think in directions that Onja’s mind might go. Cautiously he speculated, “As the Queen likes Elendra, I assume she likes your baby. An infant may not survive a long flight with the Tatatook, and Onja guided you here, so you could transport the baby to her.”

“What will she do with my children?” Miranda demanded.

“I do not know,” Shan said uncomfortably. “Human children are exciting to rys because they have so much energy and grow so fast. I guess Onja simply wants to have your children here because they please her.”

“It does not please me,” Miranda protested.

Compassion pooled in Shan’s eyes, and he did not seem so strange and alien to the humans in that moment. With a quiet urgency he advised, “You must show the Queen of Jingtēn the greatest respect. She considers herself the Goddess of all the human tribes, and they are expected to worship her as the divine ruler of all Gyhwen. Onja will expect this from you.”

“People worship her as a Goddess?” Miranda asked incredulously.

“Out of fear, yes,” Shan replied. “All the tribes pay a mighty tribute to Jingtēn every year. Temples to Onja are in every major human city, and a human priesthood administers her rule. Along with every king, queen, general, or chief, all humans are subject to Onja.”

This was heavy news to hear, and it troubled Dreibrand. He realized that here humans were ruled by rys.

“Is Onja a Goddess?” he asked because the concept troubled him.

Atrophane had many deities, but they did not live in cities and show themselves to mortals.

Shan shrugged. "She is powerful enough to convince people she is their Goddess. You are a fool if you do not believe in her power. Even I have to do that," he grumbled.

"She is no Goddess to me," Miranda snapped.

Actual alarm showed on Shan's face, and he hissed urgently, "Do not talk like that in her house, Miranda. I beg you!"

Miranda wanted to further express her resentment about Elendra's abduction, but she remembered the force of Onja's will reaching across the Wilderness, and she reflected upon her vulnerability.

"I have given you enough to think about for tonight," Shan decided. "We can talk more tomorrow. We should go, Dreibrand."

"I will stay here," Dreibrand said, glancing at Miranda and hoping she would not protest his presumptiveness.

"I can guarantee your liberty if you stay at my tower. Onja might throw you back in the dungeon if she notices you," Shan warned.

"Shan, I prefer he stay," Miranda said.

Hearing that she wanted him to stay made Dreibrand's heart pound and he ignored Shan's warning. He took Miranda's hand, and said, "Ah, Shan, I will slip back to your place early. I will not get caught."

"As you wish then. Meet me in the morning. If I do not see you, I will check the dungeon," Shan said playfully. He now realized that the humans desired to be together.

Shan saw himself out the door. When he shut the door, the bolt on the inside slid into place, and the metallic snap startled Dreibrand and Miranda. Witnessing the invisible force of Shan's magic on the bolt convinced them of the reality of rys power.

Privately both accepted that they had not only come to a new land but a new world. They would need to adapt.

They discussed the information Shan had shared with them. Onja's interest in them, and especially the children, was disturbing, but they agreed it was better than dying by the cold touch of the Deamedron.

In retrospect, Dreibrand contemplated how truly foolish his entry into

the Wilderness had been. Briefly he thought of Lord Kwan, who would make his expedition soon, and Dreibrand wondered how his old commander would fare.

“Let us get out of here while we can,” Dreibrand whispered.

Fear and temptation danced inside Miranda’s green eyes, but she slowly shook her head.

Sadly she said, “I cannot run into the woods tonight. Esseldan needs to be inside right now more than anything so his medicine can work. And you heard Shan. The Queen has great powers and I can see that she has many soldiers. She will not let us go.”

“I do not care. I will fight if I have to. We need to go now while it is dark,” Dreibrand urged.

Punctuating Miranda’s concern, Esseldan began to cough and cry in the next room. Miranda rose to check on her son and give him another dose of medicine. While she tended her children, Dreibrand hung his head in frustrated thought. *Is escape really possible? Can I really expect to break a woman with two small children out of this place?*

We crossed the Wilderness, he thought in an attempt to encourage himself, but he had just learned that it had been by Onja’s will that they had survived.

I will ask Shan to help us. He clearly does not like the Queen, and I will convince him to help us get out of here, he decided.

Miranda returned from the children’s room, and a vague smile lighted her face. Having Elendra back was such a joy to her that it lessened her other worries. She walked to the open stained glass doors and the cool air rippled across the hem of her robe.

“I will ask Shan to help us,” Dreibrand said, getting up to stand behind her. “I need more information. I will ask him to tell us where the humans live. We need a place to go.”

Miranda felt guilty that she could not attempt an escape that night. Looking over her shoulder, she said, “You can go if you want, Dreibrand. I would understand. It is my fault you are here. I should not have made Taf Ila wait for you. Then you would be free.”

“Then I would be alone in the woods and not know where you were,” Dreibrand observed gently. “I will not leave you.”

She turned to face him, and he was close now. “Why do you care about me?” she whispered.

Dreibrand hesitated. When he looked at his life, helping her was the only worthwhile thing he had ever done. “It is good for me to care about you,” he finally replied.

“It is good to have someone care,” she murmured in a confusion of emotion. Miranda felt a great urge to be with him, but she had never freely chosen a lover before and she did not know how to proceed.

Dreibrand showed her. He easily sensed her mood and like any good warrior did not let the moment slip away. He entwined a strong hand through her soft hair and pulled her to his hungry lips. They kissed with a vital and instant passion that had been held back too long.

Her hands grabbed the buckles of his armor and blindly undid them. The metal plate hit the floor with a clang that neither of them heard. She pressed against his hot chest as he pulled away her robe. To feel her bare flesh intoxicated Dreibrand and he lifted her and carried her to the bedchamber.

They sank into the quilts and furs, kissing deeply. Eventually, Miranda pulled away and stood up. The candles had burned low and the flickering light glowed on her body. She yanked off his boots.

Dreibrand lay back enjoying her willingness as she removed the rest of his clothes. Grabbing her waist, he drew her down on top of him, and they explored each other’s bodies with abandon. Miranda moaned with pleasure, reveling in her choice of lover.

After they made love the first time, they rested in each other’s arms. Dreibrand’s hand still shook from the intensity of his emotions as he caressed her body. He had often known satisfaction, but never had he known such happiness with a woman.

Likewise, Miranda was delighted by the experience. She felt safe beside him, and she knew he cared for her. She had never expected such a thing.

They drifted back to lovemaking, seeking escape in their pleasure. But such a night passes quickly, and the birdsong and light of morning soon arrived. Weariness vied with the fire of their desire, and they dozed.

Dreibrand snuggled into the bedding, savoring the luxury of the furnishings. He had not slept in a bed for a long time, and he knew he had

to go soon. Miranda stirred and went into the adjacent room to see her children. Through the wall he heard her talking to Elendra, who responded in a high sweet voice. Dreibrand dressed himself and went into the main room.

Miranda came out holding her son to her breast. Elendra followed, and regarded Dreibrand with a haughty look.

“The Queen does not like you,” Elendra stated.

“Well, you will have to put in a good word for me because she seems to like you,” Dreibrand said.

Elendra frowned with uncertainty.

“How is Esseldan?” Dreibrand asked as he put his armor back on.

“A little better,” Miranda responded.

“I will go to Shan now,” he said.

Miranda nodded. “I will be here with the children,” she said, pulling her daughter against her leg.

“I will come back here by tonight,” he promised.

She smiled, trusting in his sincerity. Neither of them wanted to be separated, but he had to go and speak with Shan. Hopefully the rys would prove to be the ally he appeared to be.

Dreibrand departed quietly, only removing his eyes from Miranda’s face when he shut the door. Rys guards were still in the hallway, and they looked at him skeptically as he walked by, but they did nothing.

15~ Favor and Loyalty ~

I have been told that this year when the snows melt Dacian and his Queen will ride down from the Rysamand and face their foes in Nufal. I have been told that this year the war will end—Urlen, Kezanada Chronicler, year six of the Overlordship of Amar.

Two of Shan’s servants greeted Dreibrand when he arrived at the tower. He tried many times to ask for Shan, but the servants did not answer. They either did not understand his question or they felt no inclination to communicate. However, they did provide the human male with breakfast,

which he gladly accepted.

Giving up on them as a source of information, Dreibrand finished his food, and started exploring the tower. He wandered onto a balcony. The waters of the deep blue lake lapped gently on the gravel shore below, and the blue stone buildings of the city rose to his left. Majestic mountains ringed the green valley, and the beauty of the place was a privilege to see.

It does look like the Gods could live here, he thought.

He went back inside and paused in front of a mirror. It was good to be clean and shaved, and he was glad not to look like a mine slave anymore.

“I am glad to see you are free.”

Dreibrand whirled to face the voice and saw Shan enter the room.

Shan continued, “I was worried I would have to go down into that nasty dungeon again.”

“I have been waiting here for you,” Dreibrand said.

“Would you like to go for a ride?” Shan asked.

Dreibrand did not want to refuse the invitation, but he could not waste time on such frivolities. He said, “Shan, I must talk to you. I need advice. I need help.”

“I know,” Shan acknowledged softly and his kind tone encouraged patience. “That is why we should go for a ride. Outside the city we can have the talk. Remember what I told you about rys.”

“But you said the Queen can see across the Wilderness. What good will a ride do?” Dreibrand asked, seeking to understand.

“A ride will do much because I am with you. With a little distance, Onja cannot hear me. Now please come. Let me show you my homeland so that you may know me,” Shan said.

“If I go, you will tell me more?” Dreibrand said, still reluctant.

The rys nodded.

They went to the stables and Dreibrand was pleased to see Starfield and Freedom well tended. Shan invited him to try one of the white rys horses, and Dreibrand agreed. Starfield deserved rest and riding a new horse would be exciting.

The rys horses were a larger breed with feathered feet, and Shan

boasted that they had twice the endurance of common horses. He ordered two of them saddled.

Astride his favorite steed, the tall rys soon galloped toward the ornate iron gates of the Keep, and Dreibrand endeavored to follow. His horse resisted his will, seemingly irritated by the human rider, but Dreibrand was an accomplished rider and he prevailed.

Speeding down a city thoroughfare, Dreibrand struggled to master his mount. He glimpsed a few startled rys gaping at the human racing down the streets of their city.

Shan and Dreibrand clattered out of the paved city and headed into the alpine forest. Trees flew by in a green blur, and Dreibrand concentrated on avoiding low branches in his haste. He galloped after Shan, who set the hard pace to show off the stamina of the animals.

Steadily their steeds climbed the steep slopes and emerged above the tree line into the high meadows. Rock and snow soared above this place, and the mountains snagged the clouds. Shan pulled his horse to a stop, and Dreibrand drew alongside of him. The horses' wide nostrils flared in the thin air, but they were not winded.

"You ride well, Dreibrand. A rys horse can be hard for a human to control," Shan complimented.

Dreibrand grinned, "I grew up riding."

They continued at a leisurely pace looking down at Jington, which now looked small at the bottom of the valley. Quietly, Shan began to talk.

"In the city I can protect my thoughts from Onja, but I could never cloak my words," Shan explained. "That is why we had to come up here.

"Last night you asked me what claim I had to the throne. The answer is that my power is my claim. The rys with the greatest magic has all rights to the throne, and I am very powerful. My magical ability exceeds that of average rys. Actually, all of my kind respect me as their superior—except of course Onja."

"You wish to challenge her then?" Dreibrand whispered.

Shan sighed and looked to the nearest mountaintop. "Once before I challenged her. And she put me in my place. But that was a long time ago. A rys comes of age at one hundred, and I challenged her then."

Dreibrand considered the information, recalling how Shan had stood at the base of Onja's throne. He wondered why the Queen would tolerate him and said, "Not to be rude, but why did Onja let you live? A ruler does not let rivals live."

Shan chuckled grimly. "I am very sure Onja thought the same, but even she must follow some of our laws. Since the Great War, rys do not kill rys. It is the most important law to all rys. But do not worry, Dreibrand, she made me wish I was dead. She tore my mind apart and cast a standing stone around me. It took me five years to break out of that stone prison. But even that surprised her. I was meant to be imprisoned for a much longer time as a living memorial to her superiority. Since then it has been stalemate between us."

Dreibrand remembered the standing stones of the Quinsanomar and surmised that the spirits of the Deamedron were locked in such magic prisons. "How did you live in stone?" he asked.

"Rys can hibernate. And the greater one's magic, the longer one can hibernate. From that experience I learned to cast stone, even on myself. But I do not care to do so," Shan said.

With new respect Dreibrand looked at Shan and tried to imagine five years locked in stone. But his thoughts returned to Miranda and the guards at her door.

"Shan, Miranda and I want to go be where the humans live. Will Onja let us go?" he said.

"She might let you go, but I believe she intends to keep the children here for her amusement," Shan said.

"But Miranda cannot leave without them," Dreibrand protested.

"I know. That is why we came up here to talk," Shan said and stopped his horse. He invited Dreibrand to hike higher with him.

They followed a strenuous trail into a realm of cold sharp rock and snow. Shan moved skillfully up the rocky surface, but Dreibrand felt out of his element. He was higher now than he had been in the pass when he entered the Rysamand, and he had to focus on each treacherous step. He wondered if Shan was putting him through some kind of physical test or if the rys simply wanted him to fall down the mountain.

At last they reached a flat table of rock shrouded by clouds. Dreibrand

came puffing up behind Shan, bothered by the elevation.

“When it is not cloudy, this spot offers a wonderful view of Rystavalla,” Shan said proudly. When Dreibrand asked what Rystavalla was, Shan smiled and said that it was the world. “But the humans call her Gyhwen,” he added.

“The people in the east call the world Ektren,” Dreibrand said.

The name was new to Shan, but of only passing interest. Any word the humans used to name the world was little more than a childish nickname from the rys point of view.

“I have brought you to this lonely height because it helps to focus my power,” Shan explained. “I know Onja cannot eavesdrop on me here. Let me tell you some of our history, so you can understand better. I am sure you have noticed the tower across Lake Nin from the city.”

When Dreibrand nodded, Shan continued, “It is the Tomb of Dacian, who was the most powerful rys king to ever live. He was King of Jington and Onja was his Queen. Twenty-two centuries ago, another kingdom of rys called Nufal lay east of here beyond the plains in the Tabren Mountains. They were the rivals of Jington and there was war between Jington and Nufal.

“To win the war, Dacian and Onja conceived a trap that would utterly defeat Nufal. Their vast war hosts met on the plains. This old battleground is now called the Quinsanomar. Both rys kingdoms had gathered all of their warriors and their human allies for a great battle. After both sides exhausted themselves with fierce killing, Dacian and Onja cast the greatest spell ever upon their opponents. All of the enemy warriors, rys and human, were killed and their souls imprisoned in stone. The spell held their spirits in bondage to Jington. This was the creation of the Deamedron, and it was a terrible thing.

“When Dacian saw his victory, he realized his spell was evil and is said to have collapsed in horror. Onja however felt no guilt and promptly commanded her spirit slaves to slaughter every living soul in Nufal. The tormented Deamedron obeyed and all rys and humans were killed in the region. And to this day only ruins of the Nufalese civilization remain in the Wilderness.

“This holocaust caused Dacian to decree that no rys could kill rys ever again. It was his final law, and within days his grief killed him. At the time

the tower was the seat of the monarchy, but Onja turned it into his tomb and had the Keep built in the city. No one except Onja has entered the tower since that time.

“The human allies of Jington were terrified of Onja, whose power had created the Deamedron, and they have considered her a Goddess ever since, which Onja of course encouraged. In this way she has ruled them.”

Dreibrand ruminated this information silently. He doubted that grief had killed Dacian, but he did not share his cynical thoughts. The imprisoned souls of the Deamedron forever bound as Onja’s unholy army disturbed him deeply. In his belief, a warrior killed on the field of battle deserved his eternal rewards from the war God Golan. Thousands of years in limbo was a bitter fate.

Dismally he said, “Shan, are you telling me I have no chance against Onja?”

“No human has any chance, Dreibrand. Onja is too powerful,” Shan said.

“Then what can I do? Do you intend to challenge her again?” Dreibrand said.

Blue light flickered in Shan’s black eyes, and it startled Dreibrand. Shan wanted to say yes to Dreibrand’s question. Shan longed to be free of Onja’s tyranny and guide the rys according to his vision, but he knew that when he challenged Onja again there would be no room for error.

With regret Shan said, “The time for my challenge has not yet come, but it is close. At long last I sense that Onja has weakened. She still appears to be great, but like the old tree in the forest, she has rotted inside and waits only for a storm strong enough to blow her down. I will side with you and Miranda and help you get to my human friends.”

“Where will we go?” Dreibrand wondered.

“I will take you west to the Temu Domain. Taischek, the King of the Temu Tribe, is my closest human friend and he will shelter you if I ask it,” Shan explained.

“I do not ask for charity. I will earn my keep,” Dreibrand offered. “I am a trained warrior.”

“You are a mercenary then?” Shan inquired.

Dreibrand averted his gaze uncomfortably, wondering how best to explain himself. He answered, "I am now. In my homeland of Atrophane I was an officer in the military, but I resigned because I wanted to explore the Wilderness."

Shan considered the simplistic answer, guessing that Dreibrand left out some details. He studied Dreibrand with a piercing gaze and saw an intelligent and ambitious man, and he decided the stranger might have much to offer.

Intruding upon the rys's contemplative state, Dreibrand said, "How will we get away?"

"Onja regularly spends time in deep meditation. Next time she does this, we will leave. If I am with you, the rys soldiers will not harm you. But we must get out of Jington before Onja notices, and that is the difficult part," Shan said.

"What will happen if she does notice us?" Dreibrand asked.

"She may try to kill you with her magic," Shan replied.

"Can she do that?" cried Dreibrand.

"Yes. But I can shield you. Her killing range is not as wide as it used to be. As long as we get away from the city our danger will be minimal," Shan said.

"What if she follows?" Dreibrand asked.

"Unlikely. Onja has not gone any farther from the city than the Tomb of Dacian in living memory," Shan said.

Dreibrand realized he would have to trust Shan completely for their safety. The thought of magic striking at him from far away was daunting, and Onja's power to enslave the very spirit made his courage waver. But Dreibrand could not sit by and let the rys Queen keep Miranda's children because they entertained her.

"When can we leave?" he said.

"Maybe tonight," Shan answered.

"I will have to discuss this with Miranda first. Her son is ill, and she did not want to travel last night when I proposed we escape," Dreibrand said.

Shan frowned. "Do not discuss it with her. We must not speak of this when we get back to Jington. I will know when the opportunity to escape

has come, and I will get you then. If Miranda wants to escape, she will have to travel whenever the time comes.”

“But I must tell her I have made arrangements with you,” Dreibrand insisted.

“Speak of our plan and you risk discovery,” Shan said bluntly. “Hint to her if you must, but do not talk about it.”

Reluctantly, Dreibrand nodded. If he and Shan had to talk on a mountainside, then he had to accept that they could not talk in the city.

“I thank you, Shan,” he said sincerely.

“Thank me after we escape. Now, let me be completely honest with you, Dreibrand. Helping you is very risky for me and for my friendship, I expect friendship,” Shan said.

“How do you mean?” Dreibrand asked.

Shan explained, “Soon I will be ready to challenge Onja for the throne. But to make my challenge successful many things will have to be done, which I will explain later. And I will need all of my friends.”

Dreibrand understood. The rys’s arrangement was not so alien. For his favor, he wanted loyalty. “You want me to serve you in your war?” he surmised.

“Yes. And the rewards for victory will be great—very great,” Shan promised.

I suppose the King of Jingtun would have much to give, Dreibrand thought. He hated to make a decision when his understanding of the conflict was so vague, but if he had to choose a side, then he would choose. He had to find a place to fit into this strange land, and Shan’s offer sounded good.

I asked for his help. I have to accept his terms, Dreibrand reminded himself.

Despite his fear and uncertainty, it felt good to have a friend.

“Onja made my decision for me yesterday. I will not serve her and I will never call her Goddess. I will be your friend and ally as you ask,” Dreibrand declared and offered the rys his hand.

The rys grasped his hand firmly, and they were agreed.

“This is good! This is good!” Shan cried happily. “I knew when I saw you that it was a good sign. The Age of Onja will soon close.”

The clouds pulled away from the mountainside, and the sun blazed at its zenith. The sky opened, and Dreibrand could see the top of the world. On the opposite side of the valley, the icy peaks of the Rysamand reached to frigid heights and an invincible glacier held a plateau in a permanent grasp.

Shan could tell that Dreibrand admired the magnificent view, and he pivoted to point at the beautiful peaks. “That is Mount L’cha and that is Mount Fandanihn. And we are sitting on Mount Curlenfindi. These great mountains have beckoned rys and human alike to climb them. They are called bold and crazy, but rarely successful. But I have climbed all three.”

“It looks so incredible up here,” Dreibrand breathed. “Have you really stood on the top of those peaks?”

“Yes. It was in such a high place that I first realized how great the powers were inside me,” Shan recalled. “But we will save stories of my mountain climbing adventures for another day. We should get back.”

Dreibrand agreed and they hiked down to the meadows. The horses had wandered in their grazing, but they cantered back to Shan as soon as he returned. As they rode down into the tree line, a piercing shriek ripped the clear high air and echoed through the valley. Shan immediately stopped and surveyed the sky.

Dreibrand recognized the wretched sound.

“The Tatatook!” Shan cried and pointed to it in the sky. Dreibrand shielded his eyes from the sun and saw the flying beast swooping down from the mountains.

“The Queen has summoned her crow. Ride!” Shan commanded with ominous urgency.

The hooves of the white horses thundered through the forest as they dashed toward the city. Another shuddering call rent the air, and Dreibrand cursed himself for leaving Miranda.

16~ Dreibrand’s Choice ~

For the moment Miranda focused on what was good. The relief of being reunited with her daughter eased Miranda's worry about her circumstances, and the luxury and beauty of her suite helped her not think about the guards in the hall.

The rys physician stopped by to check on Esseldan. After another examination, the physician flashed Miranda a confident smile because the boy's cough had lessened.

Elendra chattered freely when her mother bathed her and combed her long glistening hair. Once she was dressed, the girl showed her mother a box of toys that the Queen had given her. She rummaged through lovely dolls with perfect painted faces and removed a ball that bounced delightfully.

"I want to play with this," Elendra announced.

Miranda obliged her, and they went onto the terrace in the bright morning. The girl's laughter ranged from giggles to shrieks of joy as she chased the ball. A few times Miranda had to intervene to keep the ball from bouncing off the high terrace. She had never seen her daughter so happy.

Pausing from her play, Elendra said, "Queen Onja will let us have everything we ever need. She is so nice. Do you like it here, Mama?"

"It is very nice," Miranda agreed with reservation. She wished her daughter was not so enamored with Jingtun and Queen Onja. "But don't you want to go make a home with people? We would only have to travel a little farther."

Elendra wrinkled her nose. "No!" she snapped. "I'm sick of sleeping on the ground. I want to stay here and live like rich people."

The words stung Miranda, who knew she had never been able to properly provide for her children. She stared at her daughter but could not blame her for wanting to stay in Jingtun.

I should want to stay here too, Miranda thought and looked up the tiered levels of the mighty Keep. She should be thankful that such a wealthy and powerful queen wanted to take care of her children. But Miranda wondered if she could get used to living with the rys. She admitted that she liked the rys who had helped Dreibrand. Shan had seemed easy to like, and Miranda automatically appreciated his kindness.

The physician had been concerned and gentle as well.

But Queen Onja scared her.

Although Miranda considered the practicality of staying in Jingtun, as Onja seemed to want, she knew Dreibrand did not want to stay. Miranda did not want him to leave her, and she decided to leave when the chance came. She would take Elendra whether she wanted to go or not.

However, spoiling the lovely day by arguing with Elendra would be a shame, and Miranda dropped the subject. They played until noon. At lunch, a chest of clothes arrived for Miranda to choose from. Elendra sat on the bed watching her mother try on clothes in front of a mirror. The fine surroundings and gifts made Miranda understand how Jingtun appealed to her daughter. Miranda had never experienced the indulgence of selecting beautiful clothes. Her only option had been rugged homespun.

Best of all, Miranda received a badly needed pair of suede boots of the kind the ryls wore. A servant disposed of Miranda's shoe remnants that had served her for too many years.

While trying on a fine linen suit embroidered with glossy green pine trees, Miranda strapped on her sword in its rugged rawhide scabbard and tucked her knife into the belt. She draped her dusty silk jacket over her shoulders and laughed at her appearance. She certainly was no longer the abused slave girl of Wa Gira. Clean and in decent clothes, she looked good in the reflection. Miranda had never even owned a mirror, and it pleased her to think of herself as looking good.

She was about to draw her sword and brandish it in front of the mirror for amusement, but a knock at the door snapped her out of her foolishness. A servant promptly opened the door, and two Jingtun guards entered and indicated that Miranda should come with them. Her stomach tightened nervously, and she glanced at Elendra.

"They said the Queen wants to see you," said Elendra, who had begun to pick up on the ryl language.

"I don't want to go now. I want to stay with my children," Miranda said, addressing the nearest guard.

"Mama, don't argue. Go see the Queen. Esseldan and I will be right here," Elendra said.

Miranda hesitated. She wanted to trust Elendra, who did not seem the

least bit worried, but the Queen filled her with fear. She remembered that Shan had said she would be expected to treat Onja like a Goddess.

One of the guards rapped the point of his spear impatiently on the open bedroom door, and Miranda knew she had no choice. On her way out, she turned back and saw the female servant holding her daughter. Elendra waved happily to her mother.

The guards brought Miranda to the throne room. The dazzle of the throne room was just as impressive to Miranda on the second visit.

From high on the golden dais, Onja looked down at the human. Slowly she pointed at the floor, and each guard put a hand on Miranda's shoulders and pushed her to her knees. The gleaming marble chilled her knees through her new pants.

"Yesterday you were my guest. Today you are my subject," Onja announced.

Pinned by Onja's cruel gaze, Miranda quaked with terror.

Onja continued, "Today I make clear to you what your place is in Jingtun. Everyone has a place in Jingtun, and it is only fair that you know what yours is. Your man has no place here, and he will be banished today. You may have the privilege of staying with your daughter and continue to be wet nurse to the infant."

"Wet nurse! I'm his mother!" Miranda screamed. Her outrage devoured her terror.

Blue fire flared in Onja's eyes, and she warned, "Humans do not use such a tone with their Goddess."

"Give me my children," Miranda demanded. "And we will leave Jingtun forever."

The angry glow diminished from Onja's eyes and the archaic queen actually laughed. "My poor silly girl, it is the children I want. You were allowed to survive the Wilderness to bring your infant to me. Miranda, you are my slave."

The hurtful word galvanized Miranda's soul. After so much freedom, she could never endure servitude again.

Springing to her feet and whipping out her sword, Miranda shrieked, "Child stealer!"

A spear quickly tripped her back to the floor, but she rolled and knocked the spear away. Swiping at the guards with her blade, Miranda fought them bravely, but she could not regain her feet.

Clever in combat but not inclined to kill, the team of rys guards soon had her in control. While one engaged her sword with his spear, the other jumped on top of her. He punched her in the face, but Miranda withstood the first blow, and he had to hit her again.

The second punch stunned her, and the sword was pulled from her grip. She struggled under the weight of the rys who pinned her, but to no avail.

“Bind her,” ordered Onja in the rys language as she walked down the steps.

Leather thongs were wound around Miranda’s wrists and throat, and the guards hauled her to her feet. The thong around her throat choked tighter and subdued her struggles. Secured like a captured animal, Miranda watched the Queen approach.

“You have chosen to die,” Onja informed her. “Your children shall miss you and always wonder why you abandoned them.”

Miranda cried out in rage, but the strangling thong made it a weak sound.

Onja taunted, “Yes, I will tell Elendra you did not want her anymore. It will break the little girl’s heart, but she is happier with me anyway.”

Grief tore through Miranda’s body, making her impatient for the blow of execution. Tears tumbled down her cheeks and ran with the blood on her chin.

“Bring her to the roof,” Onja commanded.

The guards dragged Miranda up many flights of dark cold stairs. With her breathing restricted, her steps began to falter. Deep inside the private thoughts of one of the guards, he pitied the human female but it did not deter his obedience to Onja.

Eventually the guards brought her into the daylight on the highest level of the Keep. By this time Miranda’s vision had grayed and her consciousness was slipping away.

Onja stood on the roof with her arms raised. The wind flowed through the Queen’s white hair and blue light shone from her eyes. The guards

waited in silence and loosened the thong around Miranda's neck, allowing her to breathe better.

When Onja lowered her arms, she hung her head as if she was tired. But the weariness passed quickly, and she lifted her head and chuckled darkly.

Sauntering over to her prisoner, Onja said, "You will suffer, but your death will not be the worst because your daughter delights me so."

"You spoil me," Miranda rasped sarcastically.

"Yes, I do," Onja agreed seriously.

Responding to the flourish of the Queen's hand, the guards stepped back and released Miranda. Before Miranda could raise her bound hands, the long blue arm of the Queen lashed out and laid a cold hand on her forehead. Pain consumed Miranda. Every nerve inside and out felt like it was cut by sharp broken flint and skewered by a thousand needles.

Miranda grimaced in too much torment to cry out and crumpled to the roof. Onja bent as her victim fell and did not relent the torture. Only the will of Onja prevented Miranda's heart from failing in the anguish.

At last satisfied with the punishment, Onja withdrew her dreadful touch. The intensity of the pain lingered in Miranda's body as she coughed blood and bled from the nose. Utterly defeated, Miranda clawed feebly at the roof. Her ringing ears did not hear the approaching cry of the Tatatook, but she felt the wind made by the great wings as the creature landed. The Queen stroked the purplish black feathers with an affectionate greeting, and the Tatatook cawed with appreciation.

In the rys language, Onja instructed the fearsome flyer. "My pet, take this pitiful human and cast her upon the Galnuvet Glacier." Turning to Miranda, Onja raised her voice and spoke in Miranda's language. "While you die you can watch your flesh freeze."

Obediently the Tatatook scooped Miranda into its arms and rushed into the air. Every motion of the great wings lifted them higher above Jingtun, and Onja laughed as she watched her victim carried to her doom. Too weak from torture to resist, Miranda considered herself dead and faded into a swoon.

~

In his heart, Shan knew that Onja had summoned the Tatatook for some grim errand, but he dare not waste time using his magic to see what

mischievous she created. He hoped to return to the Keep in time to interrupt whatever Onja was doing.

At the gates of the Keep waited a squad of Jington soldiers.

“What is this?” Shan demanded impatiently.

Taf Ila, who was Captain of the Jington Guard, stepped forward and answered, “By order of the Queen, that human is banished and to depart immediately.” He pointed at Dreibrand dramatically.

“Let us through. This man has the right to collect his belongings,” Shan insisted.

“The Queen commanded me to execute this order immediately. What he has in the Keep is now forsaken,” Taf Ila said.

Shan’s temper ran out. It was not his habit to bicker with Keep guards. “This man is my guest, under my protection. Stop him from entering and you stop me. If Onja wants her order enforced, let her do it herself,” he said imperiously.

The Captain considered Shan’s words. The power and skill of Shan were no secret, and no ryls, except for Onja, dared hinder his activities. Indecisively, Taf Ila glanced at Dreibrand, torn between his Queen’s orders and the knowledge that Shan could easily prevent all of them from doing their duty.

“What is happening?” demanded Dreibrand, who anxiously wanted to know what the ryls were arguing about.

“They don’t want to let you in,” Shan answered hastily. “Stay close, my friend.”

He had grown tired of the dispute and it was time to remind his fellow ryls that he was not to be defied. Raising a hand, Shan cast a spell with the force of his mind. The iron bird gates of the Keep banged open and Shan’s magic shook the squad of soldiers like the rising wind of a storm through dry leaves.

Taf Ila glowered at Shan, but he stepped aside. This submission to Shan’s will impressed Dreibrand, who hurried inside.

“I have to go to Miranda,” Dreibrand said urgently.

“Yes, but we have to stay together. Onja has ordered you banished, and I fear she might order you killed next,” Shan explained.

“Why am I banished? What about Miranda?” Dreibrand said.

“I do not know,” Shan muttered as his eyes roved the Keep. Inside he could not find everything he wanted to find.

They jumped off their horses near the stable, and Shan yelled for the horses that belonged to the humans to be saddled. The stablemaster hurried to comply.

Desperate with worry, Dreibrand dashed into the Keep. He did not really know his way in the huge structure, and he hollered for Shan to tell him the way. The rys ran to catch up to his friend, giving as many warnings as directions.

Twice guards opposed Dreibrand, but they would fall back as soon as Shan caught up. Dreibrand found the hall where Miranda’s suite was, and it disturbed him that guards were no longer present. He reached the door, and finding that it was locked, he pounded on it with his fist and shouted for Miranda.

“Stay away from the door!” Shan warned from down the hall, but Dreibrand did not react in time.

The door was jerked open from inside by a rys soldier who leveled a spear at Dreibrand’s chest. He dodged the spear as it sailed through the door and clanged against the opposite wall. Dreibrand drew his sword, but Shan had reached him and grabbed his arm. The rys pulled him back and tried to get Dreibrand to stand behind him.

More soldiers poured into the hall, and they were followed by Queen Onja. The suite door slammed behind her.

“Engage them and you will die,” Shan hissed, and finally stepped in front of the human.

Dreibrand had no desire to hide behind Shan, and he yelled to Onja, “Where is Miranda?”

“She does not want to see you. Leave now or die,” Onja replied in Miranda’s language.

On the other side of the wall Shan could sense the human children, but Miranda was not there.

“Let the children go, Onja,” Shan said. “They do not belong to you.”

“All humans belong to me!” Onja snapped.

“Then where have you put Miranda?” Shan asked.

His bold questions angered the Queen. “Forget her. And forget him,” she said, turning a blazing gaze on Dreibrand.

Blue light consumed the Queen’s eyes, and Dreibrand felt her power sizzle across his skin. A flash filled the corridor, and he staggered back shielding his eyes. His skin tingled, and he smelled the distinct odor of singed hair. When his vision cleared, he saw that Shan was still in front of him, separated from Onja by a wall of blue light. Through the pulsing blue light, Dreibrand could see Onja’s face, which was twisted with strain and rage.

After a final snarl Onja relented her attack and Shan gasped with relief. The fierce swirling energy disappeared between them, but Onja’s eyes still glowed with her magic power.

“If his life means so much to you, then banish yourself with him,” Onja hissed.

Blue fire filled Shan’s eyes as well, and he burned with desire to fight his enemy. He and Onja had not sparred so flagrantly since his first challenge, and it excited him to block her magic. Over the past four centuries Onja had sensed his maturing powers, but until that moment she had not realized how strong he had become, and it had startled her. Shan watched the seed of fear germinate inside her, and it gratified him, but he cautioned himself not to gain too much confidence from the success. The spell had not been meant for him.

I am a fool to try now. My magic has a better use at this time, he thought.

“I will leave,” Shan announced.

“Leave at once. Or you will spend a century in stone with birds shitting on your head!” Onja threatened.

Shan’s nostrils flared, hinting at the hate he restrained. He wanted to hurl insults at her, but now was not the time to toy with her. Turning to Dreibrand, Shan put a restraining hand on the man’s chest.

“We must retreat to my tower,” Shan whispered.

“What is going on?” Dreibrand growled.

“Onja just tried to kill you. We must go. Trust me,” Shan begged,

pushing him down the hall.

“Go live with your human friends, Shan. Die in shame at the foot of the Rysamand,” Onja yelled.

Although Dreibrand could not understand the words, the wrath of the Queen of Jington made him shudder. He feared her power, but he could not just leave as Shan wanted.

“I must have Miranda and the children,” he protested.

“You must have your life,” Shan countered and dragged him farther down the hall.

Dreibrand looked at the Queen and believed his life was in danger. Reluctantly he yielded to Shan’s will, but he loathed his lack of control.

When they reached Shan’s tower, the rys bolted the main entrance then leaned against the doors. Dreibrand watched him wipe perspiration from his forehead and realized even Shan could be intimidated.

But Shan composed himself quickly and stepped away from the doors.

“What is happening?” Dreibrand demanded again. “Did you challenge her and fail?”

“I did not challenge her in the sense that we discussed earlier, but I did save your life. Her attack spell was meant to kill you. I had to get you out of there,” Shan explained.

“But we have to get to Miranda,” Dreibrand said.

“She is not there!” Shan cried. “That is why we had to retreat. I could not waste time fighting with Onja when I have a chance to find Miranda.”

“Find her! Where is she?” Dreibrand exclaimed.

“The Tatatook probably took her somewhere. I must meditate to find her,” Shan said.

“And the children?” Dreibrand asked.

“They are in the suite. They are unhurt,” Shan replied. “Trust me Dreibrand, and do not leave this tower without me. I should be able to find her quickly. Just hope that it is quick enough and that she is still alive.”

“Alive?” Dreibrand choked, thinking of the flying monster hurting Miranda.

Such thoughts devastated him, and dark rage boiled inside him, urging him to rush through the Keep killing wantonly until he reached Onja. Luckily his anger stopped short of suicide. Such a rampage would be a useless folly. One shot and he would be defeated.

Shan rushed upstairs to a private chamber, and he sat down cross-legged in the center of the room. Dreibrand followed but stayed back to watch from a distance. Shan seemed already to be in a trance, and blue light filled his eyes.

In his mind, Shan remembered Miranda. He remembered her face and he remembered the individual force of her soul. Seeking her energy, he released his mind over the land. The features of the Jington Valley passed beneath his inner vision as if he flew in the sky like the Tatatook. He scanned the woodlands and streams, looking up and down the mountains.

Shan looked once and then twice, finally becoming desperate. He did not sense Miranda, which meant she could be dead. It could take him quite a long time to find a cold dead body.

Then his mind was drawn to a mountain. He could see the powdery snow blowing from the frozen peak where summer could never reach. Shan recognized the disdainful profile of Mount L'cha. It was the view from the Galnuvet Glacier.

A dim lifeforce abandoned on the glacier beckoned his mind. Focusing his perception, Shan looked down on the frozen giant that carved valleys out of mountains and found Miranda. She was sprawled among jutting chunks of ice. Shan gently lowered his mind over her body and rejoiced in the beating of her heart. But her eyes were closed and she was unmoving, and Shan knew that she only lingered in this world.

With less than prudent haste, Shan recalled his mind to his body. Disregarding the strain on his system, he sprang to his feet. Dreibrand stopped his crazy pacing, expecting an answer from the rys. Shan looked beyond his friend and out a window. The lowering sun reflected redly on the snowy mountains, reminding Shan of Miranda's bloody face.

He informed Dreibrand that Miranda lived but had been thrown onto a glacier to perish. Rushing to another room, Shan rummaged in a chest and began tossing out his mountain climbing gear.

"Here, take these," he told Dreibrand.

Shan handed him a large coil of rope that he draped across his shoulder. Most of the other gear was unfamiliar to Dreibrand as Shan gave him ice axes and hammers and hooks and spiked gear to strap onto his boots.

“You will need all of this to climb the glacier and save her. Now we must hurry. I will talk more on the road,” Shan explained.

“But I cannot leave Elendra and Esseldan,” Dreibrand declared.

Painfully aware of Miranda’s suffering, Shan looked hard at Dreibrand. “Dreibrand, you must choose. If we stay here and fight for the children, you might die, but Miranda will surely die. The children do not appear to be in any danger, but Miranda is dying. We must go help her right now. If you must have the children now, then I will help you fight for them, but in that time Miranda will die.”

Dreibrand struggled with the dilemma. He did not want to leave the children, but he owed Miranda his life. In the end he only had one decision within him.

“I must go to her,” he said.

Shan set a friendly hand on Dreibrand’s shoulder. “I am sorry this happened. I did not know she was in such immediate danger, or I would not have left the city.”

Dreibrand appreciated the apology because part of him wanted to blame Shan for what was happening.

“Quickly now,” Shan instructed and they left the tower.

When they rode out of the Keep, Shan turned his horse to face the ancient fortress.

Shaking his fist, Shan cried, “A new age and a new king are coming to Jington, Onja! Enjoy your last days, rotten queen.”

The nearby ryls who heard his words stared at Shan with shock. Very little revolutionary spirit stirred in anyone’s heart. Shan had failed before when he challenged the Queen, and most citizens of Jington wondered why he wasted his powers on such hopeless ideas.

High inside the Keep, Queen Onja heard his words echo through her mind but she disregarded them. She had banished him and if he dared to come back, she would destroy him.

She petted Elendra's black hair as the girl cried in her lap. The news of Miranda's abandonment had devastated the little girl, who now found comfort in the bosom of her Queen.

A well maintained road ran west from Jington and Shan and Dreibrand galloped down it. Jington disappeared behind them and the night gathered over the Rysamand.

Shan halted.

"Why do you stop?" Dreibrand asked, his voice anxious.

Shan answered, "Dreibrand, you must go on without me. I have to cast a spell of heat over Miranda or she will freeze in the night."

This was too much for Dreibrand. He barely had a grasp of the day's events and now Shan seemed to be ditching him.

"Now you just want me to leave?" he shouted. "I don't even know where to go. You trick me, Shan. You have tricked me all day. You lured me out of Jington so Onja could hurt Miranda."

"I would have no need to lure you anywhere. If I am against you, why did I let you out of the dungeon?" Shan countered calmly. He understood that Dreibrand had to be bewildered by Jington and especially Onja's random cruelty.

Dreibrand did not respond and he felt some regret for accusing Shan of such duplicity. The Queen's power was fresh in his mind, and Dreibrand admitted that Shan was right. Onja would have no need to lure him away with some elaborate trick.

"Listen to me, Dreibrand. The time you spend doubting me adds to Miranda's suffering. I cannot cast this spell while I ride. It must be precise. I do not want to melt the ice around her and make her wet, and I do not want to burn her. But I can keep her warm through the night, if I sit and meditate. You must go on ahead to save time. It is a long ride, and I want you ready to rescue her in the morning," Shan said. The rys dismounted and started packing the climbing gear onto his horse. He laid a hand on the white horse's head and concentrated a moment. The horse stomped its hoof as if confirming the receipt of message.

"Take my horse and it will guide you to this year's best spot to mount the glacier. Pick a place on the ice wall that gets the least sunlight so the ice will be strong. Strap the crampons on your boots and use the pick axes

to climb,” Shan explained.

“But you are the climber,” Dreibrand interrupted with dismay. “I need your help.”

“You can do it,” Shan encouraged instantly. “You only need to be strong and careful. You will learn at the bottom and know at the top.”

Dreibrand wanted to say that he did not know how to climb a glacier, especially if it was the behemoth of ice he had seen from across the valley that afternoon. But he had to try. Miranda could have kept running from the fenthakrabi and left him to die, but she had taken the perilous moment to cut him free.

Shan continued, “Oh! Cut a couple saplings before you start. When you get on top, use them to probe the glacier surface for weaknesses and hold them under your armpits the rest of the time. If you break through a hidden crevasse, they might catch your fall. Once you are up there, use your warding crystal to find her. I will use it to guide you.”

Dreibrand took in the flurry of information, trying to process it. Determined not to fail, he swung onto Shan’s horse, and the climbing gear jingled as he landed in the saddle.

“With the first light of dawn get started and I will catch up with you tomorrow,” Shan said.

“I am going to climb as soon as I get there, light or no,” Dreibrand declared.

“No,” Shan cried. “The night is our enemy. Do not go up there in the dark. This is a treacherous time of year to be on the ice. Without light you will step into a crevasse for certain. You will understand when you see. Now go. I promise I will keep Miranda from freezing, but you must get to her.”

Dreibrand nodded.

“Good luck,” Shan said sincerely.

Given a free rein, the white horse sped away bearing Dreibrand toward the icebound heights. He did not understand why he trusted Shan. Maybe he was so hopelessly lost that he had no choice but to do as Shan said. His chest tightened with sorrow thinking of Miranda alone in the freezing dark. If the rys did keep Miranda alive and guided him to her, Dreibrand would no longer doubt Shan’s magic or his good character.

17~ Blood on the Ice ~

Shan is a good friend and I am fortunate for that. But I know he visits me so much because he cannot bear to be in Jington and not be the king—Chendoaser, Nuram ruler, year 1850 of the Age of Onja.

The ice axe sank into the glacier and Dreibrand tested his weight on it. The grass and trees of the Jington Valley were far below him as he toiled in the land of gravel, mountains, and ice. Jagged cliffs loomed to his left, shading a fringe of the ice sheet he scaled. Even so, the softer days of summer had weakened the ice's outer shell, and every swing of the axe had to bite deep to bear his weight.

The morning light had revealed to Dreibrand the high craggy face of the ice sheet that sprawled between mountains like a half asleep dragon. The glacier emanated an elemental presence, resenting the frigid plateau that trapped it so far from the living sea.

After climbing halfway up, Dreibrand gained some confidence. His muscles strained and shook from the exertion, but he was capable of the task. He had to be certain of the grip of his equipment each time before committing his weight, and the boulders and gravel heaped below motivated him not to fail.

Reluctantly heeding Shan's advice, he had waited below for the night to end, tormented by the knowledge that Miranda was trapped above. In his anguish, he had even called to her, hoping to hear her reply from the darkness. But only the pitiless whine of the wind on ice and stone had answered him.

At last he could take action, and his rage and frustration translated into strength as he hauled himself on top of the Galnuvet Glacier. The clear morning sun reflected a million ways on the dazzling glacier, making tears start from his squinting eyes.

As Shan had instructed, Dreibrand had brought two sapling poles and placed them under his arms. Next he removed his warding crystal and examined its light to get a bearing. The magic orb indicated he search in the center of the ice field and this tangible sign that Shan led him gave him hope.

The crampons strapped to his boots aided him tremendously on the ice, but Dreibrand often needed one of the poles to keep his balance in the rough areas. It did not take long for him to discover the perils of the glacier. He heard a frightening crack beneath his forward foot and quickly jumped back, just in time to watch a chunk of ice drop into a hidden channel of rushing water. The water tunneled below the surface, and to get caught in it meant certain death.

Dreibrand continued, begrudging the slowness demanded by increased caution. The sun climbed toward its zenith, and he saw nothing in the glaring whiteness. The glacier became rougher and broken with great slabs of ice jutting upward at conflicting angles. Increasingly he saw places where the torn ice plunged into deep crevasses. These cold hungry traps he gave a wide berth. In this treacherous broken place he checked his crystal, and the blue light flared, sending waves of excitement through his body. He called to Miranda but no reply came.

Dreibrand scrambled up and down slabs of ice, searching on every side, but trying not to be reckless in his urgency. Finally, after he had despaired that Shan had sent him to a foolish death as some inhuman rys joke, he saw her motionless body lying past the next slab of ice. A streak of blood painted the slope of the ice toward her body, as if she had struck the slab and slid down to the bottom.

Dreibrand jumped down beside Miranda and gathered her in his arms. Blood had dried around her mouth and nose and it was caked in her hair along a cut on her scalp. Unable to contemplate the possible results, Dreibrand put his fingers to her neck. He could feel his own heart beating wildly as he waited for a sign of life. After what seemed like a hopeless eternity, a weak pulse revealed itself.

Shaking with gratitude, Dreibrand examined her injuries. She did not appear to have any frostbite. Apparently, Shan's magic had protected her through the night. He discovered that her right arm was broken and the cut on her head had bled heavily before clotting. Although she lived, Dreibrand knew she was in serious trouble.

He could not rouse her from her unconscious state.

"Miranda, don't die," he begged, hugging her close. "Don't die."

Steadying his emotions, Dreibrand temporarily removed the coil of rope so he could take off his wolf hide. Tenderly he wrapped Miranda in the

protective black fur and lifted her over his shoulder. He replaced the rope over his other shoulder and tucked the saplings under the same armpit. With the added weight, he had to use his ice axes to haul himself over jutting ridges of ice.

Miranda moaned faintly and he rejoiced that she made a sound.

“You are going to make it, Miranda. I am here now, and we are getting you to safety. Everything is all right.” He continued to babble comforting words as he clambered across the glacier, hoping she could hear him and find strength.

Adrenaline and determination kept him strong under his burden as he carried Miranda across the rough ice. The extra weight demanded additional caution on the summer weakened surface. Dreibrand tested every step twice as he plodded toward the edge.

Despite his care, he broke through into a hidden crevasse anyway. The crust of ice and snow bore his weight deceptively before he crashed through into nothingness. The saplings slammed into his armpit painfully, and he cried out in terror and pain, but the poles stopped his descent. Miranda’s body also helped to stop the fall by wedging him into the crack in the glacier.

The emptiness below was a terrible sensation, and Dreibrand struggled to grip the sides of the crevasse with his spiked feet. After getting himself somewhat stabilized, he eased Miranda off his shoulder and laid her back on the solid ice so that only her legs remained in the gap. He grasped an ice axe that was dangling from his wrist by its strap while the saplings sagged with failing reliability. Trying not to disturb his precarious support, he gave the axe a long swing and sank it into the ice as far as he could extend his arm. Holding tight to Miranda, he hoisted them out of the crevasse.

He panted against the cold blue ice that felt so good and solid beneath him. Although the saplings were almost broken, he kept them anyway and blessed Shan for the good advice. Dreibrand did not look back into the crevasse.

Finally he reached the edge of the glacier and immediately started pounding screws to secure the rope without pausing to rest. Shan’s equipment was marvelous and a lot of research had obviously gone into the construction of the gear. The ice screws had sturdy rings to put the

rope through, and Dreibrand regretted that they would have to be left behind.

He decided to lower Miranda first instead of risking their combined weight against the rope stakes. The rope was long enough for him to lower her and have enough left for himself. Dreibrand took great care while devising a harness around her body. He did not want to hurt her, but the harness had to stay in place. When he was satisfied that the harness would not slip or strangle her, he set a hand on her cheek and told her to stay strong.

Gathering his courage he planted his feet firmly and eased her over the edge. Her head lolled and the constant wind tugged at her hair. Dreibrand focused on her battered face framed by the warm green valley beyond the glacial waste. The rope had been threaded through two rings, and Dreibrand had decent control as he lowered her down the wall of ice. His overworked muscles screamed painfully for the oxygen rationed by the thin air, but he commanded his body to function.

Miranda arrived at the bottom with remarkably few bangs and bumps, and Dreibrand was proud as he set her carefully on the gravel. So far below she looked small and lifeless, which made him anxious to get down to her.

Shaking out his strained arms, Dreibrand took a few invigorating breaths before rappelling the glacial cliff. In the middle of a drop, a screw pulled out and the sudden slack sent him briefly out of control, and he slammed into the ice. The ringed screw slid down the rope to dangle before his eyes and deliver the message to panic. Very quickly, he continued, repelling recklessly. He was very close to the bottom and feeling better when the other screw gave way. As he flew backward away from the ice wall, he had a crazy view of the rope falling lazily toward him.

His back struck the gravel hill at the base of the glacier, and Dreibrand skidded down the slope. With his wind knocked out, Dreibrand rolled to a stop and did not move for a long minute. Eventually he drew a ragged breath, which was followed by several masochistic gasps to renew his lungs. Then he moved his limbs, and was rather surprised to find them responsive.

Trying to ignore his own pain, he lurched upright and dragged himself over to Miranda. He untied the rope from her body. Miranda groaned

weakly and he hoped it was a sign that she would regain consciousness soon.

“I got you away from the glacier,” he whispered.

A great cracking sound interrupted his encouraging report. It was like a thousand trees about to fall, and the horrendous crack made his throbbing spine tingle. Instinct immediately informed Dreibrand to flee. Grabbing Miranda, he ran as a huge section of the glacier slipped down to crash on the ground. Ice and snow smacked his back as he escaped the crushing flow of the great calving.

Once Dreibrand was clear of the danger, he collapsed with Miranda in his arms. He looked back at the grumbling ice and felt warned not to come back.

Shan’s horse approached them, picking its way across the coarse rubble and snow banks above the alpine meadows. Dreibrand draped Miranda over the saddle and set out for the lower and friendlier land.

Upon returning to the fragrant pine forests, where bees buzzed in the sunny flowered places, Dreibrand built a fire. A blanket and shaggy fleece had been packed on Shan’s horse, and Dreibrand used these to wrap Miranda. Placing her close to the fire, he began to clean the blood from her face and hair, remembering fondly how she had once helped him.

Dreibrand assumed Shan would simply find their camp. He decided to wait for the rys before setting Miranda’s arm. After battles Dreibrand had often aided his wounded men, but confronted now with straightening Miranda’s arm, he felt nervous about his amateur skill.

She deserves the best, he thought.

Late in the day, Shan arrived riding Starfield and leading Freedom.

“You are an ice climber after all,” Shan said cheerfully.

Dreibrand rose wearily, almost too battered to stand, and greeted his friend, but his mood was not light. “Shan, Miranda is not doing well. I cannot wake her.”

Kneeling next to Miranda, Shan laid a gentle hand on her bruised head. His awareness traveled inside her body and he saw her injuries. He saw the shadow of torture that Onja had inflicted on the woman’s flesh and he shivered.

“There is much hope,” he determined, but the neutral statement only increased Dreibrand’s worry.

“Her arm is broken,” Dreibrand said.

“I know. I will set it while she is still unconscious to spare her the pain,” Shan said.

“Do you know how to do such things? Or can we take her to a healer?” Dreibrand asked.

“I am competent to set a bone. My magic allows me to see that it is set just right,” Shan replied.

They prepared a splint and bandages. Dreibrand held Miranda in case the pain made her thrash about even in an unconscious state. Shan held her arm tentatively then abruptly snapped the bone back into alignment. A weak gasp escaped Miranda and she moved her head. The rys’s eyes began to glow, and he sent energy into her body, nourishing damaged flesh and soothing tortured nerves. Shan knew he could not completely undo the wicked torment Onja had imposed on Miranda, but he could help.

Dreibrand watched Shan treat Miranda with magic, but it did not alarm him. He knew the rys was not hurting her.

“She felt some pain when I set the arm. That is a pity, but it is also a good sign that she is responsive,” Shan announced when he released her from his power.

Next, they carefully bound her splint and bandaged her head.

Shan suggested, “You rest with her now. I will see to our dinner.”

Dreibrand did not dispute the idea and stretched out next to Miranda. The fire and covers had warmed her, but her face remained pale. Dreibrand hated to see her struggle for life after she had been so hot and vital in his arms just two nights ago.

“Stay with me, Miranda,” he whispered as his exhaustion overtook him.

Sometime later Dreibrand sat up with a start. Night had long since fallen, and the fire blazed happily on fresh fuel.

“Just me,” Shan said reassuringly. Two skinned rabbits roasted on a spit in front of him. “I warn you, I am not the best cook.”

Some fat sizzled in the fire and the aroma made Dreibrand realize he

was ravenous.

“Not a problem,” he said, eyeing the dinner and wondering how much longer it needed to cook.

Taking his hungry eyes from the roasting rabbits, he checked on Miranda and was shocked to see her looking back at him.

“Miranda!” he cried, leaning over her. “Talk to me.”

Her cracked lips parted and she struggled briefly to find the breath to speak. Quietly in a confused voice, she said, “I am alive.”

“Yes,” Dreibrand laughed with joy. “You are alive.”

Wincing with pain, Miranda whispered, “I don’t feel good.”

Holding her good hand, Dreibrand explained, “You are hurt, but you are going to get better.”

Because she could not sit up, Dreibrand carefully poured a few drops of water from the canteen into her dry mouth. Her exposure had made her very thirsty and Dreibrand continued giving her water for some time.

When she was somewhat rehydrated, Miranda smiled to him weakly and commented, “I smell food.”

Dreibrand laughed again, filled with hope by her interest in eating. Although he took joy in her awakening, the bad news could not wait. With serious regret, he said, “I had to leave Elendra and Esseldan in Jingtén. I had no choice. There was no time. I had to come to you. Miranda, I am so sorry...” He hung his head in shame.

With her good hand, Miranda touched his cheek soothingly. “I know,” she spoke painfully. “I fought. You would have only ended up like me. Onja stole my children and said I was her slave. I would not be her slave, and I paid the price. I thought I would die with my grief, but now I will live with it. Do not blame yourself, Dreibrand. Onja had control and we never had a chance.” Miranda coughed and added miserably, “Elendra wanted to stay in Jingtén anyway.”

“Miranda, we will get them back,” Dreibrand promised.

“Yes,” she agreed but then a fit of coughing consumed her. In obvious pain, Miranda rolled over, shaken by her heaving lungs, and expectorated some blood. She lay back with a gurgling breath and shut her eyes. Dreibrand wiped the bloody drool from her lips.

Shyly, Shan moved closer and waited until Miranda opened her eyes again. When she saw him, her sad face brightened with a serene expression that washed away her pain.

“Shan,” she smiled.

“Yes, I am here,” he greeted.

“I saw you in the night,” Miranda whispered.

“I was there, watching over you. My magic let me keep you warm from far away. I wish I could have done more for you,” Shan said.

Miranda did not feel dissatisfied. The rys no longer seemed alien to her. Despite being unconscious, she remembered him vividly. He had been more real than a dream. Shan had been there with her, helping her live, in her time of greatest need.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“I apologize for the Queen of Jingtun. She is a monster, and rys are not like her. When I can, I will try to set things right for you, Miranda,” Shan said.

“I know,” Miranda said. She would never doubt a word he said.

Later that night, Shan watched Dreibrand carefully feed Miranda bits of food. The tenderness between the humans intrigued Shan, and he was reminded of his loneliness.

Four days passed before Miranda could stand. Her health was willing to return, but the absence of her children made her sullen. She did not blame Dreibrand, but she privately blamed herself. She would be in Jingtun right now with her children, if she had been willing to be Onja’s slave. It hurt to recognize her selfishness.

She walked slowly around their camp, with Dreibrand at her elbow in case she fell.

Holding her broken arm, she said, “When can we go to Jingtun?”

Dreibrand had no answer for her, and he turned to Shan who reclined on a large boulder and stared at the sky.

The rys sat up, and his eyes strayed in the direction of Jingtun.

Then he stood to answer Miranda directly. “You want me to say that I will go right now and get your children?” he said.

“I will go with you,” Miranda stated.

Her lack of hesitation even after Onja’s torture impressed Shan, and he took her bravery as a lesson.

“Onja will not give your children back. I have already demanded that she do so, and she became hostile,” Shan explained.

“That is clear,” Miranda said.

“Shan,” Dreibrand interjected. “You have made clear your intention to challenge her. Then do it now.”

The bold suggestion startled Shan, but his shock turned to pleasure.

How refreshing this human from the east who has not been raised with the power of Jington weighing on his mind, Shan thought. He wanted to accept Dreibrand’s suggestion. Even as he thought of the challenge, Shan yearned to be the King of Jington. He should listen to Dreibrand. How long did he intend to wait before challenging Onja again? Another hundred years? It had already been over four hundred.

But Shan growled with frustration and shook his head. “It is not an easy thing,” he muttered.

“But on the mountain you said you wanted Onja’s throne,” Dreibrand urged.

“And that is true,” Shan agreed.

“Is it that you do not want to kill her and break your law?” Dreibrand asked.

Shan paused, trying to hide his inner turmoil. “It is not that. But...killing and killing Onja are two different things. To face Onja I must practice,” he said.

“Practice what?” Miranda asked.

“Killing,” Shan confessed. “I have great power, but I have never used it to kill—not human or rys.”

Miranda cast her eyes down sadly. It was horrible to think of Shan’s magic that had kept her alive with warmth and kindness being turned in harmful directions.

“How will you practice?” Dreibrand inquired quietly.

With a determined sigh, Shan said, “I will make war. As I have never

done before, I will ride on the battlefield with my friend Taischek. And as my power grows, I will turn Onja's subjects against her, and then I will make war on Jingtten."

"Why must you do this?" Miranda cried.

"Because when I challenged Onja the first time, I was inadequate. Onja is thousands of years older than me. She fought in the Great War with Nufal. She won the Great War. The magic of an entire race failed against her. I have not had such a life to forge my skills," Shan explained.

"Then what makes you think you can win?" Dreibrand asked, thinking of his commitment to serve Shan.

"Because my power is waxing and hers is waning. Dreibrand, Miranda, you must believe me," Shan insisted. He clenched his fists in frustration. He believed, but he needed them to believe.

Dreibrand and Miranda accepted the vague answer because Shan was their only hope of getting near the children.

"Shan, this is not right. Do not make this war," Miranda protested.

The rys appreciated her concern for people she did not even know, but his strategy was the least part of his guilt. He should feel guiltier for taking so long to implement it. "Miranda, I have tried to avoid this ugly path but I cannot seem to undo Onja's evil by doing right."

"When will you bring the war to Jingtten?" Dreibrand asked.

Shan would not commit to a time. "I have too many things to consider before I can say for sure, but I will start the process as soon as we head west," he said.

"West? But my children," Miranda moaned.

"You need shelter and rest. I will take you to stay with my friends," Shan said.

Realizing her children would be left behind indefinitely, Miranda became upset, but in her weak state, she fell back against Dreibrand. Supporting her, he took her to her bedding and laid her down. One drop of blood seeped from a nostril, and Dreibrand gave her a rag to hold to her nose.

"You need a safe place to get better," he gently explained.

Aware of her aching body, Miranda could not argue. Tears dripped

down her cheeks.

Dreibrand saw her desolation. Desperate to comfort her, he said, “If I thought I had any chance, I would go to Jington right now and take Elendra and Esseldan back. But I have seen Onja’s power. She almost killed me. We need to give Shan a chance to help us. You know he wants to.”

“You are right,” Miranda whispered and drifted into sleep.

The next day Dreibrand left to hunt. He was restless and wanted to sort his thoughts out in solitude.

Shan stayed in camp with Miranda, and occupied himself by knapping an arrowhead from a piece of stone. Each strike from his working stone dropped a precise flake from the arrowhead. Absorbed by his work, he constantly examined the new edge with his sensitive fingers. Shan was an obvious master of the ancient art and he finished a perfectly symmetrical arrowhead.

While Miranda had quietly watched him make the stone point, Shan knew she wanted to speak. Setting down his new arrowhead, he regarded her with encouraging dark eyes.

“Shan, as you saw me on the glacier, can you look at my children? Can you see if they are all right? If I knew how they were, maybe I could bear to leave them,” she said.

“Yes, and I can do more. I will show you,” Shan replied. He reached inside his suede jacket and removed a warding crystal.

The sight of the magic orb still made Miranda uneasy.

“Shan, what are those exactly?” she asked.

“Powerful rys can make warding crystals. Our magic can be focused through them, and they create a protective bubble of magic. The warding crystal prevented the Deamedron from killing you, but they can protect you from less evil things. Only the most powerful rys can cast a spell through a warding,” Shan said, holding one out to her. “You keep this one.”

Miranda frowned with hesitation, but Shan urged, “I made this one. It has none of Onja’s magic in it. Dreibrand has one.”

She took the smooth orb in her hand. Even though Shan said it was of

his making, it contained the same blue light that had frightened her weeks before in the eyes of the wolf.

“Now hold the crystal in front of you. Get comfortable and close your eyes,” Shan instructed.

Miranda did so, but sometimes she would peek at Shan. The rys sat in front of her in unblinking meditation. Blue fire consumed his eyes, and Miranda was fairly certain he could not see her.

Shan’s awareness flew the familiar path to Jingtun. The timeless blue stone city of the rys came into sight, and he briefly felt the sting of his exile. Looking upon the ancient capital of his race, Shan finally realized that the next time he entered the city he must become the King.

Swift as a swallow, his mind dropped into the Keep, seeking the human children. Onja had numerous wardings in place around her vast private apartments, but they had ceased to confound his mind long ago. The children were there, alive and safe. He focused the images into the crystal Miranda held in her hand.

She gasped when the images hit her mind, then relaxed. Suddenly, Miranda saw Elendra. Her daughter sat at a table with the female rys who served as her nanny. An open book lay in front of Elendra, and the nanny appeared to be teaching her from the book. Elendra’s hair was neatly combed and she wore nice clothing.

Seeing her daughter well treated relieved Miranda. The rys were even schooling her—an opportunity Miranda had never dreamed any child of hers would receive.

The scene of Elendra with her nanny shifted, as Shan guided Miranda’s perception elsewhere. He showed her Esseldan napping peacefully in a crib. His round face had a healthy glow, and the boy did not cough or snuffle. Miranda missed her baby painfully, and it disturbed her that Esseldan had no human to hold him. She wished she could touch her children. They seemed so real and close.

Too soon for Miranda, the images began to fade. Opening her eyes, she reoriented herself.

“Was it real?” she finally gasped.

Shan nodded.

“I could watch them all day,” Miranda said.

“I wanted to let you watch longer, but Onja noticed me. We are still in the Jington Valley, and she can attack us here. It is best that I not arouse her anger,” Shan said.

Reminded that Onja’s power kept her from her children, Miranda collapsed against Shan’s chest and started sobbing. She had been hiding her grief from Dreibrand because she knew he blamed himself, but she had to release her feelings somehow.

An emotional woman in his arms perplexed Shan. “Onja will pay for her crimes,” he said, patting her awkwardly.

After a little more weeping, Miranda wiped her tears and apologized, “I am sorry. Do not tell Dreibrand I acted like this. He is upset as it is, and I do not want him to feel any worse.”

Shan nodded.

“Why did Onja take my children?” Miranda moaned.

“I think perhaps because she loves young things. Onja is very old. I think she wants to surround herself with young things. When I was young, she liked me close to her, but human children are SO young. Humans live shorter lives, and children are so vital and intense that they are a pleasure to be near,” Shan said.

Miranda listened to his theory, but it made little sense to her.

Miserably she muttered, “I could never provide a good life. Maybe they are better off in Jington.”

“Do not put such hard thoughts on yourself,” Shan advised. “You suffer enough.”

Miranda forced herself to agree with his wisdom because it made her feel better. Looking up to his mysterious face, she said, “Dreibrand told me he has pledged to serve you in your war against Onja. I wish to do the same.”

“Good,” Shan accepted. “I believe you will be a great enemy of the Queen.”

“Then I do not want to hold back your plans anymore. We should start tomorrow,” Miranda decided.

Worry creased Shan’s face as he warned, “Do not be hasty. I know how Onja hurt you. You will not heal quickly.”

“I know how to live with pain,” she retorted. “Let us waste no more time. I can ride.”

Shan sighed helplessly. The human female confused him by crying with grief and then abruptly giving orders.

When Dreibrand returned, Miranda immediately informed him of their departure in the morning. Of course out of concern for her health, he protested, but Miranda made her stubborn wishes clear. Dreibrand had traveled with her long enough to know her temperament and conceded. To his mind, the sooner she had proper shelter the better.

Shan gazed sternly at Dreibrand, indicating his dissatisfaction with the man’s minimal arguments against riding the next day. “Tell her no. She will listen to you,” Shan whispered.

“I am listening right now,” Miranda snapped. “I will be fine.”

Dreibrand chuckled as Shan lost his first encounter with Miranda’s temper.

Miranda understood her companions cared for her, and she knew her recovery was far from complete, but if Shan’s war against Onja was the only way she could get back into Jingtun, then she would not delay him. Miranda could face leaving her children behind now that she saw they were still treated well. The sooner she left, the sooner she could reclaim them, she reasoned.

18~ The Domain of the Temu Tribe ~

Shan had no concerns about traveling openly when he returned to the road that ran west out of Jingtun. Onja had exiled him, but as long as he was actually leaving the valley, he did not expect trouble.

To pass the time Shan began to instruct his human friends in the common language that was used by the various tribes of the west. Dreibrand possessed a great aptitude for language and readily expanded his vocabulary. Miranda found learning a new language difficult, which frustrated her. She was glad she would have Dreibrand to rely upon.

Miranda’s stamina would last most of the day, but when evening arrived her weariness consumed her and she could not take a watch at night. Her head and chest often hurt, but she did not complain, and the

whole nights of rest did her much good.

They kept a slow pace, but by the third day the road began to rise into the western pass, where banks of snow reached down from the great mountains. Shan explained that the Jington Road was the only road through the Rysamand.

The rys recounted his explorations among the treacherous peaks. He had an obvious passion for mountain climbing and mentioned that when he had topped his first peak and looked down on the world, he had realized the potency of the magic inside him. This exceptional power had fostered ambition in his heart.

Dreibrand and Miranda had no shortage of questions about the new land they found themselves in, and Shan answered them patiently. Shan also sought from them descriptions of the eastern world. Miranda had only a small view to offer, but Dreibrand had many stories about different kingdoms and of course Atrophane, which were just as intriguing to Miranda as they were to Shan.

“With your mind, have you ever looked as far as my homeland?” Dreibrand inquired.

Shan admitted that he had not even tried. “But...that land is very far away. It would take a lot.”

“Could you do it?” Dreibrand pressed.

“Yes,” Shan answered in a slow voice.

“Has Onja done it?” Dreibrand said, and a twinge of concern stirred in his chest.

“If she has, I do not know of it. Onja does not tell me many things,” Shan said with some resentment.

Dreibrand brooded on the possibilities.

Shan added, “But I know Onja well, and I would judge that she does not concern herself with anything beyond the Wilderness.”

“How well do you know Onja?” Miranda asked.

“She raised me,” Shan said.

“She did? Then how are you her kin?” Dreibrand said.

“I am not her kin,” Shan insisted. “My mother died while giving birth to

me, and my father gave me to the Queen to raise. I am told he was an elderly rys, beyond the usual age that one would father a rysling, and he thought I would be best with the Queen. He died when I was very young.”

“Why would he think you would be best with the Queen?” Miranda wondered.

“Good question,” Shan said. “Onja told me he recognized that I was much more powerful than the other rys, and gave me to her to train.”

As a rysling Shan had accepted these explanations, but in later years he had sought confirmation of Onja’s story from other rys. Although Shan had never learned anything different about his parents, he had remained suspicious.

“Apparently Onja did not deserve the usual maternal loyalty,” Dreibrand observed.

“In the beginning, I loved her as my mother, and she adored me. But as the decades passed, and I matured, I began to doubt my feelings for her. She raised me to see her evils as normal, but I could not,” Shan said.

“Did she train you?” Dreibrand asked.

Shan nodded. “But only in some things. She keeps much knowledge from me. Onja would not want to compromise her power.”

They reached the top of the pass, and Shan stopped to look back at the green folds of the Jington Valley. The road had climbed above the tree line, and the Rysamand ringed the green valley in a rocky fortress. He always paused to look back at his home before entering the human realm. He never quite felt the same in the outer regions of Rystavalla, beyond the mountains of his birth.

While waiting to move on, Miranda put her fingers to her nose and felt warm blood. It started to drip and she rummaged a rag out of a saddlebag.

“It is nothing,” she said dismissively when Dreibrand voiced his concern.

Shan realized the thin air did not help Miranda’s healing and he stopped pondering his home.

After cleaning the blood away, Miranda smiled reassuringly to Dreibrand. Although he worried about her, he had to admit that the glow

was returning to her cheeks and her green eyes sparkled with life.

“I feel good today,” she added.

“Do you?” Dreibrand whispered playfully and allowed his eyes to wander her body suggestively.

The wind picked up through the pass and they hurried on, wishing to camp in the lower warmer elevations. The Rysamand gave way gradually to a lush lowland, hazy with warmth in the distance, but they had many switchbacks to travel before leaving the cold heights. A cloud sprawled against the face of the mountain on their left, covering it with mist down to the tips of the treetops in the forest below.

The slow progress in the rugged land grew tedious, but the Jington Road was good and well maintained. After so long in the open Wilderness, Dreibrand and Miranda appreciated the road.

At dusk they reached the foothills, and the occasional broadleaf tree now ventured to live among the pines. After making their small camp, Shan declared that he would rest that night. The rys had been up for days and he promptly descended into a deep sleep.

Dreibrand and Miranda sat up together, watching the stars bejewel the sky. In the peaceful night Dreibrand’s watch degraded into a very close watch of only Miranda. They kissed deeply, and their hands caressed eagerly.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Dreibrand whispered.

“You won’t,” Miranda said, and he lessened his restraint.

With their activities on the verge of becoming noisy, they grabbed a blanket and slipped off into the trees to ensure their privacy. Their naked bodies warmed each other in the cool night, and Miranda was thankful for the joy of love Dreibrand brought to her.

Fearful of aggravating her injuries, he made love to her gently, but still reveled in her flesh. Almost losing Miranda to death had made Dreibrand appreciate her more. While nuzzling her neck, he decided he no longer regretted giving up his life in Atrophane. He had often missed his command and loyal troops, but he did not miss Lieutenant Sandin, and he did not miss his censured status in Atrophane society. Miranda needed him more than Lord Kwan, and being the first Atrophane to see the mysteries of the west satisfied him greatly.

Kissing lazily, the lovers were inclined to arouse each other again, but a nagging sense of responsibility made Dreibrand sit up. If a soldier under his command had behaved so improperly on a watch, he would have deserved a beating.

“We should go back,” he said guiltily. “We left Shan alone.”

Miranda chuckled. “Yes. You wear me out anyway. I need my rest.”

As Dreibrand drew on his pants, he heard the horses knicker in the distance and he had a sinking suspicion.

“I will slip ahead and check on things. I have a bad feeling,” he whispered while drawing his sword. Picking up his boots in the other hand, he padded off barefoot toward the camp.

A waxing moon lent a little light to the night, and Dreibrand sensed something definitely amiss as he approached the camp through the pines. A few coals glowed from the campfire, and he could see Shan rolled up in his blanket. Dreibrand discerned two dark figures leading the horses away and he decided the odds were decent.

Leaping out of the black cover of the trees, Dreibrand gave a war cry that startled the horses enough to make them unruly. He swung his sword at the nearest thief, who blocked the blow with a wooden staff that snapped under the sharp blade. The second thief sprang to his accomplice’s aid, and Dreibrand hurled his boots at him. The thief grunted with pain as one leathery missile slammed across his face. The other boot landed on Shan.

The first thief dove at Dreibrand who reacted by stopping his approaching skull with the hilt of his sword. The thief fell to his knees from the stunning pain. The staff of the second intruder caught Dreibrand on his shirtless back, and he gritted his teeth with pain. But his sword swung in automatic retaliation, and the point bit flesh. Another swipe of the blade tore the staff from the thief’s hand, and he fell back crying out in surrender.

Putting the tip of his sword under the thief’s chin, Dreibrand commanded, “Get by your friend. Stay on your knees!”

Clutching his side, the man scooted over to his companion, who held his own bleeding head. Even in the gloom, Dreibrand could see they were young and scrawny. By now Shan had gotten up, and he stomped over to

Dreibrand with a very un-rys-like heaviness and flung the boot at Dreibrand's bare feet.

“Do the Atrophane throw clothes at their enemies?” Shan shouted with irritation.

Embarrassed by his lack of apparel, Dreibrand offered no explanation.

“What is happening?” Shan demanded.

“I stopped these horse thieves,” Dreibrand explained.

Glancing at the freely roaming horses, Shan looked upon Dreibrand quizzically and said, “It looks like you gave them a head start.”

“They did not have much of a chance,” Dreibrand joked weakly.

“He saved the horses,” Miranda interjected as she returned.

With a frown Shan turned to her. “I suggest you not distract Dreibrand from his watch,” he scolded.

“You are grumpy,” she retorted.

Shan did not reply. When rys did sleep, they slept heavily and did not like being awakened suddenly. Rubbing his neck, Shan accepted that the rude booted awakening had bothered his temper.

“I will not be so careless again,” Dreibrand offered sincerely.

With an improving mood, Shan said, “Miranda is right. No harm came to us. Now let us see who our visitors are.”

Shan leaned over the kneeling men. The prisoners were obviously fearful of the scrutiny of the rys, and Shan allowed a little hint of blue to flash in his dark eyes just to intimidate them.

“Who is it that would steal property from a citizen of Jingteng?” Shan inquired imperiously.

“I am Ka-Kala,” stammered the thief with the split head. “This is Venton. Please, Lord, we did not know—”

Shan cut him off. “Do you not recognize a rys horse?”

Kala knew his guilt was evident but tried to explain anyway. “In the dark we did not see. Lord, we would never—”

“Shut up,” Shan snapped. “You knew what you did. You are lucky my friend did not kill you amateurs. Now, Venton is it? How are you Venton?”

Did the sword cut deep?”

“Not too deep, Lord,” Venton replied painfully.

“Good. Now let that be a lesson for you Venton. You should earn an honest living or at least become a better thief,” Shan advised. Becoming more serious, the rys asked, “Do either of you know where King Taischek is currently making his summer visit?”

“I heard Fata Nor,” Kala answered with uncharacteristic sincerity.

“Fata Nor,” Shan considered. “Yes, that is probably right. Thank you gentlemen. Now off with you.”

“You are going to let them go?” Dreibrand asked with surprise.

“Do you want to bring them along?” Shan countered.

Dreibrand shrugged with acceptance, seeing his point. *The knaves will have to go lick their wounds*, he reasoned.

“Get! Before I change my mind,” Shan ordered.

Without hesitation the thieves sprang to their feet and scrambled away.

“If I see you again, I will turn you into skunks!” Shan called after them and laughed.

Quietly Dreibrand inquired, “Can you really change people into animals?”

Conspiratorially, Shan answered, “No. But it does not hurt to cultivate a few rumors.”

Dreibrand appreciated the joke now that he considered the power of reputation.

Miranda gathered the horses and tethered them again. She petted Freedom’s neck and was glad the horses had not been successfully stolen. The night had grown late and she returned to her bedroll with sleep in mind this time. Shan and Dreibrand sat around the rekindled fire, talking.

“I should have mentioned the possibility of thieves,” Shan said. “Any traffic going to Jington is usually wealthy. And at summer’s end, every tribe will send a tribute caravan to Onja. The thieves will be thickest then.”

“What is this Fata Nor they spoke of?” Dreibrand asked.

“It is a Temu town. In the summer Taischek visits every part of his

domain, and he is there,” Shan explained.

“How far is that?” Dreibrand said.

“Two days. More like a day and a half,” Shan answered. “You will like King Taischek. He has a wonderful sense of humor.” Shan smiled, thinking fondly of his friend.

“And he will help us?” Dreibrand said.

Confidently, Shan replied, “Yes. Taischek does not love paying his tribute to Jingtun and believes Onja is an evil sorceress and not a Goddess. Do not worry, Dreibrand. You will meet him soon and see for yourself. Now get some rest. I will watch the rest of the night. You knocked the sleep out of me.”

Sheepishly, Dreibrand apologized again and he was glad Shan had a sense of humor about it.

The next day the Jingtun Road split into three roads, and they took the middle road. Leaving the rougher foothills behind, they entered a fertile land. They saw the occasional farmstead carved out of the forest, and people began to pass them on the road. The three travelers received stares ranging from fascination to apprehension. Shan was shown deference on the roadway because no one wished to offend a *rys*, but Dreibrand and Miranda presented a curiosity to the local people. The humans west of the *Rysamand* were racially different with darker skin and eyes and black hair. When the local people saw Dreibrand and Miranda, it showed on their faces that they had never seen people with such light features. Most of the passersby were clearly astounded.

Shan inquired about King Taischek from a couple more sources to confirm the thief’s report. As far as anyone knew the *Temu King* was still in *Fata Nor*.

“Why do you ask for Taischek when you could just find him with your magic?” Miranda said curiously.

Shan chuckled. “It is easier to ask. Magic is not always the best way to accomplish something.”

Miranda nodded.

On the next afternoon a large village clutching the side of hill came into view. Wooden buildings, some plain some brightly painted, looked out over fields and pastures. One round stone building with a slate roof rose in

the center of the village, and Shan explained that it was a typical example of a temple to Onja.

Before they reached the outlying fields of Fata Nor, four riders galloped down the road to meet them. The riders wore vests of shining chain mail or leather jackets, and many semi precious stones dangled decoratively all over their gear. The four men had chin length black hair kept in numerous tight braids bound with red and gold thread. Swords and daggers hung from their waists, and two riders carried bows.

Dreibrand watched their approach warily, instantly recognizing them as respectable warriors. Although he had faith in Shan's influence, Dreibrand automatically prepared his mind for a conflict as a precaution.

His worry soon proved unnecessary as the warriors halted their steeds, and the lead rider smiled broadly. He lacked his two front teeth, which made his smile appear all the wider.

In the common tongue the man shouted happily, "Lord Shan honors the Temu with his visit!"

Shan and the Temu warrior brought their horses alongside each other and grasped hands in friendship.

"It is about time you came out to receive me, General Xander," Shan greeted with obvious humor.

Xander rolled his eyes at Shan's scolding and said, "The talk of your strange companions delayed me." His attention shifted to Dreibrand and Miranda and his eyes did not hide his astonishment. "Are they humans or is this some rys thing?"

Dreibrand held his tongue patiently despite his irritation at the question. He understood a meeting between differing peoples could be both delicate and volatile.

"They are as human as any Temu," Shan assured him. "They are wanderers from the east beyond the Wilderness come to meet their brothers and sisters in the west. Allow me to introduce Dreibrand Veta and Miranda."

Xander bowed his head politely but was unable to remove his eyes from the foreigners.

Shan continued, "This is Xander, General of the Temu and counselor to his lord, King Taischek."

“Greetings, General Xander,” Dreibrand said and extended a hand.

Xander hesitated, admitting to himself that the stranger’s blue eyes were very disconcerting. Still, Xander knew fear from no man and firmly grasped Dreibrand’s hand.

“Well met,” Xander said simply. On such an extraordinary occasion he preferred to leave the speaking to King Taischek.

Turning his horse, Xander cast a furtive look upon Miranda, but his manners demanded he not allow his gaze to linger. In all of his days, the General had never imagined a woman so exotic.

The Temu warriors escorted the visitors into Fata Nor. A large tent stood on the common green at the base of the hillside village, and a purple banner emblazoned with a horned yellow serpent was planted beside the tent.

Every resident of Fata Nor had put aside all tasks and duties to gather for the spectacle of the arriving foreigners. The throng parted for the warrior escort but pressed around all sides of the party. Miranda and Dreibrand heard many shocked gasps and exclamations, and the scrutiny of so many eyes made them uncomfortable.

General Xander guided the guests to the tent where more warriors kept a space clear of curious villagers. Everyone dismounted, and Dreibrand conspicuously helped Miranda from her saddle.

Two women entered the clear space. Their straight black hair was unbraided and neatly pulled back into tight buns. They wore lovely flowing robes of deep red. With downcast eyes they walked directly to Miranda and addressed her alone.

“Our Queen invites you to join her,” they said together.

Miranda glanced to Shan for guidance.

“The Queen receives all female guests,” he explained quietly. “It is their custom. You have no need to fear.”

“I do not wish us to be separated,” Dreibrand protested.

To calm his protective impulses, Miranda touched his hand and said, “You cannot keep me in your pocket. I believe it would be rude not to go with them.”

Dreibrand nodded and watched her follow the women away. Where she

entered the crowd, he noticed three men in blue robes and white skullcaps. Two were young men, who seemed to hang behind the heels of the other older man. The older one had a lean weaselly face, and his thin eyes glared at the visitors.

“Who are they?” Dreibrand whispered to Shan.

The rys was looking at the blue-robed men with equal intensity, and Dreibrand realized that they were looking directly at Shan.

“They are rysmavda, priests of the temple. They administer Onja’s rule,” Shan answered. “Normally they would greet a rys visitor and provide accommodations at the temple, but they know I would not enter their temple, and they resent it.”

“Do you think they know what happened in Jingtun?” Dreibrand asked.

“Most likely, but it does not appear they have shared the news, or Xander would have said something to me already,” Shan said.

“Should I consider them enemies?” Dreibrand whispered.

Shan hushed him. They had whispered enough in front of their hosts and it was time for King Taischek to receive them.

Xander led them into the tent. The tent seemed dark after the bright afternoon sun, and their eyes took a moment to adjust. A few oil lamps burned, providing a soft light. Many rugs and cushions furnished every inch of the tent.

The King sat with two men, and many scrolls were strewn around them. The King and one man discussed a scroll while the other man made careful notations upon a new scroll. When the guests entered, the King finished his thought and promptly tossed aside the paper and waved dismissively to his accountants.

Taischek was a stocky man with a round belly and a balding head. What remained of his salty black hair was braided in the Temu fashion. Wrinkles from age and his big grin made his eyes appear as mere slits, but the intelligence sparkled through.

Shan required no introduction and Taischek bounded energetically to his feet.

“Shan!” Taischek cried with genuine pleasure, throwing his burly arms around the rys.

Shan leaned down slightly to receive the sturdy embrace.

“Taischek, you look good,” Shan proclaimed.

The King threw back his head, laughing freely. Addressing Xander, he said, “I love this rys. I will never look old to him.” Sighing, Taischek dignified himself and looked Dreibrand up and down. “Now who are you who makes all my people drop their tools and set to gossip?”

Already beginning to like the King, Dreibrand bowed deeply. “Thank you for seeing me, King Taischek. I am Dreibrand, second son of House Veta from Atrophane, an empire far east of the Wilderness.”

Despite himself, Taischek looked a little impressed.

“You have nice manners, Dreibrand Veta, but I have never heard of Atrophane. How many taxes does Onja demand from the eastern world?” Taischek said. When he got the chance, he always compared the tribute of other peoples. He did not intend to let his tribe be overcharged.

A little surprised by the question, Dreibrand answered, “None, King Taischek. Atrophane is so far away we have never heard of Jington.”

This information fascinated Taischek, who had never heard of a people who avoided Onja’s demands, and his concept of the world doubled.

“Very interesting,” the King mused. “Come sit with me. I will send for refreshment.”

The accountants had finished packing their records into wooden chests and Taischek hurried them out. Reclining among his many pillows, Taischek clapped his hands and a servant appeared from behind curtains carrying a tray of goblets and a pitcher of wine. Too impatient to suffer the fuss of the servant pouring the wine, Taischek seized the pitcher and began sloshing wine into the cups.

“Bring us food,” he barked, and the servant obediently disappeared on his errand.

“What have you been doing with yourself, Shan?” the King inquired pleasantly.

Sipping his wine, the rys replied casually, “You know me, making life difficult for Onja. Contradicting her every order and general feuding.”

“Did she finally kick you out?” Taischek asked as a joke.

“Yes,” Shan said simply.

The humor faded from Taischek's face, and he kept his suddenly serious gaze on Shan as he handed Dreibrand the last cup of wine. Gratefully, Dreibrand accepted the drink, noting the King lacked a couple fingers but made up for them with rings.

"I hope to discuss business with you, Taischek," Shan added.

Taischek suspected the meaning behind Shan's words but shook his head adamantly. "Not today, Shan. Let us speak of serious matters tomorrow. The Temu celebrate tonight. We go to war against the Sabuto Tribe in three days and this day is only for pleasure."

"Excellent idea!" Shan agreed readily, knowing it would please Taischek. The delay of a day meant little to a rys. Shan continued, "We are fortunate to arrive before your celebration. Dreibrand, the Temu have the best parties."

"Of course we do!" Taischek cried, relieved that Shan had not pursued his business. "Tonight we shall enjoy ourselves so that we can take the warpath with memories of joy."

Xander whooped with agreement and drained his goblet. The King called for another round, and Dreibrand had to hurry through his wine in order to take more.

Too dignified to rush through anything, Shan declined more wine and asked, "Why are you in this tent? Fata Nor has a wonderful guest house."

"Yes, and all of my wives are in it," Taischek grumbled. "I'm sick of them. I'm glad it's the war season."

19~ A King to Fight For ~

With the mysterious visitors hidden from view, the Temu returned to their preparations for the evening's celebration. In a recently harvested field many tables and benches were set up and laden with a bountiful variety of foods. Several pigs roasted nearby along with a whole steer and numerous kegs of beer and wine rolled out of storage, some of which got tapped ahead of schedule. Musicians tuned their instruments, and women gathered flowers to adorn their hair.

Inside the royal tent King Taischek listened to Dreibrand describe his distant homeland. Dreibrand spoke of his military career as if it had come to a normal completion. He regretted the necessity of the deceit, but he knew he could not forge a new name in a new land by admitting to his

rash abandonment of his duty.

Instinctively, Taischek sensed the omissions in his guest's story but forgave them, understanding a man that crossed the world would leave some things behind. And Shan seemed to sanction the young man, and that counted for much with Taischek.

"And Queen Onja has no say in this Atrophane Empire?" Taischek pressed, requiring clarification on this detail because it shook his perception of the world's power structure.

Dreibrand nodded emphatically. "It is true, King Taischek. Onja is not known in the east."

"It is good to know not all men have to tolerate her," concluded the King.

Xander spoke. "May I see your sword?"

"Certainly," Dreibrand said and unbuckled his swordbelt. He eased the blade partway out of the scabbard and handed the weapon over to the Temu General.

Taischek and Xander bent over the sharp heavy blade, admiring the workmanship in their own language. Although the King possessed many fine weapons, this sword did not lack in appeal. When Taischek returned the sword, he tapped Dreibrand's armor, impressed by the metal plate.

"You must be a wealthy man in your world," Taischek commented.

"No King," Dreibrand said. "My gear may be of high quality, but it is all I own. I am not a wealthy man, especially in my country."

"A poor man generally would not possess such a beautiful woman," Xander noted in the Temu language.

By the responding expression on Taischek's face, Dreibrand wondered what the General had said. Dreibrand glanced at Shan, hoping the rys would interpret if it had been important, but Shan was renowned for his tact.

Clearing his throat, Taischek said, "And where is your woman from? Is it the custom of your people to go exploring the Wilderness with a woman?"

"Her name is Miranda," Dreibrand said while trying to conceal his discomfort. He worried information about Miranda might jeopardize his

carefully edited story. His circumstances did look strange.

She knows the truth. I should have told her what not to talk about. Where is she? I need to see her, he thought.

“And what is her story?” the King prompted with as much patience as a king could offer.

“King Taischek, you declared that this day was for pleasure, and Miranda’s story is not a happy one—and perhaps hers to tell,” Dreibrand responded. When he actually thought about it, he did not know much about her.

Taischek chuckled at the way Dreibrand sidestepped the question. “Thank you for obeying my edict. Which reminds me, we should start the festivities. A fine feast and much drinking await us.”

Shan said, “If you would allow Dreibrand and me to wash up, we will join you shortly.”

Standing, Taischek summoned a servant and ordered a wash basin. “When you are ready, come out and sit with us,” Taischek instructed as he exited with Xander.

For the sake of privacy, Dreibrand used Miranda’s language. “Taischek showed little desire to talk about your business,” he commented.

Wiping his hands, Shan said, “Oh, he has his party, like he said. Taischek guesses what I will ask him, and he does not like it.”

“Then why are you so sure he will support you?” Dreibrand worried.

“He already agreed to support me against Onja whenever I asked, just as you have done,” the rys explained.

“You saved him too,” Dreibrand surmised and wondered if other people owed Shan allegiance.

Shan nodded. “I saved him from worse than a dungeon. In his youth Taischek was a hostage in the royal household of the Sabuto Tribe as part of a peace agreement with the Temu. But these tribes are traditional rivals and hostilities started after a season or two. I went to the Sabuto when the peace ended, but they had already tortured Taischek and meant to burn him alive, but I could not see the boy die. I cut him free of the stake before the flames went too far. Still, he was terribly injured and did not walk for a year. But he was young and grew to be a strong man.”

The gruesome story contrasted with the jovial king, but Dreibrand now understood better Taischek's zest for life.

Before they left the tent, Dreibrand asked quietly, "What did the General say when Taischek gave him that look?"

"Nothing," Shan said breezily.

"Come on, Shan," Dreibrand urged.

"Really, it was nothing," Shan insisted. "He just did not think you were poor."

Dreibrand frowned but he dropped the subject. It probably was nothing, and he admitted that he often became annoyed when he did not know what was being said.

They exited the tent and found themselves in a festive atmosphere. Music played and torches were being lit in the approaching dusk. Although Dreibrand had been eager to start Shan's business, he decided to follow Taischek's order and enjoy himself.

While walking through the crowd, Dreibrand scanned over the heads of people trying to spot Miranda. Apparently a male/female segregation organized the seating with a broad length of field separating the ladies' tables from the men's tables. He strayed toward the women's section but Shan grabbed his elbow and steered him back.

"Men and women do not mix at Temu social gatherings," Shan informed him.

"I thought you said they threw good parties," Dreibrand grumbled, still trying to locate Miranda.

Shan hushed him because they had reached Taischek's table. Two seats had been saved to the right of the King, and Shan and Dreibrand sat in the honored place. Immediately servants poured wine for the newly arrived guests, while a musical performance in front of the table absorbed Taischek. When the harps and flutes concluded their rousing tune, Taischek applauded exuberantly, delighting his loyal musicians.

A clear note from a horn sounded, and the musicians withdrew, clearing the field before the King. An empty table in the women's area was across from the King's table and the horn signaled the entrance of the Temu Queen and her entourage.

“Vua is always late,” complained Taischek as he stood up.

All the men rose as Queen Vua flowed across the grass, leading her co-wives and daughters. Wreaths of flowers crowned all the women in the entourage, and they all wore fluttering red robes over soft white gowns. The spectacle of their beauty hushed the men respectfully as the King and Queen bowed to each other. With the simple formality completed, everyone sat down.

Beside the plump gray-haired Queen, Dreibrand finally saw Miranda. Dressed like the other women, her lovely raiment impressed him. She kept her bandaged arm hidden in the folds of her red robe, but in the flattering gown and crowned with flowers, she was easily the center of attention. Dreibrand had often dreamed of her adorned in fine clothes and the result pleased him greatly. Miranda looked directly at Dreibrand, and he hated the distance between them.

“What a treasure you have brought us from the east,” declared King Taischek after he saw Miranda.

“Eyes of pure jade,” Xander interjected fondly in the Temu language. “Sire, you should see her up close. She is a wonder.”

“Be careful of your manners, Xander,” warned the King softly and he checked to see if Dreibrand had understood.

Servants dished out the main courses of tender and savory meats and more wine flowed into cups. Taischek dug into his feast with abandon and bade the musicians to play again.

Between mouthfuls of food, the King said, “It is good to have you back, Shan. You have stayed away too long. And your visit gave me a wonderful opportunity to piss off Nebeck. I gave you his seat and put the rymavda at that table.”

He pointed to an empty table behind him. “I don’t think they are going to come,” Taischek said with insincere disappointment.

“It will probably take Nebeck a day to work up his courage to actually confront me. He fears my presence will soil him in Onja’s eyes,” Shan said.

“He’d soil his presence in Onja’s eyes,” Taischek joked.

Shan ate sparingly, like any rys, and listened with pleasure to the reports of the Temu King. With increasing intoxication Taischek described every thing that had happened to him since Shan’s last visit.

The Temu royal household had been blessed with two more daughters and one more son.

“Two more daughters!” Shan exclaimed. “Every man in the Confederation will end up married to a Temu.”

Taischek laughed and drained another goblet of wine. “I hope so. The other tribes will wish I made war on them instead of sending my daughters. Except the Sabuto scum. They get only my sword.”

Lifting his right hand, Taischek showed off a large emerald ring on his thumb. “Look at that Shan. I took that rock from the Sabuto last year and had my jeweler make this ring over the winter. He did a good job.”

Shan admired the wondrous green gem. The lands of the Sabuto Tribe possessed the best jewel mines.

An uncharacteristic grin broke Shan’s blue face as he said, “Shall you be wearing this to Jingteng?”

Such a question made even in jest actually startled Taischek. With a frown the King withdrew the sparkling hand.

Shan tapped Dreibrand on the shoulder and said, “You should see our great King Taischek when he pays his tribute to Onja. He wears barely more than a hermit’s rag and only brings his skinny wives.”

Taischek now had to chuckle at the duplicity he shared with Shan. The King had put his act of poverty on for so long, he had almost taken offense when Shan joked about it.

“I do what I must so that the Temu prosper,” Taischek said humbly.

Dreibrand eased away his finished plate and decided to enter the conversation. “King Taischek, you say you go to war in three days against the Sabuto Tribe. I would like to join you.”

“Oh really?” Taischek rumbled. He shoved some pork into his mouth and chewed it thoughtfully.

“Looking for work are you, Dreibrand Veta?” the King finally determined. “What kind of pay do you think you are worth?”

Dreibrand smiled, encouraged by the question. He answered, “I think that I am worth quite a bit. But for now all I ask is that the Temu provide Miranda refuge. She has injuries and needs a home to rest in.”

The King cast a concerned look in Miranda’s direction. “She looks

healthy to me,” he said gruffly.

“Onja hurt her more than it shows,” Shan explained softly.

“Onja hurt her...” the King trailed off. He did not want to know tonight. This news had to be connected to Shan’s business, which he wanted to live without for one more merry night.

Shan continued, “But Dreibrand does not need to work for her refuge. I ask this of you Taischek, as a favor.”

“This is my concern, Shan,” Dreibrand insisted.

Taischek studied the young man. He respected him for wanting to take care of his woman.

And if he wants to work for so little, I should defer to his pride, Taischek thought, but he said, “Of course she can stay. I would never turn out an injured woman. Now what pay do you want, Dreibrand?”

“Her safety is all that I require,” Dreibrand answered. “You may reward my efforts as you see fit, King Taischek.”

Taischek laughed. “He IS brave.” Nudging Xander with an elbow, he said, “What do you think, General? Should I take on this mercenary?”

“If he’s worthy, I have no objection,” Xander slurred.

“Yes, yes, of course. We will see to that,” the King agreed. “I would be glad to have you along, Dreibrand. Look at you! You will scare the balls off the Sabuto. They will think you are some rys demon.”

Dreibrand was not sure if the last comment was a compliment, but he was glad to have a king to fight for.

“But you must prove yourself, man from Atrophane,” Taischek added. He turned to Xander and gave instructions in the Temu language.

Obediently, Xander rose but swayed drunkenly. Remembering that he was a general, he plopped back into his seat and gave the orders to someone else.

Wary of the methods by which he would prove himself, Dreibrand looked questioningly at Shan. The rys sipped his wine and offered no details.

Finally, Dreibrand asked, “What will I have to do?”

Shan replied breezily, “Do not worry. They are not planning to kill you.”

Dreibrand frowned at the statement, but he did not have time to contemplate the meaning because several Temu warriors arrived behind him.

“Remove your armor and weapon,” a Temu commanded in the common tongue.

Reluctantly, Dreibrand complied. He would have to follow through on what he had started.

Across the field, Miranda noticed Dreibrand giving his gear to the warriors, and she feared the Temu had turned against them.

“What is happening?” she cried, looking at her hostess the Queen.

“It looks like our warriors wish to test him,” Vua replied, but then she saw her guest’s apprehension and added, “This will be fun.”

Miranda wanted to be reassured by the comment, but it looked like Dreibrand was going to fight someone. The servants and musicians cleared a wide space between the tables of the King and Queen, and the rest of the Temu, murmuring with excitement, crowded around on all sides. Warriors began lining up in front of the crowd, and they led Dreibrand into the ring. He was given a quarterstaff, and Miranda watched him test its weight and balance.

Now the Temu challenger came forward. His armor was also removed, and he wielded a quarterstaff. Grinning broadly and enjoying the cheers from his friends, the young warrior took off his shirt to display his supple physique. He bowed to an unmarried section of ladies, who appreciated his attention, and then held his staff high and pranced before the whole crowd.

Dreibrand examined the situation and relaxed. His test appeared to be a sporting competition on fair terms. Eyeing his opponent, he deemed the youth fast and clever, but perhaps overly proud to represent his tribe. With a confident grin, Dreibrand strode to the center of the impromptu arena and felt his heart quicken with excitement.

At this point King Taischek climbed on top of his table and addressed his tribe in the common tongue for the sake of his guests.

“Great Temu, I introduce Dreibrand Veta. He comes from a land called Atrophane in the distant east. He has asked for the honor of serving me and riding with Temu warriors. Now for all to see, the warriors shall test

him and judge his worth.”

The Temu cheered, happy with the quality of the spectacle. Dreibrand took the opportunity to approach Miranda and regarded his opponent casually while he spoke to her.

“You look beautiful,” he whispered to her.

She had to smile, but her concern could not be suppressed. “Dreibrand! This looks dangerous.”

“I can handle him,” he answered as if her worry was absurd.

Drums began to pulse in a low rhythm to herald the combat. Dreibrand left her table and faced his opponent. Because it was their test Dreibrand decided to let the warrior make the first move. They circled each other cautiously and the torchlight gleamed on the metal tips of their staves.

“Are you finished saying goodbye to your woman?” the warrior taunted.

With the practiced superiority of an Atrophaney commander, Dreibrand said, “Actually, I told her you were nothing to worry about.”

The fight started.

With a battle cry the Temu planted his quarterstaff in the ground and vaulted into the air. Dreibrand blocked too high and too late and the man’s feet slammed into his stomach. The unexpected blow knocked Dreibrand onto the field. The Temu landed and swung his staff, but Dreibrand managed to roll aside from the strike and swing his own staff. The hard wood snapped across both shins of the warrior. Springing to his feet, Dreibrand got in another good blow across the jaw. The Temu now took his turn hitting the dirt, where he received a few more whacks to the ribs and thighs before he could raise his staff to block the relentless attack.

Taischek frowned and accepted that the young warrior was losing. The King signaled to another warrior, who gladly jumped into the ring. This tribal member grinned with eagerness to avenge his younger cousin, and a whip uncoiled from his expert hand.

Pleased by the contest’s approaching conclusion, Dreibrand did not see his new opponent. The whip cracked, and his staff flew from unsuspecting hands. He looked at his empty palms with puzzlement, but the urgency of battle could not allow him to ponder the rude disappearance of the weapon. Dreibrand whirled and met the gaze of his new attacker and saw that his staff had sailed far out of reach. The whip circled over the Temu’s

head, winding for another strike.

Dreibrand accepted that he would have to take another lick and charged the warrior. The whip sang and wrapped around his ankles this time. His boots protected him from the whip's bite, and he lunged for the warrior before the whip jerked his feet away. Tackling his opponent, Dreibrand was already punching him as he hit the ground. The Temu had to release the whip to defend his face with both hands, pushing and slapping and pulling hair.

Dreibrand grimaced through his efforts, but he kept the warrior pinned. With a brutal grasp Dreibrand seized his throat and began to slam the warrior's head into the ground repeatedly.

As the choking abuse subdued the man, Dreibrand glanced back at his first opponent, who was rising painfully to resume the fight. Giving the second opponent's head one more good bounce, Dreibrand kicked free of the tangling whip and scrambled after his distant quarterstaff. He retrieved his weapon and struck the whip-bearing warrior in the back of the head just as he sat up. The first warrior engaged Dreibrand again, and their staves cracked against each other furiously. Again Dreibrand beat him back.

Taischek gestured to a third warrior to join the fight. This time a glance from the young warrior warned Dreibrand that another attacker approached from behind, and he turned just in time to block the staff of the third warrior. Struggling between two opponents, Dreibrand recalled the day Hydax and Gennor had captured him, and the sting of that defeat filled him with a furious determination. The old familiar battle rage flowed through his veins, and he remembered the Dreibrand Veta that could kill a man defending his home and whose mercy had been slavery.

Dreibrand kept moving to prevent being pinned between two warriors. His senses were keen with adrenaline, and with his skill he blocked both of their attacks, and the metal-tipped ends of his staff danced inside their defenses.

The youngest Temu got some ribs cracked and sank to one knee. Without hesitation Dreibrand finished the original opponent with a blow upside the head that knocked him out. This victory had a price, and the third and freshest warrior hit Dreibrand in the head. His brow split and bleeding, Dreibrand staggered back in significant pain.

Now the warrior with the whip had recovered enough to regain his feet, and the whip hissed through the air. The heartless leather danced across Dreibrand's back and he gasped. He continued to parry the attacks from the third warrior and the whip cut his flesh again. Dreibrand decided he really disliked the Temu with the whip and at any cost that man had to go. Roaring angrily, Dreibrand attacked his current opponent with enough force to drive him back, and then he turned to assault the whip-wielding warrior. The lash flew around his feet again, but Dreibrand swung his staff like a club and hit the hand holding the whip. The offending weapon slid from broken fingers. Dreibrand jumped closer and beat him down with several blows.

The third warrior leaped on Dreibrand's back and got his staff under his chin. Dreibrand had to drop his own weapon to grab the choking pole. The Temu pulled him backward, bending him uncomfortably. Dripping blood and sweat from his face, Dreibrand hauled forward and raised the Temu slightly off his feet.

They struggled back and forth, entering a stalemate. Dreibrand could prevent himself from being choked but could not remove the warrior.

"Hold!" cried Taischek, deciding things had gone far enough.

The Temu warrior released Dreibrand. Turning to face his opponent, Dreibrand rested a moment and then sucker punched the Temu. The men resumed their fight, both grasping the remaining staff and swinging fists at each other. Taischek jumped down from his table and broke them up himself, actually laughing.

"Do we want Dreibrand Veta on our side, Temu?" the King bellowed.

The warriors roared with unanimous approval. The foreigner was worthy.

With a sigh of relief Miranda sat back. She hated seeing him get hurt but his skill and strength had thrilled her. To have the devotion of such a man was lucky, and Miranda wished she could go to him. However, his place tonight was with the Temu men, who now introduced themselves individually to Dreibrand and welcomed him into their warrior brotherhood. Miranda saw King Taischek guide his guest back to his table.

With the trial of combat over, Miranda realized her head throbbed. Fatigued and uncomfortable, she asked the Queen to excuse her. Vua

agreed readily, knowing of Miranda's injuries, and summoned a servant to escort her guest back to the guesthouse.

Even with a throng of warriors around him, Dreibrand noticed Miranda's departure, but he was clearly expected to stay at the party. He returned to his seat, and Shan had a towel ready to clean his forehead.

"You fought very well," Shan complimented as he dabbed his friend's swollen cut.

"If I am not shot with a sho dart, I can be dangerous. How is my back?" Dreibrand asked.

Shan glanced at the welts bleeding through the fabric and said, "You needed a new shirt anyway."

Dreibrand chuckled at Shan's annoying answer. He watched the injured Temu warriors being helped away by their comrades, and it soothed his stinging back.

"Get him some wine, Shan!" King Taischek barked.

"I thought I would bandage his head first," Shan said.

"Ah, it's nothing for a strong warrior like him. Let's drink!" Taischek poured Dreibrand a goblet.

Thirsty from his ordeal, Dreibrand gratefully quaffed the wine, refilled his cup and toasted the King.

"Good job, Atrophane warrior," Taischek said. "Now save your battle lust for the Sabuto and we shall be good friends. Shan, thank you for bringing him to me."

Shan inclined his head in acceptance of the gratitude.

Taischek continued, "I have just the thing that will make your head feel better, Dreibrand." The King removed a pouch from his vest pocket. Out of it he retrieved a pipe and a bundle of dried plant material.

Shan saw this and shared a laugh with the King.

"What is that?" Dreibrand asked, truly intrigued.

"Don't they smoke in your great eastern empire?" Taischek asked contemptuously.

"Smoke?" Dreibrand was honestly baffled.

His confusion made the King laugh harder and comment, "No wonder

you left home. Xander, this man does not even...” Taischek stopped when he realized the General was unconscious. Quietly he added, “Xander is always the first to go.”

With genuine fascination, Dreibrand watched the King light the filled pipe and inhale the smoke. Completely accustomed to the activity, Taischek did not cough and exhaled with a slow sigh. He handed the pipe to Shan, who puffed happily.

“This will shut up our smart rys friend,” Taischek said. “He’ll think he is five hasas away.”

“Watching you drink is not the only thing that amuses me,” Shan countered while he handed the pipe to an empty area near Dreibrand.

“You probably can’t find your butt already,” Taischek joked, but Shan ignored him easily.

Now Dreibrand received the pipe and regarded it curiously, unsure how to proceed.

“Don’t let it go out,” Taischek ordered.

Curiosity and an aching skull made Dreibrand comply. His virgin lungs protested with much hacking and coughing, which entertained everybody thoroughly. Once his coughing subsided, Dreibrand gulped down the rest of his wine. Despite his burning chest, he began to feel an immediate pleasantness seep through his system. He nodded appreciatively, noticing the sweet smell of the smoke. His subsequent turns with the pipe caused him no discomfort, and his pain drifted away. He felt absolutely wonderful and thanked Taischek exuberantly with a slight slur.

Taischek lovingly tucked his pipe away and said, “Just a little Temu medicine.”

Shan stood and without a word wandered off.

The King chuckled and explained, “It affects Shan more than us. Sends him into some rys dreamland or something.”

This was interesting, but Dreibrand felt too good at the moment to give any thought to where Shan had gone. Dreibrand found himself sharing many toasts with the Temu King and the surrounding warriors. He had a wonderful time and consumed much more wine than was his habit. Despite repeatedly slipping into his native language, he made a few friends and, with a mildly comprehensible speech, personally forgave the

warrior who had split his head. Taischek rallied his men late into the night, and being the true king of his tribe, saw them all pass out first.

20~ The First Ripple of Rebellion ~

Shan was kind to visit me as my days come to their end. He listened patiently as I recalled the adventures of my youth. He was at my side then, but he does not seem a day older now. I know that he has changed but the changes have taken a lifetime to see, like watching a tree grow or noticing the course of a river shifting after many seasons. He is becoming powerful and some day he will stop the evil that festers in the mountains. I can die believing this—Chendoaser, Nuram ruler, year 1882 of the Age of Onja.

The fuzzy blackness emerged into a painful grayness. Dreibrand opened his eyes slightly, but even the overcast day provided a vengeful glare. His skull felt like a year old walnut shell, and he ached like a teenager after his first bender. Close dark shapes hovered him, and Dreibrand squinted at them. Several smiling Temu children kneeled around him, closely examining the immobile foreigner. His arrival into hurtful consciousness made them all comment with excitement, and their chatter pierced his eardrums like breaking dishes. He implored them to hush, but his furry tongue and dry lips hindered his speech and made them laugh harder.

Escape would be the only chance for relief.

A cool drizzle started and the merciful wet soothed him slightly. Groaning, he sat up. His vision swam and a wave of nausea passed lazily. Apparently he had dropped on the field in a stupor and been left on the ground. The only people present besides the curious children were a few villagers, who were cleaning up the mess from the banquet.

Willpower helped Dreibrand to his feet, and he shuffled to his gear that had been set under the table. He buckled his sword back on and was vaguely pleased to see that his dagger remained in its place. After a brief rest, he reached for his armor. The chestplate slid from his fumbling hands and banged on the table on the way back to the ground. The resulting clang assaulted his abused head and made him shudder. Thoroughly reminded of why he avoided heavy drinking, Dreibrand grabbed his armor and plodded into Fata Nor, searching for a well.

Shan found him kneeling at a basin by a village well literally soaking his head. After drinking and washing, Dreibrand had dozed off with the

injured half of his head lying in the shallow water.

“There you are,” Shan declared, easing his friend’s head out of the basin. “I thought I better get you when we heard children were poking you with sticks.”

“Were they?” Dreibrand muttered.

“Get up, Dreibrand. It is time for us to have our talk with Taischek,” Shan said.

Trying not to actually move his head, Dreibrand carefully climbed the basin until he stood up. Smoothing back his wet hair, he moaned, “I think I should throw myself on my sword.”

Shan scolded, “Nonsense. This will pass. We will get you some food—”

“No,” Dreibrand cut him off with an adamant whisper. “I—I am not hungry.”

“Perhaps not,” Shan reconsidered. “But you know how important our business is. Can you make it?”

“Of course,” Dreibrand replied. “But can we walk slowly?”

The rys smiled. “I assumed that.”

As they headed for the King’s tent, Dreibrand was painfully aware of his shabby appearance. His shirt had long since ceased to be anything worthy of pride, and he was rumped, battered and dirty. But he had not looked much better before the banquet, and Taischek had been impressed with him then.

Is he still impressed with me? Dreibrand wondered nervously. The last half of the evening laughed at his attempts to remember it.

“Where did you go last night?” Dreibrand asked.

Waving a blue hand, Shan answered, “I did not notice.”

“What was that smoke?” Dreibrand said.

Shan explained, “It is a flower that grows in the lowlands. Humans use it for medicine and pleasure. But its effect on rys goes beyond the human experience. It makes me unable to entirely control my awareness. My mind is set adrift. It is very pleasurable, but it leaves me very vulnerable. I rarely indulge, and I suspect last night was my last opportunity to be so frivolous.”

Rubbing his head, Dreibrand said, "I could use some right now."

"I am sure you could," Shan agreed. "But your mind must be clear. This will be my first council of war."

Dreibrand reflected on the task ahead, realizing that it had not been that long since his last war council, but much had happened in between. He was not even the same person anymore.

"Where is Miranda?" he said.

"At the guest house. Taischek went to speak with her earlier," Shan answered.

What did she tell him? Dreibrand worried, which made his head throb. But he had no way to ask Shan without seeming suspicious.

Shan interrupted his secret fretting. "This will not be pleasant."

Dreibrand lifted his aching eyes and saw Rysmavda Nebeck and the two younger priests waiting between them and the King's tent at the edge of the village.

"Lord Shan, we must speak," Nebeck announced with authority.

"What makes you so bold with me, rysmavda?" Shan demanded.

Nebeck's narrow lips twitched as the intimidation washed over him, but his purpose did not diminish from his eyes. A pale warding crystal hung over his chest on a silver chain, but there seemed to be no heart behind it. His stringent expression advertised his cold outlook, and his white skullcap made his thin face look even hungrier.

"What is your purpose in Fata Nor?" Nebeck said.

"How dare you ask my business?" Shan hissed.

"I no longer have to show you respect. I know you are cast out of Jington," Nebeck said. "Now I demand to know your business among these good subjects of the Queen, our Goddess."

"Go hide in your temple," Shan snapped.

Nebeck did not waver and his temerity surprised Shan. "You are an enemy of the Queen. I will not let you be in my templesphere. I will not let your blasphemous treachery put the citizens of Fata Nor at risk."

"The only risk is that these people will soon see that you have no power to back up your greedy and controlling ways," Shan said.

The younger rysmavda gasped, and Nebeck gaped in shock.

Villagers had gathered a modest distance from the rys and the rysmavda, and they hung on every hot word.

“Onja has no power here. She cannot strike us down from Jington as in days of old,” Shan announced. “If Onja is a Goddess, I invite her to strike me down because I say she is not.” He raised his arms as if beckoning the legendary wrath of the Queen.

Dreibrand sensed the tension from all of the nearby Temu, and he shared some himself. But dealing with Onja was Shan’s role, and he focused on those things he could cope with. Through his hangover, he monitored the three rysmavda as Shan had told him to do.

“Well, Rysmavda Nebeck, where is the power of Onja?” Shan demanded impatiently.

Nebeck cringed, convinced that a killing spell from his Goddess was surely on its way. Clutching his warding crystal, he retreated with his associates.

“Onja, take this rogue from us!” he pleaded.

Shan laughed as if a fool had irritated him for too long. Blue light flared in his eyes and he pointed at Nebeck. The rysmavda cried out in pain and released the warding crystal that now blazed on the end of its chain. The charm then burst into pieces that fell to the path like plain broken glass.

Nebeck wailed in dismay. “You are cursed!”

The crowd had thickened quickly, and the King and General Xander emerged from the tent. If Shan’s confrontation with the rysmavda distressed Taischek, it did not show. Taischek stormed through the crowd that parted for him automatically.

“Rysmavda Nebeck, why do you anger my guest?” Taischek rumbled.

“Temu King, Shan has been banished by the Queen, our Goddess, and we must not harbor him. She commanded me so last night,” Nebeck answered with extra emphasis on the last sentence for the benefit of the crowd.

“Shan is my friend and is permanently welcome among our tribe—no matter what. Why don’t you go count our gold and leave us alone,” Taischek sneered, referring to the tribute collecting function of the

temple.

“Temu King, I warn you. Shan will bring Onja’s wrath to our tribe,” Nebeck insisted.

“You act like Onja treats us well now,” the King countered. “Now leave us. I wish to visit with my friends.”

“Prime Rysmavda Arshen in Dengar Nor will hear of this,” Nebeck warned, but the King was already ignoring him. Taischek signaled for the crowd to be dispersed and waved Shan and Dreibrand into the tent.

Once inside the tent, Taischek showed his emotion. “By the great Tartarlan, you have really gone and done it, Shan.”

The rys made no reply. Shan knew that Taischek would fuss until he accepted things. Shan had told him this day could come.

Taischek flopped into his place and brooded deeply. Xander motioned for them to sit and they waited in silence, not wishing to intrude upon the King’s thoughts.

Dreibrand tried to interpret what had just happened. He had not expected the confrontation with the rysmavda or Shan to be so aggressive. He had not caught all of the words, but he had gathered that Shan had just publicly declared Onja’s religion false.

The King heaved a great sigh and his eyes rounded the gathering. He seemed to take some comfort from those present.

On a tremendously light note that dismissed his heavy mood, Taischek said, “Don’t I have a fine crew. My General is the first to pass out, and my new warrior, Dreibrand, is the last to wake up.”

Everybody chuckled and felt a little relieved.

Turning exclusively to Dreibrand, the King continued, “I spoke with your companion, Miranda. Her news was hard to hear.”

Dreibrand’s stomach tightened.

“The captivity of her children breaks my heart. I have never heard of Onja doing such a thing. This strange behavior from the Queen does not please the Temu,” Taischek said.

His sincerity was apparent. Taischek also knew the horror of torture and he sympathized with the foreign woman who had endured the hateful touch of the Queen. Most of all, Onja’s sudden desire to possess children

worried him.

Will she begin to demand children from us? he wondered.

“You see that we must tolerate Onja no longer,” Shan said. “The time has come for me to put aside my fear, and free the world from her tyranny and claim the throne of my kind. Taischek, King of the Temu Tribe, on this day I ask you to fulfill your promise. Help me overthrow Onja.” When Shan spoke her name, his voice was almost a snarl.

Xander cast anxious eyes upon his lord. He would do and die by his King’s orders, but would his King really commit to this mad venture? Every human knew rys were superior, and Onja was invincible.

Finally, Taischek said with a resigned tone, “Shan, you are the prince of favors. You pull a boy from the fire and he would say anything out of gratitude. But Shan, I have come to know you well, and I know you act first out of compassion, not ambition. Still, you control your generosity, recognizing the value of your good deeds.

“The years did pass though, and I came to think you would not defy the Queen in my lifetime. Your plots could easily outlive one man. Now in my old age you ask me to help change the world.”

Shan frowned. “Do not plead old age with me Taischek. You could kill an ox.”

Taischek raised a hand to prevent Shan from lecturing him. “I only meant that you waited so long to ask your favor, I had come to hope I was free of the obligation. Shan, my sword is at your service as I promised it would be long ago. My ancestors bowed to Onja, and it became our way.” The King gestured to Dreibrand. “He comes from a place where Onja has no dominion. If she truly were a Goddess, every person in Gyhwen would serve her as we have. Therefore, I, Taischek, have the courage to free my people, so that my heirs will prosper even more than I.

“I understand that humans can only hope to defeat Onja with the aid of a rys, and we must not miss our opportunity. Perhaps together we can prevail.”

“Yes we shall!” Shan cried with excitement. Setting his plans in motion bolstered his confidence. It was one thing to plot and whisper, but there was power in the freedom of actually moving toward his goal. He could not convey the depth of his hate for Onja to his friends. No human could quite

understand how she had wronged him by lingering in this world, continually denying him his rightful place as leader of the rys. She kept him forever in a voiceless limbo, and he could only have a furtive respect from his own kind.

With an eerie potency in his voice, Shan continued, “Onja is old, very old. Older than any rys has ever been. Since my last challenge, I have grown into the prime of my life, whereas Onja has only aged more beyond a natural life. I can feel the strain inside her mind and body, and she will not withstand my second challenge. With your help, we will aggravate that strain, until I can strike her down.”

“What part could the Temu possibly play in this rys thing?” Xander suddenly demanded.

“Please, Xander do not become upset,” Taischek soothed his general. “Shan will explain.”

Respectfully, Shan nodded to Xander, reading the reluctance on the Temu’s face. “Good General, many humans will unfortunately remain loyal to Onja—out of fear. Onja knows well that I wish to cast her down, and it is only a matter of time before she sends her allies to kill me. Threats from rysmavda are only the beginning. Therefore, I will need protection. I will need an army to return to Jington because she will set her allies to protect her. And of equal importance, the fact that an entire army has risen in opposition to her will devastate her confidence. The defiance of so many humans will make her nervous because it will demonstrate that her power cannot reach the lowlands anymore.”

“Has she really become so weak? Are we actually safe from her in the lowlands?” Taischek asked eagerly.

Shan nodded. “Her magic can still reach us, but it has become limited. She can see and hear us, and communicate with the rysmavda of course, and other minor things, but she cannot kill. Onja is no longer the Queen that your ancestors had to bow to.”

Although Xander accepted the Temu were now committed to this cause, he would still voice his concerns in council. “And when we face rys soldiers, what can you do for us?” he asked.

“The rys forces are the least of my concern,” Shan responded. “They will stand aside when we reach Jington. I have a right to challenge Onja, and it is not the way of rys to interfere in the challenges of others. If combat does

occur with rys soldiers, my magic will even the odds for you. The soldiers of Jingteng know how powerful I am and they will not be willing to confront me.”

“It is true,” Dreibrand supported. “I have seen it. The soldiers have no power over Shan.”

The rys restrained Dreibrand’s eagerness. Humbly he said, “Do not say that. I am flesh, and anyone, rys or human, could conceivably hurt me. That is why I need my friends to guard me from those that would try. I regret that I involve you in war, but Onja has wronged the humans even more than her own kind. I suggest that the Temu not pay their tribute to Jingteng this year. It will reveal Onja’s weakness to the other tribes, and the rys have no need for your treasures. We are brilliant and gifted on our own, except Onja has made the rys into lazy overlords. When I am King, there will be no tribute. Humans and rys can trade and do business as it pleases them, but I need no dominance over humans. The Rysamand will be for the rys, but that is all.”

These words appealed to Taischek and even placated Xander. The King knew his trust in Shan’s goodness had not been misguided, and he imagined the glory of marching on Jingteng. Onja’s seemingly eternal tyranny had become a part of the short lives of men, but Taischek realized that Shan had watched generations of Temu bow to Onja and give up the labors of the tribe. Now Shan offered a chance to stop the exploitation, if only they had the courage to oppose Jingteng’s ruthless Queen.

Taischek was no longer reluctant to say the words, and when he did, it felt good. But he knew that in all of his days of war and intrigue he had never done such a dangerous thing. “You are right. The Temu will not pay tribute,” he said.

Shan continued, “You know that I am not a hasty being, but too many centuries have given themselves to history, and the time for action has arrived. Taischek take me before the Confederation when it convenes next month so that I may invite your allies to join us in the denial of tribute. The more tribes that oppose her, the better. For once Onja will feel insecurity. Let her hear the voice of rebellion across the icy peaks all winter long!”

Thinking of Onja, Shan’s ebony eyes became unfocused, and the others wondered what far off place he looked upon. No one spoke, and the air

quivered as if some power quickened around the rys. A brilliant blue flared from the rys's eyes before Shan shut them and drew a shuddering breath.

Tentatively, Dreibrand said, "Shan...what is it?"

Shan opened his eyes and seemed himself again. Slowly he replied, "I suddenly felt so confident and great power surged inside me." Sweeping his gaze over the three men, he added, "I will not fail you my friends."

Taischek nodded solemnly. "Of course, Shan. I would never doubt you. But I cannot guarantee that the other four tribes of the Confederation will follow the example of the Temu. An end to tribute is very appealing, but people will be afraid. Shan, it is hard for some to change. Not everyone is a Temu."

"When we meet with the Confederates, your influence will guide their decisions," Shan said. "And I once advised King Ejan of the Tacus when the wild Zandas harassed his kingdom. He will heed my call for support."

"I will make sure you address the Confederation," Taischek promised. "But Shan, please understand that I cannot neglect the Sabuto. My warriors are counting on the plunder from the raids I have planned. And well, this is me. I attack the Sabuto every year. They would lose track of the calendar if I didn't show up."

Shan laughed. "Taischek, I would never deny you your annual revenge on the Sabuto. In fact, this year I intend to join you on the warpath, if you will have me."

Taischek blinked with surprise. He knew Shan abhorred the wanton violence of war. "Of course you are welcome, Shan," he said while imagining the fear of the Sabuto when they saw that the powerful rys lord accompanied him.

"And if I could indulge your generosity in one more thing, Taischek. I need a sword," Shan said.

"A sword?" Taischek laughed. "Do you intend to fight like a man?"

Shan's face became drawn with regret and he inwardly reproached himself for what he had chosen to do. He had tried in his life to do the right thing. He had tried to foster peace, but the world seemed to resist his efforts as if they were contrary to Nature.

"As you know, my hand has never been used in violence. But such a trait

only makes me weak before Onja. I must learn the strength of a warrior, and I can no longer hide from this fact. Therefore, I request to fight with the Temu. I will fight, and I will kill,” Shan said.

A bit flustered by these words from his kindly friend, Taischek said, “Shan, do you even know how to use a sword?”

Shan smiled. “I have never bragged about that skill, but I do possess it. I will admit I have not picked up a weapon in three hundred years. Do you recall the great warrior king of the Nuram Tribe, Chendoaser?”

Begrudgingly, Taischek said that he did, although it was not his habit to consider the kings of other tribes as great warriors.

Shan continued, “Chendoaser and I were friends as we are, and he taught me the use of swords so that I might spar with him. Chendoaser reasoned that if he could match a rys, no man could best him. And I suppose he was right. The Nuram were never greater than when he was king, and Chendoaser never lost. He died old and at home. I assumed you would have heard the story, Taischek. Back then we made quite a spectacle of ourselves.”

Taischek shrugged. “Chendoaser was a great king, but only of a little tribe. The Temu do not concern themselves with old stories about the Nuram.”

“Well, the Nuram still talk about it,” Shan muttered. “But at any rate, I am sure my use of the sword will be quite satisfactory.”

“I look forward to seeing it,” Taischek said. “Until the meeting of the Confederation, let us enjoy the pleasure of a simple warpath against the Sabuto. Then we will tackle Jingtun.”

Much to Dreibrand’s distress, the King immediately called for wine to toast his agreement with Shan. Politely, Dreibrand sipped the wine. His stomach lurched when the wine hit it, but its protests dwindled as the alcohol eased his hangover. Sternly he ordered himself not to get caught up in another bout of drinking so soon after the last.

“King Taischek, may I be excused?” he asked, hoping it was not too rude. “I would like to see Miranda and inform her I go to war in two days.”

“Have to tell your woman you are going to war, eh?” Taischek slapped Xander on the shoulder and joked, “You know what that means.”

Xander made no comment.

Guessing Dreibrand wanted to dodge the drinking, which would probably continue for most of the day, Shan supported his friend's request. "Let him go, Taischek," he said with a kindly glance toward Dreibrand.

Taischek waved one hand while his other hand lifted his wine cup. Smacking his lips, the King said, "Do as you please for the next two days, Dreibrand Veta. Those Sabuto bastards will occupy you soon enough."

"Thank you, King Taischek," Dreibrand said.

When he bowed his way out of the tent, he was pleased that his head did not start spinning. Outside the rain had increased, and he hurried into the village. He did not know where the guesthouse was, but he assumed a building fit to house the Temu Queen would not be too difficult to spot.

He found a large timber building, painted red and gold, with guards outside. A warrior stepped forward, barring Dreibrand from standing on the sheltered steps to the door, and the rain tumbled from the eaves onto his head. Dreibrand was informed that access to Queen Vua's residence was not easy, and the King's personal permission was required.

Frustrated and soaked by the rain, Dreibrand stared at the unobliging warrior and did not appreciate the inconvenience. He was about to slosh back to Taischek's tent and let the King enjoy his little joke, when a Temu woman stuck her head out a window and contradicted the warrior with an abrupt tone.

"Aren't you special," the warrior grumbled but stepped aside.

A little smugly Dreibrand smiled to the surly Temu and passed inside out of the wet. A servant girl handed him a towel to dry his hair and promptly conveyed him to the great room. Three sets of doors opened from the great room to an inner courtyard where the summer rain pattered. Women filled the room, seated at looms, spinning wheels or over embroidery hoops, but no needles pierced fabric and the clacking of looms had stopped. All of the women stared at him and exchanged hushed comments and a few giggles. Dreibrand felt thoroughly appreciated.

He scanned the room for Miranda, but she was not there. He did see Queen Vua surrounded by her co-wives and daughters, and he bowed to the Queen.

"Thank you for admitting me, Queen of the Temu, and please forgive

my intrusion. I wish only to see how Miranda fares. She left the party early.”

“And you stayed late,” Vua stated sarcastically.

“I could not refuse Temu hospitality,” he explained and added a charming smile.

“No. Of course not,” Vua agreed. “Now Dreibrand Veta, I would not normally allow a strange man into my home, but Miranda has asked for you all day. So I indulge my guest...and maybe myself because you are an especially strange man. Still, do not make a habit of coming to my door. It is not the Temu way.”

He nodded respectfully and tried not to glance at all of the women staring at him. “Yes, Queen Vua. I meant no insult, and I thank you for your patience.”

Vua studied him a moment longer. He believed she wanted to ask him many questions and talk with him as the King had, but she refrained.

“The King has told me of your arrangement, and I am pleased to have Miranda in my household while she recuperates,” Vua said. “As the Queen of the Temu, I assure you of her comfort and safety.”

Dreibrand bowed deeply. He was truly grateful to the Queen, and he was glad Miranda would be cared for. He thanked the Queen again.

“Show him upstairs,” Vua ordered the servant.

Dismissed, Dreibrand followed his guide onto the second level, where he was shown into a small room. Miranda slept peacefully on a bed in the warm light of an oil lamp. Her freshly bound arm lay across her bosom, and Dreibrand sat on the edge of the bed as the servant closed the door.

Her eyes opened promptly. “I heard you come in,” she whispered.

He leaned over and kissed her passionately. When his lips were slightly satisfied, he said, “I hated not being able to sit with you. To talk with you.”

“I disliked it too, but they are nice people,” she said.

“Nice to you,” he joked, fingering the lump on his head.

Miranda scolded playfully, “King Taishek told me you asked for that.”

“He talked to you this morning,” Dreibrand said uncomfortably.

“Oh, he did. Dreibrand, he is a real king. I can just tell. I don’t know

how, but I can just tell. He has this way about him. Like no one can tell him what to do,” Miranda commented with excitement.

“No one can,” Dreibrand noted, but his worries pressed on his mind. “Miranda, did you tell him about—about how I left the military?”

After shaking her head, she said, “Did you tell him I was a slave?”

“No, no, I told him nothing,” Dreibrand assured her. “I don’t know that much to tell.”

Looking away, Miranda said, “What I have told you is enough. The rest is not pleasant.”

He took her hand. “Thanks for keeping my secret. No one must know that I left the military so inappropriately. It is very important.”

“And no one must know that I was a slave,” Miranda added.

They embraced, pleased that they had automatically known what the other did not want revealed.

“What did you tell him?” Dreibrand asked.

Miranda shrugged and explained that she had recollected for the King events pretty much as they had happened. Miranda paused thoughtfully before she added, “Shan was with him, so he knows the same, but do you suppose Shan can tell if someone does not say everything?”

“Maybe,” Dreibrand replied, wrinkling his brow, but then he changed the subject. “How do you feel?” he inquired.

“Better. Their medicine woman put a fresh cast on my arm, but she said I needed more rest,” Miranda reported.

“And you will have it. I have arranged your lodging with King Taischek. I will go fight for him while you recover,” Dreibrand said.

Miranda sat up quickly. “Go fight? Where?” she demanded.

“The Temu are raiding a tribe called the Sabuto. I will only be gone two or three weeks, I think,” Dreibrand explained.

“You’re leaving!” she cried.

“Miranda, I am trying to take care of us. I need to make money. And Shan is going, and I need to stay with him. He is our chance to get your children back and I said I would serve him,” Dreibrand said, perplexed by her attitude.

“You will not come back,” she moaned and pushed him away. Miranda struggled with her depression. Dreibrand’s companionship helped her tolerate the absence of her children, and the news of his departure filled her with fearful desolation. The attachment she felt for him suddenly seemed a wasted emotion.

Pausing to see things her way, Dreibrand soothed her. “I am sorry. I know you must be scared to be alone with these strange people. It is hard for me too. But I promise to come back. There is no other way. I have to do this. I need to earn our way, and I need Taischek’s favor. I know what I am doing. I will come back with a share of plunder and I will give it to you.”

Miranda studied his sincere face, still amazed that he cared for her. As always his generosity moved her, but she felt troubled.

“Dreibrand, you talk like it is right to kill people and steal from them.”

Her words sounded strange to his Atrophaney educated mind, and his mouth hung open without a reply. Dreibrand contemplated her statement, knowing that he had not led the most virtuous life. Even if his family was censured, he had grown up in a privileged class and it was a ruthless world that had bred him.

He tried to explain himself. “Miranda, is it right that your father sold you into slavery? Is it right that a beautiful woman like you wore rags? A few more years in the fields and you would have started to turn into a wizened peasant that nobody would notice. You say that you will not be a slave again. Well, this is what it takes. There are rewards in this life for those who are stronger than others.” Seeing the weakness of his argument, he finally admitted, “Maybe it is not right, like you say, but it is what I must do. I believe a lot of people will die before Shan is King in Jington. Would you kill to get your children back?”

“That is different,” Miranda protested.

Emphatically, Dreibrand shook his head. “No! Killing is killing. Just think of my joining the war with the Temu as part of our greater goal. By serving Taischek I can gain a home for us. When the children are back with us, we will need a home, right? I admit that not all things I do are good, but I will always do good by you. That I can promise.”

He took her hand and she no longer pushed him away.

“You are right,” she conceded with forced pragmatism. “I should not

have judged you. Now tell me what you and Shan plotted in your meeting with the King.”

Dreibrand related the few plans that had been settled. Shan’s confident declaration to defeat the Queen gave Miranda hope.

She considered what she had heard and said, “You must promise to come get me before you go to the Confederate gathering. This war is as much mine as anyone else’s, and I will not be kept separate from it. I have told Shan I wish to play a part in his plans, and he has accepted me.”

Dreibrand suggested, “When the time comes, we will see how your arm is.”

“My arm should be out of the splint before a month has passed. The medicine woman said so. I will be ready and fit to ride to this meeting where Shan will seek allies.” Miranda would not be deterred.

“And what of your headaches that you try so hard to hide from me?” he persisted.

“I get a little better every day,” she defended. “I will not let you ride off and forget me. I intend to go.”

“I would not forget you,” Dreibrand relented with a smile. “If I can, I will come get you.”

“You must promise,” she insisted.

“I promise. I will want to see you anyway,” he said and kissed her again.

She lingered in his embrace, but wondered if it would infringe on Queen Vua’s hospitality to let herself get carried away with her man.

“Where are you staying?” she asked breathlessly, pulling away from him.

“Can I stay here?” Dreibrand asked, not terribly concerned about it at that moment.

Miranda laughed, realizing he probably had not been issued any guest quarters yet. “That’s right. You slept outside,” she teased. “Well, I do not think you can stay here. I will ask Queen Vua to get you a place to stay.”

“She seems to like you,” Dreibrand commented.

Miranda tilted her head thoughtfully. “She is probably just being polite.”

“No. I think she likes you. And you should make sure she likes you. That would be a good thing,” Dreibrand suggested.

It was still a little hard for Miranda to believe that she associated with kings and queens, but she would try to do as he said. Miranda liked Vua and she did need a friend.

“I leave in two days,” Dreibrand said.

Her face fell with disappointment. She did not want to accept that he would really leave her.

Dreibrand coiled his strong arms around her body. “Let us enjoy these two days as much as we can,” he proposed hungrily, and she was distracted by his passion.

21~ The Tatatook Bears a Gift ~

With the blessings of midsummer upon the land, I will make an expedition into the Wilderness. I have no information regarding any sort of population in the far west of Ektren, but the local people speak of the place with superstition. I attribute their fear to their ignorance and lack of initiative. By all appearances the Wilderness should offer many resources to the Empire and fertile land for expansion—Lord General Kwan Chenomet, Hordemaster, excerpt from dispatch to Darmar Zemthute II, year 779 Atrophane calendar.

“Must you go?” Elendra asked.

Queen Onja set the girl down on a couch and explained, “A Queen has many responsibilities, and I cannot give you all of my time, my sweet little dear. Until I come back, you keep your little brother company and behave yourself with Zanah.”

Elendra obediently nodded as her rys nanny approached.

Onja donned a floor length cloak that swished faintly when she turned away. On her way to the door, the Queen paused by Esseldan who played on the thick carpet. She squatted and put a hand on his plump cheek. The boy stopped rolling around when she touched him and stared at the Queen with wide eyes. He had come to accept the strange blue faces that had abruptly replaced his mother’s face, but he had spent many days wailing his disapproval.

“It is good to be friends now, Esseldan,” Onja said.

The boy's expression remained neutral, but he intrigued Onja for a moment before she hurried out the door. The Queen went to her dock on Lake Nin, where Hefshul, mute as ever, waited patiently in a skiff.

Onja boarded the skiff and Hefshul pushed off. Oars dipping into tranquil waters sent ripples across the surface. Onja watched the tower slowly get closer. The Tomb of Dacian was the only structure in Jington older than herself and equally resistant to ruin.

With his usual efficiency, Hefshul grounded the boat in front of the tower. He would wait for Queen Onja in the boat no matter how long she spent in the tower. Sometimes she would stay day and night.

Onja levitated out of the skiff and her skirts hung just over the cold water. She walked up the smooth cobbled path to the great doors of the tower.

Once known as the Jington Tower, the Tomb of Dacian was wholly mysterious to all inhabitants of Jington. Onja wrapped the tower in powerful and confusing wardings that she knew had never been properly penetrated by even the most determined rys minds. The tower housed all of Onja's secrets in its safe chambers oblivious to time.

Onja entered the Tomb of Dacian. The glowing crystals in the walls cast her shadow along both sides of the hallway. Flanked by her dark silent attendants, she walked into the throne room. Opposite the entrance rose the dusty bulks of two thrones, where Jington's King had sat by his Queen in the last age. Onja passed between the golden chairs and entered a dark alcove in the stone wall. Marvelous tapestries had once covered this special spot, but Onja had transported the tapestries to the new Keep, where they had long since disintegrated.

Energy flowed along the spine of the Rysamand, originating deep inside the world, where the incredible mountains had been conceived. This energy rose through the very fabric of the land toward the heavens, and the masters of antiquity had designed the entire tower to focus a line of the potent force. The alcove Onja entered connected with a shaft that rose through every level, and it was here that the energy had been focused. Almost any rys could link with the harnessed energy and levitate quickly to upper levels, but the privilege had been reserved for royalty and ranking guests. Any others could use the many many stairs.

Grasping the line of energy was a trivial skill to Onja, but she loved the

sensation of flying upward. She passed the lower levels that had once housed guests and bureaucrats and servants. Above these levels were the chambers where Onja and Dacian had once lived. Gliding to a soft stop, Onja hovered over the shaft briefly than stepped onto the top level, known as the observatory. Daylight poured through many skylights, and the bright observatory contrasted with the many dark levels below.

The center of the observatory opened to the throne room below, and a beautifully carved stone wall guarded the precipice. The relief carvings on the stone depicted rys among their beloved mountains and forests. Near the levitation portal sat a crystal sarcophagus where Dacian had been interred for twenty-two centuries.

Onja approached his resting place and put her slender hands on the edge of the sarcophagus. Inside the crystal, Dacian's eyes were open as if forever contemplating his cruel destruction of his cousins in Nufal.

Onja had come to this refuge to meditate. Initially in her pride she had disregarded Shan's recent threat to overthrow her, but his words had lingered stubbornly in her mind. And his conduct with the Rysmavda Nebeck in Fata Nor four days ago had not escaped her attention. Shan had publicly dared her to strike him with her magic and she had to respond. Onja knew her killing magic could not reach him in the foothills, but she could still watch him. She had not expected him to reveal her waning power to the humans, and she regretted not attacking him while he was still in the Rysamand. His protests had to be stopped before the rysmavda could no longer enforce the faith.

Looking now upon Jington's fallen King, Onja admitted that Shan was perhaps the equal of Dacian. She had always known Shan was powerful. When she had held Shan as a tiny rysling, new to the world, she had known he was extraordinary, a rys of rare quality that only came along once in an age. And Onja had known that he would have to be controlled.

Onja had tried ensnaring Shan to her will as she had Dacian, but even in his youth Shan had been difficult to dominate. He was not her contemporary as Dacian had been, and the gulf of time that separated her from Shan had made it difficult to cultivate his trust. Since winning their battle when Shan had turned one hundred, Onja had been able to intimidate him at least, but now Shan had matured and his strength made him more dangerous to her than ever.

I should have killed him, and damn your law, Onja thought.

Aloud she said, “Dacian, let us survey our realm and find the pretentious Shan.”

Swiftly Onja’s awareness radiated westward through the mountain pass, flying down the slopes to the lowlands where the human tribes dwelled. Her mind easily spotted Shan. The ryls rode at the front of a column of warriors, and Onja recognized King Taischek by Shan’s side. Briefly she wondered why Shan valued human friendship so much. To Onja, humans were useful resources, but little else.

That skinflint Taischek will regret the company he keeps, Onja thought.

The Temu force moved in the opposite direction from Jington, making Onja surmise that Taischek currently pursued one of his petty rivalries. This created no concern for the Queen, but she longed to pick Taischek’s mind and know what Shan had been saying to him. However, the proximity of Shan and his warding crystals blocked Onja’s probing awareness. Mindreading through a warding at this distance would take considerably more effort.

She saw Shan look upward with a suspicious expression on his blue face, and Onja withdrew her mind, trying to elude his alerted perception. While retreating she noticed the light haired easterner among the warriors and quickly tried to probe his mind. But a warding crystal protected him as well, which displeased her. It would require much patience on her part to catch Shan conversing with his friends about his intentions, so she could listen. She preferred reading the minds of her enemies at her convenience.

Thwarted from gaining any useful knowledge, Onja ended her observations with disgust. Blue light faded from her eyes and her awareness returned to her body, which was now leaning on Dacian’s sarcophagus. Even without reading any minds, she had learned enough from Rysmavda Nebeck to know Shan meant war. Although it stung her pride, Onja decided to strike first. She had supreme confidence in her powers, of course, but avoiding a dangerous confrontation with Shan would be the prudent alternative.

Even if Shan survives to reach Jington, being hunted will wear on his mind, she thought. She would send instructions to her human servants to

begin dealing with him.

“*Nufal.*” The thin thought of Dacian’s voice surfaced in Onja’s mind.

Blue light pulsed through the crystal sarcophagus and startled her. It had been a long time since he had tried to communicate.

With disinterest she started to disconnect her mind. She did not want to hear his regret about destroying Nufal again.

“*Look!*” His plea had a surprising note of command in it that convinced her to pay attention.

Onja settled into another meditation and followed Dacian’s mind into the Wilderness. She passed over the desolate Quinsanomar where thousands of imprisoned spirits stirred beneath the mind of their heartless mistress, expecting to be released on some vicious errand. But Onja ignored them and continued east. The prairie rolled onward toward the Tabren Mountains, where the chatter of a beautiful civilization had been replaced by the lonely moan of wind through crumbled buildings.

Arriving at a disintegrated Nufalese town upon the prairie, Onja understood Dacian’s insistence that she inspect her eastern domain. More humans had entered the Wilderness, and this time it was a large force of soldiers.

Onja inspected them freely without fear of detection. The eastern world was a wasteland of humanity that had no grasp of magic, and these soldiers clearly came from an eastern kingdom. She saw that they were richly accoutered with fine weapons and armor and good horses. Onja admired the military force and recognized that it was the product of an advanced and flourishing civilization.

The children of the east appear to be prospering. They have come far since I closed the Wilderness. Who would have guessed those enclaves of savages could make so much progress in two thousands years? Onja thought. *Perhaps the time has come for the east to know their Goddess.*

She watched the soldiers dismount and roam the ruins, puzzling at the city barely visible after centuries of decay. Onja quickly determined the leader among them by his splendid gear and the attention focused on him by the others. The leader’s white hair accentuated his tan and he stroked his goatee while pondering the surroundings. The winged creature holding two spears emblazoned upon his armor seized Onja’s attention.

How perfect, she thought pleasantly.

This time the Deamedron would not consume the intruders with mad slaughter. If she could dominate these well-armed men, it would begin her influence over the eastern peoples, whose servitude she had ignored too long.

Having seen enough, Onja returned her mind to Jington. The long distances she had covered had made her weary, but she had plans to set in motion. She rubbed her temple while organizing her thoughts. Rebellion on the horizon and a small army of foreigners in the Wilderness shocked Onja after so many changeless years, but she was the Queen of Jington and would adapt.

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The brow and eye socket of a skull peeked out of the turf and Lord Kwan squatted to examine it. The ground had almost consumed the weathered bone, and Kwan wondered what thoughts had been in the ancient mind.

Next, Kwan walked through the arched doorway of a crumbled building. Most of the roofing had long since collapsed, and he picked his way through the overgrown rubble. In the central area of the ruin he saw steps leading to a lower level, and he descended into the gloom. A little daylight filtered down into the buried chamber and revealed a depressing scene. Skeletons littered the entire chamber and the bones, connected by cobwebs and a deep layer of dust, extended beyond the light.

Staying on the steps, Kwan bent and saw the sad sight of a child's skeletal remains mixed with the bones of possibly a parent. He picked up the little skull, but it promptly disintegrated in his hand. Gingerly he examined a few more bones but he saw no conventional marks of violence.

He noticed the jewelry of the dead scattered beneath the blanket of dust. Within his reach, Kwan found a well cut diamond ring that sparkled gratefully once he wiped away the grime. He considered it very odd that the treasures had not been gleaned from the ruins. He pocketed the ring and brushed the morbid dust from his gloves before departing.

The sunny day greeted him, but it did not ease the troubles this ancient place of death brought him. Lieutenant Sandin approached and saluted the Lord General.

Sandin reported, "My Lord, there are skeletons among all of the ruins and scattered outside too. Most of the bones are crumbling and I would say this happened a very long time ago. Maybe even thousands of years. I suspect there are more remains that the soil has overgrown."

Kwan nodded. "I am sure you are right, Lieutenant. And it seems these people died all at once."

"What do you think happened, my Lord?" Sandin asked.

"I am thinking a plague...but I am not sure," Kwan replied.

"Plague," Sandin murmured with a shudder. Plague towns revolted him, even one from antiquity.

"We shall make camp outside the city," Kwan decided.

"Excellent, my Lord," Sandin acknowledged readily. "One more thing, the men are finding wonderful bits of treasure, but some are concerned that a curse protects this place. Why do you think the valuables have been left untouched?"

The Lord General swept his gaze over the empty land that looked peaceful and green except for the secretive ruins. Indeed the worries of his men had occurred to him, but, because he was a great conqueror, Kwan was an optimist and had faith in a simpler explanation.

"Perhaps no one else has ever been here," he suggested.

The loneliness of the Wilderness had also impressed Sandin and he nodded. "Truly then we are the first, my Lord."

"It would seem so," Kwan said but he frowned at the snowy barrier of mountains to the west beyond the rolling prairie. "Yet I do not feel alone."

Later that day, Kwan sat in front of his tent facing west. The expeditionary force of five hundred had camped a fair distance from the ruins near a small spring-fed lake. Kwan's squire, Jesse, roasted a pheasant, and Kwan let his thoughts wander while waiting for his supper. So far the historic expedition had been entirely uneventful until reaching the ruins that day. They had traveled north from Droxy along the nearest chain of mountains. Kwan planned next to head west and reach the higher mountains. Regarding the western peaks, which were greater than any he had ever seen, Kwan doubted he would travel their slopes this year, but he would have enough summer to go and look at them. Then next year he could come back and try to breach the barrier to the other side of the

world.

Although dreams of discovery thrilled him, Kwan also felt very far from Atrophane. The Horde road had always been his first love, and his times on his lovely estates were mere holidays between adventures, but suddenly his homeland tugged at his heart.

It is this desolate place. Nothing has prepared me for this emptiness, he thought. He admitted that the lack of human habitation made him uncomfortable. In all of his other travels, defending armies had come to face him, but the Wilderness confronted him with only countless empty elti and mysteries. His instincts warned him that danger lurked in the fragrant fertile land. The ancient holocaust within the ruins told him as much, and the more recent disappearances of Hydax and Gennor continued to bother him.

Now Kwan thought about Dreibrand. Privately he would consider that the young officer had deserted, but the notion sickened him. He knew many others thought Dreibrand had deserted, but he would not sanction that idea. To accept that truth created a rage Kwan did not want to feel. He missed Dreibrand and preferred to think that a Bosta had killed his errant lieutenant the night before the conquest of Droxy.

In retrospect, he wished he had chosen Dreibrand for the expedition if it would have meant that the intelligent young lieutenant would still be alive. Kwan had not expected Dreibrand to become so wildly upset about being left behind. Dreibrand should have considered the assignment to the chattel caravan a reward and a holiday after two years on the Horde road. But the ambitious son of the censured House had only wanted the Wilderness.

Kwan sighed and removed his thoughts from Dreibrand. The disappointment hurt too much.

You are getting old, Kwan, he thought.

The first chill of evening came across the land with a north breeze while Jesse served supper. Kwan savored the fresh pheasant and shared the bird with his good squire. Out in the Wilderness, Kwan had relaxed the formalities. There was no one to impress and everybody was completely loyal to him.

As he ate, Kwan watched the sun sink behind the mountains. Riding the last gleams of light from the west, Kwan saw a black speck in the sky.

Surprised to see a bird at such a distance, he doubted his eyes.

“Young man, do you see that?” he asked.

Jesse squinted carefully, hoping that the dusk fooled his eyes as well. Reluctantly he replied, “Aye, Lord General.”

“It must be large,” Kwan speculated.

In silent agreement the squire nodded. He faced his lord, who he trusted completely, and Kwan noticed the fear on his squire’s face, which was no doubt aggravated by the dismal discovery of the ruins.

“Shall I get Lieutenant Sandin, Lord?” Jesse offered.

“No. I will do it myself,” Kwan said dismissively.

Before the sun completely left their half of the world, Kwan determined that the flying object seemed to be coming toward him. Resting his hand on the hilt of his sword, Kwan walked over to Sandin’s fire. The lieutenant lounged half asleep but he started awake when he noticed that the Lord General had come over to him.

Kwan told him what he had seen, expressing his concern that they would soon have a visitor.

“I will assemble the archers. It is probably a large predator and we should shoot it from the sky,” Sandin decided.

Approvingly Kwan nodded but added, “Only shoot if and when it attacks. I suspect that it is a great beast spawned by those great mountains, but we should not anger it needlessly, and I would like the chance to observe it.”

News of a large flying beast spread quickly because several men spotted it. The sentries around the horses were tripled in case it attacked the horses, and the remaining men gathered near the archers. After the beast disappeared in the deepening gloom, the soldiers watched the night sky expectantly. A full moon ascended the sky and provided some illumination.

The beast announced its arrival with the distinctive scream of the Tatatook. The predatory shriek rattled the nerves of the normally fearsome soldiers, and the archers drew their bows anxiously. Lord Kwan commanded them to stand steady and not shoot in panic.

The large wings flapped loudly as the intelligent beast controlled its

landing in the midst of the soldiers. Men fell back cautiously to give it a wide berth. The taloned feet touched the ground, and it walked a little awkwardly like an eagle, but all who were near it clearly saw that it was much more than a colossal bird. The glistening black wings folded over a man-like torso and feathered arms ended in hands with talons.

The winged beast on Kwan's armor glittered in the torchlight and many immediately contemplated the similarity. The incarnation of the symbol of the Chenomet Clan was a potent sign, and some wondered aloud if it could be a divine messenger to the Lord General.

The Tatatook boldly stalked toward Kwan, who accepted that if the beast struck him down, it would be his fate. Only Kwan's orders restrained Sandin from commanding the archers to shoot. Bravely Kwan faced the beast. It turned its head after the fashion of birds and eyed him carefully. Queen Onja had been very specific about whom to deal with, and the Tatatook had no desire to make a mistake.

Satisfied that it had the right man, the Tatatook extended an arm. The talons opened to reveal a crystal orb glowing with blue light that twinkled on the sharp talons. The beast offered the orb and waited patiently for Kwan to realize that it was a gift. The Lord General experienced the unfamiliar sensation of fear, but he would never let his men see him hesitate. As he reached over the pointy talons, Kwan fully expected to feel them quickly slice into his wrist, but the beast did not move.

Grasping the orb, Kwan barely glanced at it because he would not take his eyes from the feathered intruder. With its assignment complete, the Tatatook abruptly unfolded its great wings. Soldiers scattered as it bounded for the open and leaped into the air. The Tatatook circled once overhead, and Kwan felt the wind created by the wings blast across his face. Then it flew higher, crossed the face of the moon, and disappeared into the night.

A hush remained over the Atrophane soldiers, and Sandin was the first to emerge from the shock. He ordered the archers to maintain a doubled watch in case it returned. Personally he doubted that the bird had been sent from some Atrophaney deity, as some had whispered, and he mistrusted the abomination.

Seeking instructions, Sandin returned his attention to Lord Kwan, but Kwan stared at the crystal orb in his hands and did not speak. The

magical light intensified from the crystal, glowing upon Kwan's face and transfixing his eyes.

"Lord General?" Sandin said twice without response.

Kwan gazed into the blue light, oblivious to his surroundings.

Unable to tolerate this, Sandin grabbed the orb from his commander's hand and hissed, "What is this evil charm?"

When Sandin's gloved fist closed around the orb, Kwan blinked hard and turned angry eyes upon his lieutenant.

"What kind of behavior is that, Sandin?" Kwan demanded harshly.

"It had you in a daze," Sandin hastily explained. "Forgive me, my Lord."

"Yes, yes," Kwan agreed impatiently. "But I must have it. She is trying to communicate with me. I could hear her in my mind. I could almost see her."

"My Lord, what are you talking about?" Sandin cried.

"Give it back," Kwan ordered firmly, and Sandin reluctantly complied.

"My Lord..." Sandin tried to argue but the Lord General ignored him.

Kwan retreated to his tent with the crystal orb. Too overwhelmed by his commander's bizarre behavior to react, Sandin watched him go.

22~ A Rys Rides to Battle ~

Dreibrand enjoyed the familiar sensation of riding within an armed force. About two hundred warriors, bristling with weapons, followed the Temu King. Many wore a wonderfully supple chainmail beneath their vests and cloaks, and Dreibrand was fascinated by the lightweight armor.

As he rode, Dreibrand often reminded himself that this experience would be different from the battles he was used to fighting. He was not a commander and the Horde did not surround him with organized units of infantry and cavalry. The Temu raiders would fight as individual warriors, and Dreibrand would not have a disciplined military machine to back him up. His abilities did not worry him though. He had engaged in hand-to-hand combat many times, and the fact that he was alive proved that he was capable.

Mentally, Dreibrand tried to focus on the conflict ahead, but thoughts of Miranda distracted him. When he had gone to war before, he had not

cared about who or what he left behind. His adventures had been free of emotional ties, and he had lived in the moment with no concerns beyond his own.

Now things were different. His thoughts were behind him with Miranda instead of ahead where the danger waited. He had not expected leaving her in Fata Nor to upset him so much, but it added to his motivation to survive. Living to see Miranda again would be as sweet as any victory.

Even as he had to accept his new feelings, he had to force them aside. Warm thoughts of love would not aid him in battle. He needed the calculating warrior that was so much a part of his being. He adjusted the shield strapped to his arm, thankful for the gift from the Temu that no doubt would soon prove its worth.

When the Temu camped at dusk, a warrior informed Dreibrand that by tomorrow night they would be in Sabuto territory and probably commence raiding the morning after that. Dreibrand noted his comrade's eagerness for Sabuto blood and gained faith from the warrior's willingness.

After volunteering for the unpopular late watch, Dreibrand sought out Shan who he had not spoken with all day. Dreibrand could have ridden up front with King Taischek and the rys, but he did not want the other Temu warriors to consider him a snobby stranger. He found Shan by Taischek's fire, but the rys did not look up to acknowledge him.

Taischek, who had already picked clean his dinner plate, commented, "He has been as silent as an angry wife all afternoon."

The King's witty observation finally prodded the sought after reaction from the rys. Shan lifted his black eyes and managed a smile. Taischek's often scolding sense of humor endeared him to the rys and prevented Shan from sinking too far into his troubled thoughts.

"You talk enough for both of us, Taischek," remarked Shan.

The King chuckled and motioned for Dreibrand to sit and take a plate of food. Pleasantly he said, "Dreibrand Veta will talk to me, eh? Leave the moody rys to himself. He probably is just thinking of more impossible favors to ask of me."

"They are not impossible," Shan assured him.

Dreibrand ate quietly and occasionally cast an inquisitive look in Shan's

direction. He suspected the nature of Shan's thoughts. Soon it would be time for the rys to become a warrior.

"Xander tells me there has been sign of a Sabuto hunting party in the area," Taischek told Dreibrand.

"Really? I thought we were not in Sabuto territory yet," Dreibrand said.

"This area is disputed," Taischek explained. "No one lives here and both tribes often harvest game here. Hopefully in a week or two the Sabuto will not dare slink so close to my domain." Taischek smiled secretively, enjoying the thought of the pain so close in the Sabuto's future.

He continued, "You keep a close eye tonight, young warrior. If any Sabuto cowards still lurk in the area, they might sneak into camp to murder the sleeping."

Dreibrand swore in Atrophaney and promised, "I will watch closely, King Taischek. A gutless murderer will get no mercy from me."

"I will join you on your watch," Shan announced.

This pleased Taischek. "I will sleep soundly with your great eyes watching."

Shan fingered the hilt of the sword that now hung from his hip. It was a beautiful weapon that the King had given him, and the slightly curving blade was sleek and graceful like the rys.

"Why don't you pull that out and show us what you know, Shan. After three hundred years you could probably use the practice," Taischek suggested. He was eager to see what Shan could do.

"I do not need to practice," Shan murmured.

Taischek grunted with disappointment.

"If I may be excused, King Taischek, I should go to my rest," Dreibrand said.

"A man so young needing rest?" Taischek scoffed, but he meant it only as a joke and he waved Dreibrand away.

"I will wake you when the late watch starts," Shan said.

That evening Dreibrand snatched little rest. He watched the stars come out while swatting at mosquitoes. The air had not cooled with the evening and a hot humid summer night put its wet hand on the land. He tossed

uncomfortably in the clinging heat and understood why the King's wives preferred the slightly higher climate in Fata Nor this time of year.

As soon as he managed a doze, it seemed Shan came to wake him. A full moon was high in the sky, and a haze of clouds reflected its glow, giving the night a lighted canopy. Dreibrand and Shan concealed themselves in a patch of saplings on the camp's southern edge. The warriors they relieved had nothing to report.

"Do you sense anyone out there?" Dreibrand whispered.

Shan answered, "Yes. Less than a hasa to the south. Perhaps they cannot decide to harass us or not."

"How many are there?" Dreibrand asked.

"Only half dozen. They might come at us yet. We shall see," Shan mused.

Dreibrand scanned between the patches of moonlit forest, straining to see farther. He was glad for Shan's company, knowing the rys would detect an intruder first.

"Dreibrand," Shan said hesitantly. "Onja watched us today."

After a brief glance at Shan's dark silhouette, Dreibrand returned his focus to the forest. "How bad is that?" he inquired.

Shan replied, "It is good and bad. It is good because Onja has become worried enough to check on my whereabouts. She accepts in her heart that I am a dangerous opponent, as she should."

"Then it is as you planned. You wanted her to be nervous. So, what is bad?" Dreibrand said.

"You are right. It is as I planned," Shan said evasively.

Dreibrand pressed the rys for his answer. He doubted Shan brought up the subject without wanting to talk about it.

Shan explained, "It is that today I saw that I cannot turn back. Onja sees that I want war with her, and she will give it to me. I must see this thing through, and I must shed blood."

"I know you do not want to do violence," Dreibrand said. "It is not too late for you to change your mind. All you have really done is insult a priest."

“But then I could never go home. I do not want to be banished from Jington and I cannot return in peace. First, I will take Onja’s kingdom and then I will take her throne. Therefore, I must proceed,” Shan declared.

Perhaps on this path I will do more good, he thought.

Privately, Dreibrand decided it was a shame that a being as kind and powerful as Shan should have to choose such a destructive path.

“You are just nervous, Shan,” Dreibrand soothed. “Every warrior has a first time.” Because Shan was so old and seemed so wise, Dreibrand felt strange offering Shan advice as if the rys were a frightened conscript.

“I suppose so,” Shan agreed. “And my time approaches. Two Sabuto are closing on our position.”

Dreibrand peered intently into the night, and every insect whine made his nerves more alert in the still forest. Shan leaned close and pointed to the positions of the approaching warriors.

“Come with me and take one,” Shan whispered.

“I can get both if you want to wait,” Dreibrand offered.

“No. I will do this.”

Dreibrand heard resolve in the rys’s voice, which lacked its musical quality at that moment.

Dreibrand’s heart quickened as he concentrated on every little sound, knowing he would eventually hear them as they passed through the forest litter. A thick bank of clouds consumed the moon, and Dreibrand heard the rustle of the Sabuto as they took advantage of the increased darkness to rush ahead. Two swords slipped out of their scabbards, and Shan and Dreibrand moved out to engage the Sabuto.

Following the point of his sword, Dreibrand trotted toward his enemy. In the dark he lost track of the dim form of his enemy, and his steps slowed. He did not want to stumble into him in the darkness.

Suddenly he smelled the body sweat of his quarry and froze. They had to be very near each other now, and the next one to so much as crackle a leaf would give himself away. The clouds thinned, and the moonlight gleamed on Dreibrand’s sword, revealing him instantly. Only the faint sound made by the Sabuto stepping forward allowed Dreibrand to know the direction of his enemy’s attack. He blocked high with his shield and stopped a blade

swinging straight for his neck. As part of the same motion, Dreibrand thrust with his sword, only to be blocked by a shield.

The shadowy figures struggled, and their battle was eerily silent except for a couple grunts of exertion. They exchanged a few blows before Dreibrand prevailed. His sword sank through the man's torso and stopped on a tree. The Sabuto exhaled his last breath while sliding down the sword to lean against the tree trunk. Dreibrand could barely see his face, but he knew the light of life had left the eyes.

Compared to the last two years, it had actually been quite a while since he had killed a man, and he felt the strange surge of supremacy mixed with the knowledge that he had ended a man's life. The man came from a family, perhaps had children, and probably would be missed, but Dreibrand could not allow himself remorse. The Sabuto warrior had come to kill him, and this fact of war would never change.

He eased the dead warrior to the ground, and stayed low while looking for the other warrior. He did not know how Shan fared and he could not call out to him.

Shan stalked his victim with pantherish ease. His perceptions allowed him to know the exact location of the Sabuto and even which way the warrior turned his head. Shan circled the warrior and approached him from his left side. The rys knew that the warrior did not see him.

He is at my mercy, Shan thought. He could incapacitate the Sabuto with a spell of sleepiness and kill him with ease, and Shan suddenly saw how with his magic he could simply strike the human dead in a variety of ways. But Shan was determined to do it with the sword. Only experiencing the danger of close combat could teach him courage.

Shan rushed the warrior, but did not kill him in his moment of surprise. The Sabuto attacked but his weapon could not match the speed of the rys. Shan had every advantage, especially in the night. His advanced senses let him feel every movement of the warrior as it happened, and he could react perfectly.

Finally, Shan accepted what he had chosen to do and struck the man down with effortless precision. The slender sword penetrated the man's heart, and he cried out once before he died. Shan pulled his sword back swiftly, as if expecting to keep the spurting blood off his weapon. He could feel the heat coming off the thick stream of blood. He could feel the body

of the man perish as it was suddenly unplugged from its life-giving force, but Shan was the most sensitive to the soul lurching from the body that had so abruptly evicted it.

Shan had always been especially sensitive to souls departing bodies. The soul of the Sabuto warrior recognized him as a rys, and Shan experienced the shock and confusion of the man, who had never expected a rys to be guarding the camp. Shan watched the soul rise, beckoned by the next world. When people died Shan saw much more than humans and most rys.

The energy of the soul dissipated and Shan was thankful that it did not linger. He looked at the body heaped on the forest floor. The bloody corpse proved Shan was a killer. Shan struggled against the self-loathing he suddenly felt. He told himself that the dead man was Taischek's enemy and he was justified in killing his friend's enemy. But the only thought that helped Shan at all was that he had taken his first real step toward being King of Jingtun.

Shan sensed Dreibrand cautiously approaching and the rys buried his feelings.

Dreibrand had heard the warrior cry out and moved toward the sound. Shan revealed himself to his friend with a flash of blue from his eyes. The magically lighted eyes startled Dreibrand, but he knew it had to be the rys.

Glancing at the body as he arrived, Dreibrand whispered, "Was it hard for you?"

"No," Shan answered with little emotion.

A man screamed at another point on the camp perimeter.

"I will investigate," Dreibrand instantly decided.

"There is no need. Another Sabuto died, and the others are leaving," Shan reported.

They returned to their hiding spot among the saplings. Although he wanted to, Dreibrand did not pry into Shan's thoughts.

After a while, Shan spoke in his usual friendly tone. "You can sleep if you want, Dreibrand. I can watch the whole camp."

"Thanks for the offer, but I am not sleepy. I had to fight a warrior too,

and my nerves are all on edge,” Dreibrand said.

No more incidents occurred in the night, but trouble came with the day. Winding south through the foothills, the Temu war party entered Sabuto territory and random sniper attacks started. One or two arrows would fly from a tree or thicket, but the harassing Sabuto warriors always fled after a few shots. Sometimes some Temu warriors flushed out and killed a sniper, but Taischek’s prudence would not allow the war party to disperse in pursuit of more Sabuto.

By noon, one Temu had been killed and another injured. Dreibrand’s armor saved him from becoming a casualty, but the arrow actually stuck in his chestplate. The accuracy of the shot made him perspire with agitation and the Temu closest to him called him lucky. Tossing the arrow to the ground, Dreibrand now shared the urgency of his Temu companions to reach a Sabuto settlement and have a direct battle.

The torment from the Sabuto increased all afternoon, but Taischek was not daunted and the Temu morale did not suffer. Arrows did not perturb Taischek, who like the bear accepted a few stings to get the honey.

Late in the day, the Temu topped a ridge and looked down into a cultivated valley. Sparkling in the slanting sun, a waterfall poured in from the eastern hills and a creek coursed through fields and orchards. A village smaller than Fata Nor, but similar in appearance, waited across the water.

The sniping ceased as the Temu regarded their target, and the Sabuto warriors probably retreated to defensive positions near the village. Dreibrand casually rode up beside Shan in order to hear the plans of the King and Xander and possibly give his opinion if he felt it necessary.

Xander proposed, “Sire, I say go now. We have about two hours light and we should not give them any more time to organize their defenses. If we wait, they will attack us in the dark.”

Although he loathed the Sabuto more than anything else, Taischek paused to consider his actions, not wishing to deploy his warriors incorrectly.

“You are right, General Xander,” Taischek decided.

Obviously pleased with his King’s agreement, Xander sang out the orders to attack in the lilting Temu language. The warriors cheered, and

horns blasted proudly as the Temu descended on the village. They charged the fording place of the creek and took on the bulk of the Sabuto defenders. Taischek knew if his war party could crush the resistance at the ford, the village would be easily routed.

With his spiked mace held high, King Taischek entered the stream followed by the splash of his many warriors. The sinister points on the end of his favorite weapon had torn apart the lives of many Sabuto, and the waiting Sabuto recognized the bloodlusty howl of the Temu King.

When the Temu were halfway across the water, Sabuto archers launched a rain of arrows. Warriors crouched under their shields and urged their steeds toward their enemies. Suffering few losses, the Temu achieved the far bank and exchanged blows with the Sabuto defenders. Mounted or on foot, Sabuto warriors pressed down the slope trying to force the Temu back into the water.

The Temu outnumbered the Sabuto warriors and quickly began to overwhelm them. Then the Sabuto faltered when Shan charged up the bank on his powerful white horse. Only in ancient stories did humans face rys in battle, and even the bravest Sabuto warrior felt his courage fail when Shan's sword swept near. The curved blade danced contemptuously between the weapons that opposed it, and the few who did not retreat fell dead.

Although Dreibrand did not inspire awe like the rys, he could see the curiosity in the eyes of the Sabuto, who were startled by his racial appearance. Blood sprayed from his busy sword as Starfield pranced among warriors. With well-practiced fury, Dreibrand defeated the Sabuto near him and saw that his comrades had been equally successful. Several Temu had swarmed into the trees to expel the archers, and the rest of the Sabuto fled to regroup in the village.

Taischek rallied his men for the final assault. Filled with vengeful pleasure, the King led the charge again, and this time blood crusted his mace and a grisly chunk of hair fluttered from one of the spikes. The battle swept into the village, and the remaining Sabuto warriors hurled themselves at their attackers, fighting with desperate tenacity. Weapons clashed urgently because the Temu were eager to have their task completed before the sun set. They fought from house to house, gradually cleansing the village of all inhabitants. Although Taischek maligned the Sabuto, they fought bravely, yielding their home only in death.

As the day expired, the Temu rampaged through the village and cut down the fleeing women and children and elderly. Only the swift escaped into the deepening dusk.

Dreibrand watched a Temu warrior ride down a Sabuto woman and strike her dead with his war club. Despite the sight of her broken dull-eyed face crashing into the dirt, her little children scrambled from the warrior's terrible path and escaped. The pointless killing of the woman appalled Dreibrand. He knew the Temu were not slavers and the woman of their enemy had no value to them, but he considered her murder unnecessary.

Remembering Miranda and her children hiding in the forest from the Atrophane Horde, Dreibrand suddenly understood Miranda's perspective on warfare. He turned Starfield back into the village, unwilling to watch the slaughter of those left defenseless by the day's battle. Miranda had been wise to ask him for weapons and knowledge of their use, and he was glad that he had obliged her.

Dismounting, Dreibrand wiped his sword clean and walked his lathered horse. Shan, who also had no interest in extreme persecution, rode up and greeted him.

"It was an easy battle," Shan remarked, dropping lightly to the ground.

"A small village and a small force," muttered Dreibrand, who was unimpressed with the victory.

"True enough," Shan agreed. "But the quicker this business is finished, the sooner we may attend to more important matters. I have learned what I needed from—from this place."

They led their horses to the stream, taking their time to let the horses cool. Bodies littered the stream, so Shan and Dreibrand went upstream where death did not taint the water. Dreibrand splashed the cold water on his face and drank deeply, thirsty after the exertion and stress of battle.

Somewhat refreshed but his thoughts still with Miranda, Dreibrand asked, "Do the Sabuto ever raid Fata Nor?"

Shan could imagine the reason behind the question and sought to dispel Dreibrand's worries. "Rarely. The Sabuto maintain a defensive posture for the most part. To the south and west of the Sabuto domain, there are no alliances or confederations, and the tribes war incessantly. Taischek is not the only enemy the Sabuto have to worry about. Taischek,

however, belongs to a confederation of five tribes, and there is peace in the north. Fata Nor is a safe place for Miranda to be.”

They returned to the village and the Temu had already set to work gutting the settlement. They loaded grain onto a stolen wagon and despite the night, warriors rounded up livestock and selected horses as personal prizes.

“You could pick one out,” Shan suggested.

Dreibrand shrugged. “Maybe the next village,” he mumbled.

In the village square Taischek sat on a recently tapped barrel of wine, puffing on his pipe. The King had suffered an arrow to his thigh and Xander was carefully cutting it free. Although the wound looked painful, the arrow had not angled in deeply.

Taischek winced as Xander probed the wound, and he took a long drag on his pipe. Exhaling, he smiled to Shan and said, “I picked up a little burr today.”

“The Sabuto must be practicing,” Shan joked, but he was concerned for his friend too. “Taischek, let me help you.”

The King waved away the rys before he made a fuss. “Xander can handle it. I’m fine.”

Seeing that the wound was not mortal, Shan did not argue and let the King show off his toughness.

“And what a fight from you today, Shan,” Taischek said. “I wanted to stop and watch you. What a sight! A rys at battle. Forgive me for suggesting that you need practice.”

“I still have much to learn,” Shan said modestly.

Turning to Dreibrand, Taischek complimented, “Good fight today from you too. Glad I brought you along.”

“Thank you for letting me be a part of your victory, King of the Temu,” Dreibrand said, inclining his head.

Taischek set down his pipe, and picked up his mug of wine. Making a bitter face, he drank the wine anyway and commented, “I’m glad I did not have to pay for this shitty Sabuto wine.”

“Where are we bound for next?” Shan asked.

Wiping his mouth, the King answered, “Oh, we will escort this plunder back to my border, then swing back southwest. I know another village like this one that will be easy pickings.”

“I have another idea if you would like to hear it,” Shan said.

Taischek groaned with little interest but nodded anyway.

Slyly Shan suggested, “I think King Taischek could do better than these trifling villages. We should sack Dursalene and score twice the wealth you will get from raiding all these puny farmers’ huts.”

“Dursalene!” scoffed Taischek. “Dursalene has a stockade. I have not assembled a sufficient force to attack Dursalene and I have no desire to get involved in a siege. No, Shan, I wish I could burn Dursalene to the ground, but I can’t attack a lion when I set out rabbit hunting.”

“But you have me,” Shan noted and pressed on with his plan. “The Sabuto will never expect such a small force to ride for Dursalene. You will have the element of surprise, and I will destroy their stockade so the Temu can ride into the town. We will raid them in a day, just like this place.”

Despite his initial protest, Taischek’s interest had definitely been aroused. “How much damage can you do?”

“I can breach the wall in at least two or three places. The stockade will not be a problem when I get done with it,” Shan explained.

Considering the proposal, Taischek realized Shan wanted to demonstrate his powers to the Temu. The sack of Dursalene would be a generous gift to Taischek, and it would definitely spread word of Shan’s abilities among other tribes and possibly rally more support to the rys’s cause. If Shan was really capable of performing the feat, Taischek decided it would be a win-win situation.

“Well then it is a good idea, Shan. We shall get this lot back to my territory and this arrow out of my leg and then ride for Dursalene,” Taischek agreed.

With a final tug Xander removed the arrow and held a cloth against the bleeding.

“Sire, it needs to be stitched,” the General informed.

“Yes, I know. So get it done and we can drink together to our victory, eh,” the King said.

23~ Into the Temple of the Goddess ~

Taxes do not make a religion and the power of life and death does not make a Goddess—Lin Fal the Prophet, year 1 of the New Faith.

After burning the unfortunate village, the Temu war party hurried their spoils out of Sabuto territory. The Temu dead were carried home to their tribe as well. On the border of his domain, Taischek announced to his warriors that they would attack Dursalene. The warriors applauded this choice because the rysmavda temple in Dursalene was wealthy and managed the Sabuto gold and gem mines.

Their enthusiasm for the ambitious undertaking increased when Taischek explained that Shan would use his magic to breach the stockade. Few people ever saw a rys work magic and the opportunity to see Shan's magic created curiosity and excitement.

Sending along a small squad of warriors with the spoils, Taischek turned his war party back into Sabuto territory. Dursalene was well within the Sabuto domain and the raiders kept away from any paths in order to conceal their movements.

After sneaking through rugged untraveled country for six days, Taischek estimated that they neared their goal. He had not been this deep into Sabuto territory since his youth, but he remembered well the land of his hated enemy. When Dursalene was only a few hasas beyond the next ridge, the sun was burning low and orange in the west and the King hid his force in the forest.

Taischek and Shan decided that Shan would lead some scouts on a reconnaissance and determine the best path for the war party to take out of the hills. Then the rys would stay ahead to cast his destructive spell on the city and send the scouts back to get the war party. Shan asked Dreibrand to accompany him, and Taischek assigned two warriors, Teso and Iley, to the team. If the scouting team did not bring back any discouraging news, the Temu would raid at dawn. Shan had confirmed that only a moderate force of warriors guarded the town. The Sabuto would be anticipating Taischek to be aiming at a smaller settlement nearer the border, as was his habit.

The war party settled into a camp without fires to rest while the scouts

slipped into the dusky woods. As an Atrophaney lieutenant it had not been Dreibrand's place to scout and the opportunity to prowl ahead and spy on the enemy excited him and burned away his weariness after days in the saddle.

Silently the three men and the rys slipped through the darkening trees to the top of the ridge. From there, they saw the lights of Dursalene and outlying farms. Hearths and lanterns sent their warm glow into the cooling night unaware of the enemy eyes watching from the hills.

Halfway between the scouts and the town, a campfire blazed on the hillside, blinking occasionally as men passed by it. Shan examined the area, feeling the land with his mind. The Sabuto camped on a table-like piece of land that jutted from the slope and served as a lookout post for the valley. Less than a dozen Sabuto manned the position, and their purpose was to monitor the road toward Dursalene instead of watch the uninhabited hills behind them.

Even so, they sat directly in the Temu's path.

"How many do you think are there?" Dreibrand asked.

"Eleven," Shan stated confidently. "I think those odds are tolerable for us."

"Can you kill them with your magic?" Teso asked eagerly.

Uncomfortably Shan considered the question. He could use his power to destroy flesh from a safe distance, but he was not sure if he was ready to take that step yet.

"I would prefer not," Shan replied.

Dreibrand suggested, "Let us creep closer and then judge the situation. Half of them might be asleep, and we can dispatch them simply. We are warriors. We should not give every task to Shan. He has the stockade to think about."

Although Teso obviously wanted to see a rys spell, he did not ask again. An old saying warned against wishing for a rys to use magic.

"I'd rather see their blood on my sword," Iley said darkly, in support of Dreibrand's idea.

With weapons out and stealthy steps, they moved down the slope. Nearing the camp, they heard boisterous Sabuto voices, ending

Dreibrand's theory that most of them would be sleeping. The noisy activity, however, cloaked the sounds of the approaching scouts, and they crept very close to the Sabuto camp.

In the clearing around the big fire, the Sabuto warriors engaged in a game of chance that wholly held their attention. The dice, varying in shape, were thrown across a blanket and then the results hotly debated before all participants agreed on the outcome. Gold and silver coins littered the blanket and clinked nervously in the players' hands.

"I think I shall join their game," Dreibrand whispered.

"What do you mean?" Shan asked.

Teso and Iley leaned in close as Dreibrand revealed his plan. With his allies taking their places, Dreibrand composed himself and slipped his sword into its scabbard. Quite casually he strolled into the ring of firelight and attracted no immediate attention. A particularly rare roll caused a burst of cheering and a couple disappointed groans.

"May I play?" Dreibrand inquired in the common tongue.

A lifted liquor bottle stopped short of a mouth and dribbled on a warrior's shirt, and one Sabuto choked on his pipe smoke. Several jumped before freezing to stare at the tall blond man. The fire reflected on Dreibrand's lighter skin, making the Sabuto think a ghost had drifted in from the woods. After their initial shock, a few warriors glanced around nervously but Dreibrand's friends hung back in the dark.

The Sabuto leader put his coins in a pocket and slipped out his dagger. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

Dreibrand came a few steps closer until the threatening suspicion in the eyes of the Sabuto stopped him. "A wanderer seeking Dursalene," he explained.

The curiosity aroused by his strange appearance and the fact that he appeared alone prevented the Sabuto from immediately pouncing on him.

"What tribe are you?" the leader asked, wondering if Dreibrand was some sort of weird-looking outcast.

Dreibrand shrugged. "No tribe. What is this game you play?" he asked, drawing their attention back to their gold and silver.

"What gold do you have?" inquired a practical but greedy Sabuto.

“Ah, no gold.” Dreibrand smiled and swiftly pulled out his impressive Atrophaney blade. “Only steel.”

The Sabuto now knew that he was trouble and everybody went for their various weapons. Shan jumped into the firelight, and the rys’s body was bathed in a fierce light that stained the camp in its blue glow. Shan’s sword arced like lightning and cut down two warriors before anyone could recover from the shock.

Dreibrand charged the group of Sabuto and easily killed three men before meeting any resistance. Now the Temu warriors leaped into the fray, striking their enemies with sword and war club, completing the confusion. Without even a chance to organize their thoughts, the Sabuto died. The last four fought their individual attackers, but they were intoxicated and petrified by Shan. The last Sabuto warrior saw that all of his fellows were slain and he fled. He scrambled on terrified feet, almost eluding the intruders, but Teso hurled his war club with lethal skill. The weapon twirled across the air, and the stone end shattered the Sabuto’s skull. His body crashed to the ground at the edge of the firelight.

Shan faded to his normal appearance, and the cold blue glow yielded to the warm light of the campfire and the cozy crackle of burning wood. One Sabuto groaned, and Iley quickly ended his wounded state. Teso hopped over a body and trotted to retrieve his war club.

“They didn’t know what to make of you,” Iley joked to Dreibrand, while bending down to scoop up some coins. Examining the gold, Iley added, “They are richer around Dursalene.”

Teso returned with his trusty war club and helped himself to some of the coins. “Come get your share, Dreibrand,” he invited. “Unless you wanted to gamble for it.”

“I will get mine in Dursalene,” Dreibrand said dismissively.

He noticed Shan stood on the edge of the jutting land and went to join him. The rys stared at Dursalene, only a couple hasas away now, and the torches twinkling on the catwalks of the stockade. Shan had his arms folded across his chest and the night breeze tugged at his streaked hair.

Without removing his intense gaze from the Sabuto town, Shan spoke. “You three go back and get the troops. This spot suits me, and I will stay here to cast my spell. Make sure Taishek is ready to strike with the first light of dawn. When you are in place, take out your warding crystal and I

will signal you. When it flares, I am ready. Ride for the town even if the stockade is still intact. I will blast their walls before you get there.”

Shan turned to his friend and no longer seemed withdrawn. In a casual tone he added, “And on your way, please drop my horse off so I can catch up to you. But do not disturb me at all.”

“Will you be safe here by yourself?” Dreibrand asked. As a matter of principle, he did not like leaving Shan alone in enemy territory.

“Go now, Dreibrand. No one will find me,” Shan insisted. “I need you to make sure Taischek charges on my signal.”

Accepting that he had much to do in the night, Dreibrand nodded and collected Teso and Iley to return to the camp. As the scouts hurried up the slope, Dreibrand looked over his shoulder. He faintly saw the outline of Shan’s form against the starry sky and wondered what forces the rys called upon.

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Taischek shifted in the saddle, his bones creaking with the leather, yet his blood pumped youthfully as he thought about his hated enemy. Sacking Dursalene was going to upset the Sabuto so much that Taischek almost wished he could stay behind to witness their prolonged distress.

General Xander and Dreibrand flanked the King as the war party waited on the edge of the woods near the town. They had only to gallop across a few pastures to reach Dursalene, which appeared to still be ignorant of their presence.

The night grew old and the dawn approached, and Dreibrand watched his warding crystal, waiting for the signal. Xander fidgeted on the other side of the King.

“This had better work,” the General growled impatiently.

“It will,” Taischek soothed his surly friend. “Shan would not lead me to ruin, especially while raiding the Sabuto. I am rather looking forward to seeing what he will do.”

“If he can really do anything,” Xander complained. “Has anyone ever seen him do anything like this?”

Dreibrand’s Atrophaney heritage surfaced. He had an aversion to this negative talk before a battle and retorted, “Yes! I have seen Shan’s magic.

He kept Miranda from freezing to death on the glacier from many hasas away. Shan challenges Onja, and you would doubt that he can break a wooden Sabuto fence?”

Sighing, Taischek calmed the warriors. “Settle down, young Dreibrand. No one doubts Shan. Xander just lacks patience and is quick to grumble.”

Xander snorted.

Day broke quickly once the sun passed the Rysamand but Shan had yet to signal. With the day brightening, the Temu knew they would soon be spotted so close to the settlement. Shan had to hurry.

Every bird chirp seemed like a squawk of alarm from Sabuto spies and the horses stomped, reflecting their riders’ nerves. Taischek monitored the crystal in Dreibrand’s hand and continually glanced at the foreign warrior for an explanation.

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” Xander hissed. “Sire, we must leave.”

Taischek’s heart sank. He really wanted to raid Dursalene, and he had really believed in Shan. He did not understand how the rys could have failed, but he could not waste his warriors on a raid that could not succeed.

“The time seems longer than it is,” Dreibrand offered. He had played a part in many great battles and victoriously stormed many eastern cities, so his nerve was slow to dissolve. He had battled on fields turned muddy with blood and the Sabuto town distressed him little.

Dreibrand’s confidence encouraged Taischek, who decided to wait longer and was soon rewarded with the desired signal. Dreibrand held the glowing orb aloft so some of the Temu could see the bright blue light and know the time had arrived. Excitement rippled through the warriors and raised weapons clattered in the morning air. Dreibrand tucked away the warding crystal, tightened his grip on Starfield’s reins, and drew his sword.

Smiling to Taischek, he said, “Shall we?”

The King bellowed a great war cry and started the charge. The Temu poured across the open fields toward Dursalene. The stockade remained intact, but Taischek’s faith in his rys friend was renewed. He now suspected that Shan only timed things so closely in order to show off.

At the hillside outpost littered with Sabuto bodies, Shan gasped as he

released his spell. He had mingled his thoughts with the very matter of the wooden stockade, and he felt the power surge through his body and soul as he deployed his magic. No clouds crossed the perfect morning sky, but a thunderous crack split the air and was heard throughout the valley. The gates of Dursalene flew apart in a thousand dangerous splinters, impaling the morning crew that approached to open the town anyway. Wide sections on the other three sides of the town exploded, leaving the town exposed and stunned.

The Temu horses faltered in terror mid charge because of the explosion, and the riders struggled to master their steeds. Once the horses returned to obedience, the Temu hollered joyously at the ruined stockade and resumed their charge.

The noisy disintegration of large sections of the stockade thoroughly distracted the residents from the approaching war party. A couple Sabuto watchmen, who had not been thrown from the shaken stockade, did notice Taischek's charging men, but their warning got lost in the confused terror. One jumped down from the catwalk and ran screaming for the town hall. No one comprehended his cries until Taischek jumped his horse over the shards of the gate, his cruel mace once again ready for business.

The Temu completely infiltrated Dursalene before the stunned residents could manage a defense. Many Sabuto had been jolted to the floor during the explosions, and they stayed there, covering their heads and thinking some awesome disaster struck them. Only the rumble of marauding riders brought the Sabuto out of their shock enough to realize a tangible foe descended on them. Warriors seized their weapons and burst into the streets to give battle to the Temu.

The explosions had shaken the bed of the captain of the Dursalene garrison, who was a notorious late sleeper, and he awoke to the shrieking of the two former maidens who shared his bed. More annoyed by the cacophony than frightened, the captain flopped out of his luxurious bedding, while bidding the girls to be quiet, and stormed to the balcony.

From the town hall he had a clear view of Dursalene's main gate, and squinting in the morning sun, he could not believe the gate no longer existed. He did not understand the scattered chunks of wood and the nearby dead men with bloody shards blasted through their bodies. Not until the captain saw Taischek gallop into the town followed by his warriors with tightly braided hair did he comprehend that the Temu were

attacking. What trickery had destroyed the gate, he could not guess, but it did not matter.

Flying from the balcony, he jumped into a pair of pants and scooped up his sword and shield. Downstairs, his men gaped out windows or hid under tables or ran around in confusion, but the appearance of their leader ended their disarray. Barking commands, the captain steeled the nerves of those unhinged by the explosions and guided his men out to confront the enemy.

With his warriors rampaging efficiently through the town, Taischek decided to pay a visit on the town hall. Accompanied by General Xander and his toughest warriors, the King charged the Sabuto rushing out of the building. Dreibrand also rode next to the King and plunged into the melee, his strong arm swinging his sword with unstoppable skill. The Sabuto defenders were at a serious disadvantage against the horsemen, but they were numerous.

A particularly gymnastic Sabuto, seeing the fearsome Temu King, launched himself from the top of the hall's steps and pulled Taischek from his horse. The Sabuto died for the glory of seizing his tribe's great enemy, but he did unhorse the King and Taischek found himself surrounded by Sabuto. Taischek's wicked mace forced a bloody path through the swarming Sabuto as he tried to regroup with his men.

The sudden vulnerability of Taischek did not escape the attention of the captain, who plunged through the battle to confront the Temu leader. Taischek killed a Sabuto who lunged at him, and then saw just in time the captain's blade slashing at his upper body. Taischek ducked behind his shield, and the impact of the sword sent unsettling vibrations through his body. Taischek shook off the blow, and the thrill of battle did not let him feel the strain. His mace arced for the Sabuto captain, who dodged the sweeping spikes. Yanking back his sword, the captain hooked his blade under one of the mace's curved points and jerked the weapon from the King's hand.

The loss of his mace at that moment doomed him. Although his loyal men fought fervently and would surely win the day, their victory would be a minute too late to save his old Temu hide.

The captain brought his sword down hard, splitting Taischek's shield, and the other Sabuto held back the frantic Temu. Taischek blocked the

excited flurry of blows from the captain with the remnant of his shield and hoped for an opportunity to grapple the man with his bare hands.

With a determined howl, the Dursalene captain knocked Taischek off his feet with a mighty blow. Taischek could not recover from the fall in time and he locked eyes with the captain, facing death with bravery. Taischek thought of his family and his people and accepted that his time with them was completed.

Lasted a lot longer than I should have, he thought.

But the Sabuto's sword never crossed his flesh. The head of the captain flew from his shoulders and as his body tumbled, Taischek saw Dreibrand looming over him with his bloody sword. Dreibrand extended a hand over the headless corpse and helped Taischek to his feet, and the gratitude was clear on the King's face.

"Dursalene is yours, King Taischek," Dreibrand announced. When his horse had been stumbling on bodies, he had jumped from the saddle to save the King.

The King completed his opinion of the young man. He definitely liked his foreign mercenary and would show him favor. Taischek sensed that the Temu were lucky to have access to the easterner's wit and skill, and he was glad that his enemies did not.

The Temu routed the defenders, and those who could not run away soon died. Taischek glowed in his possession of Dursalene. The Sabuto King would learn of this outrage by nightfall, and Taischek happily pictured the man's livid expression. Having border villages looted annoyed the Sabuto, but the rape of Dursalene would really set the Sabuto Tribe behind.

"Come Dreibrand, let us go inform the local rysmavda that they have not collected their tribute for Jingtun this year," Taischek suggested cheerfully, dismissing his recent flirtation with mortality.

At the temple, Temu warriors were already trying to break down the barricaded entrance. A team of four battered the doors with a marble bust of the Sabuto Prime Rysmavda, who dwelled in the capital city of Chanda. The local rysmavda had retreated into the sanctuary of their temple and they hurled threats from behind the high shuttered windows.

The barred door of the temple reluctantly began to split and the marble bust crushed the beautiful designs carved into the surface. The stern face

of the marble Prime Rysmavda suffered the indignity of battering his own temple. The sturdy door resisted as long as it could, but it had never been meant to resist such bold behavior from humans. The wood shattered and the warriors hurled the bust through the gaping entrance. The marble sculpture crashed on the floor, and the nose and an ear chipped off.

Taischek whacked the broken door out of his way with his spiked mace and strode into the temple with his gang of warriors. The senior rysmavda of the temple faced them in the antechamber.

“Begone blasphemer!” he cried. “Onja shall torment your soul forever for your crime.”

“Onja’s power is gone and she can’t help you,” Taischek shouted triumphantly.

The rysmavda cowered as the Temu King raised his terrible weapon and the bloody spikes ripped across his chest. Blood spurted across the shredded blue robe, and the rysmavda crumpled, screaming in pain. Another blow ended his life.

The Temu swarmed into the inner sanctum of the round temple and two rysmavda kneeled before a pedestal with a crystal orb on it. The orb was about half the size of the great orbs in Onja’s throne room, but it pulsed with the blue glow of rys magic.

Faith could not keep one of the rysmavda on his knees, and he sprang away from the pedestal as the Temu stormed toward him. The rysmavda who stayed on his knees died first, and the one who fled died second.

Pointing to Xander, Taischek told him to clear out the upper levels, and the General bounded up the wide staircase at the opposite side of the inner sanctum, followed by half the warriors.

“Kill them all!” Taischek ordered.

Dreibrand had rushed inside the temple with his sword ready, but there was nothing for him to do. The King had killed two of the three dead priests, and the intruders met no more resistance on the ground level. A few brief screams came from the upper level, but Xander and his crew were soon finished with the violence.

Dreibrand looked around the inner sanctum of the temple. White columns lined the circular wall, and between the columns, rich frescoes of brilliant color filled the spaces. Each fresco featured a portrait of Onja in

various settings. Sometimes she was the aloof Queen on her throne, in others she walked in lush meadows and seemed to beckon the bloom from the plants or she brushed her blue hands across the golden tops of ripening grain. In one pose, Onja stood over a mother and new infant, which immediately disturbed Dreibrand although he realized it was supposed to be appealing. In another portrait, only the starry night surrounded Onja, but no matter what the setting, she always bore the same beautifully indifferent face.

He counted twelve portraits and in the last space stood a statue instead of a painting. Carved from the blue stone of the Rysamand, her polished form was larger than life, and the glow from the orb on the pedestal reflected on the jewels set in her eyes.

“What do you think? Are you a believer yet?” Taischek said.

Dreibrand smiled. “No, King Taischek. But the art is quite good.”

Taischek laughed, seeming to find the comment particularly funny for his own reasons.

The crashing of furniture being tipped over came from the upper level and Xander soon came downstairs to report that the temple was completely clear.

“We have already found much in their quarters. These priests were squirreling away more than their share,” Xander said wryly.

“Typical,” grunted Taischek. “But we know where they keep the good stuff.”

A warrior extracted a set of keys from the corpse of the senior rysmavda near the entrance and gave them to Taischek. The King unlocked the door under the staircase, which led down to the temple vault. Many chests of treasure were stowed below the inner sanctum, and the Temu hurried to loot the vault.

“Take as much as you can carry. We’ll have no time for wagons. We have to be riding out of here before late day,” Taischek announced while breaking the lock on a chest with his heavy mace.

Dreibrand selected two bags of gold. One had coins and the other held raw nuggets, carefully pried from the bones of the mountains. He left the broken temple and deposited the gold in his saddlebags. He watered his horse, and after affectionately scratching Starfield’s neck, he wandered to

the gaping city wall to watch for Shan. Dreibrand was not worried about someone looting his unattended saddlebags because all of the warriors were brimming with gold and silver.

Dreibrand saw the last of the retreating Sabuto moving south into the woods. The gaps blasted on all sides of the town had been a sort of mercy to the citizens of Dursalene because they had provided avenues of escape. Otherwise, the raiders would no doubt still be killing people. The shrieks of terrified children faded into the countryside along with the occasional anguished cries from wounded Sabuto struggling in pain to get away.

Out of the eastern hills Shan emerged on his magnificent white horse, galloping across the pastures already trampled by the Temu charge. Dreibrand waved to him.

The rys gestured to the fleeing Sabuto when he reached Dreibrand. “They will not be gone long. The warriors will regroup and they will send for help that will not be long in coming. Taischek better not take his time,” Shan said.

“He’s not,” Dreibrand assured him.

“Let us go make sure,” Shan suggested knowingly.

“Shan, do you think the Sabuto saw you?” Dreibrand asked.

“Yes, and I wanted them to,” Shan replied. “The news of my power and defiance of Onja will quickly travel beyond the Sabuto domain. People everywhere will soon have to decide between Onja and me.”

Dreibrand nodded thoughtfully. *This could get to be a big war.*

They found Taischek still in the temple, alone except for a few warriors straggling in and out. Standing near the dead priest who had stayed on his knees, the King stared at the crystal orb and the blue glow looked sick on his face.

“You should not look at that thing so long,” Shan admonished as soon as he saw him.

“It’s true, Shan. She really can’t strike us down anymore. If she could, she would kill me right now. I have defiled and pillaged her temple of her tribute, and nothing has happened,” Taischek said.

“Well, you do not have to stand here waiting for her to try,” Shan complained. “Are you ready to go?”

“Let my men catch their wind,” Taischek soothed. He turned away from the orb and happily smacked Shan on the shoulder. “What are you worried about? They won’t come back so quick after what you just did. You almost scared me off.”

“I suppose you best get used to it,” Shan said, scanning the bloody bodies.

Taischek knew the consequences would be serious, but he stuck to his fanatical good humor. “The Prime Rysmavda in Dengar Nor will certainly be waiting for me with open arms.”

“Yet another reason you should hurry home,” Shan added.

24~ The Bounty ~

Heavy thoughts weighted the steps of Taf Ila as he made his way slowly to the throne room. Being Captain of the Jington Guard was usually an effortless assignment. He had responsibilities, of course, but except in the autumn when the humans brought their tribute, there was rarely anything of consequence to do—until this summer.

When the Tatatook had abruptly appeared bearing the human girl, Taf Ila had actually been sent east to collect the other humans. Never before had Onja allowed humans to approach Jington from the east, and, at the time, Taf Ila had worried that her unprecedented mercy signaled changing times.

Changing times?

The concept caused Taf Ila difficulty. Even by a rys’s reckoning things never changed in Jington, but the arrival of the easterners had quickly altered the timeless quality of daily life in Jington. The festering stalemate between Onja and Shan had finally collapsed, resulting in Shan’s expulsion from the bosom of the Rysamand. And the humans had been badly treated, except for the children. Although Taf Ila had not personally harmed Miranda, he still felt linked to her murder.

Taf Ila winced, upset that he had actually let such thoughts form. He should not consider Onja’s commands with criticism or guilt. The woman had defied the Queen’s will and suffered the consequences. That was all.

Nearing the throne room, Taf Ila concentrated on his duty. He did not

know why Onja had summoned him. The door wardens let him enter and the rich magical light of the throne room bathed him. No guards attended Onja, who waited on her dais. She always addressed her captain from her throne. The centuries could never diminish her love of lording over others. Respectfully Taf Ila bowed to her, holding his gaze down until she spoke.

“You lack punctuality today,” Onja observed.

To Taf Ila, this was a scathing criticism, but he mustered an apology. “Forgive me, my Queen. I have many concerns these days. You have made a busy rys of me.”

“I shall make a busier rys of you,” she responded.

He noticed a stack of parchment scrolls on a table near the dais.

“What do you will of me?” Taf Ila inquired humbly.

Onja wore a dark blue high-collared gown heavily embroidered with gold, and her haughty gaze held her loyal captain. When he looked upon his Queen, Taf Ila felt renewed reverence as the depth of her powers went beyond his senses. He believed a more regal sight than Queen Onja could not exist.

“I am expecting more visitors from the east,” Onja announced.

Surprise lifted Taf Ila’s features.

Onja continued, “You will ride out to meet them and escort them to Jington. It is a large force of five hundred soldiers, so take an appropriate number of rys with you. Your intention is not to make battle. Just display our strength and intimidate them mildly, if they need it. I have every confidence that you will perform this task well, Captain.”

It took Taf Ila a moment to absorb the information. More people in the east? An army! He needed more details.

Collecting his thoughts, he asked, “My Queen, have you put them under a spell?”

“Their leader is Kwan and I have contacted him. He is compelled to come to me. He will accept your invitation to escort him to Jington,” Onja explained.

Taf Ila relaxed now that he knew his Queen had the foreign leader under her influence. His errand would be somewhat difficult, but with a little care, he could manage it.

“My Queen, please forgive me, but I must ask. Why do you want to see these humans from the east? You have never wanted them before,” Taf Ila said.

Onja indulged her captain’s curiosity. “There are great realms in the east now. An empire of humans, if you can imagine such a thing. The eastern world has an impressive civilization, by human standards of course. Therefore, I would speak with this Kwan. Our contact will begin the expansion of my dominion to the far east. It is time the rest of Rystavalla accepted me as their Goddess.”

A rare and mysterious smile graced the Queen’s face as she considered the servitude of the east and pictured more proud humans submitting to her out of fear. Claiming a new land would make her feel young again. She had no particular purpose in mind for her future subjects, beyond enjoying them bowing to her supremacy.

Her plan stunned Taf Ila, who had never thought much about the east.

When he said nothing, Onja continued, “But this will take time. My first step is to meet this eastern general and perhaps find a use for his army. They approach the Rysamand as we speak, but you need not leave on your mission until morning. I have another task for you today.”

As if this was not enough? he thought with exasperation, then instantly regretted it.

Directing his attention to the table full of scrolls, Onja said, “You must arrange for these dispatches to be sent before you leave tomorrow.”

Taf Ila regarded the pile. He had handled dispatches countless times, but he had never seen so many. Some bore the blue seal for the rysmavda, others had the gold seal for delivery to kings, and one had the black seal.

“There must be two for every kingdom,” Taf Ila said.

“Note the special one for the Kezanada,” Onja instructed.

Taf Ila looked at the black seal and nodded.

Onja continued, “In the drawer is a copy I had made for you to read. You need to know about this situation. Read it now.”

Her voice trembled with anger on the last word, and Taf Ila now sensed that his Queen was upset. He obeyed instantly and removed the parchment from the drawer. The flowing script of the official Jington

scribe stated the Queen's decree in the common human language. Taf Ila considered the scribe's beautiful hand better suited to the rys language, but few humans could read that.

Onja expected that her captain would want to speak freely once he had read the scroll. With a lock of white hair sliding over her shoulder, she leaned forward like a curious cobra.

"Any questions, Captain?"

Taf Ila's black eyes fell to the marble floor as he considered discarding his concerns, but the issue was too important. He glanced at the parchment again, hoping the words would change.

Forcing his voice not to falter, he said, "My Queen, this bounty you offer the humans for Shan's head troubles me."

Onja's upper lip twitched with displeasure as she sat back against her solid and reassuring throne.

"Why does this trouble you?" she asked.

Onja obviously wanted him to talk to her about the dispatches, and he raised his gaze cautiously and answered, "By rewarding the humans for his death, it could be interpreted that you caused his death...thereby breaking Dacian's Last Law."

Onja kept her face neutral but she scowled inside. Dacian had really inconvenienced her with his last decree and she wished that she had shut him away only one day sooner.

"Does the Captain of the Guard presume to tell his Queen the law?" Onja snarled.

"No, no," he answered quickly. "But my Queen, is it really necessary to arrange his murder? Is not banishment from Jingtun enough?"

"He would kill me!" she hissed defensively. "Do you know what he has done just this morning?"

Taf Ila shook his head, but her accusation surprised him. It was true that Shan desired to be King, but no one took him seriously anymore. Shan was known for his generous heart and non-violent disposition, and Taf Ila did not want to believe his Queen's claim.

"This morning Shan led a Temu war party on the Sabuto town of Dursalene. He used his magic against the Sabuto, and the Temu looted my

temple! The flames have consumed it already!” Onja shouted in rage. “The noble Shan would throw away your precious rys law, and you accuse me of his crimes.”

Taf Ila gaped at her news. He could not imagine that the humans would be so bold, even with Shan’s encouragement.

He apologized, “I am sorry, my Queen. I was ignorant of the looting of a temple. But I meant only to inform you that this bounty would upset many citizens. Could you talk to Shan and make him see reason? I cannot imagine that he really wants to make war on you. No one wants to see a rys die. For over two thousand years we have lived in peace and unity, and it has been good. We must not lapse into the darkness that consumed our cousins in Nufal.”

Revealing her fury, Onja stormed down the dais and Taf Ila felt energy crackle around his body. He was a brave rys, but he wavered at the approach of his wrathful Queen, raising his hands and falling back a step. The parchment fluttered in his grasp as a puny barrier to her anger.

With blue light flaring in her obsidian eyes, Onja screamed, “Speak not to me of history. I was there. My magic ended the killing, and my magic will guard the rys forever.” She bent over the cringing Taf Ila and added, “Shan would bring back the dark days you and the others fear. He is no longer a citizen of Jingtun and does not deserve the protection of our law. His lust for my throne is unjustified, and his greed will get many rys killed if I do not stop him. So, do not whine to me, Captain, about Shan’s rights, because he does not have any! Tell that to the citizens of Jingtun when they complain about the bounty I offer the humans.”

Receding into a bitter calm, Onja said, “He knew his place among us, but he would not stay in it. Shan is a dangerous renegade, and I will deal with him. And if I choose to use my human servants, that is my concern. Your concern is this Kwan in the east and those dispatches.”

The blue light withdrew from Onja’s eyes. Turning from her captain, she decided not to punish him. She had wanted to hear his opinion. Taf Ila was a capable and loyal rys and she should not have treated him so badly.

“You have your assignment. Leave Shan to me. The interests of Jingtun are ever close to my heart. Dismissed,” she said.

With rattled nerves Taf Ila saluted somewhat ridiculously with the parchment then bowed to his Queen. He had always accepted Onja as the

supreme ryls, but today she had truly terrified him. For a moment he had thought she would strike him dead and the experience left him visibly shaken. Scooping up the scrolls, he left the throne room. He was so disturbed that he dumped the dispatches at his office and walked straight home to his fine stone house. A couple hours of meditation in the comforting surroundings of the house that had been his home for almost seven hundred years would soothe him.

Unbuttoning his suede jacket, Taf Ila strode through the entry hall and did not notice his daughter rush to meet him.

“Father! You are home early,” she cried happily.

Her voice startled him and he jumped back with uncharacteristic nervousness, but the sight of his daughter pleased him. He immediately reached out and hugged her close.

“Quylan.” He said her name as if it was a spell that would calm him. Stroking her glossy black hair, he gave her another squeeze.

“Something is wrong,” Quylan stated.

“I was upset, but I am better now,” Taf Ila said.

She looked at her father quizzically.

“I came home to have some tea,” he said tiredly.

“I am glad to have your company, Father,” Quylan said and tugged at his hand.

His lovely daughter renewed him and he followed Quylan, whose steps skipped lightly down the hall to the kitchen. Although Taf Ila and her mother had separated, their union had been blessed. He also had an older son, but his daughter was his joy. The largest heap of treasure in the Keep could not rival her in his heart.

Dropping heavily into a kitchen chair, he watched Quylan pour the tea. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows, filling the room with pure warmth. A blue aura flared briefly around Quylan when the sun hit her just right. Although still a rylsling, she had begun to show potential as a magic user—a lot of potential. Taf Ila was suddenly glad that she would have this strength to help her through life.

Quylan sipped her tea while her father did not touch his cup. Patiently she waited for him to explain his obvious distress, but he only stared

moodily at the kitchen table.

Finally she asked, "Father, what has happened?"

Sighing, he took a drink of tea and looked at her warmly. "Nothing to concern you, my treasure. You are still free of the problems of your elders and should enjoy the remainder of your ryslinghood," he replied.

Quylan ignored his paternal evasion and whispered, "Is there bad news about Shan?"

His expression turned instantly hard and Taf Ila demanded, "Why do you ask about him?"

He had never used such a harsh tone with her, and Quylan looked away with guilt. Softly she confessed, "I tried to find him the other day. I saw him with human warriors, but I could not see much else. It is hard to see beyond the Rysamand."

"Why would you do such a thing?" Taf Ila asked with horror.

Quylan defended herself in a bolder tone and looked straight at her father now. "No one has ever been banished from Jington before. I wanted to see what he was doing. I was worried."

"Do not worry yourself about him," Taf Ila ordered.

"There has been bad news about him," Quylan surmised again, hoping to coax the news from her father.

Taf Ila buried his face in his hands and regretted yelling at his sweet daughter. He had to gain control of his emotions. Many rys depended on him, most especially Quylan. Sitting up, he tried to rub the tension out of his temple. He did not want to share the terrible news with Quylan, but she would hear about it anyway.

In a soft voice, he said, "Shan has led an attack on a temple and it has been looted and burned. Queen Onja has issued a bounty to the humans for his head."

"What?" Quylan cried. "She cannot."

"The Queen can do this because it is necessary. Shan cannot defile temples. The Queen will not excuse his behavior. I have already discussed this with her, and asked her not to call for his death," Taf Ila explained quickly, reaching out to Quylan.

"No, no. They have quarreled before. Shan always comes back," Quylan

insisted.

Taf Ila set a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Not this time, Quylan. Shan has gone mad. He is banished and does not have the protection of law."

"Father, a rys cannot say that a rys must die. Just because Onja asks the humans to do it does not get around our sacred law," Quylan protested.

"And I told her so," Taf Ila soothed. "But Queen Onja made it very clear that other rys should not get between her and Shan."

"But you taught me yourself that Dacian's Last Law was more important than any other law. You cannot stand by while that law is ignored," Quylan argued.

"I must, and you must, Daughter," Taf Ila said firmly. "Rys have another law and that is a challenge for the throne is between the monarch and the challenger. Only in that way can the strongest truly prevail and lead us. Onja and Shan will never relent in this battle, and this can only end with one of their deaths. Leave the guilty to the guilty."

"Oh, it is so horrible," Quylan whimpered with tears now clinging to her lashes.

Her father hated to see her upset and wished Shan had never caused this evil conflict that marred the beautiful peace of Jington. Taf Ila vowed to do his best to protect Quylan from the coming turmoil that he felt building like a bad blizzard.

He said, "Now forget Shan. I doubt the humans could kill the likes of him. I have more important news that concerns us more directly. An army of humans is in the Wilderness, and I must leave tomorrow to meet them."

"An army in the Wilderness!" Quylan cried with dismay.

Still coping with the shock himself, Taf Ila continued, "I know it is hard to imagine, but Queen Onja wants to speak with these people from the east."

"An army. But Father, it will be so dangerous," Quylan worried.

"Onja has everything under control. They are only humans, and I need only to escort them to Jington. But I do not want you to go anywhere near these humans. And stay away from the Keep. I insist that you obey me in this," Taf Ila decided.

Quylan nodded absently, trying to imagine an army approaching Jingteng from any direction, let alone the east. The overwhelming news frightened her young mind. Suddenly the world had stopped following the rules she had been raised to believe it would always follow.

After finishing his tea, Taf Ila attempted to console his daughter. “Quylan, you are not of age yet and need not let the troubles of your elders bother you. As a rysling you have the privilege of ignoring these ugly days. Go to your friends’ parties in the forest and sing and dance. Let your soul soak up the glory of the Rysamand and enjoy the sweetness of youth. You will be old most of your life.”

“Yes, I will try,” Quylan sighed, actually wishing she could turn her mind from the disturbing events.

Trying to end on a lighter note, Taf Ila added, “But do not make promises to any young males. You are too young for that.”

Quylan indulged her father’s attempt to treat her like a rysling, and she giggled shyly. “Father, you talk like you were never eighty nine.”

“Well I certainly was once, and that is why I said that. A female should not have a mate until she is at least one hundred and fifty,” he said.

“At least!” she agreed jokingly, glad that his dark mood had improved.

Taf Ila rose and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “Thank you for the tea and the talk, Daughter. I shall meditate upstairs for a while, then I will be gone for a couple days.”

“Be careful Father,” she said sincerely.

“You would be surprised how well I manage,” he said.

After Taf Ila went upstairs, Quylan wandered into the backyard and sat on a bench next to the lakeshore. Some swans drifted silently over the water. Outwardly Jingteng seemed as beautiful and tranquil as ever, but Quylan could only think of the troubled future. Humans were in the Wilderness, and Onja and Shan would throw away the law to battle with each other. And she had never seen her father so disturbed.

He was frightened, she admitted. What did Onja say to him?

She raised her eyes from the lake and stared westward into the mountains—the direction Shan had taken in his exile. She wanted to look for him again, but her heart ached with illogical young love and she could

not focus.

Over the years, Quylan had accompanied her father to the Keep many times, and she had shyly watched Shan whenever she dared. Twice she had noticed Shan observing her and dreamed that he was interested. Two years ago Shan had come to Taf Ila's office when she had happened to be there, and Shan had smiled to her before her father shooed her out. She had wanted to say something to Shan, but the aura of his great power had kept her silent.

But it was his power that attracted her and now that Shan was banished, her dream of knowing him could never happen.

Quylan wiped a lonely tear from her cheek and scolded herself for breaking her own heart. Any male rys would gladly accept her devotion, and she wanted only the outcast.

I should take Father's advice, she concluded miserably.

25~ The Kezanada ~

Miranda awoke with the restlessness of returning health. In the two weeks since the Temu war party had left Fata Nor, she had slept excessively. Shan and Dreibrand had been right. She had needed the rest.

Miranda reflected that she had never slept so much in her life. There had always been toil and servitude to get her up early and keep her up late. And her children had always needed her attention.

Many times during her convalescence nightmares of Barlow had tossed her sleep. Even on the other side of the Wilderness, she feared him. As often as she dreamed of him, she dreamed of her children, but they reminded her of Barlow and started the nightmare again. Secretly she wished she could leave the children behind with Barlow and forget all the wretchedness he had inflicted upon her.

But these thoughts made her guilty. Elendra and Esseldan needed their mother and she would not forsake them. The freedom she now enjoyed would be ruined if she abandoned her duty to them.

Lying in bed and staring at the wood paneled walls of her room, she contemplated who she was. Free of her children and living in the household of a queen, Miranda did not really know herself.

She shrugged out of her bedding and propped herself up. Looking out the window, she saw that she had slept late and the day was cloudy. She usually stayed in her room late, enjoying the solitude. Queen Vua and the members of her household were extremely kind to her, but Miranda was not sure how to act around them. Her skills with the language were still limited, and only a small number of women knew the common language that Shan had taught her.

Miranda decided she would take her horse for a ride. Her body had recuperated enough to crave some physical activity, and Miranda wanted to get away from the town and have the freedom of the open countryside.

At first, Queen Vua disputed her idea, especially when Miranda said she wanted to be alone.

“Ladies do not ride alone,” Vua admonished softly.

“But my horse needs exercise,” Miranda said.

“I am sure your horse has not been neglected,” Vua said. “And your arm is still in a cast. You should not go riding.”

“But I rode here worse than I am now, Queen Vua,” Miranda pointed out. “And I feel much better. Getting out would be good for me.”

Vua sighed, thinking perhaps her guest had been in too much, especially in the summer. “Very well, Miranda. But my daughter Sephina and her sister Lana will go with you, as well as two warriors.”

Miranda did not really want so much company, but she accepted the decision of Vua and thanked her hostess.

The Princesses Sephina and Lana were excited to go, and they were genuinely pleased to see Miranda feeling stronger. Despite the clouds, no rain fell, and the women raced each other across the fields and pastures before galloping into the woods. The two warriors stayed close and joined in the fun. They were young warriors who had not been included in the King’s war party, and they shared playful glances with the princesses that would not have normally been allowed. The princesses and warriors joked with each other, enjoying the informal outing, and the warriors were pleased with their duty.

Miranda rode ahead of them, enjoying the wind in her hair, which felt as good as two weeks bed rest. Reaching the top of a hill, she halted her chocolate brown mare and patted Freedom’s sweaty shoulder. The mare

snorted, feeling good from the run.

“You needed to get out too,” Miranda commented.

Ahead of her was the nearby bulk of the Rysamand, rising to its supreme heights over the Temu domain. The gray clouds passed swiftly overhead, rushing into the mountainous barrier, bringing the rumor of winter. Pain clenched Miranda between her heart and her stomach as she looked upon the peaks. She had never seen winter in the mountains, but the Temu had explained to her that the pass would be impossibly clogged with snow in two months. The winter would cut her off from Elendra and Esseldan with the same effectiveness as Onja’s magic.

Miranda fought back the tears that constricted her throat. She had spent enough time laying in bed and crying, and she did not want her grief anymore. Staring hopelessly at the Rysamand, she tried to think of a way she could get back to Jingtun and reclaim her children, but she had no more chance of success than the day Onja took them.

Bitterly, Miranda looked down at her right arm. The bone was thankfully mending, but the cast reminded her that she had almost died in the icy reaches of the Rysamand. She needed Shan if she was going to return to Jingtun just as she had needed him to save her life. Returning her green-eyed gaze to the mountains, Miranda wished desperately that Shan was with her and that they could go to Jingtun right now. She worried that winter would come before the rys went to claim the throne.

When will Shan get back? Dreibrand said they would only be gone for a couple weeks, Miranda fretted. Her thoughts then turned to Dreibrand and she hoped he had not been hurt.

Princess Sephina cantered up and disturbed Miranda’s horrible thoughts.

“Mother told me not to let you slip away by yourself,” Sephina said. As one of Vua’s daughters, she knew the common language.

Miranda smiled and hoped a tear did not sneak out of an eye. Sephina, who was close to her age, was a pleasant woman, and Miranda decided she was grateful for the company after all.

“I thought you wanted to be alone,” Miranda teased, letting her eyes stray back in the woods where the princesses had paused to dally with the warriors.

Sephina looked a little embarrassed. Modestly she said, “I would not make trouble like that.”

Farther down the hillside, the younger Lana squealed with laughter as the two warriors chased her up the slope.

“Your laughter could be heard in Jington,” Sephina scolded when her sister arrived. One warrior noted that the Princess Sephina’s mood had changed, but the other man kept his attention on Princess Lana.

After another giggle, Lana turned to her sister, unimpressed with Sephina’s sudden self-righteousness. “You’re not my mother,” she sneered.

“I could tell your mother,” Sephina warned.

“I could tell yours!” Lana snapped, annoyed by her sister’s attitude.

Sephina widened her eyes at the threat but left things at a draw.

“My Ladies, the next hill shows a great view of the town and the roads, if you would like to go,” suggested one of the warriors. He knew having any more fun with the princesses would only bring hopeless trouble to him and his comrade, and he decided to take the opportunity to talk with the foreign woman.

“Lady Miranda, do you find the Temu domain beautiful?” he inquired while leading the way.

Miranda said that she did and added that it was good to get out.

“Everyone is happy that you are feeling better. When will your arm be healed?” he asked conversationally.

“The medicine woman said in a week, but I need time to get my strength back,” Miranda answered.

“I heard Lord Shan helped you with his magic when you were hurt. What does rys magic feel like?” the warrior wondered eagerly.

Princess Sephina gasped at the question because she had been the one to tell the warrior details about Miranda, but she was just as curious to hear the answer. Miranda did not mind the question. She was starting to get used to the fact that everybody talked about her.

“It feels good. Shan is very kind,” Miranda replied.

They continued to make small talk while riding leisurely to the top of the next hill. Miranda answered questions about the Wilderness and her

hometown, and her companions were fascinated by all she said.

“To travel so far is amazing,” concluded one warrior.

“I did not really set out to,” Miranda noted thoughtfully.

The view from the hill was commanding. To the left sat Fata Nor, and to the right stretched two roads cutting through wooded uplands that met at the base of the hill. A warrior explained that one road went to Jington, which Miranda had already traveled, and the other road went north to other tribal domains.

“Riders are on that road right now,” the warrior observed, pointing to a line of dust. “They will come into view in a moment.”

“Will they see us?” Miranda asked, suddenly nervous.

“If they look up,” the warrior said.

“I do not want them to see us,” Miranda said, yielding to her innate need to be cautious.

The Temu warrior had not thought to hide and he did not know why Miranda was so paranoid, but he decided it might be a good idea.

“My Ladies, there is no need for strangers to know you are out riding,” he said.

The princesses accepted his decision, but Lana said, “I still want to see.”

“We’ll be able to see,” he assured her pleasantly.

They moved into cover and dismounted. Concealed by the shade of trees, they waited for the riders to come into view.

“Could it be King Taishek’s war party returning?” Miranda asked hopefully.

“No. It is too small and from the wrong direction,” answered the warrior.

“Look!” hissed the other warrior.

About twenty riders emerged from the woodland and they were clearly not Temu warriors. Even from a distance, black horsetails could be seen streaming from the top of metal helmets, and visors covered all of the riders’ faces.

“Kezanada,” a warrior said, and both princesses gasped.

“They are heading for Fata Nor,” cried the other warrior.

The warriors exchanged panicked looks.

“What are they?” Miranda asked, watching the darkly clad warriors get closer.

“We have to leave,” a warrior announced, already urging the princesses toward the horses.

“Please, you must hurry,” the other warrior told Miranda while pulling her away from her observation.

“Are they enemies?” Miranda said.

“They are Kezanada,” the warrior replied as if that answered everything.

Miranda could not ignore the clear fear displayed by her companions, and she suddenly wished she had the sword she had lost in Jington.

“We can get to Fata Nor just ahead of them. Follow me,” said one warrior.

It was a hard cross-country ride back to the town, with the earlier frolicking forgotten. Urging her horse to greater speed, Miranda felt her muscles begin to ache after growing soft from weeks in bed.

Queen Vua was in the town center meeting with villagers when she noticed the riding party returning across the fields. The droning testimony from a local grievance faded from her ears as she saw how fast the riders approached. She scowled at the princesses riding so recklessly.

And Miranda with that broken arm! she thought, but her mental scolding ended when she realized something had to be wrong. The Temu warrior in front waved urgently to the people.

A Temu laden with firewood scrambled out of the way as the riders rushed into town. The leading warrior jumped from the saddle and his feet hit the ground before his horse even stopped.

Breathing hard, he said, “My Queen, Kezanada are coming on the north road. They will be here any time.” He looked over his shoulder, expecting them.

A serious expression consumed Vua’s face. “How many?” she cried urgently.

“Ah, twenty, not many,” he answered.

This figure made Vua relax slightly, but it was enough to make other people cry out with alarm. An old veteran warrior who had been attending the Queen during the public meeting stepped forward. His name was Hetano and he had only one arm.

“My Queen, I can handle this. But you and the princesses must get inside,” Hetano said.

She nodded and ordered the princesses and Miranda to go immediately to the guesthouse.

Hetano told the two warriors who had been riding with the women to gather the other warriors. A crowd of concerned people had quickly thickened around Hetano.

“Get off the streets. There are only twenty of them and that is not enough to attack. The warriors will handle it,” Hetano announced.

He escorted the Queen to the guesthouse. When Vua hurried inside, her youngest daughter rushed into her arms and Vua petted her reassuringly. Outside a dog barked, and a few people cried with alarm from the surrounding fields, sending a ripple of apprehension through the women in the house. Servants ran around locking doors and windows, but Vua calmly took her seat and sent a servant to watch from a shuttered window.

Warriors were assembling outside and Hetano gave fast orders and pointed to various locations around the town. Three warriors stayed with him in front of the guesthouse.

Miranda heard the noise of riders, and they sounded like they were heading straight to the guesthouse.

Peeking carefully through the shutters, the servant girl reported, “Kezanada, my Queen.”

Vua nodded gravely, but no one dared breathe a word. The jingling of armed warriors dismounting could now be heard directly outside. Miranda crept near the servant girl so she could also look out.

Hetano faced a tall thickset man who acted like he was the leader of the riders. With his hands placed disdainfully on his hips, he looked down at Hetano. The stranger did not raise his visor and only shadows could be seen through the slits in the metal. By the amount of sweat-streaked dirt on his bare muscular arms, the man appeared to have traveled many fast

hasas that day.

His voice had a metallic ring as he spoke through the visor. “My men would take water from the wells of Fata Nor.”

Hetano gestured generously with his one arm toward the nearest well and said, “You are welcome to the water if that is the extent of the Kezanada’s business here.”

The Kezanada leader laughed. “I came here for more than water. Where is Taischek?”

“King Taischek is away on Taischek’s business,” replied Hetano.

From the looks of the present Temu warriors, the Kezanada leader figured Hetano spoke truly, surmising that Taischek was probably off on some raid with his prime warriors. But the Kezanada was a bully and chose to be argumentative for the pleasure of it.

“I know the royal household is here, so don’t tell me he’s not here,” he rumbled.

Hetano showed no signs of intimidation but expanded his answer slightly, “King Taischek is away at war.”

“Ah, but surely his Queen is here?” said the Kezanada with a lewd tone. He turned his hidden face toward the guesthouse.

The young warriors behind Hetano bristled at the Kezanada’s mention of their beloved Queen, but Hetano maintained his composure.

“Let me speak with the Queen,” the Kezanada demanded, knowing the inappropriate request would provoke the Temu.

Stepping forward, Hetano boldly suggested, “If you wish to do battle with us, then just start it.”

The Kezanada leader looked around. He knew Temu warriors had to be concealed all over the town, and no doubt, bows were drawn. Taischek would not leave his family undefended, and the Kezanada force was not large enough to guarantee the submission of Fata Nor, and no one was paying him to attack a Temu town—at least not yet.

“You Temu have such attitudes,” the Kezanada commented.

He signaled to the other Kezanada men to go to the well. Leading their horses, they swaggered down the street, seemingly unconcerned with the glare of the watchful Temu warriors.

The Kezanada leader and Hetano did not move. “Where is the rys, Shan?” the Kezanada suddenly demanded, getting to the true nature of his business.

Hetano made no reply. He could be difficult too.

“Don’t play dumb with me you old cripple?” barked the leader. “I know Shan was asking for Taischek and bound for Fata Nor two weeks ago. Is he still here?”

“The Temu do not discuss their friends with people who do not give their names,” Hetano spat.

The leader paused. Kezanada, especially a ranking member, tended to be very private about their identities with outsiders. He also realized Hetano meant what he said. The Temu were notoriously loyal once they chose a friend, but the leader decided to press Hetano a little further. If he could make the Temu reveal any information, it could be helpful.

“You are hiding Shan,” he accused.

“A rys would not hide from you,” scoffed Hetano.

If Hetano could have seen the sinister glare behind the visor, he may not have remained so calm and confident.

Taking a new approach, the leader asked, “Is Shan with Taischek?”

For the smallest instant the truth flickered across Hetano’s face as the Kezanada leader had expected it would.

Although Hetano realized this, he still lied, “I do not know where Shan is. I know only he is not in Fata Nor.”

The Kezanada leader asked no more questions. He knew the old warrior would not reveal Taischek’s whereabouts, unless of course he took the trouble to torture him, but he did not want to use such time consuming methods. If he could find Shan before the rys learned of the bounty, he would have a greater chance of succeeding in his mission.

“Tell Taischek he best part company with his rys friend,” warned the leader.

“King Taischek cares little about the opinion of a Kezanada,” Hetano said proudly.

“I doubt that,” scoffed the Kezanada. “Just thank your ancestors that I don’t want to waste time attacking your pitiful town.”

“Water yourselves and be gone,” Hetano said.

“Talk like that to a Kezanada and you will lose your tongue like your arm.”

Startled, Hetano whirled to see who had spoken. His attention had been so focused on the Kezanada leader, he had not noticed the approach of Rysmavda Nebeck.

“Shan has shown the emptiness of your threats,” Hetano retorted. He had never respected Nebeck, and now all of his faith was in his King and Shan.

“And Shan will bring death to those who serve him. When you learn of the crimes the renegade rys has tricked King Taischek into committing, you will wish you had not protected Shan,” Nebeck said.

“Enough of this prattle,” snapped the Kezanada leader. “You have obviously come to talk to me Nebeck, so do not waste my time.” He barged past Hetano and started walking down the street with the rysmavda. Nebeck scowled at the Kezanada’s rude behavior but he followed without complaint.

Once they were out of earshot, one of the young Temu warriors whispered to Hetano, “You cannot let him insult us like that. Hetano, let us fight them.”

“It is best to let them leave. A quarrel with the Kezanada is best avoided, and we will have war soon enough,” Hetano explained.

Inside the guesthouse, the servant girl related what had happened in a hasty whisper to Queen Vua. Miranda stayed at the window and strained to see the Kezanada again, but they had moved out of sight. Although she had not understood all the words exchanged, she had gathered that the Kezanada wanted Shan. Deeply concerned, Miranda went and kneeled before Vua.

Worry creased the Queen’s face as she thought about her husband and the storm he was bringing upon his tribe, but she relinquished her attention to Miranda.

“What are the Kezanada?” Miranda asked.

Vua tried to formulate a description for something everyone simply understood. “They are a brotherhood of professional soldiers or maybe criminals is a better term. Anyone can hire their services. A tribe or rich

family can hire them to perform services like kidnapping, extortion, assassination, spying, or to fight in a war. They are very secretive and very powerful. They work for Jington as well,” Vua explained.

“And their whole tribe does this?” Miranda said.

Vua replied, “They are not a tribe. Their castle is in Do Jempur north of the Temu Domain, but they are not a people like the Temu. A member of the Kezanada can come from any tribe. A man can join if he is willing and can meet their requirements. Sometimes the Kezanada invite a warrior to join them, if he has a talent they want or need.”

“Queen Vua, they want Shan. That means someone has hired them to find Shan, right?” Miranda said.

Vua nodded. “There is always some profit behind their actions, but I do not know much more than I have told you.”

“You said they work for Jington. Queen Onja must have sent them,” Miranda determined.

“You are probably right,” Vua said.

“Shan must be warned!” Miranda cried.

Vua agreed. “He will be. Tonight I will send messengers. The Kezanada will watch us for this move, so I will send them in all directions. I have reasonable knowledge of where the King can be reached, and he will receive this important news.”

“Let me go with them,” Miranda proposed.

Adamantly Vua shook her head, determined not to indulge Miranda with the request.

“Why do you ask such a thing?” Vua demanded.

“I cannot sit here while those men hunt Shan. He saved me from death and I must warn him. Please, Queen Vua, let me go,” Miranda pleaded.

“No,” Vua said sternly. “The Kezanada are very dangerous, and you would only jeopardize yourself and the Temu warrior with you. The messengers have a better chance of success if they travel alone.”

Miranda knew she had to accept Vua’s decision, but she murmured hopelessly, “But I must do something to help Shan. He is the only one who can get my children back. Without his magic, I know I cannot beat Onja.”

Her face fell into her hands as sadness and frustration momentarily overwhelmed her.

Vua truly felt sympathy for the foreign woman. In her life, Vua had given birth ten times and seen five of her children die. Two sons lost at war, one in a riding accident, a grown daughter in childbirth, and a baby girl to childhood disease, but she could not quite grasp the horror of having her children stolen.

How this girl must suffer, she thought and then said, “Shan will not be harmed. Shan is with Taishek, and Taishek is with warriors. They will be safe.”

Lifting her head, Miranda thanked the Queen for being patient with her. Dismally Miranda realized she probably could not contribute much to Shan’s defense anyway. Shan had a Temu army and his magic to protect him. Mostly Miranda wanted something to do. She was tired of waiting among the women. Seeing them with their children caused her a jealous pain, and she would rather be with Shan plotting his return to Jington.

26~ Luxury and Strategy ~

Miranda had to languish in Fata Nor for nine more days after the disturbing incident with the Kezanada before General Xander returned with most of the Temu war party.

People rushed out to greet the returning column of warriors. Miranda easily spotted Dreibrand among the Temu and her heart thudded with joy to see him alive and unhurt. His bangs had gotten long over the summer and now a couple small braids held them on each side of his face, put there recently by a Temu comrade. His beard had started again as well.

Seeing Miranda, he steered Starfield away from the ranks. Miranda rushed into his anxious arms as soon as he jumped from his horse. They simply hugged each other for a moment to affirm their physical reality.

“You look better,” he said happily.

“I am much better,” Miranda agreed then kissed him.

When their lips parted, Miranda grinned but Dreibrand stared at her thoughtfully. He remembered the woman he had seen killed at the first Sabuto village.

“What is it?” Miranda wondered.

His face brightened and he dismissed the memory. He could be happy now.

“I was worried about you, but that is over,” he replied. “I have something to show you.”

Dreibrand opened a saddlebag and removed the sack with gold coins in it. Miranda gasped lightly when he let her peek at the contents, but her awe quickly turned to caution and she glanced around nervously.

Dreibrand chuckled approvingly, but he dispelled her worries. “All the warriors have the same. This is my proper share. No one will take it. We raided a rymavda temple in Dursalene and it was full of treasure.”

Recalling that the rymavda were an omnipresent part of the western world, he looked over his shoulder to the temple. Nebeck and his junior rymavda had not joined the people of Fata Nor in greeting the returning war party.

“Where is Shan?” Miranda asked.

“He and Taischek went with a few warriors to the capital city of Dengar Nor. Xander came here to escort the Queen’s household back to the capital. So of course I came here,” Dreibrand explained.

“Did King Taischek get the message about the Kezanada?” Miranda inquired urgently.

“Yes. One of Vua’s messengers reached us a few days ago before we split from the King,” Dreibrand said. “Miranda, are these Kezanada really as terrible as everyone makes them out to be?”

“Yes, they are frightening,” Miranda said, recalling the tension when the Kezanada had entered Fata Nor.

Dreibrand shrugged. His judgement of these infamous mercenaries would have to wait until he saw them for himself.

“Dreibrand, do you think Shan is all right?” Miranda whispered.

This question amused Dreibrand. He had come to have an even greater appreciation of Shan’s powers over the last couple weeks.

“Yes, I am sure Shan is fine,” he assured her. “He went on with Taischek instead of backtracking to Fata Nor with me so he would spend less time on the road and avoid the Kezanada.”

Gesturing with his eyes to the temple, Dreibrand inquired about Rysmavda Nebeck. Dreibrand had learned that Onja could communicate with her priests via the large orbs in the temples, and he very well expected the rysmavda in Fata Nor to know what had happened in Dursalene.

“The rysmavda have kept to themselves in the temple. That Nebeck talked to the Kezanada though. I saw it myself. I do not know what was said, but I am sure he told them everything he could,” Miranda said.

“Yes, but Nebeck will not matter much longer. Taischek is going to close the temples in the Temu Domain,” Dreibrand said very quietly.

“Really?” Miranda whispered.

“It is only a matter of days, but we will not get to see Nebeck lose his job. We are going to Dengar Nor,” Dreibrand said.

“I am told that is a fine city,” Miranda said with excitement.

~

Queen Vua’s household was packed and on the road early the next morning. With Kezanada in the area, Xander insisted upon a hasty departure. The residents of Fata Nor turned out to see off the Queen’s caravan. Silently some wished the warriors would not leave, but others did not worry so much. The Kezanada tended to trouble the upperclasses.

Most of the women rode in covered coaches and wagons, but Miranda rode her horse with the younger women and servants. Dreibrand conveniently chose to be among the warriors that flanked the female riders so he could chat with Miranda all day long.

He noticed Miranda had their old bow and quiver packed in her gear, but all the arrows were gone and she could not possibly draw the bow until her arm was better. At her waist she had tied her old knife—the one she had used to cut him loose when they met.

“I will have to see about getting you a new sword,” Dreibrand mentioned.

Her eyes lit up. “Oh please, could you? I just do not know how to ask the Queen, and I do not think she would approve. I think she would have said something about my knife but there was too much of a hurry this morning. But she gave me a look.”

“Oh, she probably has a dagger tucked in her sleeve,” Dreibrand joked quietly.

Before the day ended, Dreibrand heard more about Miranda’s sidearm than she did. At the midday break some of Dreibrand’s new Temu friends teased him because his woman carried a weapon, but he did not get angry. Although informed that an armed woman was unconventional in Temu society, he believed Miranda was safer with her knife and he knew that he was.

En route to Dengar Nor, Xander took every precaution, sending scouts in all directions around the caravan. The General did not want to be surprised by any Kezanada. The reported group of twenty warriors had evaporated into the countryside and Xander hoped fortune would keep it that way.

At sunset on their second day of travel the caravan reached Dengar Nor. The softened foothills gave way to a broad flat valley, heavily cultivated with green pastures, golden fields of ripening grains, orchards and vineyards. Rushing streams of snowmelt slowed into a system of creeks and rivers that watered the fertile valley. Rising out of the bounteous heartland of the Temu Tribe, Taischek’s castle claimed the top of a rocky mesa. A fine walled city clung to the base of the mesa, and a switchbacked road led from the city to the castle.

Stone towers flanked the main city gate and the yellow serpent standard flapped from both pinnacles. It was a splendid city, and Taischek often employed artisans and workers to remodel and improve the city and castle.

The imposing castle and sophisticated city impressed Dreibrand. The Temu Tribe was far richer than the foothill town of Fata Nor had indicated.

Crowds cheered Xander when he entered Dengar Nor. Everyone at the capital knew about the sack of Dursalene, and they gave the returning war party the same adoration that Taischek had received four days earlier when he had returned. Xander enjoyed his glorious welcome, and Taischek descended from his castle to greet the General. The King proclaimed that the next day would be a holiday to celebrate the victory in Dursalene and the return of the royal court.

The caravan labored up to the castle and servants quickly began to

unpack the Queen's household. A steward sought out Dreibrand and informed him that the King had given him an apartment in the castle. This generosity pleased Dreibrand and he promptly requested that the steward take Miranda to his new apartment before she got shuttled off with Vua's entourage. Dreibrand told Miranda to follow the steward, and then he took off in pursuit of Taischek so that he could immediately thank the King.

Miranda opened her mouth to ask him where he was going, but Dreibrand dashed through the crowd too quickly to be stopped. She scowled with frustration.

"Do you have any bags, lady?" the steward inquired.

Miranda turned to the Temu man. He asked his question again, and Miranda understood him the second time. She pointed to her saddlebags and the steward draped them over his shoulder.

"I need to take care of my horse," Miranda said.

"It will be seen to. Please come," the steward said.

He escorted her into the fine castle that towered many stories above. Graceful arches and high ceilings made the castle seem even bigger on the inside. Miranda had only experienced luxury once before in Jington, but she found herself in it again. The steward took her to an apartment with a fire already blazing in a marble fireplace. Velvety furniture sat on thick carpets with octagon designs. In the bath, another servant was already heating water for her to wash.

Later as a girl washed her hair and sponged her back, Miranda actually had to laugh. Although her heart ached for the safe return of her children, she had to admit she liked the good treatment. While suffering through her dismal life, Miranda had dreamed of better things, but she had had no concept of how well some people lived.

I deserve this, she thought and reclined into the warm water.

The servant was tying a robe around Miranda when Dreibrand returned with a wine cup still in his hand. Miranda promptly asked the girl to heat more water, and Dreibrand collapsed into a chair and set the wine on a table.

"Well, I managed to escape tonight's drinking. I need to save my strength for tomorrow's victory banquet," he declared. "Gods! Taischek

would rule the whole of Ektren if he stayed sober.”

Miranda sat on his lap despite his travel stained clothes. “You chose me instead of your party?” she said sweetly.

“Of course. I would rather be here. In Atrophane we say it is not much of a party if there are no girls,” Dreibrand explained.

Miranda laughed, a genuine laugh. She had missed Dreibrand’s sense of humor.

Unbuckling his chestplate, she whispered, “You must tell me more about how an Atrophane has a party.”

“As much as you want to hear,” he said feeling his lust build pleasantly. He had survived yet more battles and wanted the pleasures of life.

Politely Miranda thanked the servant and asked her to leave. She would attend her warrior herself.

The next morning Dreibrand rolled over in the empty feather bed. Sleepily he sat up and saw Miranda sitting at the window. Wrapped in a blanket, she rested her elbows on the windowsill and stared at the dawn over the Rysamand. The sun had just slipped over the peaks, lighting the snow-capped mountains in a fuchsia blaze.

Hearing Dreibrand stir, she murmured over her shoulder, “At least my children are in a beautiful place.”

Realizing the joys of the evening had faded into the realities of the day, Dreibrand walked over to her and put an arm around her shoulders.

“Miranda, we will get them back. Shan will help us. He just needs more time. In the Sabuto Domain I saw him fight and kill. He is doing as he said. I have seen his power and I know he will defeat Onja when he is ready,” Dreibrand said.

Despite her terrible grief, Miranda’s eyes stayed dry. “I know,” she whispered.

She continued to stare at the Rysamand, feeling her soul crack into sharp cold edges of determination.

My strength is returning, Onja, she thought spitefully.

“It is early. Come back to bed,” Dreibrand urged.

Miranda let him guide her back under the covers but she could not fall

back asleep. Dreibrand returned to a deep slumber and Miranda realized that while she had been recuperating in Fata Nor he had known no rest on the warpath. Careful not to disturb him, she slipped away and quietly dressed. She wanted to see Shan.

When she left the apartment, the long empty hall looked like it went nowhere in the huge castle. Dreibrand had mentioned that he had seen Shan the day before, but Miranda had no idea where to find him. Wandering deeper into the building, she soon ran across a servant and inquired about the rys. The servant rattled off the directions and Miranda half understood them, but she gathered that Shan was quartered in the south wing. After questioning a few more servants after several wrong turns, she located his apartment. Two Temu warriors guarded Shan's door.

"May I enter?" Miranda asked, sounding as confident as she could.

"That is the rys lord's decision," replied one of the Temu. "You are the woman from the east?"

"Yes. I am Miranda. Shan knows me," she said.

"Then you may knock. Lord Shan will let you enter if he wants to see you," the guard explained.

Trying to ignore the watchful Temu, Miranda knocked on the door. The presence of guards surprised her and made her think about the Kezanada who had been looking for Shan. The knock gained no response, and Miranda wondered if Shan was sleeping. Her patience soon eroded and she lifted her hand to knock again, but before her knuckles hit the wood, the bolt snapped back and the door opened slightly. Tentatively she pushed the door open but no one was there. She entered and slid the bolt back in place.

Shan had the best accommodations the Temu had to offer. A vast suite unfolded before her with many rooms connecting to the large entry hall. At the center of the foyer stood a beautiful vase taller than a person. Daylight streamed through a skylight and reflected marvelously on the many iridescent glazes. Miranda paused to admire the vase but saw no possible function for the oversized container.

She called out to Shan. His euphonious voice answered from the room farthest down the hall. Miranda found him on a divan apparently doing nothing.

With genuine warmth Shan rose to greet her. “Miranda. How wonderful to see you. Last night, Dreibrand told me you felt much better.”

She nodded, suddenly at a loss for words as she reacquainted herself with Shan’s features. After not seeing a rys for a few weeks, his appearance was slightly shocking, but his black eyes and the white streaks in his black hair quickly became familiar again.

“May I?” Shan said, gesturing to her arm.

With her consent he held her cast and concentrated briefly. Miranda saw his magic faintly flicker in his eyes.

“You can tell your medicine woman that your bone is healed and the cast can come off anytime. That is, if she is interested in my opinion,” Shan said.

“I will make sure that she is,” Miranda responded happily.

“Now sit with me. What did you come to talk about?” Shan invited.

Miranda did not waste time expressing her concerns. “Shan, I saw these Kezanada that pursue you. They look very dangerous. Can they harm you?”

Shan shrugged. “I accept the possibility that they could succeed...but they would have to get lucky.”

“You have guards on your door, I see,” she noted.

“A prudent precaution. Not all Kezanada are tall bold warriors. They have other agents, more discreet in appearance and possessing skills in stealth and murder,” Shan explained.

“And what happened to the warriors I saw in Fata Nor? No one has seen them since,” Miranda said.

Shan answered, “They are in the countryside, listening to their spies and reassessing the situation. I believe they hoped to catch me on the open road. I expect them to make their next move when I journey to the Confederate Council.”

Miranda pursed her lips in thought. She intended to go the Confederate Council with Shan and the possibility of a Kezanada attack disturbed her.

She continued, “I am told these Kezanada work for hire. Who do you think has hired them?”

“Anybody and everybody,” Shan chuckled mirthlessly, picking up a large

parchment from the low table in front of him. “The Kezanada Overlord may have made me his own project, but I suspect that Onja has directly hired him. I would bet that other people have purchased the services of the Kezanada for information about my location.”

Presenting the document to Miranda, Shan added brightly, “Have you seen the details of my bounty?”

Miranda glanced briefly at the parchment then looked to Shan.

Politely Shan explained it to her. “This is the seal of Jingtun at the bottom. And here it says that if a tribal leader presents my actual severed head to Onja, then his tribe shall be excused the payment of five year’s tribute. Or if a private party or individual is so fortunate as to acquire my head, then the payment will be one million gold pieces.”

Miranda’s eyes widened at the figure, which sounded very large.

“Cheap bitch!” Shan grumbled. “Jingtun holds perhaps the greatest treasure in the world. A million gold pieces is a trifle. Onja flatters herself sending this offer to Taishek. I know he would not betray me.”

Miranda contemplated the parchment and the details Shan said it contained. Even though Shan scoffed at the reward Onja offered for his head, Miranda believed that it would encourage more people than the Kezanada to seek his death. The ryls’s jeopardy would increase with every day.

“Shan, let us go to Jingtun now, before the snows. Before more enemies gather around. There is no reason to go to the Confederate Council. The tribes there might try to kill you. This is between you and Onja. You do not need to recruit allies. For my children, let us leave for Jingtun now,” she pleaded.

Emotion showed on Shan’s face. He truly cared for her. Her desire to return to Jingtun and fight inspired him, but he needed caution as well as courage.

Slowly Shan responded, “For your children I must wait. My mind and body must be completely ready when I face Onja again. In the Sabuto Domain I did things that I have never done before and I learned much. I explored aspects of my power that I had hoped to never use, but it opened my mind to new directions. I can kill and destroy, and I can do it without hesitation, but I must not forget that Onja has two thousands years more

experience than me. I cannot afford to overestimate my powers. If I launch my attack on Onja prematurely, then we all shall perish. Me, you, Dreibrand, Taischek, all the people who trust me.”

The rys sighed heavily. “Miranda, know that I desperately want to go now. I wanted to strike at Onja when she put you on the glacier to die, but if I had done that I might have failed and you would be dead for certain, probably Dreibrand too. But I cannot allow my rage to provoke me into a foolish move. Defeating Onja must be a perfectly calculated act.”

Miranda buried her face in her hands, physically holding her grief inside.

“Then tell me how to help you if we must wait. This idleness will kill me. Command me, Shan. Tell me how to keep your enemies away from you,” she insisted.

Shan considered her request, uncertain how to reply. He wanted to use her, and he cherished her loyalty, but she had already suffered so much. Shan hated to put her in harm’s way, but he had accepted her offer to serve him.

He decided, “Miranda, I do not know if you can keep my enemies away, but you can help me turn people away from Onja’s side. The more humans that rebel, the weaker Onja will become, and the sooner I can strike her down. She draws confidence from her domination of others just like I draw confidence from the support of my friends.”

“Yes, of course. What must I do?” Miranda said eagerly.

“It may not be easy for you. I want you to bring your story to the people. I want people to see the young woman, who Onja has wronged, the mother of the children who are captives in Jingtén. Then humans will see that it is not just for a rys they fight,” Shan explained. “The Temu Tribe is loyal to the King, but defying Jingtén is very stressful for them, and out of fear, people might look for reasons to go against Taischek. But this can be kept to a minimum if Taischek and I act quickly. Already we are taking the rymavda from the people. We cannot have agents of Jingtén insisting Onja is a Goddess when we seek to destroy her.”

“Dreibrand told me the temples would be closed,” Miranda said.

“More than closed. The rymavda, including Prime Rymavda Arshen of Dengar Nor, were put in prison two days ago. All rymavda in the Temu

Domain should be locked up by now. Next week the King plans a spectacle in the city with the prisoners here. Most of the rymavda are of the Temu Tribe, so Taishek will give them a chance to recant their belief that Onja is a Goddess and their role as priests. Those rymavda from other tribes are being deported. I want you to come to this. You can tell people about your children and you can confront the rymavda with the wickedness of Onja,” Shan said.

“What of the priests who do not give up their belief?” Miranda asked.

“They will be summarily executed,” Shan stated.

Miranda gasped lightly. Resisting the possibility, she said, “But they will all give up their beliefs, right?”

“Most will,” Shan assured her. “Taishek will not kill members of his own tribe without giving them ample opportunity to choose their people over Onja.”

“If some stay loyal to Onja, can’t they just be left in prison?” Miranda suggested.

“It would not send a strong enough message. We are trying to show other tribes that Onja is not a Goddess and that she cannot do anything if her rymavda are removed from power,” Shan said heavily.

“It is so terrible,” Miranda murmured.

Leaning closer, Shan gently added, “You can help convince them to recant. Most of the rymavda are not bad men. Being a priest is an occupation passed down through their family or they became a priest because it suited their skills. It is not wrong for them to believe in Onja’s power, because she has great magic, but they must see that they can no longer promote her as a Goddess who demands tribute.”

Miranda nodded, trying to comprehend everything Shan had said. It seemed to make sense, but it was hard to think about so many things at once—the loyalty of the Temu, the imprisonment of priests, the impression other tribes would receive.

“Shan, how will I do as you ask? I am not good with the language. I do not always know the words to use,” Miranda said.

“I will help you. But the harder part will be speaking in front of so many people. Most of the city will turn out. Have you ever been in front of so many people?” Shan inquired.

Miranda stiffened. She had not thought about it that way. The only time she had ever been in front of a crowd of people had been her slave auction in Ciniva, and that had only been a small crowd. She shuddered and sent away the terrifying memory.

“It frightens most people, but you can get used to it,” Shan said.

Thinking of her children, Miranda said, “I can do it.”

“If you get afraid, just look to me. I will be there to help you. You have a week to improve your language skills and I will help you practice. Now, tonight think about what you want to say, and we will go over it in the morning.” Shan instructed.

With a deep breath Miranda tried to picture herself in front of so many people, people who were actually listening to her. “Thank you for letting me help. This sounds so important, I hope I can do it right,” she said.

Shan started to smile reassuringly but his sculpted lips failed in the attempt and he turned away from her. Miranda felt that something troubled him, and she took one of his hands and asked what it was.

His slender blue fingers squeezed her hand lightly. “Before you devote yourself to this cause as my enemies gather, I would confess something to you,” he cautioned softly.

“What?” she whispered, apprehensive.

“I should have acted quicker to help you when you arrived in Jingtun. I should have known Onja would do something terrible. I had no doubt that she meant to keep your children, but I thought I would have time to get you and the children out of Jingtun. It is my fault you are separated from your children. I did nothing when I might have,” Shan said.

This statement caused no anger in Miranda, and she immediately tried to soothe Shan. “Do not blame yourself. Although I was afraid of Onja, I chose to stay that first night. Dreibrand tried to get me to leave, but Esseldan was sick and I thought it was best for him to have the medicine and be inside. You could not have convinced me to leave, if Dreibrand could not.”

“I could have tried. I should have tried. Instead, I wasted time sneaking off to talk with Dreibrand,” Shan lamented.

“It is easy to find mistakes in the past,” Miranda admonished. “If you want to blame yourself for Onja’s wickedness, then I forgive you. I know

you did not want this to happen to me, and I do not take back my wish to serve you. Shan, you are good.”

Shan snorted. “I no longer can claim to be good,” he muttered.

“None of us are perfect,” Miranda said.

Shan seemed to resist this notion, but finally conceded, “True enough. You are kind to me, Miranda. Let me say that I am sorry the rys have committed this crime. I feel responsible.”

“Most of my life has been very unpleasant. I stopped blaming anyone but myself a long time ago,” Miranda explained.

Shan studied her, wondering how bad Miranda’s life had been. It surprised him that Onja’s cruelties compared to others in her life.

“Any help you give to me will put you in danger,” Shan warned.

“I am not afraid. I have already been tortured by Onja. Not much else worries me,” Miranda said.

Although he did not show it, Shan’s heart ached when she mentioned the abuse the Queen had inflicted on her. “Know that I will protect you with my magic if anyone tries to hurt you while you serve me,” Shan promised.

Miranda remembered his magic keeping her warm and alive when she neared death, and it gave her courage knowing he would continue to protect her.

“Now go get that cast off,” Shan suggested pleasantly.

Miranda hugged him and Shan told her to come back early the next morning.

That night Miranda lay awake thinking about what Shan had assigned her. She wondered if she really could inspire people to fight a war like Shan said. She thought about how strange it was that she had run away from war in Droxy only to find herself plotting a war now. Although she had no experience in such complicated matters, she resolved to learn. Her heart steeled itself for the violence ahead.

27~ A Chance to Recant ~

I heard the words of Lin Fal the Prophet, and I believed. But I knew his days were numbered—Semsem II, Temu ruler, year 1230 of the Age of Onja.

The prisoners squinted when they were led into the morning sun. The grime of Taischek's prison had smeared their blue robes and they plodded down the castle road to the city under heavy guard. Prime Rysmavda Arshen was the foremost prisoner, and the warding crystal on a silver chain around his neck had been replaced by manacles and iron chains on his wrists. Thirty rysmavda and acolytes trailed behind Arshen, but few expressions matched the fury on Arshen's face.

Astride a chestnut horse with a white mane and tail, King Taischek led the procession and Arshen hurled condemnations at the back of his monarch. He warned of Onja's killing fire falling from the sky and he told the Temu warriors that surrounded him that they were as good as Deamedron already. Arshen called for the other rysmavda to join him in haranguing their captors, but only a few added their voices to the threats of the Prime Rysmavda. Over a week in prison with no sign of Onja's magic to save them had worn on the faith of some, and others were too afraid to speak and draw attention to themselves.

Crowds overflowed onto the castle road, and people packed the streets leading to the city square. Some people started throwing rocks at the rysmavda, but Taischek quickly ordered a few warriors to stop them before those who liked to throw rocks encouraged those who had not thought of it.

In the city square Baydek Hall stood across from the rysmavda temple of Dengar Nor. Named after the Temu monarch who founded the bureaucracy, Baydek Hall housed the offices of government officials. The steps of Baydek Hall were broad and designed as a platform for public announcements, parade observation, and sometimes trials. The steps would be crowded today with the thirty-one prisoners on display.

Warriors held back the crowd, and Taischek watched as the prisoners were lined up in their chains. The name of the King flew off the lips of many in the crowd as they hollered their support. The rysmavda had been in prison for over a week now, everyone had heard about the looting of the Dursalene temple, and people were beginning to believe that they had a chance to defeat Onja. No righteous firestorm descended to punish the tribe, Taischek seemed as healthy as ever, and the report was circulating

that he had actually killed rysmavda.

Shan waited with Dreibrand and Miranda just inside Baydek Hall. Warriors and bureaucrats milled around the lobby, taking turns looking out the doors and windows. The sound of the crowd outside filled the three story high lobby like a strong wind in a hollow tree. Shan and his friends were tucked in an alcove beside the main doors, and beyond the glossy pillars, they could see the backs of the heads of the rysmavda lining up on the steps.

Miranda wet her lips and noticed that she was breathing faster.

“Are you all right?” Dreibrand asked.

She nodded but looked afraid. Dreibrand understood her fear. Taischek and Shan had asked him to give his testimony about the Atrophane Empire in the east where Onja had no control. He had addressed large groups of soldiers on countless occasions but he had never spoken to the public. Under the Darmar’s censure, all Vetas were excluded from pursuing a political career.

Dreibrand clasped her hand and told her not to worry.

“I hope no one has to be killed,” Miranda said.

“They serve Onja; just remember that,” Dreibrand reminded her sternly.

A commotion broke out on the steps. Dreibrand strained to see what the yelling was about as a couple warriors pushed past him to assist the situation.

As the yelling dwindled, Shan explained, “They had to gag Arshen. Taischek will speak now.”

King Taischek mounted the steps to stand beside his prisoners. He wore his official crown and all of his courtly finery. A winged serpent of gold circled his head, complementing his skin that was the color of polished oak. A long tailed coat of brilliant red draped his body and the sleeves of his coat were constructed entirely of thick strings of amber beads. Beneath his coat he wore a knee length white robe trimmed with golden bells and impossibly white boots covered his feet, fitted with golden spurs. He was as much the lord of the palace as the master of the battlefield.

Banners rose on each side of the King, and the purple fields of fabric with their yellow serpents cast shadows over the prisoners. The thousands

cheered for Taischek until horn blasts insisted on quiet. Gradually a suitable hush crept over the city square, and Taischek scanned the faces of his tribe.

The King addressed his people.

He officially announced that the Temu Tribe would offer no tribute to Jington and that they were the ally of Lord Shan in his battle to overthrow Onja. Although this news had been a fact to a few and a rumor to most, hearing it confirmed by the King finally made it reality, and cries of dismay erupted from the crowd.

Taischek continued, projecting his voice even farther from his stocky body. Of course not everyone could hear him, but it would be enough that some heard him.

“The wealth and hard work of generations of Temu have been wasted on Onja. Not even a rys can rule forever. It has been twenty-two centuries and Onja is old. Look, I take her temples and her priests and nothing happens.” Taischek gestured contemptuously to the sky. “In Dursalene I looked directly into a temple orb and the Queen did not strike! The Temu are done with Onja. The Temu will no longer obey an evil rys who claims her powers make her a Goddess. The Temu are not afraid to let Onja know what we think of her. We have taken her temples and we will disband her priests!”

Taischek pivoted to view his prisoners. Chomping on his gag, Arshen glared at the King. They had hated each other for years, and the Prime Rysmavda still did not quite believe that Taischek dared to treat him so. The faces of the other rysmavda ranged from terror to resignation. The younger faces of their acolytes appeared convinced already.

“Rysmavda of Dengar Nor, I, King Taischek, ask you to return your full loyalty to your tribe and renounce your service to Onja. Do not contribute to her evil tyranny. Help your tribe to be free,” Taischek said.

His invitation met with murmurs of approval from the crowd. As always the King was fair with any Temu.

Arshen growled through his gag and struggled violently against the two warriors who kept him in place.

“Prime Rysmavda Arshen wishes to speak,” Taischek said and signaled for the gag to be removed. “Let Arshen be first to set the example and

recant his belief in Onja as the Goddess.”

Arshen gasped when the gag was pulled away, but he had no intention of accepting Taischek’s offer.

“The King of the Temu brings death and damnation to the whole tribe!” Arshen immediately cried. “Remember the false prophet Lin Fal. He burst into flaming cinders in front of a thousand of his worshippers during the kingship of Semsem II. Onja tolerates no blasphemy.”

“That was a thousand years ago,” Taischek scoffed.

“Now the King of the Temu would be the puppet of a pretender rys who has already failed once against Onja. The tribe will die as did Lin Fal,” Arshen predicted.

Taischek hated to let him go on like this, but he knew he had to let the Prime Rysmavda plead his case. The King did not want his tribe to think he had gone mad. He wanted to prove to his tribe that Onja had grown weak and her theocracy could be ended.

“You know nothing of the powers of Lord Shan,” Taischek countered. “You call him a failure, but I see a rys who challenged Onja and lived! No one in history can make this claim.”

“The Goddess will consume the foolish rys and all who serve him,” Arshen insisted.

“Onja is no Goddess!” Taischek thundered. “If she were a goddess, I would have been punished already. If you will not listen to me, listen to Lord Shan.”

The rys emerged onto the platform and Arshen recoiled into the grip of his guards. The Prime Rysmavda did not want the presence of Shan to taint him.

“Do not fear me, Arshen,” Shan said. “My quarrel is not with you. Onja no longer needs priests to serve her. Her time comes to an end.”

“The Goddess is forever,” Arshen hissed.

Shan shook his head and, as he argued with the priest, he addressed the crowd as well. “Magic does not make a Goddess. Onja was very powerful and humans and rys had to bow down to her. But she is not eternal. Like all rys, Onja was born of the Rysamand that were born of the world—not the other way around. Onja cannot create life or make the weather. The

true power of the divine cannot be grasped by any mortal creature.”

Turning directly to the people, Shan proclaimed, “When I am King of Jington, I will not be called God and I will not demand tribute. The human kingdoms will be free of rys tyranny.”

People gasped in wonder and some cheered. Shan’s dream of a new world was tempting even when compared to their ingrained fear of Onja.

Shan continued, “Arshen, I do not blame you for serving Onja. It is a fact that her power was great and we all have had to obey her. But as a rys, I know that her power fades. Already it is apparent to any who would open their eyes. Onja does not strike at the Temu or me because she cannot reach this far. Her magic will let her see me, but her impotence strangles her as we speak. Her killing magic has receded into the Rysamand. The human kingdoms have no need to obey her now.”

Taischek spoke. “Even now human kingdoms exist that Onja does not rule. A new warrior has entered my household. He is from a distant land east of the Rysamand, where humans know nothing of Onja. If she was a Goddess, would there be kingdoms she did not control?”

The King beckoned to the building where Dreibrand waited, and the foreign warrior walked out. Dreibrand bowed to Taischek, but his eyes roved the faces of the priests and the spectators. The morning had turned hot and the drama of Taischek’s show trial was ripening. Dreibrand wondered how deeply the populace cared for Onja’s religion. He knew in his country priests could be very powerful and they would not be likely to recant their beliefs because that was the source of their power.

But the Temu seemed willing to give up Onja’ religion. Dreibrand attributed this to the fact that Onja was not a Goddess, and people knew that in their hearts, even if they had never dared to say it.

Taischek proceeded to carefully question Dreibrand, who explained the large human civilization that existed beyond the rule of Onja. He answered that before he traveled west, he had never even heard of rys.

Then the King had Dreibrand relate the events that took place while he was in Jington, describing the confrontation between Shan and Onja in which Onja had relented and Shan had been unharmed. Dreibrand added without prompting that Shan had saved his life when Onja assailed him with her magic.

The King whirled on Arshen. “Tell me priest of Onja, why does your Goddess only rule here? Is she not jealous of the many Gods and Goddesses who are worshipped in the east? We are allowed no idol or belief outside of her.”

“The mind of the Goddess cannot be known,” Arshen responded dogmatically but the conviction was ebbing from his voice.

“I’ll tell you why—because it is far away,” Taischek cried. “If Onja was a human, she would be no greater than the ruler of the Empire where Dreibrand Veta is from. But instead she is an evil and corrupt rys who would make us worship her.”

Arshen’s mind scrambled a defense and he regained his venom. “You would let a stranger fill your head with lies. All humans must do Onja’s will or pay for their disobedience with their souls,” he said.

“I doubt she has that threat over you,” Taischek hissed so that the crowd could not hear. “Stay stubborn, Arshen. It would not ruin my day to execute you.”

“Kill me and your domain will rise against you,” Arshen warned.

“I don’t think so. Nobody complained while you were in prison,” Taischek said.

Shan cut them off. He knew that Taischek and Arshen would degenerate into bitter name-calling if left to do it. “Arshen, there is no question what Onja has been capable of, but her power no longer reaches the lowlands. She demonstrates this by placing a bounty on my head. Why would Onja have to pay humans to hunt me?”

“The bounty is to warn humans that you are the enemy,” Arshen answered.

“It is because she cannot hurt me here. She cannot hurt any of us,” Shan persisted.

“Arshen, recant your belief in Onja as Goddess. Set the example for the rest of the rysmavda of the Temu Tribe. Deny Onja and declare your only loyalty is for your tribe,” Taischek ordered.

“No,” Arshen said.

“You know what the stakes are,” Taischek warned.

“Never!” Arshen shouted and the other rysmavda jingled in their chains

with agitation.

Taischek had predicted that Arshen would refuse, but the King would not relent. He glanced meaningfully to Shan before he continued, “Arshen, do not throw away your life for an evil sorceress. Come back to your tribe that wants you. You can’t expect the people to worship evil.”

“The Goddess is not evil. Onja protects all of Gyhwen. The Temu Tribe must not turn from her. Has the story of the Deamedron grown so old?” Arshen pleaded, trying to get the people to believe. It was hard for the Prime Rysmavda when no supporters cried out from the sea of people. He knew they believed in Onja’s power. It was a fact. But the tribe was on the side of Taischek and Shan.

Will I have to die to make them believe? Will we all have to die? he thought.

As Arshen’s hungry eyes looked for support, Shan went to get Miranda. She saw him coming toward the doorway and she knew it was time. All of her nerves buzzed like hummingbird wings.

Before Dreibrand had left her, he had tenderly put his lips close to her ear and whispered that she should pretend like she was mad at him so everyone could hear. She loved how he encouraged her and his little joke helped her in this moment of terror.

Miranda followed Shan outside. She had tried to prepare herself for the crowd, but being the center of its attention was much more intense than looking at it through a door. The crowd seemed to become especially attentive, and Miranda’s mouth felt especially dry. Luckily, she did not have to speak right away as Shan introduced her.

“Tell us what Onja did to you, Miranda,” Shan prompted.

Miranda cleared her throat. Everyone was looking at her. The King, Shan, Dreibrand, General Xander, countless Temu warriors, the spectators, and the prisoners. She looked at the grizzled priests and remembered that Shan had said she must help convince them to recant. If they did not, the executions would start.

With a deep breath she found her voice. The words were halting and soft at first, but they quickly became stronger. Suddenly Miranda wanted everyone to hear her.

“I came west with my children. I have a six-year-old daughter and an

infant son. Onja took them from me and said I had to be her slave. I said I would not do this, and she tortured me and left me to die on the icy mountains. Lord Shan saved me from freezing with his magic. My children still are in Jington. I will help Lord Shan become King in his home because he will give my children back.”

Her nervousness caused her emotions to surge and she directed her anger at Arshen. “Why do you tell your people to worship Onja? She steals children and tortures people.”

Arshen had no answer, but Taischek pressed him. “Arshen, how do you expect the Temu to tolerate this behavior from Onja. Will she start to demand our children with the tribute?”

“I do not know the mind of Queen Onja,” Arshen defended.

“Do you think we can have no better Goddess than a rys sorceress who steals children?” Taischek asked.

“I cannot judge the actions of the Goddess. It is our place to obey,” Arshen said.

“Enough of this, Arshen. Onja is old, and the Temu must join with Shan to get rid of her. You cannot tell us it is to our benefit to stay subservient to her. Recant!” Taischek yelled.

“I told you no! If the Temu do not turn back to Onja, she will kill us all. Rysmavda, do not recant. We must show our people our faith,” Arshen ordered.

The prisoners stirred with mixed feelings. Taischek stomped past Arshen and addressed the prisoners at random, asking them to recant. Arshen continually yelled for the rysmavda to stand by their beliefs, until Taischek ordered him regagged.

The King reached a young acolyte. An earnest youth in the midst of his indoctrination who looked fearfully at his King.

“Recant and join your tribe,” Taischek said.

The wide eyes of the acolyte rolled toward the Prime Rysmavda, seeking guidance. He feared Onja most, but he feared Arshen first and he wanted to obey his high priest. Part of him believed he must not recant in order to show his tribe that they must not rebel against Onja. He believed that Arshen was right.

“This is your last chance,” Taischek warned. He had not anticipated that the acolyte would stand so firm.

“No, my King,” the acolyte blurted.

Taischek paused and looked at the face of the teenage Temu. This moment was as hard as he had thought it would be, but the boy could be a fanatic just like Arshen if he let him live.

“Executioner!” Taischek ordered.

The youth gasped as reality assaulted him and he grabbed for the warding crystal that no longer hung around his neck. Four warriors hustled out with the chopping block followed by an axe man who began to warm up his shoulders for the swing.

Miranda watched two guards start to drag the youth toward his sharp edged doom. She turned to Shan and then Dreibrand, but she could see that they believed this had to happen. Before it was too late to act, she rushed to intercept the acolyte and stopped his advancement toward the executioner.

Clasping his hands, Miranda implored, “You are too young to be so stubborn. Would you die for a Queen who tortured me? Your death will not change my mind. I have to fight Onja. Now tell your King that you are loyal to him.”

Her action truly stunned Taischek, but he said nothing. He saw that the acolyte could be on the verge of recanting. Taischek would never be sure if it was the truth of her words or her pretty face that worked on the youth.

The acolyte gaped at Miranda, absorbing her words. He looked at the executioner and the warrior waiting to put a bag over his head. Then he looked to Arshen, but Miranda grabbed his cheek and turned him toward Taischek.

“Look to your King,” Miranda said.

The acolyte blinked with confusion, but he was grateful for his second chance.

“I am loyal to the Temu Tribe and King Taischek,” the acolyte said.

“Say Onja is not a Goddess,” Taischek ordered.

“Onja is not a Goddess,” the youth whispered.

“Louder,” Taischek barked.

“Onja is not a Goddess!” the acolyte wailed and fearful tears filled his eyes. He dropped to his knees, falling out of Miranda’s grasp. “My King, protect me. Onja will kill us all.”

With relieved tenderness, the King comforted him. “No. She cannot hurt us. See, we are fine.”

Filled with confidence from her success, Miranda turned to the nearest prisoner and pleaded for him to recant. He was a full-fledged rysmavda and he capitulated. Miranda moved up and down the row of prisoners asking them to recant. Her sweet invitation to live was hard to resist, and all but six priests refused with Arshen.

Speaking to Arshen, Miranda tried to convince him one last time, so the other six priests could change their minds. “Do not die for Onja. She does not even care about you.”

Arshen’s gag had been removed again so he could recant, but he said, “Stop lying to me you wandering strumpet. Onja has your children because you cannot take care of them.”

Although his harsh tone allowed Miranda to guess that he had insulted her, she did not understand every word, but Dreibrand did.

“I’ll kill you myself,” Dreibrand cried and his ivory handled dagger appeared in his hand.

Shan restrained him. “He is dead already,” he whispered.

Taischek stepped close to Miranda and said, “I thank you, but there is nothing you can do for him. Go stand by Shan.”

Miranda wanted to do more. She wanted to argue with the rysmavda all day. She could not understand their loyalty to Onja, but she obeyed the King and returned to her place. Dreibrand glared at Arshen one last time before joining Miranda with a kinder gaze.

Slipping his dagger back in place, Dreibrand said quietly, “You were wonderful.”

“You saved many lives, Miranda,” Shan added.

The rysmavda who recanted were released from their chains and their blue robes were stripped away. In their plain under tunics, the rysmavda kneeled to their King, and Taischek told them to watch closely the fate of their former brethren because all followers of Onja were the enemy of the

Temu.

Taischek returned his attention to the expectant crowd. “Temu, you have seen twenty four rysmavda recant their belief in Onja as Goddess and return their loyalty to their tribe. Unfortunately, the Prime Rysmavda and six foolish priests refuse to join us even though I have clearly shown that Onja has grown weak and that Onja is evil. It grieves me to put this sentence on men who were born Temu, but the tribe cannot suffer enemies to live among us. They are sentenced to death.”

Excitement rippled through the crowd and people pressed against the ring of warriors who held back the spectators. General Xander hollered orders for more warriors to reinforce the barrier and he hollered to the civilians to stop pushing.

Taischek leaned close to Arshen and said, “I should have done this to you a long time ago.”

“Your soul will serve the Queen for eternity in harsh bondage,” Arshen snarled.

“At least I get to see you die first,” Taischek retorted with satisfaction. “Enjoy watching your men die, Arshen. You go last,”

With a victorious flourish Taischek left the condemned rysmavda and stood by Shan. A warrior beat a slow and solitary rhythm on a drum and one rysmavda was dragged toward the executioner.

“Your faith honors the Goddess,” Arshen shouted.

Miranda watched the rysmavda facing his executioner. When she had pleaded for him to recant, his eyes had not even looked at her, but he lost his composure when a warrior pulled the bag over his head. The rysmavda struggled in terror as insistent hands pushed him toward death.

A simple basket that might have been used to collect long stemmed flowers or even carry a baby was placed by the chopping block. Miranda fought the urge to turn away, knowing she must watch to show how much she believed in Shan’s cause.

The blind prisoner was bent over the block now and the axe was raised. The entire throng of people seemed to hold its breath, then the axe fell, and a great roar rose from the throats of the Temu. The head fell cleanly into the waiting basket, but the body jerked with alarming animation before flopping away from the axe man. Blood spurted in quantity and two

warriors immediately wrapped the body in a shroud and tossed the head in the package. The corpse was dragged to the foot of the steps, leaving a red trail on the polished stone.

The axe took the life of the second rysmavda with all efficiency, but the third rysmavda collapsed in the grip of his captors, shrieking for mercy. He recanted his belief in Onja as goddess and begged the King to accept him back into the tribe. Taischek had to be merciful but he ordered the rysmavda put back in prison because he had taken too long to recant.

Three more rysmavda died, leaving only Arshen. As the warriors took the Prime Rysmavda to the block, he again warned Taischek of his doom.

“Enough of your empty words. You have always been against me, Arshen,” Taischek said.

Prime Rysmavda Arshen, master of all Temu temples and servant of Onja died on the block. The axe fell with a meaty thud. The crowd no longer cheered, exhausted by the violence. The drummer stopped and an eerie silence held the city as if the people waited for Onja’s reply.

The bloody remains of Arshen were tossed onto the pile of bodies.

Taischek signaled to General Xander to proceed with their planned finale. The temple on the opposite side of the square was heavily guarded in case the crowd became frenzied and decided to loot the temple themselves. The doors of the temple opened and a squad of workers hauled out a cart bearing the temple statue of Onja. Warriors parted the crowd so the statue could be brought before the King.

Taischek placed his hands on his hips and surveyed his people, waiting for the perfect moment to speak.

“Temu Tribe, this was an easy day. Harder days lie ahead. Like the fools executed today, some people in other tribes will stay loyal to Onja. Enemies will gather against us, but with the power of Lord Shan, we will prevail. The Temu will help Lord Shan return to his home and end the Age of Onja!”

The workers pulled the statue off the cart. It crashed onto the pavement and one blue stone arm broke away. Sledgehammers had been loaded on the cart as well, and the workers each seized one and began to demolish the statue. The heavy hammers soon bludgeoned the lovely face of the Queen of Jingtun into chunks and dust.

When the King left, the crowd took a long time to disperse. The spectators who wanted souvenirs from the historic day gleaned every shattered scrap of the statue from the pavement.

Upon returning to the castle, Miranda could not relax. She paced alone in her apartment while Dreibrand had lunch with the King and Shan. It bothered her somewhat that she had not been invited, but other things bothered her more at the moment. The bloody images of the executions played through her mind over and over.

A sharp pain started in her temple and she had to lean on the mantle of the fireplace. A headache had not struck her for many days, and she wondered if the stress of the morning had caused her to relapse. Next a couple drops of blood came from her nose and she hurried to wipe it away. Perhaps the power of Onja could not punish the rebellious Temu, but Miranda still felt the touch of Onja's wrath.

The nosebleed ended and she was cleaned up just as Dreibrand returned. He carried a covered plate of food and Miranda greeted him with a forced smile.

"Here, I brought something for you to try. The Temu call it palalai. It is just great. You have to try it," Dreibrand said. He removed the cover, revealing a crispy fruity pastry but Miranda quickly turned away.

"I cannot eat," she said.

Dreibrand reconsidered the dessert and set it down. He moved close to her and massaged her shoulders.

"Everything went very well today. Taischek is very pleased," Dreibrand reported. "He is a popular king and after today his tribe will not doubt his decisions. And most of the tribute had already been collected by the temples for this year and that will more than finance Shan's war."

Miranda heard the good news but she could not forget the men who had just died.

"Why didn't they listen to me, Dreibrand? Why did they choose death when they could have lived?" Miranda asked.

"They are priests. It is their job to be faithful. Nothing you could have said to Arshen would have changed his mind. Taischek and him have been feuding for many years I am told. Arshen would not have sided with Taischek for any reason. He preferred to die thinking he had won,"

Dreibrand explained. “Miranda, just think about the rysmavda you saved. Some of them would not have recanted if you had not asked them as you did.”

Miranda sighed, knowing she must see this day as a victory. “I just cannot believe I saw six men get killed,” she murmured.

Dreibrand moved his hands around her body and kissed the side of her face. “You really impressed me today. The most powerful Atrophaney lady could not have done better,” Dreibrand praised.

Miranda remembered her experience in front of the crowd. She had worried about her foreign accent, but Shan had coached her carefully and she had spoken with success. It had been good to feel important.

“Now do that again at the Confederate Council and we shall have many allies,” Dreibrand predicted.

“I will have to speak at the council?” Miranda asked with a share of excitement and surprise. She turned in Dreibrand’s arms to face him, waiting for the answer.

“Yes, Shan told me so. But he said we should not talk about that. He has some details to work out with Taischek,” Dreibrand said.

“When do we leave?”

“The day after next,” he replied. “Now you must stop moping about those executions. They were servants of Onja and you must think only of that. Pleasant things remain to be done today. We need to go shopping.”

“Shopping?” Miranda said, confused by the frivolous proposal.

“Yes. You need more clothes and I need more clothes. And I want to buy us two new horses before we leave,” Dreibrand said.

She looked at him skeptically.

“Dengar Nor is a fine and beautiful city. You must want to see some of it,” Dreibrand urged.

Dreibrand always made everything sound like a good idea and she did not protest. She had only seen the city from the main road or the city square, and it would be a marvelous thing to walk the streets of a real city. Hoping her headache would fade, she agreed to go because she needed the distraction.

28~ Intoxicating Possibilities ~

Dreibrand managed to spend almost half his gold in one afternoon. The large crowd after the executions offered a tempting market for the merchants and they stayed open late. Dreibrand picked out a handsome bay stallion for himself and a roan gelding for Miranda along with hand-tooled leather saddles and bridles.

He hired two tailors and had himself and Miranda fitted for several outfits. He spared no expense on fabric and insisted that Miranda pick out only the best quality. She had protested at the cost and insisted that she did not need so many things, but Dreibrand had firmly instructed her not to care about the money. He spread a little extra gold between the tailors to make sure the orders were complete when they returned from the Confederate Council.

Miranda had not protested as much about the purchase of the horses and the next morning she waited with Dreibrand for their delivery to the castle. The horse dealer was not late and he rolled into the courtyard in a cart with his youthful assistant. The saddles were in the cart and the horses were tied behind it. Jumping down from the cart, the dealer shook hands with Dreibrand and bowed politely to Miranda. He was an amicable man with chubby cheeks and an abnormally unruly head of hair that his crooked braids could not quite tame.

“Thank you for bringing them up here today,” Dreibrand said.

“For you, no problem. Let other warriors in the King’s household know who has the best horses,” the dealer said happily. “You want to ride?”

They nodded and the dealer hollered to his assistant to saddle the horses. Dreibrand had inspected the animals thoroughly and rode them the day before, so he only checked them briefly on delivery. Once the horses were saddled, Dreibrand thanked the merchant and gave him a few more coins.

“Thank you, sir. I hope you need more horses soon,” the dealer beamed.

“I will look for you first,” Dreibrand assured him.

As the dealer departed, Miranda grumbled, “You did not have to give him that money. You did not even talk him down enough when you bargained yesterday.”

“We are foreigners, Miranda. It is important people around here like us,” Dreibrand explained.

Miranda supposed he was right, but she wished he would take a little more care with his gold. The dealer had liked him well enough yesterday.

The castle occupied only part of the mesa overlooking the city, and Taischek had tracks for riding and fields for practicing the arts of war on the rest of the high land. Here, Dreibrand and Miranda put the new horses through their paces and had fun racing each other.

When they returned to the castle stables, Miranda appeared almost carefree and happy. Dreibrand hoped she had put aside the trauma of the executions the day before.

“Now I have two horses,” Miranda said, celebrating the fact.

Dreibrand was glad that he had been able to provide her with something she liked. Every day he thought he loved her more. They made love every night, losing themselves in pleasure. Dreibrand enjoyed his good quarters, good food, and his good woman and never recalled being happier, but he wondered if Miranda shared the same feelings. Her passion had a hunger that thrilled him endlessly, but he could not tell if her feelings went beyond this.

He lent her a hand as she dismounted and asked how her arm was holding up. It was thin and pale, but she said it had not caused her any discomfort.

“I will have my old strength back soon. Then I want to practice archery again. I can almost pull my bow back already,” Miranda said.

Pleased that she was recovering, he told her to practice as much as she wanted.

They arranged stabling for their new horses and checked on Starfield and Freedom while they were there. The horses thrived on good hay and good oats and were getting a well deserved rest.

As they left the stable, Dreibrand said, “I have to go to a meeting with Taischek and Shan. I will see you tonight.”

“I want to go,” Miranda said.

Dreibrand paused with uncertainty. “I am not sure if that is allowed,” he said.

“Why?”

Awkwardly he avoided her gaze. “Miranda, you know how things are around here.”

“Do you not want me there?” she asked, and her voice revealed a hint of vulnerability.

“That is not it,” he answered.

“It is because I am not a man,” she surmised bitterly.

“Do not look at me like that,” Dreibrand defended. “You know I do not judge you that way. Atrophaney women do not have restrictions like the Temu. But we are here, and I do not think you can go.”

“Have you asked about this?” Miranda pressed.

“Well no,” he admitted.

“Then take me with you. I am sick of hearing about what you and Shan plan after the fact. I need to be there,” she insisted.

Dreibrand completely sympathized with her but she needed to be aware of her chances of attending the meeting.

“I want you there, but I cannot just change the Temu. Please understand this,” he warned.

“I will tell Taischek he has to let me,” Miranda said.

Dreibrand scowled and said very firmly, “Taischek is a King. You do not tell him anything. You ask. Do not go and upset him. We are Taischek’s guests and he treats us very well. His customs deserve respect.”

“Then I will ask,” Miranda said wearily.

Taischek and Xander were engaged in a heated conversation in their own language when Dreibrand and Miranda entered the council chamber. They stopped talking and Taischek quickly gave Dreibrand his attention, apparently glad to drop the discussion he was having with Xander.

Respectfully Dreibrand bowed. “I hope that I am not late, King Taischek.”

“Oh, no, no.” The King invited Dreibrand to sit in one of the high-backed chairs at the long table. “It is Shan who can’t tell time.”

Dreibrand cleared his throat, thinking of his words carefully. “King Taischek, Miranda wishes to sit with our council this afternoon.”

Taischek frowned and flatly told Miranda that it was not allowed.

She stepped forward and addressed her royal host, “Good King, this war concerns me closely, and I will hear what is talked about.”

Dreibrand shot her a look that she ignored. Taischek raised his eyebrows with surprise. Vua had mentioned how willful Miranda could be, but he had not been prepared for outright pushiness. Not even his most spoiled daughter spoke to him with such an assertive tone.

“These affairs concern me too, and I will conduct my meeting in my way. This is not your place,” Taischek said.

Remarkably unintimidated, Miranda protested, “This is my place. I was good enough for you yesterday when you wanted to show your tribe what a good cause this war is.”

Dreibrand shifted uneasily. He did not want to lose the favor he had risked his life to earn from Taischek because Miranda chafed under Temu custom. The position she placed him in was impossible, but he blamed himself. He should have guessed her antagonistic mood and advised her better.

The usually jovial King used a stern tone. “Miranda, I understand that you have a great interest in how this war is conducted, but such decisions are for men to make. Dreibrand Veta, you will escort her out and see that your woman observes her manners in the future.”

Dreibrand felt suddenly sick. He had worried this would happen, and he was not sure if Miranda would forgive him for what he had to now do. They needed the friendship of Taischek and he could not let her jeopardize that.

He was about to obey the King when Shan walked in and dissolved the confrontational moment.

“Hello, Miranda,” the rys said breezily as he seated himself beside Taischek.

“She was just on her way out,” the King growled.

“Oh Taischek, let her stay. I know it is not proper, but indulge me,” Shan said. “We could all learn of bravery from Miranda. Have you ever drawn your sword face to face with Onja?”

Taischek gave Shan a sour look, but it was hard to refuse when the rys

put things in such words. He glanced to Xander for the General's opinion but he shrugged noncommittally. Secretly Xander enjoyed her presence, which was too rarely near him.

The King sighed heavily. "Perhaps a new age is truly upon us. We have more important matters to discuss. Stay if you must, Miranda, but do not cross me again."

Dreibrand quietly let his breath out, thankful for Shan's intervention.

"Thank you, my King," Miranda said with sweet sincerity because she had won her way.

Xander started the meeting by reporting on Kezanada activity. The elusive mercenaries had been descending on the Temu Domain in increasing numbers and an attack was expected when the King traveled to the Confederate Council.

"There is evidence of groups of Kezanada crossing the countryside, but it is difficult to put a number to them. I have no doubt that they have many agents in the city right now," Xander said.

"We will travel with five hundred warriors. That should be enough to fight them off if they are foolish enough to directly attack me," Taischek said.

Shan agreed. "Yes, that will be plenty. I have observed the Kezanada and there is a group of one hundred hiding in the Nolesh Forest to the north."

"One hundred? They must be planning something big then. Kezanada do not usually work in such large groups," Taischek said, shaking his head.

"Have you considered that they might seek a royal hostage?" Shan said ominously.

Discomfort crossed Taischek's face, but he nodded to Shan's question.

"Where is Prince Kalek?" Shan asked, referring to the Temu heir.

"He is safe," Taischek answered. "He is still on summer holiday with his brothers Doschai and Meetan in Selsha Nor near the Tacus border, but they are well guarded, and I dispatched three hundred warriors to see them home."

Shan relaxed and said, "Wise as always, Taischek. When do you expect

your son to return?”

“At the start of tribute season. I thought it was best that he stay away. I wasn’t entirely sure how the tribe would react when I dissolved the rysmavda. If there was unrest, I did not want the princes traveling the roads. Kalek rarely wants to come home early anyway,” Taischek answered.

Shan said, “Good, but let me suggest that you instruct the protectors of Dengar Nor to be alert for a Kezanada attempt to infiltrate the castle. Any member of the royal household would suit them.”

“They can’t hope to storm the castle with only one hundred warriors,” Xander said.

“No, but they can climb the mesa, scale the castle walls and sneak inside. I have seen them practice just such a thing on their own castle in Do Jempur. Why do you think I requested guards to my suite?” Shan explained.

“True enough,” Xander grumbled. He knew what the Kezanada were capable of. Abduction was an expensive specialty for the Kezanada, but the size of Shan’s bounty would merit any effort.

“The guards on the castle will be tripled, and I will send two hundred more warriors to the princes,” Taischek decided.

“King Taischek, if I may?” Dreibrand interjected.

The King looked to his foreign warrior, almost eager for his opinion.

Dreibrand continued, “Shan knows where most of these Kezanada are hiding. I say we go clean them out right now. Such enemies should not be tolerated in your domain. Let them count their dead instead of making plots.”

The corners of Taischek’s mouth curled upward. He liked the foreigner’s thinking.

But Xander groaned. “Sire, the Kezanada would just love us to take a war party into the Nolesh. They could kill many Temu and still escape.” Looking to Dreibrand, the General explained, “The Nolesh Forest is very rugged and dense. The Kezanada prefer such conditions. They can fight well on the open field of battle, but they love to strike from the shadows. They would never give us a direct battle in there.”

A little crestfallen, Dreibrand admitted that he had spoken without knowing the lay of the land.

Taischek's smile faded because he knew Xander was right, but he still had no solution. "You are wise, General, but Dreibrand has a point. The Kezanada are our enemy now, and I would not be much of a king if I let them do as they please in my domain. Until now, they had my leave to travel my domain because their affairs did not concern me and sometimes I found their services useful. But things have changed. They have made my business their business. I will drive them out," Taischek decided.

"Sire, that may be impossible. Yes, we could clean out the Nolesh, but as we labored there, they would only find new places to hide," Xander warned.

"True, but they would have to hide their forces farther from the city," the King said.

"Sire, I was not exaggerating our losses. They have the advantage in the Nolesh. That place is a den favored by thieves," the General grumbled.

"My friends," Shan said quietly. "No Temu need die. I caused the Kezanada to come here, and I will deal with this threat. I believe they want to ambush me on the way to the Confederate Council or worse yet abduct a royal hostage. Either way, it cannot be allowed. General Xander is right in that if they are driven from the Nolesh, they will come back in another place, but I will bloody their noses enough to keep them away for now. Tonight, I will go kill these hundred Kezanada."

Taischek had hoped Shan would offer to help. "Thank you, Shan. With your magic, the Temu will have the advantage. How many warriors do you need?"

"None," Shan stated, casting his eyes down on the table.

The meeting fell into a shocked silence as every person considered Shan's claim that he could kill one hundred warriors by himself.

"What are you going to do?" Taischek asked.

Shan folded his hands and rested his chin on his knuckles. A sad ache pressed on his chest. He did not want his friends to see the cruel destroyer he was becoming, but if he could say the words, then his plan would be real.

Softly he said, "I will kill them with my magic."

Dreibrand understood that Shan did not like to take this action. He had seen Shan kill in battle, but the rys had used weapons and assumed the pretense of a fair fight.

Miranda wanted to speak against the plan, but she remembered well that Shan had said he needed to practice killing if he were to have any hope against Onja.

“Surely you will want some warriors,” Xander said.

“I will go alone,” Shan said adamantly. “No one is to follow me. As soon as it is full night, I will leave the city. Taischek please provide me with one of your horses, so I will attract less attention. In the morning I will be back and we can depart for the Confederate Council.”

“I will be ready in the morning then,” Taischek said. It touched him deeply that Shan took this course of action to lessen the burden on the Temu.

Dreibrand protested, “Shan, at least let me go with you. I can watch over you while you do this spell. Spies might see you leave the city and pursue you.”

“I will go alone!” Shan insisted.

Dreibrand looked to Miranda for support but she had none to offer. She did not want to argue with Shan after he had just stuck up for her with Taischek, and she believed the rys had chosen the best course of action. Miranda hated the thought of Queen Vua and her household being in danger from the Kezanada.

But Dreibrand persisted. “Shan, you have said yourself you need your friends to help protect you.”

Shan explained, “It is for your safety. I have not used my power in this way before, and I will be casting a large spell. I would not want any of my allies to get hurt. After tonight I will be able to refine the spell, but it is difficult to predict what will happen the first time. It is important no one follows me. I can avoid a few spies.”

Reluctantly, Dreibrand relented even though he thought Shan’s plan was too dangerous.

Shan tried to put him at ease. “Dreibrand, you will be at my side in many battles, but this I must do alone.”

Turning to Taischek, Shan said, “Unless there is something else you wish to discuss, Taischek, I would like to prepare for tonight. Once the Kezanada threat is removed, I see no trouble between here and the Confederate Council.”

“I have nothing else for today,” the King said and dissolved the meeting.

Shan quickly left the room with his head bent in thought.

As everyone else rose from their chairs, the King said, “Dreibrand Veta, do stay.”

Dreibrand cast Miranda an exasperated look, but her face mirrored his resentment and she walked out. General Xander left as well, leaving Dreibrand alone with the King. He walked to the head of the table where Taischek sat and waited for his royal reprimand.

Taischek stood and paced with his hands clasped behind his back. “Did you put her up to this?” he finally demanded.

“No, King Taischek.”

“But you brought her to this chamber and asked me to let her stay,” Taischek said, stopping his pacing and confronting Dreibrand.

Dreibrand explained, “She wanted to come, so I told her I would ask, but I warned her that it might not be your custom.”

“It is not!” Taischek snapped.

“King Taischek, she does not mean to offend. Miranda lives every day knowing Onja has her children. She wants to know how Shan proceeds with his challenge. She did not interrupt the meeting. She did not even speak,” Dreibrand said.

“But her words were hot before the meeting,” Taischek complained. He grumbled in his own language and paced a few more steps. When his temper was calmed, he said, “Dreibrand, I realize you are from a different land with different ways. I see that you are lenient with Miranda and perhaps that is your way—although I do not see any wisdom in it. But you are in the Temu Domain now, and her behavior is your responsibility. Do you understand?”

“Yes, King Taischek, I apologize for her,” Dreibrand replied.

The King measured Dreibrand with his eyes. He respected that

Dreibrand accepted his responsibility, but he did not want to scold him too much. The foreigner was a cunning warrior and Taischek liked learning about foreign places from him.

With a sigh, Taischek said, "I can see that she is a difficult woman, but she must learn not to be difficult with me. If she comes in here again and starts telling me what to do, it will be your insubordination, Dreibrand. It will be your fault."

"Of course, King Taischek. I will see that she understands," Dreibrand said with a bow.

"I'm sure you will," the King said confidently. "Now, it is my understanding that Miranda has chosen to travel with us tomorrow. I presume, so she does not have to wait for news from the Confederate Council. Let this be an opportunity for her to show off her new manners, eh?"

"Yes, King Taischek."

When Dreibrand left the council chamber, Miranda was waiting in the hall for him. She did not miss his angry look and fell in step beside him as he stalked down the hall.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"What do you think?" he retorted in an ugly tone.

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Shan waited in the drizzling rain the next morning while Taischek prepared for departure in the castle courtyard. The rys reported that the Kezanada were killed, but he said no more. Once again on his large white horse, Shan sat in silence. A flowing black cloak draped his body and the heavy hood completely cowled his face. Only the blue hands emerging from the black fabric showed that it was a rys.

Dreibrand waited beside Shan as the King's honor guard formed their ranks. The rest of the five hundred warriors would join them outside the city. Dreibrand kept looking around for Miranda. They had quarreled bitterly the day before and she had stormed off and not come back. Dreibrand had fought the impulse to look for her, and when she did not return in the night, he assumed she had gone to stay with Queen Vua. Angrily he had thought that if she would not listen to him, then she might learn from the Queen. Who better to impress on her the importance of

manners than the King's wives and daughters?

But now, moments from leaving, Dreibrand worried that she had actually left in the night. He worried that she could have gone anywhere. It was a crushing thought.

Dreibrand wanted to ask Shan to locate her with his magic, but the cowed rys did not look like he wanted to talk, or maybe he was too tired to talk. Dreibrand did not know which, but he decided not to ask.

Taishek was ready to leave and panic stressed Dreibrand. As upset as he was, he could not leave the city without knowing where Miranda was. Dreibrand accepted that he would have to find her and catch up later, but it would be humiliating.

Just then, Miranda finally appeared. She was riding her new roan gelding and she hurried to join the entourage.

Gods! She is late. She must want Taishek to hate me, Dreibrand moaned inwardly.

Miranda took a place behind Shan, but she did not acknowledge Dreibrand. He tried three times to talk to her, but she ignored him as if her ears were incapable of hearing his voice. He gave up.

They left Dengar Nor and hooked up with the larger force of warriors. They traveled in peace all day with only the rain to bother them. Trees lined the road north out of Dengar Nor, and the dripping leaves tearfully wished the summer farewell. The Temu were traveling to a place called the Common Ground, three days to the north. It was the traditional meeting place of the five allied tribes.

Shan stayed silent, and Dreibrand's pride prevented him from dropping back to talk to Miranda. He knew he could get her to talk if he tried harder, but it would probably only restart their fight. He could feel the strong words from their fight festering in her mind, but he did not know what to do about it.

Miranda had accused him of wanting to shut her out, which was ridiculous, but telling her so had only made her angrier. Dreibrand had tried to make her understand that making reckless demands of the King was counterproductive and would win her no favor, but she would not listen.

Dreibrand looked back at Miranda. When they made eye contact, he

turned around quickly. *I must wait her out. I am the one who is right*, he commanded himself.

By now, Dreibrand had hoped Shan would want to talk. Dreibrand burned with curiosity to know what had happened with the Kezanada.

Shan must have sensed that Dreibrand was about to attempt a conversation, and his cowl swung toward Dreibrand before he spoke. Dreibrand saw blue fire blazing in the depths of the cowl, as if Shan worked magic at that moment. Although he had seen light in Shan's eyes before, he was taken aback this time.

"Is something wrong?" he asked quietly.

"No. My enemies lie dead in the forest," Shan said as if he looked at the bodies at that moment.

"So what happened?" Dreibrand asked.

From within the hanging hood, Shan gazed at Dreibrand and truly wanted to answer his friend, but the fever of what he had done in the night still burned inside him. Shan boiled with a turmoil of new thoughts and sensations, and the events of the night replayed in his head.

Last night had been perfectly black after the sliver of a moon had set and the cloud cover had rolled in. Taischek had made sure that his most trusted men were manning the gate that Shan used to leave the city.

On the open road Shan bolted into a full gallop. His voluminous black cloak billowed from his shoulders like bats pouring from a cave. When he decided he had been on the road long enough, he headed cross-country to the north. Shan did not need his ryl's perception to hear riders thunder down the road he had just left. Looking back, he saw the lights of Dengar Nor across the black fields and Taischek's castle twinkling high on the mesa. Soon the spies would realize Shan had left the road, and for their sake, he hoped they did not find his trail.

He had many hasas to ride before reaching the Kezanada encampment. The Temu farmlands yielded to wooded hills, and Shan eventually felt the presence of the old growth forest envelop him. Some of the trees in the Nolesh were older than he was and they told no secrets.

Probing the forest with his mind, Shan located the Kezanada sentries and dismounted to continue on foot. Beyond the sentries, he could feel the mass of men camped in the forest. Shan hoped what he was about to do

would shock the Kezanada into rethinking their pursuit of his bounty.

Shan put a spell of sleepiness on the first two outer sentries that he approached. Lulled into a doze, the sentries awaited their death. Shan crept closer until he could see the campfires. Most of the Kezanada slept, but a few sat up talking.

Shan lowered himself into a cross-legged position, trying to limit the crackling of the ferns and forest litter. He focused his mind on his grim task but his conscience struggled to distract him. He had killed, but now he would kill with much greater intimacy. To magically extinguish life, especially in stealth, grated against his sense of honor. Deep down he judged himself harshly, knowing that what he did was wrong, but the Kezanada had to be deterred from hunting him or Taischek's family. He had to gain more allies among the humans in order to weaken Onja's position, and he could not allow the Kezanada to hinder him. Most importantly, those who were already his loyal friends relied on him to lead them to victory.

Banishing his natural revulsion, Shan began to meditate on his spell, gathering all the lifeforces of the surrounding men into his awareness. The rurs felt the blood moving in their veins and the air passing through their lungs. He heard every word of conversation and the rattle of every snore. Shan linked to every man in the camp, sentries included, latching onto them like an invisible lamprey. Shan focused on their hearts. Only their hearts. The unsynchronized beating of a hundred hearts stormed his mind with a terrible roar, and Shan had to hold in a scream of agony.

He concentrated on only the rushing blood and the pumping hearts. Then, like the stockade at Dursalene but with a thousand times more refinement, Shan shattered the hearts. Valves flapped in useless tatters and the muscles of life screeched to a torn halt. Shan saw every internal detail of each man's death as he released the spell's visualization.

Most of the Kezanada clutched their chests in a terrible moment of pain before quickly dying. Some sat straight up out of their sleep and gasped before slumping back into a permanent rest. Every heart had been assaulted simultaneously, and as the Kezanada died, they did not know their comrades shared the same fate.

Shan sprang to his feet with outstretched arms, trembling with the awesome power he felt. His mind had been intimately entwined with each

man at the moment of death, and Shan now held their souls. He experienced a sudden clarity of understanding as he grasped the many fresh spirits.

This is how Dacian and Onja made the Deamedron! he realized. He could conjure magical monoliths to imprison these souls restrained by his mind and create his own ghost soldiers who obeyed him.

The possibilities intoxicated him. He did not need to court the favor of the humans when he could create his own force of faithful and eternal Deamedron. Why should he care about the humans anyway? He was a million times greater than the best of their short-lived race. Rys deserved respect and they should demand the servitude of humans. He sullied himself by cultivating friendships with humans and promising them freedom.

I should be the master of all!

These mad thoughts filled Shan's mind while the power of his spell surged through him. Holding the helpless souls made him feel so potent. Shan's concept of magic swelled to a higher level that truly approached Onja's power.

Finally, the thin wail of souls realizing their state of limbo reached Shan's mind. The compassionate part of Shan shuddered at the sound, making the rys see that the thrill of his power had twisted his ambitions in awful ways, and had done it quickly.

"No!" Shan physically screamed and he released the Kezanada souls.

Sick with guilt Shan hurled himself onto the ground and wept until his face was muddied. Great sobs shook his blue body as he punished himself with unmitigated grief.

Is this how it started with Onja? he wondered. Was Onja once a decent being with caring feelings? Did her extreme talent for magic twist her into the Queen who loved her supremacy so much she claimed divinity?

Now Shan asked himself the most frightful question of all. *Will I decay into such an evil being?*

Rising to his knees, Shan cried, "I did not know the power would cause me such wretched temptation!"

The great old trees looming in the darkness absorbed the sound of his tortured voice, but they had little interest in his painful discoveries.

Shan's mind lurched to the present where he was riding with the Temu. Dreibrand was asking him if he was hurt because the rys had slumped in his saddle.

"No," Shan replied weakly, realizing he was exhausted.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Dreibrand coaxed.

"I learned many things. Many things," Shan said cryptically. He bowed his head and the cowl covered the glow of his eyes.

29~ The Conqueror Learns to Fear ~

Lord Kwan stayed in his small tent staring at the warding crystal for the whole night and the next day. The Atrophane soldiers waited nervously for some word from their commander and they watched the skies for the bizarre bird beast.

Kwan had no desire beyond watching the swirl of blue light within the smooth orb. When Sandin tried to intrude, he ordered away his lieutenant with all the force of a Hordemaster.

The blue glow absorbed Kwan's thoughts until they were not his own. He began to see images. He saw great blocks of stone standing on the plains. He saw his men dying, crumpling in hopeless agony, being torn apart by the ethereal hands of fearsome wraiths. Then he was in the mountains. Snowy peaks lorded over an alpine forest. He began to hear the dream voice of the Queen and was told her name was Onja.

Kwan began to understand. Onja began to make things very clear. She summoned him and his soldiers west into the mountains, and if he did not comply, she would release her army of ghosts to kill them. There was no defense from the Deamedron, as she called them. She showed him over and over her tormented spirit slaves killing the Atrophane like a scythe against grass. She showed him the horror until Kwan regained the mental faculty to beg her to stop.

Onja commanded Kwan to let the warding crystal guide him west.

Two voices started calling his name and Kwan opened his eyes. Sandin and Jesse were leaning over him. Kwan sat up, surprised that he had been asleep. It was dark except for the light from the lantern in Jesse's hand and the glow of the warding crystal lying next to him on his sleeping mat.

Rubbing his head, Kwan said, "I must have dropped off for a couple hours. It should be morning soon."

"My Lord, the sun has only just gone down," Sandin said.

"What do you mean?" Kwan demanded.

"You came in here last night, and you have been in here all day. Don't you remember me trying to talk to you?" Sandin said. Pointing at the warding crystal, he explained, "That thing put you in a trance. It is an evil charm. My Lord, you must get rid of it."

Kwan turned to Jesse and ordered his squire to leave.

Now in private, he tried to explain things to Sandin. "Someone lives in the mountains to the west. She communicated with me somehow through this crystal."

"My Lord, you are talking like a priest," Sandin complained boldly.

"I know it is strange," Kwan whispered. "But it is true. She wants to see us."

"She?" Sandin asked.

"Her name is...Onja." Kwan's mouth shaped her name slowly, trying to match the sound to the abstraction in his head.

Sandin stared at his Lord General, and Kwan realized his lieutenant thought he was crazy. He had never seen such doubt on Sandin's face, and he had to reassure his officer.

"I will try to explain later. Now I must rest. Prepare to move west in the morning. If we find what I think we will find, I will explain everything," Kwan said.

"My Lord, what will we find in the west?" Sandin said.

"Nothing, I hope," Kwan whispered and lay back down, exhausted.

"Are you sick, my Lord?" Sandin asked quietly.

"Just tired, Lieutenant."

Sandin's gray eyes looked from the warding crystal to the weary face of his commander. In his fifteen years of service, he could not recall speaking to his Lord General while he was prone.

"It really is magic. I never would have expected such things. But the beast picked you out as our leader and gave you that charm." Sandin was

half talking to himself, trying to organize the information, trying to believe it. “This Onja must be a sorceress, like from a myth. My Lord, we should not go to her.”

“You are not Lord General yet, and I will decide what we should do,” Kwan said sternly.

Sandin dipped his head to show his respect. His must keep his faith in his Lord General. It was Kwan’s duty to lead well and it was Sandin’s duty to serve well.

The Atrophane headed northwest and a week later they reached the standing stones. When the monoliths were still just dots in the distance, Kwan halted his force. He stared at the stones covering a broad swath of prairie from the northeast to the southwest, and they looked just like the images that had been put in his mind.

Sick inside but trying to hide it, Kwan ordered his soldiers to make camp, and he added the strict order that no one was to approach the monoliths. In the light of day the Atrophane were curious about the place and they quietly wondered why their commander wanted them to stay away. It was only stones on the land and they had combed the ruins of the city, but when night came, the soldiers stopped grumbling.

A fog rose among the stones and damp tendrils drifted up the hills to the edge of the camp. Then points of light began to flare over the stones and they intensified until a pulsing glow filled the forbidden field.

Kwan stood on the edge of camp, facing the glow. He did not want to believe that the standing stones really contained the ghost soldiers of Onja, but his denial would require proof and he had to go look. He opened his hand and looked at the warding crystal in his palm. It shone with a fierce light tonight and he could feel heat coming through his gauntlet.

He shut his hand against the magic light and he set his other hand on the hilt of his sword. Alone he approached the fog-shrouded stones. Every step that brought him closer became more difficult than the last. Instinctive fear clutched his heart, but he forced himself onward.

Once the mist surrounded him, the choking cold of the damp filled his lungs. He passed some small stones and stopped in front of an imposing monolith. Spheres of light beyond the monolith started to move toward him, and a bright spectral shape emerged from the stone in front of him. Kwan beheld a skeleton draped in a translucent cloak and shimmering

armor. Points of bloody red light burned in the eye sockets, and the spirit swiped at him hungrily with a wispy sword. Kwan drew his sword, but the thing did not advance. More spirits swarmed the area, until he was completely surrounded. Sensing their malice, Kwan whirled to face the ring of spirits with his weapon, but an unseen force seemed to hold them back.

Before Kwan even knew it, his feet were retreating. He looked over his shoulder as he walked backwards and saw the watch fires of his expeditionary force on the high ground. He turned and ran until he was free of the clinging mist. Gasping for breath, Kwan checked to see if any of the spirits pursued him, but they had remained in their place.

He paused before returning to the camp to gather his nerves. Tonight, Kwan, the conqueror of the east, had learned of terror. It left him exposed and changed. He could not risk his men against these wretched spirits. The images of his soldiers being slaughtered by them had been branded deeply on his mind. If Onja was bluffing about their violent potential, he would just have to find out later. He would have to go before this Queen Onja if he was to learn anything. This realization hit him like a bear trap sinking into his leg.

Two torches left the perimeter of camp, and Sandin arrived with two soldiers.

“We must definitely go around this place,” Kwan announced.

“Yes, my Lord,” Sandin readily concurred. “But why have you drawn your sword?”

Casually Kwan sheathed his weapon but gave no answer. He signaled to the soldiers to go back to camp.

When they were out of earshot, Sandin asked, “My Lord, is this what you thought we would find in the west?”

“Yes. I was told of this place while I was in the trance with the crystal,” Kwan said.

“What did you see in there?” Sandin asked, glancing at the disturbed mist.

“The very face of damnation,” Kwan replied. “Onja claims that these ghosts are her slaves and she will send them to kill us if we do not go to meet her.”

“Do you believe this?” Sandin asked in shock.

“I don’t know,” the Lord General confessed in a rare candid moment. “But for now, I believe we must continue west. If we turn back and her threat is real, these ghosts will hunt us down. What can the living do against the dead?” Kwan shook his head.

“But you were not harmed by them,” Sandin observed hopefully.

“This crystal must have protected me,” Kwan said.

“Curse that thing, my Lord. This magic could just be filling your head with nonsense,” Sandin argued.

“That is real,” Kwan cried, pointing to the haunted stones.

Sandin could not deny that. His skin tingled with preternatural warning just being close to the stones, but that gave him more reason to think his commander was possessed.

After so many years together, Kwan guessed the strain his lieutenant was under.

What would I think of Sandin if a crystal put him in a trance? he thought.

“Lieutenant, we have entered the Wilderness, and it seems the rules are different here. I cannot fully judge the situation until I learn more about this Onja. With no knowledge, how can I oppose her? And we came to explore. It would not make sense to run away from the first thing we encounter. This journey will not be what we are used to, but we must maintain the courage and discipline that has made the Atrophane supreme. We must present a united command as we have always done,” Kwan said.

Sandin understood what his Lord General alluded to. The lieutenant knew he had been especially argumentative and doubtful of every decision from his commander.

But I have good reasons to question him, Sandin thought stubbornly.

He was not some junior officer. He was first lieutenant to the Lord General, and it was his duty to speak his mind.

Never imagining that he could speak such faithless words to his commander, Sandin confessed, “Lord Kwan, you are possessed. How can I trust you?”

The words did not upset Kwan, and he actually respected Sandin for having the nerve to ask the awful question.

Kwan said, “Yes, this sorceress has communicated with me with her magic. But I am not possessed by her. I am Lord General Kwan of Clan Chenomet, Hordemaster to the Darmar Zemthute II. I serve only the side of Atrophane! You know I hold the life of every soldier, and officer, in the highest esteem, and I consider them in every decision.”

Hearing these words did reassure Sandin. Lord Kwan was Atrophane’s greatest military leader, a legend in his own lifetime, and his integrity was well established.

Sandin cast his eyes down and said, “My Lord, forgive my disloyal thoughts and words.”

Kwan readily accepted the apology. “Lieutenant Sandin, do not regret your actions. You were doing your job as an officer when it appeared your commander was under a foreign influence. You thought first of the men under your command, and that is never wrong. Responsible leadership has ever been the source of our glory. I do not know what is going to happen. If this Onja truly enralls me and I betray my duties to you and Atrophane, then by all means take command and get home—if you can.”

“I pray such a thing does not happen, my Lord,” Sandin said quickly. “I wish to be Lord General someday, but not by your misfortune. You have all my faith as always, my Lord.”

Kwan laid a firm hand on Sandin’s shoulder. “I know Sandin. You have always been the most reliable,” he praised. Kwan then thought of another officer who had not kept his faith.

After allaying Sandin’s fears and reinforcing his loyalty, Kwan addressed the men, explaining that they would travel west to meet a Queen who claimed to control the land they had entered. He perceived that the news unsettled the soldiers, but in the vast solitude of the Wilderness and in sight of the Deamedron, each man realized that they depended on the cleverness of their Lord General.

The Atrophane force traveled around the haunted standing stones. When they left the Deamedron behind, Kwan felt a measure of relief to have them out of his sight even if they were uncomfortably between him and Atrophane.

Here is the adventure you wanted, old man, Kwan thought as he led his force into the Rysamand.

Two days later, as the Atrophane ascended the eastern slopes of the towering mountains, riders appeared on the top of the next ridge. Kwan halted his men and sensed the familiar ripple of anticipation run through his soldiers.

“I see about one hundred of them,” Sandin judged, after quickly scanning their silhouetted forms.

“There could be more that we cannot see,” Kwan reminded. “They have a good position on us too. We will let them make the first move, but reinforce our flanks. Those on the ridge may just be a distraction.”

Sandin galloped down the front of the force, giving orders and positioning soldiers. Kwan patiently waited front and center. The riders on the ridge made no moves while the Atrophane rearranged their forces defensively.

After the Atrophane stewed for a while, three riders began to descend the slope. The heavy white horses managed the incline with surprising ease. No longer in silhouette, the characteristics of the riders became clear to the Atrophane. Cries of surprise and shock rose from the ranks as everyone saw that these riders were not human.

The blue riders halted a short distance in front of Kwan. The highland wind moaned against the ridge and the Atrophane fell silent. Signaling for Sandin to keep his place, Kwan eased his horse forward and marveled at their strange beauty. Their blue skin and fine features were quite attractive, but Kwan found their black eyes disturbing and mysterious, although not nearly as disturbing as the Tatatook.

The blue rider in the middle of the trio had mostly white hair with only a few remaining streams of black. All of them wore beautiful green suede uniforms, but a white cloak flowed around the shoulders of the middle rider and it looked like a stubborn snowdrift in a spring meadow.

The white-cloaked rider spoke, “You are the Lord Kwan.”

Although Kwan did not understand the language, he heard his name and nodded.

“Taf Ila,” the blue rider said, pointing at himself.

Despite the language barrier, Taf Ila was good at his job and he

peaceably convinced the Atrophane commander to follow him. The main force of rys kept ahead of the Atrophane, but Taf Ila rode beside Kwan in a gesture of good faith.

At night the two races camped separately, but Taf Ila and his two aides shared a fire with Kwan, making rudimentary attempts at conversation. Kwan managed to learn that they were called rys and Queen Onja was their ruler. Kwan wondered if these rys possessed magical powers like their Queen. Because Taf Ila and the others behaved very self-assured and were only lightly armed, Kwan assumed they must have some reason for their confidence.

In the morning the Atrophane entered the Jington Valley. The lovely city beside Lake Nin excited the humans. Lord Kwan had led them across the Wilderness and the discoveries were going to be greater than hoped. To the eyes of men accustomed to conquest, the city looked wealthy and vulnerable, and for an instant, Kwan even had to check his ambition. He remembered feeling the power of Onja, and his instinct warned him that this place was not without defense. Tact and diplomacy would be his tools for now, especially when he had no idea how large the rys army might be.

The rys stopped the Atrophane force outside the city, and Taf Ila indicated that Kwan could continue with only a few companions. Kwan selected five soldiers of excellent wit and skill, but he did not choose Sandin.

“Lieutenant, you have command. If I do not return by morning, take what actions you deem appropriate,” Kwan said.

Sandin saluted but he clearly did not relish being left behind. He burned to enter the foreign city.

With understanding Kwan added, “Your duty is here, Lieutenant. I would keep you insulated from this Queen who has summoned us. Be patient, I believe you will see the city soon enough.”

Sandin nodded, seeing the wisdom in Kwan’s decision. The lieutenant watched his Lord General ride away with his small honor guard and he sincerely hoped he would return before morning.

“Jington,” Taf Ila proudly named his city as he escorted the humans.

Kwan admired the exotic place that seemed to be a well kept place of luxury. All the buildings were large and of thoughtful design. Trimmed

hedges enclosed the properties, which were surrounded by flowering gardens and ornamental trees. Crystal streetlights lined the perfect roads, where every stone of the pavement was smooth and in place. Kwan saw no lesser dwellings for servants or workers, and he guessed that Jington might be a ceremonial city kept apart from the disparities of the rest of the world. In all of his fantasies about exploring the Wilderness, he had never envisioned such an incredible place or the rys, who seemed a race taken from some forgotten myth.

The tiered Keep rose above the city, and when the tall iron bird gates swung open on their own, Kwan knew he entered the stronghold of the magic Queen. He could almost feel her looking at him now and he could not forget the way Onja had invaded his mind from so far away.

When the door wardens opened the throne room, the glow of Onja's inner sanctum reflected on the silver studs on their jackets. The light from the four large spheres and the dazzle of the crystal encrusted walls made Kwan squint as he left the cool shade of the corridor. The white marble floor rose into the gleaming steps of the dais and a broad throne plated in gold commanded the room.

Bowing deeply, Taf Ila presented the humans to his Queen, but Kwan could not hear the rys speak. He had no perception beyond seeing Onja. She was easily the most incredible being the Lord General had ever seen. A simple black gown trimmed with sable fur covered the Queen. A netlike headdress of diamonds covered her pure white hair, surrounding her blue face in the light of a thousand rainbow facets. Kwan almost gaped at the sight of her jewels. Her headdress alone rivaled most fortunes, making him realize that Onja was unbelievably wealthy.

Onja allowed Kwan to study her, enjoying his awe. She had specifically worn her most spectacular diamond ensemble to impress upon him the magnitude of her rule.

“Queen Onja is pleased that you have come.”

The words roused Kwan from his viewing of the rys monarch and he looked to see who had spoken. The language had not been Atrophaney, but was somewhat familiar. It sounded like a dialect of the language used in the recently conquered lands bordering the Wilderness. His eyes found the figure of a small human girl seated two steps below the Queen. Her dark eyes regarded him calmly.

Kwan asked the men with him if any of them had understood the girl. One told him what the girl had said, adding that he had a fairly competent grasp of that language.

Probably just enough to pick up a wench, Kwan thought sourly, knowing that this was the moment when Dreibrand Veta would have served him best.

“Say that I am Lord Kwan and I have come as the Queen has asked,” Kwan instructed.

Hesitantly the soldier interpreted. The little girl translated for the Queen, and Kwan began to wonder where the rys had obtained the human child. He disliked communicating in a language foreign to both parties.

Onja spoke to the girl, who said, “Does Lord Kwan know that he intruded lands forbidden to all?”

When Kwan heard the question, he responded, “We are exploring. The Wilderness is an empty land without marker or warning.”

The Queen spoke again through the child’s voice. “Death is the punishment for all who enter the Wilderness.”

Kwan protested, “We did not know we intruded on land claimed by another.”

The soldier interpreted the response quickly this time.

Again in the rys tongue Onja spoke to the girl. She had carefully rehearsed each question and response with Elendra and the girl’s performance was pleasing her.

Elendra said, “If you believed the land did not belong to anyone, why do you bring an army?”

Kwan answered, “We did not know what we would encounter on our exploration. It is only a small force, meant for protection.”

As soon as the soldier managed an interpretation of the explanation, Onja spoke in the language used by the girl.

“You would make trouble where you found none!” the Queen accused, her voice ringing with power.

It was a sly accusation and inwardly Kwan smiled. Onja had faked her ignorance of the language and then revealed her feint, allowing him to see her devious nature. Now he would always have to wonder how much she

knew.

“We have made no trouble,” Kwan said with diplomatic innocence.

Onja did not need the interpretation to catch the meaning of his words. Relaxing into her throne, Onja judged the human to be cunning and proud but willing to pay the prices necessary for survival.

“Elendra,” Onja said sweetly. “You may go now. You have served me well.”

Elendra stood and bowed to her Queen. Scampering down the steps, she flashed a curious look at Kwan. Onja watched the girl leave, letting her adoration of the child distract her.

When her attention returned to Kwan, she stated coldly, “Entering my Wilderness results in death.”

“Then why have you not killed us?” Kwan asked boldly. The soldier disliked passing along the question.

Onja explained, “The death sentence has been delayed because I require a service of you. Serving me shall be the price for your lives.”

The scar on Kwan’s face rippled with restrained anger. Atrophane did not serve others. Atrophane served Atrophane.

Maintaining his pride, Kwan said, “Do we appear to you as mercenaries?”

Onja scowled at the impudent question. *The day you learn not to be argumentative will soon come...but not today*, she thought.

“I have mercenaries at my disposal. You are volunteers. I spared your lives from the Deamedron because I may have a use for an extra army. Jington may require a defense in the spring, and defending the city will be the payment for my mercy. Until then, you and your men will be sheltered and provided for. I believe my proposal is more than fair,” Onja said.

Listening to the interpretation, Kwan wrinkled his brow thoughtfully. He had not expected her to ask them to defend the city, but it did mean something actually threatened this sorceress. This would be worth learning about.

Kwan said, “Queen Onja, you said Jington may require a defense. You are not sure?”

Onja shifted her eyes uncomfortably, hating that she had not come

across as omnipotent. Her words had been too precise and miraculously not lost in the translation.

“The threat to Jington is being dealt with as we speak. Your army is a back up defense,” she answered.

“If Jington is never attacked, will we be held here indefinitely?” Kwan asked.

These easterners! How I shall enjoy teaching them unquestioning obedience, Onja thought.

To Kwan’s tentative relief, she replied, “If I do not require the help of your soldiers, I will send you home. You shall escort an ambassador of the rys to your capital. I wish to establish relations with your leader and learn about the east.”

Although encouraged that she actually said they could leave, Kwan doubted her friendliness toward Atrophane. He worried that his expedition had opened an accursed tomb.

With no options at the moment but much to think about, Lord Kwan politely bowed to his demanding hostess and said, “We shall do as you ask, Queen Onja.”

Fully aware that his agreement lacked sincerity, Onja decided to devise a fitting demonstration of her authority to reinforce his commitment when he required it.

“Excellent,” Onja proclaimed. “You and your force shall camp in the forest for now. Shelter will be arranged before the snows come. Barracks for your men, and proper lodgings for you and your officers.”

Onja waved a hand imperiously, indicating that the meeting was concluded. Taf Ila promptly escorted the Atrophane from her presence. While leaving the Keep, one thought crowded out all others in Kwan’s mind. Who or what was the enemy of Queen Onja?

30~ The Confederate Council ~

“She can’t enter the Confederate Council,” Taishek insisted again.

Shan sighed. “Taishek please. You know I will keep asking until you say yes.”

King Taishek almost crossed his eyes with frustration. “I thought you had no more favors to ask of me,” he growled.

“What more have I asked?” Shan said innocently.

“You just said you intended to bring her into the council. That is a very large favor, Shan,” Taischek said.

Sitting in the circle at the King’s campfire, Miranda for once strategically held her tongue. She knew Shan would speak best for her, but she grew tired of this wrangling with Taischek.

Incredulously Shan countered, “Why did you think Miranda came with me?”

“Because she does not like to wait for news. I don’t care. Shan, you know women are not allowed at the Confederate Council. I did not make this rule. It is only how it is,” Taischek persisted.

Dreibrand also sat in the circle and he reached for Miranda’s hand, but she jerked it away. On the three day trip, she had barely spoken three words to him and he was at a loss as to how to end her anger with him. Dreibrand had the small consolation that at least she seemed to have heeded his advice that had caused their argument in the first place. She had not offended the King, and she was letting Shan argue on her behalf.

Shan continued, “Taischek, you promised that I could address the Confederation and Miranda is part of my presentation.”

Groaning, Taischek responded, “Shan, it is not just my decision. The Confederation is based on respect among the tribes and observation of common rules. No tribe would bring a woman into the council. It is bad enough she participates in my council, but if I bring her into the Confederate Council, the Temu will instantly offend the other four tribes. Then we will accomplish nothing.”

Shan paused to think. Taischek did have his point. Shan did not want to offend his potential allies, especially when his bounty probably tempted them to be his enemy. Turning to face Miranda, Shan felt torn. The captivity of her children would generate an emotional response from the humans and it was a crucial part of his argument to oppose Onja. Having the empty handed mother at his side would create the impact he needed to draw sympathy to his cause.

Finishing off a cup of wine, Taischek poured another, feeling confident that he had actually won an argument with the rys.

Miranda looked at the King and then at Shan, realizing that Shan

considered giving into Taischek and leaving her outside the Confederate gathering. Although longing to argue for herself, Miranda remained quiet and accepted some of the dynamics of her situation. Taischek was not who she needed to convince. He already tolerated her presence, and Miranda knew he truly sympathized with her situation. After all, he had committed the Temu to the war against Onja. The recruitment of allies from the Confederation was of the utmost importance, and Miranda admitted to herself that she should not diminish Shan's chances of success.

"I will wait at camp with the horses," Miranda decided.

Taischek looked at her sharply, distrusting her surrender.

Shan said, "I will convince the other tribes to let you speak to them. I will send for you then."

"I know you will do what you can. While I sit here, everyone else will decide what to do. It is only my children in Jington," she grumbled sarcastically.

Dreibrand caught her veiled hostility. He hated this counterproductive issue and empathized with Miranda's frustration. Dreibrand knew what it felt like to be excluded arbitrarily.

Groping for a solution, he suggested, "None of the tribal delegates have to be offended right away. Miranda need not attract any attention until Shan wants her to speak. Miranda could wear a hooded cloak to hide her features. She is as tall as some men. No one will notice."

The King had hoped the subject to be concluded and he had not expected Dreibrand to propose alternatives.

"Why sneak her in only to hide her?" Taischek said.

"Because Shan wants her there, and because Miranda wants to be there," Dreibrand replied.

Miranda's expression softened and she appreciated his support. He had openly sided with her—something he had been avoiding.

"That would work," Shan agreed brightly.

"Hold on you pushy rys," Taischek complained. "I didn't say yes. What if she is noticed before you start to make your case? It will spoil everything."

Dreibrand proposed, "The Temu need not take the responsibility. I will assume all blame if any offense is taken. I am clearly not a Temu, and you

can say you did not know I brought Miranda to the council.”

It was a generous offer but Taischek had no use for it. “Dreibrand, I do not let others take blame for my decisions. You are a member of my household and offended tribal rulers will not look to you first. So I get the blame anyway.”

“You are right, King Taischek. I was only trying to find a solution that would suit all of us,” Dreibrand said.

Taischek found himself reconsidering. “Shan, can she really help you that much?”

The rys nodded. There were many reasons to rebel against Onja, but Miranda seemed to make those reasons clear to people.

“Miranda puts a human face on our cause. It is natural to help a woman whose children have been stolen,” Shan explained.

Taischek tapped his wine cup thoughtfully with a jeweled finger. He locked eyes with General Xander who was sitting on his right.

“She will get everyone’s attention,” Xander said.

Slowly the King decided, “We are breaking so many rules already, I suppose one more won’t matter, but we will do as Dreibrand suggests and conceal the fact that she is a woman. I suspect tomorrow many things will change, including the Confederation.”

Shan agreed, “Tomorrow will be a momentous day for humans and rys. What I have to say will cause plenty of disturbance. Offense caused by Miranda may highlight our enemies more than it insults our friends.”

“Then I should get my rest. This war might start tomorrow,” Taischek concluded.

With the meeting over, Shan and Miranda left to practice her wording and pronunciation for what she needed to say. Dreibrand went to his bedroll to attempt some sleep before his watch, and he thought that Miranda had stopped looking so angry with him.

When he stirred for the late watch, he sought out Miranda.

Sitting awake in the dark, she heard him coming. “Dreibrand?” Miranda whispered.

He answered her and crouched beside her. Nearby, Shan slept deeply, renewing his strength, and Miranda seemed to be watching over him.

For a moment they sat in an awkward silence, until Miranda said, “So what did you want?”

“I was, I mean, I wanted to...” he trailed off. He felt himself on the verge of some kind of apology but he restrained it. He had already had to apologize to the King for her and he had not liked it.

“Why are you still up? You should get some rest,” he said.

“I cannot sleep. I am too excited for tomorrow. And Shan rests tonight. Many tribes are camped in the area, and I was worried,” Miranda said.

“I think we will be safe for tonight,” Dreibrand commented. He wanted to reach out to her, to kiss her. “Well, I have to get to my watch.”

Miranda caught his hand when he stood and she rose to face him. “Thank you,” she said simply.

“For what?”

“For sticking up for me with the King,” she replied. “It meant a lot to me.”

Feeling his anger dissolve, Dreibrand reminded her softly, “You made me promise to take you to the Confederate Council.”

“I should not have become so angry with you,” she confessed.

Dreibrand could tell that it had been hard for her to say that. Now he did put his arms around her. “I lost my temper too. I regret the quarrel,” he said.

“You were right. I should have used more care when speaking to the King. You tried to give me good advice, but I ignored you,” Miranda recalled.

“Let us put our angry words behind us. I see now that you are careful not to upset Taishek,” Dreibrand said.

Miranda sank into his embrace, whispering, “After so much freedom, it was hard being told what to do. I was so free in the Wilderness, and now I feel restricted and I got angry.”

“Everyone has pressures on them. Rules to follow. It is hard to take sometimes,” Dreibrand agreed. He cupped Miranda’s cheek in a hand. “Miranda, I will not choose the King before you, but I am trying to please him with my service. Taishek has much to offer us. I need to look to the future. When Shan is King, he will reward me and I will be wealthy. Then I

will ask Taischek to sell me some Temu land, or if I am lucky, he will grant me some for my services. You and the children will need a home.”

“You are good to think of us,” Miranda murmured.

Dreibrand kissed her, relieved to have the return of her affection.

“I have to go. Remember, we are on the same side,” he whispered.

Miranda smiled and let him go. He disappeared into the dark to take his place on the camp perimeter, and Miranda marveled at her luck in finding such a trustworthy companion.

By morning she had fallen asleep and Shan roused her. Miranda felt queasy and she did not eat her ration, taking only a little tea instead.

As Shan tied her hair back and arranged the hood over her face, he asked what was the matter with her.

“I think I am too nervous to eat,” Miranda answered.

“You will do fine. Probably better than me. And there will not be nearly so many people as in Dengar Nor,” Shan encouraged.

“How many people will there be?” she said.

“Each King will have about fifty men with him, plus there will be some rysmavda, so two hundred fifty to three hundred,” Shan answered.

“And everyone just meets in the forest?” Miranda wondered.

“No, the Common Ground is a special meeting place. It is a very ancient place. Humans have lived here a long time. You will see,” Shan said.

Shan pulled the cloak around her torso and stepped back to consider her appearance.

“Do I look like a Temu warrior?” Miranda asked skeptically after she slung her bow over her shoulder. Dreibrand had acquired a few arrows to fill her quiver, but her arm was still weak and her shot was not good.

“No, but you do not look like anything and that will be enough. You will sit behind General Xander away from Dreibrand and me. Most people will be looking at me or Dreibrand because he looks different. No one should notice you until I call for you,” Shan explained.

“I am ready,” she said.

When the Temu delegation reached the Common Ground, Miranda understood what Shan meant when he called something ancient. The

woodland gave way to the ruins of an amphitheater surrounded by statues. She could sense the antiquity in the sunny clearing as if the land itself remembered the many people who had come here through the ages. All five tribes of the Confederation considered this place neutral territory, and they had been meeting here for over two hundred years. One paved path led to the amphitheater, and it showed signs of recent repairs. Fresh paving stones had been placed where ancient ones had withered into the grass, and vines had been cut away from the statues.

The two statues flanking the path were larger than the others. No one knew the names of the stone humans or what tribe they may have belonged to. The arms of the statues had broken away long ago and the faces were worn dim by the ceaseless elements. Even so, a hint of ancient majesty lingered upon the faint features. Miranda felt uneasy as she passed between the statues as if they knew the secret under her cloak.

The amphitheater had been renewed by the Confederation, and new stones had been cut to replace the broken seats. Each tribe took a section of seating and the Kings were in the front row at stage level. There was King Ejan of the Tacus, King Atathol of the Zenglawas, King Sotasham of the Hirqua, and King Volvat of the Nuram. The blue robes of the rismavda were plain to see next to the kings of these tribes, and warriors in their various tribal regalia filled the rows behind their leaders.

All eyes were on Shan and a tangible tension flirted among the Confederates.

King Atathol of the Zenglawas, who was the elected speaker every year, strode to the center of the stage to call the council to order. His straight black hair fell freely from underneath his fox-trimmed crown. Precious stones dangled from his pierced ears and a rich red velvet robe draped his royal body. From the voluminous robe he removed a parchment scroll and all in attendance guessed what document it had to be. Jington had delivered a copy to every tribe.

In the traditional manner Atathol greeted the gathered tribes and blessed the Confederation for the peace and prosperity it brought, but he obviously rushed the opening formalities. Only the words on the parchment occupied the minds of the council.

Skipping the mundane issues usually discussed at the annual meeting, Atathol pointed at Taishek with the scroll and asked, "Have you brought

this renegade rys to share with your allies, Taischek, King of the Temu?”

No one expected Taischek to say yes, but everyone listened expectantly.

His round face stern with dignity, Taischek stood up and joined Atathol on the stage. He knew Atathol liked being the center of attention and he enjoyed taking some of it from him. Placing his hands on his hips, Taischek measured the gathering with his eyes.

“It is well known that Shan is a trusted friend of mine,” Taischek said with great antagonism.

Atathol responded, “Your friend has been condemned by Queen Onja. The Confederacy must not defy Jington.”

Taischek hurled his gaze at Atathol, demanding, “Would I ask any of you to give up a friend because he is wanted? The Confederacy is about respecting each tribe’s sovereignty, not taking from each other.”

The Prime Rysmavda of the Zenglawa hurried to Atathol’s side and challenged Taischek’s statement. “No one here needs to be reminded what the Confederacy is for. But you forget that the Confederacy is just a part of Onja’s domain. No authority is above our Goddess. Keeping Shan in your domain could bring Onja’s wrath onto the entire Confederation. I propose a vote to decide if Taischek should give up Shan for the good of the Confederation.”

Atathol immediately concurred and motioned for the vote to be done without delay. A few shouts of approval came from the crowd, mostly from the Zenglawa section, but Taischek protested.

“To what purpose?” he barked. “Would you set all the tribes to quarrelling over my friend’s head? Onja would never award the bounty to the entire Confederation. Or would you claim the prize, Atathol?”

“How dare you, Taischek!” thundered the Zenglawa King.

Taischek sneered, “Don’t act so insulted. I know of the extra Zenglawa warriors in the area.”

Many faces scowled throughout the gathering. All the tribes were guilty of bringing more warriors than usual, but the Zenglawa had been the least discreet.

“Of course, we all know who would really get the bounty—the rysmavda,” Taischek added.

“I will not listen to your accusations, murderer,” the Zenglawwa Prime Rysmavda shouted. “It is the faith of the rysmavda that nurtures the goodwill of the Goddess.”

“It is the faith of the rysmavda that sends our goods into the mountains,” Taischek retorted.

While the Prime Rysmavda sputtered on his rage, Taischek continued, “And I think Athol brought extra warriors to attack me if I continued to protect Shan.”

“Would you accuse me of wanting to start a war on the Common Ground?” Athol cried with indignation.

“I accuse you of hoping to capture Shan,” Taischek said.

“And why wouldn’t I?” Athol demanded defensively, looking to the audience for support. “Every tribe desires the bounty. Does Onja’s offer not tempt you, Taischek?”

“No!” Taischek roared. “Onja makes no real offer anyway. She offers a tax break. The Queen tempts you with that which is rightly yours. The Temu have no need to betray Shan. We have joined Shan in opposition to Onja, and we shall pay no tribute this year or ever again! I, King Taischek of the Temu, announce to you my Confederate brothers that the Temu are free.”

The Temu contingent applauded their King, but shocked murmurs rolled through the audience and many a brave warrior let his mouth slip open, aghast.

Before the wave of surprise crested, Taischek continued, “The Temu invite their allies to join this noble cause. In the spring we march to Jington to cast down the Queen.”

The rysmavda seated by each king instantly advised each leader to spurn Taischek’s proposal, and the Zenglawwa Prime Rysmavda addressed all the delegates at once.

“Do not listen to the blasphemer. The renegade Shan has put a spell of madness on him. The only reason the Temu still live is because Onja must think of a special punishment for their heinous actions.”

Taischek laughed at the Prime Rysmavda. He was so happy he did not have to tolerate the priests anymore.

“Lord Shan does not put a spell on me. He speaks the truth, and the truth is Onja does not have the power that she had in centuries past,” Taischek said.

“Fool!” Atathol gasped. “Onja is the Goddess. She will kill us all for listening to your madness. Her wrath will soon be upon us.”

“And what is Onja’s wrath?” Shan queried as he strode out beside Taischek.

A hush fell on the amphitheater, and Shan hoped they all felt foolish arguing about his fate in front of him.

As if Taischek could actually give me to them, Shan thought.

With Shan’s approach Atathol actually stepped back and the Prime Rysmavda quailed behind him. Now that Shan was closer, the Zenglaw could no longer pretend he was some insignificant rys. They could not ignore the aura of his power, especially when they had been speaking against him.

Shan said, “I am listening, King Atathol. What is this wrath you seem to know so much about?”

Atathol glanced to the Prime Rysmavda for support. “Queen Onja will make us into Deamedron,” the King answered.

“She would have to leave Jingtun and come here to do that. Not even I could cast a spell that powerful over such a long distance,” Shan explained.

The Prime Rysmavda found his tongue. “Queen Onja, our Goddess, can strike us down with fire and burn us alive. You can’t deny that, you rys heretic.”

“In her younger days she could,” Shan agreed with a viperish congeniality. “But she does not have the strength anymore. Onja has grown too old to terrorize the lowlands as she once could.”

“Onja is eternal!” shouted the Prime Rysmavda.

Shan scoffed, “Rys are not immortal.”

King Ejan of the Tacus stood up to speak. He was a tall man and his skin was darker than most of the Tacus, which was a trait of his royal family. A circlet of silver rested on his velvety short black hair.

“Lord Shan, has Onja truly grown weak with age?” he said.

“Yes, King Ejan. She is twice the normal age for a rys, and she is much weaker now,” Shan replied and he was glad to read the interest on the face of the Tacus King.

“You said her power could not terrorize the lowlands. Does that mean her power is still great in the Rysamand?” Ejan asked.

This was a detail Shan did not want to advertise, but he had to be honest with his potential ally. Ejan was an intelligent man with a large army. “You are correct, King Ejan. In the Rysamand, her power remains profound. The weakness I refer to is in her range. I assure you, she cannot hurt us here.”

Ejan considered Shan’s words and they did make sense to him. He reasoned that with age a man’s sight could become shorter, so with age, a rys’s magic might not reach as far.

“But when you and Taischek go to Jington, Onja will be able to attack you with her magic,” Ejan surmised.

“My power will protect all who march with me. And when I battle with her, she will have to focus all of her power on me, and yes, King Ejan, her magic will be great, but I am greater. When she is defeated, I will become King of Jington and master of the Rysamand. But I will not demand tribute. The human tribes will be free of rys rule.”

With excitement Taischek added, “Can you not see that the Age of Onja is at a close? The crazy Queen is old and her powers are fading. Shan is in his prime, and he is a fair and generous being. I know I am not the only one here who has seen his good character. We would all be better off with a friend in Jington instead of a tyrant.”

Shan appreciated Taischek’s enthusiasm, and he could see that Ejan wanted to believe.

King Volvat of the Nuram now stood up to speak. “Lord Shan, you answer the King of the Tacus with good words, but will you have good words for my question? If you are powerful enough to defeat Queen Onja, why do you hide with the Temu and ask for our help?”

It was an uncomfortable question for Shan, especially the way Volvat put it.

Inclining his head in polite acknowledgement of the just question, Shan answered, “I ask for your help because your very obedience to Onja helps

to keep her strong. She thrives on control of the human tribes and it pleases her when you send your tribute. If you turn away from her and reject her rule, it will shatter her confidence, which will make her more vulnerable to my attacks.

“I also ask for your help because unfortunately not all humans will be bold enough to defy Onja. Whole armies may try to prevent me from reaching Jingtun. I have to rest sometimes and I need the protection of my allies.”

Volvat accepted the logic in Shan’s explanation but he was clearly not convinced. “I have no desire to meddle in the affairs of Jingtun,” he decided.

Shan hid his disappointment at the blunt rejection and said, “Then agree not to hinder me or the Temu in our cause. Even your passive support would be helpful.”

Volvat pressed his lips together in consideration and sat down.

Atathol snorted with impatient disgust. “Taishek, this is madness. If you will not see reason, take your rys friend and leave. No one wants any part of your suicidal dreams. The Temu are only free to die a horrible death.”

Flushing with anger, Taishek restrained himself from striking the rude Zenglawa King. He had never liked Atathol and his opinion was not improving.

The Temu King managed a diplomatic tone and suggested, “I’m sure the other kings have more questions. Let us give Shan the stage so he can finish his proposal.”

“As Speaker, I deny your request. Both of you leave now,” Atathol ordered.

“You have no such authority,” Taishek scoffed.

“The Confederacy will not listen to any more blasphemous rantings from heretics,” the Zenglawa Prime Rysmavda screeched.

“The Rysmavda are not the Confederation!” Shan shouted with a sudden horrendous anger. Blue light filled his eyes and his spell vaporized the warding crystals hanging from the necks of every rysmavda in the amphitheater. It was a stunning blow to the rysmavda to see Shan destroy the very representation of Onja’s magic touching their bodies. “Where I

walk, Onja has no power. Any spell she makes, I shall undo,” Shan declared.

The rysmavda with every tribe cried with outrage and fear when their warding crystals disappeared in a flash of heat, leaving black scorch marks on their robes. The Prime Rysmavda of the Nuram Tribe promptly left the council with his lesser rysmavda in tow. When the other priests saw this, they decided to do the same.

As the rysmavda exited the amphitheater, Atathol said, “This meeting is dissolved.”

Ejan spoke. “Wait, King Atathol. Nothing requires the rysmavda to be at the Confederate Council. I am interested in hearing more of what Shan has to say. Let the guest of the Temu continue.”

Looking for support, Atathol eyed Sotasham, the Hirqua King, who had not spoken yet.

“King of the Hirqua, you have ever been a reasonable man. You surely agree with my judgment?” asked Atathol.

Sotasham shrugged and responded, “I like this talk of no more Onja.”

When Atathol failed to find anyone to agree with him, Shan narrowed his eyes at the Zenglawa and whispered, “See, they do not share your unshakeable devotion to Onja.”

Shan’s stern look unnerved Atathol but he disguised his discomfort with a display of disgust. Throwing his hands into the air, he stormed back to his seat. Once nestled among his grim Zenglawa warriors, he glowered at Taischek.

“I told him he didn’t have the authority,” Taischek muttered smugly as he returned to his seat.

Alone on the circular stage, Shan felt an odd vulnerability. The surrounding humans seemed so alien and the hold Onja had on their minds was strong, but he had to break it for the good of everybody.

Drawing a deep breath, Shan began, “Onja has kept the human tribes in servitude for many centuries, skimming the cream from your labors. I personally know the Queen of Jingtun takes pleasure in simply dominating you. I was sent to Onja’s court as a ryslign and I was raised as her ward. I have spent long ugly years in her household, witnessing her callous decisions and feeling her wicked thoughts. She considers humans amusing

pets that can be made to serve her demands.

“I believe that Onja is evil and she corrupts the potential in my own kind. Her excessive demands of tribute make Jingtun wealthy, but the rys do not earn anything. They do not deserve their luxuries. The rys used to have a reason to be proud, and they were skilled in many esoteric crafts. Now they are lazy and supercilious. The rys have no need to live off the fat of your land, when we could prosper by our own means.

“I admit that while I prepare to confront Onja, I need allies to help me. The Temu believe in me and I thank them for their support. The Temu have ever been strong and good allies in the Confederation and they should not face this challenge alone. Join us and be free. None of you should pay tribute this year. Send Onja the message that you will be her slaves no more!”

These words stirred Ejan’s heart, but he was hesitant to get involved in a rys power struggle.

Ejan said, “Lord Shan, you have been a friend to me and helped me in the past, and the Tacus have benefited from your generous counsel. But I see a rys who would be King. There is nothing wrong with that, but I do not know if I could take my tribe into such a dangerous war just to support your ambition. The Tacus despise Onja’s taxes, yet we live well and the consequences of failure in this venture are grave.”

“True enough,” Shan conceded. “I am ambitious, but with your help I will not fail. At least deny Onja her tribute. The blow to her ego will diminish her confidence, and confidence has great value in the making of magic. But there is another reason I must return to Jingtun and cast Onja down. A reason you may find more worthy than my desire to lead my kind.”

“What might that be?” asked Ejan, who was interested but skeptical.

Pausing for effect, Shan replied, “Onja holds captive two human children, taken from the people visiting from the far east. I have brought their mother to attest to this crime. I must defeat Onja so I can reunite this family and restore the honor of rys, who Onja sullies with her crime.”

Shan beckoned Miranda. Taischek stirred uneasily as she entered the stage and he wanted to grab her and conceal her, but he resisted the urge.

This might be entertaining, he thought with whimsical resignation.

Miranda fought the natural anxiety of being on stage. It was easier this time with a smaller audience, but they were all important tribal leaders, which was intimidating. At least the rysmavda had left. Shan's mysterious eyes gleamed at her and she believed in his strength. She had to show these people her faith in Shan's abilities, and Miranda now understood that Shan needed her faith as well. Meeting the rys, she grasped his outstretched hand and with her free hand, she tossed back her hood.

Many cries of surprise filled the amphitheater. Miranda suspected many of the remarks concerned her foreign racial appearance as much as her improper presence. Atathol, however, did not hesitate to attack this violation of protocol.

The Zenglawa King sprang to his feet and shouted, "Outrageous! Taischek, this is too much. You jeopardize all of us by siding with this Jingten fugitive and now a woman!" The speaker of the Confederacy actually floundered with the rest of his angry words, such was his indignation.

Taischek merely folded his arms and ignored all the shocked looks from the other tribes. Atathol stormed toward Miranda as if he meant to physically remove her. Seated with the Temu, Dreibrand tensed with readiness. He did not care if Atathol was a king backed up by warriors.

If that man touches her, he will get hurt, Dreibrand thought.

"I will not allow this insult," Atathol declared.

Miranda leveled her green gaze at the outraged King. She recognized too well the tone of his voice and the stomp of his foot. His manner and posture reminded her of her former master when he had been about to assault her. Miranda's toleration for such treatment had stopped many months ago.

"Be quiet and sit down. We have important matters to talk about," Miranda snapped.

Her disrespect halted Atathol two paces away. No one in all of his life had ever spoken to Atathol in such a way, especially a strange woman, and he briefly lost touch with reality.

Taischek roared with laughter. He really could not help it. The expression on Atathol's face was worth all the upset Miranda had ever caused him. Leaning close to Xander, he remarked, "I thought she gave

me a hard time.”

Then louder, Taischek said, “Miranda has my leave to be here.”

General grumbling occurred throughout the council, but the fascination with the proceedings outweighed the break with tradition.

Atathol hissed, “You will pay for your insolence, woman.”

“There is little you could do to frighten me,” Miranda said with pride.

“Please sit King Atathol. I am not finished,” Shan urged in a soothing voice. He bent his will toward the upset Zenglawawa, hoping no one would notice his subtle spell. Shan had seen Onja use magic in this way many times. Although he hated mimicking her, Shan decided it was necessary to calm the Zenglawawa King. Miranda had been reckless with him.

Atathol returned to his seat, but he still seethed with anger.

Quickly returning to business, Ejan asked, “You are the woman of Taischek’s foreign mercenary?”

Miranda answered that she was. Shan interjected and introduced Miranda properly, explaining her story. In general, the people of the west were quite interested in seeing and hearing about the people from the east. Many had already been glancing curiously at Dreibrand most of the morning, but no one had guessed that an eastern woman was concealed in the Temu ranks.

As Shan told how Onja had claimed Miranda’s young children and then nearly killed Miranda for protesting, many human hearts stirred with anger. As Shan had expected, this human drama aroused their emotions. Not paying taxes to Jingteng tempted these people, but worrying about their children might actually motivate them.

Hearing how Miranda had defied Onja and suffered injuries from the hand of the Queen made some of the assembled warriors look upon her with respect, which was new for Miranda. Privately, warriors wondered if they could have been so fearless in the face of the dreaded rys Queen.

As Shan concluded her sad story, Miranda implored the council, “Please give Shan the help he asks for. If not to make Shan King of Jingteng, then to help me get my children back. Shan is the only one powerful enough to face Onja’s magic and defeat her. This I know much too well. Therefore, I will be at Shan’s side as he returns to his homeland no matter how many warriors Onja can buy to stop us. If you will not help us with your swords,

at least keep your tribute. Let Onja know her final hour approaches.”

Miranda’s plea had a definite impact on the council. Any honorable man automatically wanted to help her, even if Shan’s cause had not moved him before. And Miranda’s brave pledge to return to Jington and oppose Onja again shamed those that feared to face their tyrant at all.

Dreibrand smiled proudly when Miranda finished her speech. At that moment he thought she was the finest strongest woman he had ever met.

Ejan looked from Miranda to Shan, then glanced at his counselors. Finally the King of the Tacus proposed, “I call for a recess for the rest of the day, so that the tribes may consider the requests of the Temu and Shan.”

Indulgently Shan nodded. He knew Ejan to be a man who made careful decisions without rushing, but the rys felt confident that the Tacus would take his side. The Zenglawa, Shan had dismissed as a loss. Athol obviously lusted for the bounty. Five years without owing tribute tempted him more than a future of freedom.

“A recess is an excellent idea, King Ejan,” Athol agreed for once. “Do the other kings concur?”

All the tribes readily agreed because they had much to discuss and consider, and the council was closed for the day. The excitement and importance of the morning’s events caused the gathering to disperse in a quick informal manner. People left their seats and formed talkative knots, and the Kings of the Zenglawa and Tacus departed immediately with their warrior entourages.

“Well it is done then,” Taishek said as Shan and Miranda rejoined their group.

Glumly, Shan eyed the thinning crowd and muttered, “I do not think I did well.”

“It was fine,” Taishek encouraged. “They may be my allies but they are not Temu. They are not as brave as us. They will need time to come around to our way.”

“Some will,” Shan said, trying to retain some confidence. Trying to persuade people with words and reason was often discouraging.

Taishek directed his attention to Miranda now and scolded, “We did not come here to start a war with the Zenglawa.”

“Yes, my King,” Miranda said respectfully, but she noticed that Taischek did not really sound upset.

“But the Zenglawa may have come here to start a war with us, Sire,” Xander said. “Atathol left with a purpose in his step. We should get back to our camp and secure it well. I do not trust him—not even on the Common Ground.”

Taischek nodded as he heard his General’s wise counsel, accepting that he must now be wary of even his Confederate neighbors. The peace and prosperity between the five tribes had lasted for generations, and Taischek regretted that his choices had brought a good thing to an end.

31~ The Third Assassin ~

The fires of the five tribes burned late into the night in the hills around the Common Ground. The Temu had proposed a revolution and the Confederates debated it hotly. Some believed Shan could defeat Onja. He had disgraced the rymavda by destroying their warding crystals like he was swatting at a bug. Rumors from the Sabuto Domain indicated that Shan had allowed the Temu to destroy a whole town in a morning, and they had looted a temple. And of course there were the recantations and executions of the Temu rymavda. No matter how much the rymavda attached to the various tribes condemned the act, it only brought attention to the facts that the Temu had defied Jingtun and Onja had not struck with her killing magic.

No one could dispute that Shan was powerful, but some insisted that his power could not possibly match the power of Onja. Yes, Shan could make strong spells, but it did not mean he could defeat the Queen in a face-to-face battle in the Rysamand. Others argued that Onja’s great age had to be weakening her, as Shan said, and the time was right to rally behind a rys champion and free themselves of Onja’s domination.

Then Shan’s sincerity about revoking rys rule of humans came into question. Some believed in his good character, but other people would never trust a rys as a matter of principle.

Some counselors and warriors were practical and based their decisions on simple loyalty to the concept of the Confederation. King Taischek had asked for their assistance, and as allies, they should comply, at least in

some way.

Final decisions varied from tribe to tribe.

At the Temu camp things were quiet because they had chosen their course weeks ago. Shan meditated, listening to the discussions of the other tribes, particularly the Zenglawa. When he was done spying, he let his mind drift, exploring new ways to express his magical abilities. Late in the night, Shan emerged from his trance and relaxed into his bedroll. The stars reflected in his black eyes, but he missed the view of the night from the clear high slopes of the Rysamand.

Shan heard Dreibrand wake up and shake off his grogginess, preparing for his watch. Miranda had fallen asleep hours ago and Dreibrand did not disturb her. Shan was thankful to have friends nearby. He almost pitied Onja, knowing that she existed bereft of any sincere companionship.

Maybe that is why she keeps those innocent little children, he speculated.

Sitting up on his elbows, Shan whispered for Dreibrand, who made only a faint rustle in the darkness when he moved closer.

“Tomorrow may not go well,” Shan said.

“I know,” Dreibrand agreed. “I had doubts about even coming here. Do you think any of these people will join us?”

“The Tacus will. Ejan wants to join and he is convincing his tribe right now,” Shan reported.

Shan’s knowledge impressed Dreibrand, who thought it was incredible how the rys could monitor people far away. It was a tremendous advantage but Dreibrand worried that they might need it.

“Any other tribes?” Dreibrand inquired.

“The Nuram and Hirqua were still arguing when I stopped listening, but I do not expect them to cause us any harm. Now it is the Zenglawa who trouble me. They have many warriors in the area, and I know they will disregard the sanctity of the Common Ground. Tomorrow they will try to kill me,” Shan answered.

“What? We must tell Taischek. When are they coming?” Dreibrand cried urgently, but Shan quieted him.

“No need to wake anyone. I will talk to Taischek about it in the

morning. The Zenglawa will not attack our position tonight. They plan to place assassins in the audience tomorrow. When I speak on the stage, they will try to shoot me with arrows,” Shan said, shaking his head at their folly. “They talked so openly as if I could not listen to them.”

“Maybe they did that on purpose to misguide you, and they plot something else,” Dreibrand suggested.

“Oh, I am sure they will plot many things, but I know the assassins will be there tomorrow. I read it in Atathol’s mind—may I never have to go there again,” Shan said.

Dreibrand paused. It was sometimes startling to consider the extent of Shan’s powers. “What will you do then?” he whispered.

“I will protect myself with my magic. I can prevent their weapons from hitting me. I shall try to neutralize the assassins without killing them. I do not want anyone to say a guest of the Temu violated the Common Ground. I will only defend myself,” Shan explained.

“Will that be enough? What should I do?” Dreibrand asked.

“Watch for trouble. I will have most of my focus on those assassins, and I might miss another threat. But hopefully after I thwart the Zenglawa that will be the end of it for a while. Do not be so distressed, Dreibrand. This will give me a chance to demonstrate my power to all of the Confederate tribes,” Shan said.

Dreibrand disliked the plan. “Shan, do not go tomorrow. I want you to avoid this danger,” he recommended.

“You flatter me with your worry,” Shan murmured.

“I need you to get to Jingtten,” Dreibrand said.

“Yet I will go to the council tomorrow,” Shan insisted. “If I cannot be brave with humans, how can I be brave with Onja?”

Dreibrand stopped arguing and accepted that they would not gain allies by showing fear.

Shan continued, “I regret that I pull these tribes apart. The Confederacy has brought peace to the north.”

“It is best to draw the lines early in a battle. If they will not be allies now, they were worthless allies anyway,” Dreibrand stated.

“Tomorrow the Confederation may dissolve, and it will be the end of a

good thing,” Shan lamented.

“As you like to say a new age is coming,” Dreibrand said. “Old alliances crumble and new ones will form. I suppose some bad days lie ahead, but once the war has started, you will get used to it.”

Shan chuckled darkly. “You always make things sound so simple. Even so, I regret the deaths I cause, so that I can set things right in Jingteng.”

With a sigh, Dreibrand admitted, “Perhaps I just make things sound easy to soothe my own conscience. Maybe I am wrong to say you will get used to the dying, but the world is a beautiful place where people do ugly things. I entered the military life over two years ago and I have seen a lot of carnage, even directed a lot of it myself. After a while one does become numb to the killing. The true test to my soul was to let myself feel the pain around me. When you let yourself be numb, you will kill for no reason...”

Dreibrand trailed off, remembering Miranda close to death on the glacier. He tried to remember the last time he had played with Esseldan. He even missed Elendra although the little girl probably did not miss him. Looking up at the stars, he did not ask for redemption but the strength to win more battles. With the blood of so many on his hands, he could tolerate another war.

He continued, “But this war we make on Jingteng must be done. It must be done for the humans, for the rys, and for Miranda.”

“You are right, Dreibrand. This war will be terrible like all wars, but I hope more good comes of it than evil. I have chosen my actions, and I must not moan about the consequences,” Shan decided. He then apologized to Dreibrand for making him late for his turn at watch.

Reluctantly Dreibrand went to his duty and watched carefully until dawn, expecting the Zenglawa to attack.

In the morning Taischek was not pleased with Shan’s news about assassins, and he complained at length about Atathol’s worthless character. No tribe had ever been so deviant as to plot a public assassination on the Common Ground. Like Dreibrand, the Temu King did not want Shan to attend the council, but Shan convinced him that he could handle the assassins. The rys emphasized that he did not want the Temu to raise arms while on the Common Ground, unless it was absolutely necessary.

“Let the other tribes see the evil Onja inspires in those loyal to her,” Shan concluded.

In the amphitheater, faces were grim and warriors fingered their weapons nervously, fearing the Confederacy might collapse at any moment.

As speaker, Atathol swaggered onto the stage and opened the council for the second day.

The Zenglawa King announced, “Before the tribes proclaim their decisions, I would remind my Confederates why our ancestors long ago acquiesced to the rule of Onja. She has been the Queen of Jington for as long as we have history, and she deals with her enemies harshly. In life she demands loyalty and taxes, but our spirits are free. Her enemies she makes into Deamedron, shackling the soul with magic. And the Deamedron are not just humans, but rys too.” Looking directly at Shan, he added, “Even the rys long ago accepted the rule of Onja.”

Shan countered, “Long ago, long ago! You speak of centuries past. Then, Onja truly was supreme, but twenty-two centuries have passed since she made the Deamedron. Her time now fades, and it is my time of ascension. The strongest rys always rises to the throne. It is the natural course of our society. Onja is not immortal, and she is afraid. Why do you think she tries to pay humans to murder me? It is because she cannot do it herself.”

Atathol barked, “You have made your case, Shan the pretender. Now let me warn my human brothers against your dangerous ideas.”

“I can assume I will not have the friendship of the Zenglawa to rely upon,” Shan said with cold certainty.

“The Zenglawa will not participate in any revolt against Jington,” Atathol proclaimed.

“Will you raise arms against the Temu if Onja commands it?” Taishek demanded bitterly.

Atathol cast his eyes down, answering no.

Taishek frowned. He had seen Atathol lie better, but at least Atathol had given him the courtesy of lying poorly. Shan and Taishek exchanged knowing glances.

King Ejan rose from the Tacus section and said, “The Zenglawa have made their decision and shared their opinion. The Tacus now wish to

state their decision.”

Atathol begrudgingly yielded the stage, deeply suspecting the Tacus King had a greatly different opinion.

Solemnly Ejan announced to his Confederates, “The Tacus Tribe has decided to lend its full support to Lord Shan and the Temu. Shan’s vision of a world free of Onja’s tyranny appeals to us. I know Shan to be an honorable rys who will end taxation from Jingtén, like he said. I would see my tribe inherit a free world, and I will join the Temu on their march to Jingtén.”

Ejan crossed the stage and bowed to Shan.

“Lord Shan, I will commit half of my warriors, including myself to your campaign in the spring. And the Tacus will pay no tribute this year,” Ejan declared.

Shan stood up and returned the bow, gratefully accepting the pledge of the Tacus King.

The Hirqua and the Nuram announced their decisions next. Unfortunately they did not commit warriors like the Tacus, but the tribes did lend what support their courage would allow. The Hirqua agreed not to pay tribute, but they wanted to reserve their army for the defense of their homeland with rebellion sweeping the land. The Nuram would not directly enrage Jingtén by withholding tribute, but King Volvat sincerely pledged not to raise arms against the Temu or any of its allies.

Militarily Shan had only gained half an army, and that not until spring, but much had been achieved. Two more tribes were withholding tribute, and this defiance would shock Onja. The snows would block the pass by the time she wholly accepted that three tribes were actually not sending tribute. Then it would be too late for her to send the rys soldiers that the humans feared.

Shan kept his mind tuned into the surrounding people, especially the Zenglawa. He could feel each body and every soul, and he vividly recalled his attack on the Kezanada. He disliked the memory but it gave him strength. Shan felt the edginess among the Zenglawa and he located three assassins in the top row of their section. He felt their lurking excitement. They believed that they could kill him and win Onja’s favor for their tribe.

It was important to Shan that Atathol betray himself in front of his

Confederates. If the Zenglawa were to be his enemy, Shan wanted them isolated. He did not want Atathol to reconsider his plan, and Shan decided to present the assassins a better target and coax Atathol into attacking.

Better now than on the road back to Dengar Nor, Shan thought.

When Shan left the partial security of the Temu section, Dreibrand restrained himself from following.

Noticing the discomfort of his foreign warrior, which he shared, Taischek whispered, "They must see Shan's strength."

Taking the stage, Shan issued a rather bland and uninspiring thank you speech. His mind could not be spared to focus on elegant words. As Shan expressed his appreciation for the audience that they had allowed him, he casually faced Atathol several times. Atathol stared back at Shan with great intensity, and the rys could sense the Zenglawa's courage coiling for the strike. Speaking while focusing on the assassins became more difficult and Shan realized what a gamble he had taken. If his concentration was flawed, he could get hurt.

Appearing to remove his attention from Atathol, Shan heightened his awareness around the King and the assassins while ending his speech. The rys no longer saw his audience with the sight of his eyes. With his mind, he saw only his enemies, and his magical perception provided him with the vivid details he needed.

He saw the subtle hand signal from Atathol. From the top row of the Zenglawa section, three bows swiftly rose with archers behind them. Arrows jumped onto the strings as the assassins took aim. Shan visualized his spell instantly. Not long ago wielding magic of this precision and power would have taken him a long period of mental preparation, but his skills were expanding rapidly.

Miranda and most of the other people saw the assassins raise their weapons as Shan turned his back on them. Except for a few gasps, there was no time for anyone to react.

"Shan!" Miranda cried in a strangled voice as her hands flapped excitedly for her bow, although she could not possibly make a shot in time.

With a vibrating snarl two arrows flew from their bows. Shan's mind had locked onto all three minds of the archers and he knew the instant the men decided to release their shots. Shan's eyes burned bright blue as his

spell sheltered him. Instead of the arrows slamming into his exposed body, the missiles burst into hot flames and only sprinkled his rippling cloak with sparkling ashes.

The third assassin had yet to fire his shot, and he hesitated as he watched the other arrows wither in the impregnable magic around the rys. This assassin had been prepared to shoot, ordered to do so by his King and Prime Rysmavda, but in the final moment, he had been reluctant to murder. His fingers still tentatively held the string.

The other two assassins reached for their second arrows, but Shan ended the assault. His mind enveloped the bows in the hands of the three archers, and the weapons were incinerated in a superheated flash. The failed assassins cried out in pain and flung the glowing embers from their burned hands. Sparks rained onto the Zenglawa section, and warriors scrambled away from the assassins, fearing more retaliation from Shan.

The fiery spectacle of Shan's defense convinced all who saw that Shan had reason to boast of his power, and the Tacus were further encouraged by the display. However, the Zenglawa paled with fear, and not a single warrior dared to draw a weapon. With a perturbed menace, Shan whirled on Atathol. Eyes still glowing with power, Shan approached the King, who cringed in a very unroyal posture.

"I am as powerful as Onja," Shan snarled. "So if you lack the courage to strike at her, do not expect to succeed against me."

"They—they did not have my consent. I would not—I would never condone such an action on the Common Ground," Atathol stammered.

"Silence!" Shan roared. "Atathol of the Zenglawa has disappointed his Confederate brothers. Leave now before you cause more trouble."

Thrilled to see that Shan had weathered the attack, Taischek sprang to his feet, followed by Dreibrand. Miranda left her seat as well, but a firm yet gentle hand took her arm. General Xander had halted her departure. The Temu opened his toothy mouth but issued no words. He really wanted to say just about anything to her, but a crushing shyness assailed the valiant Temu General.

"Let go of me," Miranda insisted.

Xander finally managed some words, knowing he could not grab her and not say anything. "Stay. You should not go near the Zenglawa. It is not

safe. Remember how you angered Atathol? He may be unpredictable, especially in this moment of shame.”

“Shan will not let the likes of him hurt me,” Miranda argued.

“Is there not enough trouble, Lady?” Xander whispered.

Miranda had not intended to give in, but the pleading look in Xander’s eyes made her relent. The council did teeter on the verge of a violent eruption, and she decided to go along with the General’s sincere wish to protect her.

Taischek and Dreibrand were at Shan’s side now, and Taischek yelled, “How dare you attack my guest and friend? Atathol, if I didn’t have greater things to accomplish, I would call this an act of war. But I won’t sunder the Confederacy because of a foolish Zenglawa. Atathol, you are never to enter the Temu Domain and may we never speak again.”

Atathol barely heeded Taischek’s tirade because he was so shocked that his plan had failed. The arrows had been in the air, and Atathol still had not fully accepted that Shan had not been hit. He had meant to swiftly kill the rys and end the mad rebellion that Taischek had infected the Confederation with. Once Shan was dead, the Zenglawa could have claimed the bounty and life would have continued without worry of Onja’s retribution. Now Atathol had enraged the renegade rys and disgraced his tribe in front of his allies.

Regaining some composure, Atathol stood despite Shan’s simmering proximity. Taischek glared at him with passionate offense, and the foreign mercenary seemed ready to kill him right now. The other tribes were yelling with outrage, and some Tacus warriors had tried to reach the assassins, but a line of Zenglawa warriors had formed to stop them.

Braving their hatred, Atathol announced his retreat. “The Zenglawa shall depart. But remember us when Onja enslaves your spirits.”

“Let them leave in peace,” Shan shouted, before anyone got hurt.

The Tacus warriors who had sought to seize the assassins relented, remembering that this was the Common Ground.

As the Zenglawa left their seats, Shan scanned their faces. They quaked in the sight of his ire, but Shan resisted the pleasure their fear offered him. He wondered why Onja’s bounty had tempted them so much more than his offer of freedom, but he did not hate them. Shan forced himself to

forgive their greedy foolishness.

They are insignificant compared to my true enemy, he thought.

The Zenglawa section had almost cleared out when Shan noticed one of the assassins still standing on the top row. It was the archer who had not fired, and he was staring back at Shan. The archer's scorched hands hung at his sides, and he was oblivious to the glares from the nearby Tacus. One of his comrades grabbed his arm and pulled him along with the last of the Zenglawa. For a moment Shan's attention lingered on the archer, and he wondered why the Zenglawa had not fired his arrow. He had been about to do it. Shan had read it in his mind. Perhaps he had convinced one member of the Zenglawa not to serve Onja, but it was a small consolation.

As the last of the Zenglawa passed between the ancient statues on their way out, Taischek muttered a few Temu expletives.

Shan spent the rest of the day talking privately with the other kings. Ejan arranged to muster with the Temu in the spring and share information until then. The Kings of the Nuram and Hirqua further agreed to pass along any useful information to Dengar Nor, particularly if they noticed more Kezanada movements.

That evening, Shan returned to the Temu camp feeling encouraged and especially glad that no fatal violence had occurred at the council. Around Taischek's fire the mood was relaxed now that the worrisome council had ended. Scouts had reported that the Zenglawa had broken camp and were leaving in the gathering dusk. Because it was not Taischek's way to stay too serious for too long, he settled in after his meal for some drinking. A servant fetched a bulging wineskin from his cargo—an act Xander readily applauded.

"I brought this in case things went well," Taischek explained, although everyone knew Taischek brought the wine in case of anything.

Dreibrand passed Miranda a cup of wine before accepting his own. Her closeness pleased him, and he wished they could slip away into the darkness, but the sentries kept a tight perimeter, and they would probably attract undesired attention.

The King raised his cup and all the others followed.

Taischek toasted, "We have lost the Zenglawa as our Confederate brother, but the Confederacy continues. This is a minor loss compared to

the gains we will make. To the future King of Jington!”

Shan allowed their cheers to please him.

32~ Volunteers ~

After three or four more toasts to Shan and to himself, Taischek easily got a few cups ahead of everybody else and he spoke in a pleasant stream of words.

“Oh, Shan, I really enjoyed the way you showed everyone what a sneaking cur Atathol is. I never liked that man. He has no flair for arrogance, unlike myself. When you turned on him, I thought he was going to piss himself. Maybe he did a little.” Taischek laughed, and was echoed by Xander’s chuckle.

“I would have rather made a friend of him,” Shan lamented.

Taischek scoffed, “Atathol was supposedly my friend for years. But did he ever pay a friendly visit? Did he ever make a generous gesture? All he ever asked of the Temu were loans and ridiculous prices on trade items. You know, I even heard a rumor that he has a cousin married to a Sabuto. Can you imagine?!”

Miranda yawned discreetly on the other side of the campfire.

Using her language, Dreibrand whispered, “If you want to be included, you will have to listen to his stories.”

She smiled at his teasing. “You listen for me.”

Before Taischek progressed any further with his celebration, the challenges of sentries rang out on the perimeter, and Taischek quickly became serious again. Dreibrand stood up and drew his sword. He had expected some trouble.

To Miranda he said, “Stay close to me and Shan.”

A modest commotion moved through the camp and a warrior trotted into the light of his King’s fire. Dreibrand recognized him as Iley.

Bowing to Taischek, Iley reported, “Sire, a party of Hirqua warriors has approached the camp.”

Scowling, Taischek asked, “Do they attack?”

“No, Sire. They announced themselves openly and in peace. They wish to speak to Shan—Lord Shan,” Iley added respectfully and dipped his head to the rys.

With raised eyebrows, Taischek faced Shan. “Maybe you’re a little more popular than you thought, eh?”

“Perhaps,” Shan mused.

“Can we trust them?” Dreibrand wondered openly.

“The Hirqua are still our allies. We must allow the visit. They have joined us in refusing tribute to Jingtun,” Taischek said.

“All a deception maybe. To get close to Shan,” Miranda suggested.

The rys considered things for a moment and decided, “I must receive these Hirqua. But prudence is required. Iley, have the Hirqua choose three representatives, and I will speak with them. Keep them guarded though.”

Taischek approved the plan and sent Iley on his way.

Remaining on his feet, Dreibrand put his sword away but intended to stand guard between Shan and the Hirqua.

Iley returned leading three Hirqua warriors who were guarded by several watchful Temu. The Hirqua kept their black hair short, but they were racially very similar to the Temu with dark eyes and pleasing faces. Stiff leather armor covered their torsos and forearms. Brilliant multicolored cloaks hung down their backs, and the design and weave of each garment signified each man’s family. Swords hung from their waists, and they normally carried spears, but the Temu had temporarily confiscated them.

“Why do the Hirqua approach my camp at night?” Taischek demanded gruffly.

The three warriors were young men, in their teens or just beyond. The oldest replied, “We meant no harm or offense, King of the Temu. We wish only to speak with Lord Shan.”

“King Sotasham said he could send no warriors. Why does he send them now?” Shan said.

The Hirqua bowed deeply to Shan, but his awe of the powerful rys did not make his words falter. “Our King has not sent us. We are individual warriors that come to serve you, Lord Shan.”

“You go against your King’s orders?” Taischek asked with displeasure.

Quickly the Hirqua explained, “No, we have King Sotasham’s leave to come here. He cannot commit our tribe to war, but a Hirqua warrior is a free warrior. Some of us want to join Lord Shan as an individual interest. As long as there are enough to defend the Hirqua homeland, warriors are free to pursue private warpaths.”

Very interested, Shan asked, “What is your name?”

“Tytido of Clan Gozmochi,” he replied proudly.

“How many have come with you, Tytido?” Shan said.

Gesturing to his companions, Tytido answered, “Besides us, thirty five more, Lord Shan.”

“And why do you join me?” Shan inquired.

“I believe, and so do the others, that more must be done than sit home and await the outcome of this rebellion. My tribe has agreed to withhold tribute, so our interest is firmly based upon your success, Lord Shan. I am willing to fight so that Clan Gozmochi can live free of Onja’s tyranny. Today the Zenglawa showed us that people would serve Onja against you. I wish to defend you from her servants who would prevent you from reaching Jington.” Shan regarded the other two Hirqua and said, “Tytido of Clan Gozmochi speaks well. Do you think as Tytido does?”

The other warriors introduced themselves and echoed the sentiments of Tytido. One of them added, “I will fight to return this lady her children.”

This comment startled Miranda. The concern of the stranger touched her deeply. Miranda remembered how her own people had openly disregarded her suffering, even when she had screamed for help when Barlow attacked her.

Shan declared, “This is all very excellent. Hirqua warriors make your camp where the Temu instruct you. We shall speak more in the morning. And welcome.”

The three Hirqua bowed to Shan and thanked him for his acceptance.

When the Hirqua were escorted away, Shan commented, “That was a pleasant surprise. I wonder if more men will join us by spring.”

“There will be more,” Taischek said. “If the Hirqua really intend not to pay their tribute, they will have to send more. It is good to see Sotasham

will not keep all of his warriors at home. He probably even encouraged this Tytido and his lot to come to you. He is trying to have the best of everything without risking his army.”

“Yes, but the Hirqua are our second best ally after the Tacus, and this Tytido is sincere. I must find a place for these Hirqua warriors,” Shan said.

“We will absorb them among our ranks,” Xander offered.

Thoughtfully Shan shook his head. “I do not know if that would be best. The Temu and the Hirqua are Confederates but each tribe has its ego. The Temu warriors will want to lord over the Hirqua volunteers as a matter of pride. I do not want the Hirqua to resent their position among the Temu and rethink their decision to serve me. These Hirqua are proud and I doubt they will like taking orders from an equally proud Temu. I think they will serve me best if kept together as their own unit.”

Taischek said, “They have yet to prove their trustworthiness, and until then they must be controlled.”

“Yes, I know, Taischek,” Shan conceded. “But I have a solution. Put a trusted man as commander over them. This will control them and preserve their strength and morale.”

“Who do you have in mind?” Taischek asked.

“Dreibrand,” replied Shan, looking to his friend.

Dreibrand’s eyes widened with obvious interest. “You honor me, Shan.”

“You are most capable of the task and best of all you are of no tribe. You will bear them no prejudice and they will have no biases to hold against you,” Shan explained.

Dreibrand almost burst out with his acceptance. Until that moment, he had not realized just how much he missed command, but he remembered to ask permission.

Restraining his excitement, he said, “King Taischek, do you agree with this? I would like to accept with your leave.”

The King considered Shan’s proposal. Taischek did trust Dreibrand, who had so far pleased him very much, and the Hirqua most likely would not respond well to a Temu commander.

“Dreibrand, I recognize that our cause will be better served with you as

a commander. You have my leave to command any volunteers who come to serve Shan, but you will still be in my service. I will trust you to keep these foreigners from disturbing my domain.”

Thanking the King, Dreibrand accepted his new responsibilities with a broad grin. At this moment assuming command of three dozen warriors felt as grand as receiving his commission in the Atrophane Horde. He was concerned about how the Hirqua would react to him because he was a foreigner, but he had never had much difficulty cultivating obedience and loyalty from his men before. He recalled that it had been everyone above him who had caused him problems.

Lifting the sloshing wineskin, Taischek said, “We had better have a toast to Shan’s new general then.”

After a quick glance at Xander, Dreibrand politely said, “General? There is no need to lift me so high. It is only a command of three dozen men.”

“Xander is the general of the Temu, and you will be the general of those that come to serve Shan. Perhaps by spring you will have more than a few Hirqua to command,” Taischek explained.

“There will be more volunteers, especially after I tell Tytido and his fellows that they will be rewarded handsomely for serving me,” Shan added.

“Not out of my share I hope,” Taischek cried with good nature.

“You know I would never do that to you,” Shan said.

Chuckling, Taischek accidentally drank some wine before he made the toast and he had to refill his cup. “To Shan’s general, then.”

Noise erupted on the perimeter again, interrupting the toast.

Dreibrand was the first to rise and his sword hit the night air again. “Perhaps I have nothing to command anyway,” he muttered, scanning the dark for intruders.

“Report!” Xander hollered.

A warrior acknowledged him and scrambled off to investigate. When he returned, he said, “Sire, General, several Nuram warriors approached our camp, but as soon as they announced themselves to the sentries, they ran into the trees. The situation is a little confusing. We are trying to collect

them all now.”

With a groan, Xander hauled himself to his feet, grumbling, “I better handle this myself. This could be a trap.” As the General stomped away from the campfire, he barked orders in every direction.

“Now the Nuram are skulking about,” Taischek said.

“Maybe they are more volunteers,” Shan remarked hopefully.

From across the camp they heard shouting in the breezy night. Dreibrand fidgeted impatiently, almost on the verge of investigating the commotion himself. Setting down her wine, which she had barely touched, Miranda stood beside him and her presence reminded Dreibrand of where he wanted to be.

When the camp quieted, Xander returned and reported, “Five Nuram warriors have come to offer their service to Shan. They claim they discovered a Zenglawa lurking outside the camp after they greeted the sentry, and that is why they ran off. They were trying to capture him.”

“A Zenglawa. Did they get him?” Taischek said.

“Yes, Sire. I don’t know if the Nuram are mixed up with him or not. I have politely detained the Nuram, and Shan can decide if he wants to speak to them. The Zenglawa spy is a prisoner. Some of the men got a little excited when we finally nabbed him and smacked him up a little,” Xander explained.

Taischek chuckled but said, “Make sure that stops for now. We are better than the Zenglawa. Do you want to see these Nuram, Shan?”

The rys had been staring at the fire, but his attention snapped back to his surroundings when he heard his name. He answered that he would see the Nuram.

The group of Nuram warriors was from the same family. Two were brothers and all were cousins. Although their tribe would not openly support Shan, these men had decided to fight Jington for reasons similar to the Hirqua who had volunteered. Shan deemed them quite sincere and welcomed their contribution.

After meeting with the rys, the Nuram were taken to join the Hirqua, and Xander settled back into his place by the King.

“Sire, what should we do with the Zenglawa spy?” he asked.

Taischek grumbled, "I don't know. I don't want to think about those Zenglawa. When we depart in the morning, just leave him tied to a tree."

"That is very lenient of you, Sire," Xander said.

Shan spoke up, "Taischek, let us see this Zenglawa."

"I don't want to see a Zenglawa. I have had enough of their rudeness," protested the King.

"But he might be interesting," Shan persisted.

"Oh, if you must," Taischek relented and called for the prisoner.

Two Temu warriors produced the Zenglawa, whose hands were bound. Blood was caked under his nose and a puffy bruise discolored his caramel skin above his right eye. His long straight black hair had picked up a few leaves when he had been rolled on the ground, but the gleam in his eyes made it clear that no simple beating would lessen his pride.

Much to everyone's surprise, Shan jumped up as soon as the prisoner was presented.

"Why are you here?" demanded the King as if he knew the man.

The Zenglawa did not reply and Shan stalked up to him and looked at his hands. They were painfully scorched and blistered.

"Come back to try again?" Shan growled.

The Zenglawa shook his head and said, "I come to serve you, Lord Shan."

Taken aback by the declaration, Shan said, "This morning you wanted to kill me."

"This morning I wanted to obey my orders, but I never wanted to kill you, and I did not," the prisoner responded.

"So you disagree with your tribe?" Shan asked.

"Yes, my Lord. It upset me when I was ordered to be an assassin, especially on the Common Ground. I am a master archer, and I use my skill for battle or sport, but I am not a murderer. King Atathol wanted me to be the instrument of his dishonor. I sought to obey him and think that his reasons were good. I thought maybe if you could be killed, you were not worthy of the allegiance you asked for," the prisoner explained.

"There's some Zenglawa thinking," Taischek snorted.

An angry look crossed the prisoner's face, but he remembered his situation and kept his emotions in check. He continued, "But I could not do it. I did not take the shot, although I don't suppose anybody noticed. Everything happened so fast."

"I know you did not take your shot," Shan said and the prisoner's eyes lit up with awe. The ryls had not even been looking at him.

"Then, when you did not kill me or the other men who fired at you, I realized the good in you. You could have killed us—burned our whole bodies. You had every right to. Am I wrong?" he said, lifting his injured hands.

"I have no desire to kill anyone, but sometimes necessity demands it," Shan said. "What is your name?"

"I am Redan," the Zenglawa answered, lifting his head with pride.

"Atathol has sent him as a spy," Taischek decided.

Shan held up a hand to quiet Taischek. He fully understood how deeply the Zenglawa had insulted them all, but he did not want Taischek to vent his anger on this one young warrior. Although Shan realized Redan could be part of an elaborate deception, he wanted to believe in the Zenglawa's change of heart.

"Does Atathol know you are here?" Shan asked.

Redan answered, "No, I will no longer serve Atathol. He ordered me to shoot at your back, and I almost did it. I feel guilty for even lifting my bow. I wish to cleanse myself of this dishonor by serving you. Lord Shan, only you are worthy of my skill and loyalty."

Tired of the Zenglawa's speeches, Taischek complained, "If he is not a spy, he is a traitor. We asked for allies not Zenglawa strays."

Crossing his arms, Shan pondered his latest volunteer. Most likely Taischek was right about the man, and short of interrogating him during a mindreading, Shan could not decide.

"Redan, I would like us to be friends, but you understand that it will be difficult for you to earn my trust. I must take my enemies very seriously these days."

Giving into his misery, Redan hung his head and yielded, "I can only prove myself through good service, but if I cannot have the chance, then

punish me as you see fit, Lord Shan.”

“I have but one enemy to punish, and she awaits her fate in Jingtun. Go back to your tribe, Redan,” Shan declared.

Redan considered the possibility of returning home. He could catch up to the Zenglawa, but he still considered his tribe disgraced and he had abandoned his King’s side without permission.

Dreibrand had been observing the prisoner while Shan spoke to him. He had noticed the burned hands that marked him as an assassin, but when Dreibrand heard that this archer had not taken his shot, he became interested. Perhaps Shan’s power and goodness had won over one Zenglawa. Cursing himself as a fool, Dreibrand made an impulsive decision.

“I will accept you, Redan,” he announced. “Prove your sincerity to me, and I will recommend you to Shan. And if you are a spy, may the Gods help you, because I will find out.”

All faces turned to Dreibrand with various shocked expressions.

“Dreibrand, you can’t be serious,” Taischek sputtered. “The man does not deserve a chance. If anything he says is true, he has at least been faithless to his own King. He will be faithless again.”

Taischek’s judgement of the prisoner bit unknowingly deep into Dreibrand’s conscience.

“But, King Taischek, would you not agree that Athol does not deserve his loyalty, especially because he serves Onja? Just because Redan has chosen to change his loyalty does not mean it is not loyalty,” Dreibrand said.

Taischek studied Dreibrand long and hard and was not altogether pleased with his attitude. *But how else would a mercenary think?* the King concluded.

“I still don’t trust him,” he grumbled.

“Nor do I, but I would give him a chance. Of course, it is still Shan’s decision,” Dreibrand said.

Shan wondered what had compelled Dreibrand to give the Zenglawa a chance. Whatever his reasons, Shan knew Dreibrand considered his security of the utmost importance and he decided to trust Dreibrand with

Redan. To himself, Shan admitted that this archer intrigued him, and if the circumstances were different, he would probably immediately like the man.

“What do you think, Miranda?” Shan asked.

For a moment she considered her answer. The Zenglawa accent of the prisoner had been harder for her to understand, but she had followed most of the conversation. “I think any of these volunteers might be spies,” she warned, and Taischek laughed, appreciating her perfect suspicion.

“This one certainly is,” Taischek said.

“Not certainly,” Shan countered, making up his mind. With a hint of magic fire in his eyes, he leaned close to Redan. “You shall have your opportunity, Redan. This is Dreibrand Veta who has taken responsibility for you. You will obey him in everything.” Then speaking over his shoulder to Dreibrand, he added, “If at any point you doubt his motives, kill him.”

“Of course,” Dreibrand agreed.

“I hope we will speak again, Redan,” Shan said.

“We will, Lord Shan, and thank you,” Redan promised.

Shan returned to his seat by the fire, content to leave the Zenglawa to Dreibrand’s judgment. Taischek greeted him with a sour look, but Shan defended his action by insisting volunteers needed to be given a chance. It was hard enough to get people to go against the rule of Onja as it was.

Ignoring their conversation, Dreibrand focused on Redan, seeing some of himself in the Zenglawa warrior. After a nod from Dreibrand, the Temu guards released the prisoner and Dreibrand pulled out his ivory handled dagger. The Zenglawa flinched before he understood and put his bound hands over the blade so Dreibrand could cut him loose.

“Your days with me will not be easy. But if you prove trustworthy, things will improve,” Dreibrand stated.

“Then things will improve,” Redan said confidently.

33~ The Armory Unsealed ~

Nufal was broken and dying but Dacian did not revel in his victory. A madness struck the King of Jington and he cursed his own genius that

won the war. He commanded our agents to put their weapons in the water, and when they did not want to, he made them obey with his magic—Urlen, Kezanada chronicler, year six of Amar's Overlordship.

When the Atrophane heard that the rys Queen commanded them to stay in Jington until spring, their impulse was to rush into the open city and conquer it. Kwan longed to do the same, but he would not allow it. More needed to be known about rys powers before attempting aggression. The Lord General ordered his men to be patient and observe the enemy.

Life remained pleasant for the humans, and the Jington Valley grew more beautiful every day as the golden hues of autumn mingled with the deep green conifers. Although the Atrophane still camped in the forest, the rys supplied them well and were gradually outfitting some unused buildings for their housing.

Even a month after meeting the intimidating Queen Onja, Kwan still found the gathering of information about the rys to be painfully slow. His greatest obstacle was the language and he prioritized learning it and bade all of his men to pursue this interest. Unfortunately, the rys appeared to take little outward interest in the humans and they were openly snobby, rarely attempting to speak with them.

However, Taf Ila visited the camp daily and Kwan sought to learn from him. The rys captain showed little desire to oblige Kwan, but the Lord General wore him down with persistence, following the captain and asking incessant questions.

Because Onja had not forbidden it, Taf Ila finally began teaching Kwan in brief daily lessons. Giving the human some time each day was far better than suffering his constant badgering in a foreign language.

At first, progress was slow for Kwan. For a lifetime he had spoken only his native language. The conquered could learn to speak Atrophaney as far as he had been concerned, but now necessity motivated Kwan and he practiced diligently.

Learning the rys language from Taf Ila's uninspired tutoring might have proved impossible for Kwan, but then the rys began to enjoy his daily sessions with Kwan and they became longer and more detailed. In all his centuries of life, Taf Ila had dealt with many humans on an official basis but he had never interacted with one on such a personal level before. His time with the human increasingly pleased him and Taf Ila grew to

appreciate the other race, enjoying the differences and being surprised by the similarities.

Yet, Taf Ila disliked the presence of the humans because they reminded him of the changing times. He knew Queen Onja plotted to dominate Kwan's homeland and in the mean time use his army in the coming war with Shan.

This war with Shan troubled Taf Ila most of all. The news from the lowlands was never good these days and getting worse.

Keeping his worries to himself, Taf Ila continued teaching Kwan. One afternoon during a lesson, they sat on a hillside overlooking Jington. The humans would be moved into the city that night, but until then Taf Ila wished to enjoy the fine day out of the city. Pointing to the surrounding peaks, the rys told Kwan their names, obviously pleased to describe his homeland. Attentively Kwan listened. All knowledge of this strange land was good.

Abruptly Taf Ila halted his lecture and turned toward the trail that zigzagged up the hill. His relaxed and happy demeanor faded as he sensed his daughter approaching. He jumped up and marched down the trail.

Wondering what had disturbed his teacher, Kwan followed and saw a rys female scrambling up the slope.

“Hello Father!”

Kwan understood the greeting, but Taf Ila had never mentioned he had a family. Although rys did not show their age much, Kwan judged the female to be youthful. He thought she was lovely with fine sharp features and pure black hair, glistening like spun onyx. The tone Taf Ila used with the fair child surprised Kwan.

“Why are you here?” Taf Ila barked. “I told you not to come near the humans, and now you have just crossed their encampment.”

Quylan started to explain herself but her father interrupted.

“You have directly disobeyed me,” Taf Ila accused. *I was having such a good day*, he lamented.

“But I have a reason!” she blurted. “The Kezanada Overlord approaches.”

Looking at the west road in the valley below, Taf Ila said, “How do you

know this?”

Quylan straightened her shoulders proudly and replied, “I perceived them. They are still many hasas away but I can see farther than most rys. No one else in the city has noticed their approach—”

“Stop bragging,” Taf Ila cut her off although her rapidly maturing powers impressed him. He knew his daughter could see even outside the Rysamand. “I assure you Queen Onja took note of them long before you did.”

Quylan frowned at the reminder but continued, “Father, I had to find you. Please let me come with you to the Keep when the Kezanada arrive. I must hear their news. Too many warding crystals protect the throne room and I will not be able to listen to the Overlord’s meeting with the Queen.”

Taf Ila gasped at his daughter’s words. He wanted to grab her and shake her, but he would never treat her roughly. His voice shook with emotion when he ordered, “Do not ever spy on Onja! Where do you even get such ideas? Quylan, do you think your silly young mind could elude the Queen? Onja would perceive you in a second.”

“Then take me with you, Father. Then I will have no need to spy,” she pleaded.

Sorry for his anger, Taf Ila said softly, “Do not concern yourself with such things. It is only the Kezanada tribute caravan.”

“But they are early!” Quylan insisted. Tribute caravans were never early.

Taf Ila shrugged. “The Kezanada are wealthy. They do not care when they pay.”

“But they must have news of Shan. Something must have happened,” Quylan said, revealing her true concern.

“Who are Kezanada?” Kwan interjected. Although he had not gathered why Taf Ila was upset with his daughter, Kwan did understand that a group called Kezanada approached the city.

Taf Ila had almost forgotten that Kwan waited nearby. He tried to explain, “They are...mercenaries. A society who sell their services.”

“They Onja’s enemy? Attack Jingteng?” Kwan asked, almost hoping to see some action and maybe free himself of Onja before winter.

“No. They are no threat. They are paying their taxes,” Taf Ila said.

Disappointed, Kwan wondered what this society of mercenaries was like and why they paid taxes.

“Are Kezanada rys?” he asked.

Such a notion offended Taf Ila but he reminded himself that Kwan asked only out of genuine ignorance. “Humans,” he answered bluntly.

Since Kwan had spoken, Quylan had been staring at the human from the east.

“He does not look like the other humans,” she whispered.

“The humans from the east look different, but they are still humans,” Taf Ila explained quietly.

Kwan decided to introduce himself because they were talking about him. “Lord Kwan of Atrophane. Hello, daughter of Taf Ila.” He bowed politely.

His manners impressed Quylan. A human had never addressed her before and the encounter fascinated her. Taf Ila put a protective arm around his daughter and pulled her close. Normally he would not have introduced her to a human, but he felt the impulse to extend Kwan this courtesy.

“This is Quylan,” he said.

Kwan made an effort to recall some new vocabulary and managed to compliment, “She make you proud.”

With an exasperated smile Taf Ila admitted, “She makes me lose sleep.”

“Daughters,” Kwan laughed. “I have two girls.” He realized he had not thought about them for a long time.

“Then you will understand that you must excuse me. I have to take this daughter home,” Taf Ila said.

“Father, I want to go to the Keep,” she protested.

Taf Ila gently insisted, “I shall take you home, but I will tell you any news as soon as I can.”

Quylan had to accept her father’s decision but she pouted with disappointment.

“I hope Shan still lives,” she said.

Taf Ila winced. “Stop talking about Shan,” he ordered. “Lord Kwan, I

will send rys to see you and your men to your new quarters tonight. I may not be available, but if you have any problems, send word to me at the Keep.”

Kwan nodded and thanked him. He wanted to ask more questions, but Taf Ila hurried away with his stunning daughter.

Now who is this Shan? Kwan thought.

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Onja settled into her throne, excited to receive the Kezanada Overlord. Since the rymavda executions in Dengar Nor, she had not observed the lowlands and she was looking forward to good news from the Overlord. The audacity of Shan’s tactics had angered her so terribly that she had stopped watching. His strategy would lose its effectiveness on her if she ignored it. If she did not see what was meant to frustrate her and advertise her reduced range of power, she would not suffer from the mental toll Shan wished to take from her mind.

The lives of a few priests were insignificant, and Onja had placed her hope in the Kezanada. She knew they had been massing for a strike against Shan and today Onja dared to think that they had been successful.

So pleased by the thought that the Kezanada had completed their assignment, Onja did not probe the mind of the approaching Overlord for confirmation. If Shan was dead, she wanted to experience the moment of delight without forewarning. Onja had even devised a special spell of preservation for Shan’s head to keep the trophy fresh and glorious.

The great doors opposite the Queen parted, admitting the Overlord and his entourage. The Overlord strode across the cool marble with the confidence of a very powerful man. He was a man of large build with a hefty girth and huge arms bulging with muscle. One long braid hung down his back, ending in a clasp set with a large ruby. A gold trimmed black mask covered half of his face because it was traditional for Kezanada to conceal their identities from people outside their society. His dark eyes peered through the mask with a cunning gleam. He possessed a creative and cruel intelligence that was sometimes subdued by the various things he put in his pipe. But today his mind was sharp and clear, as it always was when he met with Onja.

A jeweled belt held a scimitar to his waist and his mighty frame was

clothed in richly embroidered robes that were trimmed with brightly dyed furs. His apparel conveyed a sense of excessive wealth more than taste, but the Overlord did not care if Onja saw how rich the Kezanada were. Most of the wealthy and powerful segments of society hired the Kezanada occasionally, and Onja often employed the Kezanada as agents of her malice. This gave the Kezanada the distinction of actually earning more from Onja than they paid in tribute. As the Overlord often liked to note, the rys so hated getting their hands dirty.

Onja clawed the armrests of her throne as she anticipated the news she wanted to hear. The Overlord stopped before her dais and kneeled, as did the rows of Kezanada behind him, who all looked the same in their horsetailed helmets with their visors down. Unmasked servants with shaved heads carried a large chest to the front of the throne room, stopping beside the Overlord.

Normally Onja would speak first, but she remained strangely silent. With his knees beginning to ache under his weight, the Overlord decided to proceed. Rising, he stepped over to the chest, and with a flourish, he flung it open. Gold, silver, jewels, curious rare crystals, chunks of uncut jade, and lovely figurines carved from alabaster and studded with lapis lazuli filled the chest.

The Overlord was fluent in the rys language, which was rare for humans, and he began his speech. “The Kezanada respectfully present their Goddess Queen, fair mistress of Jingtun, with the finest prizes we have to offer from a year’s labor. Along with this magnificent chest of treasure, the Kezanada have brought cattle, grain, fine furs, and many items that will please the citizens of Jingtun.”

With a sick expression Onja stared at the chest, curling her lips with displeasure. It was just the Kezanada’s usual tribute and the Overlord was giving his same old boring speech. The twinkle of treasure had never looked so dull to Onja. Somehow, Shan had robbed her of even this pleasure.

“Stop!” she thundered.

The Overlord obeyed and crossed his arms patiently. He had been waiting for the outburst.

“You were to bring me Shan’s head. I said you were excused this year’s tribute as downpayment for your service. Why are you here with your

junk? Why do you not hunt Shan?" Onja demanded ominously.

The Overlord withstood her angry glare and explained, "The Kezanada have lost a hundred good men pursuing Shan. Great Queen Onja, we are only humans, and we cannot get near the powerful rys, who has so offended you. Shan knows where we are before we know where he is."

Scowling, Onja said, "How could you have lost one hundred Kezanada?"

The Overlord felt his blood pressure surge. The news of the massacre in the Nolesh was still fresh and upsetting. Outwardly he maintained his trademark calm, answering, "I had massed a force in the Temu Domain to fall upon Shan when he left Dengar Nor. Then my people found this force all dead without any sign of battle, without so much as a wound. I can only conclude that Shan killed them with his magic."

Onja frowned, scolding herself for not monitoring Shan, but she had hoped to avoid the exertion. And she had not expected Shan to do such things.

So, Shan finally used his superior powers to kill his precious humans, Onja thought with wicked satisfaction.

Despite the pleasure Onja gained from knowing how Shan must have been morally tormented by this action, she acknowledged his advanced use of power. Now more than ever, Onja knew she could not allow Shan to return to Jington.

"So the Kezanada have given up," Onja criticized.

The Overlord tolerated the sting in her words, but he had a purpose to his patience. "The Kezanada have already suffered their worst defeat in many generations and did not even engage the target. With such losses, we do not profit. The Kezanada have decided it would be worth it just to pay the tribute."

"Since when can the Kezanada not be bought? Do you not want your revenge?" Onja stormed. She could not imagine that Shan had subdued the notorious Kezanada.

At the mention of revenge a subtle smile curved under the fringe of the Overlord's mask. "Oh, the Kezanada desire Shan's head," he hissed.

"Then why are you here?" the Queen demanded again.

"We require your assistance, Great Queen," he replied.

Onja glanced uncomfortably toward the attending Taf Ila, remembering his opinion of the bounty on Shan. She knew many rys would disapprove of her increased participation in the hunt for Shan. Onja had no fear of her subjects' disfavor, but she did not want the distraction of a disgruntled citizenry either.

"Taf Ila, take your squad and leave," she ordered.

For an instant Taf Ila almost protested the breach of security, but he caught his tongue. Onja and her mercenaries were discussing Shan, and he did not want to be involved. Without a word, he marched out with the guards.

This privacy made the Overlord wonder if he should be worried or impressed. Either way Onja certainly meant to talk seriously.

"What assistance do you have in mind?" Onja asked.

Containing his excitement, the Overlord said, "Give us some magic charm that will protect us from Shan so that we can approach him. Surely you must have such a thing."

Onja did not answer. Although her face appeared inscrutable, the Overlord could guess that she had something on her mind, something important, something she did not want to tell him about.

Slowly the Queen made her reluctant decision and nodded. "I believe I have some items that will help you. Overlord of the Kezanada, meet me again tomorrow and I will give you that which you ask for."

The Overlord bowed graciously to Onja and kept his thoughts buried.

Late that night, Hefshul ferried his Queen across the blackened lake. A cold wind howled down from the peaks and the old mute rys had to strain against the waves. Hefshul had long ago given up any concern for Onja's activities, but his silent thoughts guessed the nature of her errand.

With the skiff rocking against the gravel shore in front of the Tomb of Dacian, Hefshul hunkered down into his fleece coat and watched Onja go ashore. The darkness was briefly broken by the blue sparkle of the Queen opening the magically sealed tower.

Places in the tower had not been entered since the days of warring with Nufal. On the day when Dacian had made his Last Law, the rys had thrown their enchanted weapons into Lake Nin, but Onja had stowed a few arms in the tower and she went to her ancient armory.

Onja removed the seal that she had placed on the armory door twenty-two centuries ago, and the air hissed out, delighting in its escape. Now secrets locked in forgotten silence could get out. A crystal mounted in the wall glowed in her powerful presence, revealing the few weapons that remained on the racks.

Onja remembered when the tower had bustled with activity and the armory had almost been cluttered with fine tools of war. Then she recalled the sickening day when the rys and humans had followed Dacian's folly and hurled their weapons into the water. Incredible masterworks of enchanted weapons had sunk into the lake that day, returning their magic to the deep secret waters of the Rysamand. No artisans today possessed the knowledge to remake that which had been thrown away.

But Onja had not let the fools get them all.

She hated to risk her precious collection out in the world in such uneducated hands, and she would not loan out every piece. Humans had not had such weapons to use since the defeat of Nufal, and Shan would not be prepared for this threat that he did not know existed. The enchanted weapons had been crafted specifically for the humans who had served their rys masters on the battlefield.

Delicately Onja plucked a quarrel from the shelf and she stared at the crystal tip of the arrow. Holding the sparkling point near her face, she shuddered as she felt the terrible power within. If this quarrel pierced rys flesh, the crystal tip would deliver a painful and lethal spell.

Only a small stock of the potent quarrels remained and she took these along with two crossbows. Onja gathered six swords with twinkling crystals set in the hilt. She removed her flowing cape and wrapped the weapons into an awkward bundle. When she returned to the skiff with her heavy burden, Hefshul eyed her package. From his vague emotion she sensed his disapproval.

"Row!" she snarled and Hefshul obeyed lazily.

Clutching her dark bundle, Onja wondered why her rys did not appreciate her efforts. She had made the rys of Jingtun wealthy, respected, and the supreme race in the entire world, yet they balked when she had to put down one renegade.

The Kezanada Overlord received his summons early the next morning and he hurried to the throne room. Onja was alone and when he kneeled

before her, he saw the bundle at the base of the dais.

“Rise and look inside,” Onja bade him.

Eagerly, despite fearing a trick, the Overlord unwrapped the cape and beheld the fine sharp weapons engraved with rys script and embedded with crystals. Reverently he grasped a sword and raised the perfect blade before his masked face. No agent of time could mar the enchanted blade that made the light quiver painfully on its sharp edges.

The history of the Kezanada stretched back even to the Age of Dacian and the fragile lore books had hinted at the existence of the enchanted weapons. When the rys had warred with Nufal, they had crafted arms that would protect them and their human allies from killing spells on the battlefield. The Overlord had hoped that Onja still possessed such things and he could barely suppress his triumphant joy to have the charmed sword in his hand. Onja had to be desperate to let him use this treasure, but he banished that line of reasoning. Even a thought was perilous in the court of Jington.

“Shan will not be able to sense the warriors who carry these weapons. The enchantments on them will hide their bearers from Shan’s powers of perception and his spells. With these you should be able to arrange an ambush,” Onja explained. “Consider these weapons a loan. Do NOT lose them, and do not fail this time.”

“The Kezanada are honored to use your great treasures, Queen Onja,” the Overlord said solemnly.

Onja continued, “Leave your tribute as a deposit on the weapons. Bring me Shan’s head and my original offer stands. Begone from Jington, Overlord. Every day Shan lives offends me.”

“He offends the Kezanada as well,” the Overlord agreed while wrapping the weapons.

Bowing deeply, he hoisted the enchanted bundle in his mighty arms. He would lead this mission himself and he needed his seven finest Kezanada to raise these magic weapons at his side. As he departed, his mind was already going over a list of candidates.

34~ The Lesson ~

Kwan reflected that it was good to see humans, even at a distance. From the rooftop terrace of the building that he had been lodged in the night before, he watched who he presumed were the Kezanada depart the city. The horsemen rushed away on the west road, disappearing into the green coniferous folds of the Jingtun Valley. The helmeted warriors looked dangerous and fearless behind their brightly clad leader, and Kwan wondered if they were part of a vast force similar to the Horde. He very much wanted to learn more about them, but the soldiers had not permitted the Atrophane to stray far from the three buildings they had been allotted. Kwan guessed that Onja did not want them meeting the other humans.

He wondered if the Kezanada had left Jingtun at such a high rate of speed because Onja had given them some urgent assignment or because they wanted distance between themselves and the Queen.

Probably both, Kwan concluded. If Onja has such mercenaries already in her service, why does she keep us?

With growing frustration Kwan lifted his eyes to the awesome peaks encircling the hidden valley. Normally he would have enjoyed the beauty of the towering fortresses of natural wonder, but the Rysamand looked like a prison now. The mysterious mountains looming out of the Wilderness had beckoned him with a thousand promises of adventure but now they enslaved him.

Kwan went inside and retreated to his private room. The soldiers had provided him with a nice house, comfortably furnished, and two tribute warehouses across the street had been outfitted as barracks for his soldiers. When he had been camped in the forest, he had been content to bide his time and learn about the soldiers, but now that he was inside the city, he truly felt like a prisoner.

With the freedom of his expeditionary force gone, Kwan reconsidered his decisions. When he had been in the Wilderness, the Deamedron had frightened him. Onja had said she could release the wraiths to kill upon the land, and Taf Ila had confirmed this. Of course, the soldiers could be lying to him, but Kwan believed in the threat of the Deamedron. If the demented spirits really could be released, it explained the emptiness of the Wilderness. What else could have prevented people from occupying the land? People lived in places less hospitable than the bountiful Wilderness. And the purportedly lethal power of the Deamedron could explain the

mass deaths at the ruins.

Kwan feared to go east. If he took his soldiers and fled back the way he had come, the wretched wraiths could be sent to destroy him. But the road west went to a land where humans lived. Kwan contemplated gathering his men and making a break to the west. If he fled west, Onja would have to bring her Deamedron through the Jington Valley, and he would gamble that she would not or could not do that.

He realized Onja might have another type of magic to use against him. She might enter his mind again and control him that way, or she could send her rys soldiers to stop him. That he feared the least. His Atrophane were veteran fighters and he guessed that the rys would have little stomach for fighting.

The Lord General sighed heavily, knowing he plotted his escape without enough information. He knew the humans in the west were the subjects of Onja and therefore he had to assume they would be hostile. He could not fight an entire civilization with five hundred men. Yet, Onja had her mysterious enemy in the west. If he could find this enemy, he might find sanctuary. When Kwan thought it through, his plan was clearly hopeless, even futile, but the indignity of being cloistered in Jington awaiting Onja's whim grated on his soul.

I am Atrophane. I can serve no foreign queen, he thought.

His hand rested on the hilt of his sword. Drawing his steel and deploying his armies had always been the answer in the past, so why did he doubt himself now? Did the new element of magic frighten him so much he would become as meek as the most servile commoner? Recognizing his fear was painful, and Kwan longed for his courage to return.

Reaching into a pouch that dangled from his swordbelt, Kwan removed the warding crystal. The blue light locked within the glassy sphere immediately intrigued him, as it always did, and he stared at it for a long time. He knew Onja could communicate with him through it, forcing her thoughts upon the fabric of his mind.

Does she do it right now? Does she spy on me? Does she make me think only of my fear?

Before Onja could potentially reply to any of his questions, Kwan hurled the orb at the window. It shattered a pane and flew into the street, rolling

over the cobbles until it came to rest.

“Read that thought, Onja,” he growled.

When the orb had crashed through the glass, Kwan had felt liberated, but the joy quickly faded. He had hoped that ridding himself of the magical device would free him from its sick spell, but perhaps more than self doubt bound him to Jington.

The breaking glass had been heard and hurried steps banged up the stairs to Kwan’s chamber.

“Lord Kwan,” Sandin called outside his door.

“Enter.”

Sandin opened the door and stepped inside. A few soldiers stood behind him in the hall.

Seeing the broken window, he asked, “My Lord, did someone throw a rock at your window?”

“No. I did it,” Kwan replied calmly. “There is no danger. You may send the men away.”

Kwan invited Sandin to sit with him at a small table.

Leaning in to a conspiratorial distance, Kwan said, “I threw out the crystal orb. I thought you might like to hear that, Lieutenant Sandin.”

The news brightened Sandin considerably. “Excellent, my Lord.”

“But it will take more than tossing away a charm to free us of Onja’s magic,” Kwan muttered.

“It is a good start,” Sandin said.

“What do you think of leaving? Heading farther west?” Kwan whispered.

Sandin nodded. “We are all with you, my Lord. But why west?”

Kwan hesitated. His instincts nagged him to stop having this conversation. “In the east are the Deamedron. By Golan, I believe that threat is real. You did not see them up close like I did. We cannot go that way,” he replied.

Sandin recognized the conviction in his commander’s voice and knew he could not convince Kwan to go east. It was enough that Kwan had decided to take control of their situation. To Sandin, any direction was

better than staying in Jingtun with the creepy rys, but he would not have chosen to put the Rysamand between himself and Atrophane.

“We could all die,” Kwan warned.

“We should go—even if we die,” Sandin decided. “We are Atrophane and we should not serve this foreign Queen.”

“Good. Quietly ready the men. We will depart in the night,” ordered Kwan.

The decision to act renewed his self esteem. Whatever the danger, he could no longer respect himself if he did not try to escape.

That afternoon while his squire fitted a board over the missing windowpane, Kwan dozed on his bed. Before he returned to the hard outdoors, he intended to enjoy the comforts of Jingtun for a few more hours.

“Lord Kwan!” Jesse called sharply.

When Kwan opened his eyes and heard the rumble of many hooves on the cobbled street below, he had an overwhelming sense of dread.

“My armor,” he said simply, putting his feet on the floor.

Kwan watched outside while Jesse strapped his chestplate in place. Rys soldiers on their fine white horses filled the street, and Taf Ila entered the house followed by many rys soldiers. A brief disturbance occurred on the first floor. Shouting reverberated in the stairwell, but the noise was soon replaced by the soft tread of suede boots on the floorboards.

As a surprise courtesy, a knock sounded on the door. Kwan faced the door and waved his squire aside. The door banged open to reveal a grim Taf Ila.

“Hello, Taf Ila,” Kwan said with mock pleasantness.

“Queen Onja summons you to the Keep,” Taf Ila announced gruffly, stepping forward.

Kwan asked, “Why so many soldiers? You only had to tell me to come. We are friends.”

Six rys flowed into the room with Taf Ila and surrounded Kwan impatiently.

Leaning close to the human’s ear, Taf Ila whispered, “Kwan, my

friendship will not help you.”

Kwan studied the face of the one rys with whom he had fostered a relationship. He sensed no malice from Taf Ila. A cry from the squire redirected Kwan’s attention. The rys had seized the youthful Atrophane.

“Stop!” Kwan shouted. “Queen Onja could have no business with my servant.”

“Queen Onja has business with us all,” Taf Ila muttered bitterly.

The boy panicked in the grasp of the two rys, but their slender hands were strong and the squire could not get away.

“Do not fight us. None of us have any wish to harm you,” Taf Ila stated.

“Relax Jesse. I will protect you,” Kwan bade his squire.

Calmed by his lord’s words, Jesse stopped resisting and the rys released him. Nervously the squire fell into place behind Kwan. Downstairs, many Atrophane soldiers stood behind lines of rys soldiers. A few Atrophane soldiers were crumpled at the feet of the rys and Sandin was among those on the floor.

Taf Ila put a quick hand on Kwan’s arm before the Lord General’s hot words rushed out. “They are unharmed and will recover,” Taf Ila said.

As Kwan was escorted out, he glimpsed the anguish in Sandin’s gray eyes. Never before had Kwan seen defeat on the face of an Atrophane and the shame he felt almost made him stumble on the steps.

I must get them out of this cursed trap, he thought.

Kwan had the indignity of walking through the streets while the rys rode around him, but he realized he would be lucky if that was the worst that happened. The fact that the rys were bringing his squire to the Keep also disturbed Kwan, who recognized it as a bad sign.

Taf Ila and a dozen soldiers ushered Kwan and his squire into the Keep, forcing a brisk pace. Apparently Onja wanted to see him with all immediacy.

Before they entered the throne room, Taf Ila turned and whispered urgently, “She is the ruler of us all, Kwan. You must believe that. I tell you this as a friend.”

The ominous words did little to encourage Kwan, but at least Taf Ila had revealed himself as a friend. Kwan understood that the rys captain

would not go against his Queen's wishes but it was good to know that Taf Ila was not an evil being.

When the two Atrophane men were presented before the dais, the white-maned Queen pointedly looked away. After announcing Kwan, Taf Ila and the other rys stepped aside. In the sudden absence of the surrounding rys, Kwan felt exposed before the Queen, and he noticed Jesse edge a small step closer.

Still looking away, Onja rumbled, "Instruct them to kneel."

Taf Ila relayed the order, knowing that it stung this human's pride. With an insincere posture, Kwan complied. He had only kneeled to the Darmar before and the act felt strange. Jesse, who was much more accustomed to kneeling, made a better display of humility.

"All humans show me this respect," Onja said, turning her hot gaze on Kwan. A blue glow consumed her black eyes and Kwan shuddered when he looked upon her powerful visage.

"You have been thinking of leaving Jingtun," Onja said. Her voice bore no accusatory tone. She simply stated fact. "You dislike serving in Jingtun so much you are willing to risk running west into lands unknown to you. You hope that you could slip away and outrun the reach of my magic."

Kwan stared at her blankly, remaining silent.

"Admit this!" Onja shouted.

"They are only thoughts," he explained lamely.

"You told your officer to prepare your men to leave," noted the Queen.

Overwhelmed, Kwan looked down at the smooth floor. His reflection in the glossy marble had no advice to offer. He had no chance of convincing the Queen of his innocence. The details Onja knew were staggering.

Onja chuckled at his discomfort. "I do not need the warding crystal to know your mind. It protected you from the Deamedron and it helps me to communicate with you, but it is hardly necessary. I can see anybody anywhere."

Kwan made no reply and wondered what would happen next.

"Have you forgotten our agreement? You must stay here until spring in my service in exchange for my clemency. All of you deserve death for invading my realm." Onja paused, hoping Kwan would respond, but he

suffered her lecture patiently. “Why do you plot to leave my service? I ask so very little of you, and I treat you so well. You have all been given good food, good shelter.”

Kwan had to concede that point. “Yes Queen Onja, you have been generous.”

Indignantly Onja said, “And yet you still wish to run away? Your ignorance made you bold, Kwan. You hoped that my magic was not enough to stop you. You were very wrong. Your punishment would have started the instant you passed outside the city. I would not even have to send one soldier after you.” She pointed a white-nailed finger at Jesse and cried, “My mind sees everywhere and my hand touches everything!”

Jesse shrieked in pain. He attempted to run away but fell, clutching at his shins where a heat spell burned his legs.

“Stop! Stop hurting him,” Kwan begged. He jumped up and reached for his sword, but Onja swung out her other hand and halted any offensive the Lord General might have launched. His body froze and no longer obeyed the commands of his brain. Sweat instantly wetted Kwan’s forehead as he struggled against the paralysis but he only succeeded in knocking himself to the floor.

Onja intensified her spell toward the squire, making the boy scream as the heat began to blister his limbs. Pleased with how the lesson proceeded, Onja came down from her throne. Kwan had never been so close to her before. The long centuries had rounded and softened her once perfect features, but she still would have been beautiful if her soul had not been utterly wicked. The ancient being assailed Kwan with such cold malice that he knew it had been folly to attempt a simple escape. He would have to be a hundred times more clever to elude this sorceress, who could hear a whisper across the city.

Jesse screamed as he writhed in increasing pain.

“Promise me you will serve in Jingtun and his suffering will stop,” Onja said.

Kwan looked at his poor squire but he hesitated to promise.

“You have forced me to extract this pledge from you. My proposal was fair and generous but you spurned it. I can make all of your men suffer this way,” Onja warned. “Now promise to serve Jingtun and serve well.”

The torment of the squire increased and the horror of his cries shattered Kwan's resistance.

"He will burn away before your eyes. I will cook him!" Onja shrieked.

Kwan relented. He had to. "Yes, I promise. We will defend Jingtun. We will serve you, Queen Onja," he gasped.

Throwing up her hands, Onja ended her spell and the invisible fire left Jesse's body. Free of the clutching paralysis, Kwan went instantly to the side of his squire. Jesse had lapsed into shock from the torture, and Kwan lifted his head into his arms. The fabric of the squire's pants had blackened from the heat and Kwan dreaded to know what terrible mess Onja had made of the boy's legs.

"Oh lad, I am so sorry," he murmured in Atrophaney. A helpless rage swelled inside him, sickening his mind.

"Take heart, Kwan," Onja said. "The demonstration on the boy has spared all of your men a worse fate. Furthermore, I will not hold today's insubordination against you. I knew this lesson would be necessary. My original proposal remains. Obey me and you will see your homeland again."

The self control Kwan exercised at the moment was perhaps the greatest act of will in his life. The pride of his soul demanded he take his sword and lash out at the Queen, who stood so nearby. He could see the softness of her blue flesh that appeared so very mortal, but Kwan believed he could not win. He knew his sword remained at his side only as a bitter temptation, an added detail to aid in his torment. Onja left her victim armed because she was completely in command. Her painful magic could defend her quicker than a human's violent outburst.

Miserably Kwan held his poor squire who had been punished for his master's decision. Attacking Onja would not help Jesse, and Kwan accepted that he had to try and save the boy's life.

Satisfied that her new Atrophaney subject had been sufficiently enlightened on his place in Jingtun, Onja returned to her throne. She paused to enjoy the scene of the devastated Lord General holding the innocent young man.

"Taf Ila, get them out of here," she ordered.

Relieved that he no longer had to stand by helplessly, Taf Ila eagerly

complied. The rys soldiers, who had rushed the humans to face their cruel Queen, now gently lifted the damaged squire who whimpered fitfully.

A wagon conveyed the grievously injured squire back to Kwan's new residence, and Taf Ila summoned a physician. Awkwardly, Taf Ila tried to explain to Kwan that the rys physician was a very successful healer, but Kwan could not even look at Taf Ila. He could not look at any of the rys, wishing he had never encountered the magical race. He could only look at the feverish face of Jesse.

Upon Kwan's return to his lodging, the Atrophane were filled with both relief and dismay. A dozen questions assailed the Lord General as rys carried Jesse upstairs, but Kwan silenced them all with one harsh order.

Seeing Sandin slumped in a chair recovering from the sho dart, Kwan simply instructed, "Lieutenant, keep this place quiet." Then he followed the rys up to his room.

Kwan insisted the rys lay his squire on his own bed. The rys physician soon arrived and began to tend the human. He coaxed a medicinal drink down the squire's throat to help hydrate the burn victim and ease his pain. With tender patience, the healer carefully removed the human's clothing, trying not to pull away much of the devastated skin. Jesse's legs were badly burned, scorched almost to ash in some places.

The wreckage of the blistered oozing legs gave Kwan a greater understanding of Onja's methods. If Jesse survived and did not succumb to an infection, it would take him all winter to heal. Until then the squire could not walk or ride, and if Kwan wanted to consider another departure, he would have to consider abandoning the boy.

Kwan turned away from the bed and slammed a fist into the wall repeatedly, venting his terrible rage on the cracking plaster. Taf Ila grabbed Kwan by the arm. The Lord General's gloved hand was probably already broken, but he sent his other fist at Taf Ila in a blind fury.

Taf Ila blocked the blow and shouted, "The physician has enough to do."

Kwan relaxed slightly, but he rationally considered attacking Taf Ila anyway.

"I am not your enemy," Taf Ila insisted.

"You are Onja's lackey!" Kwan shouted in Atrophaney.

Even without a translation the rys captain guessed the nature of the

human's outburst. He knew what he was.

Deciding not to pursue himself as a subject, Taf Ila said, "I believe Queen Onja will release you in the spring if you only obey her."

Shaking free of the Taf Ila's restraining grasp, Kwan slumped into a chair. "Obey her," he groaned, rubbing his hand. "She gives me no commands, except to stay here. What use could she have for us? She plays with me. Who will she torture next?"

"It is possible you will defend Jington. Queen Onja does have an enemy," Taf Ila explained very quietly.

"With all of her magic, she needs humans to defend Jington? That is nonsense," Kwan scoffed. "Will not Taf Ila defend his home for his Queen?"

Shrugging, Taf Ila simply responded, "I am not threatened. It is Onja's enemy."

The statement from the obviously loyal captain confused Kwan and he figured he misunderstood the rys words. "But if her enemy attacks Jington, you will fight?" he pressed.

"Rys do not kill rys," Taf Ila answered, clinging to the law. "I will not get between Onja and her enemy. None of us will."

A picture began to form for Kwan. A picture in which he was a pawn. He did not quite understand the statement about rys not killing rys, but Kwan suspected the rys used humans to fight their wars. He remembered the Kezanada leaving on seemingly urgent business.

Is the war already being fought somewhere? he thought.

From Taf Ila's somewhat cryptic statements, Kwan surmised that Onja's enemy was a rys or maybe an army of rys. This thought did little to encourage Kwan. If Onja could dominate him, what chance did humans have against her rys rival? The Lord General realized he and his five hundred Atrophane were just fuel for the fire of her war.

"Who is Onja's enemy?" he asked.

"I will not speak of that," Taf Ila said.

"If I am to defend your city, I must know what I am facing," Kwan insisted irritably.

"Onja will instruct you if the need arises," Taf Ila said.

Abandoning the pointless round of questioning, Kwan asked a personal question. “I see you do not want to hurt us. Why do you serve Onja?”

Taf Ila answered, “Queen Onja is the most powerful rys. It is her rightful place to lead. My magic is common, and it is my place to serve.”

Kwan considered the answer a little too dogmatic. Glancing at the physician attending his squire’s burns, he wondered if Taf Ila could not speak his mind openly because Onja might be spying.

Kwan’s white eyebrows lifted quizzically on his weathered face. He wanted to know more of the rys’s real thoughts.

Inwardly, Taf Ila appreciated the cynical expression. Humans could convey so many thoughts with just their faces.

Choosing his words, Taf Ila carefully expanded his response. “Queen Onja hurt your servant because you care about him. She often chooses the target that will cause the most pain. I assure you, obedience is the proper choice.”

“Onja keeps everyone in their place,” Kwan muttered bitterly while watching the physician work on Jesse.

Kwan had wished to cultivate Taf Ila as an ally, but now he doubted it would do him much good. Remembering Taf Ila’s fair daughter, Kwan realized the rys captain had his own vulnerabilities and would not wish to risk Onja’s anger. Kwan did not blame him though. Taf Ila was right. Onja was the most powerful rys and even the other rys could not dispute her actions.

Once Jesse’s wounds were medicated and dressed, the rys left Kwan alone. The Lord General kept a vigil at the boy’s side for many days and talked to no one, not even Lieutenant Sandin. Of all of the soldiers who had fallen or been injured under his command, Kwan felt the most remorse for his squire’s suffering.

35~ Watchers in the Pass ~

Dreibrand read approval on the faces of the volunteers when Shan informed them that he would be their commander. The volunteers saw that Shan favored the man from the east, and Dreibrand’s growing reputation as a warrior had reached their ears. And although no one

dared to mention it in the company of a large Temu war party, it did suit them that Dreibrand was not a Temu.

Shan told the volunteers that they and any others who joined their group would be called Yentay, which was the rys word for someone who climbs the highest mountain. The men found it typical that a rys would use such a poetic concept, but the symbolism was not lost.

When Dreibrand assumed command of the Hirqua and Nuram volunteers, his first order was that they must elect their officers before they reached Dengar Nor. Having had no personal experience with these men who had joined Shan's cause, he judged that deferring to their choices would be the best way to select a first and second lieutenant.

This suggestion was well received by the Yentay, and Dreibrand felt the familiar comfort of a successful command returning quickly. He had been trained for such things, and he was good at such things. Enjoying the glow of his brand new command, Dreibrand had not expected immediate complaints, but they erupted when he introduced Redan.

Neither the Hirqua nor the Nuram wanted a Zenglawa among them. The attack on Shan at the Common Ground had offended all the Confederates. When a few Yentay recognized Redan as one of the assassins, the yelling started.

Dreibrand looked sideways at Redan and noted that the Zenglawa faced the derisive hostility with calm and determination. Dreibrand called for silence and had to shout the order several times while Shan watched impassively.

Dreibrand stifled his displeasure because it made sense that the Yentay would resist Redan. Clearing his throat, he said in the common language, "Redan surrendered himself to Lord Shan and claimed that he believes in our cause and wishes to serve. I am aware that Redan was among the archers who so wrongfully attacked Lord Shan, but he did not take his shot. Lord Shan knows this to be the truth." He looked to Shan, hoping the rys would offer confirmation. Without it, Dreibrand doubted he could ever get the Hirqua and the Nuram to accept Redan.

Shan nodded once, and the Yentay murmured.

Dreibrand continued, "Lord Shan chose not to punish Redan. He will be given a chance among us, but he must prove his loyalty. I will be judging his service and any of you should feel free to report to me if you see him

doing anything wrong. For now, as you can see, he is unarmed.”

The Yentay looked at Redan and reconsidered. The Zenglawa did not look very intimidating. Redan had a black eye and bandages wrapped his burned hands. Begrudgingly the volunteers withdrew their protest, but no one would agree to ride double with the Zenglawa who had no horse. Dreibrand did not ask the Temu for a spare horse because he did not think it would be appropriate to trouble them over a Zenglawa.

He will probably run away before walking all the way to Dengar Nor, Dreibrand thought.

But Redan did not leave, and every evening after falling behind the column of riders, he would straggle into camp, get harassed by sentries, and eventually be allowed to enter. He would offer to take his turn at the watch, but no one trusted him so he would just relax by himself. When Dreibrand saw this, he found chores for him to do and observed that Redan suffered his hazing with patience and confidence.

On the third day of travel Dreibrand watched the sun rise. Although as a commander Dreibrand did not take a sentry position, he awoke well before dawn out of habit. They would be in Dengar Nor before the day was over and Redan was still with the group.

He had stayed in the Yentay section of camp but Miranda had spent the night in the nearby village. They had reentered the Temu heartland and better accommodations had become available for the King and a portion of his entourage. Taishek had invited Miranda to use the local guesthouse, and she had graciously accepted. When Dreibrand had awakened in the night, he missed her reassuring presence but it was fitting that she have a bed. He would have very much liked to join her, but he had thought it best to stay with his command.

Warriors stirred around Dreibrand, stretching the stiffness from their backs after sleeping on the cold ground. Each night was cooler than the last, and the frost was not far off in the future. Five Hirqua warriors and one Nuram warrior approached him in the brightening morning. Tytido of Clan Gozmochi was among them, and he saluted Dreibrand.

“According to your order, we have chosen our officers, General,” Tytido said.

“Call me Sir,” Dreibrand decided.

“Yes Sir,” Tytido said. “I have been elected the first lieutenant, and U’Chian of the Nuram has been elected second lieutenant.”

U’Chian bowed to Dreibrand. Like all the Nuram he kept the sides of his head shaved and the remainder of his long black hair tied in the back. The Nuram wore a plainer style of dress than the colorful Hirqua and the extravagant Temu. Dreibrand was pleased that his officers reflected both tribes. He looked back to Tytido and he was not surprised that this Hirqua had been elected. Tytido seemed to be the leader of the Hirqua volunteers as it was, and Dreibrand might have chosen the man anyway, because he was obviously intelligent.

Dreibrand asked the other warriors to confirm the election of Tytido and U’Chian and they stated that it had been so.

“I am pleased, and I know that you will perform your duties well,” Dreibrand said. “I realize that we will need some time to get used to working with each other, but our common interest in the defeat of Onja will bind us together. I intend for us to be the best warriors who serve Shan. We will be with him all the way to Jingtun, and when he is king, he will have no lack of wealth to reward us with.

“But we have much to do until then. I have a good deal of military experience, but that was in my land, and I realize that some things are different here. We will learn from each other, because I know you have much to teach me of your part of the world. Because victory does not come to the idle, we will begin right away. Today I will ask Lord Shan if we can go on a patrol of the wild lands between the Temu Domain and the Jingtun Pass. I believe the hardest part of our war will take place there, and I need greater knowledge of that area. If it pleases Lord Shan, we will leave tomorrow. The comforts of the Temu capital can wait until winter.”

“I look forward to it, Sir,” Tytido said.

“Good. Now get the men in their saddles, Lieutenant. We do not want the Temu to think we are slow,” Dreibrand ordered.

“That will not happen, Sir,” Tytido promised cheerfully.

The Temu war party and the Yentay passed through the village where Taischek, Shan, and Miranda joined them. Miranda rode by Dreibrand, and he noticed she looked tired despite having had a bed to sleep in. With hindsight, he worried that traveling to the council might have aggravated her recovery, and he was glad that she would be back in Dengar Nor that

night.

Shortly after leaving the village, Miranda abruptly left the column and rode behind a hedgerow. When she did not return in a timely manner, Dreibrand veered from the road and went back to find her. Her roan gelding browsed casually on the hedge but he could not see Miranda. After dismounting, he heard her hacking on the other side of the shrubbery. Traveling with the Horde and camping in close proximity with thousands of people had given Dreibrand the unenviable skill of knowing the sound of almost any bodily function within ten paces, and he knew she was sick.

“Miranda,” he called nervously, trying not to rush to her and invade her privacy.

“I am coming,” she replied weakly.

He heard her canteen slosh as she rinsed out her mouth. When she came out from behind the hedge, she forced a smile and chided, “Can’t someone use the bushes in peace?”

“You are sick,” Dreibrand cried, rushing to her and laying a hand on her forehead. In a flash his concern turned to desperate worry. He had seen fevers strike people dead in a day.

Her green eyes shifted as if she considered contradicting the truth. “It is nothing,” she insisted.

Her forehead did not feel hot, but Dreibrand was still anxious. “This could be a fever. You should not have made this trip,” he fretted.

Seeing his terrible worry, Miranda tried to put him at ease. “My stomach was upset. Everyone has an upset stomach sometimes,” she said.

“But it might be worse,” he whispered.

“Dreibrand, I watched my mother and all of my brothers and sisters die of fever. I know this is not that,” she assured him.

He held her close, feeling a great compassion. She had not told him that about her family before. Every time she shared something about her past, it was so ugly, and he could understand why she kept so much to herself.

“If you are sick, I will change my plans. I will stay with you—I promise,” he said. He had told her earlier that he intended to talk to Shan and Taishek at the midday break about the mission he had planned for the Yentay, but he truly would not leave her if she fell ill. He hoped it was just

a brief stomachache, as it seemed.

Miranda nudged him. "Let us go. We have fallen too far behind."

Indeed all of the riders were gone and Redan walked by on the road. Miranda eyed the Zenglawa with dislike as Dreibrand helped her back into the saddle. Bruises still distorted the handsome high cheek-boned face of Redan, who looked at her with curiosity. When Dreibrand looked at him, he turned his eyes quickly back to the road.

"I do not like him," Miranda stated firmly.

"I see quality in him. I believe his wish to serve Shan could be real," Dreibrand said.

"Shan only tolerates him to show that he is merciful. That he is better than Onja," Miranda complained.

Dreibrand responded, "Shan needs to inspire loyalty in as many ways as he can. I want Redan to have his chance. It is not an easy thing to go against your people."

Miranda shot him a piercing look, guessing Dreibrand's reasons for giving the Zenglawa a chance.

During the midday break, Dreibrand approached Taischek.

"Those Hirqua aren't giving you any trouble are they?" the King teased. "Because if they are, I'm sure Xander could advise you."

The Temu General brightened after his King's kind comment, but Dreibrand politely declined any assistance.

"King Taischek, my visit does concern the volunteers," Dreibrand said. "I came to ask you and Shan if I could take them on a patrol right away."

"A patrol?" Shan said with curiosity.

"Yes, into the foothills east of the Temu Domain and up to the pass. I believe this is the likeliest place that Onja will put her allies to stop us, and I want a better knowledge of the land. Also I would like to observe the tribute caravans. I would like to verify that the Tacus and Hirqua do not pay and I want to see who does. But most importantly I need to get to know my warriors, and they need to get used to my command. This is best accomplished in the field," Dreibrand explained.

"I see that you have given this much thought," Taischek complimented.

“You are kind, King Taischek. But I must look to the discipline of these volunteers. I should keep them busy and not leave them to get bored in Dengar Nor,” Dreibrand said.

“Well I don’t know about being bored in Dengar Nor, but I see what you mean,” Taischek joked. “What do you say, Shan?”

The rys responded, “It is a good idea. Dreibrand will be able to judge the abilities and the loyalties of the Yentay.”

“Then you have my leave to travel east in the Temu Domain. When you are beyond my borders may your wits serve you well,” Taischek decided.

“Thank you. I will see what manner of men have joined us, and hopefully learn something of our enemies. I would like to see these Kezanada for myself,” Dreibrand said.

“Oh, don’t look too hard for them,” warned the King.

“Yes. Taischek is right,” Shan chimed in. “I know you are anxious to learn the details of the west, but be careful. You would not like to see the Kezanada.”

Taischek added, “And don’t look to make battles. Do your reconnaissance, but the war season is over. I don’t want some petty tribal leader complaining to me that you attacked him during the tribute season. That is not something you want to do.”

“Yes. I have no wish to waste warriors before they are needed,” Dreibrand assured them.

“Well, hurry back then, Dreibrand. The winter will be long, and you will need to entertain an old king with tales from your side of the world,” Taischek said.

“I look forward to it. But there is one more thing.” Dreibrand paused, trying to hide his discomfort. “I will need some provisioning. I mean, the Yentay will need some provisions before we leave tomorrow.”

Taischek scowled automatically and muttered in his native tongue.

Shan said, “Dreibrand, I will make arrangements for such things. The Yentay will need barracks as well. Taischek, do you remember that line of credit I was talking about?”

The King’s cheeks puffed out as he exhaled slowly. “How could I forget?” he grumbled.

“Now my friend, you must remember this is all an investment toward much greater things,” Shan soothed.

“Yes, yes, it isn’t a problem. Now let’s get to Dengar Nor,” Taischek said, signaling for his horse.

As soon as the king bustled to get back on his horse, warriors lounging along the road quickly concluded their break. The Yentay were the rear guard and Dreibrand hurried down the road to join them. With a light step, Shan appeared by his side and Dreibrand slowed to listen to the rys.

“Just one thing, Dreibrand,” Shan said very seriously. “I do not want you to go all the way into the Jingtén Pass. You can approach but do not enter. Then you would be in the Rysamand, and her power can reach there.”

Thinking about Onja’s magic was sobering and Dreibrand took the warning seriously.

“Do not get any ideas. You do not want to go into the Rysamand without me,” Shan whispered.

“Then come,” Dreibrand whispered back with enthusiasm.

The turmoil showed on Shan’s normally neutral face. He wanted to go home. He wanted to be King of Jingtén. He wanted to return Miranda’s children, but he did not want to lose.

“Not yet—I am sorry,” Shan said.

“I know,” Dreibrand said, disappointed.

“I will check on you when I can. And take your warding crystal,” Shan concluded when Dreibrand reached his horse.

The rys took a moment to speak pleasantly to Miranda before trotting to the front of the column to ride with the King.

The lovely city and castle of Dengar Nor appeared before sunset, and Taischek was glad to be home. With the Confederate Council over and no tribute to take to Jingtén, he could settle in for the winter.

When Dreibrand and Miranda reached their apartment, Miranda flopped gratefully onto her soft wide bed. She had discovered that the rigors of the road became more acute after one had become accustomed to comfortable furnishings. Dreibrand stretched out next to her and brushed her curling locks from her face. She seemed to be fine and her

cheeks had a healthy glow.

“See, I have no fever,” Miranda said happily.

He kissed her and she moaned happily as his arms tightened around her. It was good to be alone.

“Must you leave so soon?” she asked.

“I will be here until morning,” he said, as if that were all the time in the world.

“But what will I do tomorrow night?” she pouted.

Dreibrand stopped kissing her and looked at her with a little shock. He could see that she had made the comment specifically to disturb him, and he was not used to her toying with his feelings.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

Miranda smiled and curled one of the small braids on the side of his face around her finger. “It was only a little joke, Dreibrand. Do not look so upset.”

He had not realized he looked upset. His forehead wrinkled with thought and he sat up. He was upset.

“Well, why did you, um, make a joke like that?” he fumbled with his words and was not sure what he wanted to say.

Miranda took his hand. Softly she said, “Dreibrand, I am sorry. You have my faith.”

The confusion left his blue eyes and he looked at her with complete relief. It touched Miranda to see that his emotions for her were so intense.

Her voice became timid and she continued, “But, I was thinking, that maybe I want to know if I have your faith. We are lovers but there have been no words between us, and you are going away again...” Miranda trailed off. It had been difficult to say so much, to show that she wanted him to continue to care for her.

“Is that all,” he said with a happy little chuckle, embracing her as he did before. “I am yours, Miranda. I do not have time for other women, and what use would they be to me? Could I count on them to save my life? Could I trust them, as I do you? When I fought with the Sabuto, it was you I wanted to live to see. Trust me, Miranda, you are very special to me—I am in love with you.”

Dreibrand saw that his declaration startled her, and he realized that perhaps no one had ever said anything so kind to her before. He did not expect her to return the endearment, but he did not regret telling her. She had wanted assurances, and now she had some.

Miranda did not know how to respond. She supposed she should not be so surprised. His love had always been apparent in his actions, but it was still difficult for her to imagine someone loving her. Before she could say anything, someone pounded on the door.

“Who could that be?” she wondered.

Dreibrand bounced out of bed with excitement. “Our clothes. As soon as we got here, I sent a servant to tell the tailors we were back and to bring our order immediately,” he explained.

Miranda followed him out of the bedroom and he was already opening the door. After all the serious events at the council, she had forgotten about all the clothes Dreibrand had bought for them. She recognized the tailors he had hired when they entered with four servants carrying two trunks.

The dressmaker greeted Miranda with practiced delight and fussed until his servants opened a trunk. He brought forth three dresses, a cloth quilted jacket, a fur jacket, a long outer robe meant to be worn over dresses when the weather was cold, and a black wool riding habit with pants. Tassels and beadwork and embroidery adorned all of the outfits, and Miranda had the decent beginnings of a Temu lady’s wardrobe. She marveled at the beautiful clothes. The fine fabrics she had picked looked far more wonderful than she had imagined.

“Well, put something on,” Dreibrand urged.

While Miranda retreated to the bedroom, Dreibrand checked out his new clothes. He unloaded the trunk himself, too impatient to wait while the servants tried to do it dramatically. He had basically been in tatters since the Wilderness, and he was glad he could look presentable now.

“Will you want to do a final fitting now to see if any alterations are necessary, Sir?” the tailor asked.

“Not now. Send someone back tomorrow to help the Lady Miranda. For me, I will just use what I can for now, and get back to you later. I am leaving the city again,” Dreibrand answered.

“So soon, Sir?” the tailor inquired and his associate and the servants quieted themselves to listen.

“Cannot be helped,” Dreibrand said.

“The news from the council I hope is not bad, Sir?” the tailor wondered.

“No, not at all,” Dreibrand replied and indulged them with some news from the King’s trip.

“I wish I could’ve seen Lord Shan use his magic. That must have been a sight,” a servant commented dreamily and received five stern looks because he had interrupted Dreibrand.

Dreibrand used the opportunity to end his report. He had told them all they needed to hear, and he did not want to mention why he was leaving town or where he was going.

“Ah, here it is,” Dreibrand said as he pulled the last item out of the trunk. It was a mid length blue cloak lined with fur and he would need it in the highlands this time of year.

Dreibrand paid the tailors and dismissed them so he could be alone with Miranda again. The night passed quickly and Dreibrand was anxious to leave. He awoke and dressed before dawn after catching two hours sleep. Miranda and he had stayed up late enjoying their time together.

Miranda stirred when he sat at her bedside. Only a gray hint of dawn brightened the drapes.

“Wait for me and I will go see you off,” she offered after a sleepy groan.

“No need. I have some things to do in the city first. It will be boring. Stay here and sleep. I insist,” he said and brushed a kiss across her forehead.

He set a heavy purse next to her and placed her hand on it. “Here. This is most of the gold. If you want anything do not hesitate to buy it.”

“I only want you to come back safely,” she said.

“I will not be long. A couple weeks maybe. Not enough time to worry,” he said cheerfully.

When he stood to leave, Miranda stopped him with her hand. She regarded him thoughtfully and Dreibrand assumed she wanted to say something else.

“What?” he pressed because she did not speak.

“Nothing,” she said letting him go. “Just come back, General.”

He grinned when she used his title, but it reminded him how eager he was to be off. Miranda smiled back and her eyes drooped lazily with returning sleep. Dreibrand left quietly.

He made his arrangements for provisions at one of Taischek’s official storehouses and then he collected the Yentay, who had been given a barracks in the city. The Yentay were waiting for him with their horses saddled, and Dreibrand complimented Tytido on their readiness.

The general inspected his small company, impressed by the enthusiasm of the young men who had joined Shan. He understood their motives. Being a part of the rebellion against Onja had a tremendous allure, with both adventure and reward.

He found Redan standing in the last row. The proud face of the Zenglawa actually looked embarrassed that morning because he still had no horse. Dreibrand halted Starfield by the outcast volunteer.

“Do you still wish to serve Lord Shan?” Dreibrand demanded.

“Yes Sir.”

Dreibrand grabbed a short sword in a worn scabbard out of his saddlebag that he had picked up in the city that morning. Tossing the cheap weapon to the Zenglawa, he said, “You will not be much use without a weapon.”

Redan snatched the falling weapon with a bandaged hand that moved with speed. He smiled while strapping on the sword.

“Sir, I would be of much better use with a bow,” Redan mentioned with a cocky tone.

Dreibrand scowled at the presumptiveness and explained, “I do not think I want you shooting at anything yet.”

Remembering that he had yet to prove his loyalty, Redan resisted his natural urge to boast. He would never get to serve Lord Shan if he upset the mercenary commander.

Respectfully, he said, “Sir, I will pass this test of trust and I thank you for giving me a chance.”

“Well, you have passed your walking test. When we pick up our

provisions, you will get a horse,” Dreibrand said.

Before Redan could thank him again, Dreibrand rode to the front of his small group and ordered them to move out. It did not take long for them to get their light supplies and leave the city.

By evening they were camping in the open lands east of the farmlands of Dengar Nor. Dreibrand called a meeting around the main fire, for which Redan had earned the privilege of gathering all of the wood. The smallness of the force allowed everyone to attend the meeting, and the Yentay appreciated the openness of their commander.

Although the beginning slopes of the Rysamand were three or four days away, Dreibrand shared his plans with them.

“We will find a position in the highlands where we can spy on the traffic going to Jingtén. But tonight, I do have a special mission for a few men.”

The announcement caused murmuring throughout the group. Dreibrand looked at the surrounding faces until he had their full attention again.

“I want to send some spies into the Sabuto territory. Word will not have traveled there yet that any Hirqua or Nuram have volunteered to serve Shan. I want news from the Sabuto. Because Shan is such a close friend of Taischek, I expect the Sabuto to stay on Onja’s side. After what Shan did to Dursalene, I imagine they will want revenge.”

A few men chuckled and a nearby warrior said, “The Sabuto have no balls for revenge. They take their beatings, then go looking for weaklings to attack.”

Finding the comment interesting, Dreibrand noted that the reputation of the Sabuto was widely maligned.

“You recall that Onja offers a bounty for Shan’s head. Greed may make them bolder,” Dreibrand reminded. “I want the Sabuto monitored. A few men should visit a couple towns and gather the news. If they are plotting anything big, something should come out in the gossip”

No one disputed Dreibrand’s decision, but no one was anxious to leave the main force and enter Sabuto territory.

“Would anyone like to volunteer?” Dreibrand prompted.

A few quiet conversations started in small cliques. U’Chian, the eldest of

the Nuram cousins, spoke up first.

“Sir, we will travel through the Sabuto Domain and attempt to learn if they plot against Lord Shan,” said U’Chian.

“All five of you?” Dreibrand asked.

“We wish to stay together, Sir,” U’Chian responded.

Dreibrand considered a moment. He was not sure if he wanted to send the second lieutenant away so soon, but it was a good mission for a second lieutenant.

“And what Hirqua shall join them, Sir?” Tytido demanded, interrupting his thoughts.

Dreibrand understood that the Hirqua felt the Nuram had made his tribe look less bold. But Dreibrand liked his small Nuram team as it was.

“There will be no Hirqua. It would arouse suspicion to see Hirqua and Nuram traveling together in a foreign land,” Dreibrand explained. “I think it is best to send the Nuram.” With his decision made, he had no intention of letting it be debated. Beckoning to U’Chian, he gave him instructions. “Because you are with your kin, say you are out adventuring with your cousins. Which is maybe not far from the truth,” he added with a sly smile that the Nuram warriors reflected. “Say you are hunting or going south for the winter—whatever reasons young men have for traveling. Try not to be obvious but gossip in the towns as you go. After a week circle back to Dengar Nor, and I will speak with you when I return. If you learn something urgent, tell Lord Shan.”

“Sir, when should we go?” U’Chian asked.

“Leave us before dawn,” Dreibrand instructed.

After wishing the Nuram lieutenant luck and reminding him to be cautious, Dreibrand retired to his bedroll. With the fires burning low, Dreibrand lay in the dark and the old sensation of solitude in command returned to him. He remembered many nights with the Horde camped around him and still feeling alone. Being a commander satisfied him greatly, but when he lay awake in the darkness, he knew it was not everything. Thinking of Miranda, he craved her companionship. She brightened the quiet dark moments between his days as a warrior.

Dreibrand had three more nights alone with his thoughts as his force traveled east. They left the roads before reaching Fata Nor, desiring to

avoid traffic. Using rough back trails that were sketched on the map the King had given him, Dreibrand led his men into the foothills. The bite of the wind increased with the elevation and the icy peaks loomed close and beautiful. Looking at the Rysamand, Dreibrand remembered Onja high and lovely on her throne but sinister as gangrene. The shriek of the Tatatook and the grumble of the glacier returned to his mind. He also remembered the depth of the Keep's dungeon and the swiftness with which he had found himself in it. Patting Starfield's strong neck, he admitted to himself that returning to Onja's stronghold would be difficult.

The road to Jington stretched below him now, winding into the pass. Tytido had brought him to a ridge south of the road that offered a spectacular view. A short hike away the Yentay were making a camp at the base of some cliffs. A thick stand of pines blocked the campsite from the road, and passing traffic would not notice their fires in the night. From this location, Dreibrand intended to monitor the road.

Currently the road was empty. To the east, the Jington Pass yawned between its attendant mountains. He was getting close to the pass, but remembering Shan's warning, he decided to stay well below the tree line. To the west he could see the setting sun, burning redly in a fluffy sea of clouds.

Turning to Tytido, he said, "This spot is perfect. It did not take you long to find it."

Tytido grinned and admitted, "I knew about this spot. I have traveled with the Hirqua tribute caravan four times and I know the pass somewhat."

"Good," Dreibrand said, taking in the panoramic view again. "I am certain we will see something interesting from up here."

They left the ridge for their hidden camp unaware that their arrival had already been noticed.

36~ Pelafan and Sutah ~

It was a clear night near the pass and Dreibrand appreciated the dry weather. The stars sparkled like powdery snow in moonlight, concentrated in some places with such clarity that they looked like veins of pure silver in

the basalt night. The mysterious howls of a few wolves on some distant hunt hidden in the mountains occasionally drifted to his ears, and Dreibrand remembered the night the wolves had attacked Miranda and him. That seemed a whole lifetime ago.

Staring at the stars from his bedroll, Dreibrand let his mind drift toward the celestial heights. The way the constellations shifted in his travels never ceased to amaze him. Comforted by the soothing vastness of the heavens, Dreibrand fell into a deep sleep.

Because he was tired, he did not wake out of habit and he slept past midnight. Eventually the mountain cold bothered him, rousing him enough to tighten the blanket around his body. He might have slipped back to sleep, but some nagging element of intuition told him something was wrong. Perhaps he had heard a crackle of frosted grass that sounded out of place.

Although his armor was off, Dreibrand still had his dagger in his belt and his sword by his side and most definitely his boots on. Sitting up, he eased his dagger out and listened closely. There were no noises to confirm his suspicions and he wondered if he was simply being paranoid.

He called to the nearest sentry. Two Hirqua soon appeared, worried by their general's call, but they had nothing to report. Somewhat reassured after checking on the camp's status, Dreibrand dismissed them and settled under his blanket. He held his dagger across his chest and tried to resume his deep sleep. Pine needles crunched under the boots of the sentries as they returned to their posts, and the camp was tranquil again.

But something had entered the camp, guided by the deepest shadows, and Dreibrand felt the closeness of an intruder at the last instant. As he flinched and dodged in a random direction, he heard a snapping click. The noise was vaguely familiar, but he did not place it at the time. Something small flew by his face and got stuck in his long hair. Then someone landed on top of him.

Slender hands clamped onto his throat. In the tussle, Dreibrand managed to stab the assailant in the arm. With a pained cry, the attacker withdrew his choking grasp and lurched back onto Dreibrand's legs. The attacker called out several words, and Dreibrand instantly recognized the rys language. Another rys replied with a couple sharp words, and Dreibrand realized his attacker had a companion.

Tytido, who had been sleeping nearby, sprang from his blankets. He heard the brief exchange of rys words and located one of the intruders by his voice. A pair of onyx eyes gleamed in the inky dark and Tytido rushed the being bravely despite his inherent fear. He yelled, raising the alarm, but he never reached the rys. Click snap, and a dart stung his neck. Tytido immediately stumbled and the pain in his neck dispersed into numbness. In his sudden terror, while sprawling face first into the ground, Tytido thought he had been stricken dead by some punishing rys spell. Onja must have learned of his treachery and cast her judgement upon him.

Worries of Onja's omnipotence did not occur to Dreibrand, but he did realize the intruders were using sho darts and their sharp rys perceptions could aim the nasty missiles in the dark. Thanking his luck for actually being missed by the sho dart, he delicately plucked the dart from his hair before it chanced to pierce his skin.

The rys he had stabbed was briefly stunned by the pain because rys rarely had injuries. Before the rys could renew the assault, Dreibrand thrust the sho dart into the rys's cheek. The rys cried indignantly and Dreibrand shoved him away.

"Intruders in the camp!" Dreibrand yelled in his native language without realizing it.

Scrambling to his feet, Dreibrand lashed out with his dagger, seeking the second rys. The depth of the night cloaked everything except the stars and the black edge of the mountains, and the erratic movements of the alarmed warriors made it impossible for Dreibrand to interpret what he saw.

"Intruders! Do not let them get away. Stir the fires," he commanded.

He rushed in what he thought could be the proper direction and tripped over Tytido. After Dreibrand stopped his fall, he rolled the motionless Hirqua over.

"Bring a light!" Dreibrand yelled.

Tinder was being thrown on the coals of several campfires and the flickering light thinned the dark. Someone lit a fresh torch and ran to Dreibrand's summons. He was surprised to see that the torchbearer who had so swiftly answered his command was Redan. Dreibrand nodded to Redan with thanks then returned his attention to Tytido.

The light revealed Tytido's frightened eyes in his somewhat slackened face. Dreibrand understood the frustration the Hirqua had to feel from the paralysis and the fear.

"You will be fine. This will pass. It is not magic, only poison," Dreibrand explained.

This statement partially reassured Tytido but a stressed look remained in his eyes.

"Make him comfortable," Dreibrand instructed Redan.

By now all the warriors were up. Most gathered near Dreibrand or circled the area searching for the other intruder. The injured rys was surrounded by warriors, who examined him cautiously. Dreibrand entered the circle of warriors to look at his captured attacker. Remembering Shan's comment that sho darts worked well on humans, he wondered what effect the dart actually had on a rys. The glare of torchlight danced around the circle of Yentay, illuminating the fallen rys. The black haired rys had a lanky strong physique imbued with a tangible vitality, but his grace had been removed. The rys wobbled on his hands and knees, unable to coordinate his limbs enough to even crawl away. The normally intense black eyes had lost their focus.

The Hirqua warriors looming around the prisoner were intrigued by the incapacitated rys, whose kind tended to be haughty and casually intimidating. They saw the seeping stab wound and were impressed that Dreibrand had defeated the rys.

This success surprised Dreibrand as well. He knew how close the sho dart had come to its mark. *But why did they attack me?* he wondered.

Bending down on a knee, Dreibrand grabbed the rys and sat him up. The sho dart still dangled from the blue cheek and Dreibrand carefully removed it. The bright purple rys blood oozed from the puncture with a thick slowness that briefly mesmerized Dreibrand. Several warriors leaned close to look at the bleeding.

Dreibrand lifted the limp arm and examined the stab wound with a concern that contradicted the fact that he had inflicted the injury.

After ordering some bandaging, Dreibrand asked in the common language, "What is your name?"

The rys's eyes drifted up to his captor's face, but the chiseled blue lips

fumbled on the words. Finally in a quiet slur, the rys responded, "Pelafan."

"Pelafan, why did you attack me?" Dreibrand said.

"Who are you?" Pelafan said with confusion.

"I am the man you attacked," Dreibrand explained, wondering how disoriented the rys could be.

After some dreamy consideration, Pelafan answered, "I attacked you because the sho dart missed...I panicked."

Such an answer frustrated Dreibrand, but he resisted his rising temper. The rys appeared sincerely drugged, and Dreibrand needed to stay calm and take advantage of the rys's weakened state.

"Why were you in my camp?" Dreibrand said.

Pelafan's lips parted with the intention of answering but the effects of the sho dart were not sufficient to make him reveal his purposes. Taking pleasure in his last minute resistance, Pelafan grinned until his cheek hurt and he had to stop.

Although Pelafan gave unsatisfying answers, Dreibrand decided to ask more in the hopes that the rys would reveal something. "Were you looking for Shan?"

The mention of Shan's name sent a flicker of focus through the rys's eyes.

"You are Shan's friend," Pelafan stated as if he just recalled the fact.

Dreibrand pressed, "Do you want to find Shan?"

"No...not really," the rys answered thickly.

Frowning, Dreibrand added, "Did Onja send you?"

Pelafan's head rolled to one side. "No."

"Who was with you?"

This question elicited no response, and Pelafan clearly was not inclined to reveal anything about his accomplice as a matter of principle, no matter how drugged he was. Sensing the rys would not easily give up his secrets, Dreibrand rose with frustration to reconsider his interrogation. He was still rattled by the attack and he needed to go over the event in his mind.

"We have not found the other intruder, Sir," reported a warrior.

“Everyone is to watch the rest of the night,” Dreibrand decided with a scolding tone. The porousness of his sentry line upset him. Looking to the sagging Pelafan, he added, “And tie him up.”

“Rys magic will destroy any rope we put on him,” the warrior mentioned.

“Tie him up,” the general snapped. “And bring me his weapons.”

The man who had disarmed the fallen rys came forward and showed Dreibrand a long knife of the fashion the rys used and the small pistol that fired sho darts. Eagerly Dreibrand took the pistol that fit comfortably in his hand and examined the strange device with great interest. He located a compartment in the handle that contained three sho darts. Gingerly he rolled the delicate missiles in the palm of his hand, then put two back and set about figuring out how to load the weapon. He discovered a chamber that opened at the rear of the barrel and he pulled the trigger a few times to watch the inner workings of the mechanism. The trigger released a spring loaded bolt that drove the dart out the barrel. At the same time, the trigger also released a delicate clamping device that held the dart so that it would not simply fall out. The pistol was good for one shot and then it would take a moment to reload, but Dreibrand was glad to have it. He loaded the weapon with great care. He did not want to prick himself and fall over paralyzed in front of his men.

“I will guard the rys myself,” Dreibrand announced, gesturing with his new sidearm, courtesy of Jingtun. “I should be able to keep Pelafan down for a while with three of these.”

The rys looked up blearily at the mention of his name, but Pelafan did not register that Dreibrand threatened him with more dartings.

The crowd of warriors dispersed, and Dreibrand sat down to study his prisoner. He tossed a branch on his fire to drive back the predawn frostiness. Redan entered the ring of firelight and bowed to his commander.

“How is Tytido?” Dreibrand asked.

“He is better, Sir. He is glad to know he is not dying,” Redan reported while his eyes strayed to the prisoner.

“Good. Now go watch the perimeter,” Dreibrand said absently.

Redan continued to study the prisoner and he did not leave. Dreibrand

stared at him impatiently until Redan realized his general's displeasure.

"The rys is a thief," Redan blurted as an explanation for not leaving.

Intrigued, Dreibrand forgave Redan's reluctance to go to his watch. "A thief? What makes you say that, Redan?"

"I am not certain, but it is a good bet. Rys thieves do lurk in the pass this time of year—for the tribute. They are rarely seen because they can usually avoid human detection at night. People in my tribe have always told stories about seeing rys thieves. Humans are often blamed for the nighttime pilfering because no other explanation is obvious. But I have reasons to believe the rumors," Redan explained.

Although it was a guess, Dreibrand thought the possible explanation could fit. Pelafan wore a hodge podge of regular rys clothing and not the uniform of a Jingtyn soldier. If Onja had dispatched rys soldiers to attack the Yentay, Dreibrand assumed a rys war party would have attacked his camp outright. Of course, Pelafan might be a scout from a larger force, but Dreibrand preferred to believe he was just a thief.

Deciding to play with Redan's theory, Dreibrand resumed his questioning of Pelafan. "Why are you a thief?"

Pelafan lifted his groggy head, considering the question.

Dreibrand continued, "Rys want for nothing. Every luxury is provided in Jingtyn. Why would a rys be a thief?"

In his doped state Pelafan saw no need to argue with this attack on his character. Dreibrand stated that he was a thief with such confidence, that Pelafan wrongly decided Dreibrand knew this fact.

"Jingtyn is so very...dull," said the rys. "Stealing adds a thrill to my life."

This one honest answer pleased Dreibrand. Hoping to gain insight into the rys's loyalties, he slyly wondered, "Does Queen Onja not get angry that you take from her tribute?"

"Oh, do not say the words," Pelafan moaned with as much alarm as his stupor would allow. "The Queen does not know. She pays little attention to the caravans as long as they arrive. And the humans never mention they lost some on the way."

"This is not a tribute caravan. What did you come to steal from me?" Dreibrand said.

Pelafan shook his head. “Nothing,” he muttered lamely.

Dreibrand looked at the sho dart pistol and considered firing another one into Pelafan, hoping to disintegrate the rys’s resistance. If Dreibrand had been more certain of the effects on the rys, he would have done it. Instead he decided to save his three little darts, suspecting there would be a more urgent occasion for their use in the coming war.

He wished Shan had accompanied him on this venture. He had quickly gotten used to the company of his powerful friend. Shan would know the exact nature of this Pelafan and have the rys prisoner sharing all of his secrets. The idea of taking Pelafan back to Shan occurred to him but that might prove to be a futile undertaking. Dreibrand looked dubiously at the rope that bound Pelafan’s hands to his ankles. A rys, especially a rys that lived by thieving, probably did have a spell that could deal with plain rope, and Dreibrand had no iron manacles to better secure the rys. Trying to bring the rys back to Dengar Nor would probably not be worth the trouble.

Deciding he had enough of Pelafan’s slow answers, Dreibrand pondered the attack. *What did this rys want from me?* He was certain that he had been specifically singled out and the rys hoped to quietly assault him without arousing the attention of his warriors. If the sho dart had hit him, this would have been easily possible. Again, Dreibrand thanked the good half of his luck for being missed by the sho dart.

Pelafan took a deep rejuvenating breath and Dreibrand realized the sho dart was wearing off.

“I shall be free soon,” Pelafan announced.

“Then you better run away before I stab you again,” Dreibrand said angrily. His frustration had loosened his temper. He wanted to know what the rys thieves had hoped to gain from him, but the answer eluded him.

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The rys ran until he could no longer hear the upset human camp. But his panicked flight riddled him with guilt. He should not have left Pelafan behind, who had been wounded and clearly needed help, but he had not expected the confrontation with the human to be so unnerving. The rys had no experience in handling a human protected by a powerful warding crystal, and the rys had no advantage against the aroused human in the dark. The sensation of encountering a human on nearly equal terms had

overwhelmed him. When he heard Pelafan's scream, he had fled in fear.

Turning back toward the human camp, the rys scowled and blamed Pelafan's inaccurate shot for the disaster. Even though Pelafan could not perceive Dreibrand's body with his mind, his companion thought he should have been able to make the shot at such close range.

However, this rys was not altogether faithless and he intended to return to Pelafan. Relaxing, he began to meditate. The human camp was not far, but it was almost at the limit of his range. His observation yielded no information about Pelafan, and he assumed the man with the warding crystal must be too close to Pelafan and blocking his mind. With a tired sigh, the rys decided to rest. The warding crystal could not keep Pelafan from his sight under the light of day.

By the time the dawn broke across the top of the Rysamand, the rys had crept to the edge of the human camp and hidden himself among some broad-leafed foliage. The frosty ground felt as cold as a stone by a glacier, but the rys easily endured the chill. His race was of the mountains and the forces of winter caused him little bother. Calmly the rys concentrated on slowing his breathing to reduce the amount of steamy exhalations that might give him away in the bushes.

In the daylight the rys viewed the center of the camp and located Pelafan, who was miserably bound, but he could cast no spell in the area to assist his companion because the light haired human stood near his prisoner. This human was from beyond the Wilderness, and the rys had heard reports of him all summer from both humans and rys. Some Sabuto travelers had spoken of a strange man who served the Temu. The story in Jington was that the human had badly angered Queen Onja and accompanied Shan into exile. What he was doing with a bunch of Hirqua, the rys could not guess.

Yesterday, when Pelafan and his companion had observed the arrival of the human warriors, they had noticed the foreigner. Normally this would have aroused only passing interest between the thieves, but they soon detected something very interesting about this man, or rather did not detect. When the humans had strolled out of sight and the rys watched them with their minds, the lifeforce of the blond man had been completely masked. They could discern his image in the daylight, but it had no substance, no pulse of existence, and they most certainly could not apply any spells to his body.

Only one thing could cause a human to be so protected from rys magic, and the rys thieves coveted that item.

A warding crystal, a charm that only powerful rys could make, had to be on that man's body. Knowing that the foreigner was a known associate of Shan, the rys thieves guessed that the crystal had to have been made by Shan, and therefore of exceptional quality. This kindled great desire in the hearts of the criminal rys. That warding crystal could command a great price from men, and the rys could have great fun with it themselves.

Even as Pelafan considered the rope that bound his limbs and the other rys waited anxiously nearby, both of them still pondered ways to obtain the warding crystal.

Shrugging to get comfortable in his armor, Dreibrand adjusted his swordbelt and secured his new sho dart pistol by his ivory handled dagger. All the time he watched Pelafan, noticing that a sharp gleam had returned to the rys's eyes. He knew the sho dart had worn off and Pelafan should be making his promised escape attempt soon.

A little speck of blue light appeared in Pelafan's eyes and a bright flame burst out of the rope. He jerked his hands out of the disintegrating bonds as soon as he could to avoid getting singed. Pelafan slapped at the burning rope and pulled it off his ankles. He stood up and with insulting indifference stretched the kinks out of his back as armed warriors gathered around. Dreibrand drew his pistol and leveled it at Pelafan's face.

"Do not try to hurt anyone and you may leave," Dreibrand offered.

"Oh, I may leave, may I?" Pelafan sneered happily. Despite his stab wound, he felt much more confident with the return of his natural abilities. "You only have enough sho darts to keep me down the rest of the day. What will you do after that, human?"

"I will use this if you try to hurt anyone. Now leave," Dreibrand said.

"You call me a thief, yet you threaten me with my own property," Pelafan ridiculed.

"Be glad you only lost your weapons for attacking me," Dreibrand responded with equal contempt.

Reminded that the warded warrior had bested him, Pelafan held his tongue. He maintained his aloof posture, but he did not really want to

tempt the human into shooting him again.

An outcry came from the east end of the camp when the other rys erupted from his hiding place and sprinted toward Pelafan. A Yentay hurled a spear, but the rys easily dodged it. Dreibrand immediately hollered orders to end any attacks on the second rys. He did not want to see any more rys blood shed, especially in a fatal way. Actually killing a rys would no doubt upset Shan, and more crucially, the citizenry of Jingtun. It could be disastrous if the rys population decided to take Onja's side in the war.

The warriors begrudgingly held back their weapons as the rys trotted to Pelafan's side. The rys brandished a knife in one hand and a sho dart pistol in the other. Everyone carefully shifted away from whatever direction the pistol pointed.

"It lifts my heart that you came back for me, Sutah," Pelafan greeted cheerfully in the rys language.

"No having a conference!" Dreibrand barked. "Get out of here."

In a satirical expression of humility, Pelafan bowed to Dreibrand. "Sleep well, human," he said and departed with Sutah.

Pelafan and Sutah ignored the watchful warriors as if they strolled through an empty forest. The snide parting words of Pelafan warned Dreibrand that the two rys planned on returning. He wished he knew what they wanted. They seemed to have no interest in Shan or Onja but they certainly meant to cause him more trouble.

After the rys sauntered down the slope and disappeared into the trees, Dreibrand went to the ridge overlooking the road. With the Jingtun Pass in his view, he tried to comprehend the riddle of Pelafan and Sutah. He wished he could have met the rys on friendlier terms because chances were good that the two thieves had recently been to Jingtun and probably knew information that would have been very interesting.

As the morning passed and Dreibrand had some peace, his thoughts settled on the probable reason for the undesired attention from the rys rogues. The warding crystal that Shan had given him lay against his chest in a neck pouch that he had acquired to hold it. Drawing out the pouch, he rolled the orb into his palm and contemplated the milky blue light. Shan had told him that the warding crystal would protect him from the magic of all but the most powerful rys, and Dreibrand realized the item

would be valuable to any person. Pelafan and Sutare could have demanded a high price for it, or the ryls might even have a use for the warding crystal. If it was the warding crystal that the ryls sought, it did explain why he had been singled out among the men.

Whatever the reason, Dreibrand had to cope with two ryls who wanted to personally assault him. He wanted to believe that Pelafan's implied threat had just been a departing flourish of bravado. But if Dreibrand had learned one thing since crossing the Wilderness, it was that ryls were proud: all ryls were proud. Pelafan and Sutare would not accept defeat by a human.

Again Dreibrand wished that Shan was with him. Everything seemed so easy when Shan was riding at his side. Without the guidance of his ryl friend, Dreibrand suddenly felt foreign and exposed in the western world.

Perhaps I came here to test myself as much as my men, he thought.

He heard the crunch of footsteps on the rocky trail to the lookout. Tytido appeared with the wind bristling his hair and tugging at his bright cloak.

"You bring news?" Dreibrand guessed.

"Sir, the Zenglawa tribute caravan is coming. A scout has just reported that they are on the road," Tytido said.

Keenly interested, Dreibrand looked down to the exposed road, but it was still empty.

Pointing to the lower reaches of the road before its curves became lost in the landscape, Tytido explained, "We will see them any time now."

"Do you know how many warriors escort the caravan," Dreibrand asked.

"Yes Sir, one hundred twenty. King Athol's honor guard of fifty warriors and then warriors from other Zenglawa families. You can't take many warriors to Jington, but his escort is a little on the high side. King Athol knows he has lost a few friends," Tytido observed.

"Why should he be worried? King Taishek told me no one should attack during the tribute season," Dreibrand commented while he shaded his eyes to watch the road. He could now discern a column of Zenglawa warriors escorting several wagons, but the distance was too great for him to determine which rider was Athol.

“Yes, that is true,” Tytido delicately agreed. “But with rebellion in the land, anything could happen.”

Grinning broadly, Dreibrand took his attention from the road and looked Tytido in the eye. He knew what his lieutenant was suggesting, and he admitted that it was tempting. Athathol’s personality and attitude had not been endearing to Dreibrand, and the Zenglawa King was vulnerable. Dreibrand doubted he would catch this enemy of Shan with fewer warriors again.

I wish I had more men, he thought.

“Some treasure today would be good,” Tytido urged.

“There is much more treasure in Jington. None of you are wasting your time with me,” Dreibrand said.

While watching the full length of the Zenglawa force come into view, Tytido privately decided not to press the issue of an attack. “Truly one caravan is nothing compared to Jington,” he agreed.

“Where is Redan?” Dreibrand suddenly asked.

“He is in the camp—being watched,” Tytido answered.

“Thanks for thinking of that, Lieutenant,” Dreibrand approved. “Does he want to go back to his people?”

Tytido shrugged. “He does not seem to care, Sir.”

“You consider him faithless?” Dreibrand searched for the Hirqua’s opinion.

“I mostly find Redan strange. But if I were a Zenglawa I would leave my tribe too,” Tytido replied with a chuckle.

“The Zenglawa were your confederates for a long time,” Dreibrand noted.

“Just because peace is good does not mean the Zenglawa are,” Tytido said flatly.

Observing the caravan, Dreibrand said, “They do seem eager to reaffirm their loyalty to Onja.”

Tytido recalled all of the tribute caravans he had seen his tribe assemble over the years. Shaking his head, he commented, “All of us have been fools to give our wealth so easily to Onja. I am proud that the Hirqua have

ended this practice. I sincerely hope that Shan will mind his own business once he is King of Jington.”

“He will,” Dreibrand said and believed it. “Shan has no wish to tax the human nations.”

“The Hirqua leaders worry that Shan will favor the Temu more than the others. Give the Temu power to conquer other tribes,” Tytido said. He felt comfortable mentioning this to Dreibrand, who was not a Temu but might offer valuable insights into the relationship between Shan and the Temu.

Dreibrand did not quite know how to respond. If Shan and Taischek had some kind of private power deal, he did not know. Even if he did know, he served both the Temu King and Shan and it would be wrong for him to talk about it. Dreibrand believed the concern of the Hirqua was a natural conclusion, but he had seen no hint that it was true.

“Lieutenant Tytido, you have volunteered to serve Shan, and I know Shan will not forget the help you gladly offered. In truth, Shan dislikes death and violence and he would not sow seeds of war between his allies,” Dreibrand said.

These words satisfied Tytido somewhat and he said, “I mentioned this so that you would know—so that Lord Shan would know—some of the concerns among the Hirqua.”

“Shan will know,” Dreibrand promised.

Although he did not doubt Tytido’s loyalty to Shan’s cause, he now saw that Tytido had been sent forth with a specific agenda. Clearly, Shan’s allies desired equal favor from the future rys king, and it was nice to know he was in a position to influence the rys’s favor. Dreibrand saw how much he had to gain. Shan gave him opportunities that had not been available to him in Atrophane, but the stakes were perilously high.

37~ Bargaining for Revenge ~

“Let us circle back, Pelafan,” Sutah said as he watched his friend continue up the mountain trail that would converge with the road high in the pass.

“We have business ahead,” Pelafan grumbled dismissively.

“We have business behind! The warding crystal,” insisted Sutah.

Pelafan spun around, exasperated with his companion. His delicate

nostrils flared in the high thin air as he contained his temper. Pelafan was still upset with Sutah for running away when he had been hurt, but he was more upset for missing Dreibrand with his sho dart.

“Oh, we will get that crystal and have revenge on that human,” Pelafan announced with menace and touched the bandage on his arm.

“How?” Sutah asked.

Pelafan replied, “I have glimpsed Kezanada warriors coming from the Jingtun Valley as we speak. I intend to meet them on the road and convince them to attack the small force of humans. Then they will be dead and we can take the crystal.”

Remembering the Kezanada passing by a few days earlier, Sutah remarked that they had delivered their tribute quickly.

“Who cares about that,” Pelafan snapped. “Come on. I do not want to miss them.”

Trotting up beside Pelafan, Sutah queried, “How will you convince the Kezanada to help us? Those humans had very little gold and the Kezanada may not be tempted just by their gear and horses, especially if they have to fight for it.”

“Sutah, if you would keep quiet, I could think about the details,” Pelafan said irritably.

Although Sutah lacked the grumbling confidence of his partner, he stopped asking questions. If Pelafan’s plan succeeded, it would be great fun, and Sutah had no other plan in mind beyond a repeat of last night’s approach.

When they reached the road, they stood side by side in the lane and looked up into the pass where the alpine meadows stretched above the trees. Next to them, one ancient and stubborn tree grew bent and twisted, defying the constant wind. The rys had reached the road without much time to spare and they did not need their rys perceptions to see the approaching Kezanada force. The grim warriors led by their burly Overlord thundered down the pass at a full gallop. Because of their fast pace, Pelafan suspected that Onja had contracted some urgent business with the mercenary nation, but as long as Onja had not commanded them to punish him and Sutah, Pelafan did not care.

“You did not say the Overlord was with them,” Sutah said.

“Of course he is,” Pelafan said, although he had not known. When he had spied the Kezanada force entering the pass, they had been at the edge of his perception and very indistinct. He had not noticed the Overlord at all.

If the two forms blocking the road had been human, the Kezanada would have rolled right over the impudent vagabonds, but rys were a different matter. The Overlord recognized the two rys and decided to speak with them—briefly. Signaling for his warriors to halt, the Overlord slowed his steed’s mighty pace.

The Overlord’s great warhorse rumbled to a stop by the rys and many warriors flowed around Pelafan and Sutah until they were surrounded by hot lathered horses. The wind pulled at the black horsetails on every helmet, and the sun reflected brightly on the visored faces.

The handle of the Overlord’s scimitar protruded from his colorful furs, and on the other side of his mighty frame, a crystal laden pommel stuck out.

“Pelafan and Sutah, what do you want?” the Overlord demanded.

“Great master of the Kezanada,” Pelafan began diplomatically. “We require a favor from you and your mighty warriors.”

A contemptuous snort sounded behind the metal grate of the Overlord’s ornate helmet. “I have more important business than your skulking thievery.”

“But Overlord, it will be worth your while,” Pelafan said.

The Overlord scoffed, “I have no time for you, Pelafan. You know our arrangement. Go to my stronghold. My agents are always pleased to trade with you.”

“But Overlord please, I need only a moment,” Pelafan insisted.

The Overlord rumbled, “Pelafan, you have already caused me enough delay to anger me.”

Despite the Kezanada’s ominous tone, Pelafan continued, “Overlord, a nearby band of warriors possesses a valuable item that Sutah and I wish to steal. But we need your help.”

The Overlord noted the bandaged arm of the rys and chuckled, “Some human finally got the best of you, and now you want us to go punish them

for you.” The Overlord smelled truth like a dog on a strong trail.

“Exactly,” Pelafan beamed.

Although Pelafan was a wiley rys, he was about a thousand times less powerful than Queen Onja and the Overlord had no fear of him. Derisively the Overlord laughed, “Pelafan, you do not ask a favor, you ask for a service, and you do not have the means to pay me to attack anyone.”

Pelafan glanced to Sutah, but Sutah had a puzzled expression on his face. As usual, Sutah had no support forthcoming and Pelafan decided to reveal more facts about his purpose. He had wanted to avoid mentioning the warding crystal because the Kezanada might covet it, but the Overlord was not being convinced.

“But they have a warding crystal. With that Sutah and I could steal in Jington itself. We could filch all manner of jewels and antiques from the grand houses of Jington, trading exclusively with the Kezanada of course. Overlord, think of the finery of Jington slipping back down the Rysamand. With this warding crystal, our fellow rys will not be able to detect us. Except for Onja, but we will stay out of her Keep. This warding crystal is powerful. I believe it was made by Shan himself.”

The Overlord had not really been listening to the rys’s proposal, only remaining because the horses had been winded and needed the rest. But at the mention of Shan’s name, the Overlord abruptly granted his true attention.

Jumping down from his horse, he shouted excitedly, “Shan is here!?”

Elated to have the Overlord’s interest, Pelafan realized the Kezanada’s “more important business” must be the bounty for Shan. Pelafan wished he could answer that Shan actually was nearby because now that he had the Overlord’s attention he wanted to keep it. However, lying to the Kezanada was never recommended.

“A band of warriors is camped along those cliffs. They are led by the man from the east, who Shan has taken as a friend. He must be a very close friend if Shan has given him a warding crystal. You could capture him and he could reveal much about Shan,” Pelafan explained, enjoying the thought of the human suffering the Overlord’s torture.

Although aware that Pelafan tried to manipulate him, the Overlord felt tempted to attack the group of warriors. Slaughtering some men

connected to Shan would be a nice appetizer for the revenge he wanted for his lost one hundred warriors. And torturing some prisoners could provide some valuable information.

“How many warriors are you talking about?” the Overlord demanded.

“Only forty,” Pelafan replied eagerly.

The Overlord looked around thoughtfully. He had forty Kezanada with him. The other half of his force was a full day behind in the Jington Valley escorting the empty tribute wagons, baggage, and servants. However, even odds were excellent odds when the Kezanada were involved.

“Very well Pelafan, you and Sutah have your wish. The Kezanada will crush these humans who have offended you. I will have my prisoners, and you can keep the crystal because I have no use for such a thing. But you owe me,” the Overlord growled.

“Oh yes, of course, Overlord,” Pelafan accepted happily.

“I will attack in the morning. Now I need to make camp before dark and certainly not this high up the mountain,” the Overlord decided.

Pelafan and Sutah managed to persuade two Kezanada to let them ride double with them. Sutah was glad that Pelafan’s plan seemed to be working so far, but he needed to speak privately with his companion. Sutah knew Pelafan had been concentrating on his conversation with the Overlord and must not have yet noticed what was unusual. If Sutah shut his eyes, the Overlord and a handful of his warriors were simply not there. A powerful aura of magic hung over them, masking the rys’s perception more than Dreibrand’s warding crystal had. Much more.

When Pelafan finally noticed the effect, he looked at Sutah with surprise. Neither rys had heard of humans being granted the protection of warding crystals before, and now it seemed every human they encountered suddenly possessed the magic charms. The rys thieves realized that their Queen was arming her forces for genuine warfare. A rys power struggle of classical proportions was definitely brewing. Although these revelations were disturbing to Pelafan and Sutah, they, like most rys, were more curious about the outcome than interested in joining the conflict.

By now, the Zenglawa caravan had labored up the road and encountered the Kezanada, who arrogantly insisted the Zenglawa make way for them. When King Atathol first saw the Kezanada warriors,

complete with their infamous Overlord and accompanied by two rys, he thought that Onja had contracted his killing for certain. The Kezanada were a traditional medium for the consequences of her displeasure. Few indiscretions were worthy of Onja's magic, and Atathol was actually relieved when the Kezanada only bowled rudely through the Zenglawa group. The tribute caravan hurried into the pass even though it was dusk. The road would allow them to travel at night, and Atathol wanted to get into the Jington Valley before stopping, especially with the Overlord on this side of the pass.

The Overlord directed his warriors to make camp in an area commonly used by caravans. Pelafan considered the site overly visible especially when he saw they intended to have fires, and he even gave the Overlord his unsolicited opinion.

Rather testily, the Overlord responded, "Then you and Sutah will monitor for spies all night. The rebels will think we are the Zenglawa anyway."

Receiving all night guard duty for his complaining did not please Pelafan but he did not protest. He did not want the Overlord to change his mind about attacking.

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Clouds gathered against the Rysamand, creating a starless black night, and Dreibrand paced beside his campfire like a chained dog. The thought of the rys returning with the night agitated him greatly. He knew he had been lucky to beat them off the night before and he did not know how he would fare in a second confrontation.

The uncertainty of the night gave Dreibrand a bad feeling. He had just come back from the lookout ridge where he had seen the fires of what he assumed to be the Zenglawa camp. The tribute caravan had moved out of sight from his vantage point and disappeared in the dusk before the campfires had appeared in the evening, but their closeness bothered him. As an Atrophaney officer he had always been confident in his superior forces and victorious outcomes, but he did not have those sensations tonight. Dreibrand believed his Hirqua warriors were durable enough but they were not the Horde.

Tytido shared Dreibrand's fire, poking it with a stick and watching his general pace. When Dreibrand noticed his lieutenant observing him

thoughtfully, he stopped because he should not let the others see him be so bothered.

Dreibrand touched his chestplate that covered the warding crystal hanging around his neck. Quietly he said, "Lieutenant, do you think those rys will come back?"

Tytido considered a moment, watching the flame that had started on the end of his poking stick. He did not blame his commander for being worried. Tytido remembered the sho dart and he did not want the rys to come back either.

"Sir, I think they might. Pelafan will plan some nasty trick if he can. You captured him and tied him up. For a rys that is quite humiliating, but I don't know why they were bothering us in the first place," Tytido said.

Dreibrand squatted next to Tytido and said, "I have a warding crystal. I think that is what they wanted."

"You do?" Tytido cried, but Dreibrand motioned for him to keep his voice down.

"It is from Shan. Do you think Pelafan and Sutah would want something like that?" Dreibrand asked.

"Who wouldn't? Can I see it, Sir?" Tytido asked eagerly. He had seen warding crystals before in temples and in the throne room of Onja when he had accompanied his tribe's tribute caravan, but he had never touched one.

Dreibrand hesitated but he decided he could trust Tytido. He slipped the orb out of its pouch and handed it to Tytido, who admired the swirling light within the perfect sphere.

"It is my guess that those rys will go to Atathol and convince him to attack us," Dreibrand whispered.

Tytido looked up from the fascinating charm. Trying to be optimistic, he said, "Sir, they will not leave their tribute to attack us."

Because Tytido seemed so sure, Dreibrand considered that he could be worrying too much. Yet, he could not ignore his instincts, and he persisted, "You said yourself that I humiliated the rys, and I know they are up to something."

Handing the warding crystal back to his general, Tytido said, "Sir, I

know you were upset last night because the rys got into camp. It will not happen again. I have doubled the guard and assigned everyone two watches tonight. Get some rest, Sir. Do not let these bandit rys rattle your mind.”

Dreibrand disliked Tytido’s opinion that he was rattled, and he clung to his desire to take the initiative. “I am going to see what is going on in that camp up the mountain. I will be back before dawn,” Dreibrand announced.

Startled, Tytido protested, “Why do you want to do that?”

“Pelafan and Sutah cannot detect me, or at least I think so. And if I have what they want you will be safer without me,” Dreibrand said.

“And if they can’t detect you, how will they know you have left the camp? They might attack anyway,” Tytido reasoned.

Dreibrand growled with frustration because his lieutenant had a good point. “But I must know what is going on at that camp,” he insisted, starting to pace again.

Tytido stood up to argue with his commander. He was beginning to like Dreibrand, even respect him, but sometimes the foreigner’s mind raced off in strange directions. Tytido did not know what went on in the eastern world, but on his side of the world, commanders did not rush off to enemy camps in the night.

Somewhat sternly, Tytido said, “It would be foolish to leave camp, Sir. Especially with rys around. We must stay together. If you go scouting, you could be captured.”

Dreibrand really disliked the possibility of being captured. He stopped pacing and then reluctantly plunked down next to the fire. Tytido’s candor had not angered him. Perhaps his scouting idea was foolish, and Dreibrand realized that he should let himself rely on the advice of his lieutenant sometimes.

The loss of sleep from the night before suddenly caught up with Dreibrand and his shoulders sagged with weariness. He would rest.

“I would have done well to have your wisdom to restrain me in the past, Lieutenant,” he said.

Subtle happiness lighted Tytido’s face. He sat down and resumed poking the fire. “Thank you, Sir,” he said.

With Tytido watching, Dreibrand went to sleep, but he left his armor on this night. The silvery glow of the coming dawn outlined the mountains when Tytido gripped Dreibrand's shoulder to wake him. Dreibrand was surprised by the depth of his sleep as he shook it off and sat up. The first bird had not even broken into morning song yet, but the entire camp was stirring and men were already gathering the hobbled horses.

"What is it?" Dreibrand asked.

Tytido gave him a hand up and explained that he had sent scouts up the pass in the middle of the night and they had just reported back.

With a frown, Dreibrand reminded him that he had said that it would be foolish to go scouting with Pelafan and Sutah out there.

"Foolish for you, Sir," Tytido said. "But you were right to believe that there was danger. A group of Kezanada is on the road. If Pelafan and Sutah told them about us, we could be in trouble."

Dreibrand regretted mentioning Shan to Pelafan, and he imagined the deal the rys could make with the Kezanada. He had no doubt that the rys had contacted the mercenaries of Onja, and he took little comfort in the vindication that his worries had been warranted.

"How many?" Dreibrand asked as he bent to grab his sword belt and buckle it on.

"Fifty, we think," Tytido estimated, going high.

Dreibrand called to Redan to get his horse, and the Zenglawa promptly scrambled off on his errand. Dreibrand decided, "We will give the Kezanada a chance to pass by in case they are not looking for us."

Tytido nodded hopefully. Although Tytido had been eager to assail the tribute caravan of the Zenglawa earlier, he showed no signs of suggesting an attack this time. Tytido had known that this rebellion business would put him in conflict with the Kezanada, but now that this might actually happen, he found the concept had lost some of its allure.

Dreibrand noted the apprehension on his lieutenant's face and had to ask, "Do the Hirqua have the stomach for fighting the Kezanada if it comes to that?"

Tytido's face hardened into proud offense at Dreibrand's rude question. "The Hirqua will stand in any fight," he stated.

“Good! Now, Lieutenant, forgive the question. I had to know your mind because everyone speaks of the Kezanada with fear,” Dreibrand explained.

“Once we all fight together, hopefully there will be no more doubts about each other’s courage,” Tytido said.

Catching his lieutenant’s meaning, Dreibrand went on with business. He glanced at the light peeking over the mountains. “We must have a plan if they attack. We will hold this position. If they attack us, we will give way to them against the cliffs. Then our force will split and attack their flanks. We will either squeeze them successfully...or have access to escape.”

“I do not like this splitting up against the Kezanada,” Tytido said.

Dreibrand insisted, “Splitting us will split them. This position is not important to us. Our goal is to avoid defeat. If their force is too large for us to handle, we will retreat and regroup at the first bridge down the road to the east.”

“You do not sound confident with all these plans of retreat,” Tytido remarked.

Dreibrand asserted his authority. “Tytido, it is your place to advise me, even criticize, but do not snipe at my tactics. I know what I am doing. We are a small scouting force, not an army for open battle. Intelligence demands I plan a retreat. We are not here to die, but to win. I intend to be in Jington in the spring and if I have to make a few strategic retreats to get there, I will.”

Tytido apologized, grudgingly accepting that it was time for him to accept that his general had the command.

Gently, wanting to foster Tytido’s confidence in him, Dreibrand added, “I think we will win, Lieutenant.”

They went together to the lookout ridge to watch the road while the Yentay broke camp and mounted up.

The Kezanada advanced quickly down the mountain, easy to see in the morning light. Even at a distance, Dreibrand could discern the value of the warriors that were feared by even the mighty Temu. They were all big and strong and on good horses. They rode together in a close confident force that owned the road. The Kezanada obviously believed in their notorious reputation.

Dreibrand was an experienced warrior, but his encounters with fighters

of this caliber had been rare. He breathed deeply of the cool mountain air, smelling its freshness, feeling how he was alive, and prepared himself mentally to be tested.

The Kezanada force left the road below his vantage point and headed directly for his position.

“So, it is a fight then,” Dreibrand whispered.

38~ Dreibrand Meets the Overlord ~

The songs of birds dwindled as the Kezanada advanced on the Yentay camp, and Dreibrand heard the rattle of accouterments through the hushed woodland. This battle would define him to the Yentay and he hoped that afterwards they would trust his leadership.

He had arranged for Tytido to lead half of the men when the time came to fall back. For now, the Yentay waited on their horses with Dreibrand at the center of their line. The strain of waiting for the charge showed on their faces. As if in response to their worry, clouds rolled in to observe the gloomy contest. When the Kezanada came into sight, they made a grim sight. With their face shields down, they advanced with a sinister homogeneity. The Kezanada did not rush, but instead plodded toward their intended enemy with lazy confidence.

Dreibrand raised his sword, and the Yentay likewise brought up their swords and spears.

“Stay with the plan, Lieutenant Tytido,” Dreibrand ordered one last time.

“Yes Sir,” Tytido acknowledged. He was rapidly accepting the wisdom of Dreibrand’s strategy.

Directly in front of him in the opposing line of Kezanada, Dreibrand saw who he assumed to be his counterpart, the Kezanada leader. His gaudy gear set him apart from the other darkly clad warriors, and Dreibrand noted the man’s size and obvious strength. The edge of a cruel and hefty scimitar rose from the hard fist of the Overlord, and Dreibrand steeled his courage to face this daunting opponent.

A Kezanada lifted a horn and three quick blasts started the charge. The audacity of the frontal attack on his defensible position shocked Dreibrand even as he witnessed it. As Tytido had promised, the Hirqua warriors held their line and absorbed the charge.

The brightly dressed Kezanada attacked Dreibrand. A blur of big muscles and dyed furs flew at him on a spirited black horse, like a man in carnival costume who had suddenly gone mad. Dreibrand's shield blocked the first sweep of the scimitar and his body shuddered from the strength behind his enemy's weapon.

Metal weapons rang against each other with violent shrieks, and spears and warclubs banged on shields. The bellows and screams of men and horses punctuated the clash. The Yentay feigned weakness and began to fall back. The thick-bodied Overlord assailed Dreibrand so relentlessly, that Dreibrand could do little except drop back. Tytido's group broke off a little early, but it would have to do. Dreibrand's expertly trained warhorse obeyed him instantly and completely dodged the lunging Kezanada leader. Calling to his warriors, Dreibrand led them aside and around the Kezanada flank.

The split in the battle briefly sent the Kezanada ranks into turmoil, but they recovered quickly and fought with undiminished fury. A few mounted Kezanada archers had hung back from the charge and they now advanced and began to shoot arrows at the Yentay on both flanks. The skilled shots quickly began to take a toll, and no Yentay could break off from the main fight to deal with the archers.

Dreibrand ducked behind his shield and accepted another horrendous whack from the scimitar. An arrow sank into his shield at the same moment, and he knew the battle was not going well. The skill and power of the Kezanada leader kept him pinned and Dreibrand struggled to cope with the assault. The Kezanada leader seemed to want only him and pursued him so stubbornly that Dreibrand had no more opportunity for retreat. Another blow from the scimitar landed on his shield, and Dreibrand slammed back with all of his strength, throwing the Kezanada's weapon wide. With his opponent opened up, Dreibrand's sword sailed in with a vengeance. The Kezanada had to bring his shield up and suffer Dreibrand's hard furious attacks.

But this Kezanada, who was the Overlord and weaponmaster of the society, did not stay on the defensive for long. The scimitar, which usually only had to become unsheathed to win its way, swiped down from a steep angle bearing all the great strength in the Overlord's muscular body. Dreibrand dodged behind his shield too far to one side, and the force of the blow unhorsed him. Starfield bellowed indignantly as Dreibrand

grabbed futilely at the reins. He gripped the saddle desperately with his legs, but the demands of gravity could not be denied.

He slammed onto the ground and his ribs banged inside his armor. Starfield remained nearby as his training dictated, but Dreibrand would not have a chance to regain the saddle. The Overlord circled Starfield, intending to trample Dreibrand. The wide shod hooves of the black warhorse loomed over Dreibrand and he rolled aside, narrowly escaping their crashing impact.

Elsewhere in the melee, Redan struggled with his foes as best he could. The short sword that Dreibrand had given him felt awkward in his hand, but Redan was managing to keep himself alive with it. Redan heard the enraged battle cry of the Hirqua next to him suddenly end when an arrow landed in the man's throat. Frantically, Redan tried to spot the archer while keeping his horse circling one step ahead of the Kezanada mace that continually whirled by his head.

There, at the edge of the clearing, a Kezanada sat upon his calm horse carefully taking aim with his great black bow that curled at each end. Kezanada archers wore helmets with simple black cloth masks that did not interfere with vision instead of the metal visor.

Spurring his horse, Redan abandoned the fight. If any of his comrades had been able to take note of him at that moment, they would have thought he fled in fearful defeat. The Kezanada who had been fighting him laughed at his flight and then turned to find a more convenient victim.

Redan did not seek escape though. He only sought a weapon more suited to his skills. He viewed the Kezanada archer not so much as someone trying to kill him but as the wrongful possessor of what he needed. Sword held high, Redan charged the mounted archer, who stayed calm and swung his bow to face the oncoming warrior. The Kezanada arrow sank into the chest of Redan's horse, killing it easily. The horse crashed disastrously and flung Redan over its dying head. Redan skidded on the ground, getting dirt even in his mouth and pebbles down his shirt.

He landed next to the mounted archer and jumped up as the Kezanada reached for another arrow. Redan hacked at the archer's thigh before he could draw the bow. The Kezanada cried out with pain and Redan seized his arm and pulled him from the saddle. His sword jabbed the Kezanada under the chin, killing him as he fell to the ground.

Sheathing the bloody sword, Redan triumphantly took the bow and tore the quiver from the Kezanada's back. Now he could be useful to this battle. Redan had earned the master archer title at an uncommonly young age of thirteen and was considered a prodigy among his tribe. Able to assume his proper role on the field of battle, Redan took a second to judge the bow then nocked an arrow.

Another Kezanada archer, who had turned to see what Redan had done, caught an arrow in the eye. Redan quickly located a third archer and dispatched him from the world. No more archers sniped the Yentay on this flank, and he gave his attention to the central battle. Every arrow in his commandeered quiver represented a dead Kezanada. Any gap in their armor provided a sufficient target.

So many Kezanada abruptly dropped that the Yentay on that flank began to prevail. Encouraged by the sudden turn of events, the Yentay pressed in on their diminished foes and drew warriors away from Tytido's side.

Despite the help provided by Redan's wicked accuracy, no relief came to Dreibrand. He and the Overlord were locked in a mortal duel that tested Dreibrand more than it tested the Kezanada.

After dodging the stomping hooves, Dreibrand flopped aside again when the Overlord bent low and hacked at him with the scimitar. The blade sliced an unpleasant but shallow wound on Dreibrand's left arm, but he could not heed the pain. Even as the scimitar wounded him, he bounded to his feet. Although Dreibrand hated to harm such a fine animal, the fury of survival demanded brutal action, and he gripped his sword in both hands and chopped at the passing hind legs. The blade cut completely through a leg, and the warhorse screamed from the devastating blow and fell.

The Overlord recovered from the hopeless crash of his steed and whirled to face Dreibrand. The loss of his beautiful and valuable horse made the Overlord shake with rage. While the shock of the unhorsing was still fresh, Dreibrand attacked. The straight blade of Atrophaney steel that had protected him since the day he had left Atrophane swung from the left and then the right, shifting direction with a swiftness difficult for its size and weight. Dreibrand's limbs and muscles had long since memorized the fighting moves and his fast attacks usually defeated an enemy swiftly, but the shield and scimitar of the Overlord were always there to stop him.

“You better have more for me than that, Easterner,” scoffed the Overlord in the common language.

Dreibrand narrowed his eyes at the expressionless visor that issued the taunt and assailed his opponent with renewed wrath and a primal cry. The Kezanada was stronger, but Dreibrand would not think him his better. Their swords clashed with exhaustive speed. Dreibrand made a mighty swing that should have knocked the Kezanada’s scimitar completely aside, but iron muscles locked the master-made blade, and the scimitar stayed in place. Instead, Dreibrand’s sword, that had swept away the defenders of many nations, snapped in complete ruin. The broken blade twirled across the gray sky and landed on the ground a small distance away.

The Overlord laughed, and Dreibrand’s gaping face was darkly comical as he looked at the stub of his sword. Unable to contemplate this misfortune any further, Dreibrand cowered behind his shield. His brave spirit did not acknowledge what looked like his impending doom. He blocked high with his shield, but then the scimitar would instantly swoop low toward his ankles, making him jump.

Blocking and pushing back the scimitar, Dreibrand backed into a tree. He spun behind the tree to avoid becoming pinned on it, and he was thankful for the scant shelter. The scimitar chopped at the trunk, sending out a spray of bark. Dreibrand’s senses were so alive that he smelled the pitch from the tree’s wound.

The Overlord yanked at his blade that was slightly stuck in the wood, and in this instant of respite, Dreibrand’s hand went to his swordbelt and he spun out from the other side of the tree. Just as the Overlord tugged his scimitar free, Dreibrand raised his new weapon inside the Kezanada’s guard. Dreibrand knew he only had one chance, and a slim chance at that, or he would surely die. He aimed the pistol at the thin strip of skin exposed below the visor and fired the sho dart.

The Overlord yelled sharply, surprised by the little sting at his neck and indignant at his opponent’s impertinence for shooting him with a sho dart. But strength of body and skill in warfare can protect no human from a sho dart, and the Kezanada became helpless. Loss of muscle command swept through his magnificent body and the Overlord teetered with diminishing balance. Dreibrand returned his pistol to his belt and pulled out his ivory handled dagger. The numbed fingers of the Overlord clung stubbornly to his scimitar, but Dreibrand knocked the weapon from his

hand.

With a heavy crash the Overlord fell back and Dreibrand stepped forward, preparing to bend down and kill the man. Even driven deep into battle lust, he was reluctant to slay the paralyzed warrior. This hesitation saved him by allowing him to notice a familiar shade of blue out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw Sutah aiming a sho dart pistol, and just in time he raised his shield, where the deflected dart made a little bang.

The arrival of the rys required him to abandon the prone Kezanada. Snarling with anger, Dreibrand charged at Sutah, terribly upset with the trouble the rys had caused him. Before he reached Sutah, Pelafan appeared from behind a tree and tackled Dreibrand. The human and the rys grappled each other on the ground, and Pelafan barely kept the dagger at bay.

“Sutah! Shoot him,” Pelafan cried urgently.

Sutah fumbled with another sho dart, not performing well under such direct pressure. When Sutah finally got a clear shot at the struggling human, the pistol misfired and the sho dart jammed in the barrel.

Dreibrand, pumped up from his battle with the Overlord, hurled Pelafan away and scrambled to his feet.

“I’ll kill both of you!” he yelled.

By now, some Kezanada came to aid their fallen leader, and some Yentay came to help their general. In the sudden swarm of warriors, Pelafan and Sutah departed. They were not warriors and would not pretend to be. The rys sought their secret paths into the Rysamand, intending to return to Jingtun and hideout among their kind. Neither of them had any desire to experience the Overlord’s reactions to the day’s events.

A long wailing note came from a Kezanada horn, signaling a retreat. They held the Yentay back as they collected their leader. The Overlord’s Second could have stayed and probably won the fight, but he felt it was his duty to protect his master. In the opinion of the Second, the attack had gone badly and their losses had been abnormally high because of the Zenglawa archer, but he did collect some prisoners so he would have something worthwhile to present his master.

Now protected by his surrounding warriors, Dreibrand staggered to

Starfield and leaned on the side of his saddle. His body twitched with exhaustion after being put through grueling paces by the large Kezanada. He hoped Pelafan and Sutah had run off for good after failing again.

Dreibrand climbed into the saddle and rode among his men, ordering them to stay put. They were excited about their victory over the notorious Kezanada, but Dreibrand worried that the enemy fell back to regroup for another attack, and he would not allow his force to pursue pellmell.

With a happy whoop, Tytido rushed up to his general. “We drove them back, Sir!” he beamed.

Dreibrand cast a weary eye over their torn camp, viewing the bodies from both sides. He was proud of these Hirqua men who had fought bravely and well against a strong force. He no longer had any doubts in their resilience or conviction, but Dreibrand wondered what they would think of him. He had not slain a single attacker.

“Sir, did you really kill the Overlord?” Tytido asked.

“Overlord? Is that what they call their commander?” Dreibrand mumbled while examining his cut arm. He pulled off a gauntlet because blood had run all the way down his arm and inside it.

A grin broke across Tytido’s face as he realized that Dreibrand did not understand the significance of his opponent. He explained, “Sir, that was THE Overlord, the ruler of all Kezanada. At least, I believe so by his size and bright dress. He has been described to me many times. He is the deadliest warrior in all...in all Gyhwen. Or at least he was. Everyone saw him fall!” His excitement and awe became apparent to Dreibrand now.

“I did not kill him,” Dreibrand said quickly before everyone became too elated by their assumptions. “I took him down with a sho dart, but I did not get the chance to finish him.”

This news did not really diminish Tytido’s pleasure in their victory. “But you beat him. Dreibrand Veta beat the Overlord!” he shouted, and his voice blared across the cliffs, rousing a few cheers.

Briefly, Dreibrand acknowledged the praise, glad that they did not have to retreat after all. He walked Starfield to where his broken sword lay in the dirt. Dismounting, he picked up the blade and then retrieved the nearby handle. For a moment he just pondered the pieces, admiring the finely crafted detail on the pommel and hilt. The weapon had cost him a

lot of money and had always proved its value, and he was still surprised that it had broken.

His study of his broken weapon ended when an agitated Hirqua ran up to him.

“General, General! Sir, Sir! They have taken Misho,” he cried.

“Slow down, speak common,” Dreibrand ordered. “What happened, Celrand?”

Celrand continued but did not really slow down, “The Kezanada took my cousin Misho prisoner. They had beaten down the Zenglawa and since we were closest to him, we went to help. The Zenglawa had taken out their archers and with their arrows killed many of the Kezanada. That is why we won. But they had gotten to him, and we tried to help, but...they got Misho too. I saw them carry both men away. They weren’t dead. At least Misho lived.” Celrand stopped and took a shaky breath.

Looking to Tytido, Dreibrand asked, “What will the Kezanada do with our men?”

Tytido had been frowning at Celrand because he felt his tribesman gave too much credit to the Zenglawa. Snapping out of his personal thoughts, Tytido responded, “Ah, they will interrogate them. Probably torture them.”

“But Misho knows nothing important!” Celrand protested, aghast. His cousin and he had joined this adventure on a bold whim, and the dangerous realities were hitting him hard.

Proudly Tytido informed Dreibrand, “No Hirqua warrior will betray himself to an enemy. As for the Zenglawa, I cannot say.”

Dreibrand’s face was disturbed as he tried to make a decision. A chill gust of wind howled against the cliffs and tossed his long hair. A cold drop of rain struck his cheek, and he looked to the darkening sky. The day had started out bad and looked like it intended to get worse. But Dreibrand had no need to think for long about his next move. He had to do the right thing for his men, but he wished they did not have to take on the Kezanada again so soon. Looking around at the Kezanada bodies, he noticed the black Kezanada arrows protruding from many of their necks and thought that Celrand might be right about Redan’s pivotal role in the battle.

Addressing Celrand, he said with reassuring confidence, “We will go after them at once. None of my men will be forsaken as prisoners.”

This decision applied some hope to Celrand’s anxiety. He was greatly relieved that Dreibrand wanted to save his cousin.

“Lieutenant, send scouts to find their trail. We cannot afford to lose them in the wilds, especially with the rain coming. Select two men to stay and help the wounded and—tend to the dead. And make sure they search and strip those Kezanada bodies. When finished they can help the injured to Fata Nor if we do not return today.”

Tytido saluted quickly and left to distribute his orders. Dreibrand asked Celrand to stay and wrap his arm. The scimitar had sliced a gruesome flap of flesh that should have been stitched, but Dreibrand could not take the time to give himself proper attention. He knew the plight of Misho and Redan was worse than his arm. Remembering his nasty captivity with Hydax and Gennor, he empathized with their peril.

Before departing, Dreibrand toured his wrecked camp, offering praise and comfort to the wounded. Four Yentay had been lost and it was a terrible blow, but he had to make sure the number did not become six. He believed Pelafan and Sutah had encouraged this attack on him, and he resented the ruin and death the meddlesome rys had caused for their petty reasons.

He found the short sword that he had given Redan laying on the ground. He hoped he would have the opportunity to return it to the brave Zenglawa, but for now he needed it. After packing his broken sword into his gear, Dreibrand led his twenty-seven fit warriors after the Kezanada. Although the Kezanada were elusive, Dreibrand was determined not to let them slip away.

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The Kezanada galloped down the Jington Road with little artifice until they reached a bridge over a small creek that wound down from the slopes. Here they splashed upstream into the woodland, letting the flowing water consume their tracks.

As the rain turned from a drizzle to a chilling shower, the Second decided to make a camp so that the Overlord could recover in some comfort. Currently the Overlord’s great frame was draped over a horse rather unceremoniously. On another horse, farther back in the group,

were tied the prisoners.

The Kezanada force climbed out of the stream far away from the road and headed deep into a thick growth of pines. The many branches of the young trees provided a needley and difficult barrier to the riders, but they sought the cover produced by the screen of pines. The Kezanada knew the terrain along the road to Jington well and they had a particular spot in mind. The thick juvenile woods eventually gave way to a more open and mature forest, and they finally entered a grove of regal old growth, whose crowns could be seen in the distance towering over their underlings.

In this place the Kezanada strung two ropes between trees and hung some skins over them. In the hasty shelter they placed the Overlord out of the rain. The prisoners received the opposite treatment. Redan and Misho were tied to stakes that had been quickly pounded into the ground in a clear and rainy spot. Their limbs were pulled out cruelly between each stake, making them look like skins stretched out to dry.

The rough treatment and the cold rain roused Redan from the blow he had taken to the head. Stunned and disoriented, he did not immediately comprehend his situation, until a Kezanada stretched his legs taut with bindings that were connected to stakes too far away. As his body was spread painfully, Redan remembered the battle and the many Kezanada he had killed before they overwhelmed him. Actually rather surprised to be alive, Redan smiled despite his discomfort while thinking of the devastation he had brought to the feared Kezanada. Eight of the faceless and notorious mercenaries had fallen from his artful aim.

The Zenglawa's satisfied smirk did nothing to improve the mood of the nearest Kezanada, who was already upset with the lethal archer. Standing up from securing the leg bindings, the Kezanada sent a boot into Redan's groin. Redan's vague smile instantly disappeared as he let out an unflattering scream. Pain and nausea wracked his body, and he almost went back into unconsciousness. The Kezanada laughed, but Redan was beyond hearing it and only squirmed helplessly.

Under the crude shelter of skins, the Second held a flask to the Overlord's mouth. The elixir would speed away the effects of the sho dart. The Overlord groaned and raised a slow hand to wipe his lips. He took a few deep breaths and felt control seep back into his muscles.

When he found his voice, he complained thickly, "A sho dart. I had that

foreigner, and he got me with a sho dart.”

“He is a servant of Shan. He will have rys things,” reasoned the Second.

The Overlord grumbled a few curses in reference to Dreibrand, then sent a harsh gaze upon his Second and demanded, “Why did you retreat? Benladu, we would have won.”

The Second was a bold man who knew little fear and lived in a harsh world, but difficult questions from his master sent a tight discomfort through his chest.

“It is my sworn duty to protect your person. I thought to take you to safety, Overlord. The fight was not important enough to risk you,” explained the Second.

“Never disgrace the Kezanada with an unnecessary retreat,” the Overlord decreed with menace. “All who serve Shan deserve death to avenge our fallen brothers.”

“That is why I brought you prisoners,” offered the Second, hoping to recoup his favor.

“Ahhh, prisoners,” the Overlord sighed affectionately, outwardly pleased.

He decided not to pursue the issue of the retreat any more at this time. The Overlord was the most upset with Pelafan and Sutah, who had suggested the disastrous encounter with the Yentay. He hoped the larcenous rys had the sense to stay away from Do Jempur, because the sight of them would tempt him to murder, and the Overlord did not want to provoke Jington.

Regaining his feet, the Overlord commanded, “Show me the prisoners.”

The Second eagerly complied.

The Overlord looked down through his visor at the prisoners. They looked wholly miserable, wet and shivering in the rain. He could tell one was a Hirqua and one was a Zenglawa, which surprised him. The young Hirqua still looked a little dazed, but the Overlord noted the intense gleam from the eyes of the long haired Zenglawa. Even pitifully strapped to the ground with the mud gluing dead pine needles in his hair, Redan radiated a stubborn pride.

Gesturing to Redan, the Second mentioned, “This is the one responsible

for most of our losses. His skill is incredible.”

“A pity he did not seek to join the Kezanada. Shan will miss his service,” commented the Overlord as he squatted beside Misho’s head. He removed a stiletto from the many compartments of his coat and, seizing a bound hand, inserted the needle-like blade at the base of the man’s thumb. Misho winced at the poke, but otherwise remained stoic. Redan watched with wide eyes, filled with concern for his fellow prisoner.

Using the common speech, the Overlord asked, “Do you serve Shan?”

Misho quaked with the acceptance of his oncoming and painful demise and prayed to his ancestors for the strength to maintain the honor of his tribe.

“Where is Shan?” hissed the Overlord.

No answer.

“Young Hirqua, you do have a choice. The longer you resist me, the more pain you will earn,” the Overlord calmly explained, warming to the subject. “Now answer.”

Misho’s failure to respond prompted the Overlord to sink the spike deep into the hand. The Hirqua could only scream with pain as the Overlord pierced the flesh and played nerves like violin strings. Thrashing his head, Misho fought at his bindings, but the effort weakened as the pain sabotaged his strength. The Overlord twisted the stiletto inside the hand and Misho howled.

“Do you remember where Shan is yet?” laughed the Overlord, pleased with his delicate trick.

“It is no secret where Shan is!” Redan yelled. He could not bear to see Misho’s torment and tried to distract the Overlord, even if it meant receiving the awful attention of the Kezanada leader.

“Wait your turn, Zenglawa. We shall soon hear why you are with these rebels,” the Overlord warned.

“You know where Shan is,” Redan cried. “Leave him alone.”

“Oh, but I want to be sure. The rys may have slipped by my spies,” the Overlord stated sarcastically.

The Overlord released the stiletto but left it sunk into the hand that now slowly oozed blood. Much to the despair of the prisoners, the Overlord

removed a skewer from his coat. A large hand clamped onto Misho's skull and held the Hirqua's head steady. Misho's eyes bulged with terror.

The Overlord continued, "Perhaps Shan is close by and your force was trying to slip him back to Jingtun. In any case, I want every detail even if nothing is news to me."

After making this depressing proclamation, the Overlord began to carefully slide his evil tool under the skin along the line of Misho's jaw. Again the warrior screamed but his cries only made his suffering worse, and Misho lapsed into fast shallow gasps. The Overlord probed the side of the man's face and accessed a nerve that brought enough pain to make Misho twitch all the way to his feet.

"Stop!" Redan pleaded, but his concern only earned him a kick in the ribs from the Second.

Laughing, the Overlord observed, "The Zenglawa acts as if he actually feels the Hirqua's pain. Feel free to talk your business if this bothers you so much, Zenglawa."

Redan turned away from the scene of Misho's suffering. The temptation to just say Shan stayed at Dengar Nor assailed Redan because the Kezanada probably knew that anyway and there would be no true harm in confirming it. But Redan knew even that trifling admission would be faithless and he sincerely longed to do right by Shan. Now, as the prisoner of the terrible Kezanada, he would die and no one would ever know how much he truly believed in the fight against Onja.

Misho moaned plaintively and Redan gritted his teeth. The cruelty of the Overlord had not been exaggerated, and Redan suspected that nothing he could say would stop the torture.

Facing his tormented companion again, Redan insisted desperately, "We know nothing."

Leaving the dreadful skewer in Misho's face, the Overlord roughly turned his victim's head and brought out another skewer. While the Overlord examined the unmarred side of Misho's face, a Kezanada rushed up and interrupted the torture.

With a salute, he reported, "Overlord, the rebel warriors have followed us. They approach our position."

Behind his visor the Overlord scowled with surprise. The Kezanada were

rarely followed. Shan's foreign warrior was bold indeed, and the Overlord had to admire Dreibrand's perseverance. Sighing, the Overlord decided to abandon his prisoners. He doubted they knew anything of value, but their torture would have been satisfying.

Removing his instruments from Misho, the Overlord rose and announced, "Let Shan know what it is to find his men dead in the forest. Kill them."

He left with his Second to deal with the approaching war party.

The Kezanada left to dispatch the prisoners drew his knife and approached the prisoners with business-like ease. Misho panted feverishly, too relieved that his torture had ceased to care about his approaching executioner. Redan stared at the Kezanada and experienced complete helplessness. He could not defend himself physically or verbally, and the Yentay would never arrive in time.

The Kezanada kneeled first by Redan. He was pleased to kill the archer who had taken so many of his brothers that day. With open eyes that showed no regret or surrender, Redan watched the blade come for his throat. Suddenly, he heard the curious sound of sizzling and the rain began to steam on the knife, and then the Kezanada's gauntlet began to steam. The mercenary yelled with confusion and dropped the knife, which slapped into the mud with a hiss. Urgently the Kezanada tore off his steaming gauntlet that was burning his hand.

This bizarre event shocked Redan until comprehension suddenly flooded his mind as he looked at the Kezanada's burned hand. Redan had known the same sensation of having a superheated weapon scorch his hand. It was magic.

It has to be Lord Shan, he thought with incredible joy.

Redan felt heat at his wrists and ankles and his bindings were destroyed. The sudden release of the strain on his muscles and joints was bliss to his aching body, but Redan could not even take a second to enjoy the relief. The Kezanada, although confused, already reached for the knife, but Redan snatched it up. Although the heat lingered in the handle, Redan could bear to grasp it under such desperate circumstances.

Redan lurched up and thrust the knife at the Kezanada, who blocked it awkwardly with his ungloved hand. The knife sank through the hand, and Redan grasped the Kezanada by the throat with his other hand. The men

grappled fiercely, and Redan clung to his enemy with the desperation of a man who knew he only had the briefest of opportunities to save himself. Redan wrenched the knife out of the hand and struck with the speed of a starving snake, slitting the man's throat so fast he even cut two of his own fingers.

Warm blood gushed over Redan's hand as he pushed his defeated enemy back, gurgling in death throes. Still on his knees, Redan crouched lower and looked around warily. The other Kezanada mounted their horses and shouted orders, preparing for the assault on their position. So far, no one had noticed his extraordinary liberation or the killing of his executioner.

Flopping onto his stomach, he scrambled to Misho and cut his bindings.

"How?" Misho whispered weakly.

"Magic has set me free," Redan whispered while hacking away the last of Misho's restraints. "It must be Shan."

Misho clutched his bleeding face with his good hand. Although the exquisiteness of the pain had mellowed, the damage to his tissue and nerves kept him in agony. Redan put an arm around the Hirqua's shoulders and helped him sit up. The stress of the ordeal made Misho shudder repeatedly, and he feebly held his crippled hand against his chest. Great drops of blood plopped into his lap, and the rain spread the pinkness all over his front.

"Stand up," Redan hissed.

"I feel so sick," Misho whispered but he tried to get his feet underneath him.

Redan hoisted his injured comrade the rest of the way. "We must run!"

Although Misho needed Redan to support him, he did scramble along with some speed. He wanted very much to live.

The trumpeting of a Kezanada horn bounced between the large mossy trees and the war cries of the Yentay answered the horn as they broke out of the underbrush. They charged with indignant fury, knowing their only hope of saving the prisoners was to overwhelm the Kezanada quickly.

Redan dashed toward the line of advancing Yentay. Even in the rain and confusion, the Kezanada immediately noticed the unlikely sight of their

escaping prisoners. Outraged that his victims were miraculously slipping away, the Overlord trashed his defense plans and ordered a charge. He wanted those miserable fools cut down before they reached their friends.

Redan and Misho heard the cheers of their comrades, who upon seeing them, rejoiced that they lived. But Redan also heard the pounding of angry hooves behind him and estimated that the Kezanada would reach him first. Redan's nobility had not been fostered by his people, who tended to be conniving, but rather it was innate to his character. He instantly came to a decision and flung Misho ahead.

"Run, Misho, run!" he cried and turned to fight.

With only the knife he faced the closest mounted warrior despite the ridiculousness of the endeavor. At least by confronting the Kezanada, he could dodge the first few killing blows instead of just taking it in the back as he fled.

Celrand urged his horse harshly toward his stumbling cousin. Misho collapsed against the horse's side, clutching Celrand's thigh with his good hand and gasping. Distressed by Misho's bloody appearance, Celrand hauled him into the saddle fearing that he was on the verge of death.

For the second time that day, Dreibrand's force came together with the Kezanada in a violent crash. With Misho already recovered, Dreibrand rallied his men to the aid of Redan.

Redan dodged between his Kezanada tormentors, using their horses to shield him as best he could. It was a game he could not play for long. As the Yentay drew some of the pressure off, he attempted to pull a Kezanada from his horse. The attempt proved quite futile and Redan found himself parrying sword strokes with his relatively puny knife while dancing alongside the horse.

The Kezanada swatted at him with annoyance, and the sword finally knocked the knife from Redan's hand. Redan ducked as the sword came back on the return swing. Just then another sword slammed into the Kezanada's helmeted head and the sturdy Kezanada slumped forward slightly stunned.

Dreibrand was on the other side of the mercenary and Redan was elated by the sight of his general. Again Dreibrand smacked the Kezanada with the short sword but the armor protected him.

Guiding his horse to Redan, Dreibrand extended a hand. “Redan, climb on!”

Even as he said this, Dreibrand had to block the blows from another Kezanada and Redan wasted no time in getting on Starfield. A third Kezanada assailed Dreibrand, who defended himself with shield and sword. Redan felt very exposed and burdensome hanging onto his general’s back and he wished he had a weapon to help in the fight.

Dreibrand hollered orders to withdraw and kicked Starfield’s sides to let the horse know the importance of the departure. The Yentay hightailed it back into the younger woods. Dreibrand issued more orders on the fly to return to their camp along the cliffs. With the Kezanada still close, he wanted to regroup with his wounded so as not to leave them vulnerable to vengeful retaliation.

The angered Kezanada howled after the Yentay for a while, but the Overlord had little energy for the chase. As he had exhausted Dreibrand, he had wearied himself and the entire day had already been a huge waste. The captives were lost and the Overlord was not getting any closer to Shan. He needed to return to Do Jempur, study his reports, and select warriors for his final attack.

The cold autumn rains had spoiled everybody’s lust for battle, and Dreibrand did not turn back to punish the Kezanada. By the time the Yentay returned to their camp, everyone was exhausted and soaked. They were proud of driving back the Kezanada and rescuing the prisoners, but they had lost friends and Misho needed help.

Redan slid down from Starfield’s rump and said, “You came for us, Sir.”

“Of course we did,” Dreibrand said matter-of-factly as he dismounted. “Leaving you to our enemy was not an option.”

Redan thanked him sincerely.

“And thank you, Redan. You killed many Kezanada and proved your worth to your fellow warriors.” Dreibrand laid a hand on Redan’s shoulder and added, “You will have that bow you wanted when we get back to Dengar Nor.”

Redan grinned.

Next Dreibrand went to see Misho, who Celrand tended. The bloody Hirqua was pale and one eye drooped on his swollen face. Dreibrand

examined the peculiar wounds while Celrand cleaned them, and Redan softly explained how they had been inflicted.

“He wanted t’know ’bout Lor Shan, Sir,” Misho said painfully. “But we said nothing.”

“I know,” Dreibrand agreed as if he had never doubted.

Celrand began to bandage his cousin, who tried to doze and elude his pain.

Redan said, “It is good you came when you did, Sir. The Overlord has no heart and would have slowly poked us both to death. His cruelty is calm and well practiced.”

“A suitable servant for Onja,” muttered Dreibrand.

He watched the blood soak into Misho’s bandages and knew that he had to end his scouting mission. He decided to head straight for Fata Nor so the wounded could get proper help and dry off because the rains had the look of not stopping for days.

Thoughtfully he asked, “Redan, how did you escape?”

With complete belief, Redan explained that Shan had set him free with magic. This caught the attention of a half dozen nearby warriors, some of who accused the Zenglawa of making up a story.

“Then who do you think it was? Pelafan? Sutah?” Redan demanded with defensive sarcasm.

“You might have just broken your bonds. Fear of death can bring great strength,” Celrand suggested.

“Look!” Redan commanded, holding up his arms. The singed bindings dangled from his wrists. This evidence ended any scoffing and those who had doubted were now quietly impressed.

Dreibrand said, “It seems someone has helped you Redan, but we will not know that it was Lord Shan until we get back to Dengar Nor so we can ask him.”

“I know it was Lord Shan,” Redan said. He was tired of always being doubted, but he was encouraged that Shan had chosen to help him with his magic. The privilege had been great.

39~ Home and Family ~

The rain drummed incessantly outside the open balcony doors of Shan's apartment, making his weariness feel worse. Casting his heat spell on such specific points at such a distance had been a strain, but Shan was proud of the accomplishment. The greater precision he could attain at a distance meant the greater potency he could achieve at close range.

During his meditations that morning, Shan had checked on Dreibrand, and he immediately regretted waiting so long to do so. The battle with the Kezanada had just ended and Shan saw the devastation at Dreibrand's camp with dead Kezanada and dead Yentay. When he learned that prisoners had been taken, Shan had quickly sought the location of the Kezanada because the prisoners would need his help even with Dreibrand on his way to save them.

It took Shan an excessive amount of time to find the Kezanada and when he did the images repeatedly fogged up or simply disappeared. Although observing from a significant distance, Shan should not have had such difficulties. Finally the prisoners appeared to him, and it was almost too late. Shan saw the Kezanada bending over Redan with the knife and he barely had time to react by heating the weapon until the Kezanada dropped it. Then he burned Redan free and admired how the Zenglawa immediately helped the injured Hirqua.

Shan puzzled over the lack of clarity he had experienced while viewing the Kezanada. His only logical guess was that a warding crystal had worked against him, but it had not been of Onja's magic. All his life he had studied Onja's wardings, and with mild effort, he could penetrate them, but the blindspots he had just encountered did not possess any trademarks of her spells.

The unsettling possibility that Onja had devised entirely new warding crystals with unfamiliar spells occurred to Shan. Although Onja would be capable of this, he decided it was out of character. After living for so long and being so secure in her power, Onja, to his knowledge, never created new spells because her old spells had always served so well. Supreme power and great age had made her lazy.

The events of this day warned him that he had much more to learn. During his meditations he sometimes sent his awareness far and wide, or

sometimes looked deep within himself. His powers were naturally great and he was mastering them, but not all masters were equal. Shan had to hone his skills, spells and speed into blinding perfection. He had to be able to hurl a destructive spell like a great bolt of lightning while defending himself from the same onslaught.

Onja had become adept at this over two thousand years ago, and he had a lot of catching up to do. He had to believe that his youth would prevail over her aging experience, but doubt clung to his mind even as he tried to banish its insidious influence. Onja's works of old were sinister and strong. She had helped to create the Deamedron out of tens of thousands of rys and humans, and Shan accepted how difficult it was to match that might.

For encouragement, he reminded himself that Onja had only been half of the force behind the terrible spell and the legendary might of Dacian had been needed to create the Deamedron as well. With Dacian long gone, Onja was only one ancient and corrupt rys who Shan had to defeat for the sake of all rys and humans. The desire to end her tyranny and become King burned as hot as ever in Shan's heart, and he forced himself to reflect on his past failure again. The defeat he had suffered when he had first challenged Onja had taught him a great deal. Shan's flesh remembered the forced hibernation inside the stone while his mind lingered in wrathful awareness. But in his stone prison, he had learned every detail of the magic that held him, and he knew that Onja would not be able to trap him like that again.

After evaluating the lessons of their past confrontation, Shan renewed his confidence that he would defeat her the next time. By spring his mind would be disciplined enough to thwart even her great skill, but he needed to find out what had caused the blindspots he had experienced that morning.

Reluctantly he decided that he had sequestered himself overlong, and he stood up with a sigh. He needed a break so he could approach his problems with a fresh mind. Even a rys needed to relax sometimes.

He would visit with his host, King Taischek, who was a master of business but a high priest of pleasure. Among humans, Shan could find relief from his stress. Their light appreciation of a day of peace would clear his mind to think later of war.

After four pleasant days spent in Taischek's company, Shan finally

started to unwind. The King did not resent the time Shan spent shut away in his apartment because he knew his life and the future of his tribe depended on Shan perfecting his magic, but he was glad to see his rys friend all the same.

While Shan had been preoccupied with his extensive meditations, the Princes Kalek, Doschai, and Meetan had returned to Dengar Nor. Kalek was the last surviving son of Queen Vua and the heir, and the other slightly younger princes were the sons of other wives. They had spent the summer in the western part of the Temu Domain near the Tacus border. An old weaponmaster had a school in the small town of Selsha Nor where the princes received training. Although the education of the princes was not neglected, they enjoyed their freedom away from their parents and spent most of their time on lighter things like parties, hunting, sports, and Taischek privately hoped they were chasing girls. By his own admission, Taischek indulged his sons too much, allowing them to pursue their own sport more than the business of their rank. Having been fruitful with his nine wives over many years, Taischek took pleasure in seeing his children happy in their youth.

The three eldest princes had perhaps never paused to appreciate how their father spoiled them, but they began to realize that their easy days were over when hundreds of extra warriors showed up in Selsha Nor for their protection. Then came the unexpected news that their father had cast aside their stable world of privilege to challenge Onja. The rysmavda were swept out of the Temu Domain and some were executed. Upon reaching Dengar Nor, they learned that the alliances of the Confederation were weak, and, in the case of the Zenglawa, gone. When Taischek welcomed his princes home, he informed them that all three of them would ride to war with him in the spring. They were pleased and excited to serve their father, but each boy realized that their lives would become much more serious.

Although assaulting Jington was a staggering concept, Taischek's sons supported their father's war completely and had faith in Shan's ability. The rys had been a fixture in the royal household since before any of their births, and the boys had grown up trusting in Shan's friendship.

In his typical fashion, Taischek, after making his momentous announcement to his sons, bade them to put aside their worries until a later time. Winter was coming and they were all safe in Dengar Nor and

life was still good. Knowing well their father, the boys complied with his wishes, but they discussed the war among themselves all the time.

With no pause in the rain, the royal household entertained itself inside. Stripped to their waists, the sons of Taischek practiced wrestling with Xander, who in his youth had been a champion. From the side of the mat in the exercise room, Taischek cheered while holding his permanent prop—the wine cup. Shan listened to Taischek brag about his offspring as they occasionally bested Xander with their youth or were sometimes bested by the General’s craft.

“They remind me of you when you were that age,” Shan commented.

“They have not my scars,” Taischek said on a rare note of sadness.

“Your suffering made you strong,” Shan reminded softly.

Taischek nodded, remembering the strength he had needed to overcome the crippling wounds of his adolescence. “Shan, it is my sincere prayer that my children never need the strength that I had to find.”

Shan sipped his wine and said, “No children ever had a better example of strength.”

Taischek brightened under the compliment and hollered at Xander, “Are you going to let those puppies drag you down?”

Xander, who had been giving lessons on technique, succumbed under the good-natured crush of all three young princes. Glowing with sweat, he replied, “Sire, I am too old. They are children no more!”

Everyone laughed as Xander squirmed out from under the pile.

Sighing happily, Taischek said, “It is good to hear you laugh, Shan. I have missed that good sound.”

“I would not spend so much time alone and in silence if what I did was not so important,” Shan explained.

“I know, but you must not forget to appreciate the moment. Simply by being pleasant, you have Onja beat right there,” Taischek joked.

“That is why I am here, my Temu friend,” Shan said and took a liberal drink of his wine to prove to Taischek his sincere interest in relaxation. “Now, Taischek, tell me what I have missed. Have you seen Miranda?”

Hearing her name made Taischek feel like grumbling, but he answered, “I saw her with Vua twice. She asked about you.”

“Perhaps I should go see her,” Shan said.

“She directly asked me about you, forgetting to ask if she could talk to me,” Taischek went on, deciding to grumble. “Vua said she talked to her about her manners, but now I have to wonder what she said. And when is Dreibrand coming back? That’s what the problem is. That woman is the type. When the cat is away the mice will play type, I tell you she is. She needs someone around to keep her in line, eh? Or she just does whatever pops into her mind. Like bothering kings with important things on their mind—”

“Father, you must like her if you talk about her so much.” It was Kalek who had interrupted. A towel was draped around his neck and he dabbed sweat from his face as he left the wrestling mat. “It is a good thing Shan is a rys, so he can live long enough to listen to you.”

“Ah, what a smart boy,” Taischek growled and smacked his son on the shoulder. “Now be good before I talk to you about your manners.”

Kalek laughed, knowing his father was not mad.

Shan said, “Do excuse me while I go see her. I checked in on her children during my meditations, and I would like to tell her they are well.”

“Can I count on your company for dinner?” Taischek asked and Shan said that he could.

When Shan reached Miranda’s apartment, a servant girl answered the door and curtsied to the rys. She had the look of awe and wariness that most people had when near a rys, especially Shan. He asked for Miranda

“The lady rests,” the girl answered.

“May I see her?”

The girl did not know what to say. She had no wish to disturb the King’s guest who she had been assigned to serve, nor did she want to say no to Shan.

Miranda spared her the decision. “Shan!” she cried happily from the arched doorway to the bedchamber. Leaning against the woodwork, she wore a robe over her nightgown, having not dressed for the day.

“Forgive me, Miranda. I will come back another time,” Shan apologized.

But Miranda insisted he stay and ordered the servant out. She just could not get used to having servants around when she had a

conversation. Settling onto a couch, Miranda rubbed her eyes sleepily then patted a nearby cushion to invite Shan to sit.

“Sometimes I feel as if I never slept before in my whole life,” Miranda explained with a yawn. “Toil and hardship were all I ever knew.”

“That is a shame,” Shan offered.

“It is behind me. I have new problems now,” Miranda said and there was a lightness in her voice that Shan had not heard before. If he had not known the grief in her heart, Shan might have guessed that she sounded happy.

“Miranda, it is not like you not to visit me. I had hoped to see you,” he said.

She shrugged. “I did not want to bother you. What you do is important to both of us. Anyway, I have been sleeping a lot.”

“You are well I hope?” Shan asked.

Miranda looked at him almost suspiciously and insisted she felt fine.

Shan delivered his news that Elendra and Esseldan were healthy and treated well. “Would you like to see them again?” Shan suggested, reaching for a warding crystal in his jacket.

“No!” Miranda decided quickly then thanked him for his vigilant concern. In a much softer voice she offered an explanation. “I trust you that they are fine. It only hurts more when I see them. Can you tell me any news of Dreibrand?”

Shan nodded. “I think that he will be home soon. Maybe tomorrow. Last night I took a moment to find him, and he was in Fata Nor.”

“He is fine then,” Miranda said with obvious relief.

“Well, he had some trouble. They had an encounter with the Kezanada. Some men were lost.”

Miranda cried out with alarm.

“It is unfortunate,” Shan agreed. “But I believe Dreibrand has accomplished his goals. He has proved his command over the Yentay, and they have proved strong in battle.”

“I am glad to hear these volunteers are good warriors. We could use them,” Miranda said.

Shan concurred, “Yes, they are of great value and it is a shame that some were lost already. Once the wounded are patched up in Fata Nor, I am sure Dreibrand will come here. The weather is turning and I hope he has the sense to come home.”

“I cannot wait to see him,” Miranda said.

Watching her face soften affectionately as she contemplated her lover, Shan was reminded of his own loneliness. Hard decisions in his earlier days had resulted in his solitude. He did not regret his choices but sometimes considered them with longing.

Shan lay a hand on Miranda’s shoulder, assuring her, “Dreibrand rushes back to you even as we speak.”

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In fact, Dreibrand rushed back to Dengar Nor at a greater pace than Shan had estimated. The relentless and ever colder downpour motivated the Yentay with misery. There was no rest on the road, and the group of volunteers entered Dengar Nor in the blackness of the wet night. The watchers at the gate were surprised by their unexpected arrival, but they easily recognized Dreibrand and knew that it was not an attack.

The Yentay poured gratefully inside the barracks. Although cold and empty, the barracks seemed cozy and homelike after the exposure they had all endured. The stable hands were not thrilled to be roused on the cold wet night to attend to three dozen tired horses, but Dreibrand decided his men deserved the service.

The hearths soon crackled with fires and lamps were lit. Dreibrand pulled a chair up to a fire, trying to warm up, but he knew he would never succeed until he got some dry clothes. That had to wait a little longer because he needed just a few minutes out of the rain and he wanted to see that his men got settled in all right.

The door banged open and a squad of Temu warriors hurried in out of the rain, escorting Shan and a young man dressed as if he held a high rank. The appearance of the rys startled the Yentay to their feet, but Shan quickly bade them to return to their resting positions.

Dreibrand jumped up to meet Shan, and they clasped hands happily.

“I am pleased that you are back,” Shan declared.

“It is good to be back. I only wish my outing had been more useful,”

Dreibrand confessed.

“You did battle with the Kezanada. I want to hear all of the details. I did not see the battle itself,” Shan said.

Rolling his eyes, Dreibrand thought about Pelafan and Sutah’s meddling. “We have much to talk about.”

“Yes, but we will speak privately,” Shan said.

Now Dreibrand looked at Shan’s young companion, wondering who he was and why he was with Shan.

The rys noticed Dreibrand’s shift in attention and quickly introduced the young man, “This is Prince Kalek, King Taischek’s eldest son.”

The young Kalek stepped up and examined Dreibrand carefully. Dreibrand understood Kalek’s curiosity about his foreign appearance. At first everyone west of the Rysamand had looked strange to Dreibrand, although he hardly noticed now, but he realized that he was one among many and would always be an oddity in this place where he made a new life.

Shan continued, “Prince Kalek, this is Dreibrand Veta. He serves me as a general in the war on Jington. These warriors are volunteers from other tribes, who will help us overthrow Onja.”

Kalek noted that Dreibrand did not bow to him and that irritated him. Normally Kalek was haughty and demanding, but he restrained his cockiness for the moment while looking at Dreibrand’s tall strong frame and bandaged arm.

Dreibrand sized up the Prince quickly. Kalek appeared five or six years younger than himself with a thick shock of Temu braids raining around his soft face. He had intense brown eyes but they were not friendly. Even on the other side of the Wilderness, Dreibrand could recognize the spoiled heir of a great man. They did not really look so different in Atrophane.

“King Taischek has much to be proud of,” Dreibrand said, finally dipping his head a little.

“Prince Kalek just had to see the foreign warrior who has so impressed his father,” Shan explained.

“Is that a Zenglawa?” Kalek demanded while scanning the barracks.

“Yes, Dreibrand has been assessing his loyalty,” Shan explained.

“Does the King know?” Kalek asked doubtfully.

“Yes, and your father is happy to leave my affairs to my judgment,” Shan scolded mildly.

Dreibrand watched the Prince for his reaction, but Kalek kept his opinion to himself and only frowned in the direction of the Zenglawa.

“Actually I think he is going to work out,” Dreibrand said. “When we fought the Kezanada, he took a bow from one of their archers and killed many of them. It made the difference in a tight spot. I told him he could have a bow again when we got back to Dengar Nor.”

Shan pondered the Zenglawa a moment. “Perhaps,” he murmured reluctantly.

“You of course will make the final decision,” Dreibrand added.

“Later. Let us go to the castle,” Shan said.

Despite Kalek’s nearby disapproving scowl, Redan had shyly approached his general. “Sir, may I speak to Lord Shan?”

After glancing at Shan’s inscrutable face, Dreibrand gave his permission. The rys did not protest because he had seen Redan act with bravery and honor and he was almost convinced that the Zenglawa was sincere in his wish to serve.

Almost reverently, Redan said, “Was it you that set me free, Lord Shan?”

“Yes. It was me,” Shan confirmed.

Impressed murmurs circulated the Yentay. They had all heard Redan’s belief that Shan’s magic had burned away his bindings all the way from Dengar Nor, but it meant a lot more when Shan agreed with the Zenglawa.

Shan took advantage of the moment and added, “In the spring I will ride at your sides and my magic will serve all of you.”

For a moment the Yentay forgot their exhaustion and their hearts surged with excitement. They had already held their own against the Kezanada, and when Shan went to war with them, they would be unstoppable. Even without a demonstration of his power, the men felt the aura of his power and cheered because they were a part of it.

“Rest now good warriors,” Shan instructed.

“Thank you, Lord Shan,” Redan said hastily before the rys departed.

Shan regarded him thoughtfully but made no reply. The Temu warriors escorted the prestigious persons back into the rain. They hurried through the city and up the switchbacked road to the splendid complex that was Taischek’s castle on the mesa. Knowing that Miranda was in the castle made Dreibrand feel like he had come home, a sensation that he had not known for a long time.

Kalek had many questions for Dreibrand and his pestering broke the sleepy silence of the castle. Dreibrand answered the Prince with a learned patience.

Finally, Shan scolded the young man with the security of someone who is the King’s dearest friend and ally. “Hush, Kalek. Dreibrand can tell you his stories of the world at another time.”

Annoyed at the rys’s lack of respect, Kalek pressed on. “Dreibrand Veta, my father—the King—says you defeated three Temu warriors when he tested you in non-lethal combat.”

“I defended myself and I showed myself to be a warrior,” Dreibrand responded modestly.

“You would not have done so well if I had been there to test you,” Kalek boasted.

Dreibrand tried not to sigh with indignation, but failed. He hoped a day later when he was fed and rested that the Prince would not seem so tiresome.

“Kalek.” Shan purposefully did not use the heir’s title again. “I need to speak with my general—privately.”

Kalek would not cross Shan but he disliked the dismissal. “We will speak later,” he announced but no one was interested. Shan and Dreibrand continued to the rys’s apartment.

Entering Shan’s private chambers, Dreibrand said, “Thank you for getting rid of him, Shan. I am in no mood for princely puppies.”

The rys chuckled at the criticism. “He really did want to meet you, but his attitude is usually not very endearing. I have often hoped that he would out grow it, but he only seems to grow into it.”

“It does not matter,” Dreibrand muttered, throwing off his wet fur lined

cloak.

Shan easily started a good fire in the fireplace, quicker than a man could have done it. Dreibrand stripped away his gear and wrapped a wool blanket around his shoulders. Sitting gratefully near the soothing flames, he noticed that the soggy bloody bandage on his arm was staining through the blanket.

“Sorry about this,” he apologized.

“Have you had that looked at?” Shan worried.

“Yeah, I got stitched up in Fata Nor. The bandage is the worst part now. I was lucky to only get this. The Kezanada Overlord almost killed me,” Dreibrand explained.

“The Overlord!” Shan cried. “When?”

“When we fought the Kezanada,” Dreibrand replied.

Shan looked perplexed. “I know the Overlord. I have met the Overlord many times. I would have noticed him. Are you sure?”

“Everyone said it had to be the Overlord. He was a large man, brightly dressed unlike the others. If anybody could be a king of mercenaries, he could,” Dreibrand said.

Shan sat down heavily without his usual quiet grace. “Tell me everything about this clash with the Kezanada. Tell me everything,” Shan instructed greedily.

Starting with Pelafan and Sutah, Dreibrand made a full report to the rys, who listened raptly as if comparing details to his record. An uncharacteristic agitation crept into Shan’s mannerisms, which Dreibrand noticed.

When he finished, Shan confessed, “I never saw the Overlord.”

Dreibrand tried to soothe him, figuring the strain of the bounty caused Shan to be nervous. “Shan, you said you looked in on me after the battle. The Overlord was gone so of course you did not see him,” he reasoned.

Shan disregarded the idea and explained, “I knew something was wrong even at the time. I had trouble locating the Kezanada. And when I did perceive them, it was hard to focus. I barely found the prisoners in time to help.”

“It was far away. You did not know where the Kezanada were and it

took you a while to find them. You still succeeded Shan. You still worked magic. Do not judge yourself so harshly for overlooking a few details,” Dreibrand advised.

Shan frowned and corrected, “I can see clearly much farther than that, and I would not have overlooked the Overlord. His presence should have immediately attracted my attention.”

Discarding his optimistic view, Dreibrand asked, “So what are you saying?”

Clearly not pleased by the notion and still reluctant to accept it, Shan answered, “A warding crystal must protect the Overlord from my perception. Onja must have given it to him, but I long ago acquired the ability to pierce any of her wardings. It must be something new. Something different.”

“Maybe Pelafan and Sutah gave him something,” Dreibrand suggested. “Those two were up to something.”

Waving a blue hand dismissively, Shan scoffed, “Those idiots! They have average abilities and could not even make a warding crystal. The answer must be that Onja has a new warding unfamiliar to me, and now it protects the Overlord. I must learn to see through this new fog she has made, and do it quickly.”

“And you can learn this?” Dreibrand asked.

“Eventually. I learned to penetrate all of her other wardings, and so I will unlock the secret of this spell. Hopefully it will not take too long. The trouble now is finding the warding again and keeping track of the blindspot so I can study it,” Shan said. For a moment, his concern with this challenge distracted him, but then he stood up and briskly apologized, “I have kept you up with too many questions and worries, my friend. Go now to Miranda. She misses you.”

Tiredly Dreibrand agreed, and his eyes were drooping as Shan showed him to the door. A dreary dawn had arrived by the time Dreibrand dragged himself to his apartment. His weariness overwhelmed him and he remembered little past that point.

The day was almost gone by the time he woke up in his bed. His arm was freshly dressed and he vaguely recalled falling asleep while Miranda cut away his nasty old bandage. Seeing her had been a joy to him and he

found it difficult to believe he had actually collapsed upon reuniting with her.

He sat up, relishing the soft warm bed and pillows, feeling refreshed. Miranda, who had been patiently waiting for him to stir, entered and sat on the edge of the bed. Dreibrand coiled his arms around her.

“Forgive my sleepiness, my love,” he purred apologetically.

“You said you had been up for days, so I wanted to let you sleep,” Miranda said.

“And now what do you want me to do?” he asked, feeling suddenly energetic.

She smiled and kissed him. They immediately strengthened their embrace and made love with more than their usual intoxication for each other.

Resting in his arms, Miranda cherished the security she felt when they were alone. Purposefully she sat up and looked down on Dreibrand’s reclining body. Still unshaven, he looked rugged. His hair spread around him on the pillow, and he gazed at her appreciatively from under his heavy brow. Miranda wondered if all men from Atrophane were so good and strong.

Dreibrand enjoyed the sight of her naked body and laid a squeezing hand on her curving hip. He smiled at her round full breasts that were at eyelevel; then followed her curling hair up to her pretty face. He knew she had been a peasant girl, a slave even, but Dreibrand never saw her that way. There had been other lovers back in the east. Some had been wealthy women, so called well-bred women, but Miranda seemed so much finer to him. He admired her strength and her courage, and he loved possessing her. Dreibrand never wanted her to go away.

Miranda wet her lips and took a deep breath. Without knowing what else to do she blurted, “I carry your child.”

Dreibrand’s face slackened and his jaw dropped all the way. At length he said stupidly, “How?”

This made Miranda laugh. It was a relief to finally tell him. “What do you think happens when a man and a woman are together like us?” she chided.

Dreibrand actually looked embarrassed. “I know, but I never thought

about it," he confessed.

"Well think about it because we shall have a child in the spring," she said.

"In the spring? Then you cannot go to Jingtun," he said.

"Yes I will."

"No Miranda. Be reasonable," he said firmly, recognizing the defiant look in her eyes.

She insisted, "I have to go. The pass will not thaw until late spring and I should give birth in time to go. I have to get Elendra and Esseldan back."

Dreibrand clutched his head, which now felt totally muddled. Too many things were occurring to him at once. He might have to go to war without seeing his child, or at best he would see the infant, then go to war. Either way it would be a torment to him. He had only begun to get used to facing battle with Miranda in his life and now he would have a...family?

He shook the thought from his mind before the weight of responsibility took root.

Hugging Miranda gently, he decided, "We will save this quarrel for the spring. Let us just be happy for now."

"You are happy?" she asked cautiously.

"Oh, very happy!" he exclaimed with honesty but not understanding.

"I am happy too," Miranda said and it made Dreibrand feel good to hear it. But her face became serious and she whispered, "I know what it is to bear a child I do not want." Her voice was shy as if she spoke of a taboo subject. "I know the resentment of having the children of a man I hate. As much as I love my children, I did not want them."

Dreibrand listened apprehensively, uncertain of what she would say.

With a vulnerability that she had never let him see before, she continued, "But now I will know the joy of bearing the child of a man I love."

Speaking these words made Miranda feel exposed. She had no experience to guide her interpretation of her emotions for Dreibrand, but she knew she wanted him and did not just need him.

Dreibrand held her gratefully, murmuring his own loving words. To

know she really cared for him overwhelmed him with happiness. He shared a close trust with Miranda that he had not known with another woman, and he prized their relationship. With Miranda's declaration of love, Dreibrand would find a way to cope with his impending fatherhood. Even in his confusion, he was already excited to see his child.

After one more long deep kiss, Dreibrand bounded out of bed and started dressing. "Can we go tell everybody?" he urged.

Pleased by his enthusiasm, Miranda got up, but quickly sat down. Dreibrand dropped his shirt and took her hand. "What is wrong?" The normal concern he had for her well being would now be doubled.

"I got up too fast and I felt a little sick," Miranda explained, but when she saw his stricken look, she added, "Do not worry. It is normal."

"Do you want to stay here?" he suggested.

Rubbing her temple, she accepted, "Yes, I am tired."

Delicately he helped her back to bed and offered to stay, but Miranda would rather he enjoy himself instead of fussing over her.

"Go tell our news. I have kept it to myself long enough," she encouraged.

For a moment he was indecisive, then rationalized, "I have business to attend to. I must speak with the King and Shan anyway."

"Go," she insisted.

The news elated Taischek, and he jumped out of his chair and even danced a couple steps. He sent a meaningful look heavenward as if a prayer had been answered, and then threw his arms around Dreibrand in congratulations.

"This is wonderful. Wonderful!" the King declared joyously.

Taischek's exuberance stunned Dreibrand somewhat. He had imagined that Taischek would be happy for him but not thrilled. Shan shook his hand while Taischek still slapped his back.

"You and Miranda deserve this blessing," Shan said.

General Xander congratulated him stiffly while Taischek signaled to a servant. The servant automatically went to get more wine.

Prince Kalek lounged indolently in his chair, seeing little reason for his father's jubilation. *So the foreign mercenary will have a bastard*, he

thought with annoyance.

Taischek kicked his son in the foot and scolded, "Where are your manners? A man in our household is expecting his firstborn and you do not congratulate him?"

Dreibrand could not help but enjoy Taischek criticizing his son on his behalf, and he looked at Kalek with an expression of irritating expectancy.

Kalek's bored face rested on his fingers. Without standing he gestured sarcastically with his fingers and forced a smile, then returned his fingers to their propping position. Taischek frowned but knew how his son could be. He made a mental note to make sure Kalek recognized Dreibrand's qualities.

The servant returned and replenished everyone's wine. Taischek made a flattering toast complimenting Dreibrand's virility, and Dreibrand tossed back his entire cup of wine. The warm rush of alcohol greeted him kindly, and Dreibrand realized he actually needed a drink. Sitting back down, he gestured for a refill, which made Taischek grin.

"Welcome home, Dreibrand Veta. May it be a long and pleasant winter," Taischek decreed.

"Well said," Shan cheered. "May we all enjoy our friendship in this easy season before the difficult tasks of the spring."

"I see our General Veta has finally accepted that the war season is over," Taischek observed with amusement. "Perhaps in the east they fight in this weather, but we do not."

Taischek clapped his hands and called for musicians. He had noted Dreibrand's mood for intoxication and intended to enjoy the company of the normally reserved foreigner now that he had the chance.

After a few more rounds of wine, Xander rose and said, "Sire, I can't stay tonight. With your permission I would like to retire from the party."

"Have some more drinks and you won't need my permission," Taischek joked and laughed loudly, but he quieted when he noticed Xander's depressed expression. He realized he had been doting over Dreibrand, but he liked the brave young man who was so fascinating.

Surely, Xander knows nothing could diminish my opinion of him, Taischek thought. He considered making Xander stay so he could cheer him up, but if Xander wanted some solitude for once, Taischek could not

deny his friend.

Taischek said, “Yes, yes, our company is much too dull. Go to your wives.”

“Thank you, Sire,” Xander said appreciatively. The General bowed to his King and Prince before leaving.

Dreibrand considered Xander’s departure out of character, but took no offense at the General’s lack of enthusiasm over his good news. Taischek’s company was easy to like and Dreibrand settled in and recounted his battle with the Overlord.

Knowing well the rightful reputation of the Overlord, Taischek marveled that Dreibrand had survived once his sword had been broken. When Dreibrand explained that he had saved himself by shooting the Overlord, Taischek had to laugh but warned that the Overlord would want revenge.

“Because we are enemies anyway, I do not think I will notice,” Dreibrand said.

Once Taischek got Dreibrand drunk enough, Dreibrand happily answered the many questions that came from Kalek. The Prince paid close attention as Dreibrand described far off Atrophane and the many lands that the Horde had conquered. As Kalek questioned his father’s favored warrior, he restrained himself from any challenging comments although he had meant to goad Dreibrand into a fight that night.

With Kalek’s troublesome schemes on hold, the evening passed festively. Taischek continually teased Dreibrand about his approaching fatherhood, which in a way helped Dreibrand adjust to the fact.

40~ Enemies Seen and Unseen ~

The Temu guards outside Shan’s apartment had become a normal sight to Dreibrand and Miranda. Shan had summoned them that morning and they were eager to hear from him. The ryls had been in seclusion for nearly two weeks since the party where Dreibrand had revealed his happy news.

After knocking on the door, they waited patiently for a response. Dreibrand smiled at Miranda, simply appreciating her company and admiring her green velvet gown with gold trim. Its tailoring flattered the

curves of her body and the color brought out her eyes beautifully. Gradually, Dreibrand realized her new clothes would not fit her in a few months. Frowning, he thought about his remaining gold, which he had planned to spend on more gear for himself.

“Come on,” Miranda said.

While he had been contemplating the small details in his life, the door had opened. Shaking his head, Dreibrand admonished himself for being so distracted.

Shan strode through the large entry hall and greeted them promptly. He hugged Miranda politely and wished her well. “Dreibrand has told me about the baby. I am glad for your blessing.” The rys’s tone became serious and he added, “Now I must get your other dear children back to you.”

Miranda murmured her thanks, knowing how much Shan did care.

“Let us sit,” Shan said briskly, leading them to his salon. “Dreibrand, does that sword suit you?”

Dreibrand brushed his hand over the pommel of the sword at his side. He had returned the cheap short sword to Redan and selected another better one from Taischek’s armory, but it was nothing special.

“Well, I had thought this would just be a temporary weapon,” he answered.

As they settled into the comfortable furniture, Shan said, “I see. Then you shall have a new one by spring. I have arranged with Taischek’s master weaponsmith to have a new weapon forged for you. But I have a recommendation.”

Shan scooped up a suede bag from an end table and emptied two warding crystals into his palm. Points of sapphire light sparkled deep inside the milky blue orbs.

“I have made you new warding crystals,” he said, distributing them. “I want you to carry these in addition to the ones you already have, so you will be doubly protected. I have made some adjustments and refinements to my warding spells, so these are stronger. With your wardings, you will be on nearly equal terms with any common rys, and you will have some protection from Onja’s spells. I fear when we march on Jington, Onja will target my friends to make me suffer. That is one of her favorite cruelties, and I wanted you to have extra protection. Dreibrand, I thought you

might want this crystal set in the pommel of your new sword. It will make a visible statement to the Yentay that you are my chosen commander and that my power is behind you.”

Examining his new warding crystal, Dreibrand considered Shan’s idea and it appealed to him. Then he looked sternly at Miranda and mentioned, “Chances are high that Miranda will not be able to accompany us to Jington.”

“There is also a chance I will go,” Miranda added quickly.

Shan noted the understandable tension between them on this subject but breezed over it. “Nonetheless, accept these warding crystals.”

“Yes, of course we do, Shan,” Dreibrand agreed.

“Good. It is best we all stay as protected as possible. Even now,” Shan said.

Dreibrand asked, “Have you had any luck finding the Overlord?”

Shan stretched back into the couch and combed his fingers through his white-streaked black hair. He seemed to be pondering his conclusion one more time before revealing it.

He answered, “I looked first in Do Jempur, and my visions were strange, lacking in detail. I did not see the Overlord. This gave me an opportunity to study the warding, but I became weary as I tried to pierce its magic, and this morning when I woke, there was no blindspot or Overlord in Do Jempur. It is unfortunate that I lost track of the warding magic, but I did learn one thing: Onja did not make the warding.”

Miranda, who had been informed of the wardings that blocked Shan, inquired who then had made the powerful magic.

“That is the great puzzle, Miranda,” Shan admitted helplessly. “The ability to make warding magic is rare, and this warding is so powerful, I cannot imagine who could have made it besides Onja. But the magic of each rys has an individual signature, and even if this is a new spell created by Onja, I would recognize her power in the spell. But this warding was not created by any rys I have ever met.”

Immediately after speaking these words, Shan sat up with a sudden revelation and cried, “By any rys alive!”

He jumped up and started pacing. “Of course, of course,” he muttered

in agreement with his conclusion. “The warding was made by a rys who died long ago. A warding crystal made in ancient times—maybe even by Dacian. But where has Onja been hiding it? I would have detected such a thing in the Keep and nothing is in the Tomb of Dacian.”

Dreibrand broke into his thoughts. “You told me you have never been in the Tomb of Dacian, that no one except Onja can go there.”

Shan halted and explained, “But I can penetrate Onja’s wardings and I have explored the tower with my mind. It is empty. Perhaps Onja has a stash outside the city in the mountains. That must be it. Who would notice some warding crystals in a wild place, especially when no one is looking for it? Now, Onja has warded her assassins with magic unfamiliar to me.”

Calming down, Shan returned to his seat. “Very clever. I had not expected this. But I will cope. Warding or not, the Kezanada are still visible to normal sight after all.”

“But you cannot focus a spell on them,” Dreibrand worried.

“For the time being, but that will change. Once I locate the warding again, I should be able to unlock its secrets,” Shan assured him. “But now to a matter that I can take care of today. You tell me the Zenglawa is an archer of extraordinary skill and he served you well, but his loyalty must be determined completely. He cannot have a bow and be near me. We cannot go to war in the spring with any doubts about him.”

Reluctantly Dreibrand agreed. Although he very much wanted Redan to be a part of his force, he could not gamble with Shan’s safety.

“Just send the Zenglawa home,” Miranda recommended.

Shan said, “I would not arbitrarily turn him back into an enemy, especially if he did come to us in good faith. Redan will have one chance. If he will allow me, I will test him. I will read his mind. Then I will be certain.”

“Will it hurt him?” Miranda whispered.

“No,” Shan said. “Now let us go down to the armory. We will talk to the weaponsmith about how you want your new sword. And Dreibrand tell him whatever you desire. I have arranged to cover any expense.”

Dreibrand’s eyes lit up with excitement.

Shan continued, "And order a helmet and shield. Anything you desire. My general must look grand and fearsome."

"Oh, I will," Dreibrand beamed. "I have some ideas to discuss with the weaponsmith."

"And while we are down there, send for Redan. Tell him he can come to select a bow, but do not mention that I wish to test him," Shan instructed.

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Redan looked at the castle above him as he walked up from the city. Receiving the summons to meet his general at the castle armory excited him, but he was apprehensive approaching the Temu stronghold by himself. The other Yentay accepted him more or less after his decisive efforts against the Kezanada, but passing alone through Dengar Nor, Redan had seen the cold looks from the Temu. They recognized him as Zenglawa and openly disliked his presence.

Sighing, he continued up the inclining road and thought, I did not choose this path to please the Temu.

The weather had dried out but a cold wind blew hard this day, stripping trees to their bare winter branches. Redan was thankful to reach the castle entrance and step out of the wind despite the rude reception from the Temu guards. Although they had been notified of the Zenglawa's visit, the guards demanded his reasons for coming and took away his weapon. Redan knew Dreibrand had meant well by returning the short sword, but it seemed he was not meant to have it.

When the Temu finished harassing him, Redan hurried to his appointment. He had expected only Dreibrand to meet him and he was surprised to see Shan.

Hastily and a bit flustered, Redan bowed deeply to the rys. "Lord Shan, how may I serve you?"

"That is not determined," Shan stated.

Miranda set down a sword that she had been examining and strolled to Shan's side. "I still think you should send him home," she said icily.

Redan looked at the foreign woman, whose different features made her strangely beautiful, but her disarming green eyes pierced him with the precision of one of his own arrows. His pledges of loyalty and brave deeds had obviously convinced her of nothing.

“Redan has served me well, Miranda. He deserves this chance,” Dreibrand reminded.

Something about the general’s words disturbed Redan, and he glanced at Dreibrand suspiciously.

“Redan, Lord Shan would speak with you,” Dreibrand said with unmistakable seriousness.

The Zenglawa looked at Shan, but he did not dare to speak. The rys approached to an intimate distance and a sudden dread of rys magic gripped Redan and many questions flew through his mind. Had he done something to make them think he was a spy? Was this a trap? What was the rys going to do?

The black eyes of the rys leaned close, holding Redan with their insistent gleam. If he had wanted to move away, he was not sure that he could have. Stressed from his growing worry, Redan swallowed to ease his drying mouth then realized his nervousness made him look guilty.

How much time passed before Shan finally spoke Redan could not guess.

“Redan, you have performed well as a Yentay and your talents make you a valuable warrior. However, you raised your weapon against me once, and I am unable to trust you completely. I am sorry.”

His passion to prove his loyalty gave Redan the nerve to defend himself. “Lord Shan, set any task for me and I will do it. I believe in the war against Onja. I believe you should be King.”

“Ssshhh.” Shan’s gentle hushing instantly halted Redan’s quickening words. “There is no action that will prove your loyalty. No passionate words can convince me that you are not part of a Zenglawa plot.”

Observing the dejection on Redan’s face as he perceived his ultimate rejection, Shan said, “Take heart, Redan. I will make you a fair offer. I can peer into your mind. If your loyalty is real, I will know. But if you do not want to submit yourself to my magic, you may go back to the Zenglawa—or where you please. But you must leave.”

“Then do what you must, Lord Shan,” Redan decided instantly.

This lack of hesitation impressed Shan and he wasted no time in beginning his spell. Redan was suddenly unable to move or even blink his eyes. A blue light began to slowly consume Shan’s black eyes, and Redan

felt his awareness of his body slip away. His vision decreased until he saw only a blue glow, like he was floating in a bright blue sky. Whispers seeped into Redan's mind, but they were too faint for him to determine any words.

His thoughts and hopes were there for Shan see as in a dream. Redan wanted the glory that would come if Shan accepted him. Serving the powerful rys lord and participating in the audacious overthrow of Jington would be fitting uses of his talent. Not since adolescence had Redan derived much satisfaction from demonstrating his archery. He could win any tournament and the skirmishes the Zenglawas had with nomadic hill tribes offered no challenge. The admiration of his grasping and dishonest tribesmen meant little to him, and King Athol had proved unworthy.

Redan wanted his skill to contribute to a great purpose. Through great and historic acts he would win true fame, which was better than being a local novelty among the Zenglawas.

Dreibrand edged closer to Miranda and set a hand on her shoulder while they watched the rys hold the human in the grasp of his powerful mind.

"These rys have such power over us," Miranda whispered.

"That is why Shan should be King over them," Dreibrand whispered back. "He is the only one who really respects us."

Miranda knew Dreibrand was right. While observing Redan in the grip of Shan's magic, she remembered the powerful hold of Onja. Involuntarily she twitched as she remembered Onja's unkind touch that lingered in her body.

At last Shan stepped away from Redan. Dreibrand and Miranda, who both expected different news, waited eagerly for the verdict.

Shan took a renewing breath while Redan blinked and reoriented himself to the surroundings. No fear showed on Redan's face, but he did feel mildly violated.

"Athol's order to kill me really did offend you," Shan said.

"Yes Lord," Redan said feeling very much redeemed.

"Your loyalty is true. I have seen the passion of your heart," Shan declared.

A satisfied smile broke across Dreibrand's face because he had judged the Zenglawa correctly.

"Shan, you are certain?" Miranda asked incredulously.

"Ah, Miranda, ever suspicious and the last to be convinced," Shan observed lovingly. "Fear no more about Redan. He believes in our cause as much as any of us."

Miranda believed Shan, but she shot Redan a potent look, which he understood immediately. He was still on probation by her standards.

Continuing in a happy voice, Shan said, "Welcome Redan. I forgive you for what you considered doing at the Common Ground. Your bravery and skill will help us to triumph. How would you choose to serve me?"

Overwhelmed, Redan fell to his knees and breathed, "As your bodyguard, Lord Shan."

Shan laughed and gestured for Redan to rise. "Who better to guard me than he who would have been my assassin?"

Redan thanked his rys lord exuberantly, until Shan bid him to stop.

"It appears you may pick out that bow," Dreibrand said.

Redan glanced to Shan for confirmation and the rys waved him toward the racks of Taischek's weapon horde. After dipping his head reverently one more time, Redan went to find his new bow.

"I am glad that is settled," Dreibrand said.

Shan nodded. "You were right about him. He will be very valuable to us."

"He has been already," Dreibrand added, recalling the dead Kezanada.

A Temu warrior rushed into the armory looking for Dreibrand. Urgently he announced, "A few Nuram warriors have come to the castle, General Veta. They wish to see you directly."

"Yes, at once," Dreibrand answered.

He had been on the verge of worrying about his Nuram spies and the news of their return relieved him. Although he hoped for the best, he doubted their news would be good.

Taischek's vast castle provided many meeting rooms and Dreibrand received the Nuram in the nearest such chamber. Dreibrand ordered a

servant to bring wine to warm them from their cold traveling, which they greatly appreciated.

Before relaxing and drinking, the Nuram bowed to Shan and showed Miranda a particular deference. They remembered her story from the Confederate Council and they admired her brave defiance of Onja. The Nuram were weather worn and the sides of their heads that were normally shaved had grown in a little.

“Lieutenant U’Chian, it is good to see the return of you and your cousins,” Dreibrand greeted.

“The sight of Dengar Nor made us all glad,” U’Chian declared. “General Veta, Lord Shan, the news is bad.”

“Go on,” Dreibrand prompted.

U’Chian reported, “The Sabuto are outraged. They plan war with the Temu in the spring and they hope to bring Onja the head of Lord Shan as well. They have rallied the lesser tribes of the south to join them. They claim Lord Shan seeks to conquer all humans and set the Temu above the rest.”

“I suspected as much,” Dreibrand grumbled but Shan showed no reaction.

U’Chian continued, “The Sabuto are using the bounty offered on Lord Shan to recruit other tribes to their side. The Sabuto use this opportunity to rid themselves of their Temu enemy, especially now that the Confederation has been weakened by the loss of the Zenglaw. They hope to gain the favor of Jington and overtake the wealth and power of the Confederation.”

“These are ambitious times,” Dreibrand sighed.

“Taischek must hear of this at once,” Shan decided.

“Of course,” Dreibrand agreed. “Lieutenant U’Chian, I realize you are tired but you need to stay at the castle while we arrange a meeting with the King. I am sure he will meet with us quickly. We will discuss the rest of the details in the presence of the Temu. I commend you on a job well done and I appreciate the risks you took.”

The Nuram all smiled a little guiltily. U’Chian, as spokesman for his cousins, confessed, “Sir, actually we had an easy time of it. The Sabuto never suspected us.”

“Then you were lucky. The rest of the Yentay had a rough time. We battled the Kezanada and some of us were lost,” Dreibrand said.

The Nuram became sober-faced and reflective. U’Chian quietly apologized, “We did not know. We should have been fighting at your side, Sir.”

Dreibrand said, “Your mission was very important and do not regret the ease of your success. This information is very valuable, and it seems there will be plenty of war for everybody.”

When they left to go to Taischek’s council room, Redan emerged from the nearby armory. He trotted after Shan, holding high his new bow and quiver. Although Redan had no arrow nocked, his sudden appearance alarmed the Nuram warriors. Remembering Redan to have unlikely loyalty, the Nuram assumed the worst and immediately drew their swords. The hiss and ring of hastily exposed steel made the others turn with fear. Redan skidded to a halt and grimaced at the fine weapons targeting his vitals.

Dreibrand quickly recognized the misunderstanding and intervened before Redan got hurt. “No. Put your swords away,” he ordered. “Redan is a confirmed member of the Yentay now and a valuable member of our force. Much has happened while you were away among the Sabuto.”

Redan nodded to emphasize Dreibrand’s statement and straightened his back with pride. “Lord Shan has accepted me,” he stated.

Keeping a dubious eye on Redan, the Nuram reluctantly replaced their swords.

Shan chuckled. “It is good to see so much concern for my welfare.”

The Nuram glowed under the compliment.

“Redan, you are excused,” Dreibrand said, deciding the news Taischek was about to hear was bad enough without being reminded of the Zenglawa.

Redan appeared crestfallen not to be included in the council that they obviously hastened to, but he had to obey. His fine new weapon consoled him though. He stroked the curving wood of the bow, already bonding with it. The bow was not as fine as the one that Shan had blasted from his hands, but it was more than serviceable. He planned to craft another bow that would be a perfect extension of his body and soul. Only such a

personal creation would truly be worthy of a master, but until then, it was good to have a bow again.

And tonight, it would be enough to go out into the lovely city of Dengar Nor and show off for the Temu. His empty pockets could use some gold that a little friendly competition would provide.

~

King Taischek had of course been aware of the arrival of Dreibrand's Nuram spies, and when he soon afterward received a request for a meeting, he knew the news would be bad. Deep down he suspected the nature of the report from the Sabuto Domain, and he wished he could ignore it. But he could only allow himself a little kingly tardiness before going to his council chamber where everyone had already gathered.

Swathed in abundant red quilted robes, Taischek strode into his council chamber. Everyone stood respectfully and bowed as he took his seat. He lowered his stocky frame into his elegant chair at the head of the table, eyeing his Nuram guests and fidgeting with his large emerald ring. The heads of the two snakes carved into the wooden back of his chair met over his head with flicking tongues.

The rys spoke. "Taischek, these good Yentay bring word from the Sabuto Domain that your enemy plots a great revenge upon us. They rally the small tribes of the south to go to war with them against the Temu."

After letting the news ruminate for a moment, Taischek commented with fatalistic humor, "Well, Shan you have certainly set our whole world to war."

The words pained Shan to the soul, but he accepted the results of his actions. Violence was necessary to end the Age of Onja just as violence had heralded her rule.

Shan continued, "The Sabuto also wish to gain domination in the north, where the Confederacy rules now. They will serve Onja and hope to get my head as they defeat you."

"Our enemies unite once my Confederate allies proved timid," lamented Taischek.

"Not all are timid," Dreibrand reminded. He did not want the present Yentay to feel slighted, and the Nuram warriors appreciated their general's attentiveness.

The King acknowledged Dreibrand and made the proper correction, knowing every volunteer became more precious every day. Taischek then personally questioned the Nuram warriors about various details. The Nuram spies had not been able to learn the exact strategies of the Sabuto, but they knew with certainty that they would take the warpath north in the spring.

After hearing all the information the Nuram had to offer, Taischek said, “Dreibrand Veta, I thank you for gaining this news for me. You were wise to send spies while you could.”

Dreibrand inclined his head in acceptance of the King’s praise and explained, “In my heart I knew the Sabuto would strike at you once the Temu became the foe of Onja.”

“It is logical,” Taischek agreed. “But these alliances with other tribes surprise me. I would not have thought the Sabuto and their neighbors could stop raiding each other long enough to attack me. It will be a host of faithless dogs that comes in the spring.”

“Greed for my bounty drives them,” Shan concluded.

“But will they attack after we leave for Jingtun or before?” Miranda wondered.

Begrudgingly, Taischek noted her astute concern. *She never takes her eyes from the prize and neither must I*, he thought.

“That is the real problem,” Taischek said. “Onja may command them to block us from entering the Rysamand. I have no fear of facing the Sabuto in battle in this way, but I know the Sabuto lust to put fair Dengar Nor to the sword, and they may wait until I have departed for Jingtun and then invade my domain. If I leave half of my army behind for defense, it may not be enough. And surely Onja will send other tribes to guard the Jingtun Pass, like the Zenglawas, and then we may not have enough strength to break through. Whether it is by Onja’s design or not, our forces will be split.”

“We cannot allow them to split our war host,” Dreibrand declared adamantly. In his opinion, they did not have enough warriors to create two viable armies.

“I will not leave my people open to Sabuto invasion. Temu children will not know the cruelties of the Sabuto!” Taischek’s voice rang with emotion.

“Then we must strike offensively,” Dreibrand offered. “When the Tacus arrive to supplement us, we will bring the war to the Sabuto first and end their plans of conquest. Then we can go to Jingtten.”

“But that could take all summer!” Miranda protested.

Dreibrand understood her fear of delay and faced her with an intense expression. Grinding his fist into his hand, he promised, “I will crush them in a week. Two at most. Shan will be King and your children free before midsummer.”

His eyes smoldered with the potencies of his conviction. Dreibrand’s pledge was no fanciful boast. He knew how to be a successful warmonger, and he remembered the burning cities and the conquered weighted by their chains. Dreibrand did not need to hate his enemy, only desire their destruction. With Shan’s power, he would know the exact course of the Sabuto invasion force and be able to strike them swiftly and decisively. Patience was a virtue of the Atrophane but only after speed.

The King’s eyebrows arched with interest at Dreibrand’s impressive words. *Can he really orchestrate such a swift purging of the Sabuto threat?* he wondered. He glanced at Shan. *Yes, we do have the advantage.*

Shan, who had been considering quietly, decided, “It is too early to settle on a strategy. We will have to make adjustments as our enemies show themselves. However, I believe Dreibrand’s idea may be the right choice. It is the only way to keep our force united. The Temu cannot be left vulnerable to Onja’s minions while we go to Jingtten. We will defeat our enemies as they come. The Sabuto, or any other tribe, cannot prevail against me.”

Miranda sighed tiredly. Although she would never say so, she did not care about warring tribes. She wanted only to strike at Jingtten. To strike at Onja. To see Onja die. She wanted to protest more, but she did not have the energy and she was starting to feel sick again.

Dreibrand wanted the same thing she wanted. He had no personal passions against the Sabuto, but he had grown loyal to Taischek and he could not ignore the problems the Temu faced. The Sabuto were coming with everything they could muster and Taischek could not leave his tribe defenseless.

“This is enough for now,” Taischek determined. “We must wait for General Xander to return to the city before we discuss this more. I need to

consider what I have learned. And General Veta, instruct your men that this is to be kept secret for now.” The King let his eyes drift meaningfully toward the Nuram.

With the meeting dissolved, Dreibrand decided to accompany the Nuram to their barracks and check on all of the Yentay. He wanted to revise the training schedule and discuss the news with Tytido. He told Miranda he would return from the city that night. She smiled carelessly, trying to hide her discomfort. She did not want him to worry and she believed that she would feel better after lying down for a while.

Dreibrand was eager to get to work, so he asked Shan to escort Miranda to their apartment. She rolled her eyes at the formality of his doting, but she did not complain and Shan was pleased to walk with her.

Miranda accepted Shan’s arm while they walked to her quarters. She noticed the obeisant looks from the Temu passing in the hall. Their respect was for Shan but included her as well. Her relationship with the powerful rys made her special. She liked the feeling.

Shan sensed how the news from the Nuram spies had depressed her. There seemed to be no end to obstacles between her and her children. The rys said, “Miranda, we will get to Jingtun just like Dreibrand said. Do not worry about the Sabuto. They are not going to stop us. They are an enemy at least that can be seen.”

Her green eyes flashed up at him as they walked. “You are more troubled by the magic given to the Kezanada Overlord than you have said,” she guessed.

He did not deny it. “Onja has armed her agents with a potent warding. This will test me greatly,” Shan admitted. He always felt safe disclosing his troubles to her. “I must learn this magic that Onja has kept secret from me. Until I understand the enchantment she has given her assassins, I will not be ready to face her in battle. Forgive me, Miranda. I know all of this must be so painfully slow for you.”

She nodded gravely and her eyes welled suddenly with tears that she did not let fall. She understood more than the others the daunting challenge that Shan faced against Onja. The wicked power of the rys Queen prowled still through Miranda’s flesh that had been pierced by Onja’s magic. The pain could still drill deep, reaching for precious life.

Miranda faltered a step and she touched her softening belly. Alarmed,

Shan stopped. “What is it?” he asked anxiously.

With a deep breath, she straightened and explained that she was weary but that was to be expected. “Do not worry. I know about being pregnant,” she insisted sweetly.

Shan did not seem convinced but they continued to the door to her apartment, where they stopped.

Delaying their goodbye, Miranda asked, “How will you find the Overlord?”

“That, Miranda, I know for certain,” Shan said. “He will come to me.”

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Appendix A ~ A Brief History of the Kezanada ~

The Kezanada have been a force within western society since the time of the Great War between Jington and Nufal. The society perhaps originated in an even earlier period but the history of the Kezanada, as recorded by Urlen, began with the Great War. Commanding fear and respect, the society of mercenaries actively worked to organize all mercenaries so as to control the soldier for hire market. Among the ceaselessly warring tribes of the west work was always easy to find.

In the early years of the society, some accounts stated that the Kezanada performed a formal role providing security at negotiations between warring tribes. Both tribes, when they deemed it necessary to negotiate, would pay Kezanada to arrange a safe meeting. One story indicated that initially, the Kezanada were associated with Vu, an ancient God of Contests, but this religious role was dropped after the Kezanada became the agents of Onja, the Goddess Queen.

For over two thousand years during the reign of Queen Onja, the Kezanada acted as her swords among the human tribes. The services of the Kezanada exceeded the selling of soldier services. Kidnapping, assassinating, and spying came to be the pillars of Kezanada power and livelihood. The Kezanada have often been accused, and justly so, of purposefully sowing strife through assassination, abduction, and various subtle intrigues in order to foster more war and thereby increase business.

Many have also suspected Onja's hand in these activities because wars among the humans amused her.

Of the many notable Overlords through the ages, arguably the most notorious was Depponemmer, who spent fifteen years hunting down and killing all the followers of the prophet Lin Fal after Onja burned the prophet alive with her magic.

The most famous Overlord was the first recorded Overlord of the society. He was Amar, who served Onja before and during her ascent to the rys throne. Amar was a mighty warrior who fought faithfully for the rys in the Great War. Armed with enchanted weapons gifted to him by Onja, he was the bane of his enemies and set the standard for excellence in the martial arts for all Kezanada after him.

Appendix B~ The Tribes of the West ~

Temu – Confederation member: This is a major tribe with land holdings that extend from the Rysamand foothills to fertile farm lands. Its large domain size and high population, many of which are skilled urban craftsmen, promotes the economic power of the tribe. Temu warriors are professional but temperamental by reputation. Temu military power is respected by its neighbors.

Tacus – Confederation member: Although this tribe lacks the size and influence of the Temu, it has traditionally positioned itself as a key ally. Overall the tribe is of modest means being neither rich nor poor. Its economy is primarily agricultural with minimal urban development.

Hirqua – Confederation member: A small but respected tribe, the Hirqua Tribe is known for maintaining its society with strong family and clan loyalties. Hirqua warriors are known for cunning, skill, and for possessing a greater sense of opportunism than the military men of their larger neighbors. Hirqua lands are mostly located within the heavily wooded Rysamand foothills and the tribal economy is based on the commodities of the forest: wood, fur and leather. Hirqua artisans flourish however, and wood carvings, fur and leatherwork are highly sought after from this tribe. Some metal mining also contributes to Hirqua wealth.

Nuram – Confederation member: A small tribe located within the fertile farm lands beyond the foothills, its economy is agriculturally based.

Two urban centers have developed within the Nuram Domain however. Fetter Hem is known as a center of philosophy, writing and education, and Dee Hem is an arts center noted for theater and sculpture. Although a small tribe with little influence, the Nuram have an ancient warrior tradition.

Zenglaw – Confederation member: A tribe equal in land holdings, population, and urbanism to the Temu, the Zenglaw enjoy a strong agricultural economy due to its plentiful farmland. Trade and crafts thrive in the cities. Militarily, the Zenglaw are strong and generally rival the Temu although outright war is often prevented by the diplomatic structure of the Confederation.

Sabuto: A large tribe bordering the Temu Domain on its south, the Sabuto Tribe is the historical rival of the Temu Tribe. The Sabuto have warred continually with the Temu through the centuries. Such longstanding conflict has bred an attitude of permanent desire for vengeance between the tribes, and truces and treaties have never held. The Sabuto wield a powerful economy made rich by its fertile river bottom farmlands and its mining in the Rysamand foothills, where gold, silver, sterner metals, and jewels are taken from the rocky roots of the mountains. The Sabuto dominate the lesser tribes to the south and west of its domain. The threat of expansion of Sabuto influence is the motivation for the confederation of tribes in the north.

The End