

The Goddess Queen

The Rys Chronicles Book II

Tracy Falbe

Brave Luck Books TM

The Goddess Queen: The Rys Chronicles Book II

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1 ~ Fierce Loss ~

Tytido looked up from his almost finished dinner and chuckled.

Dreibrand coughed a little then asked, "Why do you laugh?"

"Nothing, Sir," Tytido replied.

"No, tell me," Dreibrand insisted. "You looked at me and laughed."

Tytido considered a moment, then decided it was safe and said truthfully, "You smoke funny."

Dreibrand frowned and contemplated the pipe Tytido was sharing with him. The pleasantness of the smoke kept him from staying perturbed and he took another puff. Again Tytido smiled.

"What do I do wrong?" Dreibrand asked with exasperation, glancing around the tavern to see if anyone else was amused.

"I can't explain, Sir," Tytido said helplessly.

"See if I take you out to dinner again," Dreibrand grumbled indignantly and returned the pipe to the Hirqua.

Tytido examined the half-charred contents of his pipe. "Forgive me, Sir. I don't mean to be rude."

Dreibrand gestured dismissively and relaxed back into his chair. He was not really upset. The food at the tavern had been excellent and he felt very warm, comfortable and happy. He had not had much of a chance to experience common Temu society and so far he enjoyed the atmosphere of Dengar Nor.

A good fire crackled in the great fireplace and Temu men sat around in small cliques drinking, smoking, eating, and playing games. One man tuned an instrument, preparing for the increased festivities of the later hours. On the wall by Dreibrand's table hung the skin of a large speckled cat unlike any animal in the east, and he studied it with interest.

A pretty girl, probably the tavernkeeper's daughter, came by with a pitcher of wine. Tytido had his cup refilled but Dreibrand required no more drink.

Once she moved on, Tytido inquired quietly, "Do you think the Sabuto will be that much trouble to us?"

Sighing, Dreibrand admitted, "Actually, I think they will. Although the Temu like to think they are cowards, I know they are not. The Sabuto have to see our rebellion against Jingten as their big chance to hurt the Temu. They will assemble as large a force as they can."

Tytido said, "I have never fought with a Sabuto, but they do not have the reputation of the Hirqua and Shan will bring us victory."

"Yes, he will," Dreibrand agreed.

The door of the tavern banged open and the draft of wind made the lanterns flicker. Redan and Misho entered in obviously high spirits. Misho's face was scarred and still swollen and his hand was still bandaged. The healers had feared that Misho's hand would be permanently crippled, and half of his face remained slack. Despite these problems, the young warrior seemed to have regained his vigor and he had become a close friend to Redan.

The Temu patrons quickly recognized the long loose hair of the Zenglawa and frowned. The hushed rustle of disapproving gossip circled the room like dry leaves.

Redan ignored them and proceeded straight to the bar. He slung his bow comfortably on his shoulder and produced a small pouch of coins. After he and Misho obtained drinks, they turned to find a table. The Temu had strategically spread out, making no seats appear available.

Redan spotted his general and Tytido at a table and brightened. Part of Misho's face also showed relief to see his commanders because he knew he did not keep popular company.

"May we join you, Sir?" Redan asked.

Dreibrand nodded and they settled in happily.

"I see you have some money, Redan?" Dreibrand commented suspiciously.

Redan and Misho shared a conspiratorial look. Patting his new bow, Redan whispered, "It is not hard to get a Temu to bet against a Zenglawa these days."

Dreibrand wanted to show strong disapproval but only managed a paternal shake of his head. He had a sneaking suspicion that Redan had a pretty good hustle, and Dreibrand could not resist respecting that.

Dreibrand simply advised, "Do not win too much money from our Temu hosts."

Gulping down some wine, Redan nodded. He knew too well the wisdom of his general's advice, but he had had a very gratifying day and wanted to celebrate his success.

"We'll all be hustling in the streets if we don't get paid something," Tytido mentioned.

"Yeah, I am working on that, Lieutenant," Dreibrand responded, trying to hide his discomfort. "I think Shan has most of his finances worked out with the King. But for now the Yentay have shelter and food and you should not complain. And I am going to try and get everybody as much new gear as I can."

"Sir, I know you will get us as much as you can, but Lord Shan offered pay after we volunteered," Tytido pressed.

"We will all be wealthy when Jingten is taken," Dreibrand reminded.

"Truly, but I wouldn't mind something to spend now in case I get killed, Sir," Tytido said.

Dreibrand laughed because there was no arguing with that point. "I will remind Lord Shan as soon as I can. He appreciates us and I am sure he will be generous. I could use some pay myself. I have the woman with a child on the way."

The Yentay chuckled at his impending financial burden and Tytido congratulated his general again. Dreibrand had just enough wine left to share a toast with them.

Pushing back his chair, he announced his intention of returning to the castle.

"Please stay, Sir. We should drink a couple more toasts to your good fortune," Tytido invited.

"No, not tonight, but thank you, Lieutenant. I should not get drunk and ask Shan for your pay," Dreibrand joked.

Tytido agreed with a grin and the three Yentay stood respectfully as their general left the table.

"Do stay out of trouble," Dreibrand ordered, giving Redan his particular attention.

On his way out, Dreibrand looked back at his men. Redan had called for more wine and held his cup close while the girl filled it. He admired her with less than proper Temu manners and it did not look to Dreibrand like Redan had any plans of staying out of trouble that night. With a shrug, Dreibrand stepped out into the street. He knew no one deserved their fun like soldiers. Thinking warmly of Miranda, he anticipated his own pleasures.

The evening was young when he returned to the Taischek's stronghold, and he went directly to his apartment. He decided he would talk to Shan in the morning about pay for the Yentay.

Now that Dreibrand had digested the reports from his Nuram spies, he did not feel as troubled. He had anticipated such difficulties from the Sabuto, and he knew he could beat the Sabuto. Their tribal domain was large but no larger than some kingdoms the Atrophane had conquered, and all he really needed to do was crush their ability to invade the Temu instead of complete conquest.

As Dreibrand entered the wing to his apartment, a woman rushed down the hall and interrupted his thoughts. He did not recognize her, but by her dress, he could tell that she was one of Queen Vua's ladies in waiting. At first he assumed the woman had been visiting Miranda, but she blocked his path, which said her purpose was with him.

His good mood dissolved as he sensed that something was wrong.

"General, I was instructed to meet you," the woman announced in a business-like manner. "Miranda is ill. You cannot go in."

An automatic panic made his temper flare and he pushed the woman aside with respectful force. Stubbornly the woman countered his move, and although she could not stop him, she impeded his every step and barred the way when they reached the door.

"What is wrong!?" he demanded, restraining himself from rudely throwing her aside.

"She is ill. You can't see her," insisted the woman, who wedged herself securely into the doorframe.

"Move!" Dreibrand ordered.

"You can't go in. Miranda can't see you. Maybe later. It is the Queen's order that you wait," the woman said.

"What is wrong!?" Dreibrand bellowed.

"She will live," the woman offered vaguely.

The statement only made Dreibrand's eyes bulge with borderline hysteria, and the woman realized the tall warrior would physically force himself inside unless she explained.

She did not want to deliver the news, but she said, "General, it is a miscarriage. You must wait to see her."

Dreibrand stepped back stunned. He did not know much about such matters, but he understood that.

"Find someplace to wait. I will let you in when she can see you," the woman promised.

The reality of the news had yet to sink in and Dreibrand moved toward the door. The desire to see Miranda was the only reaction he had. If she suffered, he wanted to help her.

The woman shook her head and whispered, "Not now."

For a moment Dreibrand stood there confused, understanding that he could not enter but unable to decide on another action.

"She has the best of care. Come back later," the woman said.

Without acknowledging her, he stormed away, allowing himself only a weak rage because he could not confront any of his emotions at that moment. He stalked to Shan's apartment and pounded on the door with such vehemence the guards almost decided to stop him.

Shan, who had been meditating, took a long time to open the door, and Dreibrand's fist beat on the wood all the while like a relentless migraine. When the door clicked open, Dreibrand pushed through and slammed it shut with the force of a judgmental gale. Dreibrand met Shan coming out of his favored meditation chamber. The disturbed rys held a single candle that sparkled off the white streaks in his hair.

Straightening his fur trimmed robe, Shan said, "Dreibrand, what is the matter?"

"Why did you not send for me? What is wrong with Miranda? I asked you to see her home," Dreibrand blathered.

"Miranda? What do you mean what is wrong with Miranda?" Shan asked, genuinely mystified.

"Shan..." Dreibrand muttered weakly, suddenly losing the intensity of his demands.

Shan guided him to a chair and lit a few more candles. In the better light, Shan could see the grief and fear that he had felt radiating from his friend.

"Was Miranda sick when I left today?" Dreibrand asked miserably.

"She said she needed to lie down but it was normal. What has happened?" Shan said.

"They will not let me see her. They sent me away." Sinking into a chair and clutching his face, Dreibrand moaned, "She is losing our baby."

Shan gasped, "Are you sure?"

"That is what I was told," Dreibrand said without looking up. His dangling hair concealed his contorted expression.

A profound sadness seeped into Shan's heart. Of any of them, Miranda deserved no more sorrow, yet it happened.

Abruptly Dreibrand grabbed Shan's arm and pleaded, "Look in on her. You can see how she is."

"I will not spy on a sick woman's bed," Shan stated firmly.

Dreibrand realized how inappropriate his request was and dropped it. He said, "I knew something was not right with her. But she always said she was fine, so I thought she knew her business. She was happy..."

Shan poured him a glass of wine, and Dreibrand gratefully accepted it.

"Do you know if she will be all right?" Shan asked.

Taking a breath after a gulp of wine, Dreibrand answered, "I was told she will live."

"Good," Shan said with considerable relief.

"Shan, can you help her? You know, maybe stop—stop what is happening," Dreibrand asked cautiously, still reluctant to accept the situation.

Shan looked at his friend with sympathy and his heart ached with distress for Miranda. "Dreibrand, I have healing powers, but some things cannot be changed. My knowledge of a human pregnancy is limited...but I will try," he said finally because he had to when he looked at Dreibrand's desperate expression. Shan suspected it might be too late for the baby, but Miranda might need his help.

"Then, come on," Dreibrand cried.

When they rushed back to Dreibrand's apartment, Shan told the woman at the door that he wanted to offer his assistance to the Queen's medicine woman. The lady in waiting slipped inside and soon returned with the answer that Shan could enter. Dreibrand had to wait helplessly in the hall, pacing and burning with distress.

Late into the night, the lady in waiting emerged from the apartment and softly announced, "You may see her, General."

Dreibrand dashed inside, relieved to finally be allowed where he had been forbidden. The thick rug of the front room absorbed the stomp of his boots. Queen Vua came out of the bedchamber and shut the door behind her. She held up a hand to halt his rush. Dark circles under her eyes shadowed her plump face and a few strands of gray hair hung from her normally perfect coif.

"Slow down, General," the Queen commanded.

"Tell me what happened," he begged.

Vua's soft face showed her sympathy as she explained, "Miranda will recover, but she is weak. There—there will be no baby. I am sorry."

"Why?" he whispered.

"Not every baby is born," Vua replied helplessly. "Dreibrand Veta, you know the injuries Miranda has suffered recently, and she has already had a baby this year. Her body was not ready." She stepped aside. "Now go to her."

"Thank you for helping her, Queen Vua," Dreibrand managed to say as he passed her.

He did not know what to expect when he opened the door. He feared some horrible scene, but the

bedchamber had been set in order and showed no sign of their personal tragedy beyond Miranda's pale face reposing on a pillow. Shan and the medicine woman stood at the bedside and a single lamp burned on a table by the bed.

Overwhelmed to finally see Miranda, Dreibrand dropped onto one knee at her side, not wishing to disturb the bed at all. So much had changed in less than a day. She had been up and active last he saw her, and now she lay hurt in bed again.

He gently scooped up her hand and felt its coldness. It was not as cold as when he had saved her from the glacier, and Dreibrand drew some hope.

Miranda opened her eyes, and their green beauty was tainted by bloodshot whites. With his other hand, he petted her hair back from her face.

"Dreibrand, I am so sorry," she whispered.

"No. Do not apologize. Will you be all right?" he said.

Miranda wet her dry lips. "Yes."

Turning to Shan, Dreibrand said, "You could not stop it?"

Shan shook his head and the medicine woman put a tentative hand on Dreibrand's shoulder. She said, "Lord Shan, eased her pain in a way I cannot do, and he used his magic power to give her strength. Miranda will heal quicker now."

"Why couldn't you stop it?" Dreibrand demanded never taking his gaze from Shan. The rys stoically absorbed the irrational anger, knowing it was grief that made his friend so cross.

The medicine woman usually bore this type of verbal assault from the loved ones of patients, and she spoke in his defense. "Do not be angry with him. We both know how powerful Lord Shan is, but as he says, he is not a god. This early in a pregnancy, if the body decides it will not carry the child, there is nothing anyone can do."

Dreibrand shut his eyes and clutched Miranda's hand. He was ashamed that he had yelled at Shan, especially when he should be grateful that Miranda would recover. "Leave us," he ordered because his emotions were in turmoil.

The medicine woman gestured to the door with her eyes and Shan followed her out.

"I am sorry," Miranda whispered again.

Dreibrand groaned. It made him feel worse when she apologized. He was the one who should apologize. Vua's words rang in his head, "*She has already had a baby this year. Her body was not ready.*"

I did this to her. I hurt her.

"Miranda, were you hiding a sickness from me? Did you know this would happen?" He hated to ask her such a question but he had to know if she was keeping health problems from him.

"No. It happened suddenly. I had been feeling tired, but that can be normal. I thought I was fine," she answered.

"Did this happen because of Onja hurting you?" he asked, feeling a painful hate for the cruel rys Queen.

"Maybe. These things happen. I lost a baby once before," Miranda said.

Dreibrand's eyes widened with shock and concern. "When?"

"Long ago. It was a couple years after Elendra was born. My master beat me so hard I lost the baby," Miranda recalled.

"How could he do that?" Dreibrand choked, appalled that anyone could treat her that way. It was bad enough that Onja had tortured her.

Miranda turned her weary eyes away. Barlow had believed that the child was not his and had

become enraged, which was doubly cruel considering the things he made her do. But she would not tell Dreibrand about that. Remembering the worse physical pain of that episode helped Miranda accept her current loss.

"He just beat me sometimes," she answered.

"I would never hurt you like that," Dreibrand stated.

Miranda squeezed his hand despite her fatigue. "I know. And Dreibrand, I will get over this. I will be fine."

Kissing her fingers, Dreibrand said, "You take as long as you need to get better."

Miranda finally showed her grief, and a poignant tear fell from each eye, lying on each cheek like drops of thawed frost.

"Dreibrand, I so wanted this baby," she said. "It would have been my first baby that I chose to make as a free woman. The pain of birthing your child would have been a joy to me because I wanted our baby so much."

Her misty eyes turned to the dark windows and she continued, "I miss my other children, but this baby gave me hope for happiness. My emptiness was filled. Now there is just the emptiness again. Onja took my children, and hurt me so much I lost your child. Now my sadness is complete."

Another pair of tears rolled down her cheeks and a small sob escaped her lips. Her sorrow tied knots in Dreibrand's stomach and he held her hand to his heart.

"There will be a child between us someday, and we will get your other children back," he soothed, hoping his words would help her.

Miranda cried in silence and Dreibrand saw as never before the depth of her grief in her stricken face. He held her until she fell asleep, exhausted by blood loss.

Standing, Dreibrand clenched his fists and felt unfamiliar emotions surge through his body. He had hated Onja before for hurting Miranda, but now the assault was even more personal. Onja's destructive actions had cost him a child. It was only the thought of a child he would never see, but it had been his child nonetheless. The loss was fierce inside him, baiting instincts that had been dormant.

In this suddenly acquired paternal outrage, he blamed Onja. Miranda had been a strong woman, almost tireless beneath the burden of her children. Surely she would have never lost their baby if Onja had not almost killed her. But even as his anger latched onto his enemy, his guilt returned. He attacked himself with the thought that he should have known better than to touch Miranda after she had been so badly hurt. Although he placed some blame on himself, he could not deny that Onja was the greatest cause of their sorrows and he longed for revenge.

Eventually the sight of Miranda's sleeping face eased the pressure of his anger. He would go crazy if he allowed his wrath to consume him. For now, Dreibrand commanded himself to relax and watch over Miranda. Violent rage and guilt served no purpose by her sick bed, and Onja was far away.

Although he doubted Miranda could hear him, Dreibrand vowed, "Soon, Miranda, soon. Once I was the conqueror. Now, I will be the punisher. Onja and all who stand with her will be defeated."

Miranda tossed her head and Dreibrand thought that she might wake, but she did not. Collapsing into a chair, Dreibrand kept a vigil. A sunny but cold dawn broke across the Rysamand. Staring at the daunting peaks, he noticed that the snowcaps had expanded down the stony blue slopes. The snows had started and Jingtén receded into its perfect isolation.

Dreibrand fell asleep dreaming of the snow blanketing the mysterious heights. He saw the Tomb of Dacian reflecting across the beautiful alpine lake and pointing at Jingtén.

After a couple days Miranda improved. The color crept back into her face, but she was under orders to stay in bed for at least a week. For her sake, Dreibrand salvaged his good humor and tried to lift her spirits. He was somewhat successful, and Miranda felt renewed mostly by the effort he made.

However, when Dreibrand was not at Miranda's side, he made no attempt to heal himself. Even as her week in bed neared its end and she seemed to be recovering, he remained grim and taciturn, usually skulking in lonely sections of the castle. The only person who received any conversation

from him was the weaponsmith down in the armory. These terse talks concerned the crafting of his new sword, and Dreibrand did not deviate from his business by even a word.

Shan knew that his friend suffered but he did not know how to help. Dreibrand had not volunteered his thoughts and Shan had to admit that he would not know what to say if he did. He had had many human friends in his already long life but some of their experiences differed from his great knowledge. As much as he cared, Shan understood that sometimes a rym could not console a human. Therefore, he privately mentioned his concerns to Taischek.

King Taischek located Dreibrand outside on a lonely parapet of the castle. A Temu flag snapped in the wind and dreary clouds flew beyond the rippling yellow and purple fabric. Although he heard footsteps, Dreibrand did not look up. He rested his elbows on the stonework, staring down listlessly at the browning fields. The ground had begun to freeze and the green blades of summer had faded and the dormant forest looked as gray as an elder's hair.

Clearing his throat purposefully, Taischek put his hands on his hips and selected a frown to wear. Dreibrand glanced up with decided disinterest, then straightened with surprise.

"King Taischek! Forgive me. I never expected you," Dreibrand apologized with actual energy in his voice.

Taischek scolded, "We are at war and you do not even look to see who approaches you."

Dreibrand lacked the will to even muster an excuse.

The King continued, "Dreibrand Veta, you sulk around depressing everybody. Stop acting like your woman died."

"Yes, King Taischek, perhaps I overreact," Dreibrand muttered.

Taischek leaned on the stonework now. His eyes squinted protectively against the sharp wind and their sable sparkle looked across his domain.

Taking a fatherly tone, Taischek said, "It is all right to be upset, but you must snap out of this sulking. It will only make you feel worse."

Shyly, Dreibrand studied the Temu King, realizing the monarch had come to him as a friend, and Dreibrand craved the attention and guidance of the more mature man. Taischek seemed to be waiting for him to say something, and Dreibrand tried to pull some words out of the jumble of thoughts and feelings that constricted his chest. It was not everyday the King climbed a bunch of stairs to talk to anybody, so he had better talk.

"I had only just gotten used to the idea of being a father, and now...that is not going to happen," Dreibrand confessed.

Taischek nodded sympathetically. "It would make it harder with your first child," he conceded. "And part of you will always remember this, but these things happen and you need to move on. At least start to move on."

Dreibrand said that he would but inside he had little confidence that he could take the advice.

Taischek continued, "You are not alone, Dreibrand. Trust me, these things happen. I have nine wives. I know how you feel."

"You honor me with your concern, King Taischek," Dreibrand thanked him politely.

"You are a good man, and I need you strong and clear headed, not forever mourning a child that was not meant to be," Taischek said.

"I will try, King Taischek. I am sure you know best in this situation," Dreibrand said.

"This experience has been hard on you, but there are worse griefs. There is the grief of seeing your child born and grown and then die later. I pray you never have to know that bitterness." Taischek's words were heavy from his memories.

Knowing that even a King had to endure such losses helped Dreibrand confront his confusing sorrows.

"In time you will heal," Taischek predicted. "Do not think that this sadness will rule you forever."

"But that is how it feels," Dreibrand insisted. "And King Taischek, it is like I will only feel better if I can have my revenge. Onja did this to her. Onja almost killed Miranda this summer and it has made her fragile."

Thinking of Miranda and how much Dreibrand obviously cared for the woman, Taischek could imagine the wretched hatred these people had for the rys Queen. As King of the Temu, he had known the sting of her tyranny, but he had luckily avoided the personal attention of her cruelties. There were stories of her evil deeds, both old and new, and Miranda was one of the few to survive the ire of the Queen of Jingtun. Taischek hoped this fortunate accident would inspire Onja's undoing.

"The plans for your revenge are already underway," Taischek observed. "Now when you go to war, you will have one more reason to succeed."

"Yes, but I am ready to fight Onja now and I cannot get to her," Dreibrand said. "At first I did not mind waiting, but now I cannot stand it."

Pointing to the whitening mountains, Taischek said, "The winter comes early to the land this year and the snows rule the Rysamand as surely as Onja does. Wait we must. But we should not let this time frustrate us. We must cultivate fond memories with the ones we love in these calm months before the snows melt into blood."

Taischek's voice became kind and he advised, "Have hope not despair. Miranda gets better every day, I am told, and you have all winter to make a new baby, eh?"

Dreibrand appreciated Taischek's confidence. The attention and advice of the King had eased the strain of his sorrow, and he felt a little less depressed.

"Thank you, King Taischek. Your words have been helpful," Dreibrand said.

A broad smile creased the King's round face and he declared, "Any king can command you to cheer up, but I believe in setting an example."

Dreibrand anticipated the announcement of one of Taischek's banquets in honor of drinking. He was not sure if he felt up to the carousing, but he decided perhaps he should try.

Instead, Taischek proposed, "I have already started arrangements for a hunting trip. A change of scenery will be good for you. When you get back, Miranda will be well, and your mind will be clear. And, well, you can take things from there."

"Hunting?" Dreibrand repeated with interest.

"You like hunting," Taischek surmised. "Good. I have a lovely lodge out in my private forest. This is the time of year to hunt stag. It will be great fun!"

2 ~ The Proving Ground ~

An honor guard of twenty Temu warriors, a band of musicians, and a gaggle of servants assembled in the castle courtyard. General Xander and Prince Kalek flanked the King, who wore a marvelously shaggy bearskin cloak clasped by a huge gold chain and a hat to match.

For the occasion, Dreibrand donned his black wolfskin, even if it looked primitive and uncrafted. The fur reminded him of his struggles in the Wilderness where he had learned the true spirit of the hunt. Dreibrand had experienced the exhilaration of the kill when he needed food and he hoped the potency of that experience would not lessen the pleasure of the sport. He had always enjoyed the formal hunt of the upper classes. For the hunt, he had obtained a good bow and he hoped his shot would not be too rusty.

When Tytido arrived, Redan was with him. Dreibrand had invited Tytido but he had not expected Redan. The men saluted Dreibrand and he asked Redan why he was there.

"Lord Shan has summoned me," Redan replied.

Being unaware of Shan's plans perturbed Dreibrand, who noticed that Redan had a healing cut over an eyebrow.

"I see you have not stayed out of trouble," Dreibrand remarked.

Redan laughed without remorse and joked, "I met a girl's father."

The humor tempted a smile out of Dreibrand, making him forgive Redan's chronic impertinence, at least temporarily.

Xander gave the order for everyone to fall in line as a cloaked figure rode out of the stables. Recognizing Shan's voluminous black cloak, Dreibrand urged his bay stallion to intercept the rys. Gloves and a cowl hid the rys's blue skin, and Shan even rode a plain horse.

"Good morning, Dreibrand," Shan called brightly. Frosty breath emerged from the hood.

"You intend to come," Dreibrand stated with shock.

"Yes."

"Shan, it is dangerous," Dreibrand whispered.

"I know," Shan agreed. "But Dengar Nor has grown tiresome. I, too, need fresh air and fresh thinking."

Before Dreibrand protested again, Shan continued, "I have been discreet. I only informed Taischek an hour ago and quietly sent for Redan."

They took their place in the column of riders and Shan beckoned Redan. "Ride with me and serve as my bodyguard," the rys said.

"Yes Lord," Redan accepted soberly.

King Taischek turned in his saddle and winked at Shan before signaling for departure.

"Everyone knows it is you," Dreibrand criticized.

"I am hardly helpless!" Shan countered.

Wanting to have a good time, Dreibrand relented. Perhaps he fretted too much about an outing in secure territory of an incredibly powerful being.

From a window high in the castle, Miranda observed the formation and departure of the hunting party. Accompanied by her servant, she had left her bed to watch Dreibrand leave. The walk down the wing from her apartment had not been difficult and she felt her vitality coming back. Shan's magic had hastened the return of her health.

With a little envy she watched the men leave for their woodsport. Dengar Nor grew tiresome for

her as well, and she longed again for the freedom of the open land. If her pregnancy had continued she would have been content to stay in Dengar Nor, but without that to consider, she wanted to return her energies to Shan's cause.

Miranda did not resent Dreibrand leaving her for the hunting holiday. He had been so kind and helpful to her and he deserved to indulge himself. Miranda recognized that their loss had been hard on him too, and she hoped this diversion would help him to get over it.

But one thing about the hunting party did displease her. Leaning against the cold glass where her nose faintly fogged the pane, she scrutinized the last minute appearance of the cloaked figure. She knew it was Shan and frowned at his intention to leave the castle.

The King and his entourage passed through the archway and onto the castle road. With them gone, Miranda rubbed a finger through the moisture she had breathed onto the glass. The window was such a fine marvel. There were no glass windows in Wa Gira.

~

The royal hunting grounds were one day's ride from the city, and Taischek and his entourage arrived just before sunset. A fluff of recently fallen brown leaves carpeted the woodland path to the hunting lodge, and the crunch and rustle of leaves beneath hooves blended with the clink and jingle of accouterments. A few startled deer scattered from the path once they sensed the intrusion of their royal landlord. King Taischek hollered a greeting to the fleeing animals, announcing his hunting season boldly, and then laughed with almost childlike delight at his silliness.

The hunting lodge was a large building that could house all the men comfortably. Built of great timbers carved with leaves, vines, and deer, the lodge was an old building but it aged well due to its excellent construction. Adjacent to the lodge a small lake sparkled like a bowl of cranberries in the setting sun and even the brown cattails and gray bare trees looked beautiful in the ruddy light.

The King and his friends walked along the lakeshore to enjoy the pristine charms of the pre-winter dusk while the horses were stabled and servants entered the lodge to start fires and scare away the dust bunnies. By the lake, Shan pulled back his hood and looked about freely.

"I do like this place, Taischek. How long has it been since I came here with you?" Shan wondered.

"It has been ten years since you came on the fall hunt with me, and you have only yourself to blame for that. I never understood your bizarre habit of letting yourself get snowed in Jingtun," Taischek said.

"That long?" Shan murmured. "I suppose the time was longer for you."

"Not so long," Taischek sighed. Turning to Dreibrand, the King asked, "How do you like my hunting grounds? Does it compare to the ones in your eastern empire?"

"This is a fine and rich corner of Nature. As fine as any King would need," Dreibrand answered with admiration.

Dreibrand liked this place that already soothed the hardness in his heart. He watched a few ducks quack indignantly at their presence as they paddled through the calm water, and for a moment, he forgot his troubles.

A rock plunked into the water beside the ducks, sending them flying in an annoyed clamor.

Prince Kalek brought his arm back from the toss and announced, "I'm going inside."

Taischek's heir spun around and waved Redan out of his way. "You don't belong here," Kalek snarled his opinion and stomped off to the lodge.

The Zenglawa's lip twitched but he restrained himself from commenting. So far on this royal outing, Redan had not formed an appealing opinion of Kalek, but he was smart enough to leave him alone. Redan looked over and saw a sympathetic expression on Dreibrand's face.

Taischek pointedly ignored the whole incident and said, "The lodge should be nicely warmed up by now."

Warm lamplight beckoned from the lodge windows and smoke rose from the chimneys as they came

up the gravel trail from the lake. Shan stopped once, halting Redan and Dreibrand behind him. The rys looked across the lake speculatively and then continued without comment.

That evening the hunters entertained themselves with wine and music under the indifferent gaze of mounted bears and heavily racked bucks, but they did not stay up late. Everyone would have to rise before dawn to pursue the stag that gathered to rut in the woods, and there could be no proper late night parties until venison roasted on the great hearth. This rule, of course, could be waived if everyone's luck was terrible and no kill happened on the first day.

The morning revealed a magical world where every blade of grass and reed wore fuzzy jackets of frost like crystal shrouds. Taischek with his son and Xander gathered with Dreibrand, Tytido, Shan and Redan to examine tracks. A multitude of deer tracks had punched through the half frozen mud by the lake, where the deer had sipped water in the privacy of night before dispersing onto woodland trails. Mixed with the deer tracks, some cat paw prints of disturbing breadth also presented themselves.

"We have competition," Taischek noted.

"It looks like Old Wontu," Xander decided after bending low to compare the print to his hand.

"What is Old Wontu?" Dreibrand inquired, trying not to sound bothered.

Glad to tell the story, Xander chuckled. "The grandfather of all speckled senshal in the Temu Domain. He is rarely seen, but he exists still. A person occasionally comes up missing and then maybe half a skull will be found later."

"Maybe you'll get him yet," Taischek encouraged.

Xander leaned on his spear and hoisted himself straight. "No Sire, I am no longer so ambitious. I have decided I do not want to see Old Wontu."

Kalek interrupted the predator lore of his elders and said, "Father, this Zenglawa is not seriously coming along?"

The question did not upset Taischek, who found no appeal in Redan's presence. By his own decree he had sundered all friendship between the Temu and the Zenglawa, and his son only honored his decision. However, the trust between Taischek and Shan was so established that the King would indulge the rys because Shan chose his companions with care.

"Shan will not be criticized in his choice of company," Taischek stated.

The Prince could not argue with that, but he would not hide his dislike for the Zenglawa.

"Redan does not agree with his tribe. He is not your enemy, Kalek," Shan explained.

Kalek showed little interest in Shan's assurances. "Stay near your friends, Zenglawa," he warned.

Shan easily sensed the anger approaching the surface in Redan and discreetly whispered, "Do not pay attention to him."

Relaxed by the rys's attention, Redan reminded himself of the greatness of his lord and tried to mentally dismiss the Temu heir as insignificant.

Depressed by the negative mood Kalek seemed determined to impress on the outing, Dreibrand tried to counter it by suggesting, "Which way should we start? I want venison for dinner."

By Taischek's choice, they headed northwest, where the woodland often gave way to meadows. Hopefully in a meadow they would find the stags striving for mates. When they were in the clear areas, a ring of surrounding hills could be seen beyond the treetops.

Dreibrand, who had become used to hunting in solitude, worried that the group of men would create too much noise and shy away the quarry. However, Shan was an extraordinary asset to the party because his rys perceptions allowed him to know the location of deer and the direction in which they moved. He would alert them when they closed on their prey and then they could spread out to encircle the herd.

Without any notable wildlife nearby, they had little need for stealth at the moment and could engage in conversation without loss. Dreibrand had never considered the uses of rys magic in

hunting and Shan speculated that hunting could have been the original purpose for the powers of his kind. He imagined how rys had lived wild in the dim ages of prehistory. Even when game grew scarce, the rys could have found the animals, and the harsh high environment of the Rysamand would not have been as forbidding to his race as it had been to the ancient humans. Mountain winters were not as difficult for rys, who were not harmed by freezing temperatures and were even capable of hibernation. Therefore, the mountains had become the natural domain of rys.

Shan ended his rambling when they neared an enclave of deer. The hunters quietly devised a strategy and crept around the half dozen deer, approaching from downwind and using the brush on the edge of the meadow as cover.

A ten-pointed stag lorded over his gathered does and exercised his hard-won mating rights. No other bucks currently challenged him that day and he patrolled the meadow proudly, swinging his rack. The stag had reached a level of superiority in his species, but his glory would not complete the season.

Dreibrand drew back on his powerful hunting bow, admiring the graceful strength of the beast as he aimed. If the opportunity presented itself, Taischek had offered him the first shot of the day and Dreibrand took it. A sinister whisper of air came off the arrow as it flew into the stag's shoulder. The animal jumped as he felt the first bite of his doom and blood stained the red-gray fur. It was not a cleanly fatal shot, which disappointed Dreibrand somewhat, but he still had the satisfaction of a hit.

As the hunters closed for the kill, the does scattered in the instant distress of their kind and abandoned their master to his fate. Kalek loosed an arrow next and struck the stag in the throat. The wound to the throat devastated the stag but the animal was strong in body and spirit, and he sprang away, determined to at least make the predators run for their dinner. But after a few leaps, the blood flooded the windpipe and a sanguine spittle sprayed from his lips. Taischek and Xander and Tytido rushed after the stag with their spears.

With an athletic swing, Taischek hurled his spear and gashed the stag's side. Tytido and Xander headed off the doomed creature and together plunged their spears into the stag's broad chest.

It was a pleasurable group kill and the stag toppled, defeated by weapons and numbers. He had not the wit to contemplate his abrupt change of luck, and the last glimmer of spirit in his eyes possessed no malice or sadness.

Shan, who had located the deer by sensing its very being, also felt the stag's death. Using his perception to stalk the animal brought Shan no guilt because he considered his senses no different than wolves catching a scent on the wind.

Redan accompanied the rys into the meadow as the other hunters gathered around the prize. The master archer had hung back with his lord and not taken a shot at the stag. Because Shan had asked him to serve as his bodyguard, Redan thought it would be irresponsible for him to engage in the sport.

"Oh, it's wonderful," beamed Taischek, who grabbed the polished antlers.

"We should let the younger men carry it back," Xander suggested with a chuckle.

Dreibrand volunteered himself and Tytido for the task. The Prince made no offer to help while Dreibrand and Tytido cut a sapling for carrying the deer. Once they hoisted the stag and with a grunt adjusted the weight on their shoulders, Kalek came up beside Dreibrand.

"My shot was better than yours," Kalek bragged.

Dreibrand looked down at the Prince and whispered meaningfully, "I was not angry with the deer."

"You are my father's guest. Watch what you say," Kalek warned as he trotted alongside Dreibrand.

Before Dreibrand's temper could really be prodded, Kalek caught his foot on an arching root and plummeted face-first onto the forest floor. The delightful scene made Dreibrand laugh so hard he had to stop and put down his load. A few snickers escaped Tytido, who struggled valiantly to discreetly appreciate the humor.

A frightful string of Temu curses and the burst of laughter made everyone stop and turn around. Kalek scrambled to his feet and smacked away the clinging dead leaves.

"Watch where you go," Dreibrand advised.

Venom simmered in Kalek's eyes, but his pride was so momentarily maimed that he could only silently stride to the front of the line.

Dreibrand drained his mirth out with a sigh and hefted the deer again. That had been the best laugh he had had in a long time and it made him feel wonderful.

The next day, Shan strategically suggested that they split their group, sensing that Dreibrand and Kalek should not spend the day together. Taischek, Xander, and Kalek were content to spend the day together and enjoy their familial closeness, and they agreed.

That day the hunters had a later start after a boisterous evening and a heavy sleep on bellies full of venison. The temperature did not warm up from the morning freeze and the clouds thickened until the sky looked like slate. By midday, tiny snowflakes swirled on the occasional gust of wind through the clacking branches. It was not a snowstorm, but it heralded winter all the same.

As they hiked, Dreibrand said to Shan, "Thank you for getting me away from Prince Kalek."

"I thought it seemed a good idea. Kalek seems to have his heart set on quarrelling with you," Shan noted.

Dreibrand muttered, "I do not know why. I hope he does not harm my relationship with King Taischek."

"He will not. Taischek has enough favors for both you and his son," Shan assured.

"I do not seek to compete with the Prince. I do not threaten him," Dreibrand insisted with frustration.

With a shrug, Shan speculated, "I think he picks on you to impress people. Kalek has big responsibilities in his future and he looks in the wrong places for the strength he will need."

"You would think the example of his father would be enough," Dreibrand grumbled.

"It will be—in time. Kalek is still young," Shan hoped.

Dreibrand walked on in silence, trying to persuade the reasonable and strategic side of his nature to prevail. He understood that if he lost his temper with the antagonistic Prince, Taischek would ultimately side with his son no matter what. Dreibrand did not want to lose his honored position in Taischek's household over a meddlesome young heir. Although Kalek had irked him since their first meeting, Dreibrand advised himself to build a better relationship with the Temu heir. Often one of nobility and power could be placated by the illusion of respect because they craved it to affirm their identity. Dreibrand knew the place and the role he should take, but the act of courting favor would not come so easily this time.

"I will try and better things between Kalek and myself," Dreibrand decided. "I know how important our alliances are right now, and I will not jeopardize our plans with petty strifes."

Shan nodded with approval, pleased that his general had come to the proper conclusion. Shan said, "Now relax, Dreibrand. You are here for your leisure after all, and I have removed Kalek for the day as a personal gift to you. Go hunt. Ahead the bucks gather on their proving ground."

"Then let us stop our chatter," Dreibrand said gladly.

Shan instructed, "Go ahead with Tytido and have your sport. I will stay here. I require a private talk with Redan."

Nervously, Redan glanced at his rys lord.

Shan continued, "Have Tytido sound his horn when you make a kill and we will catch up."

Dreibrand hesitated to leave Shan so far behind, but he was also excited to hunt, as was Tytido. Although curious about the business Shan had with Redan, Dreibrand could not deny the privacy the rys sought. Reminding himself that this trip was his well-deserved and overdue holiday, he departed and settled his mind into the task of stalking.

With an arrow waiting on the bow, Dreibrand proceeded quietly beside Tytido, who held his spear

in a confident grasp. The men ceased any conversation and drifted through the woodland, giving their senses over to the flow of life around them. Treading softly, they begrudged even a minor crackle from the carpet of leaves.

Hiking in the cold weather had finally consumed the feasting of the night before, and Dreibrand felt his appetite stir. This feeling was just a dim shadow of the instinctual urge to hunt that he had experienced when truly needing food in the Wilderness, but it would help him tap into that primal sharpness he had come to relish.

To his right, Dreibrand thought he heard something move and turned with the precision of a fox that has finally heard the mouse betray itself in the grass. His blue eyes pierced the gray and brown collage of winter-bare woodland, but the clusters of saplings, ranks of older trees, and the curtain-like tangles of wizened vines revealed nothing.

Tytido had stopped too, perhaps hearing the same thing and Dreibrand looked to him for confirmation, but Tytido shook his head. He did not see anything either.

Just as Dreibrand gestured for them to investigate, a crash sounded in the forest. Then another crash occurred and they located the direction of the noise. Their attention shifted forward and the men smiled to each other. The bang of antlers shook the crisp air as two stags battled with the strength of the season's lust, and the hunters recognized the sound with satisfaction. Soon they would behold the spectacle of the beasts' ancient duel and probably fell a glorious buck.

Checking the breeze, they adjusted their course and prowled away. They carefully found a quiet path through the underbrush until they saw the meadow. Crouching low in the thicket shadows, the men paused to admire the stags. They were mighty lords of the herd and fine examples of their kind. Great tiered racks locked together, and each bony finger of antler strove with another. Their delicate hooves dug into the soil as each stag pushed with all of his strength against the other. The muscles in their chests and necks rippled and strained, and the eyes of each animal stared from bowed heads with a stubbornness that did not heed their exertion.

The purely masculine struggle of the stags fascinated Dreibrand, and he decided to let the animals finish their fight before he took a shot. The deer briefly tore the tangle of their antlers apart only to come back together at a fresh angle of assault. Dreibrand pondered which one he wanted to shoot. Should he try to slay the victor and claim the glory of taking the strongest, or should he take the loser and leave the glory to the strongest?

One of the combatants finally began to falter and stagger backward. Excited, Tytido brushed Dreibrand's arm to encourage his general to make a shot. Dreibrand steadied his stance and took aim at the weaker stag. When the decision time came, he knew that after such a struggle the victor deserved to sire fawns for the spring.

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Shan stared into the forest for several minutes, following Dreibrand and Tytido with his mind. Then he thoughtfully considered the surrounding land. Some distance away was Taischek's party, and Shan could now speak to Redan without interference.

Redan waited patiently, wondering if Shan had some profound news for him or perhaps a special task.

Finally, Shan said, "In the spring, this land will see battles the likes of which have not occurred for centuries. I wish that I did not cause such a thing, but my magic cannot undo my actions. War is at hand."

"I know, Lord. I am not afraid and I have pledged to serve you. Do you still doubt my loyalty?" Redan asked.

Facing his archer now, Shan sincerely answered, "No. I know your heart is true to me. My worry is that the Zenglawa will be in this war...and they will not be on our side."

Redan's eyes sank to the ground as he reluctantly realized the implications of Shan's statement.

"Have you considered that you may face your own tribesmen on the battlefield? That you may have to kill Zenglawa?" Shan pressed.

"Do you want me to kill them?" Redan whispered.

"No. I do not really want anyone to kill anyone. But it will happen. If I am to depend on you, you must decide if you are capable of this before you place yourself in such a situation," Shan said.

"I will defend you even from the Zenglawa," Redan declared with his usual haste.

"You can think about it for a while," Shan advised. "Even though you have estranged yourself from your people, tribal loyalties rarely go away."

Redan responded, "You go to kill your Queen, Lord Shan, and I know that is not the way of rys. If you would do that, then I will strike at even my own people if they oppose you. I believe that my tribe will be better off without Onja's tyranny. King Atathol squeezes all of the tribute out of the poorest of my people. When Onja is gone, Atathol will not have this excuse and maybe those he oppresses will not be afraid to stand up to him. So you see, Lord Shan, in a way I fight for my tribe."

"I hope the day comes when the Zenglawa revere you, Redan, for you are the best among them," Shan praised.

A little overwhelmed by the compliment, Redan gazed with awe upon the fine blue features of the rys and the dreamy black eyes that had seen centuries come and go.

"Do you think other men would be willing to fight against their own?" Shan asked.

Redan cocked his head thoughtfully. "Lord, do you mean, do I think other Zenglawa will go against Atathol?"

"No—I mean in general. How likely would it be for a man to fight his own people because he believed in my cause?" Shan clarified.

"Well, Lord, it is hard to speak for others, but your cause is worthy. Those who have committed themselves to you can see how important it is to have a future without Onja. Some might think it is important enough to go against their own people. But it is reasonable to me because it is what I have done," Redan answered.

Shan pondered the answer like he was trying to fit it onto another person, and Redan wondered who he could be thinking about.

"Lord, do you think the Hirqua and Nuram will turn against us? Are you worried the other Yentay will betray you?" Redan asked.

"No, it is not that," Shan replied quickly. "It is—" The rys cut himself off as if he was about to reveal a secret. Taking his eyes from Redan's curious face, Shan searched the forest for his answers. He could not dispel his doubts by asking Redan cryptic questions. But his problem instantly left his mind when something else seized his attention.

Redan saw Shan's eyes widen with disbelief. The rys's normally statue-calm face that only showed the occasional emotion twisted into a look of complete panic.

Redan had not even had a chance to turn and see what distressed Shan when he heard the sharp snap of a crossbow and the familiar song of an arrow traveling the air. A wretched feeling like an icicle being slammed down his vertebrae hit Redan. Shan stepped aside in a feeble attempt at evasion and a terrible black quarrel sank into his pectoral.

An outraged shriek of pain and denial erupted from Shan's lips. The shocking horror paralyzed Redan and time slowed down to reveal every detail. When the piercing cry faded, Shan stumbled back clutching his chest. The sound of another crossbow firing answered Shan's scream, and Redan feared this bolt would slay his lord.

Shan moaned and a flash of light surrounded him. Redan cringed as if lightning struck next to him and he saw the second black quarrel break into pieces. When the magic energy receded, a blue stone monolith, vaguely in the shape of Shan's body, stood where Shan had been and the quarrel had been repelled by the hard stone. The shaft of the first arrow stuck out from the stone body. Redan reached out seeking his lord in infantile confusion, touching the hot blue stone that steamed in the cold air.

Whether the arrow had turned Shan to stone or Shan had turned himself to stone, Redan could not deduce. He barely believed what he saw and certainly had no comprehension of it.

But he could comprehend the attackers.

His terror finally released him to action and he whirled with an arrow instantly drawn in his bow. Now he saw the enemies. Their clothing made them vague against the forest because they were wrapped head to foot in mottled cloth the hues of the land. Cloth hoods covered their helmets and came around to cover all but their eyes. Although Redan had never seen such dress, he guessed that the weird assassins were Kezanada.

Three Kezanada were in Redan's line of vision. They rushed his position and Redan knew he was in terrible peril. If Shan lived or not he did not know, but he would not leave. He would at least defend Shan's body, such as it was, to the last.

An arrow leaped from Redan's bow and plunged through the neck of one of the crossbow archers and killed him. Another arrow slipped into Redan's bow with all the speed his terror and rage demanded. He spied a Kezanada stopping to aim his crossbow, but the master was faster. This Kezanada died too, falling against a tree and remaining half upright.

The third Kezanada took cover behind a tree and started talking in his language. Redan assumed he was talking to more Kezanada hidden in the trees. With an arrow drawn all the way back, Redan stood in front of the standing stone that now was Shan. He now realized he was surrounded.

Tears ran down his cheeks as he felt his mortality and his failure. He had failed Shan and not even seen the attack coming. Shan had forgiven him and honored him with a position as bodyguard, and he had rewarded his lord with only failure.

3 ~ Dueling Mercenaries ~

Dacian gave our agents weapons of rys construction so that his magic would be with them on the battlefield—Urlen, Kezanada Chronicler, year three of the Overlordship of Amar.

The leafless forest trembled from the inhuman shriek. Dreibrand froze, unable to loosen his drawn bow as the sound filled him with instant dread. Even the stags forgot their fight and snorted at the sky. In his many battles Dreibrand had heard a thousand variations on the human scream but this was not the scream of a man. With awful certainty he knew it was Shan's scream and the rys had been in pain.

"What was that?" Tytido asked.

"Shan," Dreibrand moaned. He put away his arrow and scrambled into a full run. "Come, Tytido. Hurry!"

Dreibrand crashed through the forest and did not even feel the frost-hardened branches scraping at his hands and head. In his desperation to take the most direct route, he charged through low branches and bushes and jumped over tangles of roots. Tytido followed with comparable speed, stirring the leaves before they settled from Dreibrand's passing.

With his heart pounding and his lungs athletically drawing air, Dreibrand's panicked mind begged repeatedly, *no, no, no...* He knew Shan should have stayed at Dengar Nor.

When Dreibrand neared where he had left Shan, he did not have a chance to take in the scene before a camouflaged warrior sprang at him. The only way to halt his momentum enough to prevent impaling himself on the sword was to throw himself backward and slide under the lunging blade. Dreibrand skidded to a stop at the feet of a warrior dressed in strange tawny clothes spotted with greens, browns and black. He looked up at the masked face and realized the worst.

The Kezanada had come.

The descending blade distracted him from further study, and Dreibrand dodged aside just as the blade hacked the ground. Having rushed mindlessly into an enemy without so much as a weapon drawn, he would have been in a bad way if not for Tytido. The Hirqua threw his spear at the warrior.

Incredibly the Kezanada brought his sword up and deflected the weapon, but this did give Dreibrand an opportunity to gain his feet and draw his sword, which immediately saved his life. Not yet able to retrieve his spear, Tytido pulled his blade and engaged the Kezanada.

The Kezanada drew another sword and parried both men with an impressive display of expertise. Tytido and Dreibrand circled to opposite sides of the warrior, trying to get inside his guard, but he handled the two-front attack with ease and even made them duck a few times.

Shan's scream echoed in Dreibrand's ears and he still did not know what had happened to the rys. He had no time to waste on this Kezanada. With a cry of growing battle fever, Dreibrand flung his hunting bow at the Kezanada, who swatted it away. The keen blade snapped the bowstring with a twang. Dreibrand and Tytido made a beautifully coordinated and spontaneous attack, one striking high, the other low, but the Kezanada blocked them in a brilliant counter move. However, the Kezanada was briefly pinned in his defensive posture and his side was exposed. Dreibrand kicked a foot from underneath the warrior and as he fell, brought his sword down, opening a terrible gash in the man's back. The Kezanada hit the ground bleeding from a mortal wound to his kidney, and Dreibrand's next stroke nearly decapitated him.

Crouching by the hacked corpse, Dreibrand and Tytido looked around warily for other Kezanada. Dreibrand automatically picked up the fallen Kezanada's sword because he wanted another weapon. He had reached for it almost absently, but when he touched the sword, it seized his attention. On the hilt and pommel, gold tracery snaked around numerous inlaid crystals, and the weapon was a breathtaking masterpiece. The unmarred blade gleamed in mirror-like perfection, but Dreibrand could not linger to marvel at the treasure.

The men advanced cautiously and soon spied Redan. The Zenglawas had his bow drawn and stood before a strange blue stone. It reminded Dreibrand of the standing stones of the Quinsanomar. Remembering that Shan had told him that Onja had once locked him in stone, Dreibrand feared Onja had actually struck Shan down and all of their hopes were foiled.

Shan had been absorbed in his conversation with Redan when he saw three camouflaged Kezanada emerge from the brush. Much to his consternation, he stared at a raised crossbow. Shan had not imagined that the wardings possessed by the Kezanada would be so effective at close range and allow assassins to approach him. He had arrogantly soothed himself with his growing sense of power and assumed that when he drew out the Overlord and his agents, he could deal with them. But he had been wrong. Already the first arrow had left the crossbow.

Despite his shock and terror, Shan managed a quick counterspell as he had been training himself to do. He expected the heat spell to blast the arrow into ash, but it had no effect, and when the shaft pierced his flesh, his pain was salted with dismay.

The confusion and desperation of that moment compared to nothing in his life. He knew he still possessed his magic power, but he could not use it on the Kezanada or their weapons and he had no time to untangle the wardings that guarded them.

Another arrow would surely come and he would die. If he could not block the weapons, then he would block himself. Knowing he had only a couple seconds left in which to react, Shan shunned his fear and threw his entire mind into surrounding himself in a stone monolith. The casting of a monolith was a familiar spell to him after spending five years escaping from one. This mastered knowledge allowed him to cover himself in rock just in time to stop the second quarrel.

Completely blind now and stifled because he had not engaged in any preparatory hibernation meditations, Shan could not even be thankful for his refuge. The first arrow remained deeply lodged in his chest and a hellish agony assailed his body. Locked in stone, Shan could not even squirm in his pain or cry out. Outside he did not know how many Kezanada attacked or how Redan fared. Briefly he felt bad about abandoning Redan, until his suffering doubled as the pain from his wound intensified.

A new and horrible realization flooded Shan's mind. The arrowhead buried in his flesh was a rys-made crystal of a design and concept that Shan had never considered. A spell radiated from the crystal—a spell created by a rys for a rys—and it was nullifying his power. Even now the magic in the arrow poisoned his nervous system with destructive chaos.

The stone spell Shan had made for his protection was rapidly becoming his prison. In a short time the magic in the arrow would hinder his ability to undo the stone, and he would be trapped and...helpless.

Shan had one option and a dismal one at that. He would have to undo his stone protection while he still had the power to do so or die inside it. Unfortunately, when he abandoned his stone armor, he expected to be surrounded by Kezanada and swiftly cut down by their magic weapons. It was a terrible gamble, and he would have to play without hesitation.

The insidious crystal arrow already muddled his magic focus, and it took a determined effort to scatter the atoms of the rock back into the cosmos. With another flash of energy, the monolith was gone and Shan collapsed to the ground holding his chest. The blue fire faded from his drooping eyes, but the cool air felt good on his cheeks after the hot stone that had almost entombed him. The faintest breath was torture for Shan and horrible pain wracked his right lung.

Focusing on his surroundings, Shan saw that Redan was still there and Dreibrand and Tytido were running toward him, which was a great relief. The presence of his men gave him hope for survival, but it did not ease the sting of his helplessness.

Dreibrand fell to his knees at Shan's side, horrified by the sight of the prone rys and the grievous wound. With a pitiful lack of strength, Shan tugged on the arrow, gritting his teeth and sweating from his pain.

Dreibrand gently eased Shan's hands away from the quarrel. "You are making it worse," he said.

"How many are there?" Tytido asked Redan.

Redan, who rejoiced at the arrival of his comrades and the return to flesh of Shan, kept his eyes darting among the Kezanada pinned behind trees. "I can see three right now. I killed two. There could be more circling to attack us from all sides," he answered.

Dreibrand listened to this response as well and ordered, "Tytido, blow your horn so Taischek will

come."

Tytido put his hunting horn to his mouth and blasted many insistent notes. The Temu would know this did not announce a deerslaying but was a call for help. Dreibrand hoped more Kezanada were not assaulting Taischek's position.

Shan's hand flopped onto Dreibrand's knee and clawed at his pants. Dreibrand looked back to his friend, dreading to see death throes.

With shuddering anguish, Shan coughed up blood. A line of purple lifefluid ran down his chin, and when he spoke, it smeared his lips. "Pull it out."

"No, Shan. It needs to be done properly. I will get you out of here," Dreibrand promised.

"Pull it out!" Shan pleaded.

"It will bleed worse and do more damage," Dreibrand argued.

"Dreibrand, it is killing me!" Shan gasped, putting his hands back on the shaft and pulling. "Help me," he begged.

Watching Shan suffer, Dreibrand could oppose his pleas no longer. Maybe the rys knew best about his own wounds. He planted a hand on Shan's chest and grabbed the black quarrel with the other hand. Shan's green suede jacket was already squishy with purple blood and Dreibrand hated the dampness under his palm. With hesitation he looked once more at Shan's face for confirmation. He had never seen so much emotion on the rys's face. Shivering with pain, Shan twitched a couple urgent nods.

Dreibrand performed the grizzly task. He tried to yank the arrow out as swiftly and cleanly as possible, but Shan still screamed as it tore through his flesh. A gruesome strip of blue skin clung to the crystal arrowhead that glistened wetly with purple bits of muscle and lung.

Shan drew a slightly less tortuous breath, but it made more blood spurt out the hole in his chest. Clamping a hand over his bleeding wound, Shan seized the arrow out of Dreibrand's hand before he cast it away.

"Thank you," the rys whispered.

"Here they come!" Tytido cried.

Dreibrand scooped up his swords and sprang to his feet. He could see four Kezanada rushing their position and hoped there were not more.

Quickly he ordered, "Redan, stay with Shan and cover us. Tytido, we must kill them all."

Shan could see two of the Kezanada. He could see them with his eyes but they were otherwise completely cloaked from his higher perception. With the arrow removed he could feel his power returning, but he did not know how to breach the wardings on the Kezanada, and he was too hurt to use a weapon to defend himself.

Looking at the arrow he held, which gleamed with his blood, Shan wondered, *Where did this come from?*

Dreibrand and Tytido stayed together to work as a team and charged the Kezanada.

Redan saw one warrior dash to one of the fallen archers, but he would not allow the warrior to retrieve a crossbow. The Kezanada's attempt failed as an arrow took him in an eye, and his dead body flopped back to lie at an angle beside the dead archer. But now another Kezanada had gotten very close to Redan and thrown a knife, which sank deeply into Redan's thigh. He cried out but kept his footing despite the pain and swiveled his torso and shot another arrow.

The arrow cut the Kezanada down. Dying, he crashed to the ground only one sword length from Redan.

Shan crawled away from the distasteful dead Kezanada, whose soul he had not felt. Propping himself on a tree, Shan said, "Good job, Redan."

Blood now poured down Redan's leg in frightful amounts, and he pulled the knife out of his leg. He

moaned when he did it, as much from the pain as the realization that it bled much too much. Dizziness followed this thought and with shaking hands, Redan removed the belt that closed his wool vest and cinched it around his thigh. He knew the crude tourniquet would not be enough.

"Lord Shan, I don't think I will be helpful much longer," he admitted.

The rys blood on Dreibrand's hands was clammy and sticky as he gripped his swords. The horror of Shan's terrible wound sent Dreibrand into a frenzy. He felt no fear and his battle rage swelled inside him like a tsunami. The first Kezanada he met, although brave and skilled, could not cope with his onslaught. He violently struck aside the warrior's weapon with his short sword and with his newly acquired blade hacked the man several times. Blood sprayed onto his arms and splattered nearby trees.

Snarling with satisfaction, he searched for his next victim. He saw Tytido pursue a Kezanada who retreated. Eager for the death of another enemy, Dreibrand dashed after his lieutenant, determined to claim victory and get Shan to safety.

Anger and adrenaline-driven lust for the fight had started to blur Dreibrand's mind, but he was experienced enough to recognize a ploy even through his emotion. Catching up to Tytido, he grabbed his sleeve and ordered him to stop.

"He is leading us away. We must get back to Shan," he warned.

Turning, they trotted back to Shan and soon saw another Kezanada advancing on the vulnerable rys. Painfully, Redan drew his bow, but his arms trembled from his disappearing vitality and his shot missed. Reeling into a tree, Redan slid to the ground, his leg streaming blood. He cursed in frustration. He missed a shot maybe once in a year, and he had to miss that one. His vision began to narrow until he viewed the Kezanada through a tunnel. He recognized the wide shoulders and the thick frame. When he heard a deep rumble of laughter from the masked warrior, he knew it was the Overlord who stalked toward Shan.

The Overlord gloated in the rys language, "I have you now, fool."

The Overlord held his scimitar and a shining enchanted sword with crystals sparkling on the hilt. Just steps away from Shan, who possessed such power he made Onja desperate, the Overlord knew the rys was powerless against him because he carried the marvelous relic from Jingtjen's antiquity. Even losing several of his finest warriors could not hinder the joy of this moment of domination.

Despite his injury, Shan would not yield to the killing blow like a paralyzed rabbit. Growling out his pain, Shan struggled to his feet. He could not hope to flee in his condition but he would face the Overlord bravely.

"Onja's footboy to the end," Shan sneered.

The Overlord gnashed his teeth behind his mask as the insult grated his ego, but Shan's parting jibe fueled his anger and would add to the pleasure of killing. Holding the magic sword that Onja had so conveniently given him, the Overlord promised himself he would never let it go. He would bring Shan's head to Onja and then strike her down too, making the Kezanada the supreme force in all the world.

"The end of all rys starts now!" the Overlord bellowed triumphantly, bringing back his sword for a decapitating blow.

Shan clung to his dignity and faced his executioner's blow. His mind was surprisingly clear and free of regrets. He knew the next world waited, as it always did.

A tremendous clang obliterated the peace of Shan's mind as two metal blades reinforced with the timeless spells of war collided. Running with all of his speed, Dreibrand had jumped the remaining distance and deflected the Overlord's sword with his rys weapon.

With his other hand, Dreibrand struck with his short sword, but the scimitar blocked it. The Overlord had been so intent on finally killing the rys that all else had faded from his mind, and he had not noticed Dreibrand's arrival until his sword was intercepted. Swords whirled and crashed together like conflicting avalanches, and Dreibrand actually drove the Overlord back. They fought until the hilts of all of their swords were locked together. For a second they pushed in stalemate, but the Overlord's obvious superiority in strength prevailed and he hurled Dreibrand away.

Dreibrand recognized the bulk of the Overlord and reluctantly accepted the magnitude of his opponent. He remembered vividly the flawless mastery of the Overlord's use of weapons, and Dreibrand honestly worried about his survival. He did not have his armor this time and he did not even have his armor. Nonetheless he must fight.

To the death, he thought in his native language. Drawing upon his Atrophanean heritage, he reminded himself that he too knew the ways of overlords.

The Overlord paused and puffed to get his wind up for a real confrontation. Although knowing he would triumph, the Overlord respected the quality of his adversary.

Dreibrand yelled, "Get Shan out of here!"

"But Sir!" Tytido protested, unwilling to leave his general to the grim duel.

"Do as I say," Dreibrand barked. "Shan must be saved!"

The Overlord charged like a bull and their weapons rang together in the terrible song of death. Parrying each stroke, Dreibrand gave ground, leading the Overlord away from Shan.

Tytido watched the fighters and whispered a Hirqua salute to Dreibrand. Accepting the urgency of his orders, Tytido went to Shan, who now swayed on his feet, and put a supporting arm around the ryls.

For a moment the ryls leaned against Tytido and spat a glob of blood. It hit the drab forest floor and looked like a sick violet.

"Lord Shan, we must go," Tytido urged.

Under his own power, Shan stepped toward Redan and said, "I will assist Redan. You must keep your arms free to defend us."

"I will help you both," Tytido said although he was not sure how he could assist two badly wounded people if the other Kezanada showed up. While watching for attack, he extended an arm to Redan.

Redan waved off the helping hand and told them to go.

"Come along, Redan," Shan insisted.

"Lord, I am bleeding to death," Redan said plainly.

Shan looked at the Zenglaw and had to accept the archer's diagnosis. Redan's perfect carmel skin had become pale and scary. Clutching his chest, Shan knelt by Redan and placed a hand over the stab wound. Blue fire snapped in his eyes as he magically looked inside the damaged leg. The simple wound had cut an artery but luckily had not severed it completely. Trying to clot the wound, Shan sent a heat spell through the cut, cauterizing the flesh and cooking the outpouring of blood to block the flow. Under such stressful and hurried circumstances, Shan could not attempt to knit the tear in the artery, but he hoped to stop the bleeding enough to save Redan's life.

The pain of having the wound burned shut made Redan scream and faint in weakness.

"We shall stay with him," Shan decided.

Remembering Dreibrand's orders and agreeing with them, Tytido said, "Lord Shan, we have to leave. If General Veta can't stop the Overlord, he will come after you. We have to reach safety."

Shan understood. Dreibrand and the Overlord battled a short distance away, but he could do nothing to help or hinder the combatants because magic weapons warded them both.

Redan moaned as he came out of his faint. A Temu horn finally answered and Tytido sounded his horn again to guide them.

"I will send help. Redan, I am sorry," Shan said as he moved away with Tytido.

Redan's eyes fluttered and he murmured, "Go."

Once Dreibrand saw Shan move away, he stopped giving ground to the Overlord. Now they would

battle in earnest and Dreibrand launched his counterattack. Using his short sword mostly as a shield, he swung high and low with the marvelous rys blade. The shining sword handled lightly but landed with a hefty blow. The bear-like strength of the Overlord threw off each thrust with ease, and Dreibrand could only hope to wear down the larger older man.

The Overlord did not wear the typical Kezanada visor this time, and Dreibrand could see the dark eyes above the fabric mask. This was less intimidating to Dreibrand than the last time they fought because he could now watch the focus of his opponent's eyes.

Dreibrand heard the distant response of a Temu horn.

"Your friends will not get here in time," laughed the Overlord as he slashed with both blades.

Blocking one blade and dodging the other, Dreibrand worried that the statement would prove quite correct.

Their swords came together in a jarring metallic clang. Dreibrand fainted, then angled his blade higher for the throat, but as usual, the Overlord managed to block. The desperate move had opened Dreibrand up and he realized his mistake with horror. The scimitar came at his head, but instead of hacking, the Overlord punched him with the hilt.

Bleeding from the nose and cut lips, Dreibrand staggered back, holding up his weapons in a completely defensive posture. Blearily he shook off the stunning blow and kept his eyes on his enemy.

The Overlord did not wade in while Dreibrand was unstable. Resting, he breathed loudly behind his cloth mask and said, "I have learned your name since we met on the highlands, Dreibrand Veta."

Dreibrand licked the blood off his teeth, ready to continue fighting.

"You know I can kill you," the Overlord stated.

"Then come and try," Dreibrand taunted and started to circle.

His nerve made the Overlord laugh. "You are worthy. Very worthy. Do not waste yourself. Join me. I always reward the best."

"You expect me to trust you?" Dreibrand scoffed.

"My offer is genuine," insisted the Overlord. "I know what you are, and you know what you are. You are a mercenary, Dreibrand Veta. A mercenary of your skill and intelligence should be a Kezanada. You will find it very rewarding."

Dreibrand shouted, "I have chosen my side, and you are my enemy!"

He plunged in with swirling blades, making the Overlord use his master swordmanship. Their lethal metal hissed and sang.

Still fighting, the Overlord continued, "I offer you high rank. Today I lost some of my best. I need you."

"Be quiet," Dreibrand said, still pressing his attack.

Angrily the Overlord knocked Dreibrand's swords aside and made him jump back for his life. The nasty scimitar cut the front of his jacket.

"And what has Shan offered you?" the Overlord demanded.

The Kezanada master interpreted in Dreibrand's face that he had no sure answer. The Overlord saw doubt sprout in his opponent's mind and knew he had tapped into the man's mercenary nature. Like any warrior, especially one who commanded, the Overlord guessed that Dreibrand had a desire for a high lifestyle.

"Shan will give Taischek everything. You know that don't you?" the Overlord said.

Dreibrand felt the insidious nature of the Overlord's statements creep into his mind and draw power out of his swordstrokes. But he could not resist considering this new option and he found himself rethinking his plans.

I cannot trust him! Dreibrand admonished himself fiercely. The ease with which his loyalty was tempted shamed him.

"Stop wasting time, Veta," the Overlord commanded. "The time of the Kezanada is at hand. Onja has given me these magic weapons. I can still get Shan, and with his head get close to Onja. Then I will slay her too. The humans will be free and the power of Jington will be mine!"

Knowing that joining the Kezanada would mean Shan's death banished all temptation from Dreibrand's mind. Shan did not deserve betrayal and Dreibrand would not contribute to his friend's demise.

"I prefer to face Onja with Shan's head on his shoulders!" Dreibrand hollered and his blows fell with renewed strength.

The Overlord spoke no more. He regretted that the foreign warrior would not join him. The Kezanada would have benefited from the new blood, but now he had to die and die quickly while Shan was still in reach.

Tytido helped Shan with one arm and held his sword high with the other. He hated to rush his ryl lord, who was so terribly wounded, but Shan had to reach safety. If Shan died, then Tytido's efforts would be for nothing and the Hirqua Tribe would surely receive the punishment of Onja.

Shan struggled on, sharing in Tytido's desperation. Amethyst stains oozed between his blue fingers that covered his wound. His drooping eyes saw only his suede boots plodding gracelessly, and in his pain he could only dimly feel Tytido tugging his arm.

At last, men appeared ahead of them and Tytido rejoiced to see the red threads in their braided hair. Four Temu warriors jogged toward him, followed by Taischek, Kalek and Xander.

Totally aghast, Taischek ran up to Shan, who collapsed in the arms of the Temu King.

"I am hurt," Shan gasped.

"What has happened?" Xander demanded.

Tytido reported, "The Kezanada ambushed us. Redan is hurt and General Veta fights the Overlord."

"The Overlord!" Taischek shouted.

"Go help him. Go help him now," Shan ordered and blood gurgled in his throat.

Taischek agreed and waved Xander onward with a kingly sweep of his arm. Kalek followed with the other warriors.

"I didn't imagine things were so bad when I heard your horn," Taischek muttered in shock.

"My pride has caused this. Please let them live," Shan moaned.

While Tytido watched for more Kezanada, the King leaned Shan against a tree. Taischek opened Shan's leather jacket and his hands trembled as he unlaced the blood soaked shirt. Looking upon the jagged bleeding hole in Shan's smooth blue pectoral put Taischek as close to panic as he ever wanted to be. He and all his tribe would be ruined if Shan died.

Shan raised the black, crystal tipped arrow that had wrought the damage.

"The arrow is enchanted. They all had magic weapons that warded them. I was powerless," Shan sobbed.

From a pocket, Taischek pulled a cloth, which fluttered in his emotional grasp. The soft white fabric quickly sopped blood when he wadded it against the wound.

"You are not powerless," the King said, almost as much to soothe himself as to soothe his friend.

Xander and Kalek hurried with the warriors through the woods and soon reached bodies of dead Kezanada. Xander's jaw clenched with self-reproachment as he realized the camouflaged assassins had been lurking on the King's own property. Kalek viewed the corpses with youthful surprise and his old sense of security diminished.

A warrior found Redan where he had been left.

"Lord Shan?" the Zenglawas whispered.

"He is with the King," replied the warrior and Redan smiled weakly.

When Xander examined the fallen archer, he told him he would have help soon. *If you don't die first*, Xander thought, judging from the amount of blood that was spilled.

The unmistakable crash of swords shook the woodland and the Temu rushed to help. Topping a rise, Xander looked down into a boggy clearing fringed by cedar and saw Dreibrand battling the Overlord. The intensity of their duel prevented them from noticing the arrival of the Temu.

When Xander moved to rush into the fight, Kalek grabbed his arm.

"Hold," cried the Prince to halt the other warriors.

Xander whirled his eyes upon his Prince and registered the suggestive glint in Kalek's eyes. Knowing the boy well, Xander gathered the reason for Kalek's delay. Out of his juvenile jealousy, Kalek wanted to give the Overlord an extra chance to kill Dreibrand. This opportunity suddenly appealed to Xander, whose face now reflected Kalek's idea. The Temu General thought of Miranda and how he coveted the foreign woman. The concept of her availability excited his deepest desires.

Resisting the assault of his fantasies, Xander jerked his arm away from Kalek. Xander would not abandon Dreibrand, who fought on the side of the Temu. Xander believed the foreign warrior would not abandon him if their positions were reversed.

"Save your hard heart for your enemies," Xander advised boldly. Signaling for his warriors, Xander bounded down the slope.

Quite oblivious to the nearby Temu, Dreibrand struggled, stumbling amid clumps of marshy grass. Breaking through a frozen puddle, he faltered in the hole and nearly fell over. In the fury of their battle, the men had tumbled into the swampy area, but at least the difficult ground hindered them equally.

Dreibrand noted a miniscule slowing in the Overlord's swordplay. Grasping for strategies, Dreibrand supposed the Overlord would be frustrated because he had not made a swift kill. There was only a limited amount of time left to get Shan and the Overlord had to be feeling the pressure.

Dreibrand decided he had to lull the Overlord into making a mistake, but it would take a drastic measure. Adapting a move that was only practical when wearing armor, Dreibrand devised an elaborate feint that left a big hole in his defenses.

Glad to see the end in sight and assuming Dreibrand had made his fatal mistake, the Overlord struck. Dreibrand tried to minimize the damage. Twisting aside, he dodged the blade as much as he could, hoping to get his vitals out of the steel path. The sword edge plowed through his side, biting deep. The price was high, but Dreibrand now had his chance.

Crying out with pain and victory, Dreibrand plunged his gleaming rys sword into the Overlord's torso just below the sternum and angled into the heart. Disbelief widened the Overlord's eyes as he realized his ultimate defeat. Dreibrand pushed back his heavy foe, who landed with a crisp splat in the frosty bog.

"Damn you. We could have killed all those rys," the Overlord lamented, then died.

Dreibrand stood over the vanquished Kezanada, gasping for air. The needy breaths tore at this side, but he could not yet look at his injury. He saw the last Kezanada erupt from the cedar but halt in shock at the sight of his crumpled master.

"He is dead. Bother us no more!" Dreibrand yelled crazily.

The Kezanada stared at the warrior who had slain the Overlord, and Dreibrand shook his bloodied sword at the man. Accepting defeat, the Kezanada darted back into the forest as fleet as a deer and silent as a cat.

Now through the clamor of his thudding heart and enraged senses Dreibrand heard the crunch and splash of boots in the marsh. He spun to face the newcomers, assuming they were more enemies,

but when he focused on Xander, he accepted that the fight had ended. The passions of the battle began to ebb from his system, allowing more pain to flare in his side.

Xander called, "Dreibrand, Dreibrand, you killed him!"

Dreibrand stared at his victim, who reclined in the swampy grass. Blood emblazoned the front of the clothing crafted with such cunning, and the Overlord's eyes were open and blank. Driven by a necessary curiosity, Dreibrand stooped and unmasked the Kezanada leader. A wide chubby face was revealed and some gold teeth. On the neck, there was the discoloration of an old scar where someone had apparently tried to cut the man's throat.

Indeed the Overlord had been hard to kill.

The Temu gathered to behold the mysterious spectacle of the Overlord's unmasking. No one recognized the man but that did not diminish the moment.

"Get that other Kezanada," Xander ordered, remembering his business.

"No, let him go. I want them to know I killed their master," Dreibrand said.

"Very well," Xander agreed. "You deserve the glory, Dreibrand—General."

The unprecedented kind words and recognition of his rank surprised Dreibrand, and he and Xander looked at each other with mutual respect.

Starting to feel lightheaded, Dreibrand sheathed one sword and held his side with the free hand. The warm wetness of blood flowing inside his clothes and over his fingers further prevented him from looking.

To illustrate he would not compromise his seniority, Xander said, "Young General, let me see your wound."

Dreibrand did not move his hand to let Xander look at his side. He wanted to pretend it was just another minor injury. But it felt different—it felt worse. He did not want Xander to see it and tell him it was a mortal wound. Tell him that his guts had been cut open and it would be a slow painful death. Hunching protectively over his injury, he wondered if he deserved such a fate.

"Where is Shan?" Dreibrand asked.

"With Taischek. He should be safe now," Xander answered.

Dreibrand sighed with profound relief and reluctantly allowed Xander to examine the wound. Xander was a skilled wound tender, relied on by Taischek, and Dreibrand trusted in his help. Silently Xander judged the wound and Dreibrand worried more.

Kalek watched without comment and Dreibrand hoped he showed no weakness to the quarrelsome heir.

At length Xander straightened and placed Dreibrand's arm over his shoulders. "Keep a tight hold on the wound and put as much of your weight as you can on me. Try to only use the leg on your good side. If you try to walk on your own, you will make it worse."

"Is it bad?" Dreibrand asked. The question sounded stupid.

"Yes, it is. And I will miss dinner stitching you shut, but you should live," Xander said.

"I think I can walk on my own," Dreibrand said.

"No you can't. We might end up carrying you yet," Xander said.

Leaning on the Temu General, Dreibrand started to limp away. He cast one last look at the Overlord's body, wondering what it would have been like if they had not been enemies.

The other warriors carried Redan out of the forest, but Dreibrand managed to stay upright all the way back to the lodge. Because he was slow, he was the last to return to the lodge and the news of his victory preceded him. The great deed of defeating the Overlord in a duel lifted the spirits of the Temu after the shock of the ambush.

Dreibrand insisted on seeing Shan although Xander wanted him to lie down immediately. Xander helped him up the stairs.

"Once you get up these, you won't come down for a while," Xander warned, but Dreibrand continued painfully.

Shan had been placed in the King's bedchamber, and the rys had already been bandaged. Taischek sat on the edge of the bed checking the bandages that bound Shan's chest. Shan turned his head weakly when Dreibrand arrived.

Leaning in the doorway, Dreibrand reported, "I have killed the Overlord, but at least one Kezanada escaped."

"Yes, I just heard. Dreibrand, how badly are you hurt?" Shan asked.

"My side is cut, but I am going to live," Dreibrand said.

"He needs to be helped now," Xander interjected.

"Yes, of course. Do not stand there staring at me, Dreibrand. Let Xander help you," Shan scolded.

"But what about you?" Dreibrand asked, unwilling to leave.

"I will heal. And thank you for fighting for me. I thank you all," Shan murmured.

"You can wait no longer," Xander insisted and there was no denying him this time. Slowly Dreibrand allowed himself to be led down the hall.

Alone again with Taischek, the rys asked, "And how is Redan?"

"He rests in our care," Taischek answered vaguely. The King had been told that the Zenglawa had lost too much blood to survive, but Taischek did not wish to distress Shan with the grim prognosis.

Taischek added, "I have had all of these enchanted weapons gathered so they cannot be used against you again."

"Good. I will learn much from them, but not now. I must rest. Taischek, I am going to enter a deep healing rest. Do not fear for me because I can repair the damage if left to do so. I may not wake for as long as three days. Please do not move me and do not worry," Shan instructed.

"Is there anything else I can do?" Taischek asked.

Shan shut his eyes and whispered, "No, I will be fine."

Worry lines gathered into a frown on Taischek's face. He had never really accepted that Shan had vulnerabilities and it was a hard fact to face. In the spring thousands of warriors—armies—would try to cut down the rys, and Taischek could not let it happen.

4 ~ Protégé ~

A scream of frustration rang inside the Tomb of Dacian. Falling to her knees, Onja clutched the sarcophagus of her husband and growled with unwordable wrath. Blue fire radiated from her eyes, glowing on her perspiring face. To clearly see through the wardings of the weapons that she had lent the Kezanada was a severe strain, especially at such a distance.

Onja had watched the Kezanada stalk Shan after he had foolishly departed Dengar Nor. The efficiency of the Kezanada spy network had pleased her and she appreciated the expertise with which the Overlord hunted Shan.

When the attack came, Onja observed with satisfaction that Shan had been unprepared for the ancient magic of the rys weapons. Such workings were lost to the rys these days and Shan had never detected the artifacts hidden in the tower. Onja knew that Shan had mentally explored the tower in the past, but she guarded her original lair in an elaborate double warding. The spells that sealed and preserved the tower were not sufficient to keep out Shan's powerful mind, but Onja had conceived an insulating spell that made the tower appear completely empty even when Shan pierced its first defense. This ruse had kept Shan from probing deeper and Onja had always been delighted with her artifice.

But now, it maddened Onja to see her victory over the renegade rys turn into a disaster. The swing of her emotions tore at her mind. At first, she had exulted in triumph at the successful ambush. The magic arrow had pierced Shan's body and she had enjoyed his torment as he learned that his ignorance was going to kill him.

Then Shan had survived and the magic weapons had fallen into his possession. Onja knew that once he examined those ancient enchantments, his mind would be stimulated in whole new directions. Shan had been born into comparatively innocent times for a rys, and some of the more sinister applications of rys power had never occurred to him.

Now that would change.

Again Onja cried out in unhinged fury. Her victory had dissolved into mayhem. Shan had avoided the killing blow and his humans had saved him. Her humans had not only failed but plotted treachery as well. When she had heard the Overlord's foolish plan to kill her, she had been glad that the unruly Atrophane had killed him.

As Shan lay wounded in bed, Onja wanted to strike him dead, but he was too far away. Every year eroded the scope of her power. She longed for the strength of her youth when she had been the hand of judgement to those who did not obey her. She tried to tap extra energy from Dacian's mighty spirit, but the stubborn soul of the rys King would not help her kill another rys and even he had so little left to give. The strength to kill Shan she could not extract from him.

Exhausted by her bitter anger, Onja hung her head and the light faded from her eyes. She would have to kill Shan herself when he came back to Jingten. Shan could not defeat her. No one ever did.

Eventually Onja came down from the tower. Hefshul did not wait with the skiff because the lake was recently frozen. Instead, she had ridden a horse from the city. The animal stood dutifully in the snow. The icy Rysamand wind tugged at the horse's white mane that matched the flowing hair of its royal rider. Onja rode back to the Keep with her black eyes narrowed against the snowglare.

Upon her return, she closed herself in private chambers to soothe the sting of failure with thoughts of violence and domination. Shan's rebellion was just a small problem amid her grand plans. In the spring he would die and so would the promise of freedom he spread to the humans. Onja decided that after Shan was destroyed, she would actually ride down from the Rysamand and kill every tribe that had betrayed her. Denying Jingten tribute would not be tolerated and it would result in extinction. When these enemies were eradicated, she would send Lord Kwan home to his eastern Empire. The ruler of Atrophane would then be informed of his vassalage. That would make her feel young again indeed.

Onja realized that Kwan's subjugation would no doubt dissipate after returning across the Wilderness, and she considered candidates for a rys ambassador to accompany him. The ambassador would eventually become her viceroy in the east, and Onja required a rys powerful enough to impress upon the humans the superiority of rys. Taf Ila was too old and tame and lacked the magical talent. She needed someone young and malleable, whose loyalty to her could be maintained.

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Taf Ila walked to his house with wretched uncertainty and apprehension twisting inside him. Queen Onja had just instructed him to bring his daughter to the Keep and he feared his daughter had aroused the ire of the Queen. Despite his best and prudent teachings, Quylan not only had improper opinions but sometimes voiced them. As her father, he would defend her on the basis of her ryslighthood and beg forgiveness. Hopefully no lessons would be necessary.

A few Atrophane soldiers stepped out of Taf Ila's way as he passed through their group, too distracted to notice them. Kwan's men had been given the task of clearing snow from Jington's streets in order to keep them busy. A gentle snow fell even as they shoveled.

Taf Ila ascended the freshly swept steps into his house and sought Quylan in her favorite upstairs room. Standing in the doorway, he watched her embroidering a jacket in the snowy light of a window. She hummed pleasantly, absorbed in her work, and Taf Ila paused to see her in her innocence for one last moment.

Without looking up from her stitching, Quylan inquired, "Why are you staring at me, Father?"

"Daughter—put down your work."

The tone of his voice alerted Quylan and she instantly sensed his unease. "Has something happened?" she asked.

Taf Ila entered the room and placed fatherly hands on both her shoulders. He said, "Quylan, have you done anything you should tell me about? Or rather, have you done anything you would not want to tell me about?"

With cautious confusion she slowly answered no. He gained some hope from her response.

"Put on nice clothes," he instructed.

"These clothes are nice," she said.

"Put on nicer clothes," Taf Ila ordered.

When she demanded why, Taf Ila accepted that he had to tell her, even if he did not want to speak the words. "Queen Onja has summoned you," he whispered.

"Me?"

He told her to hurry.

"Is it serious?" Quylan asked, still not moving.

"All of the Queen's business is serious!" he snapped.

"I will get ready," Quylan complied and put down her jacket. The gravity of the summons was starting to hit her.

Taf Ila said, "Obey her in everything. You know to do that?"

She nodded.

"I will be there for you, Daughter," Taf Ila pledged and went downstairs while she changed.

Taf Ila escorted his daughter into the sparkling throne room. Quylan had entered the inner sanctum of ryls power several times during large state occasions, and then the throne room had seemed grand and warm. Now it felt cold and barren. She noted the emptiness at the foot of the dais where Shan had always prowled. Even as Quylan remembered him, she squashed the thought.

Father and child kneeled together. Quylan could sense the fear in her father but she felt surprisingly calm.

"Speak Taf Ila," prompted the Queen. Her rich voice rolled down from her throne.

"Queen Onja, I present, Quylan, my daughter."

"Both of you rise so that we might speak," commanded the Queen.

Quylan kept her eyes downcast on the marble floor, beginning to be afraid as the Queen's voice hit her ears.

"Look upon your Queen," Onja said.

Young eyes that had not seen even a century lifted and met the black eyes of the oldest and greatest rys. The deep obsidian gleam that had mastered millennia bore into Quylan and made her feel insignificant.

"How old are you?" Onja asked.

"Almost ninety," Quylan quavered.

"That is a terrible answer," Onja ridiculed. "I did not ask you how old you almost are. Did you think being almost ninety instead of eighty-nine would impress me?"

Taf Ila interjected, "My Queen, as you can see, she is only a rysling. I beg you not to be harsh with her."

"She is matured," Onja declared. "Whether she is one hundred or almost ninety makes no difference."

"Difference in what?" Taf Ila blurted.

"Do not ask me questions," Onja scolded. "Now, Quylan, are you ready to grow up?"

"If that is your will, my Queen," Quylan answered.

The astuteness of this reply suited Onja better. "Quylan, you will move your things into the Keep today," she said.

"My Queen, she is not of age to leave home," Taf Ila protested.

Begrudgingly, Onja tolerated his outburst because she knew his paternal devotion had caused it.

"My Captain, your daughter is blessed with power. Her magical abilities must not be allowed to languish in uselessness. Her training needs to start now so that she may add to Jington's greatness."

Onja watched her words soothe the father and excite the daughter.

"Now go get your things, Quylan. I have much to teach you," Onja said.

Taf Ila still had many questions but he voiced none of them. Knowing that his daughter had not upset the Queen relieved him so much he could be patient for details.

The prospect of training with the Queen astounded Quylan. It made her forget the distaste she often had for Onja. The honor of learning from Jington's great Queen launched many possibilities in her mind. Quylan had always been aware of her above average magical abilities and now she would learn the refined uses of that power.

"Taf Ila, bring her to my private chambers by sundown," Onja ordered.

Acknowledging his commands, Taf Ila bowed and stayed calm despite his surprise. Onja never met with anyone any place except the throne room.

After leaving the presence of the Queen, Quylan asked, "What does this mean, Father?"

He replied, "It means the rank of our family will have a good and long future. You shall serve Onja as I always have. I am so proud."

"Really. Of me?" Quylan was surprised.

"Of course, dear treasure. I only regret that Queen Onja insists on cutting short your ryslinghood. I do not agree with that but I may not dispute her," Taf Ila said.

Quylan packed a few necessities for her first day away from home while her father arranged an apartment for her in the Keep. The remainder of her possessions would be sent the next day. Her father assured her that things would not be so different. He came to the Keep every day as his position demanded, and they would see each other the usual amount. Quylan knew her father would watch out for her, but as her appointment with Onja drew closer, she became quiet and nervous.

Promptly at sundown, Taf Ila guided Quylan to the private chamber where the Queen waited. The doors stood open and the flicker of many candles shown from the room. Onja sat upon a blood red divan with her flowing gown arranged around her. Before Taf Ila could speak, Onja dismissed him.

Bravely, he said anyway, "My Queen, due to my daughter's age, it is my responsibility to accompany her in any important dealings."

Onja insisted, "You are dismissed, Captain. No one will dispute the quality of your parenting, but from now on you must relinquish your normal controls. Quylan must learn to handle herself."

"Yes, my Queen," he accepted. With his eyes lingering on Quylan, he walked out. The doors glided shut as he exited. A shudder seized his body, but he stymied it halfway through this torso. He wanted his daughter to go on to great things, but he hated for Onja to take her so young. Sweet, naïve and loving, Quylan contrasted utterly with Onja, and Taf Ila secretly dreaded that the Queen would twist her into a cruel creature. Yet, he believed Quylan was better off having a strong place in these changing times.

Inside the Queen's chamber, candles softly illuminated Onja, enhancing her beauty and making her white hair glow with golden warmth. The proximity of the Queen awed Quylan and she dropped to one knee.

Onja spoke. "Your father is a fine captain and capable administrator. I hope you admire his example. Your Queen has need of a new minister."

"And you have chosen me," Quylan said.

"I consider you," Onja corrected. "I anticipate that you will be the best rys for the job."

Quylan decided not to speak out of turn again because Onja generally took difference with her words.

"Quylan, do you know what is beyond the Wilderness?" Onja asked.

Hesitantly Quylan answered, "The Tabren Mountains." She had the sense to refrain from calling it Nufal.

"Beyond that," Onja prompted.

"There are lands of humans. Like the soldiers in the city. But I do not know what these places are like," Quylan replied.

"I have decided that the rys should know what these places are like and Jingtén shall send an ambassador to the great capital in the east," Onja said.

Quylan gasped lightly, guessing what Onja intended.

The Queen continued, "Lord Kwan knows of my power, but his people will not believe him unless I send a representative of our race. A representative who can demonstrate the superiority of rys."

"Any rys is superior to the humans, my Queen," commented Quylan.

With approval Onja nodded. "Of course. But I will send a rys who will convince the eastern humans of Jingtén's might. You believe that the whole world should look up to Jingtén?"

Such thoughts had never entered Quylan's mind before, but she believed in the superiority of her kind. "Yes, my Queen," she said.

"Would you agree that these humans should honor Jingtén with gifts as the western tribes do?" Onja inquired.

Her voice sounded so reasonable to Quylan, and Onja looked so lustrous and fair. Onja's mind and

body flowed with the forces of the cosmos, and she was a vision of queenly perfection. If all rys bowed to Onja, then certainly all humans must do the same.

"All humans should honor Jingtēn, my Queen," answered Quylan.

Onja rose and drifted over to Quylan. Taking the young rysling's face in her hands, Onja angled Quylan's gaze upward. The candles mostly silhouetted Onja now and Quylan saw points of blue energy emerge from the shadowed face.

Onja spoke almost like a chant. "You will go east. You will go to Atrophane. You will teach the humans to honor me. You will be the voice of Jingtēn. You will be the hand of Jingtēn. I will teach you everything. All of your power derives from me. I will always be your Queen."

The blue light filled Quylan's vision as Onja's awareness consumed her, and the will of the Queen echoed in her mind.

Quylan awoke in total darkness. Her body clenched with fear and disorientation. She felt herself lying uncovered on a bed. She reached out with her awareness and identified her new apartment. Although unaware of how she had gotten there, she relaxed upon recognizing her surroundings.

Sitting up, she rubbed her temple. "Onja is my Queen," she mumbled fuzzily, then wondered why she had said such a thing.

Quylan went to a window and pulled back the heavy drapes. The brilliant stars filled the heavens above the snowy mountains. Thinking back, she had trouble remembering what had happened during her appointment with Onja.

Confused and scared, Quylan leaned on the windowsill and let the cooler air by the glass relieve her drowsiness. The fact of Onja's superiority lingered prominently in her mind along with the memory that she would go east. Quylan felt vulnerable and out of control, sensations very foreign to her. Father had always warned her not to be too proud of her growing magic, and now she understood why. Onja was more powerful than she was and Onja's whim dictated everything.

The bitter dichotomy of pride and subservience soured Quylan's heart. She knew she had excellent potential. Indeed, she had the raw talent to attract Onja's interest, but Quylan was not all-powerful. She would only be shaped and guided according to Onja's purposes.

Quylan comprehended her reality now. She was young, inexperienced and ignorant, and she could only better herself by learning from Onja. The Queen could show her the many spells and disciplines of her race—knowledge too valuable to resist. Contemplating what Onja had already done to her mind, Quylan feared the price for the knowledge would be great. Did she want to end up the completely dominated tool of Onja?

Power and knowledge did appeal to her though, and she decided she deserved an advanced place among her kind. The natural order of rys society dictated that rank be determined by magical aptitude. Directly serving Onja would be very prestigious and Quylan might become the second most powerful figure in rys society.

But Onja wanted her to go out into the world and bring more human nations under Jingtēn's domination. Earlier, this had seemed like a grand idea, appealing to Quylan's ego, and a task worthy of her talent. But now, Quylan doubted her earlier enthusiasm. She did not know what it would entail to bring the east into Jingtēn's domain, but she suspected the humans would dislike whatever the process was. Although completely ignorant of such affairs, Quylan guessed the process might not be pleasant.

A great compassion for the human race did not move Quylan's heart, but she had a kind soul and did not want to hurt anybody.

She recalled her father's advice about savoring her rysling years. She understood him completely now. The hard decisions and tasks of ryshood had descended on her, and she missed her carefree days already.

Closing the drapes against the cold of the mountain night, she undressed absently and got ready for bed properly. Whether she agreed with Onja's plans remained to be seen, but she must learn what Onja had to teach and obey her Queen.

The next day Onja summoned Quylan to the same private chamber. The Queen wore a close fitting white gown. The fabric beside her blue skin matched her perfectly to the snow-swept Rysamand.

Her black eyes looked like two bear dens as she regarded her pupil silently.

Quylan kneeled for some time, before Onja said, "Well, do you have anything to ask me?"

Hesitantly, fearing retribution, Quylan asked, "My Queen, what did you do to me last night?"

"What did I do to you last night?" Onja wondered.

Quylan recounted the little she could remember about going east and teaching the humans to serve Jington, but beyond that, she did not know what happened. "My Queen, what happened?" she said helplessly.

Onja replied, "Quylan, the value in some lessons is in recognizing the lesson. If you do not perceive last night's lesson soon, I will send you home to begin an insignificant life."

Quylan's lip twitched defiantly as Onja's words stung her. She wanted to be worthy of the Queen and admonished herself to try harder.

"How far can you see?" Onja continued.

Knowing this answer would be good, Quylan answered readily, "I can view the entire length of the Jington Valley and sometimes beyond—but that is very hard."

"Good," Onja actually complimented. "Your awareness will grow for the next couple centuries to be sure. Now, have you ever made a warding crystal?"

Shyly, Quylan replied, "Yes my Queen, but they had little effect."

"Formation in itself is a difficult task that few rys can accomplish. If you can make a crystal, you are capable of investing it with a magic quality," Onja encouraged. "Now, show me. Make a crystal."

Knowing better than to make excuses, Quylan settled into a cross-legged position. She tried to find the focus of meditation but her concentration eluded her. She kept glancing at Onja because the presence of the Queen made her nervous. And after last night's mysterious conclusion, she thought maybe she should be nervous.

But the Queen would not stay patient for long and Quylan shut her eyes to help her meditate. She had to make the crystal and pass the test.

Due to her youth, Quylan did not yet possess the discipline to put herself quickly into trance. But Onja did not disturb her with queenly demands and Quylan slowly joined her mind with the forces inherent in the universe. She pictured the crystalline structure and blended it with the energy that flowed around her. She struggled to guide the energy into matter, hindered by the strain on her unpracticed mind. Then her focus became complete and the power streamed through her mind, body and soul. Her hands came together and she felt the hot bulk of newly formed matter in her grip.

Onja observed Quylan opening her eyes, which were bright with blue light. The Queen liked what she saw. The daughter of Taf Ila could very well fit into her plans perfectly. Quylan had the strength to subdue humans but not enough to defy Onja. However, Onja knew she must prepare her protégé carefully. Once Quylan was far away in Atrophane, Onja did not want her to develop her own ambitions. Onja intended to psychologically court Quylan's willing service, but if she had to use threats, she would.

Quylan opened her hands to show her creation. A small lumpy orb lay in her palm. It disappointed Quylan that it was not a perfect sphere, but it was good to have some success at this crucial moment. Onja appeared satisfied, which was a highly desirable reaction.

The Queen took the crystal and examined it. Finally she commented, "With practice you will make the shapes you desire. Then I will teach you how to lock an enchantment inside."

"My Queen, I can almost see how to put a spell in the crystal," Quylan said with excitement.

Onja laughed with genuine amusement. What a pleasure to see an innocent mind grasping larger concepts for the first time.

"Come have dinner with me, Quylan. We will spend the rest of the day relaxing," Onja announced.

After hours on the floor, Quylan rose stiffly, deeply honored by Onja's invitation. The Queen guided her through the expansive royal apartments to a skylighted dining room. An exquisite meal served on gold and silver awaited the Queen. This finery did not startle Quylan, who was accustomed to common luxuries, but the presence of two human children did surprise her. A serious-eyed girl with long black hair stood beside a rys servant who held a baby. Quylan had known about the children but she had never seen them.

While running her fingers through the baby boy's soft curls, Onja looked at the girl and said, "Elendra, meet Quylan. She will be staying with us now."

Elendra inspected the slender female rysling with a haughtiness that emulated her royal guardian.

"Hello," she said in the rys tongue.

Quylan reciprocated the greeting. Now that she saw Onja with the human children, the strangeness of it puzzled her, but of course Quylan made no inquiries about the reason for having the children.

Onja patted the quiet baby's cheek before sending him away with the servant. She invited Quylan and Elendra to sit with her and eat.

Pleasantly, Onja said, "Once you are established in the east, I will send Elendra to live with you."

Glancing at the girl, Quylan made no comment, but Elendra certainly had something to say. "Queen Onja, I want to stay here with you."

Onja smiled fondly and explained, "When you are older, you will crave to be closer to your own kind. You will be happy to go, and you will tell the humans how kind I have been to you and your brother."

Elendra reflected on her Queen's words then asked, "Is the east where I am from?" When Onja told her that it was, Elendra wrinkled her nose and said, "Then I still want to stay here with you."

Quylan sliced off a small piece of roast and carefully bathed it in spicy gravy. Chewing slowly and deliberately, she stayed watchful of the Queen and the mysterious human child, who the Queen indulged so much. In this strange company, Quylan contemplated her future in Onja's weird little world.

5 ~ A Lesson of Kingship ~

When the news reached Dengar Nor of the Kezanada attack, no one could deter Miranda from joining the warriors Taischek had summoned. Bed rest had restored as much health to her body as it could, and staying in Dengar Nor would only have sickened her with worry.

Taischek had sent his messenger so quickly to Dengar Nor after the ambush that the details had been sketchy. Miranda knew that Shan had been hurt badly but there was no news of Dreibrand.

With her bow and quiver secured to her back, Miranda rode with her head high and felt revived by the cold fresh air. The open land and the thrill of riding beside Temu warriors added to her healing more than it strained her.

Night had fallen by the time they reached the hunting lodge and a snow-laden wind howled through the skeletal trees. Miranda rushed inside the lodge behind a few senior warriors. General Xander met them at the door and was about to usher the men to the King when he noticed Miranda. Absently he waved the warriors past him. Although startled by Miranda's entrance, he paused to admire her. She tossed back her fur-trimmed hood and revealed tousled hair and a glowing face, flushed from being outdoors.

"Miranda, why are you here?" he asked with surprise.

"To help Shan," she replied matter-of-factly.

Xander just stared at her now. The agitation her unexpected presence caused him made him feel like a flustered stripling.

Fearfully misinterpreting his silence, Miranda demanded, "Does Shan live?"

"Yes, but he rests deeply. He said we must not move him for three days," Xander explained, snapping out of his dumbness.

Concerning himself with her comfort, he guided Miranda to a fire. He found himself unable to resist the liberty of placing a helping hand on her elbow but Miranda took no notice of his touch. Xander offered her a stool, which she declined.

While pulling off her gloves to warm her hands, Miranda looked anxiously around the room. "Where is Dreibrand?" she asked.

Xander saw the stress in her eyes as she contemplated the possibility of bad news. The General felt guilt stir in his heart. If his desire for her had not delayed his actions, Dreibrand might not have been wounded. But even this thought did not diminish his longing for the foreign woman when he looked into her eyes.

"Dreibrand is upstairs. He has been hurt," Xander said.

Miranda gasped and moved immediately to the first stairs she saw.

Xander bounded ahead of her and offered, "I will take you to him."

He led her up the stairs and down the hall. Miranda's heart jumped with joy when she heard Dreibrand's voice respond to Xander's knock on the door. She scooted past the General and entered the room. So happy to see her, Dreibrand did not even question her arrival. He tried to sit up to greet her but winced painfully and lay back on the bed, holding his side.

"Oh, what has happened?" Miranda cried.

Dreibrand took her hand in a strong grasp that reassured her. "I got a little tore up fighting the Kezanada," he said.

Miranda heard the discomfort in his voice. Gently but insistently, she drew back his covers. Bandaging completely bound his lower torso, and she saw the ugly streak of blood oozing through the thick cloth.

"General Xander stitched me up last night," Dreibrand explained and nodded appreciatively to Xander.

Facing the Temu, Miranda said, "Thank you, General Xander. That is so very kind of you."

Hearing her sincerity, Xander shifted awkwardly and mumbled, "It was the least I could do. General Veta killed the Overlord."

Miranda looked back to Dreibrand and the fresh scar on his bare arm that he had earned in his first encounter with the Overlord. Dreibrand had privately told her about the fearsome strength and skill of the brutal Kezanada leader.

"He is dead?" she said, relieved that Dreibrand had defeated this great enemy.

"Yes," Dreibrand confirmed but added no details. He knew the Overlord might have killed him if he had not tried to sway him to the side of the Kezanada.

"It is time to change that dressing," Xander mentioned.

"I can do that," Miranda stated. "Dreibrand, how bad is it?"

"Not as bad as him," he answered, shifting his eyes across the room.

In her emotional tunnel vision, Miranda had not noticed the other man in a bed on the opposite side of the room. A servant dabbed a damp cloth to the man's forehead and neck. It took Miranda a moment to recognize the man as Redan. His pale face had lost the rich color of his tribe, and his suffering had drained the pride from his features.

Dreibrand explained, "More than any of us he saved Shan's life. He was with Shan when the ambush came, and he kept the Kezanada at bay until Tytido and I arrived."

Xander added, "His wound has been tended, but his massive blood loss threatens his life. And what is left of his blood has become poisoned. His fever has been building all day, and I think it will kill him."

For the first time Miranda looked upon the Zenglawa with affection and pity. She had never trusted the archer but in that she had been wrong. Redan had defended Shan with his life and she regretted her harsh thoughts of him.

Seeing the condition of Dreibrand and Redan renewed the terror she had for Shan's survival. "I must see Shan," she announced.

Stifling a groan, Dreibrand started to push himself upright, but Xander quickly belayed the effort.

"No moving around, young General!" Xander commanded. "You'll kill yourself if you tear those stitches loose."

When Xander saw Miranda's eyes widen with alarm, he realized the meanness of his words and added, "He'll be fine. But he must accept that he is a man of flesh and blood and he must stay in bed."

With a frustrated growl, Dreibrand put his head back on the pillow and turned his eyes to the wall.

"I will come right back," Miranda promised and left with Xander.

The General showed her down the hall to the chamber where Shan recuperated. Candlelight glowed warmly on the wood paneling, but Shan lay on the bed like a blue statue. He looked like he had been laid in state awaiting his funeral.

Miranda panicked at the sight of his motionless form. "He is dead," she moaned.

Xander explained, "He assured us that he would be fine before he entered this deep rest."

"May I touch him?" she asked.

Xander nodded and watched her approach the rys. Being so close and alone with Miranda tempted him to confess his feelings toward her, but he doubted she would be interested.

Cautiously, Miranda picked up Shan's hand. His flesh was stiff and cold. His face still possessed the blueness of a perfect sky in a dream, but his eyelids did not even flutter in response to her touch. And she could not discern any rise and fall of his chest. She had seen Shan sleep deeply before, but

this went beyond that.

Xander said, "Shan has entered a state like hibernation. It is a rys healing method. He slows his body and looks inside at the damage. He fixes his wound even now."

"You have seen this before?" Miranda asked.

Xander admitted that he had not. "But I have never seen a rys injured before. I have heard that this is how rys heal themselves, and Shan warned us that he would be like this."

Miranda just had to accept that Shan was not dying. She raised his hand to her lips and stared at his bandaged chest. Imagining the arrow that had pierced his chest, she wished she could have been there to help him. When she had been cast broken and dying on the Galnuvet Glacier, Shan's magic had kept her warm through the freezing night and she remembered his compassion.

A delicate tap sounded on the doorframe, and a warrior stood there seeking Xander's attention. "General, you are needed by the King," he said.

"Yes, I will be right there," Xander said quickly. He had actually forgotten about the King. "Miranda, if you need anything, please ask me."

"Yes, thank you, General," she said, not looking up from Shan.

"Miranda..." he heard himself say, uncertain of what he even meant to convey. This time she looked at him, but he simply shook his head and left.

Alone with Shan, she reached out and stroked his coal black hair that was laced with streams of pure white. His hair felt silky. For some time she stood by him listening to the blowing snow grind against the window. The storm wind pushed the cold into the sturdy lodge, and Miranda pulled a blanket over Shan's arms and chest. She was not sure if it made any difference to him, but without magic to wrap him, she had only her human caring to give.

She kissed him lightly and lingered by his sculpted lips hoping to detect a breath of life. If he made any exhalation, it was too faint to distinguish from the air.

Knowing Dreibrand needed her too, she forced herself to leave the side of the rys. She went to Dreibrand and started to change his bandage. The wound made her grimace. Long and ugly, the gruesome cut oozed fluid and blood, but she could see that Xander had done as good a job as possible in closing the wound. Under the fresh bandage, she applied new herbal packs that the Temu claimed would help him heal and prevent him from getting sick.

Normally nonchalant about his injuries, Dreibrand specifically kept his eyes off the uncovered wound. As she tended him, he described what had happened and his battle with the Kezanada. He did not mention the Overlord's solicitation. Miranda frowned when he told her about the magic weapons that had warded the assassins. She knew Shan should not have left Dengar Nor.

Dreibrand's gear had been piled in a corner and he pointed to the rys sword he had acquired. Miranda picked it up and tested its weight. She could feel the forceful heft in the swing yet it seemed light to hold.

"It is beautiful," she admired, running fingers over the dreamy crystals inlaid in the handle.

"Keep it then," Dreibrand suggested.

The offer clearly appealed to her but it stunned her as well. This was no common weapon.

Dreibrand encouraged, "Go ahead. I said I would get you a new sword and never did. So take this one."

With a grin spreading across her face, she accepted the weapon as Dreibrand knew she would.

"I am glad you came to see me, but did you really feel up to it?" he said.

"Actually yes," she replied while still examining her new weapon. She marveled at the flawless blade that lacked even the slightest knick, as if it had never been used.

"It is good that you feel better," Dreibrand said quietly.

A moment of sadness passed between them but neither one mentioned their sorrow.

To end their silence, Miranda said, "I will have to find a sheath for this sword."

Dreibrand suggested that she ask Xander to give her one from the extra gear. She said she would, but until then she grabbed the black wolf skin from Dreibrand's things and covered the beautiful sword. She remembered when the wolves had attacked. Dreibrand and she were starting to have many memories together, and she wished for them to have good memories some day.

Behind her, Redan moaned in his delirium. The servant had departed, so Miranda went to help him. He managed to drink a little water although he was entirely unaware of her assistance.

The days passed slowly with the snow piling up outside. Miranda spent her time tending the men and Shan. Redan remained fading and incoherent, and Shan's condition did not change. Dreibrand appeared not to be in any danger, but the nature of his wound demanded he restrict his movement to speed the mending of his flesh. Then would come the rehabilitation as the cut muscles regained their former strength.

Troubled by the Kezanada attack and bored, Dreibrand brooded heavily and did not talk much. When Miranda observed the distant look in his blue eyes, she hoped that his endearing good humor had not left him forever.

On the fourth day after the ambush, Shan woke up. Taischek sat by him when it happened and he leaned over Shan's face anxiously waiting for the rys to speak. Shan drew a few shallow breaths and moved a hand slowly to his bandaged chest.

Finally, Shan said, "I remember a day when our positions were reversed."

Truly elated to hear his friend speak, Taischek joked, "But my injuries were much worse."

"Yes, of course," Shan smiled. "Taischek, please help me sit up."

Taischek propped Shan up with a few pillows but grumbled, "I hope no one sees me acting like a nursemaid to you."

"I will be back on my feet soon, Temu King," Shan said.

"Then you are better?" Taischek hoped.

Shan nodded. "It still hurts, but I deserve to be dead for my foolishness."

"Your wisdom chose friends who guarded you well," Taischek remarked.

Shan conceded, "I am thankful for that. But I knew there could be a danger and I should have been more prudent. Sometimes it is hard to be cautious when I feel so much power inside."

In a fatherly manner as if Shan were his junior and not five centuries older, Taischek said, "That is a lesson of kingship, Shan."

"So close to death, I learned many things," Shan admitted. *I am learning to be a King*, he thought.

"Valuable lessons are rarely learned in easy times," Taischek noted.

"Very true. I was lucky to survive with the things I have learned," Shan said.

The statement made Taischek chuckle. Now that Shan was recovering, he could allow the lightness of his soul to return. "Oh, you must have really learned some hard lessons. Rys never admit to being lucky," he laughed.

Shan did not comment on Taischek's very human joke but said, "I would like some food. Then I will get up. It would be good for your men to see me."

"Of course, but you don't have to hurry," Taischek said.

Shan pulled a deeper breath into his tender lung while gingerly holding his chest.

"I need more time to heal completely, but the worst is over," the rys judged.

Taischek sighed. "I must admit I was very worried. I never thought I would see you so hurt."

"I was a fool. It will not happen again, Taischek," Shan promised.

"It is over now, and the enemy we had in the Kezanada has been crushed ahead of schedule. We collected the Overlord and his body is frozen outside," Taischek said.

Thoughtfully, Shan inquired, "Is Dreibrand all right? I recall he seemed badly wounded."

"He is recovering, but your archer lingers at death's door," Taischek answered.

"Redan..." Shan whispered fondly.

"I will order your food," the King decided.

Down the hall, Dreibrand heard Taischek's urgent call for food and he wondered if Shan had awakened. Next to his bed Miranda was slumped forward in a chair with her head nestled by his head on the pillow. The position looked very uncomfortable, but she had drifted off anyway. Wanting to investigate but knowing he should stay still, Dreibrand laid a gentle rousing hand on her cheek.

"What do you need?" she mumbled sweetly.

"I think Shan is up. Please go see," he said.

Miranda jerked awake and instantly left the room still rubbing drowsiness from her eyes. Shan's door stood open and when Miranda saw the rys sitting up, a joyous smile lit her face.

"Shan!" she cried and rushed to his side.

Miranda hugged his head to her bosom in an emotional embrace. Shan squirmed a little because he was not used to smothering affection, but he appreciated her kindness all the same.

Taischek cleared his throat purposefully.

Suddenly realizing her error in missing his royal presence, Miranda straightened and said, "Please excuse me, my King." Privately she wondered if she would ever master the etiquette that came so easily to Dreibrand.

Because Taischek was in a good mood and considered most of her behavior untenable anyway, he forgave her and commented, "I only hope you care so much if I get hurt."

Miranda frowned, uncertain if she understood him correctly. Her expression made Taischek laugh at his own joke.

A servant arrived with food and drink and Miranda returned to doting over Shan and helping him eat. Since it was afternoon, Taischek settled back with an overdue glass of wine and watched the amusing spectacle of Shan being fussed over.

Miranda informed Shan about Dreibrand's condition and Redan's lingering state. Knowing how crucial Redan's role had been to his survival, Shan inwardly lamented the Zenglawa's suffering. From a shelf by the bed, Shan took the crystal tipped arrow that had pierced his chest. Some dried blood remained on the serrated arrowhead.

Shan contemplated the mystery of the magic weapon. It bothered him that Onja had managed to conceal so much from him. Even now, he could detect the evil spell radiating from the arrow, and he remembered the pain and helplessness it had inflicted on him.

Looking from Taischek to Miranda, Shan confessed, "I never knew a rys could create such a cruel thing to use against another rys. Onja and I have battled before, but she never used weapons. This is a very ancient arrow made back in the days of Dacian, or so I guess, when rys warred with rys. I never knew the ways of rys warfare, but now I understand." Gazing upon the smoky crystal, Shan spoke softly to himself, "You are a clever charm."

Tentatively, Miranda reached out and Shan gave her the arrow. She examined it, fascinated by the magic that it contained but that she could not see. Miranda had experienced an intense magical attack, and she tried to imagine a force like Onja's sadistic touch concentrated into one point.

"You know what cruelty is," Shan observed.

Before Miranda could reply, a plodding limp thudded to a stop in the doorway. Holding his side, Dreibrand leaned on the woodwork. After days in bed he was a little wobbly and his side stung from moving, but when he saw Shan, it made his effort worthwhile.

The rys greeted him with excitement.

"Shan, you look much better," Dreibrand declared happily.

Miranda jumped to assist Dreibrand as he entered the room. She offered her body as a crutch to minimize his strain.

"You should not be up," she admonished.

He whispered with exasperation, "I would not be up if you had come told me about Shan—like I asked."

Miranda ignored his scolding and helped Dreibrand to the chair she had been using, but he declined.

"Getting up is too difficult. Now that I am standing it is better to stay that way. It does feel good to be on my feet again," he said.

"I too shall get up," Shan said and set his food tray aside.

"No need to push yourself. Morale can wait another day," Taischek cautioned.

But Shan insisted because he needed to revitalize his body by moving. Taischek helped him rise. His stout arms supported the shaky rys as Shan tenderly eased up to his full height, a head above Taischek. The King tossed a fleece robe over Shan's bare shoulders.

Shan glanced at his bound chest and then at Dreibrand's bandaged torso. "We have had a rough time of it," he said.

"Just like always," Dreibrand quipped.

Shan smiled and took a deeper breath. Apparently satisfied with his condition, he indicated that he wanted to walk. Keeping a light hand on Taischek's arm, Shan otherwise moved with his own strength. First, he went to see Redan. For a long time Shan stood over the archer with a hand laid on the man's clammy face. Redan moaned slightly, but it was doubtful he knew his rys master touched him. Shan detected the looseness of Redan's soul as if it only hesitated to leave the flesh.

Taischek said, "His wound was simple. If infection had not set in, he would be healing."

Watching Redan waste away, Shan thought that maybe it would have been more merciful to let him bleed to death in the forest. Shan wished he could help his faithful bodyguard. In the hopes that it might do some good, Shan sent his healing magic into Redan, but the rys had already used so much of his energy to heal himself that he had little to offer. His body had not had time to renew.

"Come back to me, Redan. I want to thank you in person," Shan finally whispered.

Redan's eyes remained closed and sunken and his only response was a faint shiver.

Shan left with Taischek and Miranda to go downstairs and show off his health. Dreibrand sullenly returned to bed. He genuinely felt invigorated to stand, but he could not go downstairs yet. Using the steps would put too much stress on his half-mended gash.

While lying on his bed, Dreibrand heard the cheers of the Temu warriors as Shan descended with their King. Dreibrand hoped the fighting spirit of the Temu would survive the long dreary winter. Staring at the ceiling, he contemplated the actions he should take in the spring. As Shan's general he intended to dominate the war strategy, believing himself to be the most capable of organizing a large campaign. He knew it would be difficult to cultivate harmony with their mixed forces, but he had Lord Kwan's example to guide him. In his two years with Kwan, Dreibrand had watched and helped the Lord General do many things. Conquest involved more than battles. Kwan was always negotiating or imposing treaties, deciding which local leaders got to keep some power, and awarding territories and plunder to Atrophaney officers. Of course, Dreibrand's share had gone to repay his debt to Kwan.

When the afternoon faded, Shan returned to Dreibrand's room.

"Where is Miranda?" Dreibrand asked.

Taking the chair by the bed, Shan replied, "I told her to get some rest. She has tired herself caring for us. I will watch over you and Redan tonight."

"But you are just as hurt as us," Dreibrand said.

Shan responded, "But I need no sleep tonight. I am over the worst of it. Rys are very hard to kill. But I do appreciate your bravery. I never needed help more than at that moment in the woods, and you were there for me." Looking sadly over to Redan, he added, "Both of you."

"And Tytido," Dreibrand reminded. "He was clever enough not to get hurt, but he would not like you forgetting the Hirqua."

Shan said, "I thanked Tytido downstairs. And I know I cannot forget the Hirqua. Now if only Redan would wake up and demand my gratitude."

Redan's condition stagnated for another day, and Xander declared on a positive note that if a man took so long to die, he might live. Because Redan showed no signs of doing either, he could not be moved when Taischek decided to return to Dengar Nor now that Shan's crisis was over. The extra warriors he had summoned needed provisions and it was best to simply return to the capital.

Dreibrand was not fit to ride a horse yet, but he could ride in the sled with the King's baggage. Being carried like luggage was somewhat humiliating for him, but he was sick of his holiday in the woods that had not turned out so well and he had been away from the Yentay long enough. But Dreibrand had not expected Miranda to volunteer to stay behind and tend Redan. He did not want her to stay behind, but she insisted, explaining that it was the least she could do considering that she had only been rude to Redan.

The next morning in the relative privacy of his room, Miranda helped Dreibrand get dressed and put on his armor. He limited his movements as Miranda eased his gear onto his body.

"It is not too late for you to change your mind and come with me," Dreibrand coaxed.

"You should not be going yet yourself," Miranda countered.

"I have responsibilities. Please come with me," he said.

Miranda sighed regretfully but did not change her mind. "I feel I should stay. I always thought badly of Redan, but he stood by Shan. He deserves someone to watch over him."

Dreibrand nodded reluctantly. Redan did deserve caring attention, especially when he fought death far from his home and people.

He embraced her with a kiss, and she relaxed into his arms, once again cherishing his closeness. Having not lain together for some time now, they felt a mutual surge of desire.

"When you return to Dengar Nor, we will both be healthy and strong," Dreibrand murmured.

"I cannot wait," she whispered back, but they had no more time for their dalliances. Before Dreibrand left her, he ordered Tytido to stay behind as a guard for Miranda. Tytido did not look entirely thrilled because he was eager to return to the city as well, but he took his duty seriously. The assignment showed how much Dreibrand trusted him at least.

Miranda watched Dreibrand and Shan leave with the Temu. Horses snorted and accouterments creaked in the cold. Many hooves trampled the fresh snow, but eventually the commotion of the riders disappeared into the frozen woodland.

With only a few warriors remaining at the large lodge, the timber building was suddenly quiet and vacant. The structure returned to the repose it enjoyed when the King was away, and a few mice moved about openly. Here, Miranda kept her vigil over Redan, and his thin gasps rasped louder in the silence of the wooded retreat.

For days, Miranda tried to coax life back into his body. She would slowly drip water and medicinal tea into his mouth. Knowing he had to need nourishment, she sometimes managed the thinnest of gruel down his throat. She kept his wound clean, but his body was too stressed for it to heal.

The boredom and hopelessness of her task finally started to foster despair in Miranda. As another gray day deepened into night and the wind began to howl, heralding another storm, Redan became worse. He tossed and started raving. Miranda did not understand any of his words. She did not know if his speaking was a good or bad sign. He might be babbling in his last moments or struggling back to life. His thrashing worsened, and she held him still so he would not start his leg bleeding again. Restraining him was an easy chore because he was as weak as a wilted flower.

Late in the night, Redan settled into a faint, and at first, Miranda thought he had died. Only when she put her ear to his chest and heard the thump of his heart did she take any hope.

Just before dawn, in the yellow light of the oil lamp, Miranda saw him open his eyes. "Redan!" she cried.

He looked around and seemed to focus on her, but he was too weak. Without speaking, he slipped into a peaceful sleep instead of the tortuous fog he had endured. Hours later, Redan awoke and she slowly fed him.

At last, he found the strength to speak. "Shan lives?"

"Shan lives. And so do you," Miranda replied happily.

Redan processed the information slowly, gathering more energy to speak again. "Miranda, why are you here? You do not like me."

"I like you better now," Miranda laughed.

"How long has it been?" he asked.

"Eleven days."

His shock at the amount of time that had passed took the last of his energy, and Redan went back to sleep.

6 ~ Faychan ~

"The King would see you right now, Sir," the servant announced.

Dreibrand looked up from the maps of the Sabuto Domain that he was studying. Judging from the servant's voice, the summons sounded urgent. Dreibrand rose from his chair and his side caused him discomfort. Four more days of rest had helped his wound tremendously, but he had a lot of healing left to do.

When Dreibrand arrived at his meeting with the King, he was disappointed to see Kalek standing next to his father's chair. Dreibrand had managed to avoid the Prince's annoying company since returning to Dengar Nor, and he lamented the end of his lucky streak. Also in attendance was a Temu warrior, dressed in the long, hooded cloak of a scout, winter white for the season, and obviously fresh from the field.

There is news, Dreibrand thought while he bowed respectfully to Taischek.

"Welcome Dreibrand. My man has a message you must hear," Taischek said.

"A message?" Dreibrand echoed.

After a nod from Taischek, the scout said, "General Veta, a small group of Kezanada openly approached my outpost on the northern Temu border. We of course denied them entry to the Temu Domain, but they were not looking for a fight. The Kezanada said they wanted to speak to you, General Veta."

Dreibrand glanced at Taischek seeking his reaction, but the King had a perfectly neutral expression. "Where are the Kezanada now?" Dreibrand inquired.

"They are camped at the border awaiting your response," the scout replied.

"Did they say why they wanted to talk to me?" Dreibrand said.

The scout answered, "No, Sir. We only agreed to relay their message to you with the King's leave."

"Since when are the Temu messengers for the Kezanada?" Kalek criticized.

The scout looked at his Prince nervously but heard reassuring words from his King. "Now Kalek, our people had to bring me the news of the Kezanada at the border. Do not encourage reluctance in bringing all reports to us." Putting an intense gaze on Dreibrand, the King asked, "What is your reply?"

"Do you know what they might want, King Taischek?" Dreibrand said.

"You defeated their Overlord. I am sure it concerns that," Taischek responded. Clearly he guessed more than he said.

Dreibrand kept his speculations to himself as well. The Kezanada most likely were setting a trap to avenge their leader's death. Despite the danger, Dreibrand knew that he could not resist his curiosity.

"If I may have your permission, King Taischek, I would go talk to them," Dreibrand decided.

Kalek protested, "Father, you can't allow this foreigner to meet with our enemy. He will betray us."

"That is absurd!" Dreibrand countered. "I have done nothing but battle with the Kezanada. I do not plot with them against the Temu."

Taischek ordered silence to prevent any more hot words. "I have no doubts about your trustworthiness, Dreibrand. You may go if you want," the King said.

"Then I will leave today," Dreibrand said and Taischek granted approval with a kingly dip of his head.

"I will go with him to observe his loyalty," Kalek announced.

Dreibrand looked pleadingly at the King, but Taischek knew that Dreibrand avoided the Temu heir, and he decided that Dreibrand should learn to accept his son.

"Kalek, take a guard of twenty warriors. Only six Kezanada camp outside our fort, but there could be more. Remember that the Kezanada have made an art and a business out of kidnapping, so be cautious even though they do not expect you," Taischek advised.

"Yes, Father." A note of triumph rang in Kalek's voice.

Hiding most of his disappointment, Dreibrand mentally braced himself for days in Kalek's company. Before leaving Dengar Nor, Dreibrand went to speak with Shan, who had been engrossed in his study of the confiscated enchanted weapons.

Shan stood over a table where the weapons were spread upon a thick green tablecloth, except for the sword that Dreibrand had left with Miranda. "Tell the Kezanada if they have more weapons from Onja, it will give them no advantage against me," Shan said.

"I will," Dreibrand said and he would be happy to deliver that message.

"In case they attack you, I will be watching," Shan mentioned.

Remembering how Shan had helped Redan and Misho when they were captives, Dreibrand appreciated the concern.

"Why do you think the Kezanada want to talk to me?" he asked.

Shan was thoughtful before offering his opinion. "They have failed in their service of Onja so far, and they must be trying a new tactic. Dreibrand, be very careful. This is probably a trap, and I do not want to lose you."

"They might want to make peace. We have defeated them twice and they may be willing to give up," Dreibrand said.

Skeptically, Shan warned, "It is impossible to know right now what the Kezanada want. Their leadership may be in turmoil. Normally, when an Overlord dies, his Second succeeds him. Or, a rival kills the Overlord and claims the title. These things can take time though. There might be a power struggle within the Kezanada for leadership. I can hope that it will distract them from pursuing me."

"Yes, they will be in disarray," Dreibrand agreed. "That is why I decided to listen to them. Now that we have weakened them, I may be able to turn them to our advantage. Depending on what they have to say, I may purchase some services from them."

"Have you gone crazy?" Shan cried.

Quite aware that Shan had just suffered an assassination attempt, Dreibrand tried to phrase his idea delicately. "Shan, they have been working for our enemies. Because they are mercenaries, information about our enemies may be available, especially if I can convince them that you will defeat Onja. They probably want Onja gone just as much as anybody, right? And the proficiency of their spy network is obvious, so I would like access to it."

"They will just feed you lies," Shan argued.

"Even lies are useful," Dreibrand countered. "Shan, I need information about the Sabuto. I cannot send any Yentay again. They will get caught for sure. And I want to know what the Zenglawa are plotting. King Taischek has many resources, but he is not a great spymaster."

Shan looked down wearily at the shining weapons on the table. He believed Dreibrand knew his business, but it was hard to consider dealing with the Kezanada with the wound still fresh in his chest.

"I have confirmed some of your reports about the Sabuto," Shan said. "They will be a great problem in the spring, and I will not neglect to observe them."

"Of course, Shan, and that is a great advantage to us. But you cannot watch them all the time when you have Onja to consider," Dreibrand concluded somewhat ominously.

Reluctantly, Shan nodded. "Yes, Dreibrand, if you see an opportunity to gain something from the Kezanada, do so. I trust your judgment—but be careful."

Shan reached out and brushed the hilt of one of the swords in front of him. He did have more important things to consider than the plans of his human enemies. With sad understanding he gazed at the ancient weapons.

"I have learned so much from these relics. I was like a painter who had never seen sculpture," Shan whispered.

"Do these still have any power against you?" Dreibrand asked.

"They can no longer block my perception or spells, but I would not want to be wounded by them again. It is ironic that Onja, in her desperation to avoid facing me, has let these ancient secrets into the world, which make me stronger," Shan said.

"Onja fears you because she knows you will defeat her," Dreibrand said.

They fell silent for a moment as they both thought about the final battle with Onja. Awkwardly, Dreibrand returned to the business at hand. "It is my understanding that the Kezanada require payment for any service."

"Now that does sting," Shan complained, but Dreibrand waited patiently until the rys accepted it. "I will give you some gold before you leave. But you are getting quite expensive, Dreibrand. You are running up a good bill at the armory."

"I need to order more things for the Yentay as well," Dreibrand added.

With a smile, Shan said, "You are lucky my credit is very good with Taischek, which by the way is a very rare thing."

Secure in his friendship, Dreibrand put forth his point of view. "Shan, you need to look at it this way. If you take back Jington, then the bill will only be a trifle to you. If we do not succeed, then the bill will not even exist."

This brightened Shan's mood and he conceded, "It is not like a rys to worry about money, is it? I must have panicked at the thought of asking Taischek for more."

"I like to think of it as spending Kalek's inheritance," Dreibrand joked.

Shan appreciated the humor but admonished Dreibrand to be careful with it. If Taischek overheard such jokes, his reaction would not be amusing.

"I know, Shan," Dreibrand assured him. "Now I need to leave. Hopefully Kalek is slow and I can take off without him."

With only a few hours of daylight left, Dreibrand rode out of Dengar Nor. The rushed departure had not inconvenienced Kalek, who was more than ready to go. The Prince had greeted Dreibrand in the castle courtyard with a wicked grin. Like he had been told, Kalek took twenty warriors, and Dreibrand took an equal number of Yentay. He thought the trip warranted the number of warriors in case of Kezanada attack, but once he was alone in the countryside with Kalek, he found his Yentay reassuring.

Dreibrand felt stiff and sore in the saddle after long days of recuperation, but he was ready for the activity. Well trained and accustomed to his master, Starfield required the lightest of handling and caused Dreibrand little strain. He petted Starfield's neck affectionately. The coat of his trusty warhorse had grown in thick with the cold weather.

Snow clogged the roads outside the city and villages, and ruts and hoofprints had trampled the snow into a lumpy path. To make up for the slow pace, the riders continued after nightfall, but as the cold of the winternight cracked down and a thin moon rose, they stopped at a village. Warm rooms and steamy hearths were locked away from the chill, sheltering both sleepyheads and night owls, but when the Temu heir unexpectedly arrived, the village gladly accommodated the Prince and his party at their guesthouse.

This guesthouse was not so lavish and large as the one in Fata Nor that annually expected a royal household. It was a modest common building for the village with a large main room and a half dozen adjacent rooms. The warriors gathered around the circular fireplace at the center of the room and shook off the cold while servants rushed to arrange hot food for them. Tables were set for the late night guests and wine was poured. Village elders and local warriors started showing up to pay their respects or offer assistance until Kalek shooed them away, insisting that he was just

passing through and wanted only dinner and some rest.

Although Kalek had cut short the social urges of local leaders, he invited Dreibrand to eat at his table. Dreibrand accepted politely, yet he felt uncomfortable, like he had just agreed to have dinner with Sandin. As he settled into his seat by the Prince, his Yentay seemed far away sitting beyond two tables of Temu warriors.

"Prince Kalek, I thank you for the hospitality your people have extended to me and my men on this cold night," Dreibrand said.

"The Temu are a generous people, sometimes too generous, as you well know," Kalek responded.

Dreibrand tasted the insulting flavor of the statement, but he tried to ignore it. "Your tribe has been very good to me, Prince Kalek, but I have earned my way," Dreibrand insisted gently. He glanced up and down the table and did not recognize the Temu warriors.

All Kalek's cronies no doubt, he thought.

Two servants came by and distributed loaves of bread, starting at the Prince's table. With a friendliness that contrasted with his words, Kalek broke his loaf in half and gave part to Dreibrand. "You say you earn your keep, but I have to wonder if you are worth it. My father, the King, has perhaps become charitable in his later years," Kalek commented.

Air hissed angrily through Dreibrand's nostrils. The Prince was trying to goad him. Dreibrand looked at the bread on his plate and suddenly did not feel so hungry. He owed Taischek his allegiance and was glad to do so, but he would not let Kalek act like his lord and master, especially when he did not deserve to. Although risky, Dreibrand decided to let Kalek know what it was like to toy with the pride of a warrior from Atrophane.

Setting the bread beside the Prince's plate, Dreibrand said, "If you do not think I earn my way, Prince Kalek, then keep this. You need it more than I do, so you can grow up."

More than one gasp was heard around the table and Kalek stopped chewing his food. Such plain words had never crossed Kalek's ears before and he did not respond quickly. Swallowing his food, he demanded, "What did you say?"

Dreibrand continued for all to hear. "Did you invite me to sit with you so you could insult me in front of your men?"

Kalek blinked, uncertain what to say. All of his warriors were looking at him, waiting for a reply. As the Temu heir he had their automatic loyalty. *What is this foreign rogue doing? Doesn't he know I could order my men to kill him?* This idea appealed to Kalek but it could not drive out the words his father had spoken to him just before he left Dengar Nor. "Kalek, do not look for reasons to anger Dreibrand. He is a great asset to the Temu. With his strength and intelligence at my disposal, we will defeat all of our enemies."

Gathering his wits, Kalek laughed lightly as if everything had been an amusing misunderstanding. "Dreibrand Veta, you are too sensitive. Do not let my jokes anger you."

"Then forgive my angry words, Prince Kalek. But I serve King Taischek with my sword and I killed many of your Sabuto enemies this summer. The King is pleased with my service, and I did not expect to hear that I do not earn my way," Dreibrand explained.

"My opinions are not always the same as my father's," Kalek said. "It is true that my father, the King, likes you, but it is not proper for a non-Temu to grow so powerful in the Temu Domain."

With the conversation growing more civil, Dreibrand cautioned himself not to antagonize the Prince again. He was satisfied that he had shown Kalek that he would not be a punching bag for Kalek to impress his warriors.

"Well, I was not aware of that rule, Prince Kalek, but these are changing times. A new age is upon us, and those on the side against Onja must all work together," Dreibrand proposed.

Servants arrived with hot stew and Dreibrand gladly accepted a bowl and took a fresh loaf of bread from the tray. He was once again eager to eat and hoped the wrangling with the Prince had ended for the night. He believed Kalek had no way to attack him now. Everyone in the room was bound by their defiance of Jington.

But after only a few bites of food, Kalek went on. "Yes, a new age is upon us," he agreed pleasantly. "But in my opinion, my father, the King, has been too quick to trust you. I have to wonder how you came to be in the Temu Domain. I can only imagine that a crime must have driven you so far from your home."

Startled, Dreibrand dropped his bread into his stew. Kalek had actually scored a good hit on him, and Dreibrand struggled to hide his guilt about his improper separation from the Atrophane. Old shames from a lifetime of censure stirred as well.

Groping for a response, Dreibrand put his words together quickly. "I am an explorer. In the east, the Wilderness is a place of mystery and I entered it as an explorer—not a criminal in hiding."

"Oh, and you crossed the Wilderness on your first look at it. What could have motivated such recklessness?" Kalek wondered sarcastically.

"Prince Kalek, you have not been to the Wilderness, so you know nothing of crossing it," Dreibrand shot back. "But as I have said before, it was not my intention to go so far west. It is Miranda's belief that Onja used her magic to influence us to go farther than we planned. And when her daughter was stolen, we had no choice but to continue."

"So Dreibrand Veta let his woman drag him here by his nose," Kalek concluded and all the warriors at the table laughed.

Anger flashed on Dreibrand's face. "That is not true," he contradicted, choking back his rage.

"Isn't it? Everyone knows she is a shrew to you. You let her do as she pleases, and you ask us to accept it," Kalek said.

It was a low blow to Dreibrand. It was hard to be criticized about someone he loved. It was hard.

Sternly, he defended, "Atrophaney men are not so insecure that they shut their women away."

No one laughed at this stinging comment, and Dreibrand narrowed his eyes at the warriors seated near him. He did not care if he was recovering from a bad wound. He was fit enough to fight anyone who wanted to attack his masculinity.

The tension between Dreibrand and Kalek had filled the whole room. Hands had drifted conspicuously near weapons and a servant sidestepped toward a door. Kalek still wanted to order his men to attack Dreibrand. He was sick of his father's indulgence of the mysterious foreigner who Shan had brought into the Temu Domain, and he could make the excuse that Dreibrand had assaulted him first. Yet, Kalek was not sure what the twenty Hirqua volunteers in the room would do. Would they rush to the defense of their commander or leave the Temu to their business? Either way, Kalek knew that he did not want to defy the specific wishes of his father, the King. Being not a great son, Kalek was aware that he had a great father, who would not easily be duped by lies from his son. Furthermore, Shan favored Dreibrand entirely, an endorsement that chilled Kalek's petty plots. The rys might even be watching.

Kalek said, "Relax, Dreibrand Veta, I withdraw my charge. I can see that I can't coax your secrets from you."

Dreibrand scowled bitterly. What good did it do for Kalek to withdraw his accusation? It was damaging enough that the Prince had called him a criminal, but he had to let the confrontation dissipate.

"I would be excused," he growled, forcing himself to observe etiquette.

"You may go," Kalek said.

Dreibrand rose from his seat and nodded politely to the other men at the table. He announced, "I see that Prince Kalek does not like me, and he has a right to his opinion. But may I suggest he save his suspicions for his enemies and not his allies."

With this, he stalked out the door and into the cold night. Kalek watched him go. He had seen in the foreigner's fiery eyes that the man had been willing to fight, to maybe even fight the Temu heir. In a small way, Kalek began to understand why his father respected the bold warrior, but he would never trust him.

Dreibrand did not walk far and stopped at the village well that had ice crusted around its edge. The

cold air slowed his temper and he scanned the village. Most of the windows were dark now in the small homes and he was alone in the street. Looking back at the guesthouse, he almost expected Temu warriors to come out and murder him. Why did Kalek hate him so much? He could only assume it was jealousy, but Dreibrand did not understand the cause of it. Kalek was a prince who would inherit a wealthy throne. What reason did he have to be jealous of anybody?

What am I going to do? Dreibrand thought miserably. No matter how wealthy Shan made him, how could he make a home in the Temu Domain with such animosity from Kalek?

He took a deep breath and the frosty air tingled through his nose hairs. With his mind clearing, he told himself to focus on what was most important. *I must help Shan to victory and get Miranda's children back.*

He returned to the guesthouse. Kalek's insults would not keep him from enjoying a warm bed.

The next day the group rode hard and the land became rougher and unpopulated. They had to camp for the night without the benefit of a village's hospitality. Tired and cold, no one's temper flared. The day after this, they reached the stockaded fort on the northern border. Although the Zenglawar border was close, the surrounding country was wild and uninhabited. From this outpost, warriors patrolled the border in both directions.

Smoke rising from the chimneys of the fort looked warm and inviting to the arriving warriors. While entering the fort, Dreibrand noted three tents at the edge of the field that was around the fort. He assumed they belonged to the Kezanada.

Kalek's presence surprised the men at the fort and they greeted him with respect and enthusiasm. They also greeted Dreibrand with an equal measure of excitement. A few of the warriors had been with Taischek's war party on the Sabuto raids that summer and they recognized Dreibrand. Although Dreibrand had not personally met them during the raids, he politely accepted their compliments on his bravery and prowess.

While Dreibrand and the warriors traded stories about their battles that summer, Kalek scowled nearby. For the first time, the Prince regretted that he had been playing boys' games while the men were at war.

Next year they will talk about the bravery of their Temu Prince instead of the blue-eyed mercenary, Kalek vowed privately.

"We really routed them at Dursalene," recalled one warrior. "I doubt the Sabuto will face us again after that day."

"We can hope they learned their lesson," Dreibrand put in confidently although he knew better. He finished the tea he had been given to warm him up and pulled his gloves back on. "Now to business. I have been told that someone wants to talk to me. Are the Kezanada in those tents out there?"

The captain of the fort confirmed that they were.

Dreibrand and Kalek rode across the field with all of their warriors. The many horses trampled the snow that had only been marred by two narrow tracks. Six Kezanada stood in the snow waiting for them, and except for variations in height and shape, they looked all the same in their black leather and gray furs. With their visors down, they offered a faceless greeting. Only the wind shaking their horsetail helmets animated their appearance.

Flanked by Yentay, Dreibrand halted his horse and examined the statue-like Kezanada. He had not had the opportunity to look upon them without the distraction of battle.

Looking from visor to visor, Dreibrand said, "Who here has asked to speak to Dreibrand Veta?"

A voice rang out from a visor in the middle of the group. "It is I who wished to speak to you."

"And who are you? Raise your mask," Dreibrand demanded.

"I will not do that," the Kezanada stated.

"And I will not speak with a faceless assassin. I will not forget how you have wasted my time," Dreibrand snarled and turned Starfield.

"I will not unmask myself in public. It is against our code," the Kezanada explained. "In my tent we may speak face to face."

Dreibrand belayed his angry departure and looked back with interest.

A Yentay hissed, "Sir, it is a trap."

"You may look inside the tent. It is empty. Only you and I will enter," the Kezanada offered.

Kalek's horse pushed over to Dreibrand, and the Prince said with hostility, "I won't allow you to have a private meeting with a Kezanada. I will join you."

The masked mercenary spared Dreibrand the annoyance. "The Temu is not invited to my tent," he said.

Kalek's nostrils flared as he retorted, "I am Prince Kalek, heir of Taischek. No one can close their tent to me!"

With a derisive chuckle the Kezanada pointed at the fort. "That represents the accepted boundary of the Temu Domain. I am on neutral wild territory and you are not my prince."

Dreibrand dismounted and signaled to one of his men to inspect the tent.

"What are you doing?" Kalek demanded. He did not know what to say to the disrespectful Kezanada, but he could yell at Dreibrand.

"What I came here to do. It is not my fault he does not want to talk to you," Dreibrand replied flippantly.

"I forbid you," Kalek growled but with little conviction. Dreibrand noted the low tone of the Prince, who did not want the Temu warriors to hear him give an order that may not be followed.

"Prince Kalek, this is important," Dreibrand quietly insisted.

The Yentay came out of the tent and held open the flap for all to see. From the outside, the tent looked hopelessly dark compared to the glaring snow, but the Yentay nodded. The Kezanada who had been speaking ushered Dreibrand forward and they disappeared into the black fabric shelter. Kalek glared at the remaining Kezanada, who seemed unconcerned about the forty warriors in front of them.

Once Dreibrand's eyes adjusted, he did not find the tent so dark. Bright light, enhanced by the snow, squeezed in around the edges of the tent. Inside the snow had been scraped aside to the frozen ground, which was covered by furs. Keeping his eyes on the Kezanada, Dreibrand eased himself down, hoping his slight discomfort did not show.

"I know you were hurt," the Kezanada said.

"Does nothing escape the Kezanada?" Dreibrand wondered.

"Not if I do my job right," the Kezanada said. He slowly raised his hands and grabbed his helmet. When he pulled it off, Dreibrand did not recognize the man who so coveted his identity. The Kezanada appeared middle-aged with graying hair that was kept short except for a braided topknot.

The man explained, "I saw you kill the Overlord. I was the one who survived."

The images from that day were vivid with emotions for Dreibrand. He recalled yelling at the Kezanada who survived, but he could not tell if this was the same man.

"What is your name?" Dreibrand asked.

"Faychan is how I am known among the Kezanada."

"And why do you want to talk to me, Faychan?" Dreibrand asked.

"We will get to that. But first let us take the edge off this cold." Faychan reached for a pouch by his knee.

Dreibrand flinched and grabbed his sho dart pistol from inside his cloak and Faychan withdrew his hand. "Don't be so jumpy. I am only getting us a drink. And didn't anybody tell you that the sho drug starts to lose its potency after a couple months?" He carefully eased his hand back to the pouch, but Dreibrand stayed defensive, wondering if his darts were useless or if the Kezanada was tricking him. Faychan pulled out a dark glass bottle and two small metal cups and commented, "I am impressed that you are so worried that you brought all of those warriors."

"Sometimes Kezanada can come out of the trees," Dreibrand growled.

Faychan chuckled and poured some of the liquor into the cups.

"I cannot believe you expect me to drink with you," Dreibrand scoffed.

"A man brave enough to kill the Overlord should not be afraid of one drink," Faychan remarked.

"Why would I share a drink with my enemy?" Dreibrand said.

Faychan put down the bottle and held a cup toward Dreibrand. "Maybe we don't have to be enemies anymore."

The Kezanada saw the hope light up the eyes of his guest and surmised that Shan's general was interested in a truce. "I am drinking from the same bottle. It is not poison," Faychan encouraged, holding the cup closer to Dreibrand.

Dreibrand did not want to drink it. He simply did not trust the man. Finally, Faychan tossed back his cup of liquor to demonstrate that it was drinkable.

Faychan sucked on his teeth then took a deep breath after downing the drink. "It is time for us to friends. Drink with me, Dreibrand Veta," he said.

Reluctantly, Dreibrand put the sho dart pistol away and took the offered cup, if only to show his nerve. The liquor had an unpleasant taste and he pushed it through his mouth immediately, like medicine. It rushed down to his stomach in a hot wave that radiated through his chest. Even if it was not poison, it seemed like it. Dreibrand cleared his throat twice as his body absorbed the shock.

"Want some more?" Faychan laughed.

"No. I did not come here to sit in a snowbank and get drunk with you. Now talk to me," Dreibrand said.

Faychan seemed to appreciate the surliness and got to his business. "Very well, Dreibrand Veta. I wanted to talk to you because you killed my Overlord. Normally, he who does that would seek to claim leadership of the Kezanada."

"I did not kill the Overlord to take his power. I killed him because he made himself my enemy," Dreibrand said.

"But you could claim his power," Faychan insisted. "Killing the Overlord demands a great deal of respect in our society. Many Kezanada would transfer their loyalty to you."

Although intrigued, Dreibrand doubted the plausibility of Faychan's suggestion. "I am not a Kezanada. I do not know your ways. And I must admit, Faychan, I do not know why you are telling me this."

Faychan detailed his reasons. "I was loyal to the recently departed Overlord. He was a great man, who renewed our society after centuries of decay, but our most profitable client may be our undoing. Queen Onja likes to promote strife among the human nations, and our treasury bulged doing her secret works. But the Overlord failed against Shan and all but one of the enchanted weapons were lost." Although these circumstances distressed Faychan, he could not totally prevent a smile because he possessed the remaining enchanted sword.

"If you think you can deal for the return of those weapons, forget it," Dreibrand stated.

"I assumed as much. I am sure Shan does not want them in the hands of others," Faychan said.

"The enchantments no longer block him. Shan has learned their secrets, so do not think you can ambush him again," Dreibrand warned.

This news interested Faychan. "The renegade ryls learns quickly," he commented.

"Shan is powerful and he will be King," Dreibrand stated.

"That is now my hope as well," Faychan said.

Dreibrand studied the man, but sincerity or duplicity was impossible to determine on the clever face. "So the Kezanada will stop pursuing the bounty on Shan?" he asked.

"If I have my way—yes," Faychan responded. "And I am not some common soldier in our society. I have a high rank and I served the late Overlord for many years, so my word does carry weight."

"How much weight? What do you mean if you have your way? You are not sure?" Dreibrand demanded. He wanted this Kezanada to speak in absolutes, not the subtle talk of a diplomat.

Faychan explained, "It is like this. Benladu served the late Overlord as his Second, and he has claimed the Overlordship. But Benladu will not go against Onja. He fears her too much, but he will not be able to appease her for our failure against Shan. I fear her too, but even if we remain loyal, I think she will punish us. Many Kezanada agree with me. Even an Overlord must be elected by his brothers, and my faction will oppose the election of Benladu. I want you to come with me to Do Jempur and be the rival candidate."

The offer instantly caressed Dreibrand's pride, and the image of himself as the Overlord had a certain appeal. However, he suspected some Kezanada scheme. Faychan probably meant to lure him to Do Jempur so he could kill him slowly.

Dreibrand proposed, "Why not lead your faction, Faychan? Be the Overlord candidate yourself."

The thin knowing smile of a criminal crossed Faychan's face when he acknowledged Dreibrand's perceptiveness.

"Now you make me admit my shame," Faychan scolded. "The Kezanada need protection from Onja, and only Shan can give that. Through you we can achieve a direct alliance with Shan."

"You have been trying to murder Shan. What makes you think he would help you?" Dreibrand countered.

Faychan shrugged as if he did not quite see the problem. "That was business. He killed many Kezanada as well. But our loyalty to Onja is leading us toward destruction. I want to make peace with Shan and hope he wins."

Dreibrand considered Faychan's words. He wanted to believe the offer was genuine. He wanted the Kezanada to work for him and not against him.

"Faychan, why do you turn against Onja now? The Kezanada profit by serving Jingtun, and Onja has used you for so long, she will spare you," Dreibrand said.

"She may spare the society, but not its leadership," Faychan replied.

"I suppose you would know best the consequences of your failure. But I am not sure if I should involve myself in it," Dreibrand said.

"But you already oppose Onja. Joining the Kezanada would not give you any additional risk," Faychan reasoned.

"No additional risk from Onja," Dreibrand chuckled. "But Faychan, I see no way to trust you so quickly. I like what you say and the Kezanada society does fascinate me, but I am too busy to be your puppet."

Faychan showed some frustration before speaking again. "Dreibrand Veta, I did not intend for you to be a puppet. I can see that you are too smart for that. I admit I want power and control, but I plan to have these things through partnership with you. You have certain qualities that will rally support for your Overlordship. For one, the notoriety of killing the last Overlord and the fact that Shan considers you worthy to serve him. And the peace with Shan is what I want. Onja has shown a desperation to avoid confronting him and her inability to strike him down from Jingtun demonstrates her weakness. When Shan is King, I do not want him to punish the Kezanada for our attempts on his life. I would make a treaty with him myself, but he would not listen to me or care about my problems as things stand right now. But he favors you. Come with me to Do Jempur."

Dreibrand absorbed the speech, but he could not see how Faychan expected him to trust him so blindly.

Then Faychan added with a sly smile, "No more Prince Kalek."

Dreibrand glanced thoughtfully at the tent flap, knowing the Prince waited outside. The Temu heir did interfere with his happiness in the Temu Domain.

Faychan continued, "Do Jempur is nice. We enjoy every pleasure and have every liberty. If it pleases you, we will fetch your woman to you."

"Never touch her! Do not even talk about her!" Dreibrand barked.

Faychan recoiled from the outburst but noted how regret replaced anger on Dreibrand's face when the man realized he should not have revealed the vulnerability of his passions.

Calming down, Dreibrand asked with all seriousness, "Faychan, can you bring her children to me?"

Faychan considered the request. It was tempting to say yes because this promise would gain Dreibrand's cooperation. But he confessed, "They are in Onja's Keep. There, I can do nothing, and with the winter, no one can even get to Jingten."

"If you could have done that..." Dreibrand muttered.

Faychan persisted, "Join the Kezanada, Dreibrand Veta. Once you are among us, you will understand that you belong with us. You can still support Shan and be powerful and wealthy on human terms."

A part of Dreibrand longed to accept the invitation of this exclusive brotherhood. It might be worth it to learn the secrets of their lifestyle, but deep down he knew not to delude himself. He may serve Faychan's purposes for a time, but for how long? It was clear that Faychan wanted power without making himself a target in a power struggle.

With a sigh, Dreibrand declined, "Faychan, I am Shan's general and I must devote my attention to that task. In the spring I go to war against Jingten."

Faychan frowned, already rethinking his strategies.

Dreibrand added, "However, there is no need for continued conflict between the Kezanada and Shan."

Faychan eyed his guest with renewed interest.

Dreibrand said, "In fact, now that I have heard you want Shan to win, I think that you would be eager to help."

"Do you want the use of warriors?" Faychan asked.

"I would not exclude that, but for now I seek reliable information," Dreibrand said.

"Concerning?" Faychan prompted becoming very business like.

Dreibrand answered, "Primarily the Sabuto, the Zenglawas and anything else that may be useful to Shan's cause."

Faychan grinned, "Now that is a lot of work."

"Better to keep you busy with that than hunting Shan," Dreibrand growled.

"Spying is expensive work that builds a costly product," Faychan warned.

"The obvious quality of your spies has impressed me enough to employ them," Dreibrand insisted. He produced a heavy purse of gold and tossed it casually to the Kezanada. Faychan's hand caught it automatically, and upon gauging its weight, he was mildly satisfied with the result.

"There will need to be more of this," Faychan mentioned.

"There will be," Dreibrand promised. "I know you must have people in Dengar Nor, so I expect to be

contacted soon.”

“It will be arranged,” Faychan said.

With a meaningful gaze, Dreibrand added, “Remember, some facts Shan can confirm for himself, so do not try and give me lies. Also, along with the gold, your payment will include the peace you want with Shan.”

Looking at the pouch of gold and then back to Dreibrand, Faychan said, “I would prefer you as a partner instead of a client.”

“Maybe another time,” Dreibrand said.

“Think about it,” Faychan encouraged.

“We will see how our relationship develops,” Dreibrand said, rising to leave.

Faychan put his helmet back on and followed Dreibrand out of the tent. Amid the snow glare, Dreibrand saw the dark impatient face of Kalek, who had been left to stew in the cold breeze.

“Until we meet again,” Faychan called as he took his place beside the other Kezanada.

Dreibrand mounted his horse and the group of warriors headed for the fort. Immediately, Kalek came alongside Dreibrand.

“Aren’t you friendly with the Kezanada,” sneered the Prince.

Calmly, Dreibrand commented, “It is my understanding, Prince Kalek, that everyone is friendly with the Kezanada from time to time.”

“What did you do?” Kalek hissed.

Dreibrand actually answered, “I discussed buying information about our enemies and ending their attacks on Shan.”

Being included in one of Dreibrand’s confidences tempered Kalek’s attitude—at least for the moment. Although their relationship remained far from friendly, they traveled back to Dengar Nor without incident.

7 ~ Reports from the Masterspy ~

When Dreibrand returned to Dengar Nor, he first went to see Shan although he knew Taischek would be eager for his report. Shan's apartment was cold and Dreibrand found the rys seated on the floor facing the open balcony doors.

"I have good news," Shan announced, rising fluidly to his feet. He shut the balcony doors against the wintry gusts, which Dreibrand appreciated. Facing his returning general, Shan said, "Redan has survived and Miranda is bringing him here."

"Wonderful," Dreibrand said, relieved that Redan was recovering but more excited that Miranda would return soon. He had been disappointed to find her still absent from Dengar Nor.

Now that Shan had reported his good news, he seemed to forget it, and he stared at Dreibrand with a judgmental gleam in his eyes. Quietly, he said, "I heard everything at your meeting with the Kezanada."

Casually, Dreibrand said, "I assumed as much."

"I am glad you chose to remain my general," Shan stated.

"You sound like you expected me to choose otherwise," Dreibrand noted.

For a moment Shan struggled with his thoughts and then said, "If you want to join the Kezanada, do so. I will not be offended. Perhaps it is the right path for you."

Does Shan doubt me now? Does he want me to go away? Dreibrand worried. He tried to assure the rys. "Shan, I do not know the Kezanada and I do not trust them. I know and trust you. I am not going to run off!" Dreibrand stopped abruptly, feeling guilty.

"I know, I know," Shan agreed, gesturing for Dreibrand to join him on the furniture. "You are a talented commander and a brave warrior. You could succeed anywhere. I became nervous that you would abandon me."

"If I am such a great commander, then I should want to fight for the greatest King," Dreibrand declared.

Shan nodded gratefully and reproached himself for feeling insecure. It surprised him how little it took to fracture his confidence.

The rys suggested, "You know, when I am King, if you want to become the Overlord, I could help you with that."

Dreibrand wrinkled his brow with uncertainty. "I do not know, Shan. I do not know why I even think about it. Faychan was just trying to trap me somehow."

"Probably," Shan murmured.

Dreibrand continued, "But I do not know what I should do. I had it in my mind that I would live with the Temu after you conquered Jingteng. My rewards would make me wealthy, and I could get a nice estate to live on and support me. Probably serve in the Temu army out of loyalty to Taischek."

"I am sure that will happen, if that is what you want. Do not worry about your reward not being adequate. I am going to make you a very wealthy man. When you see the treasure of Jingteng, you will not believe it," Shan said.

"Oh, I have no doubts about my reward. But now, I see that Kalek hates me," Dreibrand lamented. "He will be King someday, and how will I be able to live among the Temu then?"

Shan saw the problem. He knew the tribal loyalties of the humans ran deep and life could be difficult for those who did not fit a specific identity, like halfbreeds and drifters. With the Kezanada, Dreibrand would not have to face such standards.

Even so, Shan tried to be encouraging. "But Taischek likes you because you are a foreigner. And he is not so old. It will be many years before Kalek is King, and by then Kalek will be more mature and appreciate men who serve his tribe."

"Well, none of this matters until Onja is gone anyway," Dreibrand muttered, trying to maintain his focus.

"Truly, but I do not want you to be distracted by this," Shan said. "If the west does not suit you, you could return to Atrophane as a very wealthy man."

The sudden thought of home had some appeal until Dreibrand thought about his censure, among other things. "I had not considered that," he whispered.

"Trouble at home?" Shan inquired gently.

"All kinds," Dreibrand admitted, but then he quickly regretted his openness. "But nothing worth talking about."

"As you say," Shan said, truly unconcerned with what Dreibrand hid in his past. "You think about what you want, and when the time comes, you may have of whatever is mine to give."

Dreibrand thanked Shan, whose generous pledges eased his mind. Dreibrand knew he could deal with the pressure Kalek put on him. At least in the west, he was not automatically condemned because of his name and the conquest of Jington was bigger than Kalek.

When Dreibrand met with the King, Kalek was mercifully not present. To alleviate the bad light that Kalek had no doubt cast on him, Dreibrand was entirely honest with Taischek and detailed everything the Kezanada had said and offered.

Taischek did not appear surprised by the interest the Kezanada had shown in Dreibrand. The King admitted that he had expected Dreibrand to be solicited by them because their society courted the finest warriors just like any great household would. Dreibrand's honesty thrilled Taischek and did much to temper Kalek's negative opinions. Taischek was as pleased as ever with his foreign mercenary, but he made it clear that he wanted to be privy to all spy reports.

Encouraged by the favor of Taischek, Dreibrand finally went to his apartment. It was cold and dark without Miranda. He fumbled in the gloom until he found some candles and went out into the hall to light them off a candle in a wall sconce. A servant arrived and offered to get a fire started on the hearth, but Dreibrand told her not to bother. He was exhausted after the two and a half day ride from the border. He pulled his boots off, removed his chestplate, and then fell asleep in his clothes.

His rest was so heavy and good that it felt like he had only just closed his eyes when he heard people in his apartment. He tensed with alarm because he had fallen asleep with the Kezanada on his mind, but when he heard Miranda's voice, his paranoia turned to pleasure. Dreibrand was out of bed and rubbing drowsiness from his eyes when she entered their bedchamber.

"You are here!" she cried happily, holding a candle in one hand and hugging him with the other arm. "No wonder you are sleeping in your clothes. It is as cold in here as it is outside."

Dreibrand ran a hand self consciously over the front of his shirt and he could already hear the hiss and puff of a servant working the bellows on the hearth.

"How late is it?" he asked.

"Almost midnight. It took longer to get back because we had to carry Redan in a sled," Miranda answered. She lit three more candles on the nightstand and set her original candle beside it.

"So he is going to live?" Dreibrand said.

"Yes, once his fever broke, his body began to heal. He is thin and weak but he will be able to start walking soon. How are you?" Miranda asked.

"Better," he replied and grabbed her around the waist and pulled her onto the bed.

"You are better," she laughed.

"I am glad you are back," Dreibrand said holding her tight. Miranda giggled as he pulled away her coat and groped her playfully. Looking over his shoulder, she saw through the doorway the shadow of the servant moving in the firelight.

Miranda squirmed away from his advances and said, "Let me up. I want to order some food before she leaves. I have not eaten since morning."

Dreibrand released her. "Get me supper too."

While the servant was away getting food, Dreibrand filled Miranda in on what he had been doing. He told her all about his trip to the border, Kalek, and everything Faychan had said. Predictably, Miranda distrusted the Kezanada, but she did hope that the truce Dreibrand had arranged would prove to be real.

Once the food came and went, their conversation strayed from serious subjects until they stopped having a conversation at all.

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Elsewhere in the castle, Redan was enjoying the best the Temu had to offer whether he was a welcome guest or not. Shan had insisted that his recovering bodyguard be quartered in the same wing as his luxurious apartment, and the rys arranged for nurses to tend for Redan. As an afterthought, Shan recommended to the steward that the nurses should be predominantly attractive.

Also at Shan's insistence, Redan ate his supper in bed while Shan sat at his side. The Zenglaw's appetite had returned, and Redan greedily put down the good food. Finally, he sighed and handed the tray to a servant.

"You can have more, Redan," Shan encouraged. "You need your strength back."

"Seeing that you are alive, Lord, brings back my strength so that I may serve you. I thought that I had failed you," Redan said.

"No, Redan. Your skill and bravery saved me," Shan said.

Redan's face darkened as he remembered the attack. "Lord, at first I thought they had killed you. It was so awful."

Shan patted his chest and assured him that rys were a very hardy species. "We were lucky. All who were hurt are recovering. Onja's servants are the ones who have failed. Now you concentrate on healing."

"Yes, Lord," Redan said. "I am anxious to return to your service once I am back on my feet. Also, Miranda asked me to teach her the finer ways of archery, and I said yes because I understand that she would want to learn from the best. May I have the time to give her the lessons, Lord?"

Shan nodded.

Redan continued, "She says she will be your bodyguard as well, Lord."

"Does she now?" Shan asked with surprise.

"I thought you knew, Lord. She said you allow her to serve you in any way," Redan explained.

Shan remembered accepting her support and then needing it, but he had not imagined that she would take this course.

Realizing now that Shan had not approved this for Miranda, Redan said, "I believe you should have more bodyguards, Lord. But if you do not want a woman, I understand. I will tell her."

"No, tell her no such thing. Give her the lessons she desires," Shan decided.

"Yes, Lord. To be honest, I did not want to tell her no to anything. She only started liking me," Redan said.

With a smile, Shan commented, "Miranda does not change her opinion easily. Be glad of it."

"I am," Redan agreed. "She was so very kind to me when I was sick. In her way she is quite nice. I think we will get along well."

"Do not get along too well," Shan cautioned, knowing the trouble humans could make with each other.

Redan caught his meaning completely and adamantly shook his head. "I would not touch General Veta's woman," he declared and then the subject made him recall something important. "I have a girlfriend in the city! I must send a message. Her father has probably told her I am dead."

"Tell me where, and I will send word. I will put my seal on it. Maybe that will impress her father," Shan offered.

Redan chuckled skeptically, "Lord Shan, you know how the Temu are about their women."

"Well, the details are your problem," Shan said discreetly. He then bade the Zenglawa to rest and he returned to his apartment in high spirits.

~

The Yentay were pleased that Redan had survived, which was better news than the training drills Dreibrand announced for them. Despite the cold and snow, Dreibrand had them sparring in the yard of their barracks and practicing on their horses in a pasture outside the city. Dreibrand told the Yentay that they were already good fighters, but he wanted them to be the best. He wanted them to learn more discipline and fight together as a cohesive unit. No Yentay was to think that in the spring he could sit back and rely on Shan's magic.

After another day of training, Dreibrand took some time to show Tytido some of his moves in the barracks yard before the last light of the short day ended. Most of the Yentay had finished stabling their horses, and they gathered around their general and lieutenant to watch them spar. They used swords only, no shields, and they battled back and forth in good natured exercise. Dreibrand twice confounded Tytido by switching his sword to his other hand and attacking from a new angle immediately after a barrage of offensive strokes. Tytido had fended off the first part of the attack, but he had not been able to react fast enough to twist his body away from the sword that spun effortlessly into Dreibrand's other hand.

Circling his general before the next round, Tytido asked, "Sir, what do you do if you spin your sword to your other hand, but miss it?"

Dreibrand laughed. "You get yourself killed, Lieutenant."

"You do it so fast, Sir. You must have practiced a lot," Tytido surmised.

"I once practiced such moves a thousand times in a week. My schooling included rigorous weapons training, not only for combat but for the duel," Dreibrand explained, but he decided that he was talking too much about himself and attacked.

Their swords thrust and parried and sometimes Tytido made his general jump back, but it was clear to all that Dreibrand had the superior skill. Even while enjoying the friendly exercise, Dreibrand could feel that his two duels with the Overlord had sharpened his skills.

Tytido attacked hard, blocking Dreibrand's sword and leaping and kicking high. Dreibrand dodged the boot then spun and lashed out with his sword to meet Tytido when he landed behind him, but Dreibrand stretched his arm too far and it made his healing side sting with pain. Grunting, Dreibrand held his side and let his sword droop. Tytido stepped closer, concerned for his commander. Unlike the other Yentay, he had seen the terrible wound Dreibrand had suffered at the hands of the Overlord.

Dreibrand swore in Atrophaney and forced himself to stand straight.

"Sir?" Tytido said hesitantly.

Dreibrand smiled reassuringly to his lieutenant and the other men. "It is all right. The muscles that are healing back together got stretched too far," he explained.

But that was enough sparring for today and Dreibrand dismissed the Yentay as his audience. While they dispersed, he complained to Tytido, "You lose it so fast when you are hurt and stuck in bed. I will have to train hard this winter to get back to where I was."

"Oh, that makes me feel better. Even hurt, you are still better than me," Tytido grumbled.

Dreibrand said, "You are not so far behind. And remember Lieutenant, I am jealous of you because you did not get hurt when we fought the Kezanada."

Tytido smiled appreciatively.

They were about to part ways for the evening when Tytido noted a group of men in Hirqua dress walking toward them.

"Do you know them?" Dreibrand asked.

Tytido squinted in the dusky light and answered, "I can see that they are Clan Rantu, but I do not recognize them personally."

Eleven Hirqua approached and their leader bowed to Dreibrand. "I am Yolen of Clan Rantu," he announced.

"I am Dreibrand Veta, commander of the Yentay who have volunteered to serve Lord Shan against Onja. And this is Tytido of Clan Gozmochi, my first lieutenant," Dreibrand responded.

Yolen and Tytido exchanged a cordial if clannish look, and Yolen said, "Sir, Clan Rantu has decided to add its strength to the fight against Onja. We want to join your group."

They must have heard I finally got paid, Tytido thought but did not share the comment.

Scanning the new warriors, Dreibrand was pleased and he welcomed them readily. "I accept you and your company, Yolen. It must not have been easy for you to travel here in this cold weather. Your decision to join us was brave and the strength of Clan Rantu is needed."

Yolen thanked his new commander, already impressed with the foreigner who he had been hearing so much about.

Dreibrand added, "You serve Lord Shan, but remember you live here as guests of the Temu and you must follow their laws."

The Hirqua agreed to do so, and Dreibrand bade them to follow Tytido who would introduce them to the other Yentay.

The arrival of more volunteers thrilled Dreibrand and he believed even more would come. By spring he anticipated being the commander of a respectable force.

After returning to the castle, Miranda and he enjoyed a private dinner. After a servant cleared the table, he watched Miranda stir the fire. Her light brown hair glowed like brass so close to the flames as she contemplated the iron poker in the coals.

Dreibrand saw the melancholy look on her face as her mind drifted. Gently he inquired, "What do you want?"

Puzzled by the question, she said, "What do you mean?"

Dreibrand pushed his chair back and stretched out his legs. While fingering the lip of his wine cup, he explained, "I mean what do you want, Miranda? Shan says he will reward my efforts with anything he has to give. Therefore, you can have whatever you want."

"I want my children," she stated sadly.

"Of course, but what else?" he urged.

Helplessly, Miranda looked around before replying, "Except for my children, I have everything. I live in this beautiful place. I have good food, good clothes, a horse, two horses, friends, a lover." She smiled.

Dreibrand pressed, "But do you want a home of your own? An estate? Miranda, you must want more."

The years of privation and abuse surfaced in her mind and they were memories Miranda preferred to ignore. She bit her lip while subduing the painful memories. Gathering her hard-won dignity, she said, "Being free means so much to me that I have not thought about other things."

Seeing that his question had somehow upset her, Dreibrand got up and hugged her. "When you think of other things let me know," he said.

"I want to love you," Miranda whispered.

"That I can provide," he murmured happily.

Their embrace tightened with kissing and their desire flared. They found their way to the sofa and clothing was slipping free when a knock came at the door.

"It is just the servant," Miranda dismissed as she pulled his shirt off his shoulders.

Kissing her bared breasts and tugging at her garments, Dreibrand showed no interest in the knock whatsoever.

Outside a man cleared his throat and called, "General?"

Dreibrand had wanted to ignore the disturbance, but he recognized Tytido's voice. Heaving a frustrated sigh, he sat up and pulled his shirt back on.

Miranda sat up with him, keeping a hand on his chest. "Send him away," she commanded with a kiss.

For an indulgent moment, Dreibrand acquiesced before easing her back. "He would only be here if it was important," he determined.

"Very well," Miranda accepted, replacing her clothes.

Tytido waited patiently until Miranda answered the door. He politely acknowledged her and saluted his general, who now stood by the fireplace. Tytido felt a little uncomfortable as he perceived that he had just interrupted his commander on the verge of a touseling.

"Sir, I have received a message for you," Tytido said and removed a scroll from his coat.

Keenly interested, Dreibrand took it. Black wax without design held the scroll closed. He looked to Tytido, obviously seeking information on the source of a message.

"A cloaked man gave it to me outside the barracks. He avoided the light from the door and I could not see him. He insisted I bring it to you then ran off," Tytido said.

Dreibrand broke the seal and read the letter. Although he had picked up the speaking of the common language very quickly, he had not had enough opportunity to study it in written form and he had to consult Tytido. Miranda edged close and peered at the scroll. She longed to know what the writing said.

"Do you know where this tavern is? What does that say, the Silver Bear?" Dreibrand asked Tytido.

"I think so," Tytido said with the hesitation of someone not native to Dengar Nor.

"Then take me there," Dreibrand ordered.

"What does it say?" Miranda asked with exasperation.

Dreibrand said, "This is a message from the Kezanada. They have information for me."

"I am going with you," Miranda announced.

"Stay here. It might be dangerous," Dreibrand warned.

"I will not stay. I want to talk to this Kezanada myself," Miranda insisted.

"It is probably just a servant, not an actual Kezanada," Dreibrand argued.

"Then I will give him a message to take to the Kezanada. I am sick of the problems these criminals cause. I am going to tell them that if they do not take our side, I will convince Shan to punish them," Miranda decided.

Dreibrand's eyes widened with alarm. "Do NOT speak for Shan. I already have arranged a truce, so do not mess it up," he ordered.

"Why not say that? Threats are all these people understand," Miranda protested.

Dreibrand calmed his anger. He did not want to fight with her, especially in front of Tytido, who observed curiously. Tytido often marveled at her boldness, which he was not used to, but it did not offend him. He respected his general, and Dreibrand respected her, so he minded his own business.

Dreibrand decided, "You can come with us. But Miranda, promise me you will not say that."

She looked at him with defiant green eyes, but finally nodded.

"Good. I will get your coat," Dreibrand said. He went into their bedchamber and retrieved their outerwear. From a small chest he removed two bags of gold. Shan had provided him with this fund to use at his convenience.

When they rode down to the city, the wind was light and the snow was gentle. A perfect and beautiful winter night. Because Miranda was with him, Dreibrand hoped his outing merely looked like a night on the town.

Tytido took a few wrong turns but refused to ask for directions. After a couple explorations, he found the run down quarter of the city that was home to the Silver Bear. Unpainted wooden buildings and older brick buildings lined the narrow streets that were busy with foot traffic. The taverns were crowded with people, gathered for warmth and a good time, but the Silver Bear was quiet and no singing drifted through the shuttered windows. They gave their horses over to a lackadaisical hostler, who shuffled by in the snowy gloom of a single outdoor lamp. Two great pillars of icicles hung beside the entrance to the tavern. Miranda looked back thoughtfully before entering. Over the buildings and the smoking chimneys, she could see the castle high on the mesa. A sprinkling of lighted windows outlined the stronghold that looked so incredibly grand in the moonlit sky speckled with clouds.

The common room of the Silver Bear had only a few occupants, who were intent on their monotonous nightly rituals. Two Temu played at a game while a third watched officiously and puffed a pipe. A semi-talented guitarist practiced by the fire, content to make his own music whether he entertained anyone. The barkeep glanced over his shoulder, mostly disturbed by the draft of the opening door. The sight of the light haired foreigners and a Hirqua perked up his attention, but only to the purpose of staring, not offering service.

Handing Tytido a couple coins, Dreibrand told him to order some wine and have it served in a private room. Miranda warmed herself by the fire and ignored the subtle observation from everyone in the room. While Tytido waited for the slow owner to take his business, Dreibrand went to Miranda. He slipped a hand around her waist and spoke casually and the stares began to diminish.

Eventually the barkeep filled a tray with their order and guided them to the requested private room. Nothing in the man's service encouraged repeat business, and Dreibrand wondered how he made any profit.

The chubby barkeep pushed the door open with his back, and without holding it open, went to the table. Frowning at the rudeness, Tytido caught the door and entered. He shouted with alarm when he saw a strange figure rise from a corner chair.

Dreibrand rushed in, drawing his dagger, which would be effective in the close quarters.

"Who are you?" Tytido demanded.

Dreibrand grabbed Tytido's shoulder to stop him from attacking. The stranger wore the garb typical of a merchant who traveled on business trips for a wealthy household. But Dreibrand recognized the face beneath the brown headdress as Faychan, who smiled with disarming warmth.

The uncharismatic proprietor paid no heed to his guests' encounter and meant to leave, but Miranda blocked the door.

"What trick is this?" she hissed.

"No trick," he grunted.

Faychan cleared his throat and said, "The Silver Bear specializes in private meetings. I have been expecting you."

Miranda allowed the man to brush past her.

Dreibrand said, "It is all right. Shut the door."

Considering Tytido's watchdog glare insignificant, Faychan approached the table and started to serve the wine. He extended a cup to Dreibrand and commented, "I did not expect you to bring so many people again."

"Did you want me to come alone?" Dreibrand asked suspiciously.

"It makes no difference to me," Faychan said. He offered some wine to Miranda. "For the lovely Miranda."

"Tell me your name before you use mine," Miranda said.

"Oh, Dreibrand, you did not tell me she was so charming," Faychan remarked.

"This is Faychan, who I told you about," Dreibrand explained.

Miranda took the cup the Kezanada offered her and she studied him intently.

Faychan invited Tytido to have some wine, but the lieutenant scowled a wordless refusal.

"I did not expect you to be here," Dreibrand said.

The Kezanada explained, "To walk unmasked in outside society can be refreshing—and informative. Anyway, I missed you, my new friend. Have you changed your mind about anything?"

"I told you I was too busy," Dreibrand replied.

"Oh, you are going to be very busy," Faychan laughed.

Anxious for the news, Dreibrand demanded, "What do you know?"

Enjoying the suspense he created, Faychan returned to his chair and gestured for the others to sit. Dreibrand tolerated Faychan's theatrics and pulled up a chair for Miranda, before seating himself. Tytido stood by as the loyal officer.

"Now that you are comfortable, we can discuss the price," Faychan said.

"I have paid you well already," Dreibrand reminded.

"That was to get the information. Now you can pay me to tell you," Faychan explained.

"Let me kill this Kezanada," Tytido snarled.

Faychan's eyes went cold and his fingers twitched with the nerves of a fighter, belying his costume as a merchant. "You would not succeed, young man" he informed the Yentay.

"I have killed Kezanada before!" Tytido retorted.

"Enough!" Dreibrand ordered. "I have made a truce with the Kezanada. If they make no violence, neither will we."

"But perhaps Lieutenant Tytido cannot forget the violence that has already been done," Miranda said and Dreibrand watched her warily. "Tell me, Faychan, how could you serve Onja? How could you try to kill Shan, who is a good being? Would you see me separated from my children forever?"

Her harsh tone seemed to have no effect on Faychan. "Women and children do not enter into my calculations," he said coldly.

"No I suppose not. I could not hope that you would help us because it is the right thing to do. But if Onja in her wickedness can buy your help, I can hope that Shan in his goodness can buy it too. Dreibrand, give him his gold and time will tell us if he speaks lies or truth," Miranda said.

Dreibrand tossed one bag of gold onto the table where it landed with the appropriate clink. "Our stakes in this are much higher than your greed, Faychan. I want our business to benefit us both, but as Miranda said, time will tell if your information is good. And if it is not, Shan will not forget your duplicity and ryls live for a long time."

After weighing the bag with his eyes, Faychan said calmly, "Your gold is good with me and I make no plots against Shan anymore."

"Then tell us the plots of those who do," Dreibrand commanded impatiently.

Faychan pursed his lips and organized his thoughts. He started with his knowledge of the Zenglaw Tribe. Athol had offered to protect Jingteng from the rebel army in an effort to get on Onja's good side. Even Faychan agreed that there probably was no such thing.

As the Kezanada outlined the strategies of Shan's enemies, the three faces of those loyal to Shan became grim. The Sabuto already gathered an army at Chanda, their capital, and recruits were coming from the poorer southern tribes every day. As for the Zenglaw, they would seize the Jingteng Road and control the entrance to the Rysamand. Then the Temu would be caught between enemies on two fronts with no way to reach Jingteng.

Dreibrand had already imagined this scenario, but he did not like hearing it.

"But Shan can still go to Jingteng. No army can stop him," Miranda insisted.

"I am inclined to agree with that," Faychan said. "But will Shan get to Jingteng and become King before the Temu Domain has been crushed? The Sabuto have always lusted to conquer the Temu, and if the Temu must help Shan to get past the Zenglaw, then the Sabuto will invade while they have the advantage."

Tytido reasoned, "The Zenglaw will wait to see the outcome of the Sabuto invasion. If the Temu win, they will be too weak to fight off the Zenglaw. And if the Sabuto prevail, they too will be weakened by the fight and unable to secure the Temu Domain before the Zenglaw move in."

"He does have some wit after all," Faychan commented derisively, which made Tytido glare.

Dreibrand intervened, "Faychan, I do not pay you to insult my officer. But what you tell me of the Sabuto and Zenglaw makes sense—unfortunately. But you brought me this news too fast. You knew all of this when we spoke days ago."

"The activities of all tribes are common knowledge in Do Jempur. It is our way to know these things," the Kezanada explained. "I did put the past few days to use. I adjusted orders to meet your needs and so forth. Then I decided to bring you this first report. I will provide you with more details of your enemies as I learn them."

"You should have told me this news when we first made our agreement," Dreibrand complained.

"I had to check my facts," Faychan insisted.

Dreibrand doubted that, but he went on to the next thing on his mind. "Has Benladu been elected Overlord?"

"Nothing in our agreement requires me to discuss internal Kezanada business," Faychan answered.

"You did before," Dreibrand rejoined.

Faychan countered, "I invited you to join me before—you refused. Do not expect me to speak with you as a brother if you will not be one."

The attentive Tytido peered sideways at Dreibrand, intrigued by the news of the Kezanada invitation. Personally, he considered his general of better character than the overly proud criminals.

Dreibrand persisted, "Has Benladu agreed to our truce? I have a right to know that."

Faychan had made a career of spying and negotiating. His anonymous talents had been worked in many domains and his face concealed all hints to his thoughts. Only the length of his silence following Dreibrand's demand began to incriminate him. Faychan considered lying. He glanced at Miranda, who stared at him like a judge, and her hard gaze felt like the conscience that he had discarded long ago.

Clearing his throat, Faychan admitted, "Benladu does not agree. He fears Onja and will not outwardly go against her orders. But he also fears Shan, and I doubt he will make a move against him." He gestured to the gold and continued, "As long as business is good, no Kezanada will oppose spying for you."

"Forgive me if I am not completely reassured," Dreibrand grumbled.

"Dreibrand, believe me, I want peace with Shan. The opinion of my faction will prevail," Faychan added with a hint of sincerity.

"Do you have anything else to say?" Dreibrand asked.

Faychan looked at the others. "You may want to hear this alone," he suggested quietly.

Dreibrand narrowed his eyes, suspecting a trick. "Lieutenant Tytido and Miranda may hear whatever you have to say," he said.

"As you wish," Faychan said. "You asked me to gather information pertinent to Shan's war. I am not sure if this fits that order, but I thought it might be pertinent to you, Dreibrand, and because I like you, I will tell you. When I was in Jington during the tribute season, I heard that Onja was holding a force of several hundred men. Men from the east. The rys told me they called their land Atrophane. Which, if I have heard correctly, is your country."

Dreibrand blinked, stunned by the news and the jumble of emotions it let loose inside him. *It is the expeditionary force. It has to be. Lord Kwan!* Although in the back of his mind he had known the Atrophaney expedition would be in the Wilderness, he had not thought about them for some time. Dreibrand did not know if he should be worried for himself or worried for the comrades who he had deserted.

"Do you have any names?" he asked.

"No. I did not get to see them. I heard about them second hand from the rys soldiers at the Keep. I had other more important business to attend to, so I could not seek them. But I believe what I was told," Faychan answered.

"Was Onja doing anything to them?" Dreibrand asked fearfully.

"Not that I know of. The rys I spoke with said the humans were camped peacefully outside the city. No one understood why Onja had spared them from the Deamedron and allowed them to enter the Rysamand," Faychan explained.

Dreibrand noticed that his fists were clenched and he loosened them. He did not know what to think and looked to Miranda. She stared at him, knowing why he was so agitated.

Faychan continued, watching Dreibrand carefully. "I was hoping you would tell me something about your countrymen. You know, as a favor. It seems likely to me that you should know who some of those people are. I could guess that you must have gotten separated from them."

Faychan's curiosity angered Dreibrand and he jumped out of his seat and grabbed the Kezanada by the front of his jacket. A dagger appeared in Faychan's hand from a secret place and he threatened Dreibrand with it.

Dreibrand yelled, "Shut up. I don't pay you to interrogate me!"

"Get off me," Faychan snarled.

"I could break your damn neck before you kill me with that thing," Dreibrand snarled.

"Dreibrand!" It was Miranda's voice, and she and Tytido appeared on each side of him. Tytido shoved his sword in the Kezanada's face and told him to put his dagger down.

Dreibrand released Faychan's clothes and stepped back. "Put your sword down, Lieutenant," he said, trying to be rational again.

Faychan straightened his jacket but kept his dagger out. "I see you don't have anything to tell me," he said sarcastically.

Forcing himself to calm down, Dreibrand actually apologized, "Excuse me Faychan. I am worried about my countrymen with Onja, and I went a little crazy."

He is apologizing too fast, Faychan observed. "That is understandable, Dreibrand. I have been the bearer of bad news before, so I have no hard feelings. Stay, and we will finish our wine," he offered.

"No. We are leaving, but try and find out what is happening in Jingtun along with everything else. Contact me soon," Dreibrand said hastily. He withdrew the other bag of gold and plopped it on the table with the first bag. Faychan allowed Dreibrand to see his pleasure.

"Good night," Dreibrand declared and signaled for Tytido to get the door.

"Good luck," Faychan said.

"The luckier I am, the luckier you will be," Dreibrand said before leaving.

The Kezanada listened to the creaking floorboards as his visitors left, followed by the distant bang of a door. He tore off the hat of his disguise and tossed it by the bags of gold. For some time he stared at the three items on the table, pondering what had occurred and what would occur. As a Kezanada Masterspy, he knew many things and had been given many orders. Benladu had been elected Overlord and believed Onja would ultimately defeat Shan. But Faychan considered this a terrible error in judgment, and continuing to antagonize Shan would only jeopardize the future of their society.

And what is Onja doing with those men from the east? he wondered, but getting information from Jingtun in the winter was difficult, even for him, and his rymavda sources had not mentioned the Atrophane, so they might not even know about them. Dreibrand obviously knew something about them, but judging from his reaction, it would take time to get Dreibrand to talk about his countrymen.

With a sigh, Faychan opened one of the bags and let some gold spill out. The new Overlord had instructed him to tell Dreibrand entirely different things. Strangely it had not been Dreibrand's gold that motivated him to tell the truth.

8 ~ Dominated ~

My thoughts curse me, so now I avoid them—Kwan Chenomet, personal journal, year 779 Atrophane calendar.

Bright eyed and quiet, Elendra nestled against the Queen's side. The white nailed hand of Onja lay over Elendra's black hair, gently petting the girl as if she were a cat. From the comfort of an upholstered bench they watched Quylan train, and Onja gave praise and criticism often during the exercises.

Hefshul, strong, wiry and forever without comment, aided his Queen with her new pupil's defense training. When Hefshul threw blunt wooden darts at Quylan, she had to destroy them with a heat spell. At first, the task of incinerating the darts before they hit her body had been impossible. Quylan could barely conceive of the heat spell before the wood struck her. The objects moved too fast for her to focus on them.

On the first day of this lesson, Hefshul had continually pelted her with the missiles, which he hurled in relentless obedience to Onja's command. He threw them hard enough to bruise and the pain destroyed any hope Quylan had to concentrate.

Finally in her frustration and misery, Quylan had dropped to her knees and begged Onja to tell him to slow down. Then she could at least try.

With clear disdain for her difficulty, Onja had informed her that pain was the best teacher.

After a fitful night of dreading another day of incompetence, Quylan did not fail on the second day. She feared that Onja would not forgive failure two days in a row. Convincing herself that this defensive skill had to be easy for someone of her magical aptitude, Quylan scorched the very first dart Hefshul threw at her. Unfortunately, her first success resulted in being struck by a flaming piece of wood, but now that she had learned to focus on the flying object, she could intensify the spell.

By the end of the second day, Quylan could destroy each dart before it touched her, and Onja was pleased. Quylan had come to know that the goal of every day was to please Onja. A strange blend of fear and praise guided Quylan's behavior.

Today, Hefshul targeted her back and sometimes used larger or smaller objects. Onja forbid Quylan to ever turn around because the point of this exercise was to sense the danger without seeing it. Quylan easily understood the value of the lesson and concentrated diligently. Sometimes long stretches of time elapsed before Hefshul launched an attack, which strained her attention span.

In this manner the day wore on. Fatigue spread through Quylan's system and she learned how exhausting it was to work magic for long hours day after day.

"She does very well," Onja commented to Elendra.

The girl sat up and coughed. The smoke of the many blasted darts lingered in the air with some ashes.

Speaking the rys language all the time now, Elendra asked, "Queen Onja, will you teach me such tricks when I grow up?"

Onja did not respond quickly, but she withheld the derisive answer that any other human would have received. The Queen said, "I will teach you different tricks that will make you powerful among your kind."

Elendra frowned, unhappy with the answer but still content with the Queen's promises.

Quylan had overheard the positive comment from the Queen and she lifted her sagging head. Although tired, Quylan was proud of her rapid progress and her confidence swelled. The power of her expanding knowledge excited her.

Commanding Hefshul to pause, Onja rose from her seat and approached Quylan. The young female rys lowered her eyes with the proper reverence and saw a thick black sash in Onja's hands.

"You seem to have no difficulty sensing an attack to your back, which is good. When you are among

the humans, they may at first resent your power over them, and in their typical fashion seek to murder you," Onja said.

Such a scenario frightened Quylan and she realized the crucial importance of Onja's lessons if she had to go east and spread rys rule. Tentatively she turned her tender gaze up to Onja, seeking the knowledge that would protect her from such a fate.

Gently, Onja touched Quylan's soft cheek and the Queen's touch tingled on her skin with great power.

"They may try to hurt you, but I will teach you everything you need to know to protect yourself. Once the humans see your superiority, they will quickly grovel in your service," Onja explained.

The image of humans groveling did little to stimulate Quylan, but she would learn what Onja had to teach.

Onja raised the black sash to Quylan's face, clearly intending to blindfold her. With a sharp intake of breath, Quylan craned her head away.

Onja purred Quylan's name and her distrust became only a puff of wind on a calm day.

"I must obey me Queen," Quylan murmured her mantra, which pleased Onja.

Although fully compliant now, Quylan could not deny the vulnerability she felt while Onja bound the cloth over her eyes. Enclosed in the darkness, she could sense Onja's body looming over her, so much greater to her mind's eye.

Onja returned to her seat and Quylan easily understood the next level of her lesson. Now she would not automatically know from which direction came the attack. Reaching out with her perception, she located Hefshul who circled her position. Then she noticed two more rys quietly entering the room.

With three opponents, the strain on Quylan was considerable, but she adapted quickly. The harder Onja pushed her, the faster she learned now, and Quylan was elated by the fact that she had to be pleasing Onja.

When Hefshul exhausted his handful of darts, he went to a cabinet to get more as the other rys unloaded on Quylan. Hoping to elude her attention, Hefshul swiftly seized an iron bar set aside for this moment and threw it at her with his quality aim. Quylan did not catch what he had done and she cast a heat spell with her newly acquired speed. This resulted in a scorching metal bar slamming into her back, which knocked her down.

The pain of blunt impact burst through her back as she crashed roughly to the floor. The iron bar clanged a few times near her head before coming to rest, and the ring of metal gave way to Onja's rude laughter.

Quylan squirmed on the floor, too overcome by her injury to push herself up. The initial intensity of the blow receded but then she felt the perfect pain of the burn where the heated metal had struck her. The salt of her sweat stung the burn, completing her discomfort. Only now in her defeat did Quylan realize how much she had been exerting herself. Sweat soaked into her blindfold and she was suddenly so feeble she could only turn her face off the floor. Too spent to use any more magic, she retreated into her blindfold and closed her mind's eye.

Onja ordered the other rys out and sent Elendra with them. In this privacy, Onja kneeled beside Quylan and sat her up in her arms. Removing the blindfold, Onja tenderly mopped the sweat from Quylan's face with it.

"You see now that you must also consider the composition of an object. Wood is easy to burn. Metal is not," Onja said.

Eyeing the iron bar, Quylan asked, "Will I be able to burn that up?"

Onja answered, "Perhaps. Blasting away metal in a second takes a lot of power. It is something I can do, but you may never be able to."

Onja helped her pupil stand and Quylan was honored by the physical assistance from her Queen.

"You have done well. Tomorrow you will rest," Onja praised.

"Thank you, my Queen," murmured Quylan. She straightened painfully only to see Onja's eyes flaring with magic. Quylan's pain dissolved into a weightless blue mist that soothed her mind in a most ideal manner. Her eyelids became hopelessly heavy then closed as she thoughtlessly yielded to Onja's influence.

An abrupt pain in both knees intruded on Quylan's enchanted slumber. She had become vaguely awake just in time to catch herself as she fell forward. With the return of awareness, Quylan realized she was halfway across the room and that Onja had dropped her. At first, Quylan was the most distressed by the withdrawal of the pleasurable influence on her mind.

When her mind cleared some more, she stood up and the pain in her back returned. To add to her confusion, Onja was peering upward with a look of alarm—a look Quylan had not imagined the Queen could make.

The unexpected release from Onja's influence caused Quylan to realize that Onja had placed a spell of sleepiness on her, and she had done it before. This explained the nights Quylan had awoken in her room with no recollection of going there. Her first reaction was shame for not detecting the spell sooner, but then she was afraid. Asleep in Onja's possession, she would have been mentally and physically at Onja's mercy. Now Quylan truly comprehended how helpless and dominated she had become.

But something had interrupted Onja this time and Quylan had been released. Onja still ignored her pupil and her outraged expression had deepened. Quylan began to feel the presence of another and then a sphere of blue light formed near the ceiling.

The features of Shan's spectral face appeared within the light. Shan was performing the extraordinary skill of spirit projection, and at a great distance. Blue fire filled Onja's eyes as she pushed him away. His image faded only to stubbornly reappear.

It worried Onja enough that Shan could actually project his image, but now came his voice.

"What is this Onja? You cannot force me to stay away,"

Onja grimaced when she heard his voice in her head. *"Get out of my mind!"* her thoughts commanded.

"Oh, I intend to have this chat. I thought it would be fair to tell you not to waste any more of your toys on your human assassins. I understand them quite well now," Shan said.

Reclaiming her poise, Onja sneered mentally, *"You know nothing, Shan. You do not even guess at the extent of my powers. Your delusions will destroy you."*

"My delusions will destroy one of us," Shan responded.

The ageless beauty of Onja's face disappeared in a wrathful contortion. Her anger washed over Shan's mind and he knew he had fired the furnace of her volcanic temper.

"If you come here, you cannot imagine what I will do to you," her mind raged.

"You will not be able to do anything to me, Onja. I am in the prime of my power. A place you have not been for a very long time!" Shan declared.

"I am the greatest rys EVER!" Onja shrieked both mentally and verbally. A mad blast of magic followed this thought and Shan retreated from it. The Rysamand, now a domain of snow and ice, flew by in a blur as his mind raced back to the lowland stronghold of Dengar Nor.

His spirit shot back into his body only an instant ahead of Onja's vengeful spell. An explosion of energy flashed around his body and blue lightning snapped around him. Shan shielded his body with his power, but the blast faded harmlessly almost as quickly as it had arrived. Only the cuffs of his sleeves were slightly singed and Shan rolled back, clutching his sides with laughter. He had provoked Onja dangerously, but not even her legendary wrath could give her the strength to hurt him so far away.

After indulging in a moment of triumph, Shan sat up and plunged back into his magic and returned to Jingtjen. He was not done with Onja yet.

Quylan cowered after Onja's demented outburst and stumbled to a door. In her exhaustion she had to lean against the door handle and gather the energy to continue. Although terrified of her Queen, she looked back with curiosity. Onja was emerging from deep spellmaking and she growled with insane frustration. A tangible rage surrounded Onja, and Quylan decided she had to leave. With the Queen in such a state, she did not want to present herself as a target for Onja's anger.

Then Onja cried out with such dismay that Quylan paused again. Part of her conditioned mind urged her to offer help to her Queen, but she prudently resisted. Shan's presence returned to the room, and suddenly Quylan's feelings for him returned. She realized with surprise that she had not daydreamed about him lately.

For Onja's mind only, Shan said, *"Let me give you a taste of what you will get in the spring."*

Before Onja could share her vindictive comments, Shan sent an attack spell at her. Onja raised her hands to cast a shield spell. A searing wave of energy filled the chamber, and Quylan finally ducked outside to escape harm. When she heard Onja scream, she fled purely on instinct.

Onja had been teaching her to deal with human attacks, but witnessing the magical onslaught of a rys horrified Quylan. She could not cope with such power, and her fear renewed her tired limbs. She dashed down halls, leaving the inner chambers of the Keep behind her, until she met her father who led a squad of rys. Quylan flew into his arms with a sob.

Taf Ila already knew something terrible had occurred, and the sight of his frightened daughter nearly panicked him.

"Quylan, dear daughter, what is happening?" he cried.

"Shan is here. Onja has been attacked," she gasped.

"What!?" Taf Ila thundered with disbelief.

"Do not go, Father," Quylan advised.

Indeed, Taf Ila had yet to move forward or order anyone else to investigate. None of the other rys looked inclined to seek their Queen now. It was not the way of rys to interfere in power struggles.

Confused, Taf Ila asked, "You said Shan is here?"

Quylan shook her head. "I saw his image and sensed his mind. I swear it was him. Queen Onja is very upset."

To emphasize this point, a chilling scream shook the corridors and Taf Ila gripped his daughter tighter. Like the charge of a thousand armies Onja entered the hall they stood in. Energy snapped around her and a hot wind preceded her like a killing drought. All of the rys cringed against the walls and were thankful when she rushed past them in her violent fury. Overwhelmed by the terrible sight of her rage, none of the rys noticed the burns on Onja's hands and wrists where her shield spell had not sufficed.

When Onja was gone, the rys relaxed. No one perceived any intruders, and no one felt Shan in body or mind.

Leaning weakly against her father, Quylan said, "It is good to see you. I have missed you."

Taf Ila cupped her chin in his hand and smiled warmly. "Queen Onja has kept you busy and away from me. It was not my choosing."

"I know," she muttered.

Only as a parent could see, Taf Ila saw that some of the tenderness in his daughter had been replaced with hardness. Haggard circles held her eyes, and Taf Ila knew she had been overworked by her lessons.

"Come home tonight for a visit, Quylan," he invited. Then in a soft knowing voice, he added, "When Onja is in such a temper, she will not notice."

Quylan glanced down the hall that had so recently suffered Onja's tread. "She said I could rest tomorrow."

"Good." Taf Ila said and ordered the soldiers to inspect that level just in case something was there.

The rys dispersed and Taf Ila helped his daughter down the hall. Quylan nestled against his strong arm, remembering with a new appreciation the good things of ryslinghood. She understood now how much she had given up in her juvenile ambition.

Tonight, at least she could visit home and rest.

A tremor groaned through the very foundations of the Keep. At first, Quylan did not notice it because she trembled with her own weariness, but Taf Ila certainly felt the disturbance. It triggered dreadful speculations in his mind.

The vibration passed, and Taf Ila hoped to dismiss it as a rare quake that could issue from the great spine of the Rysamand. But such a notion was grasping foolishness on his part. It had been the mistress of the mountains who shook Jingtēn.

Another greater shudder moved through the Keep, and the undeniable growl of moving stone could be heard. Taf Ila rushed his daughter out of the inner Keep and onto one of the many balconies that adorned the tiered structure. A tired winter sun drooped early behind the bulk of the mountains, leaving only a dusky lavender light upon Jingtēn.

From the balcony they could see the focal point of the disturbance. The tower that had been Shan's residence visibly trembled and dust rose from its round stone walls. Then its interior structure succumbed to some destructive force and the whole tower began to collapse upon itself. The dismembered stonework started at a slow crumble and accelerated to a booming crash. Dust and fragments rushed out against the Keep and nearby city, breaking windows within a circular cloud.

"Dear Dacian!" Taf Ila breathed.

Quylan clutched her father as she beheld the spectacle of Onja's rage and power. While watching the thick dust settle over the rubble of Shan's tower, Quylan comprehended the depth of the conflict between Onja and Shan. Peace could never happen between them, and if Shan did come home, the two rys would try to kill each other.

"Father, what should we do?" Quylan asked.

"Stay out of the Queen's conflict. If rys involve themselves in the duels of other rys, we will have war, and the rys do not want war," Taf Ila answered firmly.

Quylan sighed, frustrated by the detachment her father advised. Not having an opinion in this matter seemed impossible. Quylan knew she had to obey her Queen, but Onja's domination frightened her. Quylan wanted Shan to come home and for Onja to go away.

Then with an aching heart, Quylan realized Shan would never love her because she served Onja so closely. Even if Shan was victorious, he would consider her another subservient rys who never believed in him and never helped him. Torn with fear and confusing emotions, Quylan covered her face with her hands. If Onja knew how she felt about Shan, she would end up like his tower. She must bury her thoughts about Shan and hope Onja never discovered them.

Taf Ila said, "I will get someone to help you home. I have to stay here."

He patted his daughter reassuringly, but Quylan did not register his tenderness. The ultimate realization that she was the chosen servant of evil and that her traitorous feelings put her in constant peril overwhelmed Quylan so much, her father's love could not reach through.

~

Every citizen of Jingtēn saw or felt the blast of the tower. The streets emptied early as every rys considered the foreboding incident. However, the devastation at the Keep certainly excited the attention of Jingtēn's human occupants.

The uproar made Kwan look up from the card game he played with his convalescing squire. The sound of great wreckage caused a keen light to spring into Kwan's eyes that had been absent for some time.

"That cannot be good," Kwan commented.

"So loud," Jesse said.

"I will find out what it is," Kwan announced and set down his hand of homemade cards.

He exited the room where he spent his now reclusive days watching Jesse struggle back to health. In the stairwell down the hall, Kwan saw Atrophane soldiers rushing up to the roof. Seeing so many of his men made him recall his rank that had become muddled among his troubled thoughts.

Lieutenant Sandin had led the rush up the stairs. A fresh layer of snow blocked the door to the terrace and he had to push it open.

"Wait for me, Lieutenant," Kwan called up the stairs.

Sandin turned and was visibly delighted to see his commander coming up the steps through the soldiers who parted to let him pass. When Kwan had shut himself away, Sandin had been dismayed by his Lord General's seclusion. Sandin had no desire to see his mentor spiral into denial and dotage and it gave him some hope to see that Kwan had come out.

"Do you know what it is?" Kwan asked.

"No, my Lord. We could see nothing from the street. That is why we ran up here," Sandin replied.

Soldiers filled the roof behind their officers, and Kwan and Sandin were pressed against the railing. From the vantage point every one could see the cloud of dust rising beside the Keep where a tower had once been. Although none of them knew the tower was the residence of the mysterious Shan, they were shocked by the destruction.

"Has someone attacked Onja?" Sandin wondered.

Kwan scanned the peaceful stretches of snowy woodland and the empty frozen space of Lake Nin. "There is no army," he said.

"Sabotage maybe. Some kind of rys thing," speculated Sandin.

Kwan stroked his untrimmed goatee that had become a short beard and a shadow of his old calculating scowl returned to his face. To see a hint of the great Atrophane conqueror seep back into Kwan's devastated persona added to Sandin's hope.

"Maybe things do not go Onja's way—for once," Kwan murmured.

With cloaked excitement, Sandin whispered, "It could be an opportunity for us to...leave."

Sandin's suggestion of escape flashed Kwan back to his lesson with Onja. He blinked nervously, struggled with the memory, then mastered himself.

Kwan responded, "It is more than Onja's power that holds us now. The snow is cold and deep, and Jingtun is the only shelter. The high passes are only open to death."

Sandin gritted his teeth. The cold wind agreed with his lord's truth, and Sandin had to accept that the Rysamand was his prison more than the city.

Studying the jagged edge of the crumbled tower, Kwan said, "But I believe this could be a good sign for us."

"I wish I knew if someone was attacking that bitch. I would run to their aid whoever they were," Sandin growled.

"Speak not so boldly," hushed Kwan.

"Yes, my Lord. I am sorry," Sandin said.

"I will go find out what I can," Kwan decided.

"I will go to the Keep with you," Sandin declared firmly.

Kwan shook his head adamantly. "Do not go to the Keep unless made to go, and that is an order, Lieutenant. Anyway, I am not going to the Keep."

With a rekindled purpose, Kwan strode through his men who made way for him. The soldiers were pleased to see their Lord General among them again, and they craved to hear some order from him. Kwan wished he had a command to give.

When he reached Taf Ila's house, he banged on the door. With what was happening at the Keep, he did not really expect the captain to be home, but this was a safer place to start than the Keep. Kwan feared the blocky stronghold of the rys Queen more than all of his past enemies put together.

A rys soldier answered the door and Kwan assertively demanded, "Is Taf Ila home?"

The rys looked him up and down with the usual rys disdain for humans. The man's barbaric accent appalled the rys. "No. I will tell the Captain you called for him. Now go."

"I wait here," Kwan stated with an attitude of his own.

"I tell you go away. The Captain has no time for humans now," the soldier snapped.

"Tell Taf Ila I wait here," Kwan insisted.

"You will freeze on the doorstep then," the rys warned.

"He will not!"

Startled, the rys soldier turned to see Quylan limping into the foyer.

"He may enter," she invited with a strained voice.

Remembering Taf Ila's daughter, Kwan rushed to accept the invitation, but the rys soldier blocked the way.

"Do not trouble yourself with this human. I will get rid of him," the soldier said.

"You are dismissed. Thank you for helping me home," Quylan said.

The soldier protested, "Do not trust this human. He has no right to be in this part of the city."

"Return to my father. He will have use of you," Quylan commanded with a force unusual to her years. Onja's tutelage had already made much progress.

The soldier had only acted out of concern, but now he sensed her superiority and knew he was not needed. No human could harm Quylan, and it was rude for him to insinuate that she needed his protection. He accepted his dismissal and shoved rudely by Kwan.

Quylan beckoned the human to enter. When she shut the door, she leaned on it, fighting her fatigue. "You are Lord Kwan," she recalled.

"Yes. And you Taf Ila's daughter, Quylan," Kwan said.

She nodded and said, "Forgive the soldier. He is upset. You may leave a message for my father with me."

Kwan did not catch all of her words, but he noticed the scorched fabric on her back and the blistered skin peeking through. "You are hurt," he said.

Quylan faced him now. "I am fine."

"What happened at the Keep?" Kwan asked.

Quylan hesitated to answer, uncertain of the consequences of honesty. "Come and sit," she stalled.

Her steps faltered when she guided him to the living room. Kwan caught her elbow to prevent her from falling. The grasp of his hand made her tense with shock and fear even though he supported her. Being so close to him made her gape at the strangeness of his features. The leathery tan skin and the blue eyes looked so alien.

Kwan could tell that he had frightened her and he feared a defensive reaction of magic. As soon as

she regained her balance, Kwan held his hands back, hoping to indicate he meant no harm.

Quylan understood that he had helped her and she was thankful.

"I have never been touched by a human," she tried to explain.

"Did I insult?" Kwan asked, wondering if he had committed some great taboo.

"No," Quylan replied and even mustered a warm smile. She remembered Shan's notoriety for befriending humans and thought that maybe she should do the same. It would be nice to have someone to talk to.

Quylan now applied a hand to Kwan's strong arm and allowed him to help her. While he escorted her to a couch, she marveled at her weariness. Onja had been driving her harder than she realized.

"I will tell you what happened," Quylan decided.

Kwan was thrilled to listen, hoping he had finally found in Taf Ila's daughter the ally her father dared not be. Quylan explained that Shan had antagonized Onja. Enraged by her rival, Onja had then destroyed Shan's residence.

"And I fight Shan in spring?" Kwan pressed, eager for details concerning the purpose Onja had for him and his men.

Quylan reluctantly guessed, "I think so. But ultimately Onja will have to fight him herself."

"But she will send me to die against him first," Kwan grumbled in Atrophaney.

Although Quylan did not understand his words, she could sense his frustration. It helped her somewhat to know she was not alone under Onja's domination.

While Quylan was being so open, Kwan took advantage of it. Although ryls were hard to judge, Kwan believed Quylan had been honest. Perhaps it was just her youth that made him think so, but he decided to ask her some questions and maybe ease his mind.

"Quylan, can the Deamedron kill my soldiers?" he said.

As she deciphered his poor pronunciation, she did not at first understand why he asked. Everyone knew the Deamedron were terrible death. Then Quylan realized that Onja must have used the threat of the Deamedron to control Kwan.

"Yes, the Deamedron can kill on Onja's command. They are the tool Onja uses to keep the Wilderness empty. Once I dared to look for the Quinsanomar—I can see beyond the Rysamand—and to feel the Deamedron was awful. The suffering of those spirits is intense." Quylan shuddered.

Instead of disturbing Kwan, her answer gave him a measure of relief. He had made the right decision. Although Taf Ila had told him the same thing, it meant everything to have some confirmation.

"I thank you for talking. I hope no trouble comes to us from Onja," Kwan said.

Quylan had considered that but she was not worried for once. She explained, "Father told me that Onja does not notice much when she is this angry."

As soon as she said this, she saw Kwan's eyes light up with the possibilities and it distressed her. Quylan feared that her free words would inadvertently send the humans to their ruin.

Quickly she added, "Do not think what you are thinking, Lord Kwan. You cannot get out of the Rysamand and Onja would punish you."

"Help me?" Kwan asked eagerly and with a humility he never would have shown a human.

Quylan turned away and studied the upholstery of the couch. She could not look upon the face of Onja's prisoner and tell him no. "I have no help to give. I cannot make the passes clear of snow," she said.

"In spring?" Kwan pressed hopefully.

Now she looked at him and hissed, "Lord Kwan, do you not know that if I even think about this conversation again I could betray both of us to Onja?"

Kwan nodded dejectedly.

"I need to rest. Please leave me," Quylan ordered.

Kwan would leave as she requested. He could see that she was weary, but he wanted to continue cultivating a relationship with her. Quylan was powerful, and perhaps in her youth, he could sway her to his side.

"Quylan, can we talk more, again?" he asked.

"Yes, but I do not know when. Queen Onja trains me at the Keep and I cannot come and go," Quylan answered, and she suddenly had empathy with the human who Onja held in their city.

Kwan did not like to hear that his new friend would be inaccessible, but he murmured his thanks and rose to leave.

"Lord Kwan, I am sorry my Queen keeps you in Jington. I see now that she forces your service," Quylan said.

He dipped his head, grateful for the apology. "Does Onja force your service?" he asked slyly.

Quylan slumped back on the couch. "I must serve my Queen," she said without enthusiasm.

9 ~ Dreams of Empire ~

For a week Dreibrand stewed with the news of the Atrophane in Jingten. He reported to Taischek and Shan the other things the Kezanada had told him, but he kept the rest to himself. Once Miranda had tried to broach the subject with him because she knew the reason for his distress, but Dreibrand would not even talk to her about it.

Indeed, he did not know what to say. It was not like the Atrophane had come in pursuit of him. They had planned the expedition before he left, and Dreibrand assumed he would be the farthest thing from Lord Kwan's mind. Thinking of his former commander caused Dreibrand to feel guilty. Unless things had changed, Kwan would have led the expedition, which meant Kwan could be in Jingten. What would happen when he went to Jingten next year? Would Kwan be there? Would the Temu and Shan learn the truth? What if the Atrophane marched against Shan's army?

At this point, Dreibrand's mind always stopped and he started over in his cycle of worry. He had plenty of other things to occupy his mind. The training of the Yentay was his foremost responsibility, and he started meeting with Xander every day to discuss the organization of the Temu forces.

Initially, the Temu General was not receptive to Dreibrand's ideas, but after Dreibrand urged and argued, Xander accepted the assistance. The Temu were not accustomed to fighting a largescale war. Annually the Temu raided the Sabuto, but all the warriors had not been mobilized for a major campaign in living memory.

The Temu had no lack of warriors. Taischek had a standing army of ten thousand that served in the capital, patrolled the border of the domain and conducted raids when it suited the King. After this, at least that many men were fit and had some training as fighters in the civilian population. Every town and village had a pool of men to call upon in time of need, and these men had already been notified that they went to war in the spring.

However, the skills of the nonprofessional warriors varied greatly, and in the area of discipline, Dreibrand did not know what to expect. He reasoned with Xander that all of these men needed to be organized, preferably with units of the professional warriors. Regional commanders needed to be contacted and given instructions to begin training. Reports assessing the amounts of infantry and cavalry needed to come to the capital and the list went on.

Once Xander saw how Dreibrand could improve the Temu army, he warmed to the task. Xander grasped the vision of orderly units of infantry working in close ranks, protecting each other and offering the enemy an impenetrable wall.

"We almost won't need Shan at all," Xander commented.

"That is the point," Dreibrand said. "We are there to protect Shan on his journey to conquer Jingten. But also, when Shan is King and he withdraws the authority of Jingten from the humans, the Temu will need to be strong to protect their position."

"The Temu have always been the strongest," Xander said. "But I can see, General Veta, that your people in the east must be the strongest there. You look at our situation and you already know what to do."

"You give me too much credit, General. You are the expert in the Temu Domain," Dreibrand said modestly, always careful of the older man's ego. Dreibrand did not want the Temu General to resent him, and he was grateful to Xander for fixing his wound.

When a blizzard came, all outdoor training was cancelled. Warriors appreciated the break, but Dreibrand took the opportunity to work himself harder. In an exercise room at the castle, he trained while the wind and snow howled outside the high windows. The castle was cold but his exercise kept him warm. He worked on endurance and general strength, and he focused on rehabilitating the abdominal muscles that had been cut. The newly mended muscles were still tender and Dreibrand missed the strength he remembered them having. When there was pain, he pushed on because getting back to his top condition was only a matter of time and effort. Now thoroughly warmed up, he moved through numerous fighting forms with one weapon and then two.

Afterward, a sauna soothed his muscles but it did not lift the weight from his mind. The tiny room was a haven of heat. The hiss when the servant put water on the hot rocks was a delight compared to the ice outside, but his thoughts were with the Atrophane. Did Shan know they were there, and if so, why had Shan not said anything about it?

That night Dreibrand would have more than his worries to distract him. Taischek was having a grand banquet for the royal household, complete with entertainment from musicians and dancers. The Temu were accustomed to their hard winters and they made the most of the long nights.

Before the banquet, Dreibrand stole a moment alone with Miranda in a hallway. He still wished they could sit together, but at such a large event, they had to be segregated. It was too small of an issue for Miranda to complain and she was honored to sit with the Queen anyway. Miranda was excited for the entertainment as well. A famous troupe that played for all of the royal households in the Confederation would perform.

They shared a quick kiss and entered the banquet hall. Most of the guests had already gathered and they talked about the upcoming show with anticipation. Fires burned on eight hearths, which surrounded the square arrangement of tables with warmth and light. Shan waved to Dreibrand from the King's table and Dreibrand greeted him with a reserved smile. Taischek and Xander were there along with the Princes Doschai and Meetan, but Kalek had yet to show up.

"Dreibrand!" Taischek cried and a little wine jumped out of his golden cup. "It's about time. Look, Queen Vua almost beat you here."

The King pointed across the room at the arrival of Vua and her co-wives. Dreibrand moved beside his chair but remained standing until the King and Queen had finished their formal greeting.

With that done, a servant filled Dreibrand's cup.

"Forgive me, King Taischek. I stayed in the sauna longer than I thought. It is very nice," Dreibrand said.

Taischek chuckled with agreement. "Don't you have anything like that in Atrophane?"

"We have hot baths and steam rooms, but this cold weather lets me appreciate it more. Winter is not like this in Atrophane," Dreibrand answered. He thought his homeland seemed to be coming up in conversation a lot lately, or maybe he just noticed it more now.

Kalek showed up with some friends, who seated themselves at an adjacent table. Kalek took his place by his father, and by the way he landed in his chair, it was clear he had just come from his private party upstairs.

"Welcome, Kalek. I am glad you could make time for my banquet," Taischek joked.

"I would not miss it, Father. The Dubelai Troupe is the best. My friends and I were just making sure the dancing girls got into their costumes right," Kalek explained thickly.

Taischek rumbled with laughter. "And I am sure you were no help to them."

"I can only hope that the dancers are more sober than you or this is not going to be very entertaining," Xander said, and he shared a good laugh with the King for that one.

A hush replaced the chatter in the hall, and the leader of the Dubelai strode to the center of the room. His costume was black except for flamboyant sleeves of red and gold stripes. He bowed to the King and then to the Queen before starting a speech that extolled the talent of the touring group. While he spoke, musicians entered one at a time, adding the music of each instrument with every entrance. When all of the musicians had arrived, the leader stopped talking and let them fill the room with their music. On the last note the leader threw his arms up into the air and two white doves sprang out of both hands. The fanciful birds swooped over the guests, who exclaimed with delight.

Next the cymbals and drums of the band began to bang and dancers, both male and female, streamed into the hall from all four entrances. The dancers were resplendent in their colorful costumes that covered just enough of their strong beautiful bodies to be tasteful yet tantalizing. The music softened and the male dancers stopped and the female dancers slowed to circle their partners. Dark eyed women with swaying hips obeyed the sensual and slow pulse of the music, inching closer to their male partners with every step. Then the tempo of the music picked up again, and the male dancers swung into action. They tossed the female dancers into the air and caught them. They did this three times before the whole dance group burst into an even more frenzied routine. The choreography was excellent and each dancer executed each step with flawless precision. When the music stopped, the hall erupted into fabulous applause that was led by Taischek.

After this, two thirds of the dancers left the floor and the remaining dancers performed feats of gymnastics, complete with human pyramids and impressive jumps. Then the fire eaters danced with their flaming brands, and they stopped to swallow their fire in front of each table.

For their finish, the performers swallowed swords. A beautiful female dancer performed before the King's table, and she often sent Kalek playful and seductive glances. At the end of her routine she dramatically slid a sword down her throat. When she removed the steel from her body, she winked to Kalek, who by this point saw nothing in the room except for her.

Laughing at his smitten son, Taischek clapped for her and cheered. Two male dancers carried her away while she stayed in a graceful pose. The Dubelai performed two more acts. Singers with lovely voices sang and took requests from the audience. Actors put on three small plays. Two were traditional stories that remained popular, but the third play was a new piece. An actor wore a blue mask to portray himself as Lord Shan. It was a story of people who were hopeless and without a future until Lord Shan brought the new age of freedom and joy.

Shan leaned to Taischek's ear and said, "I assumed the old one about Onja bringing peace to the world would be off the list, but I did not expect this."

Taischek said, "They showed me the script two days ago. I agreed to let them perform it because I thought it would help people see the future we want. Do you like it?"

"I suppose. But it is a little vague," Shan commented.

"In the spring, the history we make will give them the details, and I am sure they will have a better play by next winter," Taischek said.

Shan smiled. No doubt next winter the play would be much better no matter how things went.

With the entertainment concluded, except for the band that would play until the guests were gone, the performers mingled with the crowd and enjoyed food and drink. The leader of the troupe performed small tricks of magic at each table and entertained people with riddles.

Kalek kept his eyes on the dancer who had been flirting with him, but his father refused to let him venture to the ladies side of the room. A small group of female dancers gathered around Miranda. They were eager for their chance to talk to someone from so far away, and Miranda found them very interesting to speak with.

When the marvelous evening began winding down, Taischek went to the fire behind him and lit his pipe. Xander, Shan and Dreibrand joined him. They held a pleasant conversation mostly about the Dubelai. Kalek and his brothers moved off to visit with their friends at another table.

"So, Dreibrand, I have been hearing a lot of good things about you from Xander," the King said.

"I am not surprised. Dreibrand has been working very hard," Shan added.

Dreibrand glanced at the rys. The more he was near him tonight, the more he felt the urge to ask him about the Atrophane.

"I work hard because I want victory as much as anyone else," Dreibrand said.

"And I like what you have been doing," Taischek said. "I want Temu warriors to start training with your Yentay. The more warriors that benefit from your teaching, the stronger we will be."

"Talking business at a party, Taischek. That is not like you," Shan scolded with good nature.

"Yes, my friend, I know. But I have had a lot on my mind," Taischek explained. He paused to tap the ashes out of his pipe. When he had a fresh pipe lit, he offered Shan some.

"No thank you. Not until Onja is ashes may I be so frivolous," Shan declared.

"I am sure you know best," Taischek said and handed the pipe to Dreibrand.

Shan said, "Since you brought it up, I agree that Dreibrand should assist in the mobilization of the entire Temu Army. Such things are done every year in his homeland, and his knowledge will benefit us all. And I think Dreibrand wants to share what he knows."

"He has already made that clear to me," Xander grumbled good naturedly.

"Forgive me if I was pushy, General. When I think of Jingteng, I know only that we must do everything we can," Dreibrand said.

"Yes, good, thinking of Jingteng," Taischek agreed. "But I have been thinking about the Sabuto as well. And I have been thinking about what you said, Dreibrand. I want to conquer them. Not just defeat their invasion force."

"Taischek, we must not get bogged down with the Sabuto," Shan reminded. "The Zenglawas cannot be ignored, nor can Onja."

"I have not forgotten. But I want to take full advantage of this rebellion. You will take Onja's throne, but I want to claim the power over the human tribes that will be gone when she is gone," Taischek stated.

"That is not what this war is for," Shan snapped.

"And why not?" Taischek argued. "It is a natural thing for the strongest tribe to do. I want to be like Dreibrand's Atrophane. They rule the other peoples around them."

Shan whirled on Dreibrand and demanded, "Did you put him up to this?"

"No. I have only described what things are like in the east. Nothing more," Dreibrand answered but Shan's anger made him feel guilty.

"But it could be done here. The Temu could have an empire," Taischek insisted, looking to Dreibrand for support.

Dreibrand spoke carefully, wanting to please the King but mindful of Shan's obvious disapproval. "Such a thing is possible, King Taischek. But it does not happen overnight. When I said we could crush the Sabuto, I was talking about the invasion force. We can defeat them and drive them back, but I was not talking about conquest."

"But why not? We might as well, while we are at it," Taischek reasoned.

"No!" Shan said sharply. "I will help you drive back the Sabuto to protect the Temu Domain, but I will not use my power to help you conquer them. And how can you think of the Sabuto so much when Jingteng is what is important? Do you think possessing the Sabuto Domain will matter if Onja is still Queen? Do you forget Jingteng so quickly once the rismavda are gone?"

Taischek frowned at Shan's lecture and looked hopefully to Dreibrand.

Because Dreibrand seemed to have inspired this ambition in the King, he felt a responsibility to keep Taischek on track. "King Taischek, the Temu Army is strong, but do not overestimate your military. We will spoil the Sabuto invasion and punish them, but defense and conquest are different. In my assessment, you do not have enough warriors to conquer the Sabuto, leave a large force behind to occupy the territory, and still deal with the Zenglawas," Dreibrand cautioned.

"There, would you listen to that, Taischek," Shan said. "The Sabuto must wait for another time, and then it will be none of my affair."

"Yes, King Taischek, it would be best to give such an ambitious plan more time," Dreibrand said. "You have other things to consider in a conquest besides the military. If you truly want to build an empire and rule foreign peoples, you need institutions ready to place in their society that will strengthen your authority. Like temples, courts, schools, money, whatever works. With the rismavda gone, you do not have a state religion around here, so I do not know what you would use."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to bring the likes of them back. I don't miss the priests," Taischek declared.

"Dreibrand, stop talking about it," Shan ordered.

"Yes, Shan, but if I may, I would tell King Taischek that now is not the time to talk of such things. Openly seeking conquest of the Sabuto might make your allies reconsider their loyalty if they fear they are next. I have heard that the Hirqua are nervous that the Temu might do such a thing," Dreibrand said.

A big grin split Taischek's face. "Oh, you speak well, Dreibrand. I should seek all of your counsel before I go jumping to conclusions. And Shan, forgive me if I upset you. I see now that I want too

much too fast.”

“The upset has already passed, Taischek. And to defend the Temu Domain, I assure you I will see that you have much of your revenge on the Sabuto,” Shan promised.

“Yes, we will teach them they can’t invade the Temu Domain,” Taischek agreed.

Shan set his wine cup on the wide hearth and said, “But I am not used to this serious talk at your banquets, Taischek. I think I will mingle and praise the performers for a job well done and thank them for the nice play.”

Dreibrand followed Shan with his eyes. He wanted to speak with the rys, but he needed to do it in private.

“Are you going to run off with him?” Taischek asked.

Dreibrand snapped his attention back to his host. “No, King Taischek.”

“Good, because we have more to talk about.” Taischek waved to a servant, who promptly filled the cups of the three men.

Taischek continued, “I am serious about what I said about the Sabuto. You know, after Shan is King in Jingtun, he probably won’t have much need for you. But I will. I want you to stay here because I like you, and because I don’t want you working for anybody else.” He laughed.

“You honor me, King Taischek,” Dreibrand said. He looked at Xander for his reaction, uncertain that the Temu General would be as enthusiastic about keeping him around.

Taischek read Dreibrand’s mind and said, “General Xander is not opposed. We have discussed this. He wants the Temu Army to be the strongest. He will still be the General of course, but you will be nearly equal to him. You will have respect, authority, and wealth. There will be plenty for everybody.”

Xander nodded and Dreibrand believed that the General was sincere. Part of Dreibrand’s ambition recoiled from the necessity of deferring to Xander’s position, but he pushed it from his mind. This offer was everything he had been hoping for and working for. The problem with Kalek entered his mind, but Dreibrand could not discuss that with the King and perhaps there was hope in that situation. Dreibrand reasoned that once he conquered more territory he would simply live far away from the Prince, and like Shan had said, Kalek was young and there was time for things to change.

Now that the King had made such a generous offer, Dreibrand was surprised by his lack of excitement. In the west, success was coming much easier and quicker than back home, but if conquering for his own people had left him feeling empty, would this be any different?

Bothered by Dreibrand’s silence, Taischek asked, “Or are you thinking of going home after you get your treasure from Jingtun?”

“No, King Taischek,” Dreibrand answered. “I have come too far to go back, and you make things so good for me, why would I want to? Ah, but I was thinking that I will need land, lots of it. A legacy for the family I hope to have.”

Taischek brightened. “Of course, Dreibrand. You shall have your share of conquered territory. Of course. So we are agreed?”

Dreibrand did not want to hesitate and offend the King. His mind raced over his options that were very limited. Going home was problematic. What of the Kezanada? He did not trust them, and if things did not work out with the Temu, they would still be there.

“Yes, King Taischek. I will serve you and no other human king,” Dreibrand decided.

“Excellent! Now we must toast the agreement,” Taischek said.

The cups of Taischek, Xander, and Dreibrand clinked together and the men drank to their future.

Sighing as the wine warmed his stomach, Taischek said, “Of course, we will make this more formal when the time comes. For now you are still Shan’s general and you will serve him as you have been doing. As you and Shan made clear, Onja must go first.”

Late into the night, Dreibrand walked Miranda to their apartment. He was taciturn and drunk. Miranda wanted to know what everyone had been talking about with the King in his private little circle at the party. He mumbled that he would tell her later. She was not used to him being so intoxicated and when he turned to just leave her at their door, she asked where he was going.

"Find Shan," he muttered.

He blearily made his way to Shan's apartment. His fist landed with heavy slow thuds on the door, and while he waited, he leaned his head on the doorframe. The guards took no issue with him. After one of the King's banquets they expected to see people in this condition.

Dreibrand figured he had to be this drunk to talk to Shan about the Atrophane. He did not want to bring up the subject because it could lead to questions he did not want to answer. He did not want Shan to know he was arguably a deserter. If the rys knew that, he might spurn him, and Dreibrand knew his good fortune with Taischek was derived mostly from Shan's favor. But Dreibrand had to know about the Atrophane. He had to know if they were really in Jingtun or if Faychan was just making things up to mess with his mind.

He heard the bolt snap back, which signaled Shan's acceptance of the visit. When Dreibrand entered and shut the door, it banged behind him because he pushed it too hard. As Shan crossed the foyer to meet him, Dreibrand reached the tall vase and meant to lean on it, but Shan took his arm and steered him away from the work of art.

"Careful, you might just tip that over in your condition," Shan said.

"Shan, I needa talk t'you," Dreibrand said.

The inebriated disturbance did not seem to bother Shan, and he cheerfully said, "Good. I was afraid you needed to have a drink with me."

Dreibrand shook his arm loose of the rys's grip. "Hey, I'm not falling down."

He followed Shan to his sitting room. The doors were not open tonight and a good fire was roaring on the hearth. Dreibrand plopped into a chair and thought the room was a little hot. He peeked furtively at his rys friend a couple times but said nothing.

"What did you want to talk about Dreibrand?" Shan prompted.

"Nothin'," Dreibrand said.

"So, did you get lost and knock on my door by mistake?" Shan wondered sarcastically.

Dreibrand rubbed his forehead and complained. "I'm not that drunk. I just wanted to, I mean, it's...nothing. I'll get outta here."

"Wait, Dreibrand. Do you forget with whom you are talking to? I sense the emotions inside you. What has you upset? Did Kalek do something again?"

Dreibrand shook his head.

Shan suggested, "Do you want to sleep this off and talk to me when you are sober."

"I won't have the nerve then," Dreibrand confessed.

"You have more nerve sober than most do drunk," Shan said.

Dreibrand took a deep breath and decided to do what he had come there to do. Disturbing Shan and then being evasive was only making him look guilty.

"Shan, I didn't tell ya everything Faychan told me last week," Dreibrand admitted.

Becoming thoughtfully silent, Shan took a seat.

Looking at the carpet, Dreibrand said, "He told me there were several hundred Atrophane in Jingtun. He didn't see them, but rys told him they were there. I want; I need you to look for them. Find out if it's true."

"It is true," Shan said quietly.

Dreibrand looked at him now. "Don't ya have to check?"

Shan shook his head. "I have noticed them. There are five hundred to be exact."

That was the size that the expeditionary force was supposed to be. Lord Kwan must be there, Dreibrand thought.

"When were you gonna tell me? Didn't you think I would be interested?" Dreibrand demanded.

Shan became aloof. "It is not like you, Dreibrand, to get drunk and yell," he said.

"So you weren't gonna tell me," Dreibrand concluded derisively.

"I would have," Shan said.

Dreibrand thought he heard a hint of regret in the rys's voice, but it was hard to tell. Dreibrand struggled against his emotions. He did not want to get angry with Shan. If he should avoid an argument with anybody in Ektren, it was the powerful rys. Shan was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Shan apologized, "I am sorry you had to hear about it from Faychan. I should have realized he might know."

Working past his anger and suddenly feeling a little closer to sober, Dreibrand said, "Are they all right? What's Onja doing to them?"

"The good news is that they are well treated. They are housed openly in the city, which is good, because if they were in the dungeon, Onja would surely torture them," Shan answered.

"Do you know any of their names?" Dreibrand asked.

"No. I have not monitored their conversations," Shan answered.

"When were you going to tell me about this?" Dreibrand asked.

Shan shifted uncomfortably in his chair and tried to explain. "Dreibrand, I was planning to tell you eventually. But, I do not know why the Atrophane are there. Not that I would want such a thing, but Onja should have destroyed them in the Wilderness with the Deamedron. Because they are not imprisoned—or at least not harshly imprisoned—I suspect Onja intends to use them to defend the city. I did not know how to tell you, Dreibrand. I was afraid you would turn against me if you thought you might have to fight your own people."

Rubbing his head again, Dreibrand said, "Shan, you have more of my loyalty than anyone has ever really had before. I am not going to turn against you. How else will I get Miranda back her children?"

"And you will feel the same even if your countrymen oppose us?" Shan said.

"The Atrophane will not take the side of Onja. Atrophane do not serve the cause of others. Others serve our cause. We are all raised that way. It is why the Atrophane have an empire," Dreibrand explained.

"If only by your example, I know that your people are proud and strong, but Dreibrand do you really think it would be difficult for Onja to force her will upon them? I myself have made her desperate. She will want all of the soldiers she can find. I imagine she saw the explorers from your country and decided to keep them instead of kill them," Shan said.

Dreibrand had no response to this. What was human free will compared to Onja's desire? He remembered how easily Miranda and he had been drawn deep into the wilds.

"But the Atrophane would resist. They would die fighting her," Dreibrand argued weakly.

"That may be true, but it may also be true that Onja has made a deal with them or cowed them with threats. One of the Atrophane was hurt, and the wounds were caused by a rys," Shan countered.

"But you do not know they will serve Onja," Dreibrand insisted.

"No, not at this time. But Dreibrand, if we encounter your people and they present themselves as our enemy, will you fight them? I must know. I had to ask Redan the same thing. The closer we get to Jington, the more I will be dependent on the protection of my allies. You said yourself that Atrophane do not serve the cause of others, so does that include you? I must have no doubts," Shan declared.

Although Dreibrand had abandoned his homeland, he did not want to fight his own people, but he also knew that he did not have much reason not to. His people had cut him off with imperial censure before he was even born. The House of Veta was of the ruling class, one of the original seven Houses of Atrophane, but his people had stripped him of that prestige. In his lifetime, the Vetas could lose the economic power to maintain their ruling class status. Still, he had been loyal to his people. The military career had not been prohibited by the censure, and Dreibrand had once thought he had a chance to rebuild his family fortune that way. But even in the military, he had come to realize that he was being carefully controlled. Finally, Dreibrand realized that the day he had left the Atrophane he had ultimately decided he could fight his people. The Atrophane did not want him and he was on his own. He always had been.

"I can do it, Shan. I want Onja dead," Dreibrand stated.

"Thank you, Dreibrand. That means a lot to me, and I am sorry I had to ask you," Shan said.

"You had to ask and maybe I needed to be asked," Dreibrand admitted. "But Shan, do not tell the others about this. Let the Temu find out when and if the time comes. I do not want them to get the wrong idea, you know, look down on me."

"Yes, I can do that," Shan said. "But can I ask you something else?"

A hint of distress flickered across Dreibrand's face but he nodded.

"Is it possible you might know who the Atrophane are in Jington?" Shan said.

"I might," Dreibrand said reluctantly.

"Then, you might get the chance to convince them to join me, especially if Onja is forcing their service. That would be the best for everybody," Shan proposed.

Unless I am executed as a deserter, Dreibrand thought. "I will try," he said.

The best warrior sees only success. Death is the enemy's option—Galmonlay, hero of Atrophane's classic age.

The bowstring rolled off Miranda's fingers and hissed by her cheek, driving the arrow toward the target. It sank in at the edge of the bullseye and she scowled.

"It is good," praised Redan, who noted the harshness of her self-judgment. "I moved the target so you would learn to adjust for a different direction of wind. It was supposed to be harder."

"Let me try again," Miranda said.

Redan handed her another arrow and this time she struck the bullseye full center. Only perfect shots gave Miranda satisfaction. She knew too well the consequences of weakness and failure.

"You learn too fast," Redan laughed. "You will be my rival soon."

Miranda smiled now, knowing his compliment was too generous. She could only hope to mimic his agile greatness. "You have been a wise teacher," Miranda said.

Growing serious, Redan said, "Your lessons will soon be over, Miranda, and I will miss this time together, but the days of practice are coming to an end."

Most of the snow had melted from the land over the last couple of days. The frost lifted from the ground every afternoon and a bright sun warmed the soft air of spring. The land was still brown and gray from the hardship of winter, but it would soon blossom with the bitterness of war.

Miranda looked over her shoulder at the Rysamand, beautiful in the bright day. The view was always awesome from the mesa over Dengar Nor, and she could see that snow and ice still commanded the slopes of the mountains.

"It was about this time last year when my son was born," she recalled.

Redan faced the mountains with her, remembering the children held by the rys Queen. He tried to imagine Miranda with her children. She was so different from other women that Redan never pictured her in a maternal role. Now he saw the sorrow in her eyes and heard the ache in her voice as she mentioned her son.

Awkwardly, Redan asked, "What is his name?"

"Esseldan," Miranda replied, privately hoping he was still called that.

"It must be hard not knowing how your children are doing," Redan consoled.

"They are fine," Miranda said with surprising brightness. "Shan looks in on them. They live in the luxury of Jingtén."

"Lord Shan is great and kind," Redan said.

"Yes, but practice will bring him to Jingtén quicker than talk," Miranda declared. Facing the target again, she replaced a lock of hair behind her ear and intended to take another shot.

"General Veta is coming," Redan said.

Miranda followed her instructor's eyes and was pleased to see Dreibrand crossing the field. He had little time for her these days. More volunteers from the Hirqua and the Nuram had increased the ranks of the Yentay over the winter to five hundred men. He was always busy training warriors and he had left the city four times to inspect other parts of the Temu army with General Xander. Also, last night, like usual, Dreibrand had come home late and left before Miranda woke up. She reminded herself that this visit would probably be brief, but she was thankful to see him at all.

Redan saluted as his general arrived.

"How goes today's lesson?" Dreibrand inquired.

"A master could not hope for a better pupil," Redan praised.

"You are an example of modesty," Dreibrand commented. "Do not take too much credit. I gave Miranda her first lesson with the bow." His eyes smiled to her.

"Enough," Miranda scolded. "The credit is mine for learning."

"Of course, Miranda, but I am afraid I must end your lesson for today. Redan, Lord Shan requires you to meet him at his apartment," Dreibrand said.

"Yes Sir." Redan nodded politely to Miranda and then left to report to his lord.

"Has something happened?" Miranda whispered as Redan walked away.

"Nothing that is not supposed to," Dreibrand answered. "Come, walk with me, Miranda. I wish to spend the rest of the day with you."

"The rest of the day?" Miranda scoffed pleasantly.

Dreibrand said quietly, "And the night too. I am sorry I put everyone ahead of you, when it is you I want to see the most."

"I miss you too, Dreibrand, but this war will not be won if we ignore everything just to please ourselves," Miranda said.

"But a man should ignore his responsibilities sometimes, especially to be with you. And that is what I shall do today. This may be our last chance for a quiet evening together," Dreibrand said.

His hint at coming events was irresistible. "Why is that?" Miranda pressed.

"I have advance word that the emissary from the Tacus will be here tomorrow. That means Ejan will be coming with his army, and then we will go to war," Dreibrand explained.

Miranda fell silent, almost in disbelief that the long winter of waiting was finally over. The ache for her children flared in her heart and her eyes grew misty although she did not let a tear fall. Over the long months she had adjusted to the absence of her children. In the luxury and privilege of life at the Temu court, Miranda had allowed herself a ration of happiness. Despite her nagging grief, she enjoyed her freedom and Dreibrand's love.

"My children," she finally murmured.

"Yes, we will all be together soon," Dreibrand agreed.

As they walked toward the castle, Miranda looked up to him and smiled gratefully. Two small rows of braids neatly held his bangs off his face and he was shaved. Beneath his old chestplate of armor he wore a new tan suit of soft suede leather over a red wool shirt. She admired his handsomeness. She knew he worked hard for himself, but he also did it for her, and she noted the strain evident in his eyes.

Although Dreibrand wanted to relax and needed to relax, he talked to Miranda about his latest meeting with Faychan, once they were in the privacy of their apartment. Faychan had reported that the numbers joining the Sabuto Army were even higher than Shan's estimates.

"But we are still strong enough, right? You have been working so hard to get the army ready and many volunteers have come to our side," Miranda said.

Dreibrand shrugged. "The Sabuto will have a war host of fifty thousand. We have twenty five thousand. I tell myself not to worry because Shan will make the difference for us, but I still worry."

"But the Tacus are on the way. We will have enough," Miranda insisted.

"Ejan is coming with five thousand warriors, which will help, but the Zenglawa are on the move now. They are seizing the Jingtun Pass, and Athol has an army of eleven thousand. Faychan said his rymavda sources told him that Onja has commanded Athol to protect the pass no matter what. I pray to the Gods that this is true, because if the Zenglawa invade at the same time the Sabuto do, I do not know what I will do. Even as it is, I see no way to avoid splitting our forces. I cannot leave the eastern border open to the Zenglawa, while we fight the Sabuto in the south." Dreibrand shook his head, frustrated that he had not thought of a better plan.

Despite her fear that their enemies could overwhelm them, Miranda said, "Shan is lucky to have a

general who works so hard.”

“Yes, I work hard, but I worry I accomplish nothing, Miranda. The decisions I make are so important but I always fear my choices are wrong. I was a good lieutenant, but now I am a general, and I must see a thousand things more,” Dreibrand confessed.

Miranda realized that the mental strain had tired him. Taking his hand, she offered immediate encouragement. “Dreibrand, you will lead Shan’s army to victory. Shan would only have chosen the best man for the job.”

Although Dreibrand appreciated her faith in him, he cast down his eyes and seemed reluctant to agree.

Miranda continued, “Dreibrand, you are so smart and you always think everything through so well. Do not doubt yourself.”

“If I were so thoughtful I would be in Atrophane right now,” he muttered.

Miranda knew he was still troubled about the Atrophane in Jingten and the possibility that he might have to fight them. She did not doubt his commitment to serve Shan, but he clearly had never wanted to confront his people.

“I remember when I met you, the west was all you wanted. Why do you talk of Atrophane when I know you do not want to be there?” Miranda said.

“If I thought things through so well, like you believe, I would not have run off from my people.” Dreibrand took a deep breath and said, “I wish I had not left like I did. I should have made a formal resignation. Lord Kwan was good to me in some things when he did not have to be, and he deserved better from me. I am ashamed of—of what I did.” The last few words were quiet and furtive.

“Dreibrand, forget that one mistake. There is no undoing it, and if you had stayed with your people, I do not know what would have happened to me. I am glad to have you here,” Miranda said with obvious sincerity.

Her words were sweet and they helped Dreibrand to dismiss his guilt. The Atrophane did not compare to the trust and support Miranda gave him, and he forced himself not to sabotage his leadership with his private regret. He was thankful he had Miranda to confide in because she saved him from his lurking doubts.

“I suppose worrying is part of being a general,” he decided heavily.

“Among other things,” Miranda said playfully and put her arms around him.

They enjoyed their time alone, knowing that comforts and pleasures would soon be left behind for the trials of the warpath.

Stretched out face down on the bed, Dreibrand soaked up one of Miranda’s massages. Her strong hands worked his flesh, driving the tension out of his muscles. Miranda could see part of the new scar on his side. By now it had healed, but the scar was bright red and would not fade for many years.

With a satisfied moan, Dreibrand rolled over and held Miranda by the lapels of her open robe. She bent to kiss him and he accepted her affection warmly, but he did not return to lovemaking. Sitting up, Miranda regarded him patiently.

After petting her shoulder and stalling, he finally said, “Miranda, when it is time to go to war, I want you to stay in Dengar Nor.”

With a twitch of her upper lip, Miranda’s face hardened with displeasure. Proudly she got out of the bed and straightened her robe around her. Her cold quiet disturbed Dreibrand more than any temperamental outburst.

Miranda went to the window and looked across the Temu Domain. The setting sun had turned the Rysamand to gold and she was silhouetted against the dazzling mountains. She had been expecting this discussion.

“I am going,” she stated, not defiantly but factually.

Grabbing his clothes, Dreibrand started the argument he had rehearsed many times in his head. Calmly he said, "Miranda, you do not understand. War is terrible. It is not something you want to see. You could get hurt."

The comment made her whirl on him and she trembled with indignation. "Get hurt? Get hurt?" she mocked. "I have already been hurt. A painful death does not scare me. Onja took that fear from me. She tortured me beyond a pain that can be endured. She hurt me so much; I would have died if her magic had not kept me alive—to suffer through the agony."

"Then I do not want you to get hurt again," Dreibrand insisted.

"If you will not let me fight for my children, then you should have let me die on the glacier," Miranda proclaimed.

The words slapped Dreibrand and he said, "I know I failed you that day in Jingtun, but let me protect you now. Stay where it is safe."

Miranda's face softened in acknowledgement of his love. She did not want him to blame himself for the things that had happened to her. He had saved her life.

"I know. And you are right," she admitted. "But you cannot change my mind, and I have already told Shan I am going. He would not accept me as a bodyguard, but he says I may attend him on the way to Jingtun."

"Shan will free you of that service if you ask," Dreibrand said.

"But I will not stay. I cannot. I want to be there when Onja is defeated and hold my children the instant they are free," Miranda declared.

Dreibrand approached her now and took her in his arms. "I blame myself everyday for what happened. I should not have left you alone. Please, Miranda, stay in Dengar Nor," he pleaded again.

Although Miranda appreciated how much he cared, she would not yield to his wish. Returning his hug, she pressed against his body, hoping to make her words more convincing with female closeness.

"That is why we should stay together. Bad things happen when we are apart," Miranda said. "Together we are stronger."

Dreibrand sighed, resigning himself to her will. He knew he would literally have to tie her down to keep her in Dengar Nor.

She urged, "Would it not please the general to have me in his tent?"

"Yes it would," he admitted, remembering the dangers they had faced together.

"With you and Shan I will be safe," she said.

"Then let us be parted no more," he breathed and kissed her with real passion.

A part of Dreibrand was glad that she would be with him, but he had to protect her. He had never felt such pressure for victory before. He hoped Miranda was right about them being safer together.

Safe in his arms, Miranda asked quietly, "Will the war be harder than when we came across the Wilderness?"

"Yes, and it will be different," Dreibrand said. He stroked her hair and the soft curls tickled his fingers. He knew that her life had shown her few kindnesses, but no matter how tough she was, the carnage of her first battlefield would shock her. He did not want her to see it. He did not want her to see him.

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Miranda hurried into the Queen's wing of the castle. Shan needed her soon and she had not expected this summons from Vua because she had wished her kind hostess farewell the day before. It was still dark but the dawn was not far off. When morning came the armies of the Temu

and the Tacus would parade through the city and then leave for war. In the past two weeks the muds of spring had started to dry and King Ejan had arrived three days ago with his promised warriors.

A servant ushered Miranda to a private chamber where Vua awaited her arrival. The Queen shooed away the three servants who were preparing her hair for a jeweled headdress. Vua and her entourage would go down to the city and observe the parade, but they would not be near Miranda.

"Miranda, thank you for coming. I know Shan requires your attendance and you do not have much time," Vua said.

Miranda bowed to the woman who had always been so good to her. "My Queen, I would come any time you asked."

"I should have done this yesterday but I wanted to see you one more time before you left. I am selfish," Vua said. The Queen went to a large green wooden chest and opened the heavy lid. From inside she removed a carefully folded cloak, woven of the rich Temu colors of gold, red and purple. "Set aside your bow and quiver and take off your cloak," Vua instructed.

Miranda obeyed, but as the Queen spread the new cloak around her shoulders, she quietly protested, "My Queen, I have a good cloak. You do not need to give me one."

"I made this for you," Vua explained. "It designates you as a member of my household. It is not much protection, but some people might respect it."

Miranda ran her fingers over the cloth, beginning to recognize it as the pattern she had seen on Vua's loom recently. Flustered by the honor, she said, "My Queen, do not worry about me. I will not actually be in combat. I will be with Shan and his bodyguards behind the lines."

Vua glanced at the sparkling rys weapon at Miranda's hip. "If you go to a war and carry weapons, expect to be in danger. Promise me again you will be careful."

Miranda gave her promise again and Vua set an affectionate hand on her cheek.

"All of Taischek's wives are very proud of you. When you stand with Shan, it is like we are there with you. Accept my gift and remember us," Vua said.

"Of course, my Queen," Miranda murmured, overwhelmed by the show of respect.

Vua folded Miranda's old cloak and handed it back to her. "Give this to someone who needs it or use it to make bandages for the hurt men," she recommended.

Miranda did not want to think about the warriors who were going to be hurt. She would deal with that when it happened. She thanked the Queen for the wonderful gift.

"And remember your promise to bring your children here so I can see them," Vua reminded.

"You have my promise, but you do not need it. Dreibrand and I are coming back here to live after Jington is conquered. Dreibrand will continue to serve the King," Miranda said.

"I know, but I wanted the promise so I can believe you will get through this safely," Vua explained and hugged her.

Miranda took her leave of the kind queen and her heart ached with appreciation for the concern Vua had shown. It reminded her of the love she had once had from her mother, and it was good to have a little maternal affection after so long with none.

The Rysamand were outlined with the glow of the coming dawn when she met Shan and his bodyguards. In addition to Redan, the King had assigned six Temu warriors to protect Shan at all times. Outfitted now for war, Shan was an awesome sight in his supple jacket of chain mail. The dark navy color of the oiled steel rings glistened beside his blue skin, and gems set in silver pendants adorned the armor. Crystals of Shan's making had been worked into the jacket, in rows down each sleeve and around the collar. A faint inner gleam flickered from the crystals. A simple helmet wrapped in white cloth crowned his head.

In his arms Shan held a long bundle also wrapped in white cloth, which he handed to Miranda.

"Are you and Dreibrand still going to do what you planned?" she asked.

"Yes, and do not be afraid. The enchantments on the sword will become more powerful once it is done," Shan assured her.

Servants brought horses to Shan's small party and they rode down to the city. From the castle road they could see the city and the camped armies around it. Twenty five thousand Temu had come in answer to their King's call and the banners of every Temu family sprouted from the great camp. The Tacus were also present with four thousand infantry and one thousand cavalry. The multitude of warriors was milling around, forming ranks in preparation for their march through the city. The warriors would go to battle with the cheers of their people, and the people would see the strength of their bold rebellion and have faith in their defense.

On the same broad steps where the rismavda had been executed, Shan took his place with his bodyguards to preside over the parade. Today would not be like the horror of the executions. Miranda scanned the stone steps but all traces of blood had been polished away. Lines of warriors already marked the parade route through the city square and held back a thick crowd. Excitement swelled inside Miranda. She felt important inside the aura of Shan's power, and now that she always attended him in public, no one told her what to do or that she was not allowed.

The sun cleared the Rysamand and set Shan's armor ablaze. The pure light of the spring sunshine generated a myriad rainbow facets on the crystals. The crowd was awed by his appearance and people began to respectfully bow or kneel to the rys champion.

Before the spontaneous humility spread to all the people, Shan spoke loudly and his voice rolled over the crowd with the special power of his race. "Rise and stand proud men and women. I am not Onja who would see you on your knees!"

The statement roused a great cheer and people returned to their feet. They believed in Shan's goodness and that he would lead them to victory and freedom.

Trumpets heralded the coming of King Taischek who would start the parade. His tribe cheered wildly when he entered the city square ahead of endless ranks of warriors. He raised his spiked mace in salute to Shan and stopped his horse. Taischek dismounted and ascended the steps to stand beside Shan. The drums and trumpets continued and General Xander continued with the warriors to march through the rest of the adoring city.

Next came Taischek's heir, Kalek, who rode ahead of the next legion of Temu warriors. He too saluted Shan with remarkable sincerity then dismounted to stand beside his father.

Now came the Princes Doschai and Meetan. The seriousness of the occasion gave them stern faces that did not match their youth. They raised their weapons to salute Onja's challenger and basked in the clear approval of their father. The younger princes continued with the parade.

The remaining thousands of Taischek's army marched by and Shan accepted many more salutes. The very spectacle of the massed might of the Temu Tribe made the people of Dengar Nor ecstatic with confidence.

When the Temu Army had passed, King Ejan arrived with his warriors. The Tacus King saluted Shan and dismounted to join him. A green cloak billowed from his square shoulders and the silver and gold tracery of his royal armor glinted in the sun. He nodded respectfully to Taischek and before he turned to admire the passing of his army, he dipped his head to Miranda. He was a handsome if aging man, and as tall as Shan or Dreibrand. His eyes had the extraordinary trait of being the same color brown as his skin, and Miranda was flattered by his recognition.

By Shan's design, Dreibrand and the Yentay came last. The warhorse Starfield shook his long black mane and arched his strong dappled gray neck, seemingly proud to carry Shan's general. Astride his foreign-bred horse, General Veta made an imposing sight. A black helmet framed his face squarely, accentuating his serious features. He had retired his old Atrophane armor and replaced it with an armored jacket of his design. The jacket was comprised of overlapping pieces of black metal that looked somewhat like the feathers of a bird. This armor covered his torso and arms but allowed great flexibility of movement. Metal studded chaps covered his legs above thick new boots. A silver chain hung across his chest securing a white cloak trimmed with blue, which were the colors Shan had chosen for his Yentay.

Dreibrand's new gear was beautiful and cunningly made, almost rivaling the finery of the kings. But his outfitting was conspicuously incomplete. Except for his shield and ivory handled dagger, he wore no other weapon.

Behind him rode the Yentay. Although these volunteers were from the Hirqua and Nuram tribes,

they looked akin now in new surcoats of white trimmed with blue to match their commander. All of them radiated an exuberant devotion to Shan. They were the warriors who had personally chosen to serve the rys.

The five hundred Yentay halted before Shan and the kings. Following Dreibrand's cue, the Yentay saluted Shan in unison. The spectacle impressed the gathered masses who were near enough to witness it. The beating of drums ceased and the crowds quieted.

Tytido dismounted and held Starfield's bridle while the general got down. Dreibrand walked up the broad steps and bowed deeply to the kings and then to Shan. He and Shan had planned this ceremony and now that it started Dreibrand surged with emotion.

Shan stepped forward and spoke. Power shook his voice and his magic carried it to many ears. "My general, Dreibrand Veta, is of no tribe. As I accept him, I accept any human, any tribe, in friendship. Together we will end the age of Onja. As you help me free my people from tyranny, you free yourselves from tyranny. I promise as King of Jingtten to restrict my rule to the Rysamand. No more will rys rule the humans and demand tribute. Today is the first day of a new history!"

The people screamed with elated approval, and warriors made their war cries because they would be the ones to make the new age happen.

Shan whispered for Miranda. She brought forth the bundle and gave it to Shan, who unwrapped the scabbarded sword. Holding it high, Shan removed the shining new sword. Crystals blazed in the hilt and a glowing orb capped the pommel.

Shan continued his speech. "This sword made by human hands and enchanted with my spells symbolizes our union. Humans and rys can work together to build a free world. Now let our blood flow together so we may remember our bond."

Dreibrand removed a gauntlet and looked to Miranda for encouragement, but she looked nervous.

With the blade pointing to the sky, Shan held the sword toward Dreibrand, who grasped the virgin blade with his bare hand. Shan also grabbed the sword and after a nod of agreement, they began to slide their hands down the blade. They had no intention of maiming themselves, but they cut their hands enough to produce a free flow of blood.

No pain registered on either face as Shan and Dreibrand solemnly bloodied the gleaming steel before a hushed audience. Their hands reached the hilt, leaving the sword smeared with rys and human blood. For a moment their bleeding hands lingered at the hilt while blood dripped down the handle and eventually over the warding crystal at the end.

For Dreibrand's ears only Shan said, "In ancient times, the men of the east were ever the enemy of Onja. Accept my warding and finish their fight."

"I accept," Dreibrand said.

They released the sword and clasped their cut hands together. Dreibrand could feel the tingling energy from Shan's blood flowing into his open cut, and the human blood flowing into Shan's cut affected the rys as well. The essence of human life thrilled the rys with its rich burning vitality. The flesh of short-lived humans was imbued with a hot quick force that contrasted with the slow steady life force of rys that took centuries to peak.

Shan raised the bloodied sword high and the blue glow of his magic flared in his eyes. Pale blue flames sprang up the sword, making the blood sizzle and smoke.

"To Jingtten!" Shan roared.

The multitude cried out with eager agreement. The noise swelled through every street and alley of the city, removing all fear and doubt from every mind, at least for a time.

Shan lowered the sword and the flames dissipated. Sheathing the weapon, he buckled it around Dreibrand. Without further ceremony Shan descended the steps, followed by his allies and bodyguards. Miranda brought Shan's muscular white horse to him. The magnificent animal of rys breeding would bear its master back to their homeland. Flanked by the human kings, Shan left the city.

And they took to the warpath.

On the eastern road outside the city, the Kings and generals met with Shan. The stalled thousands of warriors waiting restlessly while the leaders talked.

Shan announced, "The Sabuto have left Chanda. They are three days from the Temu border and six days from Dengar Nor."

In an uncharacteristic show of anxiety, Taischek bit his lip. He loved Shan and hated Onja, but he loved his tribe the most and hated the Sabuto the most.

Taischek said, "King Ejan, for now we must part company. The Sabuto threat in the south must be stopped before we can march to the Rysamand. The Princes Doschai and Meetan will stay with you, along with two thousand Temu warriors."

Ejan nodded. It had been agreed that the Tacus forces would guard the eastern border from the Zenglawas threat while Taischek and Shan thwarted the Sabuto. "You honor me with your sons. I will hold your eastern border until you get back," Ejan promised.

"The Temu will always remember who their true ally was in time of need," Taischek vowed.

"Whether I have good judgment or I am simply gambling, I do not know. But in my heart I must side with King Taischek of the Temu," Ejan said.

"Then good luck in our battles until we may fight together," Taischek declared.

"Atathol is cowardly. The fight may wait for you to get back," Ejan predicted.

"That fool should go home," Taischek grumbled.

"We will send him home yet," Ejan said.

Shan interposed, "King Ejan, I wish we could talk longer, but we have much country to cross. The Temu Domain is in immediate danger."

"Yes, Lord Shan. Sometimes a king forgets that the world does not always wait for him," Ejan apologized.

"Soon I will have that problem," Shan said pleasantly.

Although Shan had reminded them of the need for haste, Taischek took the time to say goodbye to his two sons.

Doschai and Meetan were reluctant to part from their father, and they sent many envious glances toward Kalek.

Doschai protested, "Father, let us fight the Sabuto with you. We must defend our tribe from our hated rival."

"You're a good son," Taischek praised. "But you and your brother are needed in the east. You will be guarding your father's back. Protecting our eastern border is just as important. If the Zenglawas attack, you and Meetan will represent our tribe beside our ally."

Doschai understood the responsibility his father gave him, but deep down he desired to be with the main Temu force.

"We wish only to stay at your side, Father," Meetan echoed his brother's thoughts.

"I will be back soon. Now make the Temu proud of its princes," Taischek commanded with paternal love.

Privately, Taischek would have preferred to leave Kalek with his brothers and protect him from the Sabuto as well. Kalek had not always been the heir. Taischek had lost both of Kalek's older brothers on Sabuto raids, and he dreaded to lose another son. Kalek was the last living son of Vua, and the King knew his Queen cherished the boy, but the time had come for Kalek to learn his role as a warrior king.

The bulk of the Temu Army headed south and late in the day they began to meet refugees coming north. General Xander had ordered an evacuation of the border town of Adi Nor. Although Adi Nor was fortified, its defenses were not enough to hold back the pressure of a fifty thousand man war

host, and Xander had decided it was best for the people to simply retreat as the army advanced. Whether the town could be saved depended on how quickly they reached the border, but Xander had opted to at least save the people.

After marching into the night, the army finally stopped to take a few short hours of rest. Dreibrand inspected the Yentay section of the camp and the familiarity of the task made him recall his days with the Horde. His men were quiet. The jubilation at the morning's parade had worn off and been replaced by the contemplation of battle.

When he circled back to his tent, he found Tytido waiting for him.

The lieutenant saluted and said, "Sir, Miranda wanted me to tell you she had to go to Shan and would be back later."

Dreibrand mumbled his thanks for the message. His cut hand was itching and he pulled off the gauntlet. A simple strip of cloth had been wound around his palm and it had dried blood on it. Dreibrand removed the bandage and saw that the cut had closed. Shan's magic had accelerated the healing, but Dreibrand had not expected the ceremony to leave him with such a strange feeling.

"Would you look at that," Dreibrand said and showed Tytido his hand.

Tytido was impressed but he noticed his general was distant and distracted. "You seem to have picked up the mood that is settling on the army, Sir," Tytido commented.

Dreibrand tossed the bandage into his campfire and put his gauntlet back on. "I was just thinking about other battles of this size that I have been in before. But I have never been with the smaller force," he said.

"Lord Shan will make the difference," Tytido said.

"Yes, I know," Dreibrand said briskly. He had not meant to sound worried. "Lieutenant, if you like, stay and sit with me while I wait for Miranda."

Tytido accepted and they sat by his fire and talked business. Eventually a lull came to the conversation and then Tytido cautiously asked, "May we talk as friends? We may never get another chance."

The request surprised Dreibrand. He had always maintained some professional distance as the commander, but when he thought about it, Tytido was his friend.

Dreibrand smiled. "Do not sound so pessimistic, Tytido. We will win and we will live."

"Yes, Sir—Dreibrand. But I was taught that I must accept my death before I enter battle so I will not be afraid. I have done that but I am curious about something, and I would like to know in case I am dead soon," Tytido explained.

"My people would not talk of death before a battle, but what is it you want to know?" Dreibrand said.

Tytido looked a little embarrassed and he leaned closer and said quietly, "I want to know what you did that you had to go so far from your homeland. People think a crime has driven you from your home."

Guardedly, Dreibrand demanded, "Who says I am a criminal?"

"It is gossip, rumors. It is no one person. But Dreibrand do not worry about it. The Yentay respect you and do not care what it is. People are only curious," Tytido said.

"Then what are these rumors?" Dreibrand asked.

"Well, the most popular one is that you killed Miranda's husband," Tytido said.

Dreibrand actually laughed, relieved that it was so far from the truth. "No. I have never seen the father of her children, but from what she tells me, I would kill him. Miranda left him before I met her," Dreibrand explained.

"Then what is it?" Tytido pressed.

Dreibrand sighed and stared at Tytido, trying to truly judge the man. He trusted Tytido but his secret had to stay where it was.

"Tytido, my family is a very old family in Atrophane, and once very powerful, but not so much anymore. I came west seeking a new fortune because I had none to inherit. And that is the truth. As a friend, I ask you to leave it at that," Dreibrand said.

"So you are not going to tell me," Tytido surmised.

"I would rather your curiosity kept you alive," Dreibrand said.

Tytido grinned. Even knowing that Dreibrand held something back, Tytido was glad to know that he went to battle at the side of a friend.

Kalek had never felt such terrifying exhilaration. If the cruel spiked mace of his father had not been raised beside him and the cries of his maddened tribesmen had not filled his ears, Kalek doubted he would have had the courage to fulfill his arrogant dreams of glory.

His father had honored him by bringing him on this first charge against the invaders and Kalek would fight his first battle. Taischek led one hundred mounted warriors to harass the flank of the Sabuto host. They burst out of woodland cover onto fields trampled by the invading thousands. The Temu howled with outrage and the song of their bloodlust dared their enemy to face them.

The Sabuto and their allies yelled back with contempt and defiance, shaking their weapons and shields. They had the blessing of Queen Onja and the Temu would pay for their pretense of superiority. Amid the heat of this rivalry, only a few among the vast Sabuto ranks recalled the old saying that warned against seeing a Temu defend his homeland.

When Kalek galloped through the trees fresh with spring foliage, he thought of his dead brothers. He feared to join them until he broke into the open and beheld a portion of the Sabuto Army. Once Kalek saw Temu land trod by masses of riders and infantry, he understood the permanent flame of vengeance that burned in his father's heart. This tribe had slain his brothers, and fury overwhelmed Kalek's fear. The intoxication of attacking his enemy became an insane pleasure.

The banners of Sabuto clans and foreign tribes waved among bristling spears. Beyond this scene, the Temu saw wispy pillars of smoke from the smoldering Adi Nor. Knowing that the small town had been destroyed made Taischek envision the lines of smoke as fingers rising out of the land. The hand of his tribe's wrath would come down and crush its enemy. Once Taischek saw the huge Sabuto invasion force, he knew winning one battle at the border would not sate his anger. With Shan and Dreibrand he would punish the Sabuto as he had never done before. He would bring the fire down on Chanda, where once the Sabuto had put fire to him.

The Temu assailed the nearest group of infantry, and Taischek's mace lashed out like the club of a demon. The mace tore through the skull of the first warrior who leaped at the King, and the warrior's helmet flew up when the spikes flung it off the ruined head.

Kalek was at first daunted by the flurry of warriors who rushed to engage him, and he could not focus on a target. But his instinct soon took hold and told him to kill the man closest to killing him. Despite living for only eighteen years, Kalek had spent most of them training and now he would kill his first man.

With his sword, Kalek whacked aside a spear that plunged for his horse's shoulder. The blade broke the spear shaft and the spearhead spun uselessly to the ground. The brave warrior lunged closer to knock the Prince from his horse with the remainder of the spear shaft, but Kalek lashed out and slashed the man's throat to the spine. The head flopped precariously over the falling body and blood gushed in horrid quantities. But Kalek could not let the sight of his first victim fascinate him and he killed a second man almost immediately.

Seeing his enemies fall by his own hand made Kalek yell with triumph. The excitement of killing those who attacked him competed with his fear and distracted his reason. Still tender with inexperience, Kalek fought deeper into his oncoming enemies.

A veteran of too many battles, Taischek would not let his heir fall into such a rookie mistake. Indeed, Taischek had no intention of letting his harassment party get bogged down at all. He had brought four parties of one hundred riders each that would attack the Sabuto flank in quick succession and hopefully draw them to his chosen battle site. Already a horn sounded for the first Temu party to withdraw and Taischek struggled toward his son, his mace clearing the path.

When Kalek saw his father, his wild-eyed grimace turned into a grin. Taischek could see that Kalek was gripped by the potency of his first battle and he had not heard the signal to withdraw.

"Kalek, follow me!" Taischek thundered.

The attack plan seeped back into Kalek's mind and he obeyed his father. The rumble of Temu riders enveloped him as he left the battle and rushed back into the woods. When the Sabuto followed their attackers, Taischek's second harassment force struck and covered the retreat of the King.

The blue sky of a perfect spring day absorbed the thinning smoke from Adi Nor. Shan and the Temu Army had achieved their positions on the pasturelands north of the razed town, and they awaited the return of Taischek's harassment forces and the onslaught of the Sabuto.

From the highest hill, Shan overlooked the mass of warriors. Nearby his white horse grazed absently on the tender spring grass. With his arms folded, the rys stared at the drifting smoke. His human allies assumed he monitored Taischek's progress, but Shan contemplated heavier thoughts. Today the death and destruction would begin in earnest. Onja would see those loyal to her die and retreat, and it would represent her waning power not only to herself but also to the humans. When her human domain was gone, Shan would go to Jingten and take the rest.

Shan thought about the humans who he was about to kill and the one rys he would kill. One of his hands drifted to the ancient rys sword he now wore and he considered Dacian's Last Law. The enchantments on the sword told him the story of the warlike ways of his ancestors, and he wondered how many rys in Nufal had once felt the sting of that blade.

Dacian's decree for peace among rys had been a beautiful idea, but it protected Onja, and Shan saw that as its only flaw.

Dreibrand rode up the hill toward Shan and asked if something had happened to Taischek.

After a farsighted pause, Shan replied, "He is fine."

Dreibrand scowled in the direction of the enemy and Shan noted his agitation. "It is not like you to be so impatient, Dreibrand. What is wrong?"

"Why would Taischek not let me go on this attack? The Yentay are ready to go, and we were the best choice for the job," Dreibrand vented.

Shan explained, "This is the Temu's fight. This is their homeland. Taischek had to strike the first blow as a matter of principle. He did not mean to insult you."

Dreibrand digested the response and seemed somewhat placated by it. "The Yentay are anxious to fight for you, Shan," he said.

"I know you are all ready to serve me. There will be plenty of fighting soon enough. And we have a long road to Jingten," Shan said.

"I guess I am used to starting the war," Dreibrand murmured.

Shan's black eyes drifted over the calm green pastures ahead of the army. A small herd of brown and white cattle grazed in the distance, oblivious to the unrest in their vicinity.

"I wish I could have challenged Onja last year, instead of accepting exile. I regret that so many will die," Shan said.

"But you were not ready then," Dreibrand reminded.

"I know. Onja is a terrible foe and I must tear her down piece by piece. I only wish that things could have been different," Shan said with his hand still on the enchanted sword.

"This war with the Sabuto was bound to happen anyway," Dreibrand consoled. "There are no rys on my side of the world, and we make war all the time. Do not presume to blame yourself."

Shan chuckled at the admonishment and commented, "Thank you, Dreibrand, for reminding me that I am not a God."

These words puzzled Dreibrand and he was uncertain how to respond. He could only wonder what strange thoughts he would have if he possessed immense power like Shan.

"Taischek is coming!" Shan announced.

The first Temu harassment party emerged from the woods, scattering the cattle. The purple and yellow flag of the Temu flew beside Taischek and the hills shook with the cheers of thousands of warriors greeting their bold king.

Dreibrand buckled the chinstrap of his helmet and pulled on his gauntlets.

Shan's white horse came to its master and set its velvety nose in the rys's blue hand. Gathering the reins, Shan said, "We will have our first victory soon."

Readying his shield on his arm, Dreibrand said quietly, "Shan...I trust you with Miranda's safety. I will not be able to be near her."

"No harm will come to her," Shan promised.

"I am not sure if she grasps what is about to happen," Dreibrand worried.

"It surprises me that you doubt her fortitude," Shan said.

"No, it is not that..." Dreibrand trailed off unable to articulate his feelings.

Shan had often sensed the harsher points in Miranda's mind, which Dreibrand seemed to overlook, and the rys knew she would cope with the violence as well as any warrior, if not better.

"It is only a matter of weeks before you and Miranda shall be my honored guests in Jingtun," Shan encouraged.

"Truly," Dreibrand murmured and he followed Shan who regrouped with his nearby bodyguards.

Miranda calmly chatted with Redan, who also now had one of the ancient rys swords at his side. Although he hoped he would only have to use his bow, Redan was honored by the priceless gift from his master, who had distributed the swords before marching to war. The crossbows and quarrels, however, Shan had destroyed.

When Shan joined his bodyguards, they quieted and formed a protective circle around him. Shan asked Miranda to stay by his side because he would work great magic and he expected to become weary and possibly require her assistance. She told him she would do as he asked but she needed just a moment to speak with Dreibrand first.

"Stay close to Shan," Dreibrand whispered when she came to his side.

Miranda smiled and said, "That is my job."

"You know what I mean. Keep yourself safe. I am worried for you," Dreibrand said, ignoring her good humor.

Growing more serious, she said, "I worry more for you. You will be at the worst of it."

"I can handle it," he assured her.

"Then, General, end the battle quickly so that we can be together," she said.

When she used his title, Dreibrand always took an irresistible pleasure from it. He smiled to her as if thousands of men did not gather to kill each other, and he thought that life was good. "I fight for you, Miranda," he said tenderly and started down the hill to the field of battle.

Dreibrand joined the Yentay as Taischek thundered back among his tribesmen. Many horns blared in greeting to the King and the returning warriors held their bloodied weapons high for the approval of their comrades. War cries rose from the thousands and many chanted Taischek's name.

The King indulged in a parade through the center of the army. He ended it by smearing blood from Kalek's sword onto his son's forehead. The Prince held his sword and shield high after being anointed with the blood of his first battle and his people exalted him.

Then Kalek spurred his horse toward the Yentay and stopped directly in front of Dreibrand. Kalek let out a high pitched war cry and waved his bloody sword. With a neutral face, Dreibrand watched the Prince flaunt his new status. Dreibrand knew how the first kill changed a man, and Kalek would not so easily be dismissed anymore.

The boom of a thousand drums ended the frolicking, and Kalek returned to his father. The Sabuto had pursued their annoying Temu tormentors, and their host began to pour out of the woodlands. Swelled by thousands of warriors from southern tribes, the Sabuto force neared fifty thousand, as Faychan had reported, and they planned to soundly defeat Taischek that afternoon.

The Sabuto knew that Shan was among the Temu defenders, and they hoped to kill the rys along

with the arrogant Temu King. They had been encouraged by reports that the rys had almost been killed that winter, and they were confident their numbers would overwhelm him. Shan was powerful, but he could not possibly kill them all.

Without parley or ceremony, the armies advanced on each other like two dueling rams.

The anticipation of battle ran thick in Dreibrand's veins. He had been in great battles like this before, but this time he did not have the supreme confidence that the Horde had given him. Taischek's army had been trained with Dreibrand's Atrophaney techniques, but the warriors were untested and Dreibrand worried they would not hold their formations in the heat of battle. Then Dreibrand realized that for the first time he was on the side defending its homeland and the men would die before they failed their tribe. It was an interesting advantage.

Taischek had been enthusiastic about Dreibrand's methods, and the Temu Army was performing well. The neat phalanxes of infantry marched toward the center of the Sabuto onslaught like a fist. Like the Temu, the Sabuto warriors were used to smaller fights and fast raids, and they were not as prepared for a battle of this scale.

Taischek could ask younger warriors to learn new styles of war, but no discipline could remain in his heart when he saw the Sabuto on his domain. On a fresh horse, he fought two handed. In one hand he held his spiked mace that only the King could use, and in the other hand, he held the rys sword that Shan had given him. The ancient and enchanted blade cut through shields and flesh like a curse let out of a long-sealed tomb. Discipline he left to the generals. With their strategy and his raw courage to inspire his warriors, Taischek knew he would win.

The enemies came at each other with atrocious abandon. If it had not been for Dreibrand's design the two forces would have swarmed all over each other and become mixed up like two buckets of water being poured on the same spot. The protective but deadly formations of the phalanxes held remarkable well. Many of the warriors had been tempted to scatter into individual combats, but they obeyed their officers and soon saw the strength in their cohesion.

Now the Yentay intercepted Sabuto cavalry and Dreibrand concentrated on defending infantry from the mounted warriors. The undeniable demands of battle pressed around, reducing his attention to the nearest foe, the striking blade, and the lunging spear.

Dreibrand's new sword tasted the blood of his opponents and he tasted salt on his lips as sweat streamed down his face on the warm day.

From her vantage point beside Shan, Miranda observed the battle. The unflinching determination that drove the armies together to create such violence fascinated her. The screams of the first casualties drifted up from the field, mixed with the ceaseless clang of weapons.

She could see where the Yentay were because of their white surcoats and she tracked Dreibrand among the throng. Watching him rush his enemies at the fore of the Yentay terrified her. Sometimes warriors assailed him from three sides and the suspense of his survival made her tremble with emotion.

She glanced at Shan, who was descending into the deep trance of a spell. The blackness of his eyes had been replaced by an intense blue glow, and Miranda knew that he no longer saw her or anyone nearby.

Shan's seeing mind hovered the battlefield. Mentally he steeled himself to kill in this cowardly manner because Taischek needed the help. But to crush the beating hearts with his magic required Shan to send his mind into each man's flesh, and at that point, an ally would not feel any different than an enemy. He had to be very discriminating in the selection of targets. To kill one of his men would be an appalling deed.

Shan decided to move his attack farther into the Sabuto Army where no Temu had yet penetrated. This would not immediately relieve his friends, but it should terrorize and devastate the Sabuto enough to make them withdraw.

The rys guided his attention to the main group of battle lords, who were protected at the rear of the force. Unlike the Temu, Sabuto generals avoided the front lines and their King waited in Chanda. The victims did not feel the magic link with their bodies until a merciless strangulation gripped their chests. This time Shan was prepared for the sensation of feeling them die, and he avoided capturing any of the startled souls.

A half dozen Sabuto battle lords cried out in pain and tumbled to the ground, clutching their chests.

Their horses lurched and squealed when their riders abruptly died. The men surrounding the stricken warriors were stunned. Disbelief delayed any reaction, but each man knew the invisible assault could only have one source. The magic of Shan had entered the battle.

Rapidly panic struck the Sabuto command. The agitation and running around actually saved some of the officers because it made it difficult for Shan to maintain his focus on them.

Now, Shan moved to spread chaos through the rest of the massive force. He struck a group of warriors who were about to reinforce the front lines. Fast as a prairie fire, fifty men collapsed in death.

Up and down the ranks men started to die. Shan assailed them with a cruel randomness, sometimes just killing one man among many before moving on to drop a dozen together. The Sabuto front lines turned in confusion as the screaming grew behind them. At this point, Shan had already killed four hundred warriors, and it was starting to shake the Sabuto with fear.

Although Dreibrand did not know Shan was now attacking with magic, he sensed a wavering in the enemy. Hacking and thrusting with his sword, Dreibrand noticed the warding crystal flare on the end of his sword. Then, much to his surprise, he heard words. They were like thoughts in his head, spoken in Shan's voice.

"Push harder! Break them now!"

Dreibrand heeded the signal, trusting that Shan knew the moment was right. Rallying the Yentay, Dreibrand ordered Tytido to make a fresh charge at the Sabuto. Then Dreibrand sought Xander. Bodies littered the trampled pasture and Starfield jumped over the gruesome heaps as his master urged speed. To every warrior he passed, Dreibrand shouted the order to charge.

Even through the din of battle, Xander heard Dreibrand shouting orders, and the Temu General intercepted him.

Starfield shook to a stop with lather dripping from quivering flanks. Before Xander spoke, Dreibrand pointed his sword at the Sabuto and said, "Renew your charge. We can drive them back now. Shan is attacking!"

"But they are outflanking us to the west. I need to go there," Xander protested.

"Shan will protect that flank," Dreibrand said. The thought had just entered his head but he believed it utterly. "Trust me, General Xander. Can you not see their panic and disarray? Our time to push is now."

Xander's eyes darted among scenes of mayhem. He would not delay his decision, but it was hard to have faith in Shan when it was impossible to see the ryls' works.

"You better be right," Xander growled.

"I better!" Dreibrand shouted. He saluted the Temu General with his sword as he spun to return to the Yentay.

The Temu infantry and cavalry charged the Sabuto with renewed effort while Shan resumed his assault with invisible magic. The ryls concentrated on the portion of the Sabuto Army attempting to outflank the Temu and gain some higher ground. Shan sowed sufficient terror there to allow the Temu to drive back the advance.

Shan started to announce his presence more visibly by burning the occasional victim in an incinerating blast. Magic flowed through Shan's mind and soul at a staggering rate as the level of his destruction rose.

Casting death upon his enemies gave Shan such a sense of superiority that he was tempted to take a maniacal pleasure from it. Only his initial revulsion for killing saved him from the lamprey of addictive omnipotence that sucked at his mind.

With a gasp Shan ended his spells, and his chin dropped onto his chest. He muffled a sob, attempting to conceal his stormy emotions from his bodyguards.

"Miranda, my cloak," he hissed.

His eyes churned with blue fire that glowed on the perspiration beaded on his face. Miranda leaned

over to retrieve his cloak from a saddlebag.

Shan's vision had left the battlefield and he looked through his physical eyes, but he could not see normally yet. He turned from the others and faced Miranda as she shook out his folded cloak. The features of her face were blurred by the details he perceived. He could see each blood cell pushing through her veins, and the aura of her life force was as clear to Shan as the sun in the sky. He could feel her heart beat as if he were a child in her womb.

Miranda draped the cloak over Shan's shoulders and without needing to be asked she pulled up the hood. She could tell that he was upset and did not want to be seen.

He reached for her hand, but the power in his touch made her hand involuntarily jerk away. Shan hoped he had not hurt her. He had killed nearly two thousand men that day, and he had wanted only to feel an instant of gentleness.

The mad struggle between the armies peaked in a killing frenzy. The Sabuto withstood the fresh Temu charge briefly, but Shan's assault had taken a toll on their minds and the Sabuto began to lose their nerve.

Yet one warrior remained undaunted. A shrill yell of challenge greeted Dreibrand as he beat down his closest opponent. Dreibrand saw the mounted warrior, who shook his strange weapon at Dreibrand. The warrior had a shaved head and was apparently making a formal gesture of challenge. One end of his weapon had metal claws holding a bloodied stone and the handle ended in a cruel barbed spear.

The large muscular man did not look Sabuto either. Long straight features framed his fearless eyes, and hundreds of purposefully made scars adorned his bare chest with designs. Dreibrand guessed that he was a Sabuto ally from a southern tribe who had apparently joined the war to show the wealthier tribes what a real fighter was.

The warrior fell silent and came at Dreibrand with a startling suddenness. The man's body flew forward in fluid connection with his horse and the warclub came back for a dreadful blow.

The passions of battle had thoroughly roused Dreibrand's skills and he faced his foe, ready for the challenge. He blocked the swiping club with his shield, trying to angle away the force of the blow, but the impact still jarred his whole body. As quick as the club fell, the warrior lifted the weapon and spun it around. Speeding by, the warrior jabbed backward with the spear end at Dreibrand's kidney area. Luckily the point missed its target and glanced off Dreibrand's armor.

Dreibrand pulled his horse around just in time to meet the warrior's second assault. The speed with which the man had maneuvered his mount surprised Dreibrand, who was also an accomplished rider. Leveling his sword beneath his shield, Dreibrand prepared to block another swing from the warclub. He grunted when the blow struck his shield, but concentrated on stabbing his opponent as he passed. The force of the blow knocked his aim low, but Dreibrand pierced the warrior's thigh with his underhanded strike.

The warrior grimaced when his flesh was ripped open and the pain made his attack falter. Dreibrand pursued the advantage, knowing one wound would not be enough to stop this warrior. Starfield whirled in response to direction from only Dreibrand's knee and this fast move gave Dreibrand one clear swipe at the warrior's unarmored back. The warclub only half blocked the sword, which cut deeply across a shoulder blade.

The wound would have devastated a lesser man, but this warrior managed a counterattack. The crushing stone head of the warclub swung wide and the handle caught Dreibrand across the torso. Determined to finish the duel, Dreibrand grabbed the handle and pulled the warrior toward him.

The two horses were side by side now and agitated by the closeness. Normally the warrior would have been strong enough to yank his weapon free, but the wound on his back severed his strength. Instead, he launched himself at Dreibrand.

Not expecting the man to leave his saddle, Dreibrand could not react in time to the oncoming body. Knocked off his horse, Dreibrand fell to the ground with the warrior on top. They held the warclub between them and Dreibrand tried to hit the man with his sword, but the warrior was too close to get cut.

A great strong hand latched onto Dreibrand's jaw while the warrior tried to pin down Dreibrand's sword arm with his elbow. The warrior pushed Dreibrand's head aside, hoping to snap his neck.

Dreibrand strained against the crushing hand while trying to free his sword arm. The wounds the warrior had taken only seemed to anger him now, and glee sparkled in his eyes. The warrior knew he had Shan's notorious foreigner in his clutches, and killing him would bring reward and fame.

Achieving partial use of his sword arm, Dreibrand tried again to slash the warrior, but only managed to beat him with the hilt. The blows were not enough to stop the furious warrior. With his other hand, Dreibrand tried to reach his dagger, but the shield strapped to his forearm prevented him from reaching beneath his opponent. Finally in frustration he dropped his sword and his hand slipped to his waist.

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Shan lifted his cowed head. "Let us go," he announced.

He felt the nervousness of his bodyguards as they crowded around him. They did not fear the fight but they did not want Shan near the battle.

Shan was in little danger though. The Sabuto had finally relented and given way to the Temu defenders. The Sabuto had wanted desperately to break through to the high ground where Shan stood, but too many Temu barred the way. Unable to reach Shan and defenseless against his magical onslaught, the newly formed Sabuto command decided to fall back and try later.

With Taischek at the fore, thousands of Temu chased the retreating Sabuto, killing the wounded and reclaiming the fields. The rear of the Temu army now surrounded Shan, and they cheered him. They had faced the furious attack of the larger Sabuto army, and they knew Shan had given them the advantage.

The battle stopped when Taischek finally turned back. He longed to hunt each invader personally, but he understood that he needed to regroup with Shan and his generals in order to organize the pursuit.

Shan acknowledged the praise of his allies and their victory cries, but his eyes were scanning the sea of faces, and Miranda realized which face had not appeared.

She could not contain her fear. "Where is Dreibrand?"

"He should be here, but I cannot see him," Shan answered with concern. He knew Dreibrand no longer held his sword, but he did not want to tell Miranda that.

Tytido, who had been fighting near his general, had noticed Dreibrand's absence earlier and not rushed ahead with the victorious front line. The lieutenant's heart tightened when he saw Starfield, riderless and patiently standing among the dead and dying. Knowing the well-trained horse never strayed from its unhorsed master, Tytido jumped to the ground and started searching through the bodies. He could not believe that Dreibrand had been slain even though he looked for him among mutilated men.

Finally he saw the sandy hair beneath a black helmet. A large man was draped over Dreibrand, and with effort Tytido pushed the dead man aside. Dreibrand did not move, except when his hand dropped from the dagger lodged in the warrior's bloody torso.

Kneeling beside his general, Tytido called to him urgently.

After a distressing pause, Dreibrand's eyes fluttered open. The warrior had been choking the life out of him, and Dreibrand realized he must have blacked out. With Tytido looming over him, he could assume that his dagger had found the warrior's heart in that last desperate moment.

Dreibrand rubbed his sore neck and blood smeared onto his skin from his gauntlet. Automatically, he retrieved his dagger from the dead man.

"Are you hurt?" Tytido asked.

Dreibrand sat up slowly and considered the question carefully. "I am fine," he concluded and took note of the calming battlefield.

"We won," Tytido announced brightly.

"This battle," Dreibrand reminded soberly.

Getting to his feet with a hand from Tytido, Dreibrand looked around for his sword with worry. Much to his relief it lay nearby. When he bent to grab it, someone called his name and he recognized the voice. Turning, he saw Miranda rushing toward him on foot. When she saw the blood on his neck, her elation turned to horror.

"Your neck!" she gasped.

Vaguely, Dreibrand realized how bad he must appear and he wished that she would not see him like this. "I am not hurt. It is not my blood," he explained.

Shan arrived and a multitude of warriors now surrounded him. "Excellent job, General Veta. And the same for the Yentay and the Temu," Shan praised.

Amid the cheers, Dreibrand bowed graciously to his rys lord, who had won the day. Shan was more powerful in battle than Dreibrand had dared to hope, and he was in awe of the rys as much as anybody.

God hears the prayers of the people, but Onja hears them as well, and she laughs—Semsem II, Temu ruler, year 1230 of the Age of Onja.

Taischek was in his most jovial mood ever. He had killed more Sabuto that day than on any other day, and the King was eager to hunt their remaining forces. But his army needed to assess its losses. While the wounded were tended, the commanders regrouped their fit warriors and prepared to pursue the Sabuto that night. In the mean time, Taischek decided to put down a few cups of wine.

The King watched Xander stitch a cut on Kalek's left eyebrow. The General hurried to finish in the fading light, but his skilled fingers mended the skin neatly even in haste. Taischek enjoyed his wine and occasionally nodded with approval. He was very proud of his heir, who had fought with untiring hatred against the invaders.

"Hold still," Xander ordered when Kalek kept flinching from the needle. "Such a little cut does not deserve my attention."

"If it is not stitched, there will be a bad scar," Kalek said.

Xander snorted. "Men are dying, and you are worried about your face."

Kalek did not respond and wondered if he had been too concerned about the cut.

Taischek laughed and defended his son. "Those that can be helped, are being helped. He just wanted to show off his wound to you, Xander."

This cured some of Xander's gruff attitude. He was proud of Kalek too.

Kalek felt emotionally numb. The rage of the battle had been so intense, and any feelings he had now seemed insignificant. He smiled vaguely after his father made another toast to his new warrior status. Kalek enjoyed this newly acquired respect from his elders, but the events of the day were replaying in his head and disturbing him.

"Dreibrand!" Taischek greeted loudly, interrupting the reflections of his son.

"Good evening, King Taischek," Dreibrand said as he walked up.

"Yes it is!" Taischek cried. "And I want to be marching again in an hour."

"All is ready," Dreibrand informed.

Taischek said, "I have sent messages to the refugees to return and bury the dead and help the wounded, so we don't have to worry about that."

"That is a great help," Dreibrand said.

Taischek handed Dreibrand a cup and informally sloshed some wine into it. "Those phalanxes worked great. They were like bricks thrown at glass," he commented.

Smiling, Dreibrand said, "It was not that easy."

"Oh, but it will be. The Temu learn quickly—especially from success," Taischek insisted. "Now we must do it to the Sabuto again and again until they are dust. I want those bastards destroyed, Dreibrand. We must punish them."

"They will not get away," Dreibrand promised, but added, "King Taischek, their army is still strong and we must choose our fights carefully. Shan must be protected vigilantly."

But Taischek was not really listening. He could already see his approaching victory. Kalek's cut was fixed now and he stood up with Xander. Kalek eyed Dreibrand with his usual animosity and the men exchanged no greeting.

Taischek passed the wineskin to Xander and announced, "We are the four men who will put a King in Jington. Our army will be a legend and we will be the new standard of human power."

Everyone easily toasted these words, and Dreibrand appreciated that Taischek had included him in front of his son.

Taischek continued, "Today, Kalek showed that he is a Temu warrior. Let us pause to honor him."

The King and the generals toasted Kalek. As a warrior, Dreibrand could acknowledge Kalek's bravery in battle, but he did not like honoring the man.

The antagonistic Prince took immense satisfaction from Dreibrand's semi-sincere toast. Ultimately the foreigner had to show respect to the Prince of the Temu.

Taischek finished his wine with a sigh. "I wish we could celebrate longer, but we must push on. Many more Sabuto await their deaths."

The men went to meet with Shan, and Taischek told the rys he wanted to take the offensive in the night while the Sabuto still felt the ignominy of retreat and the thrill of victory was still fresh with the Temu.

Shan approved of the night assault. He saw no reason to wait when time became more precious with every day, but he warned, "My friends, you must know that I cannot kill as many in the night. With the darkness it will take me longer to distinguish between you and the enemy. My killing will be slower because I must not kill my friends."

"We appreciate your concern," Taischek said. "And what help you can give will be enough. The Temu do not need rys magic all the time. Our blood is up and we will scatter them before the dawn."

"Lord Shan, can you just make them into Deamedron?" Kalek asked.

The question stunned everyone for a moment. Torchlight flickered on the edge of Shan's cowl, enhancing the dark oval that contained his face. At length, Shan answered, "Your opinion of my power is flattering, Kalek, and the idea would solve many of our problems. However, I would not do such a horrible thing. It is one thing to kill my enemies in battle, and it is another thing to keep their souls from the next world."

Kalek considered the answer. He had asked mostly out of curiosity in an attempt to gauge Shan's power. The rys had not directly said he could not do such a thing, saying instead that he would not.

Kalek continued, "I should not have said make Deamedron. I meant, could you just kill them from here? Strike them all at once?"

"Kill a whole army?" Xander asked incredulously.

The idea made Taischek raise his eyebrows in anticipation of Shan's answer.

Honestly the idea tempted Shan. He had killed so many already with his unfair advantage that killing all of them did not seem that much worse. Shan reasoned that simply blasting the Sabuto invasion out of existence would save them much time. The Zenglawa might not hesitate forever and Shan wanted to march on the Rysamand as soon as possible.

Taischek saved Shan from making the horrible decision. The initial appeal of having his enemy conveniently killed while he stood by had faded quickly.

"Letting Shan fight our battle for us without our help is wrong. The Sabuto are Shan's enemy because of me. I would not ask him to murder them without the honor of battle. The Temu will always have to live next to the Sabuto, and I would not have the Sabuto think rys magic alone defeated them. Someday soon Shan will be far away in Jingtun with his own land to rule. The Temu must not forget the greatness of our tribe comes from the strength of its men."

The King had spoken and Shan was pleased by the words.

With the details Shan could provide of the enemy position, they quickly planned their battle while the warriors lit thousands of torches.

So many torches burned in the hands of each army that a haze of smoke gathered over the fields and in the woods. The points of light across the ranks created a nightmare black meadow filled with hot orange flowers, and the sparkling clusters drew closer to each other. Temu drums began to bang in the night and Temu warriors strode toward the invaders with the quickening beat.

Miranda calmed her jumpy horse. The noisy dark and the passing of thousands of warriors agitated Freedom because the horse had never been used in war.

Redan leaned toward Miranda from his saddle and advised, "Stay alert. We should not be in any danger, but with a night battle things could get strange."

She nodded and tried not to be nervous.

Positioned with his bodyguards behind the advancing ranks, Shan prepared to cast spells. His awareness now hovered the core of the Sabuto commanders, who occupied the ruins of Adi Nor. Some new faces had entered the ranks of leadership since the losses of the afternoon. A Sabuto battle lord snapped at one of his officers who argued with a leader from an allied tribe. They were squabbling about what to do against the awesome power of Shan. Most of them had believed that Onja would support them when they attacked the rebels. The Sabuto and the smaller tribes of the south had remained loyal to Jingtun and sent their tribute. Her faithful followers had prayed to their Goddess for success, but now their faith was shaken.

Indeed the Queen had observed the events of that day and would have liked to fulfill the faith of the Sabuto, but she could no longer reach so far. Onja did savor the efforts they made on her behalf even if the humans were going to die. Their lives did not really concern her. What concerned her was what Shan was doing.

Onja had watched Shan cast his killing spells and it had taken her back to the days of the Great War with Nufal. Power flowed from Shan like it had from the young Dacian, and Onja regretted that Shan had preferred to be her rival. Together they could have shared much glory and power. World domination beyond the mightiest human empire could have been theirs. Shan was whom she had really wanted to send to conquer the east. But Shan had spurned the generosity of his superior, and for that he would die when he returned to the Rysamand.

The Sabuto command argued on. With the Temu advancing for the night assault, some were already willing to give up the invasion. They had been misled by Onja and the Temu army was stronger than ever before. But others scorned them as cowards for wanting to give up after one bad day. If they kept trying, they still might have a chance to reach Shan and kill him. Then they would achieve total victory.

A point of blue light appeared over the debating battle lords and they quieted. An ethereal mist gathered around the growing point of light that was coalescing into the shape of a rys face.

Before the visage became clear, an excited Sabuto yelled, "Onja has come!"

A few hopeful cheers followed this rumor and warriors started dropping to their knees. This ripple of hope ended quickly as the blurred image defined itself. Elation turned to dread when they saw it was not the face of Onja. It was Shan.

The war cries of charging Temu now howled across the land, but the Sabuto battle lords were still transfixed by the image. Shan's face became brighter before disappearing with the suddenness of a discharging bolt of lightning. At the same moment, the Temu attack crashed against the Sabuto lines and the battle lords snapped out of their trance. Commanders dashed off to direct their warriors, but Shan's warning that his presence was among them chilled their hearts.

Warriors filled the fields around the town and torches swung from hands as both a weapon and a light. Soon torches burned in the hands of the dead. The erratic lighting cast tall shadows on the trunks of aloof trees or along stone fences, revealing the brief swing of a sword or a passing rider.

The riders ran down foot soldiers, who sometimes escaped by casting away their torches and fleeing into the darkness. Screams seemed louder in the night and the points of fiery red light fueled the scene of butchery.

Shan's concentration deepened and he began attacking. As before, he struck inside the Sabuto ranks.

Miranda could see the multitude of struggling torches. The shrieks of pain and death bouncing around the dark began to scare her, and she worried about Dreibrand. Somewhere out there he struggled in the insane face of danger, and the hands of many enemies filled the shadows. Every scream she imagined as Dreibrand's, and the stress began to wear on her mind.

She looked to Shan but the fire of his magic filled his eyes and she could make no inquiry. The white rys horse shifted its feet carefully as if to emphasize that its master should not be disturbed.

Miranda bravely told herself that the hideous night would not last forever, and Dreibrand would survive. She had to have faith that he would return to her.

Suddenly she heard the pounding of running feet and the bodyguards noted it as well. They judged the noise to be approaching along a nearby fence, but no torches marked the sounds. The bodyguards moved between Shan and the noise, expecting trouble.

Three men burst into the light of the torches held by the bodyguards. They were Sabuto who must have become separated from their side of the fight and were trying to fight their way out of the area. In the dark it would have been logical for them to avoid a group more than twice their number, but the blue glow on Shan's face had marked the ryls and inspired them to attack. If any of them could get lucky and strike the ryls down, their side would win.

Miranda struggled to control her startled horse as pandemonium erupted among Shan's bodyguards. The six Temu warriors had been spoiling to fight the Sabuto all day, and their aggression was instantaneous.

An arrow sprouted in Redan's bow, but he had no clear shot. The mounted Temu swarmed around the Sabuto, preventing them from reaching Shan. Redan glanced at Shan who appeared oblivious to the situation. This was why the mighty Shan had bodyguards, and Redan was thrilled for another opportunity to protect his lord.

Miranda got her unruly mount under control and drew her sword. The stray Sabuto warriors fought to be heroes of their tribe and one horse was maimed and its Temu rider killed in the first moment of the fight, but the Temu quickly hacked down their hated enemies.

A frenzy of swords and spears danced in the torchlight until only one Sabuto remained. He fled the Temu bodyguards and ran toward Miranda. His wild eyes jolted Miranda to action and her sword split his skull. The fearsome gleam in his eyes slipped into blankness, and he dropped and disappeared into the darkness by the horses' feet.

His ruined skull had slid off her blade and the splat the sword had made when killing him echoed in her mind. Only now did she realize how profoundly terrified she had been.

"Miranda, are you hurt?"

It was Shan's voice and she turned to face the ryls. Although his eyes still glowed with a fierce light, he had returned to his physical surroundings and had been about to defend her.

"No, are you?" she said in a small voice.

Shan replied that he was unhurt.

"Lord, that was too close. Mytan has been killed," Redan said.

One of the bodyguards put the injured horse out of its misery. Shan dismounted and joined the Temu who picked up their dead tribesman.

"This is awful," Shan moaned.

"He died defending our land. There is no greater honor," a Temu said.

"I would rather he lived with the honor," Shan lamented.

"We will miss him too," the same Temu said.

Redan said, "Lord, please get back on your horse. We must find a safer position. The battle must not be going our way."

Shan looked one more time at the body of his fallen bodyguard, but none of them had time for grief. Too many died too fast in war.

"Do not fear, Redan," Shan said. "These were just a few scattered warriors. The battle is ours. Even now, the Sabuto army falters. The losses I cause them sap their courage."

The ryls returned to his horse and decided they would go find Taischek. When they started across the pasture, Miranda looked back. The dead men were not visible in the darkness, but the violent episode remained clear in her mind. It had been a long time since Miranda had known any innocence, and she had not been aware of what little innocence remained until it was gone.

As Taischek had predicted, the Sabuto were driven back by dawn. The invaders withdrew into the wild borderlands, and the Temu occupied the looted and burned village of Adi Nor. They were proud to reclaim their territory.

Here the Temu would take some rest. The joys of victory could no longer sustain them in their exhaustion. Shan needed rest as well. The intense spellcasting of the two battles had tired him. The rys had his tent put up almost as soon as Adi Nor was secured and promptly went to sleep. He could have pushed himself for days if need be, but he saved the true reserve of his stamina for Jington.

While licking their wounds, the Temu plotted their next move. Although unable to cope with Shan's magic, the Sabuto army was still a significant force. Taischek desired to pursue them into their domain until the great invasion force became neutralized. The passion of Taischek's hate demanded the campaign, but logic did as well. If Shan and the Temu army left now, the intact Sabuto force could invade again.

By late afternoon the Temu army was moving again. They chased the retreating invaders until the next day, but the Sabuto army had taken refuge in rough hills and Shan and his leaders met to decide what should be done.

Shan proposed that they hunt the Sabuto into the hills, but Dreibrand was reluctant to agree. He did not want to take an army of such size into rough terrain where the enemy would have the advantage.

"My magic will devastate them as it has in the other battles," Shan insisted.

"I know, but our losses would be heavier," Dreibrand argued. "In the hills, the Sabuto will have chances to ambush us, and there will be no way to maneuver our infantry in formation. Even with your help, Shan, our losses were bad enough on the open field. We cannot spend our warriors frivolously. We still have the Zenglawas to deal with."

While Shan pondered this advice, Taischek spoke. "The first Sabuto border village is not far from here. I want to strike that. Let their army watch the smoke rise from their hiding spot."

"That might draw them out to the farmlands where we can have another battle," Xander said.

Dreibrand nodded thoughtfully and added, "If we can engage them in one more big battle, we can get the decisive victory we need."

Shan looked around the faces of his human friends and asked, "And you think the Sabuto army is going to come out of the hills over one village? Time is a factor for us and they know it. This might be part of Onja's plan to keep us bogged down in the south. She might change her orders to the Zenglawas and send them to invade the Temu Domain."

It was a sobering thought. Dreibrand had wanted desperately to avoid this situation, but he still was not sure if he wanted to rush his men into the hills.

"Have the Zenglawas changed their position?" Taischek asked.

Shan answered, "No, they are still guarding the Jington Pass."

"Then we will attack the village," Taischek decided. "If protecting one settlement is not enough to get those Sabuto cowards out of hiding, then we will attack the next one, and the next one. Once we get close to Chanda, that army will have to meet us on the field of battle. The Sabuto King is a coward hiding in his capital and he will order his army to protect him."

Shan frowned and looked to Dreibrand, hoping his general would have a different idea. Although Dreibrand was not thrilled about heading south, he did not have an alternative that he preferred.

"We should do as King Taischek says. I do not want to go into those hills. They will have the high ground and be able to watch our every move as we advance. Already some Sabuto got close to you by accident, Shan. I do not want that to happen again. I think the Sabuto are trying to lure us into a trap," Dreibrand said.

Xander added, "The army could use the supplies we can get from raiding the settlements."

"We will be marching back north in a week," Dreibrand predicted hopefully.

"Yes, Dreibrand, we will," Shan said and reluctantly agreed to the plan.

Resuming the march south, the Temu army looked into the vale of the first Sabuto village by afternoon. The settlement looked just like any village the Temu might raid, except that all of the warriors were gone. The Sabuto army still skulked hasas away, and the defenseless people scrambled to flee before the fearsome Temu gathering.

Taischek gave the order to run down every inhabitant and show no mercy. Dreibrand decided to abstain from this assault, but he left the Yentay free to pillage as it pleased them. They were loyal men and he had no right to keep them from some easy loot. Shan likewise saw no reason to add his power to the attack because the village had no chance whatsoever.

There had been a time when Dreibrand would not have thought twice about the deaths of civilians, but now Miranda was beside him and he felt guilty. Unfortunately, his humane feelings could not alter the necessities of this campaign. It was war and his compassion could only belong to his warriors.

When Miranda learned of the decision to sack villages and towns, Dreibrand had expected her to protest, but she did not. She sat on her horse next to Shan and listlessly watched the army approach the terrified village. Miranda had not told Dreibrand that she had killed someone the other night, and apparently, no one else had mentioned it to him. Everything about the war had been revolting to her, but she did not think she had the right to speak against it. The blood was on her hands now, just like everyone else.

When Kalek noticed that Dreibrand did not participate in the attack, he could not resist the opportunity to criticize the foreigner. Before the army reached the village, he rode back to Dreibrand's position.

"Where is your famous courage today?" sneered the Prince.

"I lead my men in battle. This is no battle," Dreibrand declared.

"Hide here with your woman then," Kalek snapped.

This tiresome game had become familiar to Dreibrand. "May you have the courage to kill their women," he said with sarcasm.

Kalek floundered with frustration. He hated how Dreibrand always managed to turn his taunts against him. He spurred his horse and galloped to the front of the army.

Watching the swarm of warriors overtake the village, Miranda asked in her language, "This is what your people did to my home?"

Staring at the violent scene, Dreibrand at first felt helpless to reply. He glanced at her cautiously but her gaze was glued to the horror ahead. Miranda imagined herself back in Wa Gira or Droxy when the Atrophane Horde arrived. Her dream had only been a shallow warning of the reality of mayhem now revealed to her.

Flames were sprouting from buildings, and Miranda saw an old woman struck down and tossed into the ungrateful flames of her own burning cottage. Before her death, the woman had rushed at the charging Temu in a crazy rage, wanting her enemy to see and hear her defiant spite.

"Miranda..." Dreibrand said, still trying to think of some soothing reply to her question. He gave up and confessed, "Yes, this is like what happened to your home."

"You have done this many times?" she asked.

"I have followed orders to do so and given such orders," he answered heavily. He wanted to say more, to insist that his hand had not murdered woman and children, but he had been in command, and that was just the same, and he could no longer hide from the truth of things.

Miranda turned her bright green eyes upon him, and Dreibrand expected her to bitterly renounce all feelings for him. Instead she said, "And this is how war is done?"

"So it seems," Dreibrand sighed. "Believe me, Miranda, I do not like this, but war is not always the meeting of warriors."

Miranda pondered his words. She did not blame him for the slaughter, as he feared. She knew

Dreibrand did not make the world in which they lived, and she knew well that he was not an evil man.

Gesturing toward the dying village, Miranda said, "I am glad to no longer be helpless. I have you to thank for that."

Her attitude relieved him. He had worried she would irrevocably hate him, which would have been especially tortuous because everything he did was as much for her as for himself.

The Temu army rolled over the village, but Shan and his party avoided it when they continued south. The ryls had no desire to see the plundered village up close. He knew those who had not run soon enough had been killed, children included. The Sabuto and Temu had spilled each other's blood for generations, and Shan had seen the atrocities before. The only truce in the tribal feud had been negotiated by Shan in Taischek's youth, but the peace had collapsed quickly.

The next Sabuto settlement had been better warned of the Temu advance, and the residents were midway into a panicked evacuation when the Temu arrived. Flames greeted Taischek's eyes when he reached the village. The Sabuto had set their granaries on fire instead of allowing the enemy to seize the food.

With flaming chaff sparkling in the dusk, the Temu attacked. No Sabuto warriors came forth to defend the village and a heartless slaughter ensued. The village was easily taken and secured with the setting of the sun. A bright starry night covered the land and the pure heavens seemed heedless of the violence below.

Two of the granary fires were beat out and some of the grain was salvaged. From the homes and bodies, warriors soon gleaned anything of value that they could carry.

The Temu army decided to camp and Miranda tried hard not to look at the scenes nearby. Warriors picked up the Sabuto in their fresh death poses and threw them onto fires or piled them in gutted buildings. Miranda had glimpsed some of the bodies, and some of them had been small, very small. She busied herself with raising Shan's tent and was thankful for the darkness that hid many horrors.

Miranda knew what was happening was wrong, regardless of the military rationalizations, but she could not hide from her guilt. She wholly supported Shan and committed herself to any course of action required to help him conquer Jingten. These people had taken Onja's side, and Miranda struggled to accept her choice.

She pounded a tent stake with extra force and fought the disgust rising in her chest. *I can stand this for Elendra and Esseldan*, she ordered herself.

Finished with the tent, Miranda sat down to rest. Nearby, two Yentay worked on Dreibrand's tent and she could not wait until they were done so she could retreat inside. Beside the half-raised tent, Dreibrand spoke with Shan. They were intent on their conversation, which she assumed was about the location of the Sabuto army. She actually hoped they would attack soon.

Redan, who stood beside Shan, noticed Miranda observing them and he waved to her discreetly. She gave him a tired smile to recognize his friendliness. Miranda wished she could be more like him. Redan never seemed to doubt his course of action. She thought about joining them but decided she did not want to hear any more reports. Until they turned for Jingten, all news was bad in her mind.

A scream.

Her entire body froze, chilled by the sound. Many noises came from the surrounding army and spoiled village, but Miranda had heard a scream muffled in the disorderly night.

Someone dying, she thought, trying not to care.

She heard the scream again, and something in the quality of the cry touched her deeply and forced Miranda to her feet. The sound came from a hut on the edge of the village. A dim orange square of lantern light revealed the door, and she approached the structure.

Hesitating steps brought Miranda closer to the hut as if she knew to stay away. Now an aborted scream came from the shack, like a hand had muffled the last of the sound. Miranda recognized the sound and almost felt the hand over her mouth.

She ran now.

When she burst through the open door, the images inside made her berserk. Three Temu warriors occupied the hut. Two stood by while the third raped a Sabuto woman spread-eagled on a table.

Miranda's ryl sword flew out of its sheath and rang with her snarl of perfect rage. With harpy-like

aggression, she charged the rapist's back. The two Temu not in the lewd position reacted quickly. Although Miranda's assault startled them completely, their nerves had been at battle readiness for days and their defense was swift. One of them had been leaning on his long shield, and he brought it up quickly to defend his busy companion. The force of Miranda's anger took the rys blade through the shield and into the man's back. It was not a fatal blow, but it opened him up painfully. With an ugly curse he lurched away from his victim.

The third Temu warrior tackled Miranda while her sword was still lodged in the shield. With her free arm she beat at him wildly. The Temu holding the shield got dragged along as his partner pushed Miranda backward. She slammed into a wall, wrenched her sword free and flailed it at the men.

The rapist pulled his pants up, still reeling from his lust and the pain of his wound. The violated woman squirmed to get away, but her struggles and the abuse had weakened her. Her tormentor grabbed his war club and killed her with two swift blows.

"Noooo!" Miranda screamed.

Horror overwhelmed her, and the warrior with the shield pinned her sword arm against the wall. A knife sprang into the other Temu's hand, and he surely would have killed her if a fist had not impacted with his jaw.

Redan had entered the hut and his punch knocked down the Temu. Redan kicked him in the knee. "Get away from her!" the Zenglawa ordered and put the point of his rys sword under the chin of the Temu who pinned Miranda.

The third Temu swung his war club at Redan, who countered the attack, and the keen rys blade chopped into the wooden shaft of the club. While the blade was stuck in the club handle, Redan twisted the weapon out of the hands of his opponent.

Miranda resumed her attack and her Temu target ducked behind his shield.

"Stop! Stop!" Redan begged. He had not taken in the scene entirely and he did not know why Miranda was fighting, but he did not want anyone to get killed.

Redan grabbed Miranda's shoulder and held her back. "Miranda, get out," he ordered.

"I am not afraid," Miranda raved.

Redan dragged her with him toward the door.

"Everyone out now!" It was Dreibrand's voice from outside and it was a general's bark.

Redan pushed Miranda through the door. Dreibrand approached the hut with Shan and the other bodyguards. Torchlight glistened on Dreibrand's black armor and splashed gold on his hair. When he saw Miranda emerge from the hut, his mood darkened. At first he had been peeved by the prospect of breaking up a soldiers' fight, but Miranda's involvement made it infinitely more serious.

Someone has attacked her! he thought.

The three Temu warriors exited the hut next, and their angry voices erupted. Dreibrand had a decent grasp of the Temu language, but they all yelled together and it was difficult for him to process.

Lapsing into her language, Miranda added to the shouting. Redan restrained both of her arms now, but her sword swiped insistently at one particular Temu.

"She attacked you?" Dreibrand asked incredulously when he finally figured out what the Temu were saying.

"She is crazy. She shouldn't have a weapon," shouted the wounded Temu, who reached over his shoulder and held his bloody back.

Dreibrand moved beside Miranda and relieved Redan of restraining her. He saw tears streaking her face.

Noticing the blood on her sword, he whispered, "Miranda, put the sword away."

"No," she hissed and squirmed away from his grasp, making him grab her with true firmness.

Dreibrand sensed a profound hatred fueling her emotions and he struggled to keep his temper in check. He now suspected what had unhinged her.

"Everybody, weapons down," Shan ordered. "Move away from the building."

The ryls told his bodyguards to make everyone comply. With the doorway cleared, Shan looked inside. His lip twitched slightly as he skipped his feelings of outrage. The eyes of the naked shattered woman were still open. The deathblow to her skull had sprayed blood across her face and breasts.

The nasty corpse clarified everything for Shan. He stepped away from the wretched building and shut even his mind to its physical existence. The three Temu and Miranda still hurled bitter accusations at each other and were drawing a crowd. Yentay flocked to Dreibrand's side and other Temu came to hear the complaints of their tribesmen.

"What did you do to her?" Dreibrand demanded, taking Miranda's side completely.

"We did nothing!" insisted the wounded warrior.

"Nothing to Miranda," Shan completed the man's answer. All attention switched to Shan, and he continued, "She saw what you were doing to that woman and tried to stop you."

"I can do whatever I want to the enemy," the Temu said with no hint of regret. "That mad woman had no right attacking me. She should be whipped for cutting me."

His two companions loudly agreed with him and cried out for their justice.

Protectively, Dreibrand pulled Miranda closer and his eyes narrowed with menace. No Temu volunteered to administer the punishment.

"She must be punished and permanently disarmed. No woman can carry a man's weapon," persisted the offended Temu.

"I will kill you!" Miranda shrieked.

Her Temu adversary stepped forward, but Dreibrand pushed him back. "No one will touch her," he warned in the Temu language.

Although bleeding, the Temu was not terribly intimidated. His wrath had made him bold and he considered himself as good a fighter as Dreibrand.

"I want my justice. Our law does not allow a woman to strike a man. She must pay," he yelled.

"Go away and forget this," Shan ordered. "I will reprimand her."

"You are not our ruler!" the angry Temu snapped. "I want my justice."

A few timid agreements issued from the crowd and Shan realized the crisis refused to end easily.

"You should get my justice," Miranda cried and actually spat at the warrior's feet.

The Temu gaped at her shocking disrespect, which did little to promote her case.

"I will stop any man who tries to touch her," Dreibrand announced, hoping the threat would be enough.

One of Shan's bodyguards spoke up. "Lord Shan, a man can defend his woman from any charge."

"Do you mean a duel?" Dreibrand demanded.

The bodyguard answered, "Yes. If you defeat her accuser, her indiscretion will be only your concern."

"Fine," Dreibrand said and glared at the upset Temu.

But the wounded warrior was equally ready to defend his opinion and he beckoned for a weapon from one of his companions. "I do not fear a man who can't control his woman," he derided.

Already calm and focused for the duel, Dreibrand stepped away from Miranda. As a precaution, Redan took Miranda's arm to prevent her from interfering, which she was likely to do.

"If I kill him, then the matter is closed?" Dreibrand asked for clarification.

All the Temu agreed, but the bodyguard quickly added, "Or if he yields."

"I will not yield!" thundered the opponent.

"Then expect to die," Dreibrand said coldly.

Shan cried, "Dreibrand, do not do this."

The out of control situation distressed Shan. If his general killed a Temu, the whole campaign could fall apart. The Temu always held a grudge, and if Dreibrand killed one, the harmony between the Yentay and the Temu could disintegrate.

Dreibrand heard Shan, but Miranda needed him. He looked from Miranda to Shan. "I must," he said as a helpless apology.

Shan's eyes darted among the mob of warriors. He could simply prevent the duel. He could disperse the crowd and possibly make the upset warrior forget his demand to punish Miranda.

Should I? It will not work. They will know I used my magic to trick them, but I must do something, he thought.

A growing murmur broke the hush of the crowd that anticipated the fight. Warriors parted and General Xander strode onto the scene. Two attendants followed him with spears and torches. Xander adjusted his ornate helmet and swayed a little drunkenly.

"What's going on?" he demanded with comfortable authority.

Many voices jabbered disjointed explanations until Shan silenced them.

"Miranda attacked this man when she saw him raping a Sabuto woman," Shan said. "Now he demands that Miranda be punished."

"I oppose the charge," Dreibrand stated, and Xander saw that the duel had been about to begin.

Despite the many drinks that he had been sharing with his happy King, Xander understood that the duel could disintegrate discipline between the allies. He looked at Miranda, who was clearly upset, but he forced his eyes not to linger on her.

Glancing around the crowd, he asked, "Was anyone hurt?"

The wounded Temu turned for the General and pointed at his cut shoulder. "General, look what she did! I did nothing wrong and I want that crazy woman punished," he complained hotly.

"Bah!" Xander scoffed. "We are in the middle of a war and you're crying about that?"

Xander's lack of sympathy outraged the warrior even more and he cried, "That bitch is going to pay!"

Dreibrand would have attacked the warrior right then if he did not have to grab Miranda when she broke away from Redan. The rude comment singed Xander's temper as well because he was very sensitive to anything concerning Miranda, as his tribe was about to learn.

"Shut up!" Xander hollered and his anger surprised the crowd. "How dare you call Miranda such a name? You won't duel anybody. Your charge is dismissed."

This announcement pleased Shan who could not believe that Xander was being so helpful.

"General, you can't do that," protested the warrior. "No woman can attack a man."

Xander ordered, "Go to the perimeter and take a watch for our real enemy, and think of this no more."

"I have my rights," argued the warrior.

"Stop your whining. You deserve to be hit for taking that Sabuto woman. What Temu woman wants that filth brought home to her? Now go," Xander said.

The warrior opened his mouth to protest again, but Xander cut him off. "State your charge again, and I will defend Miranda myself," he warned.

This threat impressed the offended warrior and he relented. He would not fight with his General.

Xander barked orders for the crowd to disperse. The offended warrior hesitated briefly, but finally moved away with the other men.

Miranda had calmed herself enough not to need restraining and Dreibrand only held one arm around her gently. She trembled from her intense emotions and a few tears smeared her cheeks. Dreibrand wiped them away with a corner of her cloak.

Xander watched Shan's general brushing the tears off her face and wished he could be the one to do so. Her moist green eyes looked back at him now, and Xander saw that she was grateful for his intervention.

Shan was thanking Xander most sincerely, but Xander could not even listen to the rys. The older Temu was lost in Miranda's exotic gaze, which unfortunately did not stay long on him.

Dreibrand and Miranda exchanged some murmured words, and then Redan escorted her to her tent.

Xander's rapid and passionate defense of Miranda had been noticed by Dreibrand, who suspected that a Temu would not normally defend another man's woman from such a serious charge. A little bit of jealousy automatically stirred in Dreibrand's heart, but he realized that Xander had diffused a bad situation and he would try to leave it at that.

Stepping up to Xander, Dreibrand said, "I thank you, General. I had no wish to fight with a Temu."

Xander tried to think of what to say. He had only heard a man insult Miranda and reacted emotionally. He did not really care what anyone thought of the decision either. He was simply glad that he had done something good for Miranda.

"It was the right thing to do," Xander said.

"That it was," Shan agreed. "We cannot afford to squabble among ourselves. The Sabuto have been flanking us all day. They may attack soon."

"Unless they want us to destroy all of their villages," Xander joked.

"I doubt that," Shan muttered.

Dreibrand smiled politely, knowing how much the Temu were enjoying the campaign so far. Xander excused himself because he felt quite ready to sleep off his intoxication.

Once the Temu general was out of earshot, Dreibrand said, "Do you think the Temu will hold this against me?"

"Xander made that man look bad," Shan responded. "And most of these men know they would be fools to challenge you. This will blow over."

"Yeah, I hope so," Dreibrand said, wanting to believe.

Without looking at the hut that contained the body of the dead woman, Shan ordered it burned.

Dreibrand noted the sorrow in Shan's voice. *It is hard for him to be cruel*, he thought, feeling a surge of affection and loyalty for the rys. *I must try harder to hasten our victory.*

As flames took the hut to the ground, Dreibrand retreated to his tent. Miranda's rage had faded into a sobbing depression and he tried to console her. The viciousness he had seen in her just a short time ago had been shocking, but her misery softened his heart.

Setting a lantern inside the tent, he tied the flaps shut. The light glinted off the edge of Miranda's sword that lay unsheathed in front of her. Dreibrand unbuckled her sword belt and put her sword away.

"I do not think you need this right now," he said.

With a shuddering sigh, Miranda wiped her tears away. "I am sorry I caused such a problem," she apologized with uncharacteristic meekness.

"You were upset. Do not think about it," he said.

"There are many things I must not think about," she grated bitterly.

Her anger was still very close to the surface and Dreibrand took her hand. "You were right to be angry. I was proud to defend you," he said.

"I just wanted to help her," Miranda whispered and slipped into his arms. She was grateful to have his love. At that moment, he was her only reason for not going completely mad.

"You are brave to suffer this ugliness with me," Dreibrand said.

"I must be braver. I will not cause any more trouble like that, I promise," Miranda decided.

"You are no trouble to me," Dreibrand whispered. "Now rest. The days will not get easier."

Miranda fell asleep and Dreibrand blew out the lantern. In the darkness of a foreign land, he did not think about home, but of Jingtun. No one's suffering would end until he reached that place. He had been born and grown into a man without knowing Jingtun even existed, but right now, he had never felt farther from the magic city in the Rysamand.

Sabuto civilians fled ahead of the Temu army now and Miranda was spared the ordeal of witnessing more atrocities. In two days, the vengeful Temu rolled over four more villages and two towns, but the settlements were always abandoned and gutted by the time the marauders arrived.

Dreibrand had seen these tactics before. He was not nervous yet because the army had provisions for a few more days, but he fully understood that the Sabuto meant to deny their enemy sustenance. Dreibrand wanted this Sabuto campaign finished before things turned against him. Hungry warriors were strictly against Atrophaney policy.

Wary of going deeper into the Sabuto Domain while the enemy avoided confrontation, Dreibrand reconsidered Shan's proposal to pursue them into the rougher country. He still did not feel right about it though, and it came as a relief when Shan called a council and announced that the Sabuto prepared to attack.

"The Sabuto will be here in three hours, maybe less," Shan said. "It will be another night battle. They will confront us from the south and then a secondary force will assault us on our northern rear."

"Good. Then our victory is at hand," Dreibrand said. "But I still wonder why they attack now after enduring so much. They have more to gain by making us wait."

Taischek laughed and Xander automatically shared in the joke. Taischek sought to relieve Dreibrand of his puzzlement and explained, "We are only half a day from Chanda. Their cowardly King has no courage with us so close. The Sabuto King is too afraid to look out a window and see me. That is why they attack. His terror drives their army now. That worthless son of a whore will not even come out and face me!"

"If that is so, their army will surely fail," Dreibrand said.

"The will of their warriors will break on my sword," Kalek declared.

Taischek praised his son and slapped him on the shoulder, but Kalek had made the comment mostly for Dreibrand's benefit.

"I am sure it will," Dreibrand offered graciously. His mood was improved with the completion of the Sabuto campaign in sight.

When the battle came, it went much like the night battle at Adi Nor. With Shan's last minute reports on Sabuto movements and his deadly magic, the battle could only really go one way.

But Dreibrand did admire the courage of their assault. On the frontlines, the battle was as close, and hard, and dangerous as any battle between men had ever been, and the great toll taken by the random death that Shan inflicted was a much needed advantage. However, Dreibrand thought that with enough time and men, an army might eventually break through to Shan, and he positioned extra warriors around Shan. He did not want another group of Sabuto to get lucky and blunder upon the rys again.

Even as the Sabuto began to taste defeat, they clung to their enemy with intensity. In the last frenzy of killing, the Sabuto tried to reach Shan before his magic forced them back. That night, the Yentay lost one hundred men, including the second officer U'Chian, and the Temu lost two thousand. When the Sabuto ranks finally collapsed, Dreibrand thanked his old war god, Golan. He knew he needed his warriors for future battles and he could not afford to lose any more men.

When the sun crossed the Rysamand, it lighted a world scarred by violence. The remnants of bonfires smoked into a clouded sky and bodies covered the ground. Limbs lay at odd angles to torsos, and blood thickened like smashed black cherries over many mortal wounds. Many of the dead showed no marks on their flesh because rys magic had sabotaged them from the inside. On other bodies, rys magic had been more obvious, charring the warriors beyond recognition. Flies gathered excitedly over the gruesome banquet, and their buzzing increased rapidly with the heat of the muggy morning.

Shan brushed back his cowl and surveyed the field of his victory. The land had been sown with the seeds of spring, but the promising shoots had been obliterated beneath hoof and boot. Shan analyzed the movements of the retreating enemy as warriors on every side of him shouted with exultation. Everyone knew the might of the Sabuto army had been broken. Shan had promised

victory and they were impressed. No one could resist them, and the thousands of warriors felt strong enough to face Onja herself.

Miranda saw the fire in Shan's eyes dim slightly. She had come to know that this signaled his return to a more normal state. The power of his magic would linger in him for some time, but his spells were ending.

She said, "The Sabuto have been scattered before us in the heart of their land. Shan, can we now go to Jingtun?"

Shan's chiseled face swiveled toward Miranda, and he actually smiled. It was a prudent but excited grin as if his toils had finally ended and he could pursue his interests.

"Yes, Miranda," he answered.

A strange mix of anticipation and dread swept through Miranda. Now that the time had come to go to Jingtun, terrible memories of Onja became fresh. Thoughts of her torture visited Miranda every day but now they returned in a vivid flash. She felt again the cold of the glacier against her spine and shivered. Despite the memories, her courage returned as well because she would get her children back soon.

"Let us gather the army. There is no time to waste," Shan said.

The ryls and his bodyguards sought Taischek. Gore spattered the King's mace, and Taischek swung it jubilantly over his head as he rode among his cheering warriors. Kalek cheered his father, proud that his tribe had achieved such a great victory in the land of their enemy.

Eventually, Taischek noticed Shan and galloped recklessly toward his ryls friend. The King's horse deftly avoided the fallen bodies that cluttered the field. The lathered horse puffed and snorted as it jingled to a stop before Shan.

"Hail Lord Shan!" Taischek cried. "Truly none can stop us together, Shan dear friend."

"Truly," Shan agreed happily. He knew Taischek had taken great pleasure in his revenge.

Taischek said, "Hurry, help me reassemble the ranks. We must take them down in their cowardly flight."

"What do you mean?" Shan asked.

Taischek laughed. "Wake up, Shan. Do your spells show you so much that you become blind? We must press on to Chanda. The day is new and we will be there before noon."

"To what purpose?" Shan demanded.

Impatience flickered across Taischek's face. Why would Shan question him so? The ryls knew the rage of his heart better than any man.

"Do not joke with me, Shan. Do you think I would stop this close to Chanda? I will see their King in the fire," Taischek declared.

Shan eased his horse beside the King. "We spoke not of this," Shan whispered.

Pointing his mace in the direction of the Sabuto capital, Taischek growled, "Chanda lies ahead. Do you forget the last day we were in that city?"

"No," Shan admitted. To the ryls it had not been that long since he saved the suffering boy from his tortuous execution. "But Taischek, is this victory not enough? Those tribes allied to the Sabuto have now fled in terror, and the rest of the army has been cut by half. The Sabuto threat has been destroyed and the Temu are safe from the south. Think now of the Zenglawa in the east. We must hurry to that front. We must go now."

"Are the Zenglawa invading me yet?" Taischek demanded hotly.

Hesitantly, Shan answered, "No...I do not know why Onja would hold them back, but her reason can only be bad. Even at a forced march, it will take us five or six days to reunite with Ejan at the border. We cannot linger here. Our goal has been met and we must attend to the Zenglawa."

"I will have the entirety of my revenge!" Taischek thundered.

"You shall. When I am King in Jingten, you can do as you will to the Sabuto. But today we have to leave. We agreed to this," Shan insisted.

By now Xander and Dreibrand had joined them, but they hung back without speaking. The spectacle of the leaders' disagreement transfixed all viewers.

"I will have Chanda. And I will have Chanda today," Taischek said.

"You have no time for a siege," Shan retorted.

The statement perplexed Taischek. Momentarily subdued, the King said, "But you will blast their walls."

"I will not," Shan stated firmly.

True anger seized Taischek's mood. He could not believe Shan's contrariness.

"What? You complain of time, and you would withhold your magic that would let me sack Chanda in a day? How could you, Shan? Was this battle just to tease me?" Taischek yelled.

Shan cut off the bitter questions with his own. "What is the purpose of attacking Chanda beyond your own greed for retribution? Shall I give you more women and children to slaughter? Do you forget the real war waiting in the east?"

"Enough!" Taischek ordered. "I risk my entire tribe for you, and you quibble over one city. Stay here then. I do not need your help."

"Go then! I will wait here until you realize where the Temu army needs to be," Shan shouted. His white horse pawed the ground, agitated by the vitriolic voice.

Taischek was already turning away. He would waste no more time arguing with Shan, and he beckoned to Xander.

Dreibrand also intended to follow Taischek. He had heard enough of the exchange to know what Taischek was doing. Dreibrand meant to talk to the King man-to-man. He understood that battle rage and a life of hate clouded Taischek's reason. The King was wise and Dreibrand was confident he could persuade Taischek to give up his wanton attack on Chanda. He would placate the King with promises of future victories.

"Dreibrand, come here," Shan called.

Because he was Shan's general, Dreibrand had to respond, but he regretted watching Taischek storm away.

Before Shan could say anything, Dreibrand demanded, "What are you doing?"

"Me? I am following the plan we all agreed on," Shan snapped defensively. "Taischek is the one out of control."

"I will go talk to him," Dreibrand said.

"No. Assemble the Yentay. I am sure there are wounded men who need help. We will wait here until the Temu come to their senses," Shan ordered.

Dreibrand did not want to wait and said so.

"I know it is a terrible waste of time, but there is no reasoning with him," Shan explained.

"Perhaps if I could—"

Shan cut him off. "Dreibrand, do as I say. I will not lose any of my men on his folly. The Yentay serve me so they can conquer Jingten."

Dreibrand said no more. He had never seen Shan in such an angry state, and he had never imagined that Taischek and Shan could have such a bitter quarrel.

The ryls rode to the nearest area free of bodies. His bodyguards followed but Shan ordered them to hang back and give him privacy. With his back toward the direction taken by Taischek, Shan stared northeast and thought of Jingtun.

Miranda stayed beside Dreibrand. "Why does Taischek do this?" she moaned.

"He just cannot stop yet. He...he will come back," Dreibrand said hopefully.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"I do not know. I need to think," he answered.

The rumor of the fight between Taischek and Shan spread quickly, and Tytido sought his general. Already the Temu army had started moving south, and the Yentay assumed they would follow. While approaching his general, Tytido studied the solitary figure of Shan.

Before Tytido said anything, Dreibrand answered, "We are staying here. King Taischek is pursuing the Sabuto as they retreat to Chanda, but Shan wishes to stay here."

"We should not split from the Temu, Sir," Tytido said. Even in his weariness, he quickly understood the stupidity that had erupted.

"I know," Dreibrand snapped. "But our kings are quarrelling so we must all behave madly."

Growing troubled, Tytido asked, "What will happen?"

"Because Taischek cannot breach the walls of Chanda, the Temu should grow tired of their rampage and return. For now, we will rest." Dreibrand tried to sound confident.

Hot-headed Temus, Tytido thought but gladly took his rest. He trembled with fatigue and the circles under his wide eyes were darker than his skin.

No warriors grumbled about staying behind. After campaigning with tens of thousands of Temu though, the Yentay felt a peculiar loneliness once their mighty ally marched away.

As the morning passed, the clouds thickened and the air became clinging and still. Many Yentay reposed quietly. The wounded had been tended, and those men inclined to loot bodies had done so.

Shan remained apart from his loyal warriors. He sat on the ground and the large white head of his horse hung by his shoulder. Absently petting the horse, Shan continued to stare toward his homeland. No one dared approach him. A ryl in a bad temper was to be avoided.

But Miranda's patience for Shan's brooding did not last. While eating her midday ration, she decided to speak with him. She took her remaining food and sat next to Shan.

"I have no wish for company," Shan grumbled.

"I have not seen you eat for some time, Shan. I thought I would share my food," Miranda said.

"Go away," he commanded.

"I do not think I will," Miranda stated.

Shan looked at her now. Power no longer flared in his eyes, and Miranda could see herself mirrored in their glossy blackness.

"You will teach the world not to give you orders yet, Miranda," he commented.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

Shan shook his head listlessly.

"It is because you are upset," Miranda said. "Why did you and Taischek fight? You love each other. Everyone is terrified by such anger between two who are such friends. Even Dreibrand does not know what to do."

Shan looked away, but Miranda continued, "Are we just going to sit here until the grass grows

around us? Most of your army just stormed south and you do not know when or if they are coming back."

"Taischek will come back," Shan growled, straining against his anger.

"When? In a week? A month?" Miranda demanded. "He just might siege that city."

Shan actually cringed from her questions. Although filled with anger, he was incapable of directing it at Miranda.

"Taischek will come back tonight. He will bang his head on the walls of Chanda, and then his senses will return," Shan insisted.

"He did not say he would come back so soon," Miranda countered. "His anger may keep him away as yours keeps us sitting here."

Shan shut his eyes, resisting her words. "Miranda, he has to come back. I do not want to leave him."

"Oh, we will not leave him. We need all of those warriors. Now let us go get Taischek. He has pledged himself to your cause and he will turn around if you ask him again," Miranda said.

"I should not have to ask him again! He breaks the plan we all agreed to. He KNOWS what is at stake, and still he behaves like a fool. I want him to realize his mistake and come back to me," Shan decided.

"I thought pride was a problem for humans, but rys are sick with it," Miranda vented.

Her words stabbed Shan with the truth. Timidly, he explained, "It is not my pride. I just did not want to go kill more people. Miranda, it is not good for me to use magic like that."

"No, it is not," Miranda agreed with sympathy.

"But the time for me to kill the true enemy approaches," Shan said.

"And that is why we must go get Taischek," Miranda encouraged.

Shan believed her but his anger was too fresh for him to agree to her proposal. Shan had resented Taischek's assumption that he would gladly kill more people just because he could.

Belligerently, Shan insisted, "Taischek is wrong. He must learn this and then come back."

"You are as stubborn as a child!" Miranda cried. "Sit here and pout. I will go get Taischek."

She stood and strode away to saddle her spare horse. Shan folded his arms and let her leave.

Taischek will think of his eastern border and come back, Shan reminded himself.

Dreibrand had observed Miranda's attempt to talk with Shan. When she headed for the horses, he called her name and she glanced over her shoulder without breaking her stride.

"I am going to get Taischek," she said when he caught up to her.

"Has Shan told you to do this?" Dreibrand wondered.

"No, he will not come. But I am going," Miranda said.

"Then I am going with you," he decided, although Shan had ordered him to stay.

Miranda shot him a look, surprised that he did not tell her to stay.

"What will you say to Taischek?" Dreibrand asked.

"I do not know," she admitted. "But I have to convince him to come back"

"We will think of something by the time we reach him," Dreibrand said.

Tytido and Redan watched their general ride away with his woman and ten warriors. Even Shan

looked over to watch their departure. When the ryls did not interfere, Dreibrand considered it permission to leave.

Before galloping off, Dreibrand gave command to Tytido, who felt the weight of responsibility settle on him as his general disappeared down the path of destruction left by two armies.

An eerie quiet claimed the land and the clouds gathered with the promise of a fearsome storm. No breeze disturbed the thick air, and no thunder yet shook the heavens. Ravens had wasted no time arriving for the buffet of bodies that covered the fields. Wheels of vultures circled the dark sky, and more vultures were settled around their unfortunate meals.

On the road south to Chanda, the bodies finally began to thin. Only the occasional warrior littered the roadside where he had finally expired from wounds. A path much wider than the road had been trampled by the hasty retreat and pursuit of armies. On this grim route Dreibrand and Miranda rode swiftly, and even with their warriors, they felt hopelessly small in the war-torn country.

The humans and horses sweated freely in the close air. Inwardly, Dreibrand cursed at himself. Miranda was right. The Temu needed to be retrieved immediately and he should have gone after Taischek hours ago. Like Shan, he had hoped the Temu would come back quickly.

Miranda was also silent with her thoughts. She did not know what she would say to Taischek. Although the King tolerated her, Miranda believed he rarely listened to her. She hoped that her passion to win the war would give her the words to convince him to forget Chanda.

They passed a riderless horse browsing on the side of the road. The horse lifted its head leisurely and watched the warriors hurry by. They noticed the Temu-style beaded tassels hanging from the horse's gear.

Next, they came upon four Temu warriors dead on the road. Dreibrand halted the party and they viewed the bodies from horseback. Arrows with Sabuto fletching stuck out of the bodies. Dreibrand and the Yentay eyed the surrounding trees and bushes.

"Ambush," remarked a Yentay.

Dreibrand nodded. "When we raided the Sabuto last year, they would ambush us, then melt back into the country. They will not make battle until Taischek reaches Chanda. Come, Chanda is only a few more hasas, I believe, and the battle will start soon."

They raced onward, hoping all snipers had abandoned the vacant countryside, even though more dead Temu began appearing on the side of the road.

Finally they topped the ridge overlooking Chanda. Homes and farms filled the green river valley. A wide river, filled perpetually by the snowy Rysamand, slowed down to curve through the flat fertile land. A broad stone bridge crossed the river in three graceful arches and led to the gateway of the beautiful city of Chanda. Canals had been dug off the river and several channels entered the city, but portcullises protected the canal entrances from attack. High walls of stone surrounded the city, discouraging any hopes for a swift assault.

It was a magnificent city and Dreibrand felt a surge of excitement when he saw the grand capital of the Temu enemy. Conquering such a city would be satisfying and profitable. Briefly he was the Atrophaney conqueror again, conceiving of the city as a place to dominate. Dreibrand could understand why the King was tempted.

From the ominous gloom of the storm-dark sky came a triple flash of colossal lightning. A few seconds passed and a lengthy roll of thunder threatened the land.

A puff of cold air whipped through Miranda's hair. "Look!" she cried.

The battle had already begun. The Sabuto had retreated all the way to the river before making a stand. From the ridge, Miranda and the others could see the armies raging against each other. They could also see that the Temu were being outmaneuvered.

Dreibrand quickly ordered them off the road and into some cover. Only the distraction of the escalating battle had kept them from being spotted. Dreibrand determined that the Sabuto must have retreated so far in order to surround the Temu in the river lowlands. Taischek's blind fury had driven him into a trap.

Dreibrand was about to speak when lightning crashed across the sky again. Thunder followed

closer this time, creating a mighty noise. A cold wind hit the hot still air like a sword into flesh.

Yelling above the rising wind and thunder, he said, "The Temu are in trouble."

Miranda paled. "Are you sure? Their army is large, and the Sabuto have been driven before us."

"The Sabuto still have enough of an army to hurt us. The threat of invasion has been removed, but now they defend their homeland," Dreibrand explained.

"Then we must go to Taischek now," Miranda said.

"The trap is already closing. Miranda, you must go tell Shan. Tell him to help," Dreibrand said.

"Go to Shan! I came here to get Taischek," Miranda declared.

"No," Dreibrand said. "You must get Shan to intervene. If Shan does not help the Temu now, we may lose the whole army."

Miranda stared back at him in horror. Even without liking Dreibrand's judgment of the situation, she believed him.

"But I cannot get to Shan in time," she protested helplessly.

"The storm will slow the battle, and Shan can strike from where he is," Dreibrand said. "Please, Miranda, go now. I will help the Temu fight their way out. Xander will listen to me."

"You are staying here?" Miranda cried. "If you are certain of the danger, why do you stay?"

Dreibrand saw the concern on her face and treasured it. Softly he answered, "Because the Temu need help and I owe it to them. And if my life is at stake, I know you will succeed."

Miranda refused adamantly to separate from him, but Dreibrand ignored her argument and he ordered two Yentay to go back with her.

"I will not leave you!" she said.

Preparing to join the battle, Dreibrand drew his sword. He saw the dismay in Miranda's lovely green eyes. Indeed, he did not want to send her across hostile territory with only two warriors, but he needed Shan's help and he knew Miranda would get it for him.

"Miranda, it is the only way. You must get Shan to help. If you love me, go!" he said.

Why must he put it like that? she thought miserably. "If I must," she muttered.

With no more time for soft words, they rode in opposite directions. Dreibrand with eight Yentay hurried to join the Temu while they still could, and Miranda raced back to Shan.

Large drops of rain starting smacking Miranda's face, but she hardly noticed them because she could only think of Dreibrand's peril. *I must not fail!*

~

A sentry shouted and Shan heard the alarm relay through the Yentay. He hoped it was Dreibrand and Miranda returning. He had not monitored their progress, losing himself instead in the power of the storm. A light drizzle remained over the land in the wake of the storm, which had been long and terrifying. A furious wind had brought an intense downpour that had soaked everybody.

Surely this storm cooled Taischek's temper, Shan thought.

Miranda and the two warriors who accompanied her drove their mud-spattered mounts straight for Shan. The exhausted horses almost stumbled when they finally stopped.

A wave of sick distress hit Shan when he realized that Dreibrand had not come back. Although in his heart Shan knew Dreibrand still lived, he panicked and realized something was very wrong.

Abandoning his solitude, Shan ran toward Miranda. Dripping wet and muddy, Miranda babbled incoherent alarms.

"What? Catch your breath, Miranda. What is happening?" Shan said.

"The Temu are in a battle with the Sabuto. Dreibrand says the Temu will not win," she answered. "Dreibrand says you must use your magic to help or the Temu army will be lost."

"Where is he?" Shan said urgently.

"He went to help Taischek," Miranda moaned, clearly opposed to the action.

"Damn Taischek's foolishness!" Shan snarled.

"Shan, forget your anger. Dreibrand says you must help. Surely you have seen the battle. Is he all right?" Miranda said.

Angrily, Shan waved a hand and paced a few steps. "I have not been watching," he admitted. "I will not reward Taischek's bloodlust with my attention."

Miranda grabbed his hand and stopped him. "You must look! You must help them," she insisted.

Shan gripped her hand and compassion tore now at his anger.

"Taischek deserves this trouble," he growled.

"Perhaps he does," Miranda conceded. "But he is still your friend and he needs your help."

Shaking his head sadly, Shan whispered, "I wish Dreibrand had come back."

Miranda saw that Shan stubbornly resisted ending his dispute with Taischek. She had to make him understand the severity of the situation. Not knowing what else to do, she clutched Shan with her other hand and fell to her knees.

"Shan, please look at the battle," she pleaded. "Dreibrand would not ask for your help if he did not need it. We need the Temu army, and...and I need Dreibrand. Please help him. He would do anything for you."

Shan gaped at her appeal. What desperation could drive Miranda to her knees? Proud Miranda, who stood against Onja, now begged for his favor. Shan would not let her debase herself because he was upset. Shan would not see her beg anymore.

Gently he lifted her into his arms. "I hear you now, Miranda. I will do as you say."

Miranda took a shaky breath and held back a sob. So close to Shan, she could feel that his wrath had finally left him.

"Tell Tytido to prepare the Yentay to ride and I will look at the battle," Shan whispered tenderly.

Miranda hugged him gratefully but quickly let him go. She did not want to delay him. She feared that it had been too long already. It had taken her more than two hours to return to Shan. At one point the storm had forced her and the warriors to stop during the worst of the rain and the wind.

Miranda backed away from Shan as he entered his meditation. Tytido was waiting to speak to her, and she told him everything, including Shan's order. The lieutenant glanced at the gloomy horizon. The afternoon was late and he contemplated another night battle.

Preparing to leave, Miranda pulled the soggy gear off her tired horse and went to saddle Freedom. After cinching on the saddle, she noticed her hands shaking. She wondered how much longer she would be immune to her weariness. The stress got worse every day, but it seemed to be her only source of strength now.

Nearby Starfield nickered tentatively. Miranda looked at the statuesque warhorse that obviously wondered where his master was. Dreibrand always rode Starfield into battle. Thinking of him fighting hasas away, Miranda hoped his spare horse served him well.

A wretched scream shattered her thoughts. The wailing shout came from Shan, and the rys hugged himself as if in pain. But he remained deep in his trance and no one disturbed him, not even Miranda.

Dreibrand staggered back from his opponent, relying on his shield. He had heard a scream in his head and been briefly distracted by it. The scream seemed to come from Shan, and he dreaded that something had happened to the rys, but the pressures of staying alive did not let him contemplate the haunting sound any further.

In the press of struggling warriors, he thwarted relentless attacks from the two Sabuto warriors nearest to him. It seemed like a century since his horse had been cut down and even longer since the Sabuto had achieved their stranglehold on the Temu.

Dreibrand had caught up to the Temu just as the Sabuto trap had closed. A feat he instantly regretted. He knew it had been honorable of him to rush to Taischek's side, but in hindsight, it did not look practical. He had seen the Sabuto trap from the ridge, and it looked worse from the inside.

Taischek and Xander had been thrilled to see him but were disappointed that he had not brought all of the Yentay. Dreibrand had seen the worry on Xander's face. Xander knew he was not the first general to rush to his greatest defeat out of loyalty to a king, but the knowledge consoled him little.

The Temu army was still large and strong, but the Sabuto bottled them up between the ridge and the river. If it had not been for the storm, Dreibrand believed the Sabuto victory would have already happened. The rain and wind had been so thick and strong that an arrow could barely fly.

As the storm hit, Dreibrand had convinced the Temu to shift their fighting in favor of a retreat. With evident disappointment Taischek had acknowledged his error. The heinous storm had covered their retreat as much as it hindered it. The Temu army was only halfway out of the river bottoms, and Dreibrand could see that they would only escape with heavy losses. The Sabuto continually pressed on their flanks and the Temu had no space to maneuver.

All Dreibrand could do was fight until he got away. Miranda should be with Shan by now and he would reach them somehow. Assuming Shan was unhurt, they could still get to Jingtun.

Fighting carefully, Dreibrand did not allow his desperation to reduce him into a sloppy frenzy. With controlled movements he spared his stamina, knowing he would need it.

Finally, Shan's assault on the Sabuto came.

The lethal rys magic hit with greater intensity and recklessness than the other battles. By the dozen, Sabuto warriors crumpled and crisped in blasts of merciless heat spells.

The intervention by the rys relieved Dreibrand, but the display of awesome power also made him afraid. He felt the heat roll off the victims. He knew Shan was very accurate, but standing so close to the scene of deadly magic still made him nervous.

A wail of rage and terror rose from the Sabuto. They had been on the verge of vengeful victory, but Shan now made it very clear that they would not have it. Shan concentrated his fiery spells on the portions of the Sabuto army that hindered the Temu retreat. The Sabuto who survived the initial assault gave up their positions, choosing to let the Temu withdraw.

Shouts of joy and exuberant battle cries sprang from the Temu forces. Shan's entrance into the battle changed everything but Dreibrand ran through the ranks and encouraged retreat again. Clearly, Shan intended to facilitate their withdrawal, and Dreibrand did not want the Temu to get excited and go on the offensive again.

Dreibrand tried to locate Taischek, but he had lost track of the King in the madness of the fight. However, the Temu army did not squander its chance to get away. Shan had struck the Sabuto a staggering blow and the Temu broke free of the trap.

~

Shan gasped when he returned to his body. Weakly he wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. The Yentay were gathered around him, waiting for his next order. When Miranda saw his spell end, she went to his side.

Discreetly she offered a supporting arm, and Shan took it.

"Can you get to your horse?" she whispered.

"Yes...we must ride," he choked.

"Did you help them?" Miranda asked.

Shan moaned with hateful distress, "Not in time."

Miranda cried out with dismay, "What of Dreibrand?"

"He is well," Shan hastily reported and sprang into his saddle. "But we must go. Oh, Miranda, if only I could fly."

Shan bounded onto his white horse. His bodyguards had to scramble to catch up with him, and the Yentay streamed after the rys who was already racing south.

The cold air that had come with the violent storm moved on, and hot humid air returned. The sun had set by the time Shan met the retreating Temu army, and pulsing heat lightning played in the dark sky.

The confident and invincible Temu of the day before had been replaced by bedraggled warriors who had been pushed too far. The Yentay poured into the Temu column seeking their general. Tytido supposed Dreibrand would be managing the rearguard of the retreat.

Shan charged straight through the limping legions with a frantic purpose. His bodyguards struggled to stay near him without trampling any exhausted Temu. When Shan reached his goal, he jumped from his horse and shouted for Xander.

The General yelled in reply and the night accentuated the stress in his voice. Shan stopped by Xander's horse.

"Get him down," Shan said, reaching up.

Xander gently slid a bulky form down to the rys. The heat lightning flashed and revealed Taischek's face, drooping over Shan's arm.

The faithful Xander instantly hopped down to help carry his King to the roadside.

"Is it safe to stop yet?" Xander asked. He had lost track of everything after Taischek had been hurt.

"It has to be," Shan said.

The rys kneeled and laid Taischek's head in his lap. Trembling blue hands reached over the King's torso, examining the wounds.

Kalek dismounted and stood over his father. He had a stricken look and did not speak. His mind teetered between hysteria and denial.

"The Sabuto were all over him. I don't know how. I think it just took his strength to turn away from Chanda," Xander explained. "I drove them back. I need only my King to be strong. I carried him all this way."

Emotions tightened Xander's chest, where he clutched one of Taischek's hands as if he could will life back into the body.

The King of the Temu wheezed and moaned. Shan put a hand on his forehead, blocking some of the pain from his friend's mind. It eased Taischek enough to let him breathe without agony.

Tears filled Shan's eyes when the severity of Taischek's condition confronted him. Until this moment, Shan had hoped, but not any more. It did not take magic to feel the slick slime of blood all over Taischek's armor. With his mind, Shan saw the pierced armor and wretched wounds beneath. Organs had been shredded and ribs crushed. As Shan blocked Taischek's pain, he absorbed some of it. The physical discomfort knotted Shan's stomach, but it was nothing compared to his guilt.

A tear rolled from a high rys cheekbone and splashed on Taischek's forehead. The rich color of the King's once vital face was fading fast. Briefly, Shan sought to close Taischek's wounds, but the futility of the task only tormented both of them. Shan choked on his frustration. The damage was too devastating. Perhaps if Shan had devoted his entire life to the healing arts, his magic would

have been sufficient to save Taischek, but Shan was incapable.

"I am sorry," Shan sobbed with utter humility.

Taischek reached back and clasped the hand Shan had on his head. "Shan," he rasped.

"It is my fault. I have done this to you," Shan said.

Taischek felt his awareness slipping. He knew Shan somehow eased his suffering and was grateful. Even in these waning moments, Taischek resolved not to leave his rys friend with the heavy burden of guilt.

"My fault," he said. A faint smile curved his lips. It was the last one that would grace his fun-loving face in life. "I was wrong, Shan. Aren't you glad you got to hear me say that before I die, eh?"

"Taischek!" Shan cried.

"Settle down you rys," Taischek whispered. "I regret only our argument, not the consequences. I should not have gone to Chanda, but I went mad. I wanted to tear down the places where they hurt me."

"I should have done it for you," Shan moaned. "I should not have turned my back. Now I have killed you."

Kalek heard this and snapped, "But you can save him!"

Taischek released Shan and held out a hand to his son. "Kalek," he called. "Come to me, son. At least you are unhurt. Praise our ancestors."

Kalek crumbled to his father's side, opposite Xander. He struggled to be strong. His stuttering breaths were really dry sobs, but it was the best he could do.

"Kalek, you will be King now," Taischek told him.

Too overwhelmed to speak, Kalek shook his head. His body swayed with the encroaching grief.

Taischek continued, "Yes, Kalek, you are the King. You must always keep the best interests of the Temu in your heart. And you must honor my commitments to Shan. Our tribe relies on him ruling Jingten."

"No, no, no!" Kalek protested hopelessly.

"Swear these things to me!" Taischek ordered. The force of his words split his tattered body and he jerked with pain.

His father's writhing ended Kalek's denial. "I swear. I swear," he said.

"You are King," Taischek murmured and with his last breath added, "Goodbye Xander."

Shan's senses reeled when Taischek's soul lifted away. Shan clung to his friend's spirit. He did not selfishly restrain the soul, but instead let his spirit ascend with the soul of the King. Shan was not ready to permanently part from his dear friend. The sting of the harsh words they had shared that morning filled him with regret.

Taischek's spirit approached the next world. Shan saw his friend floating in a bright place, a shimmering place like where the ocean meets the sky. Shan pushed his mind closer to the next world than he ever had before. The brilliant radiance of the gateway warmed him and made the living world seem like a distant quaint memory.

Suddenly, Taischek appeared for Shan as a young man. He had a full head of black hair and the sleek strong body of a man in the prime of his youth. A bright grin lighted his face that was free of the wrinkles and lines that had accompanied his smiles for many years now.

"Shan, why didn't you tell me of this place?" Taischek asked pleasantly. He marveled at his hands. The rings were gone, but all the fingers were present.

"It is not my place to speak of the next world," Shan answered. "I do not know if you see it the same way I do."

Taischek's joyous expression faded. "I am dead then," he said simply.

"Yes," Shan replied.

"Where is this?" Taischek asked.

"We are still in the living world you have known. But you must keep going, Taischek. Spirits are not happy to stay. Soon you would despair for your flesh," Shan explained.

Very carefully Taischek glanced over his shoulder. The rippling silver energy beckoned him.

"What is there?" Taischek whispered.

"I do not know. If I looked, I do not think I could go back to my body," Shan said.

"Then I will be pleased to know something before you do," Taischek joked.

"I should go with you. I cannot forgive myself for killing you," Shan admitted.

"No!" Taischek snapped. "The Temu still need you."

Shan thought of the loyal tribe. He could not leave them to Onja's fury. He really owed Taischek that.

"My friend, I am so sorry," Shan said.

Sincerely, Taischek comforted, "Shan, you did not kill me. You gave me life. Without you, I would have been killed by the Sabuto long ago. Three decades may not be much to you, but it was my life. You gave me all my children. Shan, I thank you. You have done me no wrong."

"I will miss you, Taischek," Shan said miserably.

"Maybe in my next life, you will still be alive," Taischek proposed cheerfully.

The young Taischek began to recede into the light. Shan held his spirit away from the pull of Taischek's departure.

"The world will be boring without you," Shan called after him.

With a grin Taischek disappeared. Shan let his spirit plummet back to his body, where the ache of his broken heart redefined his grief. The loss of a human friend always seemed to happen so suddenly.

Kalek's sharp cries of denial assaulted Shan's ears. The Temu heir shrieked at the heavens with the rage of a war cry and the sorrow of a devoted son. Many Temu warriors heard the keen wail of their Prince and knew he was now King.

~

Tytido rode deeper into the slowing ranks of the Temu army. When the heat lightning glowed, he scanned for Dreibrand. Finding him quickly in the gloom would be impossible, and the lieutenant starting calling out for his general. Sometimes a Temu warrior would respond that he had seen General Veta behind him, and Tytido would move on.

"Tytido!"

Someone seized his leg and the lieutenant flinched.

"It's me."

"Damn, Dreibrand, you scared me," Tytido said once he recognized the foreign accent. He had been looking for Dreibrand on a horse.

"Is Shan hurt?" Dreibrand asked, and the heat lightning revealed the face of a man who had just faced death many times.

"No, he is here," Tytido answered.

Dreibrand sighed with relief and then asked about Miranda, and was equally relieved by good news.

"Do you need my horse, Sir?" Tytido offered.

"Not unless you lost my other one, Lieutenant," Dreibrand said. "Just get the Yentay on the rearguard. The Sabuto might come after us yet. And I will try to get things moving. We are slowing down. I have to find King Taischek."

"I think the King is hurt. Shan is with him," Tytido said.

"Taischek hurt?" Dreibrand whispered.

A scream came through the night and turned into long terrible cries of grief. Dreibrand did not want to believe what it might mean even though he had not seen Taischek or Xander since the river bottoms. During the battle he had been busy fighting and commanding the retreat, but now he realized that the Temu leadership had been absent and the army had basically been his.

"I have to go," Dreibrand said and walked away.

Fatigue owned his legs but he plodded quicker. Because of the wet, few torches could be lit, but he saw a cluster of them ahead, in a ring of smoky bleary light. The Temu warriors had stopped moving, and Dreibrand picked his way through the immobile mass. The cries had stopped and a rumor rushed through the army like only bad news could.

"The King is dead," a warrior said.

When he heard this, Dreibrand automatically shook his head while pushing through the crowd. He hit a ring of mounted warriors, mostly Shan's bodyguards, who made a barricade at the center of the crowd. He strained to see past the horses.

"Dreibrand."

He looked up and saw Miranda on a horse moving toward him. "Is it true?" he whispered, too numb from stress and denial to greet her.

Although she regretted Taischek's passing, it was good to see Dreibrand alive and uninjured.

"Yes," she replied. She bent and brushed a hand on his cheek.

He reached for her hand but decided against it and set his hand on the saddle by her leg. Blood and mud encrusted his gauntlets, and he did not want to touch her with such filth. Dreibrand looked over her horse and finally saw the awful scene. Xander, Kalek and Shan were huddled around a prone figure. Thunder rumbled and Kalek lifted his head from his father's chest, and Dreibrand saw the unmoving body of the King. He knew that the career of a warrior could end quickly, but he simply had not expected Taischek to get killed.

The death cry announcing the King's passing still lingered in Dreibrand's mind and he saw the grief on Kalek's face. Dreibrand almost pitied Kalek in his suffering and wondered what it would be like to even care about his father that much.

The Temu heir looked at Xander and Shan and then all around. Kalek did not know what to do but realized he was expected to speak.

Woodenly, he rose to his feet and pushed back his ragged braids. His helmet had been lost in the battle. He cleared his throat that now hurt from his yelling. On his first word, his voice failed him and he had to try again. Kalek struggled to think of what his father would say.

"Taischek, King of the Temu...my father...has fallen on the noble warpath. I, Kalek, am King of the Temu now. My father will be conveyed back to Dengar Nor for burial. Now, even with our broken hearts and weariness, we must march. Our enemies will not wait."

Kalek knew his words had been sparse and uninspiring, but at least he had made his first decision.

When I saw that my leader was a fool and would lead us to our deaths, I decided that he would die first and I would win the day—Galmonlay, hero of Atrophane's classic age.

Onja commanded Quylan to bring a lantern. Obediently, she followed her Queen through the corridors of the Keep, wondering what lesson Onja planned for today. Over the winter, Quylan had acquired many skills and passed many tests. A few months with Onja had expanded her knowledge tenfold and Quylan felt very powerful now, except around Onja.

Descending level after level, Onja led Quylan down halls the young female had not been in before. This made Quylan nervous, and to mask her fear, she tried to think only loyal thoughts.

She was following Onja into the dungeon.

The delicate nostrils on Quylan's face fluttered against the musty odor. They were below ground now in a cavernous stairwell. High above, light peeked in barred windows but did little to lessen the gloom.

A flame flared inside the lantern as Quylan released a satisfying little burst of energy. Onja glided down the steps of smooth stone without pausing. Down here the Keep had never been remodeled and did not receive meticulous maintenance, and it showed its age. The Keep was over two thousand years old, built shortly after the war with Nufal, and an ancient funk of mold and damp crept up from the deeper levels.

Quylan resisted the urge to ask questions. She sensed in this place that fear was better than answers.

The steps ended and they went down a dark corridor. The close walls felt oppressive after the large stairwell, and Quylan dreaded their destination. It had to be another test. Nasty scenarios began to enter her mind. Would Onja lock her up down here to see if she could get out? Did Onja want to see if she would complaisantly be locked in a cell?

The corridor ended in a guardroom. No ryls were on duty, but the clutter on the table indicated guards were sometimes present. Onja halted before a heavy ironbound door. Quylan stopped behind her and stared at Onja's loose mane of white hair.

"Quylan, please open this door," Onja directed.

Quylan reached out with her mind and examined the door. Three simple bolts secured it, and Onja would expect her to open it quickly. Quylan did not want to open the door, but she must not delay.

The bolts scraped open and it strained Quylan to make them move. Onja entered first and Quylan dutifully followed. After another long and claustrophobic hall, they went down another flight of steps. There were no windows at this grim level. They crossed a large chamber that devoured the lantern light. The Queen fastidiously lifted her skirt and stepped around the puddles on the rock and gravel floor. On the far wall was a row of cells. The weak light showed several forlorn doors with barred windows. Quylan shuddered.

Onja stopped and gave no order. Unwilling to speak first, Quylan timidly reached out with her senses. With a gasp, she jumped back. The lantern light swayed across the black wall. Onja turned to face her student and smiled.

"We have a prisoner," Onja said.

"Who?" Quylan asked.

Onja shrugged and answered in a humoring tone, "A human. I retained one from a tribute caravan. I did not notice which tribe. It does not matter who."

"A man has been down here since autumn?" Quylan asked with shock.

The Queen raised her eyebrows disdainfully. "Quylan, you really must not be so sensitive."

"But why?" Quylan demanded. She immediately regretted the hint of outrage that had escaped. She dropped her gaze respectfully as Onja's eyes flashed with displeasure.

The Queen let her anger slowly pass. Coldly, she replied, "A captive was required for you."

The answer chilled Quylan. She hated the thought of the miserable human locked in the hole on her account. "He must be almost dead after so much time," Quylan murmured.

"His care has not been neglected. My guards fed him and exercised him. His health is viable," Onja said.

A shuffling came from a cell. The light and voices in the inky bowels of the Keep had roused the prisoner. Onja stepped around a reeking puddle and peered into the cell. A frightened hiss issued from the cell and the occupant retreated from the door.

"He is fine," Onja announced sarcastically, and Quylan knew her Queen ridiculed her concern for the prisoner.

The Queen circled back beside Quylan and smiled to her student with maternal warmth. "Quylan, you have had little contact with humans," she stated.

"Very little, my Queen," agreed Quylan.

"I know you have met Lord Kwan, and that is acceptable. He will be serving you closely in the future," Onja said.

Quylan's stomach clenched, but she forced herself to relax. Thinking of Kwan reminded her of her secret misgivings about serving Onja, and she must not think of such things.

Onja continued, "I have taught you how to defend yourself, and you have learned well. Already you sense your growing security from attack. However, defense alone will not earn respect. Simply stopping an attack is not enough. You must strike back.

"The rys of Jingteng have grown sweet and innocent in the world I have created for them. But to subjugate the wealthy east I must train my chosen agents in...harsher methods."

Onja slowly traced a finger down Quylan's throat and along her collarbone.

"Shan's war rages in the lowlands," Onja said. "He has killed many humans, but my armies persist. You will take Kwan and his soldiers to reinforce the Jingteng Pass. There will be another battle in a few days. But before I entrust you with this important mission, you must do one more thing. You must kill this prisoner."

Horror and hate gripped Quylan's heart. She hated herself because she had a terrible feeling that she would obey. Vividly, Quylan felt the lifeforce of the human in the cell.

"But—but why?" she stammered.

"I will not send you into battle without the ability to kill," Onja answered. "Shan's army will try to kill you, and you must work to destroy them."

With poorly veiled panic, Quylan shook her head. "I cannot strike at Shan. Our law—"

Onja snorted derisively. If she heard one more rys bring up Dacian's Last Law, she thought she would go mad. Calming herself, she soothed, "Leave Shan to me. He is my concern. You need only fight the humans who are invading your home. This mission is an important learning experience for you. The humans will learn to follow you, and you will learn to handle them. Now kill this man and show me the truth of your heart."

"But he has done nothing," Quylan protested.

"If you can strike down an innocent, your enemy will have no chance against you!" Onja seethed impatiently.

"I cannot," Quylan whimpered.

Onja seized her hand in a violent grip and twisted the soft blue palm into Quylan's face. "Do you think clean pure hands wield power?" she hissed. "If you cannot do this simple thing, go home and lead your simpleton's life. If you would see the world and know power, kill that pitiful creature. For the greater glory of Jingteng, some of us must give up our innocence!"

Quylan quaked in the grasp of her Queen. Fear and ambition tore her mind in every direction.

Onja's voice softened and became like feathers on skin. "Quylan, you have more potential than any of the other rys. You were born for this life."

The kinder tone relaxed Quylan and urged her to obey. She wanted to serve and exist in the warm folds of favor that Onja rewarded to loyalty.

But the part of Quylan that was still her own opposed killing the cursed prisoner. She probably would have failed and been forever cast from Onja's favor if it had not been for one thought. If she passed this test, she could leave Jingtun and go to the war, the war where Shan was. She could see Shan...

She halted her thoughts. She must not think of Shan and she quickly added more thoughts of war and power.

"My Queen, how shall I do it?" she asked in a tremulous whisper.

Onja released her. "In any way that suits you," she replied happily.

The prisoner did not know the rys language, but he guessed his danger. He looked through his barred window again, squinting in the lantern light. It was painfully bright after the shadows that had held him for so long, but he confirmed that Queen Onja had indeed come to look in on him. He had no idea who the other rys could be, but when she approached his door, he retreated to a filthy corner.

Quylan opened the door. Her mind screamed for her to stop, but perhaps she could do some good if she committed this foul act. The human was never getting out of the dungeon anyway.

Her slender form threaded the doorway, and Onja came up to watch. The Queen had the lantern now and illuminated the cell. Pairs of beady rat eyes reflected the light. The rodents squealed and disappeared down a hole.

The man saw the blue glow start in Quylan's eyes and he panicked.

Cringing against the wall, he begged, "Queen Onja, save me! Great Goddess, please have mercy. I have done nothing. My tribe is loyal. I will serve you."

His babbling rose to a scream when Quylan stretched her hands toward him. His terror and begging tortured her and she had to make it stop. Crying out, Quylan blasted a hole into his chest. Her focused heat spell incinerated his breastbone and charred his heart. It was rather indelicate but immediately effective. He jerked against the wall with a final scream. A little smoke rose out of his gaping mouth as the human toppled forward.

Quylan jumped away from his tumbling corpse. His soul rushed over her, and she threw her arms over her head to physically protect herself from the horror. She felt all his spite for being murdered. Quylan had never been around death before, and she had been completely unprepared for the soul release of the dead. In terror she flailed her hands at thin air. The wraith hated her and she could feel the malice, but luckily the soul soon left.

The departure of the victim's judgment relieved her. Sweating in the subterranean cold, Quylan forced herself to take one hard look at the man's corpse. His skin was white from no sun and his matted hair dangled over his rags. She could not decide which was worse—that she had killed him or that he had suffered so long in order for her to kill him.

Finally she faced Onja.

The Queen commented, "Not quite what you expect, is it?"

"I felt the anger in his soul. It was everywhere," Quylan said.

Beckoning her pupil, Onja nodded. "Yes, the soul is a very powerful thing. You needed to have this experience. But Quylan, you at least could have made him suffer for me. He was begging so nicely."

Quylan blinked in disbelief but quickly maintained a neutral mind. Onja must not sense her revulsion.

Onja continued, "I will show you how to have fun another time. Let us leave this hole."

Quylan followed her Queen and was glad to leave the stinking dungeon behind. She wanted to cry and run away, but such rysling emotions were no longer allowed her. She had to act happy because she should be pleased about passing the test.

When they reached the levels above ground, they seemed brighter and airier than ever before. Quylan would try to leave memories of the killing in the dark awful dungeon. At least now Onja might grant her some freedom.

The shock of the angry soul lingered on her mind, and she tried to deal with it. Rys could perceive such things and she should get used to it. Quylan suspected she would see more people die in the near future.

For now, she had to put on a good show for Onja, so the Queen would believe in her loyalty and conviction.

"My Queen, I see the wisdom of your lesson. It would have been inappropriate for the humans to witness my first killing," she said.

Onja looked back with an approving smile. "You did well, Quylan. I had been worried that you would refuse, but you are stronger than some."

As they entered Onja's vast apartments, servants stepped aside and bowed to the Queen. Quylan abruptly wondered if anybody knew what she had just done. She fought back the rising guilt. One wretched human life should mean nothing to her, as Onja had taught her.

Onja took her to a room with a large table that had no chairs. A few shelves lined one wall and they held a couple dozen large scrolls. Onja took one and unrolled it on the table where squares of light fell from the skylight. It was a map of the Jingtén Pass and the western slopes of the Rysamand. The map had been beautifully drawn with the detail that only a rys mind could provide.

"Now we will discuss the details of the coming battle," Onja said. "In two days you will leave with the Atrophane to reinforce the Zenglawa. As I said before, this is more for your benefit than a real military need."

Examining the map and trying to picture the armies on the land, Quylan asked, "How will I manage the Atrophane with the Zenglawa? They will have no language to speak to each other."

Onja replied, "Atathol of the Zenglawa has been told that you will come with a force of mercenaries from the east, so that will not be a shock to him. You will coordinate yourself with Atathol, but the Atrophane will be under your command. Use them where you judge best. Kwan is a professional, so listen to his opinion. Tell him his freedom depends on victory in this battle. That ought to motivate him."

Quylan was too overwhelmed to speak. The power that Onja had promised her was really being given to her. She was a leader now.

Onja went on to explain that Shan's army would reach the pass in four or five days. She pointed to the location of the Zenglawa army and said they had eleven thousand men. Quylan was told to use her magic to protect her soldiers from Shan's assaults, if she could, but her priority was to kill Shan's soldiers. This would give the Zenglawa or the Atrophane a better chance to kill Shan. Of course, Onja planned to kill Shan herself because her magic would enter this battle, but if the army could overwhelm him, that would do just as well.

It was a lot for Quylan to face. Although she had just killed a man, it was hard to imagine killing more men while witnessing the terror of war. And it still seemed like she was helping to kill Shan.

Onja read the ambivalence in her protégé and added, "You will be defending Jingtén. Would you see the humans who Shan has driven to rebellion with his insanity loot our homes?"

"No, my Queen. I will do as you say and as you have taught me," Quylan answered.

"I know you will," Onja said. "And do not be afraid. I know being near so many humans will be distressing. But you will start to get used to them while you travel to the pass with the Atrophane soldiers. Remember, you must assert your authority over the humans. You are the agent of the Queen of Jingtén, and you must not let them treat you as anything less."

Although she recoiled from the possibility, Quylan forced herself to ask the next question. "My Queen, what do I do when Shan is defeated?"

"Collect his body—or what is left of it," Onja instructed. "Do not let Atathol or any of the other humans take possession of it. They will seek the bounty I have offered, but no one shall have it. If someone gets Shan's body before you do, take it from them. Command the Zenglawas to hunt down the remainder of the Temu army and make war as it pleases them. Bring the Atrophane back to Jingtun and bring Shan's body to me."

Quylan absorbed her orders, steeling herself for what she would have to do if any of the humans resisted her will, especially if they thought they deserved the bounty.

Onja continued, "Quylan, you will have a chance later tomorrow to ask me more questions. Until then I will be resting because I have a great task ahead of me. When you depart in two days, I will enter deep meditations. I will be working powerful magic in this battle. The world and Shan will see why I am supreme."

"My Queen, may I ask one more question right now?" Quylan said. With a nod from Onja she continued, "May I go into the city today? If I must go to the war, I would like a day to myself. To see my family."

Except for the night when Onja had destroyed Shan's tower, Quylan had not been allowed outside the Keep.

"Yes, you may do that. You have earned a day to yourself," Onja granted.

"Thank you, my Queen," Quylan said.

"And inform Lord Kwan of our plans while you are in the city," Onja added.

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That evening violent storms danced between the peaks of the Rysamand. No rain or wind troubled the Jingtun Valley, but lightning kissed the secret places on the high mountain country. Kwan enjoyed the view from the rooftop of his building. Distance made the lightning appear gentle. The brief lights on the mountains shone like the facets of a ruby ring on a moving hand.

For over an hour Kwan had stood at the railing, observing the spectacle in the mountains. With a sigh, he turned to Sandin who sat on one of the chairs that the men had put on the roof. Other Atrophane soldiers shared the roof with them. With the spring thaw the rooftop had become a favored place among the men. Walking outside the city was not allowed and the rooftop offered the only breath of freedom.

Sandin spoke heavily as if he had been waiting for the right moment but it had never come. "My Lord, we cannot stay here much longer. The snows have retreated."

The nearby soldiers became carefully quiet and Kwan knew they were listening. That did not disturb him, but the thought of Onja listening did. Automatically he hesitated to discuss the need for departure. It was hard to deviate from his constant state of paranoia, but he forced himself.

"Jesse is fit enough to ride. That is what I have been waiting for. Soon I will ask Onja to release us," Kwan said.

"That is all? You will ask?" Sandin whispered hotly.

"Do you want everyone to suffer like Jesse?" Kwan snarled.

Sandin hung his head in frustration, searching for an argument. He could not accept that Onja had bested the Atrophane.

"Taf Ila has hinted that we do not have much longer to wait," Kwan offered.

"You have told me Taf Ila knows nothing," Sandin complained.

Kwan had sensed a growing unease among the rys. The strange beings hid it well, but they could not hide their discomfort completely. Something was happening. "He knows something he will not tell," Kwan corrected.

"Either way it is the same for us," grumbled the lieutenant.

Kwan tugged thoughtfully at his beard. "I will go speak with Onja tomorrow," he decided.

Sandin was not satisfied. "My Lord, what good will that do? We must escape."

"Do you have any idea how dangerous this discussion is?" Kwan demanded.

Sandin stood up and ordered the other men off the roof. Kwan folded his arms and patiently waited for the argument. It was obvious his loyal lieutenant had resolved to force the issue.

Once they were alone, Sandin said, "My Lord, we cannot just cower in silent fear. I have to believe that Onja cannot watch us with her magic all the time. She must have other things that occupy her. We have to take a chance that she is not paying attention."

"You could be right," Kwan conceded skeptically. "So what do you have to say, Lieutenant?"

Excitement quickened Sandin's heart. Getting Kwan to actually have this conversation was an achievement in itself.

"My Lord, we can fight our way through the ryls patrolling the city. I do not care if they have magic and their shield darts. It is my suspicion that they have little nerve for a fight. You said they will not even defend their city from their enemy and that is why Onja uses us," Sandin said.

"And what of our horses, Lieutenant? They are scattered in the pastures south of the city. We need them to escape. On foot we would be too slow and Onja would surely be alerted before we can collect our horses," Kwan argued.

Leaning close to his Lord General, Sandin whispered, "But, my Lord, our horses were gathered today and are corralled by the city. We can get away."

Kwan absorbed this news and began to be infected with Sandin's excitement. Truly, Kwan was tempted. He believed they could get to the edge of the city and claim their horses, but the opportunity looked too good. He fretted that it was all an elaborate tease engineered by Onja. He remembered Jesse's screams during torture and every detail of Onja's many threats.

When Sandin saw his lord shake his head, he pressed his case again. Passionately he said, "My Lord, I know it is not fear that holds you back. I know she tortured Jesse in front of you and threatened to do the same to all of us. But my Lord, the men are all willing to face the danger. We are of Atrophane. We win or we die."

Kwan stared at the Keep across the rooftops of the city. Slowly he said, "Lieutenant, it is one thing to order men into battle and know some will die. It is another thing to order men into battle and know failure will result in them all being tortured to death. I have never had so little to offer my soldiers."

"My Lord, you taught me it is our duty to consider the use of our soldiers wisely. But it is also every prisoner's duty to escape. I will not fight for this Onja," Sandin stated.

A long pause ensued. Kwan studied his lieutenant's serious face. Sandin had served with him fifteen years, almost sixteen now, and Kwan decided he owed the Atrophane officer his honorable battle.

Maybe it is better to die than endure this enslavement, Kwan thought.

"We shall go tonight. Tell the men to get ready but keep it QUIET," he said.

"Yes, my Lord," Sandin responded with an ecstatic salute.

Kwan watched him bound for the stairs. The Lord General had ordered an escape before, but he felt no relief or elation this time. Kwan had been close to Onja and felt her power grip his body as if he were nothing but an insect, and he could not share in Sandin's confidence.

"We win or we die," he murmured.

When Kwan left the roof, he wondered how long the mystery of his disappearance would be discussed in Atrophane.

Quylan reclined in an open carriage. She had chosen to travel in such ostentation to impress upon the citizens of Jingtun that she was much more than a ryslign now. She had gone first to her father's home. The familiarity of the house had been pleasing but already she sensed that her former life was long gone.

Although her entire life had been spent in Jingtun, the city seemed new to her now. After being restricted all winter to the Keep, it was blissful to move freely in the streets. Quylan saw rysligns looking at her with respect and awe. They could feel her power, but none of them knew what she had been through and none of them wanted to know. She had never felt so alone.

It was nearly midnight when she went to see Lord Kwan. Two dozen mounted ryslign soldiers escorted her carriage. Although Quylan had assured her father that the humans could not harm her, Taf Ila had insisted on the guard.

The rumble of horses on the cobbled streets gave the Atrophane some warning of the approaching rysligns. Only a few candles burned in the main room of Kwan's residence and many men were gathered there. Across the street, the rest of the men waited anxiously in the barracks.

A ryslign patrol had just passed by and Kwan had been about to begin the escape. The noise of the unexpected riders delayed his signal. Kwan and Sandin rushed to a window and peered through the shutter.

"I say attack," Sandin whispered.

"It may just be a new patrol. Give them a chance to pass. We need to keep this quiet for as long as possible," Kwan advised.

"If they stop at our door, we must kill them," Sandin said.

"Yes," Kwan agreed reluctantly.

A gut feeling told Kwan this was not another patrol, and when the clip clopping of hooves slowed, he was not surprised. Sandin hissed the appropriate orders and weapons whispered in the shadows.

The carriage pulled up next to a streetlight, and its crystal brightened. Kwan recognized Quylan in the light, but he did not want to see her get hurt. He had regretted never seeing her after that day they had talked alone. She had sympathized with his plight, and Kwan had hoped to get help from her.

She had been different.

Kwan, who was always thoughtful and calculating, committed a rash act. He barked orders for his men to stand down and he ran for the door.

Sandin protested, but Kwan hissed, "This could be our last chance. Do not hurt her. Obey me!"

The sight of Kwan rushing down the steps surprised Quylan. He was fully dressed, complete with armor and sword. She had expected to have to wake him, and she immediately suspected something was amiss. A quick scan of the buildings informed her that all of the Atrophane were up. And none of them were in their bunks. She knew no word had been sent to them about their marching orders. Therefore, they had to be engaged in some clandestine activity.

The ryslign soldiers did not intend to allow Kwan near Quylan. Two spears, aimed under Kwan's chin, halted him and he put up both hands submissively.

Quylan stepped down from the carriage and pulled her light cloak around her body. "Hold back your spears," she ordered.

Kwan lowered his hands once the sharp steel receded.

"I have come to speak with you, Lord Kwan. It is good to see that you are up," Quylan said.

"It is my pleasure to speak with you, Lady Quylan," he said. His ryslign language skills had been improving. The physician who attended Jesse all winter had been kind and helped him practice.

"Let us go inside," Quylan said.

The rys soldiers began to dismount, clearly intending to accompany her.

"Could you leave your soldiers outside?" Kwan asked.

Quylan heard the desperate suggestion in his words. The hint was clear. If the rys soldiers entered, fighting would occur.

Peering deeply into the human's eyes, Quylan said, "That would be fine."

"My Lady, no!" protested the chief rys soldier.

"Never contradict me!" Quylan snapped harshly. The power in her words slapped the soldier, and he lowered his head, abashed. She was superior, and he must not presume to know better.

Quylan supposed his warning was well founded though. After months of captivity, the humans were desperate and they might try hurting her or kidnapping her. However, Queen Onja had trained her for exactly this and Quylan felt secure. Ultimately she was not afraid because she believed that Lord Kwan would not hurt her. She remembered his helping hand when she had been exhausted and hurt.

Relieved by Quylan's cooperation, Kwan went back up the steps. He had taken a big gamble rushing out to greet her, and he knew it had been a great test of Sandin's loyalty not to attack.

Quylan entered the building and the door slammed behind her. She knew she was surrounded by warriors and she could feel their hostility like a cold hand at her throat.

"I wish to speak to you in private, Lord Kwan," she said quickly.

Sandin leaned into her face. The gray-eyed human stared at her with malignant determination. The human, who was untutored in rys superiority, believed he was intimidating, which was intriguing for Quylan to observe.

"May my officer join us?" Kwan inquired, positioning himself slightly closer to Quylan.

"Ah...yes," she answered, scolding herself for hesitating.

The three of them proceeded to a small room. While crossing the main room, Quylan observed the numerous warriors. They looked at her with a full range of emotions, including hate, awe and curiosity.

Once in a private chamber, Quylan accused, "Lord Kwan, you plan a break out."

Kwan lit a couple more candles and the light revealed a worn and sad face. Glumly, he said, "Onja knows?"

Quylan shrugged. "I do not think so. But it was obvious once I arrived."

Her answer brightened Kwan considerably.

Sandin hung back, and although Quylan did not look at him, she knew he blocked the door.

"Lord Kwan, you must not do this," she whispered.

In an equally low tone, Kwan said, "We cannot stay. We will not serve."

"But we leave in two days," Quylan revealed.

"Leave for where?" Kwan asked.

She explained and Kwan translated for Sandin, who said, "We must not do it."

"We would rather die than serve Onja," Kwan told her.

The courage of the humans inspired Quylan. Deep inside she realized she felt the same way, but she had to serve. In Jingtun she must serve, but once she left and Onja was deep in her spells, then she might dare to ponder the true desires of her heart.

She said, "I believe you would rather not die. We can all leave Jingtun and no one gets hurt. Just

wait two more days. What is two days after so long?"

"We will not fight Onja's war," Kwan insisted.

Trying not to actually speak her mind, Quylan continued, "These long months in Jingtun have made you restless. Once we are on the road you will feel differently. Onja is great and generous and serving her will be your path to freedom."

Her dismissive chatter perplexed Kwan, but Sandin would listen to no more of it, even if he did not understand the language. Kwan glared at his lieutenant and shook his head strictly.

Swiftly, Quylan heightened her senses and saw Sandin strike with his dagger. She jumped aside and blasted the weapon from his hand. He received a nasty scorching on his fingers, and the jolt of magic briefly stunned him. As he recovered, Sandin cradled his hand painfully.

Quylan faced them both now. Her eyes glowed blue as the magic built inside her. "Do not try. I can kill you as easily as I can stop you," she said.

"Then start killing us, Quylan," Kwan dared.

She clenched her fists, but did not know what to do. It seemed Onja had been right about everything. The humans would strike at her back and she would have to dominate them.

Initially the attack made her furious, but reluctantly she realized that she deserved it. The ryls had held these men against their will, and they had a right to resent it. Quylan had the power to control them, but did that really mean so much?

Onja dominates me, so what side am I really on? she thought.

Earlier, she had killed a man, and with Onja at her back she might be driven to do anything. But by herself, she was not inclined to do it.

Some of the magic faded from her eyes and she softly admitted, "I would not kill you, Lord Kwan."

"Then stay in here," Kwan said. "Because we will start fighting and I do not want you hurt. Your father was as good to me as he could be, and I believe you are beautiful and kind. Goodbye."

"Lord Kwan, do not go. Not like this," she begged.

"I can waste no more time. I am sorry," Kwan said.

"But Lord Kwan, I want to leave Jingtun too," she whispered nervously. As she made this confession, Quylan probed her surroundings, trying to detect Onja's presence. She did not sense the Queen, but she could not be sure.

Be careful, she warned herself.

"Then come with us. We could use your help, Quylan," Kwan offered with sincerity, wanting her to come.

"I cannot fight my own kind," Quylan protested. Then very quietly and fearfully she said, "I will help you but you have to do things my way."

"Lord Kwan, we need to go now," Sandin urged.

"Your plan will not succeed," Quylan warned.

Sandin bent down and retrieved his dagger. "We shall just have to make sure you do not turn us in," he growled in Atrophaney.

"You will not hurt her," Kwan hissed and the lieutenant stayed back.

"Please trust me, Lord Kwan. My way is the best way. You asked for my help, so do not argue when I give it," Quylan whispered earnestly.

Kwan wanted to believe she offered him an alternative. Inwardly, he believed Onja could stop his men no matter when she detected their flight.

In his language he spoke to Sandin. "We will leave in two days with Quylan under the pretense of obeying Onja. It is the wisest choice."

Sandin's face contorted and he was on the verge of a tantrum. How could Kwan change his mind like this? The Atrophane lieutenant almost mutinied. In his surge of rage Sandin nearly stabbed Kwan, but he had admired his Lord General for years and could not do it.

Pain tingled in his burned fingers, reminding him of the power of rys magic that he did not understand. Lord Kwan's decisions had been unpopular, but Sandin admitted that they all were still alive.

An unworthy man would not be Lord General, he thought.

If they really could ride out of the city in two days, it would be logical to do so.

Sandin now noticed he was actually pointing his dagger at Kwan. Horrified, he put it away and his madness receded.

Kwan had calmly watched Sandin's turmoil, almost hoping for his officer to plunge the blade in deep and free him from responsibility.

Very seriously, Kwan said, "Lieutenant Sandin, if my judgment proves wrong, by all means, kill me."

Sandin tried to apologize, but Kwan stopped him.

Addressing Quylan, who waited patiently but nervously, Kwan said, "We will go with you, but do we understand each other?"

"We shall come to understand each other," Quylan said cryptically. She wanted to be clearer with him, to let him know she wanted to get away from Onja, but she could not jeopardize their chances for mere words. It would be hard enough to conceal her thoughts for one more day.

Shan had been away too long from his mountain homeland and he breathed deeply of the highland air. Standing near the tree line, he looked up and reveled in the vivid majesty of the frozen peaks. He could feel the thin high air moving over the forbidding heights and the sensation renewed his soul and filled him with vitality.

Dragging his dreamy black eyes from the craggy snowy places that no one could touch, he focused on the Jington Pass. The gateway beckoned even if Shan did not feel welcome. The army of the Zenglawa blocked the way, and Shan could sense the thousands of warriors as easily as he could see the meadow that he strolled in.

Shan fought the impulse to blast the obstinate Zenglawa off the slopes of his beloved Rysamand. Killing them so wantonly would be evil, and Shan was determined to be a better rys than Onja.

Miserably he cursed Atathol, wishing he could have convinced the Zenglawa to join the rebellion, or at least abstain. Instead, the mean spirited Atathol had remained doggedly loyal to Onja, and now many Zenglawa would die.

Shan understood now why the Zenglawa had waited in the pass instead of attacking the Temu Domain. Onja wanted to insure that the battle with Shan would take place in the pass. On the slopes of the Rysamand, her power could still reach and Shan knew he would soon feel the sting of her magic.

Even now her presence was on the land. Onja was watching him and coiling for the strike.

"I have missed my mountains," Shan said to Dreibrand who walked at his side.

"The Rysamand is the most beautiful place I have ever been," Dreibrand said.

"I will never understand how such beauty bred such wickedness," Shan lamented.

"The wickedness will be gone soon," Dreibrand said. He glanced back at Miranda, who trailed with Redan and the other bodyguards. Soon she would have her children back and Dreibrand could set to rest his mistakes of the past summer.

Shan halted and signaled to his bodyguards to hang back. He needed a few more minutes of privacy with his general. Shan still had business to discuss, but it had been nice to walk and chat with Dreibrand as a friend if only for a while. The rys wished he could have one more leisurely talk such as this with Taischek. With the passing of each human friend, Shan took care to appreciate his new ones more.

"Dreibrand, you know the strength of the Zenglawa army. If I was not here and it was just a fight between men, could you defeat them?" Shan asked.

Dreibrand frowned at the disturbing question and responded, "Where will you be?"

Shan eyed a distant bird of prey that surveyed the mountainside from the sky. "I will be here, but Onja is able to attack me now, and I may not be able to assist the army," he answered.

"Is she here?" Dreibrand whispered urgently, looking at the pass as if he expected the ancient queen to fly down.

"No, she is in Jington. I have never seen her leave the city, except to go across the lake to the Tomb of Dacian. But I am now within range of her deadly magic and my hands will be full defending myself from her assault," Shan said.

"Will Onja kill our warriors the way you killed the Sabuto?" Dreibrand asked.

"Only if she kills me—but that will not happen. When she attacks, I will occupy her and absorb all of her battle magic," Shan explained.

"How can I help you?" Dreibrand said.

Shan replied, "Do as you have been doing. Fight the ground war. It would be a shame if a Zenglawa killed me while Onja had me occupied, which is exactly her plan."

"Stop talking about getting killed," Dreibrand moaned.

"Yes, yes," Shan agreed, realizing that his speech showed his fear. "Now, Dreibrand, I am trusting you with this information. I am not going to tell Kalek and Ejan that Onja will effectively remove me from the human battle. The Temu's morale is already low, and they fared badly against the Sabuto when I did not assist them." The rys paused to grieve over the memory.

"Shan, you must not keep this from them," Dreibrand advised. "Kalek is loyal. It is me he does not like. You must not keep such information from your allies."

"But if the Temu sense the Zenglawas will not invade, they might go home. Kalek resents losing his father, and the Temu Tribe is in turmoil. The new King has not even been to Dengar Nor yet," Shan worried.

"Because of his father, Kalek will not give up this war," Dreibrand said. "I believe we can defeat the Zenglawas. Their army is not that strong and Atathol is a fool. But all of your warriors need to know what will happen."

While Shan considered the advice, Dreibrand added, "I know things feel different without Taischek. The Gods know Kalek has it in for me. I can just feel it. But we cannot start sabotaging loyalties. Everyone believes in you now more than ever."

"You speak the truth. I must be honest with everyone. I must go on without Taischek," Shan decided.

"As must I," Dreibrand muttered.

For the first time Shan realized that Kalek's kingship probably would not be good for Dreibrand's future. "Has Kalek threatened you?" the rys asked. His impending confrontation with Onja had distracted him from Dreibrand's problems.

"No, Shan. Although I appreciate your concern. Onja is all you should think about," Dreibrand said.

"Truly, but there is something for both of us to think about," Shan responded. "My observations have shown me that the Atrophane soldiers are approaching the pass. I expect them to join in the battle."

Dreibrand stayed quiet. He felt miserable but he knew what side he was on.

I might as well meet them on a battlefield, he thought.

Shan continued, "I know this troubles you, but if you can, I still want you to make a truce with them."

"Shan, how am I going to do that in the middle of a battle?" Dreibrand asked.

"I know it is difficult, but if you can see a way, try. There is a rys with them. She is young. I am afraid to think what her intentions are. She is powerful," Shan explained with clear distress.

"Powerful? What do you mean?" Dreibrand cried.

"Not powerful enough to really threaten me, but humans she can hurt. Those with wardings should be protected, but Dreibrand, please try not to hurt her. I don't know how I could bear it," Shan said.

"How can you say that, Shan? She might start killing my men, but you do not want me to hurt her. I have to fight my people but this rys is off limits? Shan, you might have to make the same sacrifices you expect from all of us," Dreibrand said. He knew his words were harsh but he was not going to accept impossible restrictions.

The powerful rys almost squirmed and his eyes scanned the meadow as if he looked for a way to escape. Quietly, he said, "But she is so young. Onja must have twisted her mind. I had not expected a rys to serve in the war, especially her."

Sympathizing with Shan's distress, Dreibrand asked, "Do you know this rys?"

"All rys know each other. I have met her, but little more than that. It is only my concern for my kind," Shan explained.

"Why not incapacitate her with your magic?" Dreibrand suggested.

After a moment, Shan nodded. "Yes, I will try to do that, if I get a chance."

"And I will try not to hurt her. Maybe I could capture her. My sword will protect me from her, right?" Dreibrand said, although being careful not to commit to not hurting her.

"Oh, yes," Shan confirmed.

"Good. Now we should go to our council with the Kings," Dreibrand said.

Shan nodded to his bodyguards who came and surrounded him. As he walked to the meeting place of the kings, his mind surveyed the land. While approaching the pass during the forced march, Shan had probed the land with his mind and sensed that something was amiss. He hoped tonight to meditate and discover what nagged at the edge of his perception.

But so much distracted him—the grueling confrontation with Onja that would finally happen and especially the young female rys rushing to the battle.

When the leaders met to plan the battle for the pass, the absence of Taischek pained Shan. He missed his friend, but the pressing business of the war forced him to push aside his emotions. To the Kings of the Temu and the Tacus, Shan explained that his magic would not enter the battle until he had pushed back Onja's magical assault.

"Do not fear for me when I am in the grip of her magic. Protect my body from the Zenglawa and I will prevail," Shan said.

The Kings took the news better than Shan had imagined and he was grateful for Dreibrand's advice.

Thoughtfully, Ejan asked, "Lord Shan, in this struggle with Onja, will you kill her?"

Shan shifted uncomfortably, wishing he could say yes. He answered, "We are still far from Jingtun. Chances are small that I could kill her from here. Her plan is to occupy me until the Zenglawa can reach me."

Ejan nodded, satisfied with the answer.

Now the kings and generals discussed strategies for the coming battle. By natural design the pass was a defensive position, but Shan guessed that the Zenglawa would be drawn down in an attempt to reach him. Because the Tacus warriors were fresh, all agreed that they would lead the assault. Ejan added that his warriors were ready to do their part.

Kalek spoke very little. In many ways he appeared to still be the prince watching his father's council. Although his silence was rooted in inexperience, no one judged him harshly for it. It was only Kalek's fifth day as king and the shock of his father's death had not worn off. He had sent his brothers, Doschai and Meetan, home to attend the funeral, but Kalek had stayed to finish the war. The Temu army admired the stoic example of their new leader.

When a decision from the Temu King was necessary during the meeting, Kalek would defer to Xander's judgment. Basically, Kalek ignored any thing Dreibrand had to say, unless Xander restated it. This message was not lost on Dreibrand, who noted the occasional icy stare from the young Temu King.

When the council dissolved, Dreibrand tiredly relayed his orders to Tytido. The Hirqua lieutenant had come to respect Dreibrand very much and he felt an undeniable loyalty. When things got crazy tomorrow, Tytido knew whose orders he would follow.

The shadows of a late spring evening gathered and the campfires of the two armies filled the pass. Miranda walked at Dreibrand's side and they retired to their tent. No one knew when Onja's magic would come, and Miranda took Dreibrand's hand when they entered the tent.

They kissed deeply with more urgency than usual. Neither spoke, leaving fear behind for pleasure. Armor and clothes and weapons were replaced with bare skin and tight embraces. As always Miranda's physical willingness encouraged Dreibrand's lust. He enjoyed even the odor of her sweat because it was hers. While their lovemaking ebbed, they shared a moment free of worry.

When the oblivion of their private joy passed, Dreibrand said, "Only a few more days until we get

Elendra and Esseldan back.”

Miranda kissed his neck and murmured, “Maybe we made our own child tonight.”

He tightened his arms around her, knowing that was her way of saying she loved him. Like Taischek had predicted, their sorrow over her miscarriage had not consumed them and they hoped together for another chance. With yet another battle only a few hours away, it comforted Dreibrand somewhat to think that his lover might be conceiving his child. He wished that he and Miranda could be in a quiet place and live in peace.

But his troubled mind forced aside this fantasy. “The Atrophane are coming to the battle,” he whispered.

“What will you do?” Miranda asked.

“What I must. I am on the side of Shan and that is where I want to be,” he said.

“They did not want to reward your talents. They deserve this,” Miranda said, trying to make him feel better.

He grunted and changed the subject. “Miranda, after the war, I do not think we should live with the Temu anymore.”

She shifted in his arms and spoke one knowing word. “Kalek.”

Dreibrand sighed but it was mostly a disappointed growl. “Even if there was peace between Kalek and I, things would never be the same. I will not tiptoe around him. I would rather leave.”

“Dreibrand, you do not have to explain,” Miranda offered.

“But I do,” he insisted sadly. “I was trying to make a home for us. The children need a home and I was happy with the Temu, really. But now that Taischek is gone, everything is changed. I am sorry, Miranda, I do not know where to go.”

Miranda kissed him faithfully and said, “My freedom is my shelter and your love is my home.”

Fiercely, Dreibrand gripped her and returned the kiss. He thanked the Gods for guiding Miranda to him. Her needs were so uncomplicated that they eased his worries.

Again, they made love, gently and sleepily.

That night Miranda dreamed. Esseldan appeared in her arms. He was a happy baby, brighter and more beautiful than she remembered. His little body felt so real in her arms that waves of happiness soaked her mind. She hugged him and laughed with joy.

The boy’s hands clutched her breasts and her smile faded. Her milk had gone away shortly after their separation, and she felt the weight of guilt.

Elendra’s voice came to her ears. Even though Miranda could not understand the faraway words, it was good to hear her daughter’s voice. Now if only she could find her. A gray world without landmarks surrounded Miranda and she wandered aimlessly because Elendra’s voice seemed to come from all directions. In hopeless frustration, Miranda searched and called out for her daughter. When Elendra’s voice finally sounded closer, the drab dream world dragged at Miranda’s limbs and she toiled uselessly.

With a gasp Miranda jerked awake. Dreibrand stirred next to her and his closeness helped to calm her. But her arms ached for her baby and it disturbed Miranda that Elendra had not appeared in the dream. For some time Miranda lay awake, overcome with dread. She had to get to Jingtun soon. She had been away too long.

~

King Atathol waited in the pass with his rismavda counselor, who had entered a trance an hour ago when the crystal orb on his neck chain had started to glow fiercely. The rismavda had been in contact with the Goddess Queen every day for weeks, and Onja relayed her orders through the priest. The time to execute their plan was now only moments away.

Two hundred Zenglawa warriors had been hiding in caves outside the pass, awaiting the arrival of Shan's army. Onja's magic was supposed to mask the presence of the warriors so they could assault Shan's army from the rear. It was a small force of warriors, but with the element of surprise, they might reach Shan.

Judging from the movements of Shan's army, Athol believed that his enemy was unaware of the hidden warriors. This gave Athol further proof that Onja was stronger than Shan. Athol thirsted to kill Shan and gain for his tribe the glory of slaying the rebel rys, along with the bounty. Once he achieved this victory, Onja would favor him always and he would be the most powerful human king.

Athol knew the Temu did not respect him, nor did any tribe in the Confederation, but their arrogance would not serve them. With the power of Onja on his side, the Zenglawa would crush their former allies.

Athol had been told that Onja was sending a rys to aid him in the battle and that she was bringing a force of mercenaries. He cared little for the extra help and was glad that Quylan had not yet arrived. Although he had no idea what delayed Onja's servant, he would not wait for her. Athol did not need the help of another rys or mercenaries to win the battle, and he did not want to share the glory anyway.

The glowing orb slipped out of the slender fingers of the rysmavda and fell back on its chain against his chest. His eyes were still glazed over, but he spoke clearly. "The power of our Goddess is coming. Praise Queen Onja, the giver of truth and justice. Her magic will mark Shan with blue light that we will see. When this happens, we must drive toward the rebel rys with all of our strength."

Athol's heart pounded with excitement. He was not afraid. The Goddess was on his side and he would be the hand that delivered her punishment.

~

Shan's army stirred before the dawn. Standing at the side of the Jingtun Road, the rys watched his allies move forward to confront the Zenglawa, and he was nervous for his warriors. The Temu and the Yentay showed signs of wear. Bitter battles with the Sabuto and long days of marching had sapped their strength.

In his meditations during the night, Shan had detected the heavy wardings that Onja had placed upon the land. Even though Onja had vied with his mind all night and distracted him from piercing the gloom she created, Shan knew her magic could only be hiding one thing—warriors.

Certain now that Onja hoped to attack him above and below the pass, he ordered Dreibrand to stay back from the main battle and guard the rear. Dreibrand had many questions but Shan had no time for answers. He ordered the army to keep moving because Onja's attack was only moments away. Knowing that Shan's last minute warning could only be serious, Dreibrand obeyed but he disliked staying in the rear. He supposed he could give up trying to communicate with the Atrophane now.

Redan stood beside Shan and the archer noticed that the crystals on Shan's armor pulsed with more energy than usual.

"Lord, your horse is ready," Redan said.

"I will not use my horse for now. Onja's magic could too easily affect my horse," Shan explained. "I will stand my ground here, and you must protect me, Redan."

"Of course, Lord. That is my greatest desire," Redan said solemnly, gripping his bow with true faith.

"She is coming," Shan whispered.

An energy stirred the air, and many men could feel the disturbance in their minds as well. Redan took an involuntary step away from Shan and the marching feet of many warriors faltered. Horses squealed, fighting their reins. The bold hearts of thousands of men fluttered suddenly with fear. Yesterday, the Jingtun Pass had beckoned them as the gateway to a new age, but today, it lorded over the invaders with the promise of doom.

Shan raised his arms and actually laughed. His daring chuckle renewed the spirits of those who heard it and inspired them to struggle on beneath Onja's wrath.

With his magic, Shan intercepted Onja's onslaught. He would not allow her to harm his warriors, and his counterattack absorbed all of her attention. Shan's body jerked and his impudent laughter ended. His head fell back and he looked like he was frozen in the middle of a violent seizure. Blue fire rippled around his body, growing higher and higher until it formed a stormy pillar of energy. The crystals in his armor glowed with such hot brightness, it seemed they should have fallen away in ashes.

The spectacle of rys battling rys could be seen for hasas, from the heights of the pass down to every rebellious warrior. It transfixed the humans, who had not witnessed such a thing since their distant ancestors served Jington against Nufal. Kings and generals gaped at Shan's silent struggle, and the entire army ground to a halt. No one knew how Shan fared inside the roiling tower of energy, but the sense of dread no longer shackled their courage. No magic harmed their flesh, and Shan's warriors could believe that their rys champion blocked all of Onja's assault.

A wave of exuberance passed through the army serving Shan. At first hundreds and then thousands began to cheer. Beating weapons on shields, the warriors exalted Shan. At the very door of the rys homeland, Onja could not touch them.

The horn blasts of the charging Zenglawa roused Shan's allies from their trance. It was their job to fight and they faced the Zenglawa with eagerness. They would clear away the foolish men who blocked Shan from his rightful kingdom.

The sun shot over the Rysamand with a vindictive glare and the Zenglawa pushed down from the pass. Dreibrand saw the Tacus meet the charge and he heard the nasty clamor of war begin.

Miranda was near Shan and the awesome forces swirling around the rys made the cool mountain air shimmer with heat. She had seen Shan work magic many times, but the level he battled on today was far beyond anything she had seen before.

Because she could not comprehend what she saw, Miranda focused on matters she could deal with. "Redan, get on your horse," she said.

Without taking his eyes from his lord, Redan nodded absently but did nothing.

"Now Redan. The Zenglawa are attacking," Miranda urged.

Redan looked over his shoulder at the clashing armies. He had been so distressed for Shan, that he had briefly forgotten the Zenglawa. Seeing his tribe rushing to hurt Shan kindled an ugly rage in him. Redan loved Shan and would serve no other. Shan was the best chance any tribe had for human freedom, and Redan would not allow his foolish people to commit this ghastly error.

Snapping out of his horror, Redan mounted his horse and waited grimly with his bow across his lap. A fat quiver of arrows hung on his back. If the battle did not go well and the Zenglawa came close, he intended to make a wide circle of death.

Miranda looked at Redan and gained courage from his resolute face. She had overheard talk that Redan would not fight his tribe, but she saw no sentimentality in his expression. Miranda remembered her own people, who had never helped her with anything. She understood how Redan could think that his tribe did not deserve his loyalty.

The fury of the battle increased rapidly. Although the tribes involved had lived in peace for generations, no love was lost between them now. Every tribe had its future at stake and the fighting was brutal.

The rising sun grew hot and sweat soon streaked the straining warriors. Dainty flowers in the high meadowland were soon lost beneath the ugly destruction. Bleeding bodies flopped onto lingering patches of snow, staining them red, and the screams traveled across the mountain heights. If the majestic peaks flanking the Jington Pass noticed the struggle, then it was only an insignificant squabble to them.

Kalek and Xander led columns of Temu up each flank of the Tacus army, and the battle raged in a sick stalemate. Dreibrand itched to join the battle. The Yentay numbered just over three hundred now, but they were enough to make a difference. Dreibrand did not like hanging back. It reminded him of some of the Atrophaney officers who he had considered cowards in their success.

Impatiently he calculated the best place to lead his warriors into the fray, but then restrained himself because Shan's hasty warning echoed in his mind. The priority was to keep Shan protected. The Temu and the Tacus would win the pass eventually. It was only a matter of time—and lives.

However, Dreibrand had no doubt that Kalek would not miss the chance to ridicule him for not fighting.

Starfield stamped a hoof, clearly confused by his master's lack of participation. Frustrated, Dreibrand decided he could at least move among the Yentay. He rode around his circle of warriors, telling them to stand ready and reminding them that guarding Shan was what was most important now.

Often he glanced to the front of the battle, dreading to see Atrophane, and relieved to see none. Almost bored, he looked back at the alpine slopes that descended toward the lowland forest. When Dreibrand realized that his wish for combat would come true, he cursed in his native language.

Rushing to Tytido, Dreibrand shouted orders for the Yentay to turn around. By the time he reached his lieutenant, Tytido had seen it too. Zenglawa warriors were rushing out of the trees. They issued no battle cry and ran silently with their spears toward the Yentay.

"How can it be?" Tytido cried. "Lord Shan would have known if warriors were behind us."

"He feared as much and that is why he told us to stay here," Dreibrand explained, hoping that Onja had not been able to hide too many warriors from Shan.

At least they are on foot, Dreibrand thought and drew his sword. He ordered some Yentay to reinforce Shan's bodyguards. Then he looked at Miranda and hesitated. An arrow waited patiently in her bow and her face was calm. Dreibrand knew she was not afraid, but her courage could not put his mind at ease. Abruptly he decided not to leave her side. His warriors were accustomed to being rallied by him but today they would have to do without him. He ordered Tytido to take the lead.

When Dreibrand joined Miranda, she was surprised. "You do not have to worry about me," she said.

"I think this time I do," he countered.

Miranda said no more. She was glad to have him near her, instead of at the forefront of danger.

Spears pierced horses and the screams of the animals marked the arrival of the Zenglawa attack. With speed and determination, some Zenglawa pushed into the ranks of riders, slipping by the defenders instead of engaging them. As foot soldiers, they were at the disadvantage, but if anyone could break through and kill Shan, then their tribe would win. Many perished beneath the blades of the Yentay, but some breached the outer circle of Shan's defenders.

Redan's bow denied them further access. He had not flinched for a second to strike the Zenglawa, but his presence only enraged the attackers more. The Zenglawa could only see him as a traitor, and the sight of Redan maddened the Zenglawa so much, that they focused on him more than Shan. The longing of the Zenglawa to slay the rebel rys was blasted from their minds when they saw Redan. His defection offended every Zenglawa warrior personally. And it especially hurt because Redan was so talented.

Redan saw the hate from his former tribesmen, and it sharpened his aim. A Zenglawa hurled a spear just before an arrow took him down through the heart. The spear sank into the chest of Redan's horse and the animal staggered in death throes. Redan jumped off his toppling horse and snapped off another lethal shot when his feet hit the ground.

The whine of an arrow passed Dreibrand, and he whirled just in time to see the shaft plunge into a Zenglawa's face. The man screamed indignantly and died, and his bloody spear dropped from his hands.

"And you worry about me," Miranda teased for she had saved Dreibrand with her shot.

Dreibrand would find the words to thank her later. A surge of trust passed between them, strengthening their bond.

Miranda moved back closer to Shan and provided Redan with some covering fire. Yentay and Zenglawa fought in a disorganized mix and the archers had to choose their shots carefully.

Some warriors managed to throw their spears at Shan, who was still immobile within the blue energy, but his Temu bodyguards deflected the missiles with their shields. Dreibrand hacked down Zenglawa, desperate to keep them from getting another shot at Shan. Then he circled back to meet

the last wave of Zenglawa who still lived.

Standing near Miranda's horse, Redan shot a Zenglawa down as he leaped at him. An arrow took the warrior in the heart and he tumbled heavily to the ground. Miranda shot an arrow and another Zenglawa died just short of Redan.

"Good shooting!" Redan cheered, proud of his pupil.

A Zenglawa warrior plunged across the violent fray on the horse that he had taken from a dead Yentay. A gleaming axe spun over his head and Dreibrand rushed to intercept him, fearing he would throw the weapon at Shan.

But instead, the warrior forgot his purpose and aimed the whirling axe at Redan.

Dreibrand's sword slammed into the mounted Zenglawa in an explosion of blood. The man did not even scream as his ruined torso flopped off the horse, but the axe had already left his hand and oncoming death had not spoiled his aim. The axe landed in the back of Redan's skull and the archer fell forward onto his bow.

Miranda screamed and Dreibrand momentarily thought the axe had hit her. She jumped off her horse in a thoughtless panic and scooped Redan into her arms. The axe fell out of his head and blood poured onto the ground. Redan's eyes were glazed with death. He had not suffered or known what hit him.

Sobbing with denial, Miranda closed her hand over the gory wreckage at the back of his skull as if her hand could undo the damage.

Nervously, Dreibrand looked around but the Zenglawa seemed beaten. The Yentay had halted the onslaught and the few surviving Zenglawa were fleeing back into the trees. Shan was unhurt within his private battle and Dreibrand let out a sigh of relief. For a twisted moment he was jealous to see Redan in Miranda's arms, but Redan had died for Shan and perhaps deserved a woman to cry over him.

Onja sought to shred every fiber of Shan's body and fill all of his nerves with pain. Shan fought her, but her magic pushed through even the tiniest weakness in his defense. Wicked fingers of energy pried at the scar tissue in his lung, making the flesh recall the sting of the enchanted arrow. The pain was incredible and distracting, but Shan would not let it break his concentration. It would take more than pain to keep him from Jingtén.

As Onja attacked him, he attacked her in the same way. His powerful mind sheathed her in magic where she sat in Jingtén, and Shan could tell that he was wearing her down. Attacking from a distance strained her more than it did him.

Finally, her assault faltered and Shan hurled her magical grip off his body. He intensified his attack, drawing stamina more from his will than his body. He breached the shielding magic around her body and his mind heard her scream. The satisfaction of causing her pain gave him more strength, and Shan pushed her out of the Jingtén Pass.

Their minds roared through the mountains and into the Jingtén Valley in a storm of conflicting powers. Onja's awareness plunged into the forest and Shan assumed it was a desperate move to evade him. Then he saw humans—warriors on horses. They were the Atrophane. Shan sensed Onja gathering the last of her waning energy for an attack spell, but it was not aimed at him. With horror, his mind saw that Quylan was the target. Her horse bolted in terror, flinging her to the ground just as Onja struck. Shan cast a hasty shield spell around Quylan, augmenting the young female's insufficient defenses.

Quylan tumbled down a hill, thrown by the power of the blast. Blue light surrounded her and several trees caught on fire as she rolled past them. Shan beat on Onja as if he had not even been upset before, and the sky above the Atrophane flashed and crashed from the magical punishment.

Shan hounded Onja back to Jingtén. His magic stormed around her body, until she had to give all of her power to shield spells. Worked into a fury that he had never before attained, Shan tried to kill her but it simply was not possible with so much distance between them. When he believed that Onja was too exhausted to resume her defense of the pass, he relented.

When Shan ended his fierce attack spell, a myriad disjointed images flooded the void left in his mind. His perceptions were reeling with so much power that his mind was opened to a wide range of stimuli. He saw into a thousand corners of the world all at once but he could not put anything together. He saw every rys in Jingtén, but their faces flew by so rapidly that he could not recall names. He saw Atrophane and Kezanada and Zenglawa and Yentay and squirrels and bees and mating mosquitoes and birds nesting and flowers blooming and glaciers dripping. Finally the tornado of images gave way to one clear face. A skeletal rys, old and brittle, with wispy hair.

"*I am Dacian,*" the rys said but the dry lips did not move.

The image blurred and Shan pulled his awareness away from Jingtén. He feared that Onja had found some way to drive him mad.

On his way back to his body, Shan looked for Quylan. He saw humans gathered around her, and to his relief, they seemed concerned. They were not taking advantage of her misfortune in any way. For a terrible instant, Shan thought that she was dead when he saw her cradled in the arms of a white haired man. Then, Shan sensed the life within her, but she was injured. Her limbs and back were burned and the tumble had created many cuts and bruises, but Shan had saved her from the worst of Onja's attack. Otherwise, she would be ashes.

Shan longed to lower his mind gently over her hurt body and cast healing spells, but he could not stop. For all he knew, the Zenglawa might be about to kill him.

Shan gasped when his awareness returned to his flesh. The secure union of his body and mind was comforting.

"Shan, can you hear me?" Miranda called.

She had been helping a man with a wounded leg while waiting and hoping for Shan to emerge from his trance. The tower of blue light around Shan had lifted off the ground but stayed connected to him by streamers of energy from Shan's eyes and hands. Then with a deafening boom the energy had broken away and flown up the pass faster than the strongest wind. The force of the passing magic had bowed every warrior and stones and snow had rattled down the mountainside.

Since then, Shan had fallen backward and been twitching on the ground. Miranda had not dared to touch him because he remained deep in trance. Only when he gasped did she call to him.

When he did not answer, she said his name again and moved to his side.

This time, his hand moved and brushed the ends of her hair. "Miranda, I am glad it is you," he whispered.

She moaned with relief and clasped his hand. His words were pleasing but not as pleasing as knowing he was alive. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

"No," he whispered and sat up. "I have driven Onja back to Jingtén. She cannot stop me from entering the pass. I am the stronger."

"The Zenglawas still hold the pass. We are still fighting them," Miranda reported.

"I will tell Atathol to surrender. He will see that he cannot oppose me," Shan said confidently.

"Shan, there is something else...Redan is dead," Miranda said.

A ripple of emotion passed over the rigid features of the rys. "Show me," he commanded.

Yentay bowed to Shan as he walked toward Redan's body. In their eyes he was already King of Jingtén. Shan saw many bodies strewn in his vicinity and some of them were Zenglawas. Mishi was sitting next to Redan, but he scrambled to his feet and saluted Shan. A tear clung to Mishi's droopy eye.

Shan took a deep breath when he looked down on his dead bodyguard. He doubted he would have devotion like Redan's again.

"How did the Zenglawas get so close?" Shan asked. The battle still raged farther up the pass, but it was quiet near him.

"A group came from behind. They must have been hiding in the forest," Miranda said.

Shan reflected a moment, thankful that he had noticed Onja's subtle wardings. Her warriors had been hidden with great cunning, and Shan was reminded of how skilled his adversary was at war.

"Where is Dreibrand?" he asked.

"He has gone with some of the Yentay to the front of the battle," Miranda answered.

"I will put an end to this. Wrap Redan's body. We shall bury him in Jingtén. Redan will be by my side always," Shan decided.

"Lor San," Mishi slurred. His torture had left his speech impeded and one hand crippled, but Mishi had survived every battle since without injury. "In Denar Nor dere is a girl. She will have Redan's baby soon."

Shan nodded. "When the war is over, remind me of this, Mishi. She and the child will be taken care of."

Many approving eyebrows went up among the Yentay who heard the news. They were pleased with Shan's decision, but they were also proud of Redan. Temu girls were notoriously inaccessible.

"Prepare to ride," Shan ordered. He had no time to linger over his fallen friend. His white horse came and Shan vaulted into the saddle. He drew his enchanted and gleaming blade and headed to the battlefield.

The Temu and Tacus warriors parted to allow Shan through. With the arrival of the rys, the battle actually halted and the combatants stepped away from each other. The courage of the Zenglawas wavered when they realized that Onja's magic had failed them.

Shan made a terrifying image to his enemies. His great white horse climbed the Jingtén Road at a purposeful pace and endless vistas of lush lowlands hung behind him as he entered the high pass. His eyes burned with fearsome light as if the power of the whole world moved inside him.

The magic crystals set in Shan's armor blazed like his eyes, and his radiance was clear even in the

noon brightness. The Zenglawa warriors fell away before him and lowered their weapons. Shan was like a rys out of legend, a master of magic and untouchable.

Shan headed straight for Atathol. The King bellowed orders to attack, and when his commands were ignored, he cursed his men as cowards. The Zenglawa no longer heard their panicked King. Who could hear the words of a human king when Shan came to conquer?

Fear of Onja's wrath had driven Atathol to this moment, but now he had to fear Shan more. He supposed it was his fate to be destroyed by a rys.

The rysmavda counselor to the King tried to intercept Shan. He fell to his knees and cried out for Shan to accept the rule of Onja. Shan appeared to ignore him, except that the crystal around the neck of the priest exploded, which was Shan's answer.

The rysmavda scrambled out of the way and Shan continued toward Atathol. Bursts of magic snapped around the hooves of the King's horse, causing it to buck and squeal. Atathol felt the itching terror of power coalescing around him. He jumped off his uncontrollable horse and fled on foot. Shan approached rapidly and Atathol felt the will of the rys burning on his back.

Atathol seized a bow and arrow from one of his warriors and faced Shan. His hands trembled as he drew the bow. Atathol looked down the shaking arrow, aiming at Shan's heart. At such close range, the strong bow would drive the arrow through the chainmail.

Shan stopped and turned his horse aside, offering Atathol a perfect target. A profound hush gripped the watchful thousands, and only the snapping of flags in the stiff breeze could be heard.

Atathol released the arrow and it burned away as it cleared the bow, like a moth flying into a fire.

"You know that does not work," Shan commented.

In frustration, Atathol hurled the bow at Shan. Oddly, Shan did not incinerate the bow and let it smack his arm. His horse stomped once with annoyance.

In a deadly serious tone Shan commanded, "Surrender yourself and your army, Atathol."

Stubbornly the Zenglawa King reached for his sword but it only came half way out of the scabbard before a spasm shook him. He did not cry out or make any sound except the faint wheeze of air drifting out of his lungs. Off balance, he fell over on his side. A sharp rock cut his cheek but he could not roll off it. Atathol had lost control of his muscles and lay there pathetically paralyzed. He could not command his chest to draw air, and the panic of oncoming suffocation blazed in his eyes.

Shan continued to speak. The mountains and sky were the only proper theater for the triumphant ring in his voice. "Onja cannot help you now, Zenglawa. She cowers in Jingtien licking her wounds. Onja cannot stop me from entering the Rysamand and neither can you! Do you feel my hand on your heart, Atathol? You know you are defeated. Surrender and take your army home."

Shan released Atathol from the precipice of death. The Zenglawa King hacked and clutched his chest. He could not believe that Shan had not killed him. To pull air into his lungs was sweet mercy.

"I surrender," Atathol moaned.

"Louder," Shan demanded.

"The Zenglawa surrender!" Atathol yelled painfully.

"Then stand and lead your army home," Shan commanded.

Atathol pushed himself to his feet with an entirely new appreciation for the workings of his body. Regaining some of his breath, he said, "Yes, Lord Shan, you are merciful to forgive this trouble between us. You must understand that I had to obey Queen Onja. I am sorry—"

"Say one more word to me, and I will change my mind about many things," Shan snapped and Atathol took the hint.

Dreibrand rode up beside Shan with most of the Yentay behind him. Dreibrand had to admit that Shan had awed him by marching straight into the Zenglawa army, but he decided not to waste time moving warriors into the pass.

Shan watched Atathol intensely while the King returned to his horse and genuinely ordered his army to withdraw. The Zenglawa seemed content to surrender. They had not expected Onja's magic to fail them, but standing between Onja and Shan was foolish and they appreciated Shan's leniency.

Kalek and Ejan arrived as their armies also moved into the pass. The Zenglawa yielded their position and marched down one side of the road under the glare of the victorious.

"You should have made them throw down their weapons," Kalek complained to Shan.

"I did not want their defeat to sting too much. We still all have to live together," Shan explained.

Kalek frowned. "They will probably take those weapons and attack my domain now."

"That is why I suggest you send most of your army home. You too, King Ejan. The battle for Jington will not be decided with large armies now," Shan advised.

Both kings considered the option. Kalek eyed the departing Zenglawa and did not trust them to go home. The Temu Domain was his responsibility and he must not leave it vulnerable to attack. Ejan more wisely reasoned that Shan did not want to offer Onja more human targets than necessary.

"Are you sure you will not need my warriors?" Ejan asked.

"They will not be needed. The war is between rys now. Only those who wish to stay with me need continue," Shan answered.

Ejan kept five hundred cavalry and sent the rest of his army home. The Temu force had been reduced to about fifteen thousand by this point and Kalek ordered home all but one thousand warriors. The Yentay barely numbered three hundred now, and Dreibrand asked all who were fit to continue. Even most of the wounded Yentay, if they were at all able, chose to come. They remained eager to see Shan made King of Jington and none of them wanted to miss the first awards of treasure.

While the wounded were being helped and the armies divided, Shan took Dreibrand aside. He spoke in Miranda's language for privacy.

"Dreibrand, did the Atrophane join the battle?" he asked.

"No."

Shan nodded. "I saw them when my mind was over the valley. I saw the female rys with them. They are not far from here. I am not sure why they stayed behind, but my guess is they purposefully decided not to fight. With the last of her strength, Onja tried to kill the female rys. I think I saved her, but she is hurt."

Although Dreibrand was pleased that his former comrades had not come to the battle, it disturbed him to know they were so close. What would he do when he saw them? Would Lord Kwan be there?

"I did not think they would fight for Onja," Dreibrand said.

"So it seems," Shan agreed, happy for his friend and happy for himself. "We must find your countrymen and Quylan—that is the female's name—as soon as possible. I want to help her with her injuries, and we need to make a peace with the Atrophane. We can afford no more battles that could distract me from Onja."

"Yes, Shan," Dreibrand murmured.

"Now, let us enter the Jington Valley," Shan said triumphantly.

Shan moved to the front of his smaller force and prepared to lead them through the pass, but he took a moment to look back. Right behind him waited the kings and generals and his bodyguards. Briefly, Shan locked eyes with Miranda. She helped him believe in more than his greed for power. Helping her was the right thing to do and it always had been.

The pass bristled with eighteen hundred warriors who waited for the order to march. Flags fluttered above grim faces and the sun glinted off spears and the occasional patch of unsoiled armor. Their loyalty swelled Shan's heart with gratitude. These people had believed in him when his

own kind would not dare to express interest.

"My allies, you have fought bravely and hard for this moment. When you enter the Jingtun Valley, know that you were the humans who freed your kind. Know that you were the people who brought the new age!" Shan thundered.

An ecstatic cheer rose from the warriors, and they were ready to ride as free men into the Rysamand.

"Today Onja truly begins to die!" Shan cried and the cheering swelled in agreement.

The warriors did not suspect how much their cheers bolstered Shan's courage. Shan could not quite predict what peril lay ahead, but he expected that his next battle with Onja would be much harder.

With the Rysamand pulling at his heart, Shan could finally enter his homeland. He gave the signal to advance and led his army through the pass. The Jingtun Valley opened before him like a welcoming paradise. Warm and embracing, the valley was a green treasure coveted by the icy cruel mountains that surrounded it. Shan could smell the ancient yet tender alpine forest below. In the outer world, forests did not smell so sweet.

The ancient Jingtun Road, winding down from the pass, was the only sign of civilization in the beautiful valley. Gravel and stubborn snow gave way to lush meadows that finally yielded to forest. Spring was still young in the mountains and the excitement of its bounty and softness glowed on the land.

The army was weary after fighting for the pass in the thin air, and Shan ordered a halt once they entered the forest. Warriors refreshed themselves in the Rysamand snowmelt that gurgled by in numerous streams. The pure waters eased wounds and renewed men after the hard battle.

Shan paused to grieve over Redan's body that was now wrapped in a shroud. Shan could feel the absence of a soul in the stiffening flesh. Redan had been a strange spirit and Shan's relationship with him had been strange. The assassin had become his most loyal follower. Shan decided he should be proud that he had been the only one worthy of Redan's loyalty. The ryls cast some mild spells of preservation over the corpse so it would not become offensive during the two or three day journey to Jingtun.

When he was done, he turned to Miranda who stood beside him. With a finger he delicately wiped the one tear clinging to her cheek. "Redan still exists. He has just gone to a different place," he soothed.

"Is that what you believe?" she whispered.

"I believe that now more than ever. When Taishek died, I saw his spirit just before he left. He was young again," Shan said.

Miranda contemplated what he said. Her life had always been so hard and miserable that she had never considered what would happen to her when she was dead. Staying alive and tolerating life had taken all of her attention, but with the knowledge that Shan shared, she discovered some comfort and hope.

"When will Onja attack again?" she asked.

"In a day, maybe two. I hurt her and she must recuperate. We are safe for now," Shan explained.

"Are my children still all right?" Miranda whispered.

"Yes."

Miranda shut her eyes and tried to find the strength to wait a few more days to see them. As she had done a thousand times before, she pushed her worry for her children to the back of her mind where it would torment her the least.

When she opened her eyes, she noticed blue light flickering in Shan's eyes. "What is it?" she asked a little fearfully.

"Please bring Dreibrand to me. I will be at my tent," Shan said and stalked away.

Miranda found Dreibrand bringing his horse back from a stream. Starfield had been allowed to

graze briefly, but now Dreibrand was saddling his horse again.

"Are you going somewhere?" Miranda asked.

"Maybe," he muttered.

"Shan wants to see you," she reported.

Dreibrand turned to her now and she saw a stricken look in his eyes like he was facing an execution. She knew he was troubled because the Atrophane were so close.

Although he did not want to hear the words, Miranda cautiously whispered, "Dreibrand, you need to tell Shan your problem with the Atrophane. He will not be angry with you."

"No," he snapped.

"But he expects you to go speak with them. What will you do?" she said.

"I will do what I must," he said tersely and brushed by her.

Miranda sighed with frustration. Dreibrand was smart and bold, but she could see that he was not coping with the impending reunion with his countrymen. And she had never seen him act so distant. Worried, she followed him and intended to hear what Shan told him.

"Quylan is approaching our camp," Shan said when Dreibrand arrived.

"Who is Quylan?" Miranda asked.

"She is a rys that accompanied the Atrophane from Jingtun," Shan explained. "I will go meet her. It pleases me to see her riding. Her injuries must not have been as bad as I feared."

"How many men are with her?" Dreibrand asked heavily.

"She is alone."

This news brightened Dreibrand, who was thankful to delay meeting any Atrophane. Forcing aside some of his worries, he tried to focus on his duties. "Shan, stay here. I will go meet her. You do not know what her intentions are. This could be a trap," he cautioned.

"I stopped Onja from killing her. She has obviously displeased the Queen and is coming to my side," Shan insisted.

"It could be an elaborate ruse. Onja might have pretended to hurt her, so you would trust her," Dreibrand said.

Shan considered this and reluctantly nodded. In his excitement to see another rys, he realized some of his better judgment had slipped away.

"Search her for any weapons or charms and take them from her. Then bring her to me. Your caution is wise, Dreibrand, but do not fear. I am her superior," Shan said.

"Where is she?" Dreibrand inquired.

"She is on the road," Shan said.

Dreibrand left with a dozen Yentay to intercept her. Evening was coming quickly to the valley, and the trees cast long shadows down the road. When they met the female rys on her white horse, she stopped and patiently waited for them to act. Bandages wrapped her arms and blisters marred her face, but she still possessed an enchanting attractiveness. Her black hair glimmered in the slanting sunshine shooting over the mountains.

"I am General Veta, and I serve Lord Shan," Dreibrand announced as his warriors surrounded her.

Quylan did not answer right away. Although she had been tutored in the common language so she could communicate with humans, she was unpracticed in its use.

Dreibrand noticed that she was staring at him hard, and he supposed she recognized him as an Atrophane.

"May I see Shan?" she finally responded.

"I must search you for weapons first," Dreibrand said.

She got off her horse in obvious discomfort. Dreibrand removed his gauntlets and inspected her for weapons. She submitted to his search without protest. She seemed a little dazed and she eyed the warding crystal on his sword nervously. Dreibrand wondered if the magic that protected him caused her fear. Although he tried not to be rude, he was quite thorough in his inspection. Her clothing in places was ripped and singed, and bandages wrapped one leg.

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

She nodded.

"What are your intentions?" he said.

"I have come to ask Shan to help me. I have disobeyed Queen Onja and I need his protection," Quylan explained.

Dreibrand studied her but it was impossible to judge the rys. "If you are still in league with Onja and plan a trick, Shan will detect it. He is superior," he warned, watching for her reaction.

"He has nothing to fear from me," Quylan said.

Dreibrand was about to ask her about the Atrophane, but his parted lips remained silent. He would rather wait to know.

When they arrived at Shan's tent, several hundred warriors had turned out to see the new rys, and Kalek and Ejan stood beside Shan. Quylan's heart pounded with fear and delight. Today, she would finally speak with Shan. Before Onja had recruited her, Quylan had imagined this moment many times, but her juvenile scenarios were useless now. She limped toward Shan with Dreibrand at her side. As he guided her to Shan, he warned her not to start trouble that he had to finish.

She was stopped three paces from Shan. To finally be near him overwhelmed her, and she dropped to her knees. Her abasement startled Shan, and he resisted the thrill of power it gave him.

"The daughter of Taf Ila has no need to kneel to me," Shan said softly in his native language.

She looked up at him and soaked up his goodness. It was such sweet relief after so many months of Onja's malignant attention. Almost in a sob, she said, "Please protect me. I have no where to turn."

Shan reached for her hands and drew her up. "Quylan, I have already done so. It was I who protected you from Onja today."

"I knew it was you," she whispered and gripped his hands.

She is so beautiful, Shan thought helplessly. "What are you doing with those warriors?" he asked.

"Shan," Kalek interjected. "Can she speak common? I want to know what she is doing here too."

Shan read the suspicion on the Temu's face and noted that many of the humans felt the same way. Shan reminded himself not to trust her quickly. She was powerful and perhaps devious.

Ejan agreed with Kalek's request, and Shan asked Quylan to speak common. In his excitement to hear his language, he had forgotten his human listeners.

Quylan's common speech was slow but understandable. Guiltily she glanced at the closest humans. These were the people she had been sent to kill. "Queen Onja commanded me to help the Zenglawa. I was to use my magic against your human army. But I could not do it, Shan. I would not do it. I want you to be King," she explained.

To hear a rys speak support for him redeemed Shan from many doubts. At that moment he believed he would be King just so Quylan would not be disappointed.

"And what do the five hundred Atrophane down the road think about this?" Shan asked.

Kalek and Ejan looked at each other with surprise and then they looked at Dreibrand, who avoided

everybody's eyes.

Quylan said, "The Atrophane have promised me they will make no battle with you. Queen Onja thought she could force their service, but she was wrong. They were going to fight her and die, but I talked them into pretending to obey so we could get out of the city. Shan, you must protect them too. The Queen will kill them for their betrayal. Please, Shan, they only came here because I told them you would not hurt them."

"I have no quarrel with them," Shan said to calm her. "Onja is not going to kill anybody anymore."

"Then I will go tell them. Thank you," Quylan said with relief.

But Shan would not let her go. "Quylan, you have no need to go. You are hurt. Stay here, so I can help you and we can talk more. General Veta is from Atrophane. He will go to them and give them my pledge," Shan said.

Dreibrand looked like he had just been told to jump into an active volcano, but he nodded to Quylan in agreement with his orders.

Shan's command to stay flustered Quylan but she said to Dreibrand, "Their leader is named Lord Kwan. They are camped to the south of the road. A natural spring marks the point on the road where you should turn..."

Her voice faded from Dreibrand's mind. Lord Kwan was there. Dreibrand remembered his last moment with his former commander and he could almost feel Kwan's angry hand on his face.

What am I going to do? he thought and looked at Tytido. *If I take all of the Yentay, I should be safe. But then they will see the reaction of the Atrophane to me. My loyal warriors will see me in disgrace.*

Dreibrand desperately did not want to be embarrassed in front of the Yentay. At least Shan was not going, which would give him some time to think. Perhaps Lord Kwan had bigger problems than a deserting officer now.

I have the power this time. If Kwan tries to kill me, I will tell him it will make Shan his enemy. Fear of Onja will keep him from hurting me, Dreibrand reasoned.

As recklessly as he had left Lord Kwan, he decided to go back to him.

"Tytido, stay here," he ordered and stalked toward his horse.

This command startled Tytido who had expected Dreibrand to take at least an honor guard. Miranda had heard the order as well and realized that he intended to go alone. She trotted after him and called for him to stop.

His response was so nonexistent that he appeared to be deaf. She reached him when he swung into the saddle. "Dreibrand, wait!"

He said nothing and snapped the reins. Starfield tore off at a gallop and warriors had to scramble out of the way. Dreibrand bent low to avoid tree boughs and disappeared into the pines.

Miranda would have yelled for him but she decided to maintain her dignity. It really hurt to see him leave. He had not listened to her, and at that moment, she had not been in his thoughts. Emotional pain was nothing new to Miranda but it had never come from someone she cared for. The blow stabbed at a place in her heart that she did not know was there. Dreibrand had always been so reliable. Miranda had allowed herself to depend on him, to love him.

The hurt turned into anger. *Let him ride away. I have gotten over worse,* she decided. Spitefully, she even hoped he got hurt.

This last ugly thought dissipated her anger. She guessed that Dreibrand had snapped under the strain of his guilt, but she did not really want him to get hurt. She resolved to go after him and convince him to rethink his plan, whatever it was.

Miranda looked at Shan as she went to get her horse. Shan was examining Quylan's burns and seemed completely absorbed in the task. Kalek was leaving with his entourage of warriors and Miranda presumed that he was retiring to the Temu section of the camp. She was thankful that Dreibrand's crisis did not seem to be attracting any attention.

Shan moved his fingers over the burns on Quylan's face.

"How bad are the burns on the rest of your body?" he asked.

"My arms are the worst. The Atrophane helped as best they could," Quylan answered.

"With your permission, I would like to use my magic to speed your healing. I should be able to eliminate most of your pain," Shan said.

Quylan looked down shyly. It was a thrill to have Shan stand so close to her, and the aura of his power was much stronger than she remembered. "That would be kind of you," she murmured.

"Come into my tent," he invited. As he showed her to his shelter, the crowd continued to disperse and Shan assumed Dreibrand had gone to speak with the Atrophane. Shan informed his bodyguards that he did not wish to be disturbed and then he entered his tent with Quylan.

The crystals in Shan's armor glowed inside the dim tent, and the burns that marred Quylan's face did not look as bad in the magical light. She stretched out on her stomach because she had burns on her back. Shan lit a lantern and settled down beside her.

"I have never tried to do healing magic," Quylan said.

"I am sure one as young as you has had little reason to try," Shan responded.

His mention of her age bothered her. She worried he would just think of her as a rysling.

"I will start with your face, Quylan. The quicker those burns are mended, the quicker your face shall return to its perfect loveliness," Shan said, and these words pleased her beyond all hope.

Shan noted the effect of his sweet words, which were meant to make her feel more secure. While he cast healing magic, he intended to gently peek into her mind and hopefully discover her true loyalties.

He began to soothe her wounds and encourage rejuvenation, which was not difficult in rys flesh that was so youthful. When he carefully increased his magic, Quylan did not seem to detect his subtle intrusion into her mind. Shan sensed that she was strongly conditioned to obey Onja but her fear and dislike for the Queen were also apparent.

When he was done, Quylan's recovery had been speeded by days and she sighed with relief. Shan had not perceived any secret agendas in her mind, but when dealing with his own kind, he knew to use more than one test.

Quylan thanked him but Shan did not respond graciously.

"Now what is Onja's new little kitten really doing here?" he inquired.

Quylan cringed from the question, finally seeing his suspicion. "Why do you speak to me so?" she said.

"I do you the courtesy of not interrogating you in front of the humans, but it still must be done. Do you think I am in a position to blindly trust you?" Shan demanded incredulously.

"I have told you the truth," she insisted rather meekly.

Unmoved by her conventional sincerity, Shan said, "Do you think I have not seen Onja training you? I have seen you at her right hand for months. You are clearly her tool."

Quylan tried to protest. She had risked so much to disobey Onja that she resented his doubts.

"I can feel her all over you," Shan snarled and kept his senses keen for her reaction.

Quylan started crying. Tears spilled down her delicate face as her emotions cracked and Shan felt an urge to be kind to her. If this was a trick, Onja could not have picked a more perfect creature to sabotage him. This lovely female was irresistible and Onja knew he could feel temptation.

But what could Quylan do to me? I sense no hidden plan, Shan thought.

Through her sniffing, Quylan started to defend herself. "Shan, what choice have I had but to obey Onja? I am not you. I cannot make war with her. My father is her captain and he expected me to serve her. Now I have disgraced him." A fresh sob choked her.

Feeling his steely suspicion dissolve, Shan said, "It is difficult to trust you. You always appeared to be her faithful servant."

"I had to!" Quylan wailed. "These tears you see have been held back for months. Onja would have punished me if she guessed how I felt about your challenge. You do not know what it is like! The way she dominates you. Always being afraid. Always hiding your true thoughts."

Overwhelmed by his sympathy, Shan reached out to touch her face. She flinched like an abused animal, but he only brushed back a strand of tear-soaked hair.

"But I do know what it is like," he whispered.

Tentatively, Quylan touched his hand. The life force of his flesh blended with her energy, and the sensation was of mutual cravings. Shan pulled his hand free.

"Perhaps I judged you harshly," he admitted. "I know what it is to be young and want to know about your power."

Quylan dried her eyes. Her breakdown had embarrassed her. "Shan, whether you believe me or not, I have betrayed Queen Onja. My life depends on your victory over her," she said.

The music of her voice and the magic of her closeness lulled Shan toward trusting her. "Will you promise me that you will not harm any of my allies?" he asked.

"I promise," she answered easily, and Shan sensed no deceit from her. *Did this young daughter of Jington actually have the nerve to defy Onja for my sake?* he wondered hopefully. No rys had dared to side with him before.

"I am glad you are here," he said.

"I came because I wanted to be with you," Quylan admitted. Already this brief time with Shan had been a joy to her, especially after a winter with Onja. Quylan could appreciate Shan far more now than she could have as the innocent rysling who had once dreamed of him with an innocent rysling mind.

"You must be tired. You can rest in here," Shan said and moved to leave.

"Stay." Rys females were innately bold and her one word was laced with suggestion.

Shan hesitated to look at her. Despite all of his power, he did not know what to say or do. The urge to be with a female, so long denied and dormant, now raged through his body. He wanted her...

This must be the trap. Onja is waiting for me to be helpless in this female's embrace, he thought. Desperately, he reminded himself to remain cautious, but he believed that Onja was too fatigued to fight him for at least a day.

"I do not think that would be appropriate," he finally said.

"I can choose to be with a male, if he would have me," Quylan said.

"You are too young to choose," Shan resisted.

"And you are too old not to be chosen," Quylan said playfully, sensing the futility of his resistance.

But her comment upset him, and Shan faced her with a hard look. "What makes you say such a thing!" he cried.

Quylan heard his indignation and tried to explain, maybe even apologize. She had not realized how rude her comment could be.

"I have never heard of any female keeping you company. They are afraid Onja will dislike them if they are nice to you," she said.

Sternly, Shan admonished, "Quylan, you have not been in this world for much of my life. Do not presume to know the details of it."

With a mix of curiosity and jealousy, Quylan asked, "Then who?"

"Who do you think?" Shan snapped.

Quylan recoiled when the awful possibility dawned on her. There was one female who had always been in Shan's life.

"I suppose you want to change your mind now," Shan said.

Some of the shock relaxed from Quylan's face. "I am sorry. It was not my business," she murmured.

"It does not matter now, but believe me when I say that I understand how she treated you. Be thankful she only had a few months with you. Onja had decades to twist my mind. I was raised to love her and for years I did. It is amazing I ever resisted her in the end..." Shan trailed off, remembering the bitter day when he had torn his mind from her totalitarian grip.

Quylan contemplated what his life must have really been like. During her few months of training with Onja, she had experienced so much fear and confusion that it staggered her to think how things might have degenerated over many years.

She admired Shan even more now.

"Please stay. There are so many trials ahead," she said.

Her fresh youth was strong magic to Shan, a spell he could not cope with. Soon he would face the greatest battle of his life, and he longed for the indulgence she offered. Recalling his past experience, Shan now viewed Quylan in her innocence. The earnest curiosities of a young female differed greatly from the seductive advances of an ancient sorceress.

Vaguely Shan knew Quylan was not at least one hundred years old, but he planned to break greater laws than that.

He moved close to her carefully, as if he feared to break a dream.

~

Emotion battled reason in Dreibrand's mind. He desperately wanted to resolve the issue of his past with Lord Kwan before Shan encountered the Atrophane, and this would be his only chance. Dreibrand was lucky to get this evening of privacy to buy the silence of his countrymen, if he could.

How will I explain to Lord Kwan? Dreibrand thought. He urged his horse to go faster as if he could outrun his doubts.

Dusk descended upon the ancient woodland, and the mountaintops glowed in the departing sun. Dreibrand was thankful for the coming dark. It would give him a chance to mask his identity when he reached the Atrophane, at least for a while.

Still struggling to compose himself, Dreibrand searched the side of the road for the natural spring mentioned by Quylan. He felt his heart thumping from the stress of his misgivings. He slowed Starfield and removed his white cloak, which would be too easy to see.

Ahead in the piney gloom, he heard the gurgle of the spring and the singing of dainty frogs. He stopped for a moment, listening to the water and letting the night gather around him.

I am afraid. He considered turning back and realized he had not said a word to Miranda. But he could not go back. The Atrophane needed to be told that Shan would protect them from Onja, and they needed to be told on his terms.

I have the power now. I can get them to forget the past, he thought forcefully and started riding south from the road. He expected that one or two sentries had already spotted him and he stopped to listen. The cold bare slopes above the forest were not far away and a chill blast of wind rushed through the trees. His senses tingled with life as the wind hissed through the pine needles, and when the gust passed, he heard a runner bounding across the forest. The man was not close, but Dreibrand gauged which direction he ran. The occasional jangle from Starfield's gear resumed

and Dreibrand followed the path of the alerted sentry.

When he caught a whiff of wood smoke, he knew the camp was near.

"Hello!" he yelled in his native tongue. "I come from Lord Shan bearing a message of friendship for Lord Kwan, Hordemaster of the Josar Province and leader of Clan Chenomet."

When no response came, he made his announcement again. The Atrophane were no doubt startled to hear their language so far from home.

Finally, the conspicuous movement of four figures appeared between the trees.

"Do not come any closer," Dreibrand commanded. He drew his sword and made sure the glow of the warding crystal on the weapon was not blocked from their view. "The magic of Lord Shan guards me. Do as I say and bring Lord Kwan to me so he can hear the message I bring."

Dreibrand heard the sentries murmur in the dark and he was pretty sure two moved off. He circled Starfield and menaced all directions with his sword. He hoped he was playing this right. After spending so much time in Jingtun, the Atrophane would either respect the threat of ryls magic or not care at all.

He heard the rustle of more soldiers closing around him.

"Who are you?" a voice asked.

"The servant of Lord Shan and his interpreter," Dreibrand answered with authority.

"Where are you from?" the same voice said.

"My words are for Lord Kwan. Now bring him to me," Dreibrand said.

Starfield snorted when a soldier moved close enough to be seen. Dreibrand warned, "Stay back. Lord Shan would not want his messenger ill treated."

Knowing that he had to be surrounded, he thanked the Gods of his homeland for keeping the soldiers from attacking. The Atrophane had to be waiting for news from Quylan, and Dreibrand expected that Lord Kwan would come soon.

But every second passed in exacting slowness and the quick thud of his heart made him feel very mortal. Finally, a flickering procession of torches snaked through the trees toward him. Dreibrand sheathed his sword and draped his hand over the hilt so the blue glow of the crystal shone on his hand. He took a deep breath and the revealing light of the torches drew close.

Many soldiers were approaching, at least fifty. The torches crackled with oily snaps when the Atrophane came into sight, and the light skin and eyes and hair ranging from brown to blond struck Dreibrand in a rush of familiarity. It was strange to be among his people again. Memories flooded his mind. He wondered how much of the firelight showed on him.

Then everything stopped for Dreibrand. Even the flicker of the torches seemed to freeze. The soldiers parted and he saw the white hair. There was a beard instead of a goatee on the weathered face and the winged beast was still emblazoned on the armor.

Lord Kwan.

"Who is it that speaks for Lord Shan?" Kwan said, peering up at Dreibrand.

"It is good to see that you are well, my Lord," Dreibrand responded. He was surprised that his voice sounded so calm, as if he had not been gone even a day.

A long pause ensued until Kwan whispered, "Dreibrand?" He recognized the voice but did not believe.

Sandin who stood behind his commander leaned forward. After an Atrophane oath of surprise, he declared, "By the Gods, it IS Veta!"

The soldiers began to murmur as more men began to recognize him.

Kwan stared in utter shock and struggled against his outrage until he achieved his own outward

calm. "I feared that you were dead, Dreibrand Veta," he said.

"My Lord, seize this scum," Sandin hissed but Kwan raised a stern hand and ordered him to silence. Sandin saw the hard gaze in Kwan's eyes and remembered that no one had deserted the Lord General. Sick with hostility, Sandin glared at Dreibrand.

"Lord Kwan, could we speak with some privacy? Lord Shan has sent me, and I came alone as a gesture of peace," Dreibrand said, hoping to maintain control of the situation.

"Peace!" Sandin scoffed. "Do you remember the last words you spoke about me?"

"Leave us!" Kwan decided and faced his lieutenant to make him comply.

Sandin blinked with disgust and Kwan continued in a whisper before his officer shouted again. "This is not the time for your anger, Lieutenant. I must find out what is going on."

"My Lord, do not trust him," Sandin advised and sent Dreibrand a venomous look.

"But you can trust me. Now go, but leave ten soldiers," Kwan ordered.

Sandin complied but with an ugly frown. The sudden appearance of Dreibrand did not make sense but if Dreibrand actually did know the mysterious Lord Shan, Sandin figured that he best not attack him just yet.

As most of the soldiers withdrew, Kwan said, "Dreibrand, come down from your horse. You know better than to look down on your Lord General."

"Our relationship is no longer the way it was. I serve Lord Shan now," Dreibrand said.

"Yes, I see that, Dreibrand," Kwan said stiffly. "But let us talk man-to-man. I must hear the message from Lord Shan and I must hear what happened to you. I have missed you."

Slowly, Dreibrand decided to leave the small safety of the saddle. Kwan had stayed remarkably calm and he seemed to be ready to listen. Steeling his nerves for this moment that he had dreaded, Dreibrand stepped toward Kwan. The Lord General looked different with his beard filled in.

Kwan also studied Dreibrand, who did not look like an Atrophaney officer anymore. Dreibrand's bangs had grown long and a couple small braids held them to the sides of his face. His armor was of a foreign fashion and it looked very costly.

He has gone native, Kwan thought.

Finally venting some emotion, Kwan struck Dreibrand savagely across the mouth. Dreibrand's head swung aside from the force of the blow, but he recovered and started to draw his sword. The remaining soldiers rushed forward.

"Are you going to try and kill me, Dreibrand?" Kwan demanded. "Is that what you want?"

Dreibrand froze with his sword half way out and the soldiers pressed close from all sides. He had been reacting on instinct but he deserved worse from Lord Kwan and he was supposed to be delivering Shan's peace offer. Dreibrand pushed his sword back into its sheath and wiped the blood from his chin.

"Grab him," Kwan ordered and the soldiers lunged.

Dreibrand offered no struggle, but as two soldiers took a firm grasp of his arms, he protested, "This will affect Lord Shan's opinion of the Atrophane in his domain."

Kwan noted the threat but he would finally give voice to his disappointment. Kwan grabbed the ivory handled dagger from Dreibrand's swordbelt and ordered a soldier to confiscate the sword.

"I will need that back," Dreibrand told the soldier nonchalantly.

Infuriated by Dreibrand's confidence, Kwan started his interrogation. "Hydax and Gennor. Did you kill them?"

Dreibrand cast his eyes down and his brash demeanor faded. "No. They found me, but a terrible

beast attacked us. It is what the Bostas call a fenthakrabi. I barely managed to escape. I think the creature ate them," he answered.

This news was repulsive to Kwan. Those men had been his best scouts and they did not deserve such a grisly fate. But Kwan knew Dreibrand well enough to believe that he spoke the truth.

"What were you doing? Why didn't you come back?" Kwan said with managed wrath.

Dreibrand stared back at him. He regretted his disgrace and dishonor, but he remained defiant. "If you want protection from Onja, who I hear you have disobeyed, I suggest you forget our past," he said.

Kwan leveled the dagger at Dreibrand's face. "Do you remember what this means?" he hissed.

"That I am an elite Atrophaney warrior," Dreibrand muttered at the blade glistening in the torchlight.

"Do you remember the oath you swore to me when I approved your purchase of a commission?" Kwan demanded.

"I did not want to go back to Atrophane. I thought you would be glad to be rid of me," Dreibrand answered.

"I should cut your throat with this," Kwan growled, bringing the dagger dangerously close.

Dreibrand did not flinch and suggested, "Why not give that honor to Sandin? You have never spared him any others."

Kwan could have killed over such flippancy, but in Dreibrand, he could only secretly respect such boldness.

"Do you plan to kill me?" Dreibrand asked calmly.

With a weary exhalation, Kwan lowered the dagger. "I should, Dreibrand. And in another place and time, I would. But damn, it is good to see you," he confessed. After the trials of Jingtun, any familiar face was welcome. He told the soldiers to release Dreibrand and move away, but Kwan tucked the dagger into his own swordbelt.

Dreibrand noted that his other precious weapon remained in the grasp of a soldier, but he decided to bring up that subject when it was time to leave. Now was the time to settle the past with his former commander.

"Lord Kwan, you know what living under censure is like for me in the Empire. I could not be a part of it anymore. I know I went about that the wrong way and offended you deeply. I made a mistake last year, but I ask you to accept my resignation and free me of my duties to you," Dreibrand said.

"You seem to have no problem avoiding your duties to me," Kwan commented with disdain.

"But I have not forgotten them. Shan saw the Atrophane in the service of Onja and he believed you would fight against his army. It was I who told him that Atrophane would not take the side of Onja willingly. Shan could have easily killed you all and not worried about it," Dreibrand said, embellishing the truth for greater effect.

Kwan stared at Dreibrand hard, and his mind suddenly felt sharp like it had been before Onja lessened him with constant fear and stress. "Where is Quylan?" he asked.

"She is with Lord Shan. She has asked Shan to protect her and the Atrophane from Onja. Shan has sent me to assess you, and he awaits my appraisal to make his decision," Dreibrand said.

Kwan considered what Quylan had told him about Shan. She believed him to be kind and generous, a rys who would help before he hurt. Kwan signaled for the soldiers to move back and give him privacy. With some relief Dreibrand watched them recede.

"You do not want me to tell Shan that you deserted me," Kwan surmised.

"I believe that would be a fair exchange for a favorable recommendation to the one rys who can defeat Onja," Dreibrand said.

"Except that I think you want to impose conditions on Shan's protection that are not there. Quylan assured me that she would gain his protection and that he would gladly give it," Kwan countered.

"You are making guesses, Lord Kwan. Shan will listen to me. I serve him as his general and I am also his friend," Dreibrand insisted.

"Dreibrand, do not try to play me," Kwan scoffed. "I taught you most of what you know, and I see clearly now how you are trying to manipulate this situation."

"Do not underestimate me," Dreibrand warned as his mind raced to regain the advantage.

Kwan retorted, "I have had all winter to learn to talk to rys. I can go speak to this Shan for myself. And you are not the only one with a rys ally. Quylan will help me. I do not need to placate you with promises of silence about your crimes. I could disgrace you and still get what I need."

"If you harm me, Shan will not listen. He takes his friendships seriously and attacking me will anger him," Dreibrand said.

"As you can see, you still have your life, which I will give back to you. I believe that would be a fair exchange for a favorable recommendation to your Lord Shan," Kwan said sarcastically.

Dreibrand clenched his teeth, fighting to hide the sting of his failure. Kwan had turned his own words against him. *But I am alive*, Dreibrand thought and decided not to press his ploy any further.

He sighed and asked, "So, I have my life then, Lord Kwan?"

Slowly, Kwan nodded and explained, "Because you were brave enough to come alone and ask for it, Dreibrand, and because I have no true desire to take it."

"Thank you, Lord Kwan. Now I will tell you that Shan will protect all the Atrophane soldiers if I can have your pledge that you will not attack his army," Dreibrand said and detailed the nature of Shan's forces, explaining who the Temu and Tacus were.

"That is better, Dreibrand," Kwan said with satisfaction and folded his arms. "You should have known to only be honest with me. I will always own a part of you. Such disappointment. All the teaching and coaching, only to have you leave me."

"To what end was your guidance supposed to take me?" Dreibrand asked bitterly. "So I could be sent on your official errands? So I could count slaves?"

"I gave you more than any other would have," Kwan defended.

"Shan has more to give. Soon, he will defeat Onja and become King of Jington," Dreibrand said with triumph.

"I see that you have been doing well for yourself somehow," Kwan said and looked over Dreibrand's fine clothing and armor.

"I get to keep what I earn now," Dreibrand growled. "I am still waiting for your pledge of peace, Lord Kwan."

"I grant it. And tell your Lord Shan that I wish him luck," Kwan said.

"That would please him," Dreibrand said.

"And I am still waiting for your explanation of how you got here. Or perhaps you are waiting for when I meet Shan to tell that story," Kwan said.

The distaste Dreibrand had for that suggestion reflected on his face. "It is a long story that I do not have time for. I fought a great battle this morning and I must take my rest while I can," Dreibrand said.

A twinge of jealousy stirred inside Kwan when he pictured Dreibrand fighting for another lord, but he tried not to show it. "Quylan told me of the battle. And we saw the fury of rys magic blasting at the sky. These rys are so powerful, Dreibrand. They are like something out of a myth," Kwan commented.

Dreibrand watched the fire and fight drain from Kwan's face. He realized that Onja had taught the

Lord General fear and it must have been a bitter lesson. "If it had not been for Shan, I surely would have died in Jingtun last year," he offered.

"So this Shan, does he expect to be a God like Onja is a Goddess?" Kwan wondered.

"Shan is not a God and would not claim to be," Dreibrand said adamantly.

"Well, time will tell. You will probably replace one tyrant with another, which seems to be the way of the world," Kwan said.

"When you meet Shan, you will see that he is not like Onja. But Shan is very powerful. I suppose he is the next best thing to a God," Dreibrand admitted.

"Just as long as he can beat Onja and I can go home," Kwan said. "Now, leave me, Dreibrand. Go back to your new life."

It was a cool dismissal and Kwan already turned away.

"My horse and weapons!" Dreibrand reminded.

Kwan scowled over his shoulder as if a slave asked for a ridiculous favor. "I give you back the life you owe me, and you ask for your possessions?" he scoffed.

"I am in the middle of a war," Dreibrand stated with exasperation.

"Arrange for me to meet your Lord Shan and there you can ask me for your things," Kwan decided. "Now, on your walk back maybe you will feel how stripped I felt when you deserted me,"

Dreibrand wanted to argue, but perhaps he deserved the humiliation, and Kwan had been very generous not to kill him. Kwan walked away and Dreibrand knew the Lord General would not change his mind. Fearing that a trap was being set, probably by Sandin, Dreibrand rushed back to the road. The less time he spent unarmed in the woods the better. The Atrophane could be plotting to cut him down away from their camp in an attempt to escape responsibility for it.

Dreibrand had not accomplished his goal of bullying Kwan into silence about the desertion, but perhaps he did not need to. Slipping through the trees, he reflected on his encounter with his countrymen. No one had outwardly accused him of desertion and the one time Kwan had specifically mentioned it, he had made sure none would hear.

Kwan does not want to admit someone deserted him! And when Jingtun is conquered and I am wealthy, I will pay my debt to him and he will forgive me, Dreibrand thought with sudden hope.

The enmity of my enemies was expected, but the jealousy of my allies was a bitter surprise—Baner Veta, grandfather of Dreibrand, excerpt from prison journal

Bad things had happened to Miranda often enough to give her a sixth sense for them. She did not know what the Atrophane would do to Dreibrand, but she remembered him as a prisoner that day when she first saw him.

Why has he gone to them? What plan could he have? she wondered, still angry over his rude departure.

She sprang onto Freedom and adjusted the bow and quiver on her back. With the excitement of Quylan's arrival over, the camp seemed abnormally quiet, and Miranda rode into the gathering gloom. On her way to the road, she crossed a Temu section of camp and began to feel edgy. Warriors looked at her strangely and she noticed movement on the periphery of her vision.

Then she saw Temu riders flanking her. With a glance behind her, she saw that Temu riders also followed her. She slapped the reins and urged her horse to go faster. When she faced the front, a pine bough smacked her face and a small cone scratched her cheek.

Miranda burst onto the fitted stones of the Jingtun Road only to find it blocked by a line of Temu warriors. At the center of them was Kalek. The riders who were following her caught up and she was surrounded. To show her dislike for being trapped, she brought an arrow to her bow.

Aiming it at Kalek, she hissed, "What do you want?"

A dozen bows and spears immediately challenged Miranda's drawn weapon, and she switched her aim between several targets. *I have no chance*, she judged.

Kalek laughed and approached her. A smug grin spread comfortably across his face, and Miranda returned her aim to him. *I should kill him and do Dreibrand a favor*, she thought, but his grin only broadened in the face of her hostility. She had seen Dreibrand intimidate Kalek before, but apparently, she had no such effect on him.

"You wear the cloak of my mother's household and you would raise a weapon against her son," Kalek remarked confidently.

Miranda wavered. She did not like to think it about it that way. She lowered her bow but Kalek noticed that the defiance in her eyes did not diminish. He considered her intensity intriguing and could understand how some men found her powerfully attractive.

"What do you want, Kalek?" Miranda said bluntly.

The happy expression dropped from Kalek's face. He brought his horse alongside her horse until he was close enough to touch her, and his warriors pressed closer as well. A wildcat glare sparkled in Miranda's wide eyes, but many weapons were still aimed at her and she had no way to escape.

"You need to learn how to address the King of the Temu," Kalek said.

Miranda said nothing, staring at him with patient intolerance. She knew she had to respectfully acknowledge his rank, but her obtuse nature was holding her back.

"None of your friends are here now, Miranda," Kalek sneered. "My father had trouble with you, but there will be no trouble between us. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?" Kalek demanded.

When she did not answer, he snatched her wrist and yanked her halfway out of the saddle. A warrior grabbed the bridle of her horse and another man took her other arm. Familiar fears assailed Miranda. Old feelings of vulnerability surged inside her, sapping her courage. She thought she had defeated those demons, but they had only retreated behind a border.

"Know that every trouble you give me, I will take out on Dreibrand," Kalek threatened.

The thought of her actions bringing reprisal on Dreibrand got her attention. She had told him that she would not cause any more trouble. *Maybe I can fix whatever has Kalek so upset*, she hoped.

"Yes, my King," she said.

"That is better, Miranda," he commented coldly. "Take her weapons. Bind her hands."

"No, no!" she protested. "I will do as you say."

She feigned her submission well, but Kalek did not change his orders. A leather cord flew around her wrists. When the bindings were tightened, Miranda remembered her last moments with the Queen of Jington. She trembled from the memory of torture, but the experience of Onja's cruelty actually gave her strength.

Kalek is a man. I have survived worse, she thought and a calm resilience settled over her nerves.

Her weapons were taken and she regretted the loss of her priceless sword. A warrior secured her bound wrists to the saddle, complicating her thoughts of jumping off and running away.

A warrior lit a torch off the nearest campfire and started spreading the flame among the torches of the other warriors. From the camp, a lone figure rushed toward the road and burst recklessly into the ring of men around Kalek.

It was Xander and he looked upon the young King sternly. The General did not like being left out of the King's plans, and he had dark suspicions about Kalek's intentions.

Seeing that Miranda was restrained made Xander visibly upset. "My King, what are you doing?" he yelled.

"These are my personal affairs, General," Kalek snapped. The respectful tone of his boyhood was gone.

"Why have you tied her, my King?" Xander asked.

"She has committed offenses against the tribe. I have decided that she may no longer go free," Kalek said.

Anxiously, Xander glanced at Miranda. "My King, do not hurt her. She does not know our ways. Miranda is a favored guest of the Queen," he said.

Kalek chuckled at Xander's sincere concern. Happily, he declared, "I will not hurt her. I need to talk to Dreibrand, and she is coming with me to make sure our conversation stays friendly."

When Miranda realized that Kalek intended to pursue Dreibrand, she tried to stop him. "My King, listen to your general. Do not treat me so. Shan will be displeased and you can talk to Dreibrand when he comes back."

"I will deal with the displeasure of Shan when the time comes. I do not think he is paying any attention to us right now anyway," Kalek said.

"You do not know that," Miranda insisted.

Kalek laughed. "Perhaps Shan showers you with favor but you do not know everything about rys. I grew up with rys and I know they consider their own kind much more interesting than humans. And I intend to use this window of privacy to settle some things with you and your mercenary."

Xander's heart sank. He did not want his King to make this trouble. "My King, is this necessary?" he asked.

"I should not need to explain this to you, General. A force of easterners is in the valley and Dreibrand has gone to talk to them by himself. He has some plot and we dare not trust these foreigners," Kalek said.

"Shan told him to bring his message of peace and protection to them. The easterners are fleeing from Onja. Dreibrand will talk to you. Do not treat Miranda like this," Xander argued.

Noting the distress of the General, Kalek said, "Don't worry, Xander, when I am done with her, I will release her into your custody."

Again, Xander looked at Miranda, lost for a second in the temptation of his favorite fantasy.

"I will go with you, my King," he proposed. Despite his loyalty, he did not trust Kalek to treat her right.

"No, your place is with the army. I order you to stay here," Kalek decided.

Kalek hollered at his horse and his small party sped away. The warriors brushed by Xander, who watched Miranda depart inside the ring of burning torches. The General obeyed the King of the Temu and stayed behind despite his concern.

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Dreibrand ran parallel to the road just inside the cover of the forest. Lacking his weapons and horse made him very nervous, especially because he was not alone. He sometimes heard the distant rustle or inappropriate crackle of a scout's foot. At first, he assumed some Atrophane were following him, but they seemed to be coming from ahead instead of behind.

When he heard the rumble of riders on the road, he ducked behind a tree. A cluster of torches appeared and Dreibrand recognized the Temu language being spoken but the vegetation insulated the conversation too much to be understood.

"Dreibrand Veta!" a voice hollered in his direction.

He pressed closer to the tree and felt a distinct foreboding. He might simply be needed back at camp and they had come to find him, but he could not shake the sense of being hunted.

One of the riders shouted again. "I have been looking for you! It is King Kalek. My scouts say you are here. We must talk!"

Dreibrand decided to continue back to camp and hopefully avoid the scouts. He doubted Kalek would personally track him down for any good purpose.

"Miranda is here. She must speak with you," Kalek yelled.

Fearful emotions chilled Dreibrand as he realized the extent of his stupidity. *I should have brought some Yentay. I should have told Miranda what I was doing.*

He needed to get back to his camp and get Tytido and some warriors. He could not face Kalek alone and unarmed.

"General Veta, we need to talk to you!" Kalek shouted again. His scouts had just reported Dreibrand's location and Kalek knew he was being heard.

"Call to him," Kalek commanded Miranda.

Resolutely she shook her head.

"I gave you a command," he hissed hotly.

"I will not betray him," she whispered.

Kalek cursed at her. He would not let this woman defy him, especially in front of his most loyal warriors. "He'll hear you one way or another," Kalek warned and raised his hand.

Miranda glared at him with contempt for his threat.

Shouting back into the pines, Kalek announced, "Dreibrand, I have your woman. If you do not show yourself, I will punish her for attacking that Temu warrior. She can't dodge Temu law forever."

Dreibrand halted his prowling escape. The threat against Miranda ripped him apart. His dislike for Kalek erupted into an intense hatred. Before this moment, he had simply accepted that Kalek and he must go separate ways, but now...

Dreibrand envisioned getting all of the Yentay and killing Kalek and his small squad. But the flaw in this plan blazed painfully across his mind. He saw the lash cutting across Miranda's back. It would take a lot of time to get his warriors, and in that time, Miranda could suffer greatly.

Despite Miranda's stubborn silence, Dreibrand could not take the chance that Kalek was bluffing about having her. Without knowing what he would do, Dreibrand headed for the road, hoping that Kalek would not really dare to hurt either one of them. The young King could not expect to get away with hurting friends of Shan.

Approaching the group of torches, Dreibrand keenly felt the punishment from Lord Kwan. Dreibrand hoped Kwan would be satisfied if he ever learned how effective his punishment had been.

With an attitude of complete confidence, Dreibrand swaggered like he had all of his warriors behind him. And seeing Kalek holding the reins to Miranda's horse made him feel as mad as a whole army.

A Temu warrior came up on the right of Dreibrand and grabbed his arm. Dreibrand cursed at him with such vehemence and smacked away the hand so fast, that the man relented. Most people knew better than to pick a fight with Dreibrand, and this man would wait for another direct order before grabbing him again.

"King of the Temu, what do you want?" Dreibrand demanded angrily.

"Thank you for finally joining us," Kalek responded casually.

Kalek gave the reins of Miranda's horse to another warrior and moved closer to Dreibrand. It puzzled him that Dreibrand was on foot and carried no weapon, which strangely made him a little nervous. Then Kalek reminded himself that he had all of the power tonight and he should just enjoy this added bit of good luck.

"Dreibrand run!" Miranda yelled and kicked the sides of her horse. Two warriors subdued the animal and Miranda failed to get away.

Dreibrand now saw that her hands were tied. "Let her go! How dare you?" he cried.

Taking a wicked satisfaction in his methods, Kalek answered, "I needed her to get your attention."

"Well you have it, so let her go," Dreibrand snarled. He looked at Miranda and she looked back at him with calm courage.

Kalek moved back beside Miranda and grabbed her chin. Dreibrand reacted instantly but several spears blocked his rush forward. Kalek liked the effect of his men holding Dreibrand at bay.

Dreibrand spoiled against the weapons but the pleading concern in Miranda's eyes begged him not to throw his life away so easily.

Forcing back his blind rage, he said, "You cannot treat us like this. Shan will not tolerate it."

"I believe Shan finds the female rys much more important than you right now," Kalek said. "And just because Shan likes you does not mean I have to trust you. Maybe Shan has some things to explain to me. He must have known a force of your people were in the valley. Why did he not tell me? And what plot did you make with your people when you rushed off alone?"

"You have it wrong. I have made no plot with the Atrophane. I took them Shan's offer of peace and protection and I am returning with a pledge of peace from their leader," Dreibrand explained, but he doubted he could convince Kalek of anything.

As Dreibrand feared, Kalek ignored the explanation and returned his attention to Miranda. Despite his rough grip, her face remained proud with disdain.

In a lazy tone, Kalek continued, "Do you know what the gossip is in the Temu camp, Dreibrand?" The King let his gaze drift from Miranda to Dreibrand. "Everybody says she likes the tent of more than one general."

The words slapped Dreibrand. It was an immature and unjustified taunt but Dreibrand could not contain his anger.

"You are scum, Kalek. There is no Temu honor in you!" Dreibrand yelled.

"Seize him," Kalek ordered with casual pleasure.

A quick struggle ensued. Spears came at Dreibrand from all sides and he could not smack all of them away before being overwhelmed. Four warriors jumped down from their mounts and wrestled

him into submission. Once a man got a strap over his throat, Dreibrand knew he was done. He never really had a chance anyway, but choking hastened his defeat.

He could hear Miranda shouting for them to stop. Even while his struggling became useless, he was glad to hear her voice. Dreibrand had never expected that his death would be by strangulation.

Then he was breathing, painfully pulling air into his hungry lungs. He could feel the weight of a man on each arm and the hot leather lying across his throat. He had collapsed against his strangler and now the warrior stood him back up. Blurry torches swam before his eyes. First, he focused on a spearhead, then a hoof, and finally he lifted his eyes to the warriors who held him.

They hauled him in front of Kalek who dismounted to inspect his prisoner. The Temu King tore the helmet from Dreibrand's head and threw it in the dirt.

Miranda moaned.

"Do not speak to me of Temu honor, foreigner," Kalek instructed. "I will not hurt your woman. She has served her purpose, although she should be taught respect."

"Let her go," Dreibrand said in a ragged and subdued voice, which he hated.

"Take her back to camp," Kalek ordered.

Two warriors started to lead Miranda away. She resisted the impulse to launch into a hysterical fit and try to break free. She would probably only get hurt and at least this way she was going back to camp. Her only chance to help Dreibrand was to get back to camp and get Shan.

"I will get help," she called in her native language.

Longingly, Dreibrand looked at her, savoring every image before she disappeared into the black night. This time, he had little faith that she could save him.

"I love you," he said in her language.

Miranda heard the remorse and farewell in his voice. She conquered the sob in her throat because now was not the time for tears. She would help Dreibrand. When she got back to camp, she would do whatever it took.

Dreibrand watched her slip out of the light. He kept his eyes focused on the last place her image had been. He did not want to see anything else.

Kalek's fist landed on his jaw in a precise delivery of pain. Metal studs on the knuckles of the King's gauntlets tore open small cuts. Dreibrand lurched against his captors but he managed to kick Kalek just below the knee. The leather strap tightened in quick reprisal, but Dreibrand still enjoyed seeing Kalek grimace in pain and curse.

"Get his armor off!" the King barked.

Dreibrand struggled like a wild horse, but he could not win. They choked him into submission several times, giving him just enough air to fight and wear himself out. At last, he lay on the ground gasping, simply grateful for the air. His beautifully armored jacket was tossed aside.

The warriors yanked him to his feet and Dreibrand resented the wobble in his legs. Only the hope that Miranda would not be harmed made his humiliation bearable.

Next came the rope. Dreibrand struggled on principle now, making the warriors work harder to follow their unjust orders. They bound his hands and threw the rope over a strong tree branch. A burly Temu pulled on the rope, stretching Dreibrand up until only his toes stayed on the ground.

Groaning from the discomfort in his shoulders, Dreibrand watched a large drop of blood fall from his lip and hit the dirt by his feet.

Kalek stood in front of him now, thoroughly pleased by Dreibrand's condition. "You know, I have been meaning to have this talk with you for some time," Kalek said, relishing the moment. "It is time you respected me, Dreibrand. Really respected me. I am your King and you must obey me."

Dreibrand sneered, "You want me to respect you, and you will not face me as a man. You bring warriors to capture me."

Kalek kicked Dreibrand's feet out from under him. Dreibrand swung painfully while he scrambled for new footing.

Defiantly, Dreibrand said, "Are you scared to talk to me on equal ground?"

A punch in the stomach was Kalek's first reply. The blow made Dreibrand feel a little sick. It was hard to flex his muscles for protection in his stretched position.

"We will never be on equal ground!" Kalek hissed. "I will always be above you. The Temu are the most powerful and there is no room at the top for foreigners—not even Shan's general."

A fist punctuated Kalek's point and Dreibrand grunted from the impact. Vaguely, Dreibrand wondered how long Kalek would take to kill him. But he commanded himself to stay strong.

The Temu on the end of the rope tied it to a tree so he could relax. Dreibrand deduced that Kalek planned to settle in for a nice evening of leisurely brutality.

Kalek grabbed Dreibrand's face. "That nonsense my father told you about commanding the Temu army better get out of your head tonight," Kalek warned.

"I think I got the idea," Dreibrand retorted.

"You still don't quite understand me," Kalek said and pushed Dreibrand to the side so he had to seek new footing again. "Your time with the Temu is done. If you are so smart, you should start begging for your life."

Dreibrand obliged him. "Do not do this. I will not go back to your domain, I swear."

Kalek grinned with the beginnings of satisfaction. "Does Dreibrand look like a fearless general now?" he asked openly.

A few timid chuckles resulted. Dreibrand craned his neck to look at the warriors. They were the usual crowd that followed Kalek faithfully.

"Look at your fearless King!" Dreibrand scoffed and braced himself for the inevitable punches.

Kalek assaulted him with a flurry of fists. When he stepped back to catch his breath, he admired the way Dreibrand slumped in his bindings. Kalek did not want to beat him too much at once. He intended to prolong Dreibrand's suffering.

Slowly, Dreibrand stood himself up, easing the strain on his arms. Blood trickled down from his wrists where the coarse rope cut. Mustering some energy, Dreibrand hocked a wad of blood at Kalek.

"Kalek—" Dreibrand began.

"King Kalek."

Weakly, Dreibrand nodded. He could not afford to take a blow over a trifling title. He started again, "King Kalek, what do you want?"

"I want your ambitions to end," Kalek answered.

~

Tytido exhaled slowly as he lowered himself onto his tattered bedroll. As always it was a chilly night in the Rysamand, but even the cold ground was inviting after the rigors of so many battles. Sleep claimed his body and mind almost instantly and he did not hear the footsteps pounding toward his dying campfire.

"Lieutenant!"

Tytido awoke like a startled warrior and was relieved to see that it was one of his comrades looming over him.

Sitting up, he asked, "What is it?"

The Yentay reported that Miranda had been abducted.

"Are you sure?" Tytido did not want to hear this news and checked to see if he was still sleeping, so it could be a bad dream.

"Yes, she did not want to go. I would have helped, but there were Temu all around and I did not dare," the Yentay said.

Now on his feet, Tytido said, "I will tell Lord Shan."

Tytido trudged toward Shan's tent, accepting that he would have no sleep. The Temu bodyguards slept in a ring around Shan's tent except for two who were keeping watch. They lounged wearily and watched Tytido approach with little interest. Tytido found himself viewing them with some suspicion after hearing what was happening to Miranda.

Tytido called to Shan several times without response. Worried, he turned to a bodyguard and asked, "Is Lord Shan in there?"

"Yes. He is healing the injuries of the female rys and he said that he was not to be disturbed," replied a bodyguard.

Tytido frowned at the news and the possible implications. He called to Shan again and patiently waited for an answer. He heard some activity inside the tent, which convinced him not to physically intrude.

"You picked a fine time to get a girlfriend," Tytido muttered in his own language and turned away. Shan was not available and Tytido would have to think of something on his own.

His first impulse was to take warriors and retrieve Miranda. He knew her safety would be paramount to Dreibrand and Tytido believed that his duty should be to help her. But interfering with the Temu King left Tytido with many things to consider. He wished he had Shan. The rys was the unifying force between the allies, and without his assistance, Tytido was wary of acting alone. If he used Yentay against Kalek, the new King could see it as an act of war from the Hirqua and the Nuram. Even if it did not go that far, Kalek had enough warriors to massacre the Yentay.

Surely, Shan would never let him go so far, Tytido thought. He decided not to be impulsive. Too much was at stake for him to rush after the Temu King with warriors, and he went to find the Temu general because Xander would know what was going on.

Exhausted after the difficult battle in the pass, most of the Temu warriors were sleeping, which reassured Tytido, but a knot of activity persisted around Xander's fire. As Tytido approached, he noted the tense faces on the warriors. Standing by the bright fire, Xander stared into his wine and the light flickered over his solemn features.

The General contemplated his reflection on the untouched surface of the wine. It felt strange not to have Taischek's company over a cup of wine. It felt worse to consider Kalek's behavior.

Xander did not look surprised when he lifted his eyes and saw Tytido.

"What is your King's business with Lady Miranda?" Tytido bluntly demanded. He kept his attention fixed on Xander despite the rattle of bristling warriors.

Xander merely chuckled and finally drank some wine. "Have a drink with me, Tytido of Clan Gozmochi. There is no quarrel between us," he invited.

"And I wish no quarrel between us," Tytido responded diplomatically. "But King Kalek has taken Miranda against her will. Why?"

"I suppose he required her company," Xander said.

Frustration spawned anger inside Tytido but he fought back his temper. Calmly he asked, "Does King Kalek seek General Veta?"

Xander shrugged noncommittally. Tytido was dreaming if he expected him to discuss his King's business.

"King Kalek means to use her as bait so he can attack General Veta," Tytido surmised in an accusing tone.

In his heart Xander did not want Dreibrand to be harmed. Xander respected Dreibrand as a warrior and he decided to encourage Tytido's worry. Perhaps the Hirqua could help Dreibrand where he could not.

"The forest at night is not a safe place," Xander said and downed his wine.

"But your King dare not hurt General Veta. Shan would be furious!" Tytido exclaimed.

Xander sighed helplessly. He certainly did not support his King's actions. "Yes, Shan would be furious," he agreed.

Turmoil gripped Tytido's heart as his loyalties tore at each other. He pictured Dreibrand murdered and was surprised by his rage. Then he thought of his tribe. If he attacked Kalek, all relations between the Hirqua and Temu could suffer. Tytido understood that leaders often quarreled. Maybe he should stay out of the way and weather the loss of a commander.

Then Tytido remembered his first battle as a Yentay. The Kezanada had taken Misho and Redan prisoner and Dreibrand had not hesitated to go after them. This straightened out Tytido's loyalties.

"Thank you for your time, General," he said curtly.

Xander could see the decision that Tytido had made. He hoped they would not have to meet as enemies.

Horses were approaching now and Tytido paused to see who was coming to the Temu General.

"Tytido!"

He recognized Miranda's voice. Three riders entered Xander's area—two warriors escorting Miranda.

"Tytido, help me!" Miranda cried, pulling at her hands.

Tytido rushed toward her but Xander intercepted him. "She is in my custody," Xander said forcefully.

Surrounded by Temu, Tytido did not argue. For the moment it was enough to see that Miranda was back.

Xander stepped up to her horse and began to untie her hands. Before freeing her entirely, he took one of her hands into his warm grasp.

"This was not my doing," he murmured apologetically and looked up at her.

Lost in his desire, Xander longed to discard his scruples and accept this gift from his new King, but he felt empty in his moment of possession. Even as he touched her with sincere tenderness, he could sense her searing hostility.

Miranda jerked her hands free and yanked loose the last restraint. Scornfully she pulled the cords from her wrists and flung them past Xander's head.

"Give me back my weapons," she ordered.

"You'll only make more trouble for yourself. Stay here with me. I can protect you," Xander said.

Leaning down close to his face, she said bitterly, "General Xander, your King is hurting him right now. If you will not let me go, it is like you want Dreibrand dead."

He stiffened at the rebuke. Her hatred broke his heart. Compared to this, Xander viewed her indifference to him with nostalgia.

Desperate to gain his compliance, Miranda added, "If Dreibrand is dead when I get there, you can have me."

Xander's face brightened with boyish hope and he ignored the threat behind her words. "Do you mean that?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered quickly. *Only so I will have a chance to bring revenge on Kalek,* she thought.

"As I said, this was not my doing. I cannot keep you here," Xander confessed. He called for her weapons and gave them back to her.

When Miranda grabbed the rys sword, she remembered when Dreibrand had given it to her. But she had no time to think of anything except his current suffering and she beckoned to Tytido. She took a foot out of a stirrup so Tytido could get on the horse and they promptly rode away.

Xander was surprised by the liberty he granted her. It bordered on treason and he could see the shock on many faces. Wordlessly he returned to his fire to stare at more wine.

Miranda quickly gave Tytido the details of Dreibrand's plight. When Miranda steered for Shan's tent, Tytido explained that the rys would not acknowledge him earlier.

"Shan will not ignore me," Miranda declared.

"Miranda, you must understand. Sometimes rys do not hear us. Their thoughts are not always with humans," Tytido warned.

"He must listen!" Miranda cried.

"While you try, I will get the Yentay. With or without Shan we must go help Dreibrand," Tytido said.

A Yentay was waiting near Shan's tent when Tytido and Miranda arrived. He glanced warily at the Temu bodyguards and whispered for privacy. "Lieutenant, a Kezanada has slipped into our camp."

"What!" Tytido cried.

The Yentay motioned for Tytido to be quieter. "He only wishes to talk to us. He entered camp without the Temu or Tacus noticing. He wants to speak to General Veta. He says he wants to get an audience with Lord Shan," he explained.

"Well he picked the wrong night," Tytido remarked.

Miranda jumped off the horse and ran up to Shan's tent. She called to him, but like Tytido, she received no reply. A faint blue glow came from the tent and Miranda realized that Shan had to be involved in some sort of spell making and she accepted that he could not hear her. Frustrated, she returned to Tytido.

"I told you he would not respond," Tytido said. "We cannot waste time trying to talk to him. We must see this Kezanada who has come to us."

"You do not need to remind me about the time," Miranda snapped, thinking of Dreibrand and hating every moment that kept them from helping him.

The Kezanada was laying low inside the Yentay section of camp. He sat between two warriors just outside the glow of a campfire. He wore the soft black garb of an assassin. A simple black cloth wrapped his face and he wore no noisy armor.

When Tytido and Miranda approached him, the Kezanada stood and said, "It is about time somebody showed up. What does Shan say?"

"Shan is not available right now," Tytido said.

Impatiently the Kezanada snapped, "Do not toy with me. Where is General Veta?"

"Is that you, Faychan?" Miranda said, making Tytido realize he recognized the voice as well.

A supercilious chuckle came from behind the mask. Like Faychan, the man sounded like he knew what the joke really was. "Truly I cannot hide from Veta's woman. How nice to see you, Miranda," he said.

"I do not have time for you right now," Miranda stated.

But Tytido took her arm and tugged her a few steps away to speak privately. "Miranda, we can hire Faychan's warriors to help Dreibrand. That way I can avoid a conflict between the Yentay and the Temu," Tytido suggested.

"Since when do you trust that man?" Miranda argued, unhappy with being pulled about.

"Since I saw a way to avoid Hirqua and Nuram fighting Temu. I will take the Yentay to save Dreibrand if I must, but it will destroy generations of peace between the tribes involved. My action could have serious consequences for my tribe. But this could work. Faychan and Dreibrand have a relationship. Faychan will help him," Tytido reasoned.

"Yes, fine," Miranda agreed. At this point she did not care what warriors went with her as long as they went now.

Faychan stalked up to them and demanded, "Where is Shan? Why won't he talk to me?"

"Shan is occupied," Miranda replied.

"With what?"

"With rys things," Miranda snapped with exasperation. "Faychan, your business can wait. I need warriors. How many do you have?"

Her abrupt demand stunned Faychan. When he recovered, his tone was surly. "What is going on

around here? Where is Dreibrand?"

"Kalek has taken him prisoner in the forest. That is why I need warriors. Please, you must come with me now," Miranda pleaded. Her voice cracked with strain and then she explained everything in an emotional rush of words. Sometimes she stumbled, frantic to think of the right word, until Tytido helped her. Possessing a quick mind, Faychan grasped the nature of the emergency.

"How many warriors do you need?" Faychan inquired.

Considering this acceptance, Miranda said, "At least twenty. You have to have that many, right? Let us go get them."

"Do you know what that costs?" Faychan said.

"Faychan, please, this is no time to bargain. You know we can pay whatever it costs," she said.

"You want me to interfere with Temu business when they have one thousand warriors in the valley, and you want me to do it on credit?" Faychan asked incredulously.

Miranda wavered, trying to think of a response. She had some gold but it was not that much, and she could not afford to spend time quibbling over a price when Dreibrand's life was at stake. She decided to make the best and quickest offer she could.

She pulled her rys sword half way out of its sheath and asked, "Would my rys sword pay your fee?" Her tone dared him to refuse. Although Miranda still had difficulty grasping magnificent wealth, she understood that the ancient sword had great value.

Faychan felt a sincere urge to accept the treasure, especially on such cheap terms. But in a brief moment of humanity, he thought she might need the weapon and decided not to take it.

"I already have one," he said playfully, unable to resist the urge to coldly refuse.

"You bastard!" she snarled and started to draw the sword the rest of the way.

Seeing her quick temper, Faychan raised his hands and said, "I was joking. I will discuss the price later with Dreibrand. I have seventy-five warriors. We will go help him now."

"Yes," Miranda breathed.

"I am going with you," Tytido decided.

"No, stay here, Hirqua. We both know why you should not go," Faychan advised.

Tytido reluctantly conceded that he should stay. Even one Hirqua present could make the Temu hold a grudge.

Miranda and Faychan rode out of camp, riding double on her horse. She let him guide the horse because he knew where his warriors waited in the forest. A few sentries yelled with alarm when they passed the Tacus section of camp but Faychan easily avoided capture. He apparently knew his way in the dark. Miranda held him tighter around the waist and felt a dagger handle inside a fold of fabric. Immediately, Faychan seized her wrist and placed her hand lower on his hip.

Miranda's heart thudded with terror, but the terror was for Dreibrand. She despaired that Kalek had killed him already.

"I want you to kill Kalek," Miranda said into Faychan's ear.

A secret grin spread behind Faychan's mask. Her audacity was refreshing, but with a paternal tone, he declined, "Miranda, you do not want to start that kind of trouble. And the Kezanada definitely will not assassinate a powerful tribal king on credit."

Miranda snorted with contempt.

"But maybe I will hurt him a little bit," Faychan teased, enjoying his humor and her arms around his body.

~

Dreibrand licked the blood from his teeth. He was starting to recover from the last stunning barrage of punches. Kalek would beat him and then stand back until the initial pain subsided. This had happened enough times for Dreibrand to lose track of time. But he knew he could not last much longer.

Some of the cuts on his face and body were clotting, but most of them still bled. With every blow the studs on Kalek's gauntlets tore his skin. Dreibrand saw patches of blood soaking through his sweat stained shirt. Breathing was difficult and his muscles shook from exhaustion.

Kalek approached again and Dreibrand regarded him blearily. He gathered the last of his strength and tensed his body for another attack.

"Do you see who has the power? Do you see who has command?" Kalek hissed.

Dreibrand said nothing and stayed ready for the inevitable fists.

Kalek continued, "And don't think Shan will take your side in this. I have honored my father's obligations to him, and the rys must do the same by the Temu."

"Kalek, why? What have I ever done to you?" Dreibrand asked weakly. Because Kalek was talking again, he would try to engage him in a conversation. Anything to delay the next beating.

"Why?" Kalek mocked. "You have told me yourself how the people of your land are conquerors. But you are very wrong if you think I will let you take what is mine!"

"How could I do that?" Dreibrand said.

"You already do that," Kalek snarled and automatically smacked Dreibrand's face. "I see how you grab everything you can get. You have spent Temu gold outfitting your warriors. Your armor cost more than mine! And I have seen you take command of Temu warriors in battle. You try to steal my own army," he accused.

Dreibrand's head lolled between his stretched arms. Kalek seemed to have unending complaints against him.

"And now more of your kind have come. But you will NEVER conquer the Temu," the King declared and several of his warriors voiced their approval.

"King Kalek, I am not your enemy," Dreibrand said. "I served your father well."

But the effect of Dreibrand's words was the opposite of his desire.

"That's right. You served my father. You served him into a grave!" Kalek's voice rose with his rage.

He grabbed his prisoner's shirt with both hands and shook Dreibrand violently until most of the garment tore away.

"You made my father believe he could conquer the Sabuto. You drove him to his death!" Kalek raved.

The King vented his grief on Dreibrand's naked torso. He concentrated his blows on the new scar on Dreibrand's side. The wound from the Overlord had healed but the healing had been slow. Kalek saw the scar and hoped Dreibrand would be the most vulnerable there. Again and again his fists slammed the scar, eventually crushing physical resistance.

With a furious blow, Kalek drove his fist deep into defeated flesh. Dreibrand screamed and then wheezed in breathless pain. A stabbing agony started in his vitals, and he teetered on the edge of a blackout.

Kalek stepped back, panting after the abusive episode. He dabbed at his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand.

"Now, Dreibrand Veta, I will kill you. And I will drag your body to the other Atrophane so they will know to stay away from me," Kalek announced.

Dreibrand's swollen lips would not allow him a last smile of satisfaction. Such an action would surely provoke the Atrophane.

"What of Miranda?" he croaked.

"She will live in comfort. General Xander seems to crave her companionship," Kalek answered rather cruelly. He treasured this final touch of indignity before Dreibrand's death.

"Miranda..." Dreibrand murmured, wishing he could apologize to her.

Dreibrand was too groggy to hear the arrow slice through the air, but he heard Kalek cry out in pain. Kalek clutched his thigh where an arrow protruded from his meaty muscle. He staggered back then tripped as he took the weight off his injured leg.

All of the Temu warriors had dismounted earlier to watch their King torment his prisoner. No one had set a watch and Kezanada had crept close on foot. Twice the number of Kalek's men swarmed around the Temu, spooking the horses and initiating hand-to-hand combat.

Caught unawares, the Temu fought poorly. In the suddenness of the assault, the Temu did not know how many black clad Kezanada with gleaming facemasks attacked them. The Kezanada battle cries naturally seemed to bring disorder to the mind as each shriek and shrill answered and echoed each other.

The Temu and Kezanada had only exchanged a few blows when the rumble of riders pounded down the road. The rest of Faychan's force smothered Kalek's position and made the Temu warriors lower their arms.

Dreibrand had yet to register the Kezanada. He did not quite comprehend how Kalek had been shot with an arrow, but he liked it.

Two warriors beside Kalek helped their King to stand as a mounted Kezanada circled him. Kalek had to keep one hand on a warrior for support. Faychan halted his steed and got down to face the new Temu King. Faychan admired the fear evident on Kalek's pained expression. The presence of a Kezanada lord made even a king worry, and Faychan was proud of his notorious society.

"Go back to your camp," Faychan commanded.

Kalek wanted to stand on his own and defy him, but he cringed in pain when he tried. Frustrated, he put a hand back on the warrior.

"That poke was to make you accept that my wishes are serious," Faychan said.

Dreibrand saw the Kezanada talking to Kalek and decided he was dreaming. When he heard Miranda's voice, he was happy. He liked dreaming about Miranda, but he wished she would stop shouting.

Abruptly a Kezanada visor appeared in front of Dreibrand's face. The Kezanada put his strong arms around him and Dreibrand did not like the dream anymore.

Then the rope gave way and he crumbled into the supporting arms of the Kezanada. The immeasurable relief of being cut down roused Dreibrand enough so he could realize he was rescued.

The Kezanada lowered him to the ground and Miranda appeared at his side. Her rys sword glistened in her grasp. She had cut him free with one swift stroke.

"Dreibrand, I am here. Everything is fine," Miranda said.

Her hands tenderly touched his face without adding to his discomfort. Dreibrand moaned from the pain burning relentlessly in his side.

"I will get you fixed up," Miranda said, trying to stay calm. She had never seen Dreibrand look so bad. Bruises already darkened his torso and blood dripped from his nose and mouth and oozed from many scrapes on his body.

Miranda carefully untied the rope, prying the bloody fiber from his wrists. Once his hands were free, Dreibrand hugged his scarred side.

Seeing her man's suffering made Miranda seethe with hatred. She glanced toward Kalek and regretted not shooting her arrow at him before he took her hostage. She would have attacked right then if Faychan had not insisted that she stay back from the Temu King. He had forcefully told

her that she may hire him but she must not interfere with his business.

At least Faychan had allowed a sharpshooter to wound Kalek. It pleased her to see Kalek wincing in pain while the Kezanada confronted him.

"How dare the Kezanada intrude on my business?" Kalek shouted.

"You interfere with my business," Faychan countered. "I came to speak with General Veta."

"I don't think Veta has much left to say," Kalek sneered with satisfaction.

"That remains to be seen," Faychan said.

"The Kezanada will pay for this!" Kalek vowed.

Faychan humored his threat and conceded, "Perhaps that arrow was a little rude. I will square things up with you, King Kalek, and give some free advice. Do not make an enemy of the Kezanada when you already have so many. And trust me, I know about your enemies."

Kalek glared at the masked face but said nothing. He understood that he was little better than a Kezanada captive and should be worried. Dreibrand plotted with the Kezanada all the time and they were probably upset with him for attacking their favorite foreign mercenary.

Faychan continued, "And do not tear apart Shan's allies BEFORE Onja is defeated. Now go!"

Kalek limped to his horse and got into the saddle with a groan. His leg sang with pain and the arrow was still sticking out of it.

Judging that the young King would withdraw and nurse his wound, Faychan went to Dreibrand. Pushing aside his mask, he squatted beside the foreign warrior. Faychan recognized that Dreibrand had been badly beaten and would not have lasted much longer. Faychan made a mental note to keep a special eye on Kalek. If he survived his fledgling kingship, he could develop into a formidable Temu ruler.

Miranda carefully gave Dreibrand some water and started to clean his face. Dreibrand was thankful for the miracle that brought her to his side. Miranda was the only one who ever really watched out for him all the time, and he loved her.

"Can you stand?" Faychan asked pessimistically.

"No," Dreibrand whispered his first word.

Worry pinched Miranda's face. "Faychan, you must help me get him back to camp," she said.

"Faychan...?" Dreibrand murmured, dragging his limited focus away from Miranda.

The Kezanada nodded. "Yes. I came to talk to you and Shan. But I find you in trouble. What happened?"

"Long story," Dreibrand replied fuzzily. "So what did you want to talk about?"

Faychan hesitated. It seemed useless to discuss his business now. Then he reasoned that Dreibrand could pass out soon and decided to get in a few words.

"I need an audience with Shan," Faychan said.

"For what?" Miranda interposed.

Faychan eyed her. It was strange how her suspicious attitude disturbed him, especially because he had led a life around suspicious people.

"Benladu supports Onja. I came to offer my allegiance to Shan. Many changes are coming and I want to come out on top too," Faychan explained.

"Finally decided to be Overlord yourself," Dreibrand surmised painfully.

Faychan looked down a little modestly. "Benladu annoys me and I cannot control him. I am only left with the option of taking over."

"I suppose Shan will see you," Dreibrand said.

"Well, that can wait now. You are hurt and need help. I cannot let someone that pays as well as you slip away," Faychan said.

Dreibrand coughed, which caused a sharp pain in his chest. When it faded, he found the strength to joke, "Kalek was just discussing my spending habits."

A genuine grin lighted Faychan's face. He appreciated a resilient sense of humor. "While we are on the subject, you do owe me for tonight. Miranda hired my warriors to save you," he said.

"Dreibrand, I am sorry," Miranda quickly apologized. "We can still get money, right?"

Before Dreibrand could answer, Faychan said, "Actually I was not thinking of money. You can just owe me a favor. Friends deal in favors."

Up until now, Dreibrand had carefully avoided being sucked into Faychan's personal schemes, but he could not deny Faychan this time.

"Things are going badly for me. I doubt I will have any favors to give," Dreibrand warned.

Faychan scoffed, "You are just having a bad night. Soon you will be a very powerful man. You have not been doing charity work for Shan."

Dreibrand made no comment. Indeed, Shan had much to give.

"Enough of this," Miranda decided. "He is in pain and can talk no more. Stop talking about money when he needs help." Along with her concern for Dreibrand's physical needs, she believed he was too vulnerable to talk to the Kezanada.

Faychan shot Miranda a look but commented pleasantly, "You have a crafty woman, Dreibrand. She makes me work on credit and then tells me not to discuss the bill."

With a strained voice, Dreibrand said, "We will talk later, Faychan. But let there be friendship between us."

"Good," Faychan declared.

"Dreibrand, can you stand yet?" Miranda asked.

He made a cautious effort but his pain defeated him. Frustration pooled in his eyes and he lay back. Faychan grabbed him and helped him on his next attempt. Smothering a moan, Dreibrand got to his feet. He swayed between Miranda and Faychan until he forced some strength back into his legs. Accepting his pain, he resolved to struggle back to camp.

~

The glow of energy faded between Shan and Quylan as their minds returned to their individual bodies. While connected by mind and body, they had shared the pleasures of flesh and spirit.

Shan kissed her face and lips, still marveling at the reality of her. He and Quylan had glimpsed each other's hearts and seen goodness in each other. They had seen dark places too, but those had only brought them closer.

"You are so powerful," Quylan murmured.

"So are you," Shan whispered.

Caressing her new lover, Quylan said, "Each time there will be more pleasure between us."

Shan agreed, believing that they could master the needs of each other's bodies. Then, ecstasy would become like a simple spell.

"I will always choose you," Quylan sighed.

Shan clutched her tighter. She was the most wonderful thing he had ever known. He believed that she loved him, but it was a young love. A few centuries around Onja had made Shan's heart hard

and practical. He cherished her pledge but he did not believe it.

"Do not be so quick to say such words, Quylan," Shan cautioned sadly.

Unconcerned by his warning, Quylan asked, "What ryls could compare to you?"

"I hope in your eyes, none ever do," Shan admitted and kissed her again.

Magic glowed in her eyes and her mind reached out to him. Shan wanted to yield to his desire and become lost in her again, but his responsibilities nagged at him. When he resisted the urgings of her body, he felt her disappointment.

"Sweet Quylan, you know I must return my attention to our enemy," Shan said.

"Let us share our joy one more time, Shan. I have longed to be near you, and I am so afraid of the days to come," she said.

Shan trembled in his weakness for her. He could have spent days in that tent with Quylan, but he suspected that he had already ignored his problems too long.

"Soon Onja will be gone and I will devote much time to you," he promised passionately. "But until then, all of us are in danger, and I must not be distracted by pleasure."

Knowing how completely she depended on him for protection, Quylan let her arms slip away from his body. Shan sat up and started dressing. Quylan could feel his mind retreat from her. Already she coveted his attention, and giving it up hurt. But she understood that a ryl who would be King of Jingtun had many things to think about besides her.

Shan pulled his chainmail on and ran his hands over the crystals on his sleeves. He felt troubled. After a moment of puzzlement, he realized the source of his unease. Pain washed over him and Shan sensed that Dreibrand had been hurt. Shan's mind raced through the trees and located his friend. Memories of Taischek stoked his panic.

Shan burst out of his tent and startled Tytido.

"Lord Shan!" he cried. "I have been waiting for you."

"Dreibrand is hurt. Have we been attacked?" Shan demanded.

"Yes, well, no," Tytido stumbled before blurting the bad news. "King Kalek took him prisoner in the forest. Miranda went with the Kezanada to save him so the Yentay would not be involved in a conflict with the Temu."

"The Kezanada? They are here already?" Shan wondered and looked to the stars to judge the time. The night was half gone and he reproached himself for spending hours with Quylan. Her arrival had overwhelmed him more than he thought it would.

"The Kezanada came to talk to you, Lord Shan," Tytido said.

Shan nodded absently and asked Tytido to tell him everything that had happened. As Tytido gave his lord the details, Shan was amazed at the amount of trouble Kalek had caused.

After absorbing the report, Shan said, "Lieutenant Tytido, you were right not to bring the Yentay against the Temu King. That damage could not have been repaired."

The judgment relieved Tytido somewhat. It had been hard not to rush to Dreibrand's aid.

Quylan emerged from the tent and Tytido tried not to give her a curious look. "Lord Shan, but what of General Veta? We must help him," he said.

"He approaches from the northeast right now. Go help him back to camp," Shan commanded.

Tytido gladly complied. When he intercepted Dreibrand outside of camp, only a few Kezanada remained with Miranda. The majority of the force had been sent to a hiding area.

"You can take him from here," Faychan said and Dreibrand tumbled to the ground from Faychan's saddle.

Tytido jumped down and picked up his general with help from some Yentay.

"I will contact Lord Shan tomorrow night," Faychan told Miranda before he quickly slipped away into the night.

Miranda vaguely heard him but her only concern was for Dreibrand. As the Yentay hurried him back to their camp, he moaned and finally passed out. When Shan ran up to meet them, only then did Miranda dare to hope.

"Get him to his tent!" Shan cried.

The Yentay carried Dreibrand into his tent and Miranda followed in a daze of distress. She clutched his armored jacket that he had been too hurt to put back on.

Quylan hovered outside the tent, uncertain what to do. She had received a cold look from the woman who had just brushed by her.

A lantern flared in Shan's hand as they clustered around Dreibrand. For the sake of room, Tytido ordered the other two Yentay out. Dreibrand shivered in the mountain cold, but remained unconscious. Miranda put a blanket over him.

Shan called to his friend several times but got no response.

"Where is his sword? Did Kalek take it?" Shan asked. His rys eyes narrowed as he began to truly become angry.

"No. He did not have it. He did not even have his horse," Miranda answered. "Please, Shan, tell me how bad is he hurt?"

The mystery of the missing sword and horse would have to wait, and Shan eased away the blanket so he could touch Dreibrand's torso. Tentatively, the blue fingers gently examined the battered body.

Miranda and Tytido waited with unbearable patience for the assessment. Their stress rose when Shan's features finally betrayed his concern.

"Two ribs are broken" Shan reported.

Miranda wanted to be relieved by the mild news, but she knew things had to be worse.

Brushing a hand over the big scar on his abdomen, Shan said, "He is bleeding inside."

Miranda gasped and took Dreibrand's hand. "What can you do?" she asked bravely.

Shan felt his confidence waver. He kept seeing Taischek die in front of him. *But this is not as bad!* he insisted.

Collecting himself, Shan answered, "I will stop the bleeding. And we will set his ribs."

"And this will heal him, Lord Shan?" Tytido asked hopefully.

After some hesitation, Shan nodded timidly. "But I would like Quylan to help me," he added.

"Can you trust her?" Miranda demanded.

"Yes—at least in this. She cares about life," Shan replied.

Miranda looked tearfully at Dreibrand. It was hard to trust any rys other than Shan.

"She can check my work and make sure that I do not miss any bleeding," Shan explained and Miranda could only agree.

When Quylan entered, Shan switched to his native language. "Quylan, this will be difficult and I am afraid. This man is a dear friend to me."

This confession of insecurity surprised Quylan but it was endearing. "Your love for your friend will guide you," she encouraged.

Quylan laid her hands upon Dreibrand. While focusing on the human body, she also linked with Shan.

"You are feeling his pain!" she exclaimed. She had not known this could be done.

Becoming submerged in the task, Shan whispered, "Yes, I am feeling his pain for him."

As the rys labored in their silent spells, Miranda and Tytido wrapped Dreibrand's cut wrists and eased the swelling around his lips and eyes. When the dawn came, they were finished and Dreibrand rested peacefully. Assisting Shan in healing had been an incredible experience for Quylan. She had been trained to destroy flesh, and sealing wounds had been a joy. This was true power. Saving a life.

Now, Shan slumped with exhaustion. Through all of his effort, he had kept Dreibrand's pain as his own and he finally let it go. With a moan, Dreibrand stirred as the pain returned. Quickly, Shan put a spell of sleepiness on his friend.

"He is much better," Shan announced.

Miranda thanked him but Shan cautioned, "He still must rest."

"How much?" Tytido asked.

"Ah...I am not certain," Shan said.

Tytido checked the glow of daylight through the tent. The deep fatigue of body and mind dulled his drooping eyes. "Should I prepare the men to march?" the lieutenant inquired of his lord. No one had forgotten Jington.

Shan listened to the armies around him, and they were abnormally quiet. He heard no rumblings from either the Temu or the Tacus. Shan knew that Kalek had been wounded, which made it likely that the Temu had no immediate marching plans. Thinking of Kalek made Shan upset. He had expected better conduct from Taischek's son and he resented what had happened. With Dreibrand's battered body before him, the rys put no fault on his general. He knew that Dreibrand had tried not to provoke Kalek.

"We are all tired," Shan said. "Lieutenant Tytido, we must rest today."

The decision relieved Tytido, who could have collapsed right there. He excused himself.

"And you should sleep," Quylan said.

"I have to talk to Kalek," Shan insisted.

"It can wait. I know how you have exerted yourself," Quylan said.

Shan smiled. He had battled Onja, made love, and healed wounds. He was weary and accepted Quylan's suggestion.

"I will catch up to you. I want to try to heal your general some more. I learned much from watching your spells," Quylan said.

Her sincere concern for the wounded man pleased Shan. He took one of Miranda's hands and told her what Quylan wanted to do.

Despite mind-numbing stress, Miranda understood that Shan wanted her to trust Quylan. After Shan left, Quylan worked on Dreibrand, giving his body energy to fix damaged tissue and ease wrenched muscles. Miranda could tell that the female rys did not hurt him and Miranda became genuinely grateful for her help. Dreibrand's hand grew warmer and more color returned to his pale face.

After a few minutes, Quylan had to stop because copying Shan's spells strained her. While resting, she did not know how to ease the awkward silence between her and the human woman, but Miranda had no difficulty.

"So how do you know Shan?" Miranda inquired in a less than casual tone.

"All rys know each other," Quylan replied.

"You seem to know him well," Miranda remarked.

Quylan sensed a protectiveness for Shan from this woman. *Shan surrounds himself with the most impertinent humans*, she thought. "Shan is very lonely," she stated.

Miranda would not begrudge Shan a companion but warned, "Do not hurt him, Quylan of Jingtun."

"No, never," Quylan said, impressed by Miranda's loyalty.

Looking down at Dreibrand, Miranda said softly, "Thank you for helping him."

"Shan cares for both of you very much. Therefore, I do," Quylan said.

Kalek noticed that few men chose to share their King's fire as the day waned toward evening. He knew his warriors were tired but it was more than that keeping them away. All the Temu expected a response from Shan concerning the actions of their King, and no man wanted to be around when it happened.

Kalek tried to convince himself that he was not worried about Shan. He had no reason to fear because he was the son of Taischek.

Adjusting his bandaged leg that was extended in front of him, Kalek took another sip of wine. As long as he reclined by his fire, the wound in his thigh did not hurt so much. It was a nasty flesh wound but Xander had tended it with his usual skill. Of course, Kalek had been so furious with his General that he had wanted to strangle him instead of letting him fix his leg, but self-interest had guided Kalek's choice.

But now that his leg had been taken care of, Kalek fumed with his anger. How could Xander have let that woman go? Kalek did not know if he would ever forgive what Xander had done. It hurt Kalek too much to be sabotaged by one who had been so faithful to his father, and he had ordered Xander not to speak to him.

Kalek reached for the skin of wine but when he saw the royal insignia on the container, he flung his cup at a rock. The metal rang when it hit the rock and the three warriors sharing his fire looked at him curiously but made no comment.

Seeing the insignia had reminded Kalek of his father, and he felt so lonely without him at the fire. He felt lost and his emotions reeled between anger and grief.

The warriors took their eyes from their King, knowing Kalek was in no humor for being stared at. But the three men exchanged worried glances. They were as agitated as their King. A whole day had passed without a response from Shan, and the waiting made the imagined repercussions more ominous in their minds.

Kalek massaged his hands because his knuckles hurt from all the punching the night before. Because there had been no word, he wondered if he had actually managed to kill Dreibrand. But the depression that gripped him made him doubt that he could get so lucky.

The gloomy wanderings of his mind were interrupted when a warrior ran up to him.

"My King, Lord Shan is coming," he reported. He was obviously nervous, sounding as if Onja herself was coming.

"When?" Kalek said.

"Now!" the warrior said and looked over his shoulder.

Kalek sat all the way up and was dismayed to see the rys stalking across the Temu camp. Warriors stepped aside from Shan's path and the rys glared in Kalek's direction with a grim purpose.

Kalek's smug disregard for the peril of this moment vanished from his mind and he was frozen with fear. No one else seemed capable of moving either, and as Shan crossed the camp, he was the only figure moving in a motionless world.

Stopping right at Kalek's feet, Shan shot each of the nearby warriors one hard look. Without seeking the leave of their King, they got up and left.

Kalek wanted to yell at his departing warriors, but they were of no use to him in this situation and they knew it.

"Stand up!" Shan snarled. He had to restrain himself from kicking Kalek's feet.

Reclaiming some of his confidence, Kalek said, "I'm hurt."

No other words could have angered Shan more and he bent down to seize the young Temu King. Kalek cringed from the lanky rys who grabbed him with the strength of a bear and the fury of a blizzard. The next thing Kalek knew he was on his feet with his face pulled close to Shan. Wrath now distorted the normally serene features of the rys.

Shan dragged Kalek into the forest outside the camp. As soon as Shan knew that all warriors were out of earshot, he tossed Kalek toward a tree. Kalek stumbled into the coarse trunk but caught his fall. Turning back to Shan, he clutched his thigh and waited for the worst. Shan was breathing hard but no magic flared in his eyes, which gave Kalek some hope for survival.

"Why?" Shan finally growled.

Knowing he better make his reasons sound good, Kalek collected his wits and explained, "Your favor allowed that foreigner to grow too powerful. I wanted Veta to know who had the power."

"So you almost kill him?" Shan said incredulously.

"Veta lives then?" Kalek asked.

"And for your sake be glad of it. That, and the fact that you are Taischek's son have saved you, Kalek. Although I would not have expected such treachery from you," Shan lamented.

Drawing strength from his own anger, Kalek retorted, "You cannot call looking out for the interest of my tribe treachery. The Temu fight all of your enemies, and then we learn that foreigners are in the valley and you send Dreibrand to talk to them. What plots are you making with them?"

"You see things that do not exist," Shan scoffed. "I seek a truce with these foreigners who Onja has tried to impress into her service."

"You must have known they were there. Why didn't you tell me?" Kalek demanded.

Shan answered, "Dreibrand did not wish it known that he might have to fight his own people. He thought the Temu would look down on him."

"See! He is plotting against me," Kalek cried. "He tricked you into keeping information from me so he could meet with his people."

"Stop it," Shan ordered. "Dreibrand has made no plot against the Temu. His only concern is Jingten, which should be your only concern as well. Do you realize your actions have delayed me a whole day? A whole day for Onja to recoup from our last battle. A whole day for Onja to gain strength for our final battle."

Shan shook his head with disgust, and Kalek was sobered by the words. His concern for Dreibrand and the Atrophane now looked petty by comparison.

"I am sorry," Kalek said.

Once more, his words incited Shan's anger. "Do not apologize! The damage is done," Shan shouted. The rys moved close to Kalek and lowered his voice. "Your only redemption now, Kalek, is through obedience. If you harm any of my allies again, the Temu Tribe is cut off from my friendship."

"What do you mean?" Kalek said. He had expected Shan to be upset with him but not the whole tribe.

Shan was a kind and generous being, but the power within him provided his threats with a profound seriousness.

"I mean, Kalek, that I already have what I need from the Temu Tribe. Jingten is within my grasp and I do not need your tribe to help me anymore. If you want to collect the rewards of conquering Jingten with me, I suggest you do exactly as I tell you," Shan explained.

"You would not dare betray your agreement with my father," Kalek said defensively. He believed Shan had to be bluffing.

"I would not betray Taischek. Freeing the Temu of rys tyranny was the heart of our agreement. Yes, I owed Taischek gold, and I would pay you as his heir, but not if you make me your enemy," Shan warned.

Kalek fell silent and pictured no rewards for his army. He pictured all the losses the Temu had suffered and then he pictured telling his tribe that he returned from Jingten with no treasure. Last, he pictured the rewards going to others who would become the stronger for it.

"Swear you will obey me or I will send you home right now," Shan said.

"Shan, I have always been loyal. I meant no harm to you," Kalek tried to explain desperately.

"You attacked one of your own allies—my general!" Shan exclaimed. "Now, if you want to profit from this war, swear to me you will not attack Dreibrand, Miranda, the Yentay, or the Tacus."

"And what if the foreigners attack me?" Kalek persisted.

"Stop worrying about that. If it does happen, you can defend yourself. What I want is your promise of peace with me and the other allies. How can I face Onja if I can have no confidence in your support?" Shan asked wearily.

Thinking of Onja made Kalek afraid. The whole Temu Tribe would suffer if Shan did not defeat her and Kalek had to look at his actions in relationship to Shan's needs. "I promise I will make no more trouble, Shan," he said.

Shan stared at the young King as if he doubted his sincerity. Then he said, "Kalek, know that my anger has only been stayed because of your father. I would not otherwise have given you a second chance. And know that I will not give a third chance."

Kalek nodded with appropriate meekness, but inwardly he was seething over the fiasco the night before. He had to suffer the consequences of Shan's reprimand but Dreibrand still lived.

Shan looked at the bandage on Kalek's leg. It was bloodier now that Shan had made him walk, but the rys did not offer to heal him.

"Now, if you can ride, Kalek. Come with me and we will go talk to those Atrophane that you are so worried about. Quylan is arranging a meeting with their leader right now. King Ejan has expressed concerns similar to yours, although he did so in a much more appropriate fashion," Shan said.

~

Sandin was suspicious about the meeting Quylan proposed. He complained that it was too close to sunset and Lord Kwan should not separate from his forces, even if he was allowed an honor guard. The loyal lieutenant sensed a trap.

Kwan glanced at Quylan who waited eagerly for his reply. He was pleased to see the return of the female rys who had gotten them safely away from Jingtun, and he was especially pleased to see that her burns were healed.

"Lieutenant, I think Quylan has proved her trustworthiness. I want to meet the enemy of Onja, and I will accept the invitation," Kwan said.

Sandin did not argue with his commander's decision. Perhaps their salvation did rest with Onja's rival, but Sandin was sick of rys running his life. He longed to teach all rys a lesson in humility.

Kwan added, "You will lead my honor guard, Lieutenant. I am sure you are just as interested as I to meet men from the west."

Although Sandin thought of some tactical reasons to oppose Kwan's invitation, he could not resist.

Switching to the rys language, Kwan told Quylan that he would meet with Shan.

"Soon you will believe in Shan's greatness as I do," Quylan said. "I will take your answer to Shan. Go west on the road and meet us half way between our camps."

When Quylan left, Sandin asked, "My Lord, do you expect Veta to be there?"

"If he wants his things back, he will be," Kwan grumbled.

"My Lord, do not give him back his things. Tell this Shan what a worthless traitor Veta is. Maybe we will get lucky, and they will agree to let us execute him," Sandin said with ugly humor.

Keeping a conspicuously neutral tone, Kwan said, "Veta no longer threatens your position. Why do you remain so concerned, Lieutenant?"

"My concern? It should be yours more than mine, my Lord. Think of how he deserted you," Sandin whispered.

Kwan narrowed his eyes. "And you would have me advertise my shame to these foreigners?" he hissed.

Sandin frowned with frustration. The delicate matter of his Lord General's honor could not be ignored. "I still do not see how you can be so lenient with him," he complained quietly.

"Well, Lieutenant, it is no secret to you that I once liked Veta, and perhaps that motivates my mercy on a personal level. But I have a practical reason. Dreibrand is desperate to make amends with me. He serves Shan and his eagerness to help me will be invaluable to us in this hostile land," Kwan explained.

Sandin contemplated this and begrudgingly agreed that Dreibrand might be of some use to them.

When Kwan rode up the road with his honor guard, a half circle of torches marked the meeting place. The light flickered off many spears and three figures stood in front of the large group of warriors. Kwan saw a rys in the center and he collected his courage for the meeting.

Quylan waited for them on the road and Kwan and Sandin dismounted when they reached her and she led them before Shan. Everyone was very quiet, making the night songs of the woodland seem louder. Kwan absorbed the scene in a rush. The strange faces of the warriors distracted him from Shan. The people looked different from the people of the east. He assumed the two men next to the rys were the kings he had heard about. Kwan had not faced foreign kings as anything but their conqueror and he felt a strange apprehension this time.

The tall man had a regal air and regarded him with a thoughtful gaze. Kwan instantly judged the man to be careful and reasonable. The other man was young, probably still a teenager, and he had a surly gaze. Kwan noted a bloody bandage on the young man's leg.

Where is Dreibrand? Kwan wondered, scanning the crowd.

Now Quylan introduced him to Shan, and Kwan nodded respectfully. He could feel Shan's powerful presence and the sensation was similar to being near Onja. "Greetings and thank you for your time, Lord Shan. I am told that you won a battle with Onja and that pleases me," Kwan said using the rys language with decent pronunciation.

Shan smiled, approvingly. "Thank you, Lord Kwan. Allow me to introduce my allies." Shan had to use the rys speech but the kings knew when they were being introduced.

"King Kalek of the Temu Tribe."

Kalek gave a perfunctory nod with little enthusiasm.

"King Ejan of the Tacus Tribe."

Ejan had a similar reaction, but responded politely.

Shan continued, "Quylan tells me that Onja kept you captive all winter."

"That is true, Lord Shan," Kwan confirmed.

"Quylan said that you would not serve Onja," Shan said.

"She thought her magic would make us attack your armies, but I would not hinder her enemy," Kwan said.

"A wise choice," Shan praised ominously. "If you give your pledge of peace between us, I invite you to ride with us to Jington. You may enjoy seeing the demise of Onja."

Kwan listened to the words carefully, making sure he understood them correctly. He thought he had given his pledge of peace to Dreibrand, but apparently, Shan wanted to hear it again. *Unless he never heard it*, Kwan speculated.

"I pledge not to harm you or your allies, but the Atrophane will stand aside from your war. We prefer to be separate," Kwan said, hoping Shan would not be offended.

Shan studied the Lord General deeply. Considering Kalek's temper, Shan decided it was best that the Atrophane stay to themselves.

"I have no reason to compel you to follow me. But I suggest you stay in my vicinity for your protection. Soon Onja will attack again," Shan said.

After Kwan accepted the advice, Shan added, "When Jingten is mine, you will be free to go back to your land. Do not go west. I have reason to believe that the western domains would not welcome you."

Kwan's eyes flashed between Kalek and Ejan. The three men easily understood each other.

"That is reasonable," Kwan agreed.

"Good. I wish for peace among the humans of the world," Shan said rather grandly. "Before we part, Lord Kwan, I require one more thing. Return the horse and weapons of my general."

Under the black-eyed scrutiny of the rys, Kwan knew better than to deny his possession of the items. "Where is Dreibrand Veta?" he asked with obvious curiosity.

The lips of the rys pressed together into a tight line, and Shan turned slightly to glower at Kalek. "General Veta is unavailable," Shan finally said.

Kwan observed the tension between the rys and the young king.

Shan let his anger simmer over Kalek for a moment before addressing Kwan again. "Sir, I do not know what transpired between you and my general, but he needs his property returned."

"Lord Shan, Veta...owed me a debt," Kwan said, wondering why Dreibrand was not present to insulate his rys lord from any information Kwan might choose to reveal.

"Oh, I see," Shan said amicably. "I will arrange an alternative payment for you."

It impressed Kwan that Dreibrand's new lord would so blithely agree to pay a debt. Frowning, the Lord General said, "The debt between us was of a more personal nature."

Although the statement aroused Shan's curiosity even more, he calmly continued, "Lord Kwan, my general needs his horse. We have been through many battles and he has lost his spare horse. And his sword was a personal gift from me. Its enchantments are specifically for Dreibrand."

Again, Kwan was impressed. "His things will be returned to you," he said, deciding not to cross the rys.

Shan thanked him. Because the rys language provided some privacy, he chose to ask Lord Kwan what had occurred between him and Dreibrand.

After a long pause, Kwan replied, "If he is your general, then ask him."

Shan determined that something was definitely unresolved between Dreibrand and this lord from the east, but both men obviously wanted to keep it between themselves. Although Shan did not like mysteries, he had other things to think about.

"It grows late and I have much to do," he said. "I look forward to seeing you again, Lord Kwan. I believe you will find my hospitality much better than Onja's. Soon I will be King in Jingten and I invite you to come see me."

"Thank you, Lord Shan. As Quylan promised, you are the greatest of your kind," Kwan said with a bow.

With the meeting concluded, Quylan walked with Kwan back to his horse. "I will be staying with Shan," she said.

Disappointed by the news, Kwan asked her not to go. He did not want to lose his rys ally, especially while Onja still lived. He would feel safer with Quylan near him and he enjoyed her company. Her female beauty even in its alien form had always astounded him.

"My place is with Shan," Quylan insisted gently.

Kwan whispered, "You are the greatest of your kind. I only told Shan that because he is to be your King."

Quylan giggled in her girlish way. "We will see each other again," she promised.

Kwan smiled to her when they parted ways. He would miss her.

Knowing Sandin was hungry for news, Kwan explained what had transpired while they rode back to camp. "It seems we have only to wait for the war to be over, and we can go back to Atrophane," he said.

"What if Onja wins?" Sandin said. "My Lord, we must go west while we can to get away from Jingtun and the Deamedron."

"The human nations will not welcome us," Kwan stated.

"Nations rarely welcome us," Sandin remarked.

"We do not have my Horde, Lieutenant," Kwan reminded.

With a sigh, Sandin said, "At least we are away from that damn city."

"Thank Golan for that," Kwan declared.

"If we ever do get back to the east, we should get the Horde and bring it back here," Sandin proposed in an optimistic tone.

Kwan smiled at his lieutenant's spirit. The Lord General thought that if he were twenty years younger, he might think the same thing. Jingtun surely was the greatest prize of all. But now, Kwan could only appreciate Sandin's daring. The lessons of rys superiority had been difficult for Kwan and he longed to return to his home where he had the power.

As Shan and the kings watched the Atrophane depart, they talked.

Ejan said, "Lord Shan, did you send the foreigners back?"

"I made it clear that they must not go west, as everyone wanted," Shan replied.

Hoping to elicit agreement from the Tacus King, Kalek spoke his thoughts. "I think we should kill these foreigners. If you let them go, they will come back with more warriors."

"How can you think of those foreigners when Onja hopes to destroy us?" Ejan scolded. He resented the delay that Kalek had caused.

"And Onja can attack at any time now," Shan warned as Quylan returned. Taking her hand, he added, "Kalek, take your mind from the Atrophane. I would not let an army through the Rysamand—either way."

Kalek lowered his eyes and said no more, accepting that no one wanted to hear him talk about the foreigners.

"We shall rest through the night and move on in the morning," Shan said and the kings prepared to leave.

Shan held the bridle of Quylan's horse while she mounted and asked quietly, "Have you noticed anything?"

"Is it Onja?" she said fearfully.

"No. Closer to us," Shan said.

With her mind, she scanned the area but she only saw the warriors around her and the departing Atrophane.

When she had no answer, Shan explained, "You cannot sense the three Kezanada just north of us because one of them has a sword like this." He set a hand on the ancient weapon at his hip.

"But I can sense you," Quylan said.

"A rys is more difficult to ward than a human, and these weapons were made to ward humans," he said.

Looking north, Quylan tried to see the Kezanada but there was only the dark forest.

"I believe Faychan wishes to speak with me. Would you like to come?" Shan invited.

Pleased to be included, she accepted. Shan ordered the others to go back to camp without him.

Quylan and Shan rode into the woods and found Faychan and his two attendants a surprisingly short distance away. It annoyed Quylan that she had not been able to perceive them from the road. But now that she faced them, she could at least discern the two Kezanada who were only warded by their proximity to Faychan.

The Kezanada did not have their horses, having walked from their secret camp.

"Lord Shan, I thought you might notice me," Faychan said pleasantly.

Staying in the saddle, Shan said, "Once I did not notice. I will not make that mistake twice."

"Of course not," Faychan agreed.

Impatiently, Shan demanded, "What do you want? I have much on my mind and little time for you."

"I wish to speak of the future, Lord Shan. I want you to know that I offer my loyalty before you become King of Jingtun," Faychan said.

"Loyalty! Kezanada are barely loyal to themselves—and only when it suits them," Shan scoffed.

Ridicule and abuse had ceased long ago to bother Faychan. With confidence, he continued, "Lord Shan, you may have use of a good Overlord someday."

Shan began to glimpse the Kezanada's mundane schemes. Onja had been generous with them in that she had paid more than she taxed. With a power change coming to Jingtun, Faychan wanted to maintain a lucrative relationship.

"I will have no need to tamper with human affairs as was Onja's hobby," Shan said bluntly.

"You never know," Faychan said.

Shan growled with exasperation. "Do you speak for the Overlord?" he inquired.

"I will be Overlord soon," Faychan declared.

"That remains to be seen," Shan noted.

Faychan could not deny that the future was uncertain but he maintained his confidence. "I have a good chance, and more money would better my odds," he said.

Shan laughed humorlessly and explained to Quylan, "If a Kezanada does not kill you, it is only because he wants to talk about money."

Faychan considered this criticism to be wise policy, but he still tried to smooth things over. "Forgive me, Lord Shan. You are too great to discuss money with one as lowly as me. I ask only that you condone my bid for Overlord. Your endorsement would bring more Kezanada to my side."

"And then you will talk to Dreibrand about money, and he will have to ask me for it," Shan interpreted.

"It has worked in the past," Faychan defended.

"Although Dreibrand earns his gold, I do not always agree with how he spends it," Shan said.

Beneath his mask, Faychan scowled. Clearly his peace with Shan was tenuous and based more on convenience than preference.

Hoping to conclude the tiresome meeting, Shan said, "Faychan, I appreciate your eagerness to see me prevail over Onja. And your spies provided good information about the Sabuto, which was well paid for. But I have no more need for your services."

"I have brought a party of warriors. The war is not over and we could be quite useful," Faychan

urged.

"Rys soldiers will not oppose me," Shan stated.

"But Onja might order them to kill your humans," Faychan warned.

Shan did not argue that point, but he maintained, "If I needed your mercenaries, I would have asked already."

"Perhaps I could interest you in something else?" Faychan proposed mysteriously.

"Such as," Shan prompted. He sensed now that Faychan had something to reveal.

Normally, Faychan would have commenced bargaining at this point, but he knew better than to trifle with the powerful rys.

"I was with the late Overlord last fall when Onja gave him the ancient rys weapons. I know you did not recognize the weapons. Therefore, you do not know where they came from," Faychan said.

Shan stirred with agitation and interest. He remembered the bite of the enchanted weapons and how he had been totally ignorant of their existence. He had wondered many times where Onja had concealed such things.

His horse pranced a few steps, betraying Shan's excitement. Could Faychan know such a thing?

"You would like me to go on?" Faychan chuckled.

Calming his horse, Shan said with arrogance, "You presume to know more about Onja's secrets than I do?"

"Knowing secrets is my specialty, Lord Shan. And I am quite good at it," Faychan replied. "And I suspect you do not know as much as you think. The rys of Jingten have almost no access to their history. Onja thoroughly censored it before any of you were born. But the Kezanada existed in the days of Dacian, and we have ancient records. Granted, they are decrepit and incomplete, but we still have knowledge unavailable in Jingten."

"What are you getting at?" Shan snapped.

"The late Overlord believed in the existence of these ancient weapons. That is how he knew to ask Onja for them. And now I know where Onja kept them," Faychan said triumphantly.

Shan disliked the human knowing something he did not know, but Faychan had him intrigued. This knowledge could be important, and so close to his final confrontation with Onja, Shan needed every detail. "Where?" he pressed.

"Then you are interested, Lord Shan?" the Kezanada said.

"Do not toy with me, Faychan. You are not warded from me anymore," Shan said. "And your information is probably worthless."

Faychan stiffened proudly, affronted by the comment. "I am a Masterspy of the Kezanada. My information is never worthless," he said.

Shan stared at the man, who had once hunted him. Faychan's loyalties would always vary according to Faychan's needs. Darkly, Shan thought Faychan deserved to have his mind probed in an uncomfortable way. Trusting this man would never be an option for the rys, but he admitted to himself that he wanted to hear what Faychan had to say. His price was small and Shan did not really care who was Overlord anyway.

"Faychan, it would please me to see you as Overlord," Shan said.

The two Kezanada behind Faychan looked at each other. They had witnessed this statement and Shan knew he would be credited with it.

"Thank you, Lord Shan." Faychan actually bowed and then started to recount his visit to Jingten with the Kezanada tribute caravan. The Overlord had asked the Queen for any sort of charm that would allow them to hunt Shan. When Onja agreed and said she would have something the next day, the Overlord had told Faychan to attempt surveillance of Onja. That night Faychan had

watched Onja leave the Keep.

Shan interrupted, "All human guests are restricted to quarters at night, especially the Kezanada. How did you get by your rys guards?"

Faychan appreciated Shan's attention to detail and explained, "Even rys have weaknesses." He chuckled at the memory of how gladly his bribe had been accepted. "We both know what grows in the lowlands and does not grow in the highlands. And rys enjoy it more than humans."

Shan frowned, but the explanation was quite plausible.

Faychan continued, "I watched Onja get into a boat rowed by one rys. They went across the lake to the Tomb of Dacian."

"How could you see in the dark?" Shan asked.

"I saw the flash of blue light from rys magic exactly where the tower stands across the lake," Faychan answered. "I have no doubt Onja went to the tower. When she returned in the boat, she had a bundle. The next day she gave the Overlord a bundle containing the weapons you and I now hold."

Shan snorted with disgust and decided to never have a conversation with a Kezanada again. "That tower is empty, except for some old junk. You are a liar."

Gathering the reins to his horse, Shan reproached himself for bothering to speak with the Kezanada. He snarled, "If you waste my time again, I will turn your organs into charcoal!"

Energy snapped around Faychan, and he momentarily regretted trying to deal with the powerful rys.

But he overcame the intimidation and said, "Your disbelief does not make me a liar. Some day soon you will know I spoke truly."

"Quylan, we are leaving," Shan grumbled and turned his horse around.

"I suggest you look into the Tomb of Dacian again. You have missed things before," Faychan called after him boldly.

Quylan looked back at the man who she could not sense with her magic. The Kezanada had said many things that troubled her. Onja had been her teacher, but now Quylan had to consider how much knowledge Onja had kept to herself.

When Shan returned to camp, the horse and sword of Dreibrand were already waiting for him. Nothing had been damaged, but Shan noted that the ivory handled dagger was missing. As long as the sword had been returned, the dagger was a minor loss and Shan did not concern himself with it. Thoughtfully, he ran his hand over the orb in the pommel of the sword.

Quylan gently set her hand over his, consuming the glow from the orb. "I do not think the Kezanada was lying," she whispered.

Shan looked at her sideways, annoyed by her contradiction. "So you can read minds with ease now?" he sneered.

She jerked her hand away. "Your tongue is sharp with me."

Instantly, he regretted his rudeness. "I am sorry, Quylan," he muttered. "I am...distracted."

Knowing that Onja was on his mind, Quylan imagined just how distracted he had to be.

"And because you are distracted, please listen to me, Shan. The Kezanada is right to tell you to beware the Tomb of Dacian. Onja could have more weapons. Magic from long ago that you do not know," Quylan said.

"I will cope with whatever she does. I am ready to defeat her," Shan said.

"I know. And everyone here believes in you. But maybe Onja has more weapons. She would not give her strongest magic to humans," Quylan reasoned.

This statement rang very true for Shan.

"Check the Tomb of Dacian again before we go to Jingtun," Quylan requested.

"It is empty! I have scanned it many times," Shan insisted defensively. "Faychan lied. Those weapons could not have come from there."

"Then you read his mind?" Quylan demanded sarcastically.

Looking down, Shan admitted that he had not. Finally revealing his frustration, he said, "If Faychan is right, how can it be that I never saw the weapons in the tower?"

"I do not know, but the Tomb of Dacian is surrounded by great magic, old magic. Onja could hide something there," Quylan said.

Suddenly, Shan hugged her fiercely and she sensed his intense fear.

With Quylan in his arms, Shan had never felt more motivated to defeat Onja. If he failed, Quylan would be killed—or worse.

"I will send my mind to explore the tower before morning. Perhaps I have missed something," he whispered in her ear. The touch of her glossy black hair against his lips delighted him.

His concession relieved Quylan. She understood that he needed to be confident but she wanted him to be cautious. Faychan's ominous musings had unsettled her.

Dreibrand awoke in pain, which told him that he was alive, at least for now. Someone stirred next to him and he heard Miranda murmur his name. He forced open his swollen eyes, but there was only darkness.

When he tried to speak, he only managed a gravelly sound.

Miranda threw a cloak around her shoulders and left the tent. Dreibrand glimpsed a few stars and the flicker of a nearby campfire while the tent flap was open.

At least I am not blind.

Miranda returned with a lantern and thoughtfully shielded the glare from his eyes. After his eyes had adjusted, she carefully gave him a drink of water.

As the water soothed his dry throat, the awful events of his beating returned. Holding those memories at a distance, he asked, "Did they hurt you?"

"No," she answered. She could not believe that he thought of her when he was in such a state.

"You must tell me the truth. I have to know," he pressed.

"No one hurt me," Miranda insisted. "They only tied my hands."

Believing her for the moment, Dreibrand relaxed with relief. He had feared for her desperately.

Miranda leaned over him and gently kissed his cut lips. "Xander let me go. He said this was not his doing," she explained.

Dreibrand growled when he thought of his former friendship with the Temu Tribe. In his opinion, Xander was lucky he had released Miranda, but facing the anger and disappointment made Dreibrand tense, which increased the pain.

"Am I dying?" he asked.

Miranda could see the fear in his squinting blue eyes. Being tied and beaten had been harder on him than any battle.

"No, my love. You will live. Shan healed you." Her voice dropped as the memories became difficult. "Shan said you were bleeding inside. Dreibrand, you were hurt bad but he made it better with his magic."

This news stunned Dreibrand. He contemplated his body wondering if it felt different.

"And Quylan helped him. Her power healed you too," Miranda added.

"The female?" he asked.

Miranda nodded. "I think Shan really likes her. He is lonely."

"Does Shan trust her?" Dreibrand asked.

"He seems to," Miranda answered.

She left again to get him food. While waiting for her, Dreibrand tried not to be overwhelmed by recent events. He could not think about Kalek yet.

Miranda returned and served him some broth that had been staying warm on the campfire. Dreibrand did not think he could eat, but she insisted. When she spooned the bland broth into his mouth, his body suddenly craved the nourishment. Being able to eat surprised him and he supposed he had rys magic to thank for that.

When he was finished, the food had revived him and eased his headache.

"What night is this?" he asked suddenly.

"It is the next night. You have slept one day. I slept too. I was tired," she confessed.

"Where is Shan?" he said.

"I think he went to speak to the Atrophane," Miranda replied.

Any vestige of morale that Dreibrand had left dissipated. Even if Kwan wanted to hide the disgrace of being deserted by an officer, like Dreibrand hoped, Shan would surely ask questions about Dreibrand's past. And Dreibrand feared that Kwan might tell Shan about the desertion out of spite.

"Did your old lord take your horse and weapons?" Miranda asked.

"Yes, but he could have killed me," Dreibrand said.

"Why did you ignore me when you left? Why didn't you take warriors? How could you risk yourself so foolishly when we have so much at stake?" Miranda demanded.

Dreibrand coughed and grabbed his chest. The coughing made him feel like he was being ripped apart and he moaned between the painful hacking. Knowing how close she had come to losing him, Miranda regretted her harsh questions.

After his chest cleared and the pain subsided, he explained, "I had to talk to Lord Kwan alone. You know, about what I did. I did not want any of the Yentay to know about that, or Shan."

"So what did he say?" Miranda said.

"Not much. He chose not to kill me, but he took my things to humiliate me. Right now, I suppose he is telling Shan how I deserted. I am sorry, Miranda, but I doubt I will be a general much longer," he lamented.

"Do not worry, Dreibrand. You are a great man. Shan will still want you," Miranda assured him.

Dreibrand shut his eyes and retreated to his private thoughts. He wanted to be encouraged by Miranda's words, but so many of his hopes had disintegrated. When Taischek had been alive, Dreibrand had a feasible plan for a life of wealth and power. But now the Temu did not want him.

And what will Shan do when he finds out I abandoned my command in the east? Dreibrand worried. He imagined the rys running him out of camp as a fraud.

Without Shan's favor, Dreibrand had limited options. He wondered if the rys would even give him treasure after he learned about his dishonored past. Dreibrand imagined himself penniless with no place to go.

But Faychan remained. Faychan would not judge him over a transgression of honor. Dreibrand resigned himself to the possibility of joining the Kezanada. It was not the worst fate.

He knew Miranda would not like it. *I will tell her if and when the time comes*, he decided. Miranda would accept that he did the best he could for her. She was strong and suspicious—two qualities that he imagined would serve her well in Do Jempur.

Someone approached the tent and Dreibrand recognized the soft sound of suede boots. When Shan entered, Dreibrand was in expectant agony. He did not want their friendship to end.

Then his depression slackened when he saw his sword in Shan's hands.

"I got your sword back, and your horse too," Shan announced and set the weapon down.

"Thank you," Dreibrand breathed. The news of Starfield's return actually aroused a good spirit in him.

"How do you feel?" Shan inquired and he bent close to examine Dreibrand's eyes.

"I hurt, especially in my chest," Dreibrand answered.

Shan pulled back the blanket and briefly examined his general. "You have two broken ribs," the rys explained. "But with your chest bound they should continue to heal properly."

"Miranda told me what you did. I owe you my life, Shan," Dreibrand said.

"We are even," Shan said pleasantly. "You were there when I needed you, remember?"

Dreibrand did remember and was glad that Shan saw it that way. Perhaps the rys was not angry with him.

Unable to tolerate the strain of waiting, Dreibrand broached the subject himself. "Did you speak with the Atrophane?"

"Yes. I invited them to ride with us to Jingtun," Shan responded. "But Lord Kwan wants to stay independent."

This sounded right to Dreibrand. The Atrophane did not join others.

Shan continued, "Apparently you have old business with him. When I asked for your possessions back, he said they were payment for a debt. Dreibrand, what is this debt between you and Lord Kwan?" Shan watched the question make his general uncomfortable.

Dreibrand wanted to tell his friend about it, but he was not capable of admitting his shame. He assumed that Shan now knew about the desertion and wanted him to confess it, but he could not.

When an answer was so slow to come, Shan knew the reason had to be bad.

"Dreibrand, is it something I need to know?" Shan asked, trusting his friend to judge the importance of it.

A grateful look sprang into Dreibrand's eyes. "No, Shan. It is something I prefer to leave in the east, in my past, if I may?" he requested.

"Yes, my friend, the past is not always a flattering place," Shan granted easily. "But I want you to know that you can ask me for help if you need it. I do not want anything worse happening to you. This is bad enough."

Dreibrand could not believe that Shan was letting him off without an explanation and even offering help. It lessened Dreibrand's pain to know that his bond with Shan had not been broken.

"As always, Shan, you are generous with me," Dreibrand said.

The relief and loyalty that Shan sensed from Dreibrand were pleasing to the rys. He continued, "Let us discuss the future, my general. We march in the morning. Do you think you can ride?"

"Thanks to you," Dreibrand said.

"Now you will not be yourself for a while yet. Do not think you can fight. You still need time to mend fully," Shan warned.

"I will lead our warriors, and my armor will hide my bandages," Dreibrand declared.

"Good, but the rest of the fighting will be for me," Shan said.

"Are you sure rys soldiers will not try to stop us?" Dreibrand asked. He moved to sit up even though it hurt, but Shan made him lie back.

The rys answered. "I have always believed my people will not hinder me when I challenge the Queen. And now I am sure of it after what Quylan has told me. None of the rys have any desire to place themselves between Onja and me. Onja has no right to order her soldiers into a battle they cannot win, and it is against the law to kill me."

"What shall I do?" Dreibrand said.

"You will maintain order in the city while I take over. The rys will feel my warding around you and respect you," Shan explained.

"At this time I will go find my children," Miranda stated.

"Yes Miranda," Shan agreed. "But I have one request to make of you. When we reach Jingtun, I want you to keep Quylan with you at all times. I do not want her near me when I face Onja."

Miranda had to consider his favor. She barely knew Quylan and the female rys made her nervous.

"Quylan is so young. In many ways, Miranda, you are much more of an adult. I want you to keep her safe," Shan said.

"Then she will help me find my children," Miranda decided.

Shan thanked her with a smile.

Because Dreibrand had been unconscious for more than a day, he figured his news would be old, but he mentioned it anyway.

"Faychan of the Kezanada wants an audience with you."

"I just spoke with him in the forest," Shan said.

"What does he want of you?" Miranda asked, clearly suspicious of any Kezanada motives.

The subject of Faychan seemed to distract Shan, and he lamely answered, "Same thing he always wants. Money and power. Faychan wants to do business with Jingten as his late Overlord did."

"Trying to get the jump on Benladu," Dreibrand said.

"I told him I would have little need of his services and that he wasted his time with me," Shan recounted.

Dreibrand's memories of his conversation with Faychan were disjointed and cluttered with pain, but he reluctantly recalled a certain detail.

"Shan, when Faychan saved me from Kalek, he made me agree that I owed him a favor," Dreibrand said.

A scowl dragged at the rys's smooth face, but he had expected as much from the Kezanada. "Such a debt will not be pleasant. Do you know what he wants?"

"No," Dreibrand replied dismally.

"To hell with him!" Miranda decided. "You do not owe him anything. You have always paid him too much anyway."

"Miranda, he saved me when you asked him to," Dreibrand said, perturbed by her attitude.

His reminder quieted Miranda but she hated that she had brought this debt upon him.

"We have no need to worry about it right now," Shan said. "We must only think about tomorrow. You will ride beside me, and the Tacus forces will stay between the Yentay and the Temu." The rys's face grew stern and he leaned closer to his general's face. "Dreibrand, we cannot afford any trouble. Onja is the only priority."

The rage finally surfaced and Dreibrand shook with emotion. "I will kill that bastard, Kalek," he hissed.

Shan shook his head. "You must promise me that you will not make trouble."

"Forget it Shan! He is a dead man," Dreibrand snarled.

"No you must not. Taischek was my friend as you are. I would no sooner allow someone to kill your child," Shan explained.

Raising his bandaged arms, Dreibrand cried, "Look at me! Do you think this will go unanswered?"

"Dreibrand, I know you are angry, but Kalek has a thousand warriors with him. I will not allow my allies to slaughter each other. Think of Jingten," Shan said.

Dreibrand exhaled with frustration. He turned to Miranda and remembered her as the bound hostage of the Temu. He remembered Kalek's hand on her face. With growing hatred Dreibrand made a malicious decision.

"Shan, I want revenge on Kalek. I want it as payment for fighting your war." Dreibrand's serious demand stunned Shan. Even Miranda was surprised.

Dread knotted inside Shan's soul. The rys could not give such an awful favor.

Desperately, Shan pleaded, "Do not ask such a thing. Do you think I could kill one of Taischek's sons? I have severely reprimanded Kalek. He will not attack you again. But please understand I had to give him this second chance."

The steadily insistent voice of the rys calmed Dreibrand to the point where he could reason. Shan would never grant his crazy request.

I cannot fight Kalek now, Dreibrand thought miserably. His injuries would impair him in a duel and it would be an awful thing to order the Yentay to fight the Temu.

Ominously, Dreibrand said, "For now, I will promise not to settle things with Kalek."

Shan gathered his general's meaning and said, "I am very upset with Kalek. He has wronged you, Miranda too. But if you ever seek revenge against him, do not speak to me of it."

For a while Dreibrand was quiet. Images of murder flashed through his mind. Tiredly he concluded, "I understand."

Shan had not really hoped to extract a better truce. Kalek had pushed Dreibrand too far, and the inevitable conflict that would result depressed Shan.

"I know it is not your fault Kalek turned against you, and I am sorry that I do not want to take a side, but I would feel wretched either way." Shan said. "But we have to deal with this in the most practical manner. Kalek knows he is out of favor and I will control him from now on. Forgive my lapse that allowed him to attack you, but we must think of nothing else except Jingten right now."

"I will not jeopardize that over Kalek," Dreibrand pledged.

"Good. Now rest. In a couple days we will change the world." Shan smiled affectionately to Miranda and added, "And get your children back."

Miranda swallowed back her emotion. So close to Jingten the anticipation of reclaiming her lost children was staggering.

In the morning, the march on Jingten resumed.

Dreibrand's armored jacket weighed tortuously on his bruised body, and his pride kept him in the saddle as much as his physical endurance. Miranda had helped him struggle through his painful outfitting in the privacy of his tent, but now in front of his warriors, he concealed his discomfort.

With a stiff nod he acknowledged Tytido, who was shocked to see Dreibrand fully armed and on a horse.

Tytido saluted his general. "The men are pleased by your quick return, Sir."

"Do you think I would miss the conquest of Jingten?" Dreibrand asked pleasantly.

"No Sir!" Tytido said.

"It is time for us to go then. And remember, we do not go near the Temu and the Temu do not go near us," Dreibrand said.

Tytido's bright face soured. One mouthy warrior could break the delicate truce Shan had made between his allies.

"We will not start any trouble," Tytido said proudly.

The warriors followed Shan down the Jingten Road. Shan stayed silent and kept his mind constantly focused on the ancient city. He felt the anxiety of his kind. The streets of the blue-stoned city were empty as the rys stayed inside awaiting the forces of history. Some rys had even fled the city, deciding to camp in the forest and avoid the coming battle between rivals.

He saw Onja sitting in the Keep, deep in meditation. Her dark thoughts were obscure to Shan, but he had no doubt that she plotted some terrible final defense.

Shan's silence spread to the warriors. A gloomy apprehension settled over them, eroding their

enthusiasm to end the Age of Onja. Every step that brought them closer to Jingtun made them think about the Queen's great power. Many of them had been to Jingtun with the tribute caravans, and some of the warriors had even seen the terrible Queen and felt the totality of her domination.

Months ago in the lowlands the rebellion had been exciting and irresistible. Now with the harsh heights of the Rysamand watching from all sides, men began to dread the consequences of failure. Shan's allies understood that the battles between men were over. They were only there to claim their reward for loyalty, or to be hideously punished as traitorous unbelievers.

Moods were especially troubled in the Temu ranks. Many of the Temu warriors felt the war had been hardest on them. Now they worried that Kalek had jeopardized their relationship with Shan. The Temu King was no longer welcome to ride up front with Shan.

Adding to the tension in the Temu forces was the fact that their General and their King were no longer on speaking terms. Xander simply gave into his depression over Taischek's death and ignored everybody.

Quylan shared in the rising nervousness among the humans. She was afraid to approach Jingtun, knowing that Onja would spare no element of torture on her if Shan failed. Although Quylan believed Shan was able to be King and indeed deserved to be King, her innate terror of Onja thwarted her optimism.

She stared at Shan's back. The sun of the gentle spring day in the mountains glittered on his chainmail. Remembering the passion she had shared with him, Quylan had no regrets about leaving Onja. No matter what happened, Quylan believed it was worth it to escape Onja.

"Do you know if my daughter has been happy?" Miranda asked.

Quylan looked at the woman riding beside her. She could see the resemblance to Elendra in this woman.

"Some days I think the only one who is happy in Jingtun is Elendra," Quylan said.

Although the news seemed good, Miranda looked down sadly. She remembered that her daughter had not wanted to leave Jingtun. She also remembered that Onja had said she would tell Elendra that her mother had abandoned her. All these months Miranda had privately worried that her daughter hated her.

"And how is my son, Esseldan?" Miranda wondered.

"I saw him very little. He is just small and in the care of a servant," Quylan responded.

"But he is healthy?" Miranda pressed.

"I believe so," Quylan replied, wishing she had more information.

"He was just getting over an illness when—when Onja tried to kill me," Miranda said quietly.

"You were lucky to survive that," Quylan remarked.

"I survived only because I was saved from the lingering death Onja had designed for me," Miranda explained rigidly. Nothing on that day had been lucky in her recollection.

After a lull in the conversation, Miranda asked, "Did Onja ever tell you why she took my children?"

Quylan shook her head. She had often wondered why Onja had the human children but she had never dared to ask.

"Shan guesses that Onja takes pleasure in the company of my children because their youth stimulates her," Miranda said.

After considering this, Quylan said, "Shan is probably right. Your daughter does have a delightful energy. I had never been near a human child before. No one ever brings their children to Jingtun."

"Now you know why," Miranda grumbled bitterly.

"I am sorry," Quylan said.

Miranda shrugged. "I do not blame you. Did Elendra ever ask about me?"

The pain in Miranda's green human eyes touched Quylan, making it harder to answer. "Not that I know of, but the Queen may have forbidden her to speak of you," she said.

This speculation added to Miranda's despair. She blinked back some tears.

As the day progressed, the land grew still. At first most people attributed this strangeness to their gloomy thoughts and dangerous business, but then the absence of birdsong or the chatter of squirrels became obvious. Even the omnipresent hum of bugs happy in the alpine spring had quieted. Warrior after warrior had the preternatural sensation of being watched.

Finally, Shan halted and Dreibrand sent the signal back to the rest of the forces. The many sections of the army out of sight of Shan became agitated as they stopped. Many warriors feared that Onja was coming.

Shan cocked his head as if listening to the wind. Patiently, Dreibrand waited for the explanation. Suspecting that Onja was about to attack, Dreibrand laid a hand on his enchanted sword. Adrenaline covered most of his pain suddenly.

"Look!" Shan cried and pointed to a southern peak.

A black speck wheeled around the snowy mountainside, heading directly for the army. Dreibrand recognized the flying beast.

"The Tatatook," he breathed. "Will it attack?"

Shan said. "I doubt it, but I am sure Onja has some evil errand in mind."

"For what purpose?" Dreibrand wondered.

"The Tatatook is probably the last creature in the world that is loyal to her, and she wants him near her," Shan said. He had always wondered about the mystery of the Tatatook. The origin of the monster was quite unknown to him, but it was a fact that the Tatatook had an unflinching devotion to Onja.

The winged beast flew into the valley, and soon everyone could distinguish the flap of its great wings and the bulk of its dark body.

The beast circled over Shan and issued a shattering shriek that startled many horses. The call of the evil creature triggered memories of pain and terror in Miranda. Once those nasty feathered arms had held her tortured body.

"Shan, kill it!" she ordered hysterically.

Another hellish screech assaulted the land, and the Tatatook swooped even closer. Shan could not tolerate such boldness from Onja's insolent pet. His raised hand launched a flash of energy that burst around the Tatatook. The flying beast screamed with definite pain and veered away. Smoking feathers rained from the Tatatook and it dropped gracelessly toward the treetops.

The entire army saw the Tatatook take the hit, and the warriors cheered with approval. Shan was glad that he had raised their spirits, but his attention remained fixed on the beast. The Tatatook recovered before crashing into the pines and it hurried away, skimming over the trees and hiding in the curves of the land.

"Tell that to Onja!" Shan announced cheerfully.

Miranda felt her unwelcome panic ease as the thing flew away. She disliked that she had become rattled and vowed that her nerve would not falter again.

The Tatatook did not make another appearance that day. When Shan stopped the march again while several hours of daylight remained, Dreibrand looked around but detected no danger.

"Pass along my command to make camp," Shan said.

"So soon?" Dreibrand inquired quietly.

"I do not think we want to sleep any closer to Jingtun," Shan said.

"Sleep?" Dreibrand was surprised. Even the fatigue of his injuries did not make him want to stop. "We can march into the night. We are so close."

Shan dismounted and went to assist Quylan from her horse. "Trust me, Dreibrand," he explained. "I need to meditate. I must know exactly what Onja is doing right now."

Quylan landed lightly on the ground, and Shan let his hand linger on her hand. Turning to look into her eyes, he added, "I have pledged to protect my allies. Therefore, you must let me determine the pace."

Dreibrand trusted Shan's judgment when it concerned Onja, but the rys's early halt worried him. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I must meditate and prepare for Onja's attack," Shan said.

The decision to camp early was not popular with Miranda. Thoughts of riding on by herself consumed her mind. Instead of helping the Yentay make camp, she paced and sometimes paused to pet her horse. She would stare into the mare's large eyes and think about riding away.

I need to go tonight, she thought.

Her anxiety and impatience nurtured horrible visions. She knew better than to try to sleep and give detail to the nightmares.

Dreibrand understood that stopping so close to Jingtun maddened her. He truly sympathized with her impatience and shared the feeling. Intercepting her, he halted her pacing and put his arms around her. He wanted to hug her tightly, but his ribs creaked with pain.

Stress had worn her down, and Miranda leaned gratefully against him. Although her children ruled her thoughts, it helped to care about somebody she could see and touch.

"Miranda, it is only one more day. After so many, it is nothing," he soothed.

"It is one day too many," she moaned. "I must go to Jingtun now."

"And what would you do all by yourself? Would you accomplish any more than the day Onja took the children?" Dreibrand said. He did not mean to be cruel, but she had to accept facts.

Bitter anger contorted her face, and Dreibrand thought she would scream at him, but her emotion subsided into blank despair.

"I do not want you to get killed, and I do not want to get killed. We will survive if we wait for Shan. You know it is the only way," he insisted.

Looking down, Miranda mumbled her agreement.

"Now come rest with me. I cannot stay on my feet much longer," Dreibrand said.

"Sleep is not possible for me. I will sit up with Shan," Miranda said and promptly went to join the rys, who sat cross-legged on the ground with Quylan.

Content to let her go, Dreibrand wandered to his tent. By the time he reached it, he noticed that he had lapsed into limping. Hopefully none of the warriors had seen his pain. Quietly he cursed in Atrophaney. Tomorrow he would need all of his strength and he simply did not have it. He fell asleep cursing Kalek.

When Miranda reached Shan, the rys was deep in meditation and did not acknowledge her, but Quylan was startled by the human walking up behind her. Quylan had been so focused on Shan that she had not heard the woman's approach. The rys sword hanging from Miranda's waist warned her and the stealth this allowed the human irked Quylan.

Miranda sat down. "Do you know what he sees?" she asked.

"No," Quylan replied.

"May I wait with you?" Miranda inquired, trying to be polite.

After a pause, Quylan welcomed her. It would be good to have company through the stressful

night. Both knew that Shan would only have bad news to report.

Even in the night, all was clear to Shan in the Jington Valley, except for the Tomb of Dacian. The night before he had failed to pierce the gloom of the ancient structure, but he tried again. Like every other time he had probed the tower, his mind revealed the same images. Every level was empty, stripped of furnishings long ago.

At last, he had a revelation and he marveled at his thoughtless assumptions about the building. In his arrogance Shan had never considered the most obvious detail about the tomb. Nothing in his explorations had indicated the location of Dacian's burial vault.

Shan's anger at his stupid blindness almost sickened him. Finally he realized that the tomb had to contain an extra warding within the first barrier of magic. In his youth, Shan had been so proud to look inside the tomb that he had not considered that he was being deceived.

Once Shan followed this reasoning, he quickly detected a new warding spell. It was a masterpiece of magic, and it was very strong. He pushed against it with his mind but it refused to yield to his efforts. Reluctantly, Shan determined that he could only breach the warding if he was at the tower. The perfection of the protection was so great that Shan doubted even Onja could see through it without standing at the door of the tower.

Perhaps Faychan had been right to advise him to examine the Tomb of Dacian. Shan would have to be wary of Onja if she approached the tower.

Accepting that he could not break through the warding even from a few hasas away, Shan turned his mind to Jington. He had maintained a diligent watch upon Onja the entire day, and she had not left her private chambers. Although Shan had been significantly distracted several times since the battle in the pass, he had not seen her go to the Tomb of Dacian at all.

Now Shan saw Onja chanting in the depths of her meditation, and he had never seen her work magic in this way before. Her words were slow and complex, and the sounds were building in intensity with each passing syllable. She was making a mighty spell.

The night went on and Shan remained in his trance. Miranda actually dozed off while sitting up, but she woke up with a start when Quylan cried out. Shan had returned to his surroundings and he leaned forward on his hands. The rys pulled deep breaths into his lungs, reacquainting himself with his body, and Miranda and Quylan went to his sides.

Shan's eyes still glowed with blue light as he looked from Miranda to Quylan.

"What is it?" Quylan asked, sensing a great fear in him.

"Onja is bringing the battle to us," Shan answered.

"But let us move forward at least," Miranda urged. "You can fight her anywhere, and I need to get my children."

"Miranda, this battle must be kept away from the city for the sake of the rys and your children," he explained.

For a moment, his emotion prevented him from speaking, but he finally forced out the words that he dreaded to say. "Onja is bringing the Deamedron upon us."

Tytido tossed in his bedroll. After so many battles, the very peace and quiet of the valley disturbed him and he was restless so close to Jingtun. He sat up, and except for a few watch fires, he saw only the stars. The coldness of the air told him it was late and the dawn was not far off.

With little chance of getting more sleep, Tytido put his boots on and tried to prepare his mind for what could be the greatest day of his life—or the last.

He went to check on Shan and, as he reached the rys, he found him on his knees flanked by Miranda and Quylan. Something was wrong.

Shan's eyes glowed with his power and he rose to his feet. He saw Tytido now and spoke with detached calm. "Tytido, Onja is bringing her terrible servants, the Deamedron, to attack us."

Tytido was a brave warrior who had faced death many times, but the Deamedron automatically chilled his soul. Everyone grew up with the awful stories about Onja's greatest evil, and the child of any tribe was always glad to learn that the crazed wraiths haunted the other side of the Rysamand.

According to legend the Deamedron froze living flesh with the demanding grip of cold death, and already the primal forces of Tytido's fear stalked his mind.

Miranda had much more than legend to fuel her fear and she urgently asked Shan when they were coming.

"They are coming now. We must hurry to protect ourselves," Shan said.

"How?" Tytido cried. To be near the Deamedron was to die.

Shan answered, "Everyone must squeeze into the proximity of all the warding crystals we possess. Those of us with warding crystals must spread out and try to include everybody."

Very consciously Miranda gripped the powerful rys weapon at her side. Very knowingly she said, "There are not enough."

"Miranda, none must be allowed to panic," Shan said sternly. "I must know the location of everybody in order to protect them. Any stray or erratic people could get caught by the Deamedron."

"There is going to be panic," Miranda declared.

This exchange added to Tytido's wide-eyed alarm. "What—what is this proximity?"

Reaching into his jacket, Shan said, "It varies. Those swords will offer protection in a wide area." He removed three small spherical crystals from his pockets and continued, "These cover a much smaller area."

Shan regarded the frightened Hirqua. The loyal man had always been a good warrior, and Shan decided to reward him. "But first, before you tell anybody, go get the rys sword that is among Redan's possessions. That will be yours now. I had meant to give it to Redan forever, but it is needed."

"Thank you, Lord," Tytido said.

"You deserve it. Now go," Shan ordered.

Tytido faltered on his first few steps before he gathered himself and was once again the lieutenant of Shan's warriors. He did not relish the thought of looting Redan's body, but the Deamedron warranted it.

Shan lapsed into a profound silence. A sudden gusty breeze moaned through the pines and Miranda recalled the damp cold that clung to the stones in the Wilderness beyond.

"Shan, what will you do?" she whispered.

"I will free the Deamedron by undoing Onja's spell. Those ancient souls should welcome release

from their false hell," he said.

Quylan emerged from her thoughtful terror. Hesitantly she said, "Miranda is right. We do not have enough warding crystals to protect every man. And what about Lord Kwan? You said you would protect him too. It is the Deamedron he needs protection from."

"I will endeavor to guard all the men with my magic," Shan said.

A veil of sorrow softened Quylan's face. She recognized that Shan was admitting that some would die.

Knowing the news could not wait, Miranda said, "I will get Dreibrand."

When she entered the tent, Dreibrand was startled at first and would have yelled with alarm, but his mouth was smothered by a passionate kiss. Miranda's hair tumbled over his face, and his surge of extreme fear melted against her warmth.

"Now I get my real medicine," he murmured playfully.

A tiny whimper of distress accompanied her breath against his cheek.

"Dreibrand," she said.

He sat up with a groan. Pain rode his muscles with every movement and his body resented relinquishing the deep sleep it had been enjoying.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The Deamedron."

His chest tightened with fear. People outside the influence of a warding crystal would have no chance of living, and Dreibrand had once had a small taste of how painfully they would die.

Dreibrand burst out of his tent and Shan was waiting for him. The rys explained the situation and his plan.

"Miranda, you will need to give the two extra warding crystals you possess to King Ejan. And Dreibrand, give her your extra one to take as well. The Tacus have nothing," Shan ordered.

Normally, Miranda had almost no inclination to give away any of her possessions, but in this case, she quickly dug into her pouch. Men would die in terrible agony and fear unless she was generous with her magical items.

Unbuckling his rys sword, Shan handed the splendid weapon to Quylan. "This will keep you safe," he said.

Quylan recoiled from his gift. "What about you?" she asked.

Shan cocked his head slightly as if her concern was silly. "The Deamedron cannot touch me and in the end I will be their master," he answered and held the sword closer to her. "I must know that you will be protected no matter what."

Realistically, she had to accept it, and when the aura of the enchanted sword enveloped her, her comprehension of the spell immediately increased.

Pushing his crystals in Quylan's hands, Shan said, "You must take the extra crystals to the Temu. Kalek and Xander possess rys swords, but they have the most warriors. Miranda and Tytido will go to the Tacus and protect them. Dreibrand, you will stay with the Yentay. Your sword will be sufficient to protect them."

"I do not want Miranda so far from me," Dreibrand protested.

With exasperation Shan insisted, "The Tacus will not harm her, and I do not want you any closer to the Temu than you already are,"

"I will defend the Tacus. I want her with our warriors," Dreibrand argued.

"Obey me," Shan snapped. "Time is short."

Dreibrand was unaccustomed to such a sharp tone from Shan and he stopped arguing.

"Now, start consolidating the camp. The evil dawn is coming," Shan commanded.

When the Deamedron entered the mountain realm, Shan could feel the Rysamand shudder deep beneath his feet. In life, the spiteful spirits had been devoted enemies of Jingtjen, and the hate from their imprisoned souls radiated through the valley. Shan decided that Onja truly deserved death for bringing this menace to the rys homeland.

Shan began to recede from his friends. He knew they would follow his orders and they would survive along with most of the army. But he was worried about the Atrophane. Their protection meant a lot to Quylan, and Shan regretted that he might disappoint her.

The Kezanada he would let fend for themselves. Faychan, with his rys sword, could weather the wraiths with most of his men.

Shan put on his helmet and cloak. He walked away from the camp and placed himself in the middle of the Jingtjen Road. Here he would stand between the Deamedron and his allies.

Before sunrise a frigid fog began to creep up the valley from the east. The damp tendrils reached Shan first, touching him like frostbite. An involuntary shiver shook his spine. Even he had not experienced the Deamedron in person, and he marveled that Dreibrand and Miranda had endured them for a day.

The rys steadied his heart. He must not be afraid.

The mist thickened, and Shan soon heard men shouting with alarm and horses squealing. He spread his magic around the warriors as the malignant wraiths gathered in the murky forest.

Cautiously he peered into Jingtjen and located Onja. He was shocked to see her doing what she had not done in living memory. Onja was leaving the city. Steeling his nerves, Shan banished even the memory of pity because he could afford no weakness, no instant of hesitation.

Shan could not make any mistakes this time.

The sun erupted over the Rysamand with the unwelcome earliness of a long day. In the glaring dawn Shan discerned the black speck of his approaching enemy.

Even before the great wings of the Tatatook came into sight, Shan knew they labored with the burden of a passenger. The mighty Onja would not walk upon the ground to meet her challenger.

With grace and precision, the Tatatook landed in front of Shan. The surreal black-feathered arms of the beast embraced Onja like an angel lover. The blue hands of the Queen clung to the arms, and she pressed her back into the strong hug of her pet. The cruel beak arched over her head like a crown, and her white hair flowed across the Tatatook's throat.

"Onja!" Shan cried in fearless challenge.

He had not physically seen her for months, and the sight of her infuriated him. A battle shriek erupted from his lungs like a jealous dragon. A blast of searing magic jumped from his fists too quick for the Tatatook to dodge.

A smug smile caressed Onja's lips as she shielded herself from the attack. She had baited him into striking first and had been quite ready for his blow. The fury of Shan's assault had sufficiently distracted him, and Onja let go the leash she had on the Deamedron.

Shan realized his mistake the instant the magic flowed through him. The Deamedron sprang forth like rabid hounds free of the kennel and he scrambled to shield his allies from Onja's sick servants while she tormented him with her delighted laughter.

Onja was still Queen of the Rysamand, and the price of rebellion had come due. The Tatatook stepped back and shook out its tired wings. Onja placed her hands on her hips, and a light as cold as a glacial crevasse glinted in her ancient eyes.

"Shan, sweet Shan, you could have had everything. But now you must be my slave forever," Onja promised.

The rage of her attack exploded around Shan, and he had to relinquish the barrier he made against

the Deamedron. His magic obliterated her spell just as the hot grip of stone sheathed his body. The stone that she had meant to seal him inside dissipated in a heavy smoke.

"That same old tired spell?" Shan sneered and sent the same thing back at her.

Onja deflected his attack contemptuously. She had always been immune to stone imprisonment. The magic masters of Nufal had once wasted their lives trying to trap her.

Shan staggered back after her next blow, but he could feel how much stronger he had become since his first challenge. He knew he could drive her back, but he must do it quickly. The Deamedron would soon overrun anyone outside a warding spell.

~

Tacus warriors pressed around Miranda from all sides. The Deamedron were almost invisible in the daylight, but the occasional gleam of a ghostly skull or the smoky image of a weapon proved their presence. The freezing fog was enough to drive men crazy with fear. They screamed with desperation to be nearer to Miranda even if they were already inside the protection of her warding.

Miranda kept a tight hold on her ryl sword, all too aware that some warrior might try to steal it from her. She resolved to kill anyone who tried.

An icy breeze of haunted malice swept over the army. The coldness made Miranda's chest hurt and her ears ache. This was much more intense than her first experience with the Deamedron, which had been hard enough. Now the wraiths were free of all constraints and eager to banish the warmth from living bodies. Onja allowed them only the pleasure of killing.

The light intensified in the wraiths' red eyes, and their translucent bodies glowed with fierce energy. The sick mist thickened around the army and the warriors pressed impossibly close together.

Then the screaming really began.

On the perimeter, the Deamedron found the limits of the warding, and the forces of the deathworld began to rend the flesh of men. The hideous sound of their agony beckoned Miranda. If she could move closer to those in pain, she could shift the warding around them. Of course, if she moved to save the dying, only others would die.

Although she longed to end their suffering, Miranda had no path to shift her location. The maximum amount of people had already squeezed inside the warding, and none would sacrifice their position anyway. Horse and man seemed to innately sense the safe areas now.

Miranda looked around, and everywhere she saw a nightmarish scene. Warriors cringed in abject terror, and anyone without benefit of warding cried out in hopeless pain. Men and horses withered rapidly and died before their shocking screams ended. Bodies literally fell to pieces as insatiable spirits sliced through tissue. Blood sprayed and steamed as it flew into the cold mist.

She could see a great circle of Tacus struggling to be around Tytido, and the same near King Ejan, who she had given one of her warding crystals. The trees and the fog blocked her view of the rest of the army, but she saw men dying in every direction where the wardings fell short.

~

Shan shielded himself from Onja's latest blast and was not harmed by the spell that would have incinerated any other mortal. But he could sense his allies dying. The souls of the newly dead flared across his perception as they flew around in disarray. Normally these souls would have ascended to the next world without difficulty, but the storm of imprisoned spirits confused them. Crippled with terror, the fresh souls were getting caught by the claws of damnation that tore at the land.

Experiencing the fear and agony of his dying supporters, Shan became angry. Onja knew the Deamedron could not harm him and she had only brought the Deamedron into the valley to hurt the humans.

Desperation to stop the Deamedron forced Shan to take the offensive. He focused a massive attack spell on Onja's head, and at the last instant, he shot it at the road beneath her feet. The spell

eluded Onja's shielding, and she screamed when the awful heat exploded up into one of her feet. She fell backward, incapacitated by the wound. Smoke curled from the remnants of her suede boot, and the flesh on her foot had been reduced to charcoal over bones.

Tremendous satisfaction surged through Shan, and he stepped toward his writhing enemy. He would have loved pressing in for the kill. The Last Law of Dacian, so sacred to rys society, crossed his mind not at all.

Onja clutched her leg near the blackened foot but the pain was too intense for her to actually touch the damage. Knowing she was vulnerable now, Onja sealed herself in a shielding spell so intense it muffled her screams from Shan's ears. He knew it would take precious time to break through her shield spell, and with every moment the Deamedron were killing scores of men. Shan could not ignore the plight of his allies and he chose to deal with the Deamedron first.

Shan spread his magic over the valley and beckoned the Deamedron. The enchantment of their slavery was strong. They were supposed to heed only Onja's summons and Shan worked to undo her spell.

While breaking the chains of Onja's domination, Shan insistently called to the wraiths, pulling them into his own spell. The amount of souls staggered Shan as he gathered them with his will. A great loathing radiated from the ancient warriors of extinct Nufal, which shocked Shan with its intensity. The long-imprisoned army of Nufal disliked the mastery of any rys from Jingtun, but Shan could give them what they really wanted now.

His mind showed the wraiths the portal to the next world after he destroyed the barrier that prevented them from taking their natural journey. Once Shan showed them the welcoming brightness of the next world, the Deamedron abandoned their killing. For centuries the passion of the wraiths had been destroying flesh in a jealous frenzy, but when they saw the warmth and freedom of the light, the spirits remembered their true cravings. Their suffering could end. No longer would the ancient warriors be tormented with the cruel memory of their living flesh. The souls could reenter the cycle of life.

None of the wraiths could resist the appeal of this escape. Tens of thousands of souls swirled around Shan and rose in a column into the sky. The glow of the concentrated spirits consumed Shan as he showed them the path to the next world and he almost became lost in the stampede of souls. The force of so many souls entering a new plane of existence threatened to suck Shan's soul into the portal as well. For an instant, he stumbled in the current. The mental screams of the Deamedron interfered with his concentration, but Shan recovered himself. His mind vaulted back to his body just as the last of the wraiths rushed through the portal.

The physical reassurance of his living flesh brought Shan back from the insane experience. The evil thoughts of the Deamedron had assaulted his mind, and it had been hard to feel so many spirits completely lacking in compassion. The hate left by millennia of torment had sickened Shan, but he could be glad that he had freed them from this hell.

While Shan had dispersed the Deamedron, Onja had struggled to master her pain. Shan assumed she would continue the fight and he was thankful that she had not been able to attack him as he grappled with the Deamedron. Expecting her retaliation, he cast a strong shield spell, but nothing came.

Tears streaked Onja's dusty face and her frustration almost unhinged her. Her rage had overcome her agony more than anything else had. She could not believe the Deamedron were gone. Onja felt a great vulnerability without her minions of genocide, and her hate for Shan swelled to unimagined proportions.

She endeavored to stand and steadied herself on her blackened foot. The crisp flesh left a sooty mark on the road and Onja snarled at Shan in incoherent rage. Seeing that her anger had unfocused her, Shan reversed his shield spell and assaulted her. As he had believed, Onja had become weaker since his first challenge four centuries earlier. This battle was going better than he expected.

Onja weathered his attack but had no reply. When Shan hit her again, Onja tumbled back to the ground because her ravaged foot prevented her from staying upright. Energy swathed Shan as he jumped forward to tower over her in exquisite victory.

Maimed, suffering and bereft of the Deamedron, Onja could not cope with him, and she raised a feeble hand over her face. The pathetic gesture thrilled Shan and he prepared to blast her into ashes. Although he tried, Shan could not resist reveling in the complete joy that he gained from

besting her.

Now she dies! his mind sang as it released the spell.

Such powerful magic flowed along Shan's tissues, that he did not recognize the intense pain in his left shoulder. But the blow caused his lethal spell to falter and it exploded in the air, sending out a shock wave of superheated air.

Directed by survival instincts, Shan's perceptions switched to his immediate physical surroundings and he saw the Tatatook tearing into his shoulder with its sharp beak. Only his chainmail saved him from being instantly cleaved open by the beast. Shan beat at its head and black feathers flapped from every direction.

The Tatatook shrieked, sending rancid breath into Shan's face. The feathery arms grappled Shan, and the beast threw itself on top of him and Shan struggled frantically to fend off its beak and talons.

Finally recovering from the shock of the unexpected attack, Shan defended himself. A flash of blue fire consumed the Tatatook's head, repelling it instantly. Flapping wings in a severe retreat, it beat at its smoking head with its hands. The gleam of eagle-perfect eyes was forever gone, replaced by crisping craters. The Tatatook screamed in blind madness.

Shan jumped to his feet without assessing his injury. By now Onja had sat up, but the glow in her eyes could not conceal her fear. Knowing the Tatatook had scattered Shan's focus, she mustered a counter attack. The road beneath Shan's feet exploded in a violent upheaval, which threw Shan to the side. In the process several flying stones battered Shan and left him slightly dazed.

Even though Shan was in a vulnerable position, Onja only had thoughts for falling back. She took command of the Tatatook's disordered mind and calmed the creature despite its pain. She guided the beast to her side, and the blind hands reached down to retrieve her.

Onja clung to her loyal servant while they lifted into the air. The total trust of the Tatatook allowed her to guide it in flight.

Shan reclaimed his senses and watched the Queen fly away. He tried to summon his magic to strike her out of the sky, but his wound distracted him and he had to grant her the retreat. He was tired after the ordeal with the Deamedron, and he needed to catch a second wind.

At least the Deamedron are at peace, he thought. He allowed himself a moment of rest and did not stir from the rubble on the roadside.

While Shan mustered the strength to continue, the humans in the Jingtun Valley emerged from their terror. Four hasas away Lord Kwan surveyed his losses. As quickly as the hurricane of death had descended on the Atrophane, it had disappeared. The mist surrendered to a balmy day, but a silent daze lingered on the land.

Exhausted by fear, Atrophane soldiers panted and slumped in their saddles. Two hundred of their comrades had been mangled to death by the supernatural forces, and their grotesque corpses surrounded the survivors. Those left alive, although seasoned veterans, were rattled by the demonic onslaught.

The loss of so many good men appalled Kwan, but he knew the casualties could have been total. He wondered if Shan had been the one who saved them.

"They are gone!" Sandin exclaimed with disbelief. His face was very pale, and his eyes darted in every direction. The lieutenant did not quite know how he had avoided death. All of the remaining soldiers were also shocked by their luck.

The allies of Shan had fared better than the Atrophane. The Deamedron had slaughtered any warriors they could reach, and the din of death screams had tormented Miranda's senses, and she still heard more screaming.

When her mind slowly began to function again, she realized the screaming came from the wounded. Some of the men had survived if their contact with the Deamedron had been short.

Shouting for warriors to move aside, Miranda sought out the wounded. The scene on the perimeter of the survivors was revolting. Tattered torsos and strewn body parts heaped the ground in an indiscriminate mix of horse and human. The verdant mountain flora had been withered by the

Deamedron. Some of the victims twitched in their last moments of agony before dying, lending a freakish animation to the scene.

Miranda struggled not to vomit. She gagged valiantly until she mastered her nausea. Nearby a man pleaded for help. He was a Tacus man writhing on the ground, clutching his legs, and Miranda went to him.

She placed her sword over his legs, hoping the magic crystals in the sword would help him like the crystal orb had helped Dreibrand. The injured Tacus shuddered with pain but gripped Miranda with tangible gratitude. He was not bleeding, and Miranda supposed that his encounter with the wraiths must have been mercifully brief.

"You will be fine," Miranda soothed.

Now more Tacus ventured into the dead area to help the other wounded men.

Although the Yentay had been the closest to Shan when he fought Onja, all of them had survived. The warding from Dreibrand's sword had provided them with enough protection, but Dreibrand knew that many others had perished. Their bodies could be seen only a short distance away, and Dreibrand hoped Miranda had not been hurt in the panic.

But he could not go look for her yet. With the Deamedron gone, he would go to Shan. Starfield balked at entering an area so recently occupied by murderous wraiths, but Dreibrand pressed the horse to advance. He ordered his men to hold their position because he essentially hoped to sneak up on Onja. The Queen might be completely absorbed by her struggle with Shan, and Dreibrand planned to simply cut her down.

A haze lingered over Shan's location and Dreibrand could not see what was happening. He heard the cries of the Tatatook and then an explosion rocked the road. A rain of stones drove him back.

Continual shrieking from the Tatatook shredded the air and Dreibrand guessed that Shan had hurt it. Gleaning hope from this guess, Dreibrand charged but he was too late. He saw the Tatatook rise out of the haze carrying Onja and he yelled with rage and unmitigated panic.

How can Onja be leaving? he thought.

"Shan!" he screamed, turning his eyes to the ground.

The smoke and dust drifted aside, and the sight of Shan face down in the rubble confirmed Dreibrand's fears.

He cried with denial and hurled himself toward the rys. Seeing the blood seeping over the chainmail, he collapsed in emotional paralysis.

"No—nooo!" he sobbed. "You must be the King."

The encroaching concept of total defeat began to strangle Dreibrand.

Shan coughed.

"Shan!" Dreibrand cried with utter elation.

The rys rolled over and slapped a hand over his bleeding shoulder. Blue fire sparkled in Shan's eyes and on his fingertips but he smiled to his friend.

"I thought you were dead," Dreibrand gasped.

"Sorry if I frightened you, General. I just needed to lie still a moment," Shan apologized with surprising good humor.

"Onja got away. It made me think you lost," Dreibrand explained.

"Onja RAN away," Shan corrected fiercely. "I beat her. She is hurt badly."

"You are hurt," observed Dreibrand.

Glancing at his messy shoulder, Shan grunted, "The Tatatook did that."

Fearfully, Dreibrand examined his lord's wound. The chainmail had been pulled apart, and ripped rings of metal were imbedded in the flesh where the beak had struck the hardest. It was a nasty injury, exposing even the collarbone.

Dreibrand looked around his person for something to use as a bandage, but any spare bits of clothing had been used up stopping wounds in the other battles.

"I will get my cloak from my saddle bag," he said.

"No. Stay here. I can handle this," Shan said. The rys gently pulled the jagged bits of chainmail out of his flesh and started to clot the bleeding with his magic. Now that the intensity of battle subsided, Shan felt his pain more acutely.

"I will need Quylan to help me with this," Shan decided. He was thankful to have one of his own kind on his side.

"I will find her, but first let me help you back to our men," Dreibrand said.

Shan groaned to his feet. He absently brushed the dust from his face, which left a smear of blood on his cheek. Without assistance, Shan picked his way down the broken roadway to the point where Onja had last stood. Despite the pain, he bent to touch the trace of soot left by Onja's burned foot. The memory of living flesh loitered in the ashy atoms, and Shan smiled wickedly.

"I have you now," he murmured in the rys language.

The pleasure of making Onja retreat revitalized Shan. He gloated privately over the fact that only the Tatatook had saved her. Filled with confidence, Shan paused to send a quick healing spell through his shoulder in order to lessen the pain. He would have Quylan patch him up quickly while he gathered his strength for the final destruction.

"Where did the Deamedron go?" Dreibrand asked.

"I freed their souls from Onja's slavery. They rest in the next world, as they should," Shan answered as he wiped the soot from his finger.

"That's wonderful!" Dreibrand exclaimed. He had always abhorred the captivity of the warrior spirits.

A Yentay came tentatively down the road to find his commander. Dreibrand called to him to bring Shan's horse and send someone to find Quylan at once.

Shan took a deep breath, wincing in pain. "Many of your people died," he said with regret.

"No. All of the Yentay lived," Dreibrand reported, but added quietly, "Except I still have to check on Miranda."

"I meant the Atrophane," Shan said.

The realization that he had not considered his countrymen disturbed Dreibrand.

Shan continued, "They had no warding crystals and during the battle I could not always focus on their protection."

"Lord Kwan...?" Dreibrand whispered.

"I will check," Shan said, but Dreibrand stopped him. He did not want to distract the rys from Onja.

Shan agreed, "I must go to Jingtun now. Onja is hurt and weakened. She knows I have seen her weakness, and this in itself will bring my victory. I must go finish her."

Now the rys gave his last orders of the war. "Keep the army out of the city. I do not want the rys population to panic. Only take in the Yentay. That will be enough to occupy the Keep. I will enter the city first and engage Onja. Do not attempt to follow my path. It is too dangerous for anyone except me. You and Miranda can get your children while I take care of Onja."

The thought of finally saving Elendra and Esseldan excited Dreibrand, but he remarked, "The Tacus and Temu will not like being kept outside the city."

"Tell them they must for their safety. Everyone will be my guest as soon as the Queen is—gone," Shan said.

"They will not obey me," Dreibrand grumbled.

Shan saw doubt on Dreibrand's battered face.

"I have made it very clear to both kings that the words of my general are to be honored as my words are honored," Shan said. "You are my agent to the humans. They all understand and accept this now, even Kalek. They will hold their warriors outside the city when you tell them to. And it is for their safety."

"I will tell them," Dreibrand said. "But Shan, let me help you kill that bitch."

Shan understood that Dreibrand was quite sincere, but he shook his head. "This is my task. Your service has made her demise possible, but your task is to get the children as soon as you can."

Truly, Dreibrand wanted the children but he wanted to make sure that Onja would die. "But Shan, she will be easier to kill if we work together. That is what she has been trying to do to you. Pin her down with your magic, and I will cut her down," he said.

"And I know you would, Dreibrand, but leave this to me. If I were to let you do such a thing, it would put you in the greatest peril of your life. Think of all the warriors who have died trying to reach me," Shan said.

"But my sword will protect me," Dreibrand argued.

Shan was about to respond but Quylan ran up and he shifted his attention to her.

"Oh, you are hurt!" she cried.

"But you will make it better for me," Shan said. "Now Dreibrand, I will think about what you said. Go get Miranda. I am sure she is anxious to move on."

"I will not be long," Dreibrand said, planning to resume his argument with Shan when he returned.

Shan watched Dreibrand hurry up the road as Quylan placed her hand on his shoulder. She had learned quickly and her magic immediately started to stop the rest of the bleeding.

A Yentay arrived with Shan's white horse. To Quylan, Shan said, "That will do for now. I must be going."

She guessed his mind. "Do not go by yourself."

"This is how it must be done. All of you will be safer this way. Help Miranda find her children," Shan said. Quylan started to argue, but he placed a finger on her lips. "I do not have time to argue with Dreibrand when he comes back. I am leaving now. Promise me you will help Miranda find her children."

Quylan nodded. Although she wanted to help Shan, she lacked the courage to face Onja. And perhaps Quylan did not trust herself near the Queen.

Shan kissed Quylan on the forehead. "When you see me again, I will be King."

Without another word, he jumped into the saddle and galloped off toward Jington.

On the highest roof of the Keep, the Tatatook landed hard but protected its Queen from most of the impact. For its reward, Onja released her pet from the soothing influence of her mind, and the Tatatook could only huddle miserably and whimper in delirious pain, lost without its mistress.

But pain would not stop Onja and she crawled toward the stairwell. In her foot, she suffered the torment of charred flesh tugging at living flesh, coupled with the agony of half-cooked marrow in the bone. As a red swoon tore through her mind, she battled vigorously for control, knowing that she could find a path out of the pain.

Taf Ila burst onto the roof and skidded to a stop when he beheld his injured monarch. His hair had gone a little whiter lately and it matched his distressed expression. Although his impulse for loyalty was strong, his lack of sincere compassion surprised him. He would help his Queen, but he had no emotional interest in her survival.

When he kneeled beside Onja, she latched onto his green suede jacket and hoisted herself into a sitting position. She gasped while examining her foot and Taf Ila curled his nose with distaste. He had never seen such a hideous wound, at least not on a living being.

With trembling hands, Onja touched her ruined foot. The intensity of her healing spell shimmered around her fingers, but the damage could not be undone. The Queen snarled with frustration.

"Get me stout boots and a cane," she ordered.

Taf Ila swallowed, unable to take his eyes from the shocking wound.

His inaction infuriated Onja. "Shan is coming. I must be able to walk," she hissed.

Still looking at her destroyed foot, Taf Ila was not processing his Queen's words. He knew there had been a great battle, involving the Deamedron, but his only thoughts were for his daughter. The tenuous hold his perception had on Quylan earlier had slipped away and not returned.

"My daughter?" he whispered.

Onja screamed with rage. She definitely would have killed him for mentioning his traitorous daughter if she did not really need his assistance at that moment. Shan was on his way, and Onja had to pull herself together before facing him again. The male rival had been much more powerful than she had allowed herself to believe.

Onja knew what she had to do.

Taf Ila was in flight as Onja's scream ended. He had tempted her ire before, and he would not do it again.

He scrambled to the stairwell and fell down a flight of steps in his haste. When Taf Ila hit the first landing, he jumped up and darted down the next flight, disregarding the bashing. He recalled Onja's orders and intended to comply. He was the Captain of the Jington Guard, and his honor was his duty.

Quylan! his mind moaned repeatedly. Taf Ila feared his daughter was dead, even though the notion was unbearable.

Two levels down a few timid rys soldiers intercepted their captain.

"The Queen is returned?" a rys asked fearfully.

"Are the Deamedron really gone?" asked another soldier.

"I do not know where the Deamedron went, but the Queen is here," Taf Ila said. "Get, ah, some stout boots and a cane."

The strange order puzzled his soldiers, who were already upset.

"The Queen is hurt," Taf Ila said.

But his orders still did not make sense to the rys.

"Get stout boots and a cane!" Taf Ila shouted.

Accepting obedience without understanding, a rys inquired, "Captain, what size?"

The absurdity of the situation began to wear on Taf Ila's mind. It was absurd that Onja was hurt. It was absurd that Shan truly came to conquer. It was absurd to think of any rys besides Onja ruling Jingtun. It was absurd that his daughter might be dead.

Recalling the shriveled state of Onja's foot, Taf Ila said, "Any size. Just find it now."

While the rys soldiers left on their strange errand, Taf Ila leaned against the cool stone wall of the corridor and collected his jumbled thoughts. Fervently he sought Quylan, but he could feel no trace of his beloved daughter.

He wished she was a rysling still at home. He should have done more to protect her.

It did not take long for the rys soldiers to return with the requested items. Although rys wore soft boots as a rule, they had easily obtained a hard pair of boots, never worn. In a realm of such leisurely abundance, just about anything was on hand.

A rys said, "Captain, if the Queen is hurt, I will fetch a physician."

Grabbing the boots and cane, Taf Ila responded, "Do not bother. Not even her magic can help her."

The soldiers silently pondered this stunning statement.

Taf Ila continued, "I will go on alone. I order every soldier to general quarters after you evacuate all the civilians from the Keep."

This was a daunting order considering half the citizens of the city had rushed to the Keep in panic when the Deamedron entered the Rysamand. Many rys had wanted the superior warding of the Keep to protect them.

A group of servants, some carrying a personal possession or two, rushed down the same corridor. Apparently they had decided to leave ahead of schedule.

"It is our job to make sure no one is hurt in the panic," Taf Ila added.

"What is happening?" asked the younger rys soldier.

Taf Ila looked toward the roof. "The Queen is challenged," he answered. "Shan claims his right to prove himself our superior. None of us shall hinder him. If he is honorable, he will leave his army outside the city. If his human servants do not attack us, we will not engage them."

Although none of the rys had ever faced an army in battle, one of them burst out boldly, "We can destroy the army."

"And can you destroy Shan?" Taf Ila countered.

Abashed, the rys dropped his head.

"Now relay my orders and stay out of the way," Taf Ila said and then dashed up the stairs.

When he reached the roof, Taf Ila offered Onja the items that she had demanded. She snatched one boot from him and he watched with revulsion as she prepared to pull the boot over her ruined foot. Now he understood that she meant for the stiff leather to encase her foot in a hard shell so it could support weight.

Onja gritted her teeth and forced the new boot over the injured foot. The act was excruciating and she moaned as she stood up. Taf Ila's sensitive mind reeled from the agony radiating from her.

The Tatatook wailed.

The Queen grabbed the cane that dangled forgotten in Taf Ila's hand.

"Tell Hefshul to ready the boat," Onja panted while leaning on the cane.

Taf Ila nodded and fled, dropping the spare boot as he went.

The discipline of a magic master returned to Onja now that she was on her feet. She methodically put her mind through the regimen to control pain. When the misery of her flesh subsided to an almost tolerable level, Onja hobbled to the stairwell.

With each step her confidence flooded back. Yes, Shan had hurt her, but Shan did not guess the magnitude of her resources.

When Onja reached her private apartments, she discovered that all of the servants were departing. She snarled with disgust at their terrorized scampering. After everything she had done for them, they fled from her side at the first sign of danger.

Two rys rounded a corner and entered the corridor that Onja was plodding down. When they saw their Queen, they instantly reversed their course. Onja forced herself to ignore the faithless subjects and sent her magic elsewhere. She seized the mind of the rys nanny, who was conveying the human children out of their rooms, and halted the female.

Stumping along, Onja found the nanny holding Esseldan in her magically locked arms. The year old boy squirmed quietly in the frozen embrace.

When Elendra saw Onja, she clasped the skirt of her rys nanny. Normally Onja's dotting company always delighted the little girl, but Elendra shrank in terror from the Queen on this day. Dirt and scorch marks spoiled the royal clothing, and Onja leaned over her cane like a crazed vulture.

Most distressing of all was Onja's face. The timeless beauty of the blue visage had been shattered by pain. Lines creased the skin that had been smooth for millennia, and the perfectly sculpted lips were shriveled and made her teeth look big.

The Queen's eyes darted greedily between Elendra and Esseldan. *The female*, Onja's mind raved, and she lunged for Elendra.

Her blue hand caught the girl's little arm like the jaws of a mad dog.

"My Queen," Elendra whimpered in complete confusion. The hands of her royal guardian had never been anything but tender and adoring.

"Come with me. I will keep you safe," Onja said.

Unable to resist the will of the Queen, Elendra relaxed.

"I am hurt. I need your help, my sweet little daughter," Onja purred.

"Yes, my Queen," Elendra breathed, feeling reassured.

Swinging the girl like a rag doll, Onja lurched away. The nanny fainted when Onja released her because the shock of magical domination had been too great. Esseldan slipped out of her arms but was unharmed in the descent. He crawled around curiously, until the tile floor chilled him and the boy curled up next to his rys caregiver.

When her feet actually brushed the floor, Elendra trotted next to the Queen. The girl had gathered that something had disturbed the pleasantness of Jington, and it reminded her of the last confusing days at Droxy. Her initial terror of Onja faded, and Elendra believed that the Queen had come to save her. Vaguely she wondered about her little brother, but the thought seemed abstract.

Onja exited the Keep by the boat dock. Beside the deep alpine lake Hefshul waited on the dock, and the skiff peeked above the dock as it bobbed in the waves. Across the water stood the Tomb of Dacian. A cloud hung over the tower, and the vegetation was blasted brown in a wide radius around it. The Deamedron had swarmed around the ancient tower whenever the strict control of Onja's mind had slackened.

"Help her into the boat," Onja commanded.

The old mute rys regarded the pale dark-haired child.

"The Queen asked me to help her," Elendra said proudly. It pleased her to be useful to her benevolent patron.

Hefshul pursed his lips thoughtfully and moved his old black eyes onto his Queen with a critical glare.

"Today is not the day for your sloth!" Onja warned. She knew Shan was getting closer and that she had to hurry.

Her aged servant lifted his chin to a contemptuous angle. Hefshul had never seen Onja injured before, and it interested him to see how the pain had ravaged her face. Hefshul realized that although Onja had always been evil, she had never been desperate, and this would unleash her terribleness.

"Put her in the boat," Onja yelled.

Hefshul looked back to Elendra, whose company had always delighted him. The radiant human child had been a pleasure, especially because he had never moved among the humans.

"No," he rasped. The word was more a noise than actual speech, but the negative tone was clear.

His refusal stunned Onja so much she forgot her pain for a moment. She never would have doubted Hefshul's loyalty. He had been a devoted servant of the throne since his ryslighthood. Onja was doubly shocked because he had not uttered a word in a thousand years.

The new lines on Onja's face deepened at ugly angles, and she shuddered with hideous rage. All defiance ended now.

Hefshul's chest exploded in a sloppy mess of flaming ribs and organs. Elendra screamed and shut her eyes as the old rys fell backwards onto the dock.

Dacian's Last Law was broken.

"Get in the boat," Onja snapped, but Elendra whimpered and could not move.

Distantly, Onja realized how badly she must have frightened the child. Controlling her own rage, Onja soothed Elendra's mind with her magic until the girl meekly hopped into the boat. Onja glanced at Hefshul's gaping body and would have kicked it, but she needed her good foot for standing.

Struggling through her pain, Onja sat down on the edge of the dock and slid into the boat. Rowing the boat was difficult because it hurt to brace herself with both feet. She could feel her foot crumbling and squishing inside the boot, which made her resent Hefshul's defiance all the more.

If only I had had the time to make his death last longer, she lamented.

Opposite the Queen, Elendra huddled at the prow of the small vessel. Fear and anxiety had been washed from her mind, replaced by a fresh dose of security and trust.

Onja ground her teeth as she hauled on the oars. Frustrated by her pitiful progress, she began to work the waters with her mind, creating a favorable current with her magic.

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In Jingtén, the rys hurrying out of the Keep drifted to a stop, and the rys in their homes crept to the windows. Shan's presence had become clear to every rys, and the onslaught of historic change confronted the populace.

Shan had come to kill his own kind.

The stately white horse beneath Shan required no command to increase its already fast gallop. The wild edges of the forest gave way to the outskirts of Jingtén, and Shan thundered into the city. Beholding the city of his birth made Shan's heart throb with excitement. The clean blue-stoned buildings greeted him with empty streets, but Shan noticed the many rys peeking from windows. He imagined this moment imprinted on their minds. The moment they had seen the new King.

His time of ascension had come, and Shan proceeded boldly toward the Keep.

Taf Ila blocked the gate to the Keep. He recklessly jumped in front of Shan's horse and he barely avoided getting trampled.

Without any acknowledgement Shan maneuvered around the frantic captain, but Taf Ila made himself impossible to ignore.

"Move away Taf Ila! I am King of the rys," Shan shouted.

"Where is my daughter? I cannot find Quylan," Taf Ila cried.

Suddenly, Shan realized that the rys sword he had given Quylan would have made her invisible to her concerned father, who must think she had been killed.

"She is coming up the road behind me," Shan answered.

Elated by the news, Taf Ila ended his harassment and Shan sped away.

The wrought iron birds in the gate shuddered angrily when they slammed shut in his face. Disdainfully he hurled the gates back open, overriding Onja's magic that sought to delay him.

In the courtyard Shan abandoned his strong steed. He sensed that Onja was on the lake now, but he hoped to engage her from the shore. Shan realized that she had to be seeking some kind of refuge in the Tomb of Dacian. Fearing the mysteries of the tower, he did not intend to let Onja reach it.

Shan raced through the corridors of the Keep and burst onto the landing, where he then stumbled to a stop. The wreckage of Hefshul's body sprawled at the water's edge jolted him out of his intense focus. The lethal mark of Onja's magic clung to the destroyed chest, and this murder appalled Shan. He knew Hefshul would never have intervened on his behalf, and Shan wondered what had prompted Hefshul to displease the Queen to such an extent.

Dragging his eyes from the corpse, Shan saw Onja in the skiff halfway across the water. He would have instantly blasted the boat into sawdust, but then he sensed Elendra in the boat.

She uses the child to protect her! Shan thought with horror. Thinking of Miranda, he was nearly incapacitated by panic. Shan had not expected to be thwarted by such mundane means. He knew he had the ability to focus his spell around the girl, but he dare not take the risk. The energy necessary to destroy Onja would obliterate the boat.

While stressing over Elendra, Shan felt the prickle of an attack spell. The stone and wood dock exploded and he leaped away from the destruction.

Onja's attack forced him back into the Keep, where he had to cower briefly in a doorway. The agitated water slapped against the crushed stonework and steaming bits of wood floated everywhere. The extra boats were destroyed and despair clutched Shan by the throat. Onja would reach her tower.

Cursing his slowness, Shan ran back to his horse. He would have to ride the trail around the lake. In all likelihood Onja had a trap for him in the tower, but he had to go. Only he could help Elendra.

When Shan reached the mighty tower, he sensed its great power although he still could not define its nature. The neatly fitted stones showed no signs of the erosion that would be inevitable after thousands of years. Every edge appeared as sharp and perfect as the day it had been cut. He had little notion of the tower's exact time of construction.

When he went up the steps to the doors, the aura of the building enveloped him and Shan experienced the thickness of the warding. A peculiar sensation gripped his mind as if he was no longer in his own time.

Shan had seen Onja enter the tower when he rounded the lake, but the doors had not been left open. He studied the perfect timbers of the high doors, knowing a strong spell sealed them and sheltered them from the worldly effects of time.

Tentatively, Shan touched a door. A surly jolt of energy threw him back and crackled around his body, even making his teeth hurt. When it wore off, Shan heard the mocking laughter of Onja echoing in his head.

Begrudgingly he agreed with Faychan's theory that the Tomb of Dacian contained the secret of Onja's prolonged power. Accepting that he may have underestimated Onja, Shan still resolved to enter. If nothing else, his pride would give him the power to breach her refuge.

Mindful of his safety, Shan retreated to the stone landing where the skiff had been parked. His horse automatically cantered a good distance away. Drawing strength from his ambition and outrage, Shan gathered the forces of the cosmos to his side. As he had mastered the Deamedron,

he would break Onja's barrier.

The foundation of the tower groaned with indignant protest before the door timbers finally cracked with a rebellious scream. An explosion shattered the doors completely. Shan's shield spell burned away the spear-like splinters of wood that flew at him and protected him from impalement.

When the dust settled Shan shook with triumphant pleasure to see the gaping entrance. The tower had been sealed with Onja's best magic, and he had breached it in an instant. Soon the Queen would suffer the same fate as her doors.

Shan entered the Tomb of Dacian. The mighty foundation issued a few more disturbing creaks. The stone structure did not appreciate the destruction of the doors, but the building soon settled into a reluctant silence.

The crystals set in the walls of the long corridor flickered at Shan's unfamiliar presence and gave an erratic light. Many strange forces assailed Shan's senses, confusing him with their intensity. It amazed him that a warding spell could conceal such great power from even a short distance away. He soon focused on the tremendous energy rising from deep beneath the structure. Shan recognized the living power of the Rysamand flowing over him, but he had never known it to be so concentrated.

I have so much to learn, he thought.

Shan did not mean to move slowly, but the unfamiliar setting awed him. The entire building opened a new world to him and brought understanding of an old world. He searched for Onja amid the confusing stimuli and located her in the topmost chambers. It surprised him that she had ascended the tower already. He had not been that far behind, and it should have taken her a long time to climb all the stairs, especially with her injury.

He had to catch up. When he entered the circular throne room, he saw the two golden thrones in the dusky gloom. Suddenly the centuries slipped away, and he could almost see Dacian sitting on his ancient seat of power. The throne room had no ceiling, and Shan looked up at the skylights in the tower's roof. Onja was up there and so was Elendra, but Shan now sensed a third being. It was a rys.

Is the spirit of Dacian locked in the tower like a Deamedron? Shan wondered.

A whole new fear assailed Shan. He had prepared mentally and physically to face Onja in a duel to the death, but could the Queen summon the power of her ally and husband? Shan peered into the top level of the tower. He saw Onja and Elendra beside a crystal sarcophagus, and Shan realized he finally beheld the resting-place of Dacian. From the scene he also determined Onja's terrible intentions.

Frantically, Shan cast about for the stairway, which was easy to find, but it would take him a long time to climb the endless flights. Onja could not possibly have gone that way. The potent flow of energy rising from the roots of the Rysamand tugged at Shan's mind. The natural force of the land had been concentrated in the tower by some long-forgotten skill, and Shan sensed its epicenter behind the thrones.

Seeing it all clearly now, Shan dashed between the thrones and into the alcove. Power rushed over him in a raging torrent. At first Shan struggled against it in his disorientation until he realized he was supposed to let it grab him. All at once Shan was flying upward through the dark shaft and experiencing one of the most exhilarating sensations of his life.

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Onja stumbled when Shan blasted his way into the tower. The floor of the high observatory shuddered from the magnitude of his forced entry. The deep spells of preservation that had protected the building from the elements began to slowly unravel.

Blue light flickered inside the crystal sarcophagus, and Dacian's voice rattled inside Onja's mind.

"Your end is coming," the entombed King whispered insidiously.

"Help me, Dacian. He has hurt me," Onja pleaded mentally.

The pain and desperation in her thoughts truly touched Dacian, but his opinion would not change.

"I will not help you to kill him," persisted the old King.

"Then see what your stubbornness has bred! Live with this on your precious conscience," Onja railed.

She flung Elendra at the sarcophagus. The girl did not react when she flopped into the hard crystal because her mind was numb with magic. Elendra laid her head on the crystal slab and her eyes were unseeing. Blue fire swirled vividly inside the sarcophagus as Dacian sensed the human child pressing on his prison.

Onja hobbled the remaining distance and leaned over Elendra. "I do not need your help," Onja hissed.

Her white-nailed hand seized Elendra by her long black hair, and she roughly pulled the girl upright. Elendra squeaked in pain, but she still had no grasp of her surroundings. The Queen started chanting the words of the dark spell that she had plotted for many long nights.

Furious that Shan had snuck away, Dreibrand tore down the Jingtun Road with Miranda and Quylan right behind him. Tytido followed with the Yentay, but Dreibrand hoped that Shan was right about violence not being necessary to occupy the city because they were approaching without caution or strategic plan.

The armies of the Temu and the Tacus advanced as well, but they had agreed to leave their forces outside the city and await Shan's invitation. Neither of the tribal leaders wanted to risk offending Shan when the rewards for loyalty were so close at hand.

Jingtun came into view and Miranda bolted ahead of the others. The Keep loomed above the city and she narrowed her eyes at the stronghold of her sorrow. She drew her sword, and the crystals on the ancient weapon glowed fiercely.

As Shan had predicted, the human invaders found the streets of Jingtun quite empty. Dreibrand urged Starfield to overtake Miranda again, and hundreds of hooves pounded the cobbled avenue as the Yentay followed him. The thunderous noise shook the abnormally silent city. When Dreibrand pulled alongside Miranda, they exchanged an excited glance. All of their risk and effort was about to pay off.

A lone rys appeared on the street and ran directly at them. The green uniform of the Jingtun Guard triggered a quick hate in Miranda as she recalled struggling against Onja's minions. She charged the rys, and although his knife was in its sheath, she swiped at him with her marvelous sword. He dodged in terror and lost his footing.

"No, Miranda!" Dreibrand yelled. He knew Miranda's temper could easily skip over any rational consequences. Shan did not want any rys killed if it was at all avoidable, and Dreibrand understood this wisdom. Shan had to be King of Jingtun, and killing rys would foster resentment.

But Miranda saw only one of Onja's servants sent to stop her.

Taf Ila recovered his footing with the speed of a rysling and jumped aside from Freedom's crashing hooves. Once more Miranda swung her weapon at him, but he was luckily out of range. He could feel the great magic in the strange sword, and encountering a human completely warded by battle magic startled him.

Finally, Dreibrand's pleas to leave the rys alone broke through to Miranda and she obeyed. By now Quylan and the Yentay had caught up, and warriors swarmed around the panting Captain of the Jingtun Guard. Taf Ila did not care because the glorious image of his daughter now filled his vision.

"Quylan," he gasped with infinite relief. "You are alive."

The young rys jumped from her mount and was instantly at her father's side. They embraced tightly in a rare show of intense and public rys emotion.

"I thought you had been killed. When the Deamedron came, I could no longer sense you," Taf Ila moaned. Now that he held his daughter he could feel the warding around her and began to understand.

Quylan very much wanted to speak with her father, who no doubt had many questions regarding her defection, but she could not waste the time.

Very business-like, she asked, "Have you seen Shan?"

"Yes. Only moments ago," Taf Ila replied.

"And Onja?" Dreibrand added.

Taf Ila shuddered at the memory of her appearance and insanity. "The Queen is terribly injured. She wanted her boat. I think she intends to go to the Tomb of Dacian," he answered.

"Where are my children?" Miranda demanded.

Involuntarily, Taf Ila cringed from the woman who had nearly killed him. He said, "In the Keep—but I ordered it evacuated. They should be coming out now."

"Show me," Miranda snarled without a trace of patience. Her sword twitched in her grip, indicating she meant to get her way.

Taf Ila groped for an answer, but his mind was too flustered by the stressful day to allow him to locate the whereabouts of the human children.

Quylan sensed his difficulty and said, "I will find them, Father. Go home."

"I must stay with you," Taf Ila protested.

"Go home," Quylan insisted. "I will be fine. Shan will protect us from Onja, and we need only collect this good woman's children."

Taf Ila noted the faith in his daughter's voice when she spoke Shan's name. He heard her affection too. Taf Ila could not help but wonder what had taken place between his daughter and Onja's challenger.

After a quick hug to her father, Quylan got on her horse. Already she concentrated on locating the children, and the bright lifeforce of the infant boy easily popped into her perception.

Assuming the girl was nearby as well, Quylan announced, "They are still in the Keep. Let us go."

Dreibrand signaled to his warriors and they continued without delay. Although Taf Ila had not agreed to stay behind, he was soon abandoned because he had no horse. He pressed against a building as three hundred human warriors hurried past him without any respect. Some of the warriors looked at him with disapproval. They only saw him as one of Onja's servants—a position that seemed no longer to command authority.

It was hard to face such rapid changes. Taf Ila hoped his daughter knew what she was doing.

What struck Dreibrand the most when he reached the Keep was the absence of Shan's tower. The rubble of the collapsed tower had been cleaned up and the damage to buildings in the vicinity had been repaired, so he knew it had happened months earlier.

The gates were open, but the courtyard was not deserted. About two dozen rys, both soldiers and domestic servants, stopped in their tracks when the humans rode in. Fear did not show easily on the faces of rys, but they looked nervous.

The Yentay flowed into the courtyard behind Dreibrand as he approached the rys at a slowing pace. Starfield lowered his head and the horse's nostrils fluttered with heavy breathing as he eyed the rys.

"We serve Lord Shan. We will secure the Keep in his name," Dreibrand announced boldly.

Sensing the warding around the humans, the rys stared at the invaders and they were afraid. Quylan moved forward to assure her people that Shan meant them no harm.

In the rys language she said, "We will not attack you. Shan only wants the Queen."

An older rys household servant found her voice. "You and Shan will only anger her with your treason. The Queen cannot be defeated."

Haughtily, Quylan said, "I would think Shan has already shown his power to you."

"I will not mix myself with your madness," spat the female servant, and she turned to leave.

The other rys in her company timidly followed. The human warriors rustled with indignation, but Dreibrand held up his hand to belay any attempts to stop the rys.

"Let them continue. As was said, our business is not with them," Dreibrand said. "Let us move into the Keep."

"Is Onja in there?" Miranda asked Quylan.

"No. Few rys remain inside," Quylan answered.

"Then are my children locked up?" Miranda demanded, wondering why her children had been left behind in the evacuation.

Quylan hesitated. She noticed that her assumption about both children being inside the Keep had been hasty. Without mentioning anything, Quylan hoped that a warding hid Elendra from her mind's eye. Many places in the Keep were heavily warded.

Quylan quickly dismounted and entered the Keep. Dreibrand and Miranda ran after her, accompanied by Tytido and a squad of warriors.

Once inside the shadowy high-ceilinged corridors of the Keep, Quylan probed the levels for Elendra. Her steps quickened with panic as she failed to locate the girl.

Quylan guided them rapidly into the private levels. At the end of a long hall Miranda recognized the form of her son beside a prone rys female. Her anticipation broke with a scream of both delight and terror, and Miranda dashed to the boy. Miranda found the extra speed effortlessly despite already gasping for breath and sweating heavily after the long run.

She snatched Esseldan in a fierce hug. Being rudely awakened made Esseldan cry, which roused the nanny. Joy rang in Miranda's ears and she did not even hear the crying, but when the female rys stirred from the floor, Miranda hissed defensively and withdrew a step.

The nanny squealed at the sight of humans, but Quylan stepped in to prevent her from fleeing.

"Where is the girl?" Quylan asked urgently in her native tongue.

"The Queen took her," the nanny said.

"Where?" Quylan snapped. She did not want to admit that she could not find the girl on her own.

"I do not know," the nanny whimpered, fearing Quylan would treat her the same way Onja had.

"What are you saying? Where is my daughter?" Miranda demanded apprehensively. She had a terrible feeling. The elation of retrieving Esseldan was being diminished by Elendra's absence.

Quylan's eyes pierced the female servant, but she believed the nanny had answered honestly.

"Onja took her," Quylan confessed, unable to look at the woman.

"What?" Miranda shrieked. She shifted Esseldan into the grip of one arm. Subconsciously she noted that the boy was much heavier than the last time she had held him. "You said they were here."

"I thought both of them were," Quylan defended.

Miranda shot Quylan a hostile and disappointed look before focusing on the nanny.

"Where did Onja take Elendra?" Miranda yelled.

The human mother frightened the nanny, who would have bolted if Quylan had not held her arm firmly. "I do not know," the nanny wailed.

Miranda instantly rejected the answer, and her free hand shot out and wickedly slapped the female rys. The abuse shocked Quylan who released the unfortunate nanny, but Miranda struck the servant again and again, driving her down the corridor. Finally the nanny tried to defend herself with magic, but her heat spells snapped uselessly around the warded woman, who did not relent.

Quylan had never imagined that a human could assault a rys with such success and vehemence, and shock briefly prevented her from intervening.

"Tell me or I will kill you!" Miranda threatened.

Dreibrand took charge, realizing the nanny was probably undeserving of the attack. He put his arms around Miranda and her son and pulled her away from the nanny. It pleased Dreibrand to see the boy, even though he still cried with fear. Long dark curls hung around Esseldan's face and the boy was well grown and in good health.

"Where is Elendra? This servant will not tell me," Miranda moaned. After her explosion of anger, she leaned into Dreibrand's strong embrace.

"We will find her," Dreibrand soothed.

Quylan emerged from her surprise and stopped the sobbing nanny who was scrambling away. "Please tell us," Quylan urged.

"I do not know," the nanny insisted.

While still holding Miranda, Dreibrand turned back to Tytido. "Keep searching," he ordered. The warriors spread out, exploring each chamber as they went.

"Quylan use your magic to find her," Miranda begged.

"I am trying, but she must be warded. I cannot see everywhere," Quylan admitted.

Reluctantly, Dreibrand reasoned, "Taf Ila said Onja probably went to the Tomb of Dacian. If she took Elendra, they must be across the lake by now."

"No. She must be here," Miranda protested, although inwardly she believed him.

"I will go across the lake," Dreibrand decided. "Shan must be there too."

"I am going too," Miranda declared.

"Stay here with Esseldan," Dreibrand said firmly.

For an instant Miranda wavered, but she knew time was too precious to waste on prolonged decisions. She did not want to relinquish her renewed hold on Esseldan, but she had to find her daughter and she could not carry him into peril.

Miranda squeezed the boy in a fearful farewell and then forced him into Quylan's unsuspecting arms.

"Promise me you will protect him until I get back," Miranda said.

Quylan had never held a child or a new rysling, and the energy of the young life directly in her grasp startled her.

Staring at the bright child, Quylan said, "I cannot. I must go with you to help you."

"No. I promised Shan I would not allow you near Onja when he confronted her. It is his wish because he cares about you. Now keep Esseldan safe, I beg you." Miranda gazed at her son with sad eyes and softly added, "And if I do not come back, please give him to a good human family to raise."

Although overwhelmed, Quylan nodded, and Miranda swiftly spun away.

"Stay here with your son," Dreibrand persisted hotly.

Miranda scoffed, "Look at yourself. You can barely put your own boots on. You cannot go alone."

Miranda stalked down the hall, and Dreibrand followed. He seethed from her words, but the pain in his beaten body agreed with her assessment.

They retrieved their mounts in the courtyard, and Dreibrand informed the rest of the Yentay of the reason for his departure and left orders to continue occupying the Keep. They galloped out of the courtyard too desperate to think. The trail along the lakeshore was not difficult to find because it was commonly traveled near the city. The trail only became fainter as they rounded the water toward the ancient structure known as the Tomb of Dacian. This side of the shore was forbidden to all.

In the soft soil by the shore Dreibrand noted the imprints of wide hooves and guessed that Shan had come this way. When they reached the tower, the presence of Shan's white horse confirmed that Shan was there, and that Onja must be in the tower as well. Shan's powerful steed pawed restlessly at the frost-killed grass that was out of place in the mild season.

The two humans dismounted, and their horses eagerly joined the familiar companion of the rys horse. Dreibrand and Miranda regarded the tower apprehensively. The lofty stone structure had a forlorn and uninviting feel, which humans termed as haunted. The blasted entrance revealed a dark gaping corridor that was foreboding. Blue crystals blinked inside like mysterious cat eyes in the night.

"Maybe Shan has found Elendra, and Onja is already defeated," Dreibrand offered.

"I hope you are right," Miranda said and started inside the ruined doors, picking her way over the debris.

They drew their swords and the glow from the crystals drove back the blackness of the Tomb of the Dacian, allowing them to see the details in the corridor. Relief sculpture lined the walls and bright mosaics on the arched ceiling were just visible. The designs appeared foreign because of their antiquity, and revealed a Jington of a different style, a delicate style that even had a sense of frivolity. This place contrasted to the heavy ponderous architecture of the Keep.

The tower groaned cantankerously, and Dreibrand and Miranda drew together fearfully. Hearing tons of stone shift made them duck involuntarily.

Miranda pressed onward although she was convinced the building would crash down at any moment.

They entered the throne room, where the daylight leaked down from the distant roof. When they looked up the hollow center of the tower, they had to shield their eyes because an unexpected flash of light burst out from the highest level. A blue haze lingered on their retinas.

Cautiously they squinted upward again and saw more flashes and heard the strange rumble of the magic battle echo down the tower.

"So much for Onja being defeated already," Miranda lamented.

"We have to get up there and help Shan," Dreibrand said. He ran to various dark doorways until he found the stairs.

When Miranda trotted to his side, he was contemplating the steps that quickly disappeared into lightless heights. Dreibrand glanced up to the roof and frowned as he estimated the many flights.

"It is the only way," Miranda said.

~

Onja had been building her spell methodically and her chanting was becoming louder with every syllable. From the nether regions of the deepest trance, she summoned the power for her evil purpose.

When her lips stopped moving, her mind traveled back to her physical surroundings and her body was bathed in pulsing blue light. All during her spellmaking, Dacian had begged her to stop but his agonized pleas had not reached her callous ears. And now that she could hear him, his distress gave her pleasure.

Onja's free hand crept to a wrist sheath concealed in her sleeve, and she extracted a tiny dagger. With one last word of dark magic, she yanked Elendra's head back and slashed the child's throat. Blood spilled across the crystal sarcophagus, blotting out the image of Dacian's face. Onja gasped with pleasure and she held the dying body tightly.

The dagger clattered to the floor, and Onja plunged her hand into the thick blood pooling over the sarcophagus. Blood dripped down the sides of the crystal coffin and onto the floor. Onja wiped the red life-fluid over her torn face and moaned as the blood soaked into her skin. Her flesh returned to a state of youthful smoothness, but the smears of blood remained on her skin.

Greedily, Onja rubbed more blood on her face and neck. She stole the vitality of the child to renew her body. The pain in her foot receded as the flesh miraculously grew back.

Not only did Onja repair her flesh, but her gruesome spell returned her to her magical prime, if only temporarily.

Elendra's body slipped to the floor as Onja cried out with triumph. It felt so good to have relief from the degradation that the centuries had inflicted on her. She took several deep breaths and then giggled with hungry anticipation. Shan was coming and he had no idea what waited for him. She prepared to greet him as he rose through the levitation shaft.

Shan's flight ended abruptly, and the pleasure of riding the wonderful energy was replaced with

the sick sensation of standing over twenty stories of nothingness. He jumped out of the levitation shaft and probed the top level with his senses.

He had intended to burst into Onja's sanctuary with the supreme confidence of the conqueror, but instead Onja had disappeared from his perception. Panic threatened his poise. Somehow, Onja had warded herself in the few seconds he had spent in the levitation shaft.

She will not trap me, Shan commanded himself bitterly, remembering his awful defeat in his youth. There would be no mercy between them this time.

He doubled the shield spell around his body, and beads of sweat started on his forehead. Believing that Onja would reveal herself eventually, Shan approached the glowing sarcophagus.

He saw Elendra crumpled beside the crystal coffin, and the volume of blood sprayed around her was impossible to ignore. Grief tore at his soul. Without hope he stooped by the body and turned Elendra over.

Shan gasped when he looked upon her slashed throat. The cooling empty body horrified Shan, who remembered idle days spent talking to the marvelous child. Gazing at her pallid face, he saw Miranda's features in the girl.

Heartless laughter that would make a starving carnivore whimper in terror replaced the tragic silence. Shan sprang to his feet, but he did not see Onja.

How did this day of triumph turn into such a nightmare? Shan wondered.

Cold fingers brushed Shan's cheekbone, and the subtle scrape of nails tickled his flesh in a parody of affection. Shan jumped like a scared cat and Onja materialized in front of him. Her ability to be invisible shocked him. Now that she had dropped her magic concealment, Shan sensed a change in her. Onja's powers were much greater as if the afflictions of her great age had been removed.

Truly awesome power bathed her being, and all of Shan's assumptions about Onja's magical deterioration in the last few centuries were incorrect.

"How do you like my spell?" Onja giggled and licked blood from her lip.

A response was impossible to muster. Shan had thought he had become immune to her evilness long ago, but now he realized he had never known its magnitude.

"Too bad you did not think of it yourself," Onja sneered. "Sacrificing a few of your beloved humans might have given you the power to defeat me."

"I still have that power," Shan whispered. He thought of Elendra and begged the cosmos for the strength to avenge the girl.

Onja faded out in a shimmer of energy. "I can make you see or not see anything," her voice echoed in the high chamber.

Shan struggled to reclaim all of his faculties. Onja could not be allowed to manipulate his perceptions. The *rys* Queen reappeared in a reclining position on top of Dacian's sarcophagus, and she spread more blood on her chest and arched her back lewdly.

"When I sacrifice you, I will absorb all of your power, and then I will be Goddess to all of the world," Onja declared.

Shan recognized that she was working her confidence into a frenzy, and it needed to be interrupted.

"You are not a Goddess!" Shan shouted and he found the courage to step closer.

Although the beauty had returned to Onja's face, it was marred by the drying blood spread across it. Bits of reddish brown streaked the ends of her white hair, highlighting her like the butcher that she was.

Onja lighted onto the floor. Her mismatched boots straddled Elendra's head, but Onja was impervious to the former vessel of her new vitality. She raised her hand menacingly, clearly intending to demonstrate her God-like powers to the impudent and ignorant Shan. There had been a reason long ago when the humans had bowed to her in permanent devotion.

A horrendous blast of killing magic exploded around Shan. At first the strength of the spell made him feel like an inexperienced youngster again, but Shan endured her assault and forced her magic back.

His defense perturbed Onja. With the reclaimed potency of her old powers, she had expected to dispatch him easily.

Now Shan attacked, and they became locked in mortal battle. Perhaps Shan did not have the wealth of knowledge from the ancients to draw upon, but he was a magic master now in his own right. Releasing the Deamedron had been his masterwork.

~

Dreibrand and Miranda took a deep breath before starting up the stairs. It did not take long until Dreibrand's chest throbbed with nagging discomfort. The tender tissue around his broken ribs deeply resented the pounding of his lungs. Miranda pushed herself relentlessly, demanding that her body give the endurance she had won back since her injuries the year before.

Gasping for breath, they eventually had to stop halfway to the top. Dreibrand leaned against the wall and succumbed to the toll his efforts had taken on his body. So much physical activity neutralized the healing process his friends had set in motion.

When he had the wind to speak, Dreibrand said, "When we get to the top, I will attack Onja and you look for Elendra."

Miranda nodded but did not spare her air on any words. Pushing her bow back in place over her shoulder, she forced her aching legs to climb more steps. Her determination encouraged Dreibrand, who followed at an equal pace.

No daylight greeted them when they staggered up the last flight. Without the luminescence from their swords they would have been in complete blackness. A heavy bronze door sealed the portal to the observatory. The air was impossibly thick and stale in this place that had been shut away for centuries, and sweat channeled down both of their bodies.

In the blue glow, Dreibrand examined the door, which had no handle or visible hinges. With a grunt he pressed his shoulder against the metal. When the door did not budge, Miranda joined him. A tremor shook the tower, interrupting their efforts. At the top of the tower the force of the tremor became amplified, and the disturbance sent them off balance. Dreibrand caught Miranda, and they clung to each other as the old stones fretted. From the shadows came the rattle of falling pebbles bouncing down many steps.

This instability fueled their urgency, and they doubled their efforts, which were finally rewarded with the grating of moving metal against stone. Miranda rejoiced that the door was not bolted from the other side. If she had been locked out, Miranda was certain she would have gone irretrievably mad.

"Get your sword up," Dreibrand panted as he prepared to force the door the rest of the way. Miranda obeyed and stepped back with her gleaming weapon high. She almost hoped Onja would leap at her.

Dreibrand stumbled out of the stairwell when the door unexpectedly gave up its resistance. Miranda bounded protectively in front of him, but he quickly recovered and got his sword out. A hot wind swirled inside the domed observatory, and a vortex of blue energy filled the far side of the chamber.

Leaning over Miranda's shoulder, Dreibrand shouted over the clamor, "They do not know we are here. They can only see each other."

The glare strained Miranda's eyes, but she managed to discern Shan and Onja inside the obscuring storm of their magic. It was impossible to tell who fared the best.

Staying near the wall, they crept around the circular chamber. The great crystal box that encased Dacian came into view, and Miranda saw her daughter lying next to the sarcophagus.

"Elendra!" she screamed and bolted toward her.

Dreibrand took this as his cue to intervene, and he rushed at Onja with his sword poised. The long

months of festering hatred for the rys queen inspired his charge, and he thirsted for his revenge. Now he would not have to feel helpless about Miranda's suffering.

The dark liquid blotches surrounding Elendra did not register as blood to Miranda until she arrived at her daughter's side. Still in denial, Miranda grabbed Elendra, but the girl's head lolled uselessly. One prolonged sob choked Miranda, and the bloody gash across the little throat consumed her mind.

Unbearable emotion assaulted Miranda, and she wished her body would stop functioning so she could die. She sobbed her daughter's name and clasped the corpse to her bosom. The cold body and slick feel of half dried blood were the ultimate torture.

When Dreibrand entered the blue aura surrounding Onja, his movements slowed and he felt very heavy. Dreibrand fought the sluggishness as his vision became watery and Onja's image began to blur. The gravity of a whole new world smothered his battered body, creating a unique strain on his internal injuries.

Dreibrand rallied his momentum and struggled ahead. With only a few steps remaining, he mustered a leap and aimed his sword for a decapitation. While executing the attack, Dreibrand saw his sword fall low because of the strange forces tugging at his body, but it was immensely gratifying to watch the blade cross Onja's torso.

The sword stroke should have sliced through the unarmored body and allowed Dreibrand to fly by the tumbling victim. Instead the weapon impacted across Onja's breast, and the steel issued a metallic yelp as it bounced off her body. Flesh that looked soft and vital, even sweating with liquid fragility, resisted the fine edge like diamonds. The repelled sword knocked Dreibrand backward, and he reeled away from the Queen.

The intrusion of Dreibrand into the battle shattered the concentration between the opponents, and the intensity of the energy between Onja and Shan diminished until they were separated into their own auras.

Shan launched an attack, thankful for the opportunity that Dreibrand gave him. During this battle Shan had found Onja to be unbelievably powerful, and only her gruesome sacrifice explained her enhanced ability.

Onja absorbed Shan's attack and still kept her attention on Dreibrand. The ineffectiveness of the attack depressed Shan, who sensed that Onja was about to obliterate Dreibrand.

Shan shouted angrily and cast a shield around his friend. Coupled with the strength of the warding supplied by the sword, Dreibrand weathered Onja's fiery blast. Shan's assistance came at high personal cost because he was exposed after shielding Dreibrand, and Onja took the shot.

Her bolt threw Shan against the decorative stone edge on the inner rim of the observatory. The blast from Onja reopened the gash on his shoulder and the fresh blood sizzled against his split skin. Shan counterattacked with vicious denial.

The casual look of self-satisfaction slipped from Onja's face when Shan's assault hit her. She stepped away from Dreibrand and a large gash opened up on her chest. The sight elated Shan, who realized that Onja made herself look uninjured to demoralize her attackers. The enchanted sword had hurt her, and Shan felt redeemed.

The wound disappeared from Onja's body, but her illusion had been revealed. Dreibrand waded in for a second shot. But he did not have the element of surprise this time and Onja paralyzed him with the expert grip of her mind.

The adversaries hesitated in a stalemate of shielding magic. Shan focused on freeing Dreibrand and detecting Onja's next move. Onja knew Shan was overextended trying to protect his wretched ally, and she had to savor the moment.

"Oh Shan, just surrender, and I will let him go. Reward him one last time for his pitiful service," Onja teased. She attacked Dreibrand and Shan simultaneously, and Shan shielded himself and Dreibrand valiantly, but he could feel himself weakening.

"You know this has always been your problem," Onja criticized. "You fail because you care for others. I tried to raise you right, but I never could break you of this destructive habit."

Like a maestro beckoning an orchestra, Onja directed her final attack at Shan. She knew she had

him cracked now.

Dreibrand jerked out of his paralysis, and Onja's horrified scream filled his ears. The blue Queen looked in shock at an arrow piercing her forearm. The intense pain of the arrow lodged between both bones of her arm did not bother her as much as suffering the indignity of being injured by a conventional weapon.

It was only an arrow, without charm or enchantment, and it had slipped by her guard like a mosquito.

Onja turned her head and saw the next arrow rolling off Miranda's bow. This one plunged through Onja's neck and smashed through her upper spine. All of her attack magic failed her, and Shan felt her awesome power slide away.

Miranda flung her bow to the floor and pulled out her sword. The ancient rys weapon gleamed with thirst, and Miranda stormed toward her enemy. Onja fell to her knees as her motor functions failed. She tried to speak, but she could only gurgle blood.

"Did you think the blood of my daughter would protect you from me?" Miranda demanded incredulously and sank the sword into Onja's stomach.

Miranda grabbed Onja by her thick locks of hair and shook the female rys while she twisted the sword. Onja would not die easily, and she lingered on the blade.

With triumphant distaste Miranda flung Onja backward and ripped the sword out in a spray of purple blood. By now Shan and Dreibrand had approached, and they watched in awe as Onja crashed onto the marble floor. The Queen's body twitched and her lips still moved silently.

"I will finish her," Shan whispered, and he reached out with his mind to seize her irascible soul.

A severe tremor rocked the tower, sending them off their footing. A thunderous crack shook the air, and the crystal sarcophagus exploded into sharp chunks. Dreibrand grabbed Miranda and shielded her from the flying shards. An intense flash of blue energy consumed their vision momentarily and the floor continued to quake.

As the energy ebbed, their surroundings became discernible again. From the wreckage of the sarcophagus a thin wobbly figure groped out of the rubble. The emerging rys was impossibly thin and nearly bald—only a few wisps of white hair fluttered from the blue scalp. Beautiful silver armor hung on the skeletal body although it seemed impossible that the emaciated rys could bear the weight of it. With blind clouded eyes staring ahead, the rys swayed to his feet and staggered toward the intruders of his tomb.

Astounded by the ancient rys, Shan recalled the withered blue face from his vision in the Jington Pass and knew that he looked upon Dacian.

Dacian was much more than a Deamedron as Shan had feared. The old King was actually alive.

When Dacian reached Onja, she clawed at his feet with her uninjured arm. Her insistent heart pumped thick blood out of her opened torso as she writhed in voiceless agony.

Overwhelmed by the sight of Dacian, Shan dropped to his knees, humiliated with shame. Dacian himself had caught Shan about to break the Last Law.

"My King," Shan breathed.

The tower shivered in its slow disintegration, and a piece of masonry fell from the inner edge of the observatory and crashed to the distant throne room below.

Dacian flexed and unflexed his stringy fingers, and his narrow nostrils flared as he drew in air after long centuries of forced hibernation.

Shan clutched his head when he felt the irresistible intrusion of the great king.

"Rise good son of Jington. Do not fear me," Dacian commanded.

Shan let his hands drop to his sides, and the pain of the mental intrusion disappeared when he stopped fighting it.

"My vocal chords have withered and this is the only way I can talk to you," Dacian explained.

"You are alive," Shan said, too shocked to speak telepathically.

"Onja locked me away up here. I am not even sure how long. When Onja's body was broken, her spells were broken too. Only then could I free myself from this prison."

Onja squirmed and pleaded mentally for Dacian to help her. A wide pool of blood spread around the Queen, but she did not die.

Feeling reassurance and benevolence from Dacian, Shan returned to his feet and pleaded his case.

"My King, she must die," Shan said. "Onja is evil and torments rys and humans for no reason."

Dacian acknowledged Shan's assessment with a slow nodding of his head. He knew more than the others the extent of Onja's cruelties. "Shan do not condemn yourself for trying to kill her. My Law was meant to protect others from her. Tell the woman I am sorry about the girl."

Shan glanced to Miranda, who waited with Dreibrand. They did not know how to react to the strange rys, and they waited for a sign from Shan. The tower trembled in its decay, and dust rained from the ceiling. The glass in the skylights began to crack.

"Wait for me. I can get us down quickly," Shan said.

"Kill her!" Dreibrand shouted impatiently. With Onja's defeat imminent he did not want to die in a crumbling building.

Shan returned his attention to Dacian. "I must do this now, my King. Then I will get us all out of here. The effects of time are catching up with this tower."

Dacian shook his head, and Shan thought he would not be allowed to dispatch Onja.

"Leave the ugly task to me, Shan. I will spare you the guilt of killing your own kind. I have suffered with that sin too much to let you share it with me. I will stay here and die with Onja in these ruins," Dacian said.

For the sake of speed, Shan collected his wits enough to speak mentally. He argued, "No. Come be King of Jington. I can feel your power, and you are the stronger."

"But I want to die," Dacian insisted. "And I deserve to die. I cannot bear to contemplate the genocide I allowed in Nufal anymore. Although Onja seduced me to her evil purposes, I am still as guilty."

"No my King. Our people still honor you. You are an example of what is great in rys," Shan said.

But Shan's reverence only made Dacian sadder and he was not tempted. *"Then leave me in my place in history. Onja has held Jingtun in darkness too long. Shan, go be King. You are what is great in rys, especially because you only had this example to guide your learning,"* he concluded and kicked Onja's clinging hand from his foot. *"There is much knowledge besides what Onja showed you."*

"I know," Shan whispered. Dacian's endorsement of his kingship had honored him deeply.

The tower continued to rumble its warning of collapse, and Miranda cautiously moved past Dacian and retrieved the body of her daughter. Because Shan apparently had the situation under control, Dreibrand followed her. He had not seen Elendra's sprawled body before, and it crushed his hope. When Miranda scooped the girl into her arms and the white face hung over the gashed throat, Dreibrand's heart broke. He could only imagine how terrible this was for Miranda, and he remembered every time Miranda had urged for speed on their campaign to Jingtun. He had tried so hard.

"Miranda..." He wanted to apologize, but there were no words.

The bereft mother lifted her daughter as if she was still alive. Miranda's eyes reflected denial. Her emotion had exploded against Onja, but now that the Queen lay in a pool of her own blood, Miranda had no outlet.

Shan saw his human friends collecting the dead girl, and the punishing image would stay with him through every century. The groan of stone feeling the rush of centuries all at once commanded him to hurry.

"My King, I must see her die or I must do it now," Shan said.

"Yes of course," Dacian agreed. Kneeling beside Onja, he lifted her head into his hands. Pale blue sparks flashed in her eyes, but they were barely reminiscent of her former power.

After seeing the great deal of blood and gore that Miranda had torn from Onja, Shan wondered how Onja could still live, and he conveyed his thoughts to Dacian.

Stroking her blood-matted hair and arranging it nicely over a shoulder, Dacian explained, "Onja was the most amazing rys. Powerful and free. Once I worshipped her power and felt blessed by her indulgence of me. But despite her awesome power, Onja cannot see the portal to the next world. Her soul does not know where to go, and her life clings to her body with the tenacity of the scrawniest pine on the highest rock."

A whole section of skylight and roof crashed down, but luckily landed on the opposite side of the observatory. A strong wind broke through the opening and began to moan down the length of the tower.

"My King please! I must get my friends out of here," Shan said.

Although the conventional sight had faded from Dacian's eyes long ago, he could see Onja in his mind and it felt good to touch her face. He had spent long years craving insane revenge on Onja, followed by long years of missing his wife.

Shan heard Dacian ramble in his mind. *"Do you know what the worst part is for me? I really loved her, and I believed she loved me. But when she imprisoned me and sapped my power for herself, I had to accept her falseness. The tragedy of knowing that every tender moment, every sweet word had only been constructed to tighten her grip on me is unbearable."*

Tugging at Miranda, Dreibrand headed for the stairwell. He watched the cracking roof and knew it was probably impossible to dodge the falling debris, but he had to try now.

Shan saw him and called, "Dreibrand, you will never make it. Come here. I can get us down!"

"Then do it!" Dreibrand hollered and altered his course.

"She must die now! I must see it," Shan urged.

"I will do it. Do not harm your own kind. May the Age of Shan begin!" The words thundered in Shan's brain, and he saw the spell swell around Dacian. A wretched wail of banshee hostility screeched from the depths of Onja's soul. Even Dreibrand and Miranda tried to block their ears from the noise. They did not know it, but every living soul in the Jingtun Valley heard Onja's parting scream of horror. And across the lake, the Tatatook stopped its agonized wailing and died on the highest roof of the Keep.

A sphere of white flame engulfed Dacian and Onja, consuming their flesh. Shan watched their bodies fall into ashes. The skulls were the last to go, but they finally collapsed into a fine powder. Painfully, Shan watched their souls fly through the fabric of the world until Dacian dragged Onja into the place where she could not see.

When they were gone, Shan felt a staggering quiet descend on his soul. His enemy was no more.

The King of the Rysamand stared at the dusty traces left on the floor. Even Onja's blood had been burned away.

"Shan!"

Dreibrand's voice pulled Shan out of his trance, and he once again felt the instability of the floor.

"This way," Shan responded, springing into action.

They followed the rys to the opening in the floor, and Dreibrand looked at Shan dubiously.

"No time for the stairs," Shan said.

"You cannot fly," Dreibrand argued.

"Trust me," Shan insisted, and he looked to Miranda. Clutching her dead child, she seemed indifferent. Jumping off a high place had a certain appeal to her right now.

"Hold me tight and step off when I do," Shan commanded.

The accelerated ruin of the tower left them no option for debate, and Dreibrand grabbed Shan and Miranda. Shan held them with all of his strength and pulled them with him into the levitation shaft.

A large portion of roof crashed over the shaft just as they fell through the hole. Broken tile and stone pelted their heads as they descended. The sensation of freefall revived Miranda's will to live, and she screamed wildly.

Shan had to concentrate on compensating for the additional weight. He had never gone down before and it was difficult to judge speed. When he halted the rapid descent, they felt their weight buoyed as if they hit a net and Shan managed a rather soft landing.

The tumultuous rain of stone in the throne room demanded a dash for the door. Dreibrand and Miranda pried their stiff hands from Shan and they launched into a run.

They flew out the blasted entrance of the Tomb of Dacian and did not stop until they were out of the tower's shadow. Exhausted and dazed they flung themselves onto the lakeshore. The tower continued to rumble, and the crash of collapsing stonework repeated itself many times. Gradually its thundering ceased once the tower was satisfied with its new silhouette. The structure retained two thirds of its height, but half of one side had collapsed inside itself.

In the new quiet, the lake sparkled in the setting sun. Even the ponderous presence of the Rysamand seemed awed by the day's events. Two powerful rys had departed the realm, and an age had ended.

Miranda sat up next to the body of her daughter. Ignoring the blood, she examined Elendra's appearance as if she were still alive and noted that the girl had grown. But the tragedy of the halted youth could not be blocked out for long. Miranda soon shuddered with grief and blamed herself bitterly. Every decision had been wrong, and she had failed her daughter.

After catching his wind, Dreibrand saw the empty look in Miranda's eyes and he decided to get his cloak from his saddlebags. His mind felt foggy and every step required increasing conviction. Eventually, he returned with his cloak to wrap Elendra.

He patiently stood over Miranda until her bloodshot eyes turned up to him. She saw the cloak in his

arms and realized that he intended to make it a shroud. Dreibrand watched the denial, mixed with a desire to retreat into madness, cross her face, but her practical mind would not let her hide. Miranda knew how to cope with bad things, but this was the worst. This pain would be fresh for a long time.

Dreibrand sensed her consent and stooped to begin the shrouding. Miranda wrung her hands uselessly. She wanted to help him. It seemed odd to watch him tend to Elendra, but Miranda could not physically lend assistance.

"You do not need to see this anymore," he said, but he meant the comment as much for himself.

As the fabric swaddled the child, he found no relief in covering the soft-cheeked face of the once energetic girl.

Shan had observed the sad scene from a distance, giving the humans their privacy.

When he chose to approach them, he timidly said, "Miranda, I had no idea this would happen. I could not conceive of such an evil thing."

With an eerie composure Miranda asked, "What did she do to her?"

Shan was reluctant to answer, but Miranda's gaze demanded a response. "Children have such energy—a lifeforce so close to the realm of creation. Onja devised a spell to steal this energy from Elendra. I did not know such a thing was possible. I could not think in such a way. Onja did this before I reached her. I had no chance to stop her."

Miranda recalled Onja fawning over the little girl and Elendra's clear adoration of the Queen. It hurt to know that Elendra had loved and trusted her murderer. Miranda wondered if her daughter had thought about her in the end, or if Elendra had simply believed Onja's lies about abandonment.

The sorrow was hideous and crippled Miranda's mind. Shan sensed her anguish and decided to ease her shock and suffering. His warm presence wrapped Miranda. The familiar relief surprised her at first, until she remembered. Once in her time of dying on the glacier, Shan had come to her and eased her pain. With his love the ryls had kept her warm and begged her to live.

The strangling pain in Miranda's chest receded. Although she understood that Shan could only relieve her temporarily, she appreciated his soothing influence.

"Perhaps nothing I could have done would have saved her," Miranda murmured.

"Do not blame yourself," Shan offered. "The blame belongs to me and my kind."

"I have already punished the guilty," Miranda growled, but she felt as defeated as Onja.

"And the guilty have punished us," Dreibrand stated.

He moved beside Miranda and put an arm around her shoulders. "We need to go now," he said. "Your son is waiting."

Miranda wiped the tears from her dusty face. She had forgotten about Esseldan. Although Dreibrand had meant to comfort Miranda by reminding her of the one child she still had, he actually sent her into another panic.

After losing her daughter, Miranda suddenly feared that her son would be next. She intensely regretted leaving the boy at the Keep.

Let that not be a mistake too! she thought frantically.

"Now. We must go now," she said.

Shan nodded. "Yes, I need to get back to the city."

"What is happening there?" Dreibrand asked. He dreaded that the Temu had started trouble.

"I am too tired to look," Shan confessed.

Dreibrand now noticed that Shan was reeling on his feet and his shoulder was a mess.

But Shan did not want to take any attention from Miranda, who needed comfort the most. Silently he mouthed the words that he would manage, and Dreibrand understood.

Gently, Dreibrand said, "Miranda, you ride back with Shan. I will be right behind you."

Unable to speak the question, Miranda glanced helplessly at her shrouded daughter.

"I will bring her," Dreibrand whispered.

Woodenly, Miranda left with Shan. Dreibrand trailed behind them, leading his horse. He had carefully draped Elendra's body over the saddle and with his heartbreaking spoil of war, he marched around the lakeshore. As he rounded the end of the lake, Dreibrand faced Jingtun, and his numb mind realized that he had won the war.

A beaded tassel tapped against Kalek's armor as he paced with agitation. He had responded promptly to Shan's invitation to the Keep, but now the rys kept him waiting too long.

Kalek sat down and tried to retain his dignity, maybe even collect his thoughts. It was hard to know what to do. Staring at the floor, he saw a vase smashed in the corner. The Keep had not been ransacked, but it had received a rough going over when the Yentay had occupied the building three days ago.

The King of the Temu considered storming through the corridors until he found Shan, but he forced prudence upon his impatience. He had to think of his tribe and losing an ally like Shan was not an option. Sullenly, Kalek realized that Shan kept him waiting for precisely that reason. He was glad no one could see him waiting like a servant.

When the door finally opened, it startled him. He jumped to his feet as Quylan gracefully entered. She wore fine white garments and looked every bit the princess of her race.

She announced that Shan would see him now and guided him across the hall and into a well-furnished chamber. Shan greeted Kalek warmly and ushered him toward a set of sumptuous chairs. As Kalek sat down, Shan softly thanked Quylan and asked her to wait outside. Shan saw the sweet twitch of a smile at the corner of her lips and he worried that he was already dependent on her.

"Lord Shan, you look in better health already," Kalek observed. He had only seen Shan briefly the night that Onja had been defeated, and the rys had been a wreck.

Shan touched his shoulder. Beneath the new set of clothes the wound remained, but much of his stamina had returned. Shan had taken two whole days to rest deeply, and he had needed it, but he could not ignore his affairs any longer. Men at the end of a long warpath needed to see their rewards.

"How is your leg?" Shan inquired.

"It is better but still hurts, Lord Shan," Kalek answered.

"In private there is no need for you to use a title with me. Taischek and I used no such formalities with each other," Shan said and he settled into a chair.

This gesture of goodwill surprised Kalek.

Shan continued, "Forgive the wait, Kalek. As I am sure you noticed, the Keep is a very busy place. Rys are coming to the Keep to express their support of my kingship. Most of them come, I think, just to see if Onja is really gone."

"It does seem hard to believe," Kalek said. "My whole life she was there. She was everything. Now, rys come to my camp, bringing gifts of food and drink for my warriors. And maybe that is even harder to believe."

Shan smiled. "My kind see that a new age of enlightenment is upon them."

Kalek fell silent. Considering his unpleasant reprimand days earlier in the forest, he was wary of the friendly conversation that he was having with Shan now.

"Do you require refreshment?" Shan asked, but Kalek declined with a quick shake of his head. He was too anxious to hear what Shan had to say.

"To begin, I owe you an apology," Shan said. "My temper fared badly with the pressures of war, and I was not the friend I should have been to the Temu. I regret my fight with Taischek, and you had every right to be angry with me. I realize you lashed out at my general out of your anger with me."

An apology from the rys was the last thing Kalek expected and he hesitated to even accept it.

"Shan, I was never angry with you. My problems were specifically with Veta. The Temu are a proud and strong people and we will not share our power with foreigners," Kalek explained.

"You told me before the reasons for your anger, and I remember them. But I would choose to put this trouble behind us. I would prefer that my friendship with the Temu endure. Therefore, it is time for you to collect on your father's investment," Shan said.

Behind Kalek a cold hinge on a cabinet door snapped open. It startled him and he jumped out of his chair.

"I have been getting you with that one since you were a boy," Shan chuckled as he walked toward the cabinet that covered a whole wall.

The young Temu King frowned, not amused by the rys's simple trick or his comment. However, the contents of the cabinet soon displaced Kalek's annoyance. Chests filled every shelf, and when Shan lugged one forward, it scraped heavily across the wood.

While opening the lid, Shan said, "Ten of these contain gold. Upon inspection you will see that this gold is double what I borrowed from Taischek, as was agreed upon."

The harvest yellow color of gold filled the bronze-bound chest, and Kalek dipped his fingers into the pieces of metal. Most of them were coins minted by the Temu, and some of them were centuries old—a solemn reminder of the generations that brought tribute to Jingtun. Some pieces were unfinished gold discs.

"Ten more chests contain silver and the remaining ten hold jewels, some cut, some uncut," Shan explained.

With speechless excitement, Kalek browsed the shelf and opened a chest full of jewels. The glitter of prism colors twinkled beneath his tentative fingers. From the mound of sparkling gems a few stones of astounding size poked out.

"So beautiful..." Kalek whispered with reverence.

"I wish Taischek could have seen this," Shan lamented.

The gleam of wealth dwindled from the Temu's eyes when he remembered his father. Truly, Taischek would have appreciated this sight more than any man.

Shan added, "Of course, I have arranged an appropriate treasure for you to distribute to your warriors."

Kalek blinked. He had just comprehended the value of the treasure in front of him and now he did not even have to pay his expenses out of it.

"You are generous," he breathed.

Shan said, "And the Temu are generous. Your father and your tribe were brave enough to harbor me when many hunted me."

"It was my father's privilege to serve you, and mine. You have blessed the Temu with the removal of Onja," Kalek said sincerely and bowed to the new King of Jingtun.

"There are more rewards, Kalek," Shan said. "New and equitable economic arrangements will have to be made between Jingtun and the tribes of the west. There will be no more tribute, which means Jingtun will need to purchase food and other trade items. The Temu shall enjoy a favored status in this business. In time I hope to guide Jingtun toward a more independent existence, but we will have to learn first. This trading with the Temu should bring you profits for some time."

"Truly these are new times," Kalek reflected. He was still amazed by Shan's kindness and generosity after how he had angered the rys.

"Unfortunately some things have not changed," Shan warned. "The Sabuto will still be a threat to you, and your success will tempt others to be jealous. I suggest you try to revitalize the Confederation, which has always aided in stabilizing the tribes. Without the domination of Jingtun, I predict many tribes may make moves to seize influence and territory."

Shutting the jewel-filled case, Kalek pondered the rys's advice.

"And you should return to Dengar Nor soon. Your tribe needs its new king," Shan added.

"Anything else?" Kalek grumbled. He begrudgingly recognized the value of Shan's wisdom but he still felt like he was being dictated to.

The rys returned to his chair and said, "I also wanted to address some personal matters. I know you are upset with General Xander, but please let your anger leave him. You may need his experience."

Kalek sauntered back to his chair, trying to appear aloof. "As a new king, I will choose a new general," he said.

"That is an option for you," Shan agreed skeptically.

"I will never trust him again," Kalek hotly insisted.

With a shrug Shan conceded the point. "Then let him retire gracefully. He was as a brother to Taischek."

"Of course I will do that," Kalek said.

"Yes, yes, forgive my lecturing," Shan apologized. "Now is there anything you want to talk to me about?"

Kalek appreciated Shan's respectful interest. Slowly he looked back at the cabinet full of treasure. "Will the Tacus receive as much as me?" he inquired.

"The Tacus will be pleased with their reward of treasure, but it is not as much as yours. Although the Tacus are a good ally, I realize that the Temu gave the most and helped me the most. I very much took this into account when divvying treasure," Shan answered.

Knowing the Tacus would not gain an advantage over his tribe pleased Kalek, but his next question did not come so easily to his lips.

After clearing his throat, the young King asked, "And how great a treasure will you give Dreibrand?"

Shan showed no outward emotion but his hesitation to answer revealed his reservations about discussing that topic.

"That is not determined," Shan stated.

"Shan, I must ask you not to compensate him on the same level as me," Kalek said urgently.

"Do not presume to dictate such a thing," Shan snapped.

The clear tone of rys displeasure made Kalek pause, but he had made Dreibrand his enemy and he feared that the foreign mercenary would plot revenge.

"But you must not give him such power," Kalek insisted. "He is only one warrior, not a king of a tribe. If you pay him too handsomely, he will hire a mercenary army and make war on me."

"And would you not deserve it?" Shan responded.

In disgust, Kalek turned away but Shan continued with his cold truths. "Your prejudice against Dreibrand is unjustified. You should not have attacked him."

"You do not understand!" Kalek complained.

Shan scoffed, "Yes I do. Dreibrand is an ambitious man and you are afraid of him."

A comment like this from a human would have ignited Kalek's temper, but he only narrowed his eyes at the powerful King of Jingtun, resenting the truth.

Shan studied his Temu guest. He wished that Taischek's third son did not have such untenable passions, but his guilt over Taischek's death demanded that he be patient and fair with Kalek.

"What I might give to Dreibrand is not your business, Kalek. Like you, he has earned the wealth I have to give," Shan said.

Kalek frowned but he dared not argue with the rys more than he already had.

Shan continued, "I know you and Dreibrand have been carefully avoiding each other, but do you think you could handle being in the same place tonight? If I have your promise of peace, I will gain the same from Dreibrand."

Kalek snorted derisively in clear denial.

Shan had expected this reaction and assumed Dreibrand would feel the same way, but at least he had tried to make peace. "Then send a Temu representative to the funeral tonight," he said.

"What funeral?" Kalek asked with surprise.

"It is for my bodyguard Redan," Shan answered.

"The Temu have no interest in that Zenglawas traitor," Kalek grumbled. "You know I lost no love on that man, and neither did my father."

Belatedly, Kalek noticed that his words had been rash because Shan had treasured his faithful archer.

"The ceremony is in honor of all the men who fell in the war, Temu included," Shan stated rigidly. "Also, the funeral will be for Miranda's daughter, who was killed by Onja as we reached the city."

Kalek had not heard this disturbing news and it aroused actual sympathy in him. "One of her children was killed?" he asked.

Shan nodded and the grief of his heart threatened to come to the surface.

"I will send a representative," Kalek decided.

"Thank you," Shan said.

"May I have my men come here to collect the treasure?" Kalek inquired.

"Yes. Speak to Captain Taf Ila before you do so. He will provide you with wagons," Shan said. "I am glad we had this talk, Kalek. The interests of the Temu are close to my heart."

"Then will you help me against my enemies?" Kalek asked hopefully.

Shan looked down as if a great burden weighed his thoughts. "It is not my plan to be overly involved in the affairs of humans," he said. "I care about you and your tribe and I will not cause you any harm. But if you want me to use my magic to intervene for you, I will not. And I will not do so for any tribe. I have killed many men and I have seen Onja fall, but I have no desire to play a part in the death of anyone ever again."

Kalek was disappointed. It was hard to see the powerful ryls recede into neutrality after having him completely on the side of the Temu.

"I must go now, Kalek. I have more business to attend to," Shan said. He rose and clasped Kalek's hand and thanked him for his bravery and allegiance during the war. Then he went to his meeting with King Ejan.

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Dreibrand relaxed in the spacious suite that he had chosen in the Keep. It specifically had a view that did not include the ruined tower across the lake, so neither he nor Miranda would have to see it.

Now that he had gotten some genuine rest, he felt much better. However, many aches persisted in his body and he wondered how he had managed at all after Kalek's attack.

This afternoon, Tytido was visiting him, and they were reflecting on the war and enjoying the fact that both of them had survived.

Esseldan, who had been clinging to a low windowsill, wheeled around and toddled toward Dreibrand. The boy had not quite mastered walking, and his last few steps were an uncontrolled stagger. Luckily, he caught Dreibrand's knee and avoided a fall.

Dreibrand lifted the child into his lap and gritted his teeth because it strained his healing ribs. Squirming and flopping, Esseldan babbled incoherently until Dreibrand had to set him back down.

"He's a fine boy," Tytido commented.

"I will raise him as my son," Dreibrand said rather proudly.

"Will you and Miranda remain in Jingten?" Tytido asked.

Pensively, Dreibrand fingered the cuts over his mouth. With the war finally over, he had considered his future at length and settled on a plan.

"Probably not," he answered.

"Victory has brought us so many possibilities. It is difficult to decide what to do," Tytido said.

"I suppose you are looking forward to being a wealthy man in your tribe," Dreibrand said.

Tytido shrugged. "Much of my spoils I will give to the poor among the Hirqua. It is really the wealth taken from my people over the years anyway."

"Your charity is commendable," Dreibrand praised.

"I plan to take good care of myself too," Tytido added with a wink.

"A nice estate on good land, I imagine," Dreibrand speculated.

This thought had obvious appeal to Tytido, but it did not tempt him entirely. "I am too young just to sit at home," he decided.

Their eyes locked, and hints of shared ideas flickered between them.

Quietly, Dreibrand asked, "You do not long for home?"

"Do you, Dreibrand?" Tytido countered.

Seeing Lord Kwan had reminded Dreibrand of his culture, but his nostalgia did not outweigh his dissatisfaction with his society.

Sighing, he admitted, "I have done some things that were foolish, and I would probably only find trouble in my homeland."

This veiled confession intrigued Tytido, who valued the trust that Dreibrand was showing.

Dreibrand continued, "Tell me, Tytido, what is the land like west of the Confederate Domains?"

After considering the question, Tytido assembled what he knew of faraway lands. "As you go west, I am told, the forests become thicker and wetter and the waters of the Rysamand gather into larger rivers. These wild lands are filled with savages. There are stories of explorers going west on the rivers, but few have survived to come back. It is believed that the rivers become too dangerous to navigate because of rapids and waterfalls. Some say that a sea, which is a place of great water much larger than a lake..."

Dreibrand laughed and cut him off. "I know what a sea is. Atrophane is a land that juts into the great waters of Ektren. I used to play in the waves for sport."

Tytido was clearly impressed. "You have been in a sea?"

"Yes, now go on," Dreibrand said.

"Well, that is about all I know. Are you thinking about going west?" Tytido asked.

Dreibrand imagined the wonders of the unknown lands farther west, and they tantalized his curiosity. But he had other things to consider. Esseldan lurched against his thigh again.

"It does not sound very inviting to the west, does it?" Dreibrand observed.

"No, not really. It is a savage place. It is said that the Rysamand is the source of civilization and

that is why the tribes close to the mountains are so advanced," Tytido said with a clear hint of cultural prejudice.

"I wonder how that news would go over in Atrophane," Dreibrand murmured.

"But Dreibrand, there are other places besides the west," Tytido noted.

"What are you getting at, Tytido?"

"Well, me and some of the Yentay are interested in serving you on your next enterprise, and I wanted to know what you are going to do," Tytido said.

With a grin Dreibrand chided, "You assume I am ambitious."

Tytido chuckled.

"Actually I was hoping some men might stay on with me. But I cannot expect things to be as good as winning Jingtun," Dreibrand said and he gestured at their sumptuous surroundings.

"Throwing a false Goddess off her treasure will not happen every day," Tytido agreed.

"How many men are with you?" Dreibrand asked.

An apologetic smile on the Hirqua's face warned his general that the number was small. "About fifty," he replied in an optimistic tone.

The figure disappointed Dreibrand less than Tytido thought it would. Cheerily, Dreibrand said, "That will work. If there were more, it would only be harder to feed us all."

Thinking about sparse provisioning paused Tytido's enthusiasm, but he was resolved to follow Dreibrand. "Where will we go?" he asked.

"I will tell you tomorrow," Dreibrand said.

Someone knocked on the door. Hoping it was Shan, Dreibrand hustled out of his chair to answer the door, and for once, he did not notice his injuries. When he opened the door, Shan stood alone in the corridor.

Ushering the rys into the suite, Dreibrand said, "My King, you should not be knocking on doors like a squire."

"Would it be more dignified if I yelled?" Shan joked.

"As a king, you should summon me, not come to my humble door," Dreibrand suggested with good nature.

"I would not trouble my friend with such ostentation," Shan said.

By now, Tytido was on his feet and he bowed deeply to his King and benefactor.

"And Lieutenant Tytido, you can save your back for an audience. You and Dreibrand have no need to exhibit your loyalty any more than you have," Shan said graciously.

"But it pleases us so much to see that you have fulfilled your destiny to rule your kind, my King," Dreibrand explained.

"Enough of the 'my Kings,' Dreibrand. You have no need to call me that," Shan said. "And now the time has come for the giving of rewards. Lieutenant Tytido, you and the Yentay may now report to Captain Taf Ila and collect your share of the treasure. And please extend my greatest gratitude to the men."

Tytido bowed again and thanked him.

"And Dreibrand, I need you to come with me," Shan said.

As Tytido left, Dreibrand called for Zannah, the rys nanny, who promptly appeared from another room. The female rys gratefully accepted Esseldan as if she resented the time the child spent with the humans. After being struck by Miranda three days ago, Zannah privately considered the woman

unfit for childrearing. Esseldan babbled happily once he was in the arms of his rys caregiver.

"Miranda must still be resting," Shan said and glanced toward the bedchamber doors.

Dreibrand nodded. "She is gathering her strength to face the funeral," he whispered.

"I wish there was more I could do for her," Shan lamented.

"I can only hope that the passage of time will help her," Dreibrand said miserably.

"It will," Shan murmured. "Now walk with me, my friend. It is time for you to select your reward."

They walked into the heart of the Keep, following a circuitous route into lower levels that finally ended in an iron portal. From an alcove beside the door, Shan removed an oil lamp and the wick flared as soon as the rys's hand touched it. He gave it to Dreibrand and then laid his hands on the portal. A slight shiver went up Shan's back as his awareness spread through the cool iron. Blue energy radiated across the metal from his hands and the portal slid aside silently.

They entered a chamber with a high ceiling and long lines of glowing crystals illuminating the walls. The oil lamp warmed the silvery radiance from the crystals and the flickering light bounced across heaps of shining gold and brilliant facets.

Dreibrand walked up to the edge of the marvelous mound. The sheer quantity of treasure astounded him. Centuries of tribute filled the chamber, and like the Rysamand rising out of the Wilderness, mighty chests filled long ago at the start of Onja's reign rose from the center of the heap. To reach the aged chests, Dreibrand would have to wade through piles of coins, jewelry, plates and figurines.

Thinking back to his days with the Atrophane Horde, he considered all of the riches that were plundered, but nothing he remembered compared to the great stash of treasure now before him.

"So much..." he breathed.

"Onja's greed knew no limit," Shan said. "There are other rooms, but this is the largest."

"What will you do with it all?" Dreibrand wondered.

"With it all? I do not know. First, I will build a new palace. This lair of Onja does not suit me. And I will spend the treasury to benefit the rys. It may take us a long time to relearn self sufficiency," Shan said. "But for now, most of this will sit right here. I have already rewarded the Temu and the Tacus handsomely. If I gave all of this away, it would lose much of its value if it entered the economy all at once. Dreibrand, you are the only man I will show this to."

Dreibrand was thrilled that Shan trusted him the most.

Shan continued, "I decided it was best if Kalek and Ejan did not see just how much Jingten has harvested from the humans over the centuries. All will court the favor of Jingten's new King, but few will truly be my friend. I wanted you to see how much I trust you and appreciate you."

"You have no need to prove that to me, Shan. You have always been kind and generous with me. But it is good to hear that you have not changed your opinion of me because you are all I have left now." Dreibrand looked down before adding, "I tried to make my way with the Temu and failed, and I have problems in my homeland."

"Yes, Dreibrand, it is a pity that you did not find the home you wanted with the Temu. But as you can see, I shall make you wealthy enough to find a home elsewhere. But first, I must ask you something. Have you mentioned to anyone that Dacian was alive?" Shan said.

"No," Dreibrand replied. When he reflected upon those final tumultuous moments in the tower, he decided that he would have trouble even articulating what had happened. Vivid images burned through his mind, even in his sleep, but words were elusive.

Shan explained, "I would like that to remain secret. Dacian told me to leave him in his place in history. It would be difficult for rys to know they stood by in ignorance while he suffered. And most of our laws were established during his reign. If it was known how Onja imprisoned him, it would cast a shadow of weakness on him that could lessen the respect for his laws."

Dreibrand listened to Shan's request and speculated that Shan also did not want any of the details

of Onja's demise to be known. Shan had not defeated her on his own, and Dreibrand wondered if that could possibly cause Shan some problems.

"I will keep it a secret if that is what you want," Dreibrand said.

"Good. I know I can trust you. Do you think Miranda has told anyone?" Shan asked.

Dreibrand shook his head. "She has barely said anything."

Shan fidgeted in a rare show of anxiety. "Dreibrand, do you think she will agree to keep this secret?"

"Of course," Dreibrand said, and he did not see the reason for Shan's distress.

"But she must hate me," the ryl assumed painfully.

"Miranda does not hate you. She knows you did everything you could. It was Onja who brought this tragedy on her," Dreibrand said.

"I hope you are right. Because of her needs, I allowed myself to believe my ambition had a noble cause, but I failed her," Shan lamented.

"I feel the same way," Dreibrand admitted.

After a moment of silence, Shan decided, "Sadness will not change what happened. All of us must look to the future. From this room you may choose what treasure you want. There is more than enough to provide you with whatever you need."

The dazzle of the incredible wealth quickened Dreibrand's heart, but it did not blind him to his dreams.

Sensing that his general wanted something else, Shan said, "You have another request?"

A grin crossed Dreibrand's face as his excitement replaced his sorrow. He had succeeded on a colossal scale, and his triumph would bring him even greater challenges and greater rewards.

"I would like my share of treasure, but there is another thing. You once said you would give me any reward within your power," Dreibrand gently reminded.

The ryl assumed the worst and braced himself to hear Dreibrand ask him again to punish Kalek.

But instead, Dreibrand said, "I want Nufal."

The request caught Shan off guard. Dreibrand had not so much as hinted that he desired the extinct ryl kingdom in the east.

"What would you do with such a lonely place?" Shan asked.

"I will start a new kingdom—my kingdom," Dreibrand answered with a determined sense of purpose. "It will not be a lonely place much longer. Already the Atrophane have come this far, and with the Deamedron gone, they will seek to occupy the Wilderness. But I will claim Nufal and any that come there will accept my rule. Atrophane has enough. It is time for me to have my share."

"But you have told me of the great and ruthless armies of the Atrophane. How could you stop them?" Shan wondered.

Dreibrand replied, "The logistics of marching an army across the Wilderness are difficult, and it will take the Atrophane a few years to establish a sufficient line of supply to reach this far. Already our forces were stretched in order to occupy the lands that border the Wilderness. When they do come in force, I will be ready. At first my forces will be too small to find, and when my strength has grown, I will defeat them. And perhaps, it will not come to that."

Shan relished his general's confidence and believed that Dreibrand just might succeed. "The Wilderness has long been a haunted and empty place. Perhaps it is time for people to live there again. And it would be best for the Rysamand to be between you and Kalek," Shan mused.

"With the curse of the Deamedron lifted, people will come," Dreibrand predicted. "Land of such breadth and quality will not be ignored. I must take it now while I can."

"I suppose I shall have to start calling you king instead of general," Shan decided.

Dreibrand sensed his ego surging with excitement but he looked down with modesty and said, "Calling me a king would be premature. So far I only know of a few Yentay who will go with me."

"You will have more people someday and they will call you king," Shan said, and there was no doubt in his beautiful voice.

"Yes people will come from the east and the west. Well, from the west if you will allow immigrants through the Rysamand," Dreibrand said.

"I will not let armies pass through my kingdom, but otherwise, people may cross freely," Shan declared.

Thoughts of Kalek flirted with Dreibrand's mind, but he ignored them. "Fair enough," he agreed. "But Shan I will need you to help me in the beginning."

Shan frowned reproachfully because he had no desire to entangle himself in human conflicts, but Dreibrand continued, "Please listen. I need you to give Lord Kwan a message to take back to the Darmar in Atrophane. I want you to tell him your borders include Nufal, and that the Atrophane must respect your domain. Your powerful claim on the land will give me more time to establish myself."

"You would make me the enemy of Atrophane," Shan argued.

"No. You only need to make the Atrophane wary of trying to take the land. Your power will intimidate them and make them proceed slowly. Lord Kwan has seen the power of rys magic and he will impress upon the others that your magic cannot be discounted," Dreibrand insisted.

"Do you really think that is all that will happen?" Shan demanded.

Dreibrand paused to consider his words carefully. He wanted to only say positive things and win his way from Shan, but he knew the truth.

"Shan, support me. Be my ally and I will serve you as I always have. There will come a time when the Atrophane have become comfortable with the notion of rys, and then they will become bold. I know they want the Wilderness, so support me now and have a friend for a neighbor," Dreibrand proposed.

"Do you think I am afraid of the Atrophane?" Shan scoffed.

"No—but they are coming. Your wealth will beckon them and they will take from you what they can," Dreibrand said.

Shan turned away from Dreibrand. The rys remembered how Dreibrand had bravely attacked Onja and he hated to think what would have happened if his human friends had not arrived to help. *Generosity is best. Remember what your stinginess brought Taischek,* he thought.

"I would see you make Nufal live again. And I promise to always support your title to the Tabren Mountains and the plains between them and the Rysamand, for that is what composed the ancient kingdom," Shan announced.

An unrestrained whoop jumped from Dreibrand's mouth and he threw his arms around Shan. "Thank you, Shan! Thank you for everything!" he said and laughed with joy.

"Generosity is my luxury," Shan said. When Dreibrand stepped back, they clasped hands and affirmed their bond.

"We must meet with Lord Kwan as soon as possible," Dreibrand said.

"I will tell Taf Ila to arrange a meeting for us. But now we have a sadder task. It is time for the funeral," Shan said.

A high wall enclosed the Jingtun cemetery and red-barked trees gnarled with great age drooped from all sides. Statues marked each grave, creating a silent crowd of stone rys who watched every funeral. Vines overgrew the monuments, which rys considered appropriate because it symbolized the return of the body and spirit to the living forces of Rystavalla. Someday, statues of Hefshul, Redan and Elendra would join the others under the languid bows of the old trees.

All of the Yentay crowded into the solemn yard to pay their last respects to their fallen comrade. Representatives from the Tacus and Temu tribes were also present, and General Xander was with the Temu group. He had come out of genuine sympathy for Miranda but he dared not approach her and offer condolence. During the ceremony, Shan announced that a monument to those who fell to the Deamedron would also be built.

Although the place had an alien feel to Miranda, she believed her daughter could find peace in this quiet space walled off from the blue city. Hefshul was buried first and if Miranda had known that his defiance had been on behalf of Elendra, she might have taken some comfort in it. As it was, no one knew why Onja had killed her oldest servant.

When Elendra was lowered into her grave, Miranda forced herself to watch the coffin descending into the rocky soil. Green turf hung over the sides of the grave as if the living things of the world took one last look at the departing child. Miranda shook until Esseldan became upset in her arms. She was glad that her son was too young to understand the proceedings.

Shan spoke beautiful words, which were followed by the extraordinary singing of a rys chorus. The music actually soothed Miranda. The lovely rys voices were both heartbreaking and therapeutic, and the song, even though she could not understand the words, reminded Miranda that her soul could still know joy.

Wrapped in the sorrowful ecstasy of the singing, Miranda forgave the rys. She knew the evil had only been Onja, and the other rys had never meant for her or her children to suffer.

Next, Redan entered the ground, and Shan eulogized his beloved bodyguard. The rys chorus sang praises appropriate for a warrior. Miranda tried to imagine Redan protecting her daughter in the next world.

She kept her emotions locked inside because she did not want to lose her composure at the funeral. She knew if she let one sob go, she would collapse into a fit of hysterical grief. It was better to be dignified as Elendra was laid to rest.

During the ride back to the Keep, Miranda shared a carriage with Shan, Dreibrand and Quylan, but no one spoke. Miranda remembered how Onja had tortured her when she refused to be her slave. That had been the last day she had seen Elendra alive, and the little girl had been genuinely happy. The fantasy life of love and security that Jingtun offered had wooed Elendra entirely, and she had wanted to share her paradise with her mother.

Every time Miranda went back to that day, she tried to see herself bowing to Onja's terms, but every time she refused in her heart. Her only solace now was the memory of Onja skewered on her sword. Nothing could bring Elendra back, and in her misery, Miranda wondered if any path could have saved Elendra's life.

For the thousandth time Miranda tried to cheer herself with the fact that one of her children had been saved. She brushed aside a lock of Esseldan's hair, which had never been cut. She loved her son with the correct maternal fierceness, but when she looked at him, she saw Barlow. The face of the father had only grown into the boy's face more in the past year.

Thoughts of Barlow aggravated her current grief, and Miranda could not consider every wretchedness in her life all at once. She handed her child to Dreibrand but offered no explanation as to why her son had suddenly distressed her. She would never speak of Esseldan's father, especially to Dreibrand.

The sun was setting when they reached the Keep and street lamps were glowing. When they entered the courtyard, five wagons surrounded by Temu were there. Kalek's men had come to collect their treasure, but Dreibrand ignored them and hurried inside with the others.

Miranda finally started crying when she reached her suite, and Shan ushered her into the bedchamber and shut the door. Dreibrand knew nothing he could say would ease her grief at this

intense moment and he hoped that Shan could do better.

Zanah, the rys nanny, appeared and relieved Dreibrand of Esseldan. As she took the boy away to his nursery, Quylan and Tytido entered.

"Is there anything you need me to do?" Tytido asked.

"No, but I would be glad for your company," Dreibrand said while wandering to a window.

"Maybe you should go to her," Quylan suggested.

Dreibrand shrugged. "Only Shan's magic can comfort her right now," he muttered.

"May I wait here?" Quylan inquired politely. Dreibrand gestured to a couch without looking at her.

Tytido joined him at the window and noticed that Dreibrand was staring at the wagons being filled with Temu treasure in the courtyard below.

"I wonder if Kalek is down there," Dreibrand said.

"I could find out," Tytido suggested warily.

"No. It does not matter. We will go our separate ways soon enough," Dreibrand said.

"So then you have decided where you want to go?" Tytido inquired.

Dreibrand turned away from the window. "I see you are impatient, Tytido, so I will tell you now. I am going to live in Nufal," he said.

"The Wilderness?" Tytido breathed.

"Does that make you want to change your mind?" Dreibrand asked.

"No. I just did not think of that place," Tytido said.

"If you want to change your mind, I would understand. It is far from the Domain of the Hirqua," Dreibrand offered.

"I can find my way back if I get homesick," Tytido said.

"I knew you would want to come," Dreibrand said, and as he continued to tell Tytido about his plan, his sorrows began to lift from his face.

The more Tytido thought about it, the more he became excited as well. "We simply have to make a kingdom instead of take a kingdom," he said.

"Yes, it is better that I choose this course and not make the trouble in the west that my pride presses me to do," Dreibrand said.

"So it has crossed your mind to make war on Kalek?" Tytido asked very quietly.

Dreibrand looked offended as if the question was stupid. "Is this why some of the Yentay wanted to stay with me? Did you think that I would raise an army to take against the Temu, and that you would have first pick at prime Temu land?" he whispered.

"It occurred to me that you might do such a thing," Tytido admitted.

"Do you think the others will still want to stay with me?" Dreibrand asked.

"I believe most of them will. Those Yentay who want to stay with you made that decision because you are a smart general and great warrior," Tytido explained.

"Then I hope I live up to my reputation," Dreibrand said. "We will make Nufal live again and that is a better purpose than bringing death and destruction to the tribes of the west, which is all our ambition could do there."

Tytido reflected on this and concluded that Dreibrand was right. Tytido had seen enough war now to understand that it was more horror than glory.

The bedchamber door opened and Shan asked Dreibrand to come. When he entered, Miranda was sitting up in bed and her eyes were puffy from crying, but she was calm. Dreibrand sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. Shan shut the door and left them alone.

"Did Shan use his magic to ease your pain?" he asked quietly.

Miranda cleared her throat. "No, we just talked. I do not want him to shelter me from my feelings anymore. It will only prolong my grief, and he agreed. Anyway, this wine is helping me as much as anything can."

Dreibrand glanced at the cup in her hands. Because she was only a light drinker, he supposed it would help to steady her nerves. "What did you talk about?" he asked.

Coughing, Miranda leaned over to the nightstand and poured herself more wine. After a gulp, she said, "Shan asked me not to talk about Dacian."

"It seems to be important to him. Did you agree to keep the secret?" Dreibrand said.

She nodded absently and took a bigger gulp of wine. It felt strong on her empty stomach.

"Maybe you should eat something," Dreibrand suggested.

"Not tonight. Tomorrow I will start to live again, and I promise I will eat then," she said and finished her wine.

"Good, I will keep you to your word," he said.

When she set the empty cup back on the nightstand, she tried to fight back her emotions but the tears began to drip again.

"Oh, Dreibrand, I wish I could hold Elendra just one more time," she wailed and lapsed into sobbing. Dreibrand held her, wishing he could do something.

When the crying had exhausted her again, Miranda regained some composure.

"Tonight was terrible, I know," Dreibrand comforted. "But now you must find a way to heal. I need you, Miranda, and so does your son."

She sighed heavily, but Miranda knew she could adapt to her loss. Inside her crushed heart lurked her will to live, and she resolved to struggle through her grief. Every woman could expect to lose a young child. She knew that.

Dreibrand continued in a soft and passionate voice. "I have asked Shan to give me Nufal, and he has agreed. I need you to come with me, Miranda. I need you so you will not let me fail. I cannot bring back your daughter, but we can still have a whole new life together. Please come help me build a new kingdom out of an empty land."

Miranda sniffled noisily and tried to look to the future. She tried to think about her son and the children she might have one day with Dreibrand. Miserably, she wondered if she even deserved to have another baby after her disastrous display of parenting so far.

"Someday you will be a queen, and even in Atrophane, songs of your beauty will be sung," Dreibrand envisioned, trying to cheer her.

Miranda considered his prediction excessive, but his fond words always pleased her. His concept of the future was difficult for her to grasp but she believed that Dreibrand could take them far. It had not been that long ago when Miranda lived as an abused slave, and her liking for privilege and authority had developed quickly.

"Do you remember how quiet the Wilderness could be? I think it was the first place I fully heard my thoughts," Miranda recalled.

"Yes, and I cannot wait to get back there," Dreibrand said.

"Will we really be able to make it ours?" she asked softly.

Emphatically, Dreibrand nodded and his eyes were stern with determination, but he warned her that it would not be easy.

"I will go with you and I will try, Dreibrand," she said. "But I will need time to get over—to get over what has happened."

"I know," he murmured and gently pushed her hair back from her face and kissed her forehead.

Miranda wiped a tear from her cheek and mentioned, "I promised Queen Vua that I would bring my children to her, so she could see them."

Dreibrand did not want to tell her that it was out of the question, but Miranda could see in his eyes what he was thinking.

"Could you write her a letter and explain what happened?" she asked timidly.

"Of course," he agreed with relief.

Miranda stared a little blearily at the carafe of wine on the nightstand. "You know what the worse thing is?" she said. "I am already used to Elendra being gone. Sometimes I try and forget that I ever saw her murdered body."

"I am so sorry, Miranda. I tried so hard. I did everything I could to get us here," Dreibrand said.

She heard the guilt in his voice but she did not blame him. "I know it is not your fault nor is it Shan's. Shan tells me not to blame myself either, and I try. He helps me so much. He helps me believe that Elendra has gone to what Shan calls the next world. He believes that when people die, they continue in another place."

"That is good," Dreibrand said and he was grateful for the comfort Shan could offer.

Miranda decided to get another cup of wine. As she lifted the cup to her lips, she muttered, "If I blame anyone besides Onja, it is that monster, Kalek."

Dreibrand watched her take a drink. "What?" he whispered.

She wiped a drop of wine from her lips and explained, "You know, if he had not hurt you, we would have gotten to Jington sooner."

Dreibrand had not considered Kalek's interference as a contributor to Elendra's death and he was stunned. It was impossible to know how things might have turned out if Kalek had not attacked him, but that lost day might have made the difference for Elendra. With the image of Miranda standing over her daughter's grave so fresh in his mind, Dreibrand started to feel a deeper anger toward Kalek than he had felt before, which he had not thought was even possible. He could tame his pride and forget his automatic desire for revenge, but he could not ignore Miranda's accusation.

Kalek will answer for this. If not for me, then for her, Dreibrand thought.

"I guess I should get started on that letter," he said and stood up.

"Do you have to do it right now?" Miranda asked.

He clenched his fists, then unclenched them, trying to hide his anger, trying to keep his mind rational. He kissed her and tasted the salt of her tears on her lips.

"Yes, I have to do it now," he said and walked out.

Tytido was snacking off a tray of food that a servant had delivered when Dreibrand exited the bedchamber. Shan and Quylan were chatting on a sofa, but they stopped talking and looked at Dreibrand quizzically.

"We need to go, Tytido," Dreibrand said brusquely.

Tytido popped a cracker into his mouth and brushed the crumbs from his finger without hurrying.

When Dreibrand stalked across the room and picked up his swordbelt and battered shield, Shan asked, "Where are you going?"

"Ah, to ah, talk to some people," he answered as if it was only a trifling matter. "Come on, Tytido."

"Is something wrong?" Shan asked suspiciously.

"I am sure it is nothing you want to hear about," Dreibrand warned and pulled open the door while buckling on his swordbelt.

Tytido realized something serious must have come up, judging from Dreibrand's strange behavior, and he followed Dreibrand out.

"What could that be about?" Quylan wondered.

"Nothing good I am sure," Shan grumbled.

By now Miranda had gotten up and stood in the doorway of the bedchamber. Before she could say anything, Shan demanded, "What is he going to do?"

"Where has he gone?" Miranda asked. She was confused by Dreibrand's hasty departure.

"What did you say to him?" Shan said.

"I don't know. Nothing," Miranda replied.

"He seemed angry. You must have some idea," Shan pressed.

"I only asked him to write Queen Vua a letter because—" Miranda gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh, I should not have said it. It must have set him off. I said I was mad at Kalek. Oh, I must be drunk."

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While watching the last of the treasure being loaded into the wagons, Kalek was trying to ignore Xander. The Temu general had shown up after the funeral to lend a hand, but Kalek figured Xander was just trying to act like he was still in charge of something. In retrospect, Kalek wished he had forbidden the old general from coming anywhere near him.

"My King," a Temu warrior hissed urgently.

Kalek turned from the chests of treasure that he was admiring and saw Dreibrand striding out of the Keep.

"Well, look who is finally up and around," Kalek casually commented to the warrior, who had been present at Dreibrand's beating.

Dreibrand stopped a safe distance from Kalek, and the Temu men stopped their work on the wagons and stepped down beside their king. Tytido was one step behind Dreibrand and still arguing with him, but Dreibrand hushed him.

"I would speak to you, Kalek," Dreibrand called.

"I have already said what I have to say to you. Go back inside and hide behind your rys," Kalek yelled.

About a dozen Yentay ran out of the Keep. Word had traveled fast among the servants and guests when they saw Dreibrand storming toward the courtyard where the Temu were. Shan was not far behind either and he arrived next with Quylan and Miranda. Taf Ila rushed up to his new King with a squad of rys soldiers.

"My King, what should I do?" Taf Ila asked.

"Be ready to break up a fight. I will not let these soldiers kill each other in my own courtyard," Shan said. The rys went to Dreibrand and asked him to go back inside.

"No, Shan. I cannot live with myself if he does not answer for what he did. I tried, but I cannot do it," Dreibrand said. He took another step toward the Temu, and a few warriors moved protectively in front of Kalek.

"Look who is hiding!" Dreibrand scoffed. "Do not be so afraid, Kalek. I only want you to apologize to Miranda for delaying the march on Jingten. That day you cost us might have made the difference for her daughter."

Kalek merely looked puzzled. Of all the things he had imagined that Dreibrand might say to him, it had not been that. He had known that Shan resented the delay the attack on Dreibrand had caused, but blaming the little girl's death on his actions was purely speculative.

Miranda pushed her way through the rys soldiers and grabbed Dreibrand's arm. "Do not do this. What I said was stupid. Forget Kalek. What happened in the past does not matter. Only our future is important," she begged.

"But you did say it and you did mean it," Dreibrand growled.

"No, please..." she said.

"Yes, Dreibrand, listen to her. Do not use her grief as an excuse," Shan said.

"An excuse is all I needed," Dreibrand retorted and he took another step toward the Temu. "What do you say, Kalek? Will you apologize for your stupid actions?"

"Shut up, Dreibrand. You do not want me to apologize. It looks like you came to fight," Kalek yelled. With an insolent finger he pretended to count the Yentay and added, "You will need more men to match my warriors."

Shan intervened, "Kalek, I will not let these men fight. I want Jingten to be a place of peace."

"Look how Shan protects his favorites. He tells me that he will take no side in the affairs of humans, but there he is standing with my enemy," Kalek criticized.

The brash comment angered Shan, but he could not avoid the truth. He knew in his heart that he wanted to side with Dreibrand, but he did not want to intervene and set an example for the humans that he would regret.

Xander pushed his way to the side of his King and provided his unsolicited advice. "My King, some of those Yentay are from important Hirqua clans. Killing them could start a war with the Hirqua," he said.

"Did my father take your brains when he died?" Kalek snarled. "I don't care about the Hirqua, and for the last time, don't talk to me."

Dreibrand realized that his anger had created a volatile situation for many others besides himself. The Yentay would fight for him and the Temu would fight to protect their King, and Dreibrand had put Shan in a terrible position. Dreibrand disliked going against Shan's wishes, but he could not walk away and respect himself after speaking such challenging words to Kalek. He would just have to make his words more challenging.

"I can see that you do not care to take responsibility for your reckless actions, so let us see if you care about your honor, Kalek," Dreibrand yelled. "I have no dispute with the Temu Tribe and will not order any man who follows me to harm a Temu, but I will see you answer for what you did to me and Miranda. It is no secret how you wronged me. Kalek, I say you have no honor and are a disgrace to your tribe!"

Many Temu warriors cried out in anger, automatically defending their King, but Dreibrand persisted, "Your king threatened my woman, and although I served the Temu and fought his enemies, he had me bound and beaten. This was the act of a coward."

Kalek yelled with rage, "You will die for that, Veta!"

"Then do it yourself. Show us all how brave you are," Dreibrand challenged.

"Why should I? Shan will obviously side with you," Kalek complained.

But Shan shook his head and walked between Dreibrand and Kalek. "I will assist neither of you," the rys announced. "I will express my wish for both of you to forget your pride and part ways, but I cannot deny Dreibrand's insistence on settling his grievance with Kalek, who attacked him viciously. I swear on my soul that I will not use my power to influence the outcome of this duel. I will honor this as I have honored all of my other promises with you."

A thoughtful silence ensued as warriors considered Shan's promise. The word of Shan was known to be good. The wagons full of treasure proved that.

"What do you say, Kalek?" Dreibrand taunted eagerly.

Kalek could not believe the reality of Dreibrand's challenge. To his knowledge no one had ever dared to duel a king. Initially, Kalek thought to dismiss Dreibrand as an unworthy challenger, but when he regarded the expectant looks of his tribesmen, he could not refuse. Even though he was King, Kalek had to support an honorable reputation, and unfortunately he now had to defend it in public. If he declined, Kalek knew he would never enjoy the adoration the Temu had showered on Taischek.

"Prepare to meet death, Atrophane," Kalek hissed with a ceremonial air.

Dreibrand laughed with derisive pleasure, looking forward to the violence that would douse his temper.

Miranda watched apprehensively. Her emotions had been wrenched into numbness over the past days, and she could not muster any more protests. Dreibrand would not listen to her, and she would have to watch him fight.

Quylan leaned close to Miranda and whispered, "You are afraid for him."

"He will win," Miranda stated.

She watched Kalek slip his arm into a shield as he accepted the encouragement of his associates. Nearby, she heard Dreibrand tell Tytido that the duel would be quick, but Tytido grabbed his friend's biceps in a firm grip and snared Dreibrand's true attention. "Even if this was Kalek's first war season, he is highly trained," Tytido warned.

A rational flicker of acknowledgement showed in Dreibrand's eyes and he nodded with thanks.

"I now stand apart from this human dispute," Shan declared.

Dreibrand's sword sang out of the scabbard and he bolted straight for Kalek before Shan had hardly gotten out of the way. His attack hit Kalek with the fury of a storm that can no longer hold back its rain. With calm nerves Kalek moved his shield up and down, blocking each swift stroke. Dreibrand increased his speed, insistently seeking the body of the Temu King with his sword.

When Kalek started fighting back, his warriors cheered him. The ancient rys sword that had so briefly belonged to his father obeyed Kalek's hand, and the magnificent weapon reciprocated the onslaught of his opponent. Soon Dreibrand's shield shook beneath the rapid blows of the blade that left deep gashes in it.

They labored against each other and their swords crashed together with a piercing clang. Sweat streaked their faces and the intensity of their mutual hate burned in their eyes.

Kalek threw his weight against his shield as he blocked a blow, which forced Dreibrand's sword aside. For an instant this made Dreibrand vulnerable, and Kalek sent his foot into his ribs. The shot was well aimed because Kalek had an intimate knowledge of Dreibrand's sore spots.

Dreibrand staggered back but he banished his pain and continued the fight. Pounding on Kalek for a few minutes had relieved some of his blind fury, and now Dreibrand could concentrate on the harsh business of ending the life of the hostile Temu.

With their eyes locked, they fell upon each other again and they provided an excellent duel. Captivated by the private battle, Temu warriors shouted when the swords flew perilously close to flesh. Tytido and the other Yentay watched in rapt silence. Miranda moved beside Shan and her grief could not dull the anxiety of watching Dreibrand fight. His rage was terrible to behold. She had watched him battle for their lives, and she had watched him battle in the war, but tonight he wanted murder.

The combatants yelled at each other. Both men were frustrated by their lack of swift victory, and Dreibrand was surprised by Kalek's prowess. The military training of Taischek's third son had not been neglected, and Kalek's mean spirit gave his swordplay a vicious edge beyond his experience.

Kalek's rys blade stuck in the wood of Dreibrand's shield. The metal bands that bound the shield barely stopped the blade, and the ancient edge that knew no dullness gently tickled Dreibrand's forearm, drawing the thinnest line of blood.

As Kalek wrenched his sword free, Dreibrand swiped at his legs. Kalek deftly jumped back, escaping

with a minor nick on his knee. The cut did not register as pain to his adrenaline soaked body, but Kalek knew that his thigh wound was slowing him down and Dreibrand was pressing on his weakness.

Their swords met in another flurry of killing steel. Dreibrand's shield saved his life a few more times, but the shattered wood was falling away from its metal bindings.

Accepting that his shield had been reduced to a flopping weight on his arm, Dreibrand tried to shake it free and fend Kalek off with just his sword. Dreibrand hooked Kalek's sword on his hilt and pushed the weapon back against Kalek. Now face-to-face with Kalek, Dreibrand tried to grab the Temu. Kalek struggled to step out of his opponent's grip and he beat on Dreibrand with his shield. The metal studded buckler slammed into Dreibrand's torso, threatening to break half-mended ribs.

Dreibrand grunted but would not let go of his adversary. With his shield useless, Dreibrand could not afford to allow Kalek to swing his sword again. He shifted to get a foot in position to knock Kalek's wounded leg out from under him. The Temu King anticipated the move and compensated. He fell on purpose just as Dreibrand tried to trip him, which allowed Kalek to send them both into a roll that ended with him on top.

A gasp rippled through the crowd when the two men went down. Dreibrand and Kalek tore at each other like cats. Dreibrand backhanded Kalek across the face with his sword hand, and the weight of the weapon in his hand helped knock Kalek aside.

The Temu swung his sword haphazardly as he fell, but Dreibrand dodged it and jumped to his feet with pantherish quickness. Kalek still had one knee on the ground because he had not quite recovered from the blow to the face, and Dreibrand struck before he lost his opening.

He lashed out wildly, hoping to catch Kalek anywhere on his body. Kalek's arms had been thrown wide to regain his balance, and the sword hit the inside of his shield before he could bring it around.

Half the spectators did not see what happened, but Kalek's awful scream told all that it was bad. From some angles it did not look like anything had happened until they looked closer and saw the stream of blood shooting onto the ground where a hand lay on the flagstones. The hand of the Temu King had been caught against his shield like meat on a butcher block.

Dreibrand struck again to finish his victim, but desperation to survive gave Kalek the ability to block. Kalek struggled to master his legs despite the aggressive shock gripping his body, but he could only scramble away a short distance before collapsing. His shield slipped away from his wet stump.

Dreibrand loomed over him, breathing hard from his efforts. With fading strength, Kalek held up his sword.

"Enough!" Xander roared and jumped into the circle of combat. The Temu General placed himself before his King as a shield. "Your revenge is done. I will not let you kill him," Xander declared while making a belated grab for his weapon.

Pumped up by the primal emotions of battle, Dreibrand almost cut Xander down, but the pleading dark eyes of the old Temu warrior cooled his temper. Xander had tried to stop the abduction of Miranda, and Xander had let her go free. As much as Dreibrand resented the man's desire for his woman, he had to admit that Xander had always been honorable, even when given the opportunity not to be. And Dreibrand remembered when Xander had tended his wound, and he could not strike the General.

Shan twitched on the verge of intervening. If Xander entered the battle, all of the warriors might jump in. Shan would have to use his magic if the others started to fight.

Xander watched the murderous contortion fade from Dreibrand's face. "Remember the friendship Taischek gladly gave and spare his son. You have cut off the hand that struck you. The Temu Tribe will always respect Dreibrand Veta as we have in the past."

"Shut up, Xander," Kalek growled, but his voice was agonized and soft. His sword fell to the ground and he clutched his spurting stump. Kalek shook with pain and weakness and the color drained from his face.

Dreibrand looked at Kalek, who was defeated. The Temu King might bleed to death yet. Already his lips had gone blue beneath his thin mustache. Dreibrand recalled how good Taischek had been to him and Miranda, and he lowered his sword. Dreibrand did not know where his mercy came from,

but seeing Kalek on his knees and wet with his own blood burned away his rage.

"I wish things had been different between us, Kalek," he said.

Xander spun around and dropped to his King's side. Grabbing the handless arm, he clamped his hand over the stump and tried to hold the blood back.

Catching his breath, Dreibrand looked for Miranda in the crowd. Her beautiful green eyes greeted him and he saw in them her relief that he had not been hurt. She did not seem upset that Kalek still lived.

Shan said, "Are you satisfied, Dreibrand?"

Again Dreibrand looked at Kalek in his suffering. Now that Dreibrand had redeemed his pride, he did not feel proud of what he had done. He scanned the faces of the Temu warriors. He remembered living among the tribe and liking it.

"I regret that my relationship with the Temu Tribe must end like this. But I am satisfied. Kalek has answered for what he did," Dreibrand announced.

"This matter is settled," Shan declared. "And I ask all humans not to bring their quarrels into my realm again."

A warm tingle of energy followed Shan's words and touched every person present. Sparkling with power, the King wheeled imperiously and headed into the Keep.

Deciding it was best not to stay in the sight of the Temu, Dreibrand took Miranda's hand and signaled for the Yentay to accompany him inside.

Quylan did not follow and instead rushed to assist Xander with the bleeding Temu King. Although she deplored the attack on Dreibrand, she now only saw a man she could help.

Through the night Shan secluded himself and meditated deeply. He released his mind from the mundane worries that swirled around him, and he simply enjoyed the powerful essence of his homeland flowing through the mountains. Shan felt the first kiss of dawn upon the supreme slopes of the Rysamand, and he felt his kingship confirmed within himself. He was the King of Jingtun and the ruler of all rys.

The liberating exhilaration of becoming King now truly soaked into Shan's soul. Before, Onja's presence had always tainted his connection with the natural forces of his homeland. Now Onja was gone, and Shan could revel in his magical perception without the cancer of her evil. The world now seemed pure, and he could put his mind to higher purposes, instead of war and death.

Shan.

He recognized the call of Quylan's mind. Easing out of the ecstasy of his meditation, Shan returned to his physical surroundings. He felt totally relaxed, and his body was entirely renewed. The strain of the war had disappeared from his flesh, and it would only remain in the vaults of his mind.

He greeted Quylan with a smile when she entered the meditation chamber and settled onto the floor next to him. Ruinous splashes of blood stained her clothes.

The troubles among his human friends returned to Shan, and he regretted the distasteful conflict that had occurred. Shan dared to hope that the soul of Taischek would forgive him for permitting the duel.

"Kalek will live," Quylan announced because she felt the question building in Shan's mind. Since their sharing of body and spirit, they could often sense each other's moods and thoughts, but Quylan noted a dark impenetrable place in Shan's mind. It had appeared after he defeated Onja. These sheltered memories no doubt contained the events of Onja's death, but Quylan respected her lover enough not to pry too much. She hoped that as his love grew, he would share this with her.

When Shan did not say anything, Quylan asked, "Does it upset you that I helped him?"

"Of course not," Shan responded. "I did not want anyone to die."

"But you would have let one of them die. I could tell that you were serious about not helping either one of them. Kalek was about to bleed to death, and you just left," Quylan said.

"I gave my word not to interfere in their duel," Shan said. "It was the only way to keep it between just Kalek and Dreibrand, who was being very foolish. I had to control the situation."

"You hated to see them fight," Quylan noted.

"I wish none of them would fight," Shan complained.

"These tensions will go away soon. General Xander told me he will order most of the Temu warriors home today. Only a small portion will stay until Kalek is fit to travel. And I expect the Tacus to leave soon. Then we shall have our peace," Quylan said.

"Where is Kalek?" Shan inquired.

"I took him to my father's house," she answered.

Shan gently took up the hand of his juvenile lover. "You are so kind. I felt the brilliance of your compassion when you went to help Kalek."

"I knew I could stop his bleeding. He will recover quickly," Quylan said proudly.

"It pleased you to heal him," Shan observed.

Quylan averted her eyes. Healing redeemed her as much as it pleased her.

Shan had seen the shame and regret in her heart, and he sought to soothe her. "I know the terrible test that Onja put to you," he whispered.

Quylan shuddered. She had hoped Shan did not know what she had done.

Softly, Shan recalled, "When my ryslighthood neared its end, Onja gave me the same test. She said it was time for me to learn to kill, but I could not do it. I ran away into the mountains and hid. When I came back, I challenged her because her wickedness had to stop, but we all know how that turned out."

Hearing that Shan had refused the test made Quylan feel worse, and she moaned, "Then I should not have killed him."

"Quylan, you did the right thing—as awful as it was," Shan said. "While I hid in the mountains, Onja tortured the captive to death. It took twelve days for her to die. I should have just killed the woman when Onja told me to. I have killed so many people since then, one more murder would not matter."

Quylan saw again the man dying from her spell. The terrorized innocence in his eyes still burned vividly in her memory, but his death had been quick.

Shyly, as if reluctant to justify the action, Quylan asked, "Would Onja have tortured the man who I killed?"

"I have no doubt of it," Shan assured her. "His life was over as soon as Onja's plots consumed him."

With a sigh she accepted Shan's assessment. Even at the time, she had known that the man could find no mercy, but Quylan regretted her cruel decision.

"If I had not killed him, Onja would never have trusted me with the Atrophane soldiers, and they probably all would have died," Quylan explained.

"I know how good your reasons were, and how many risks you took to help those men," Shan said.

Thinking of the Atrophane, Quylan returned her thoughts to business. Her father had given her several reports to relay to the King.

"Lord Kwan has received your request to speak with him but he does not want to enter the city. The soldiers father sent to escort the Atrophane are bringing them around to the east side of the city in order to avoid your allies," Quylan said. "But I am sure if I go speak to Lord Kwan personally, I can convince him to enter Jingten one more time."

"There is no need. We will ride out to meet him," Shan said.

"Ride out to meet them? Is that proper?" she wondered. "You should have Lord Kwan come to you out of respect."

Shan chuckled. Quylan had picked up a penchant for protocol from her father. "Yes, my sweet, but I can understand Lord Kwan's reservations about entering the city."

Quylan offered no more argument and Shan decided to visit the Atrophane in the afternoon.

"But I do know someone who should come to the Keep and show me some respect," Shan said. "Would you like to have some fun, Quylan?"

"What do you mean?" she wondered.

"Faychan camps in the forest. I assume he does not leave because he wishes to speak to me. But I would like to remind him of my power before we meet again," Shan explained.

"What will you do?" Quylan asked eagerly.

"I will summon Faychan with a spectral projection. That ought to impress him," Shan said. "Meditate with me while I contact him."

"Perhaps this time I will see through the warding from his sword," Quylan said hopefully, and she felt Shan's confidence in her.

As Shan entered his trance, Quylan followed his awareness out of the city and into the forest. She

saw the Kezanada camp, but there were voids where her perception provided no images. She pushed against the warding, and with Shan to guide her, she finally pierced the barrier and Faychan appeared.

Quylan was delighted but she could not express her joy because Shan was about to do his spectral projection. The intensity of his magic coalesced into a swirl of blue energy. Every Kezanada sprang to his feet, and Faychan fell back a few steps from the image of Shan forming in front of him.

"Faychan, I command you to come to the Keep now!" Shan's message boomed inside Faychan's head.

When Shan and Quylan returned from their trance, they shared a laugh.

"You scared him half to death," Quylan remarked.

"Oh, it just looked like that. Faychan is bold and I am sure his heart can take the stress," Shan said.

"You should not have been so mean," Quylan scolded.

Shan sighed, recovering from his mirth. "It was not very nice, I know. But Faychan made himself my enemy once, and I would not have him forget why he changed sides," he said.

"He must be on his way already," Quylan giggled.

"He better be," Shan said. "But until he arrives, you should get out of those ruined clothes."

His polite desire tantalized Quylan, who accepted his company warmly. They departed for quarters more comfortable than the bare meditation chamber.

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When a servant finally took Faychan to meet Shan, the Kezanada had been waiting for hours and he regretted rushing to the Keep. He realized now that Shan had been toying with him.

Yet Faychan did not show his annoyance and graciously accepted the seat that Shan offered. "King Shan, you are too kind. Onja always kept us on our knees before her throne," he said.

"I do not need ostentation to reassure me of my power," Shan stated. "I will never sit on her throne. Soon, I will build a new palace."

"Wonderful news, my King."

"Do you really need to wear that mask?" Shan complained.

"Our masks are an important part of the mystery of the Kezanada. I cannot walk around the Keep with my face showing," Faychan defended.

With a human-like shrug of his eyebrows, Shan conceded the point, but quickly got to business. "So, Faychan, tell me why you are still in my realm. I am King and you have my blessing to be Overlord. Shouldn't you be on your way?"

"Yes, my King, I should, but I did hope to get this chance to talk to you," Faychan replied.

"I see," Shan observed. "Now, how long do you expect it to take for you to become Overlord?"

"When I reach Do Jempur, I will rally my support and make my challenge. Less than a month, I suppose," Faychan estimated.

Shan nodded thoughtfully.

Clearing his throat, Faychan added, "King Shan, you do know that extra gold will aid my rise to power."

Although the request had been very anticipated, Shan scowled. In an imperious tone he said, "I have doubts about your poverty, Faychan, but I know how much influence wealth will gain you in the Kezanada, so you may have it. I will refund ten years' worth of tribute to you and not Benladu."

If Faychan had not been a wily negotiator and a master of his emotions, he would have sputtered and coughed at the quantity of Shan's offer. "That will do nicely, my King," he accepted in his slick manner.

"I do need something in return," Shan added.

Faychan had hoped for this part because he wanted the business of Jingten, but suddenly he worried about the task that Shan would set for him.

Shan continued, "You spoke of Kezanada records from ancient times. You said that is where the late Overlord learned of weapons with powers to ward human warriors. I want to see your ancient records. I will make copies and return them."

"So you found my information useful, my King?" Faychan inquired.

"Your speculations had merit," Shan corrected.

Excited as always by the pursuit of information, Faychan asked, "What was in the Tomb of Dacian?"

"Great magic, as you suspected, but it is gone now," Shan replied testily.

Faychan doubted that this was a complete answer because rys soldiers were stationed around the ruins of the tower.

Shan continued, "But I want to reclaim old knowledge that Onja hid from us. Perhaps I can learn a few things from your old records. I plan to start a renaissance in Jingten. I want rys to learn their old crafts and create new ideas. We have lived in servile stagnation too long."

"Your vision is great, my King, but you ask a lot. Every Kezanada would consider me a traitor. Our records are secret," Faychan said.

"Then show them to me in secret. You will be Overlord and can do whatever you want," Shan snapped.

"But they are large tomes and delicate parchments. They would be difficult to transport," Faychan resisted.

"You will find a way," Shan declared.

"But most of the records are just Kezanada things that are private," Faychan insisted squeamishly.

"Are you telling me no?" Shan demanded.

"Of course not, my King," Faychan said.

"Good. I understand your need for discretion, but I know you are capable of supplying me this favor. Therefore, you will arrange it," Shan said.

The command of Shan was hard to resist, but Faychan had not risked siding with Shan before Onja's defeat only to be ordered around like a servant. Gaining confidence from the memory of the late Overlord's sparring with Onja, Faychan decided that he should press his case again.

"My King, if you understand my need for discretion, have some sympathy for what you ask of me. These are treasured documents, and they cannot just disappear for a time. Anyway, I think you will find their content disappointing," Faychan discouraged.

"You son of a thief, do not tell me you cannot steal what you already have," Shan reproached.

But Faychan argued that he was sworn to protect the secrets of his society and he did not want to betray it.

Folding his arms, Shan said, "Then my offer is dissolved. I do not care who is Overlord. I am sure with Onja gone, Benladu will deal with me."

Faychan allowed himself a grimace behind his mask and quickly calculated his chances against Benladu without Shan's favors. Although he had a legitimate chance, Faychan wanted to avoid bloody strife within his society. It was so counterproductive.

"I shall arrange it, my King. Forgive my obtuse nature," Faychan acquiesced.

"You are the one who convinced me of the need to explore my history," Shan explained, being facetious.

"Do not expect too much from our records. They were not a history of Jingten. Jingten was only part of Kezanada history," Faychan warned, hoping to prevent any future dissatisfaction from the rys King.

"I understand. But it is a piece of the puzzle, and with the other things I know, it may prove enlightening," Shan said.

"And what other things do you know?" Faychan could not resist asking.

Shan chuckled softly. "Nothing that is important to you."

Faychan burned with his innate curiosity, but he knew the King of Jingten would never divulge the information. Faychan longed to know the secrets of the Tomb of Dacian. The recent destruction of the ancient tower during Onja's demise hinted that a great mystery had been housed there. But Shan had not been the only one in the tower, and Faychan hoped to hear the story from Dreibrand.

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By afternoon, the day had turned cloudy and threatened rain as Shan and his entourage galloped out of Jingten on the ill kept east road. The King went to speak with the Atrophane and Dreibrand and Miranda were in his company along with those warriors who had declared allegiance to Dreibrand. The news that Dreibrand intended to occupy Nufal had gone over quite well. Tytido and those like him were adventurers at heart and excited to see the Wilderness.

Miranda was curious to see the man who Dreibrand had served in the Atrophane military. She remembered the smoke of her burning village and it would be strange to look upon the dreaded conquerors of the eastern world and know that Dreibrand had once been their comrade.

In contrast to his last meeting with Lord Kwan, Dreibrand felt much more composed. His nerves were surprisingly steady, and the fifty stout warriors behind him gave him confidence. He supposed this might be the last time he saw Lord Kwan, and Dreibrand wanted to part on good terms, if possible.

The road started twisting and turning as the wooded slopes rose into the rough reaches of the eastern pass. The cracked and weedy cobblestones of the east road reminded Dreibrand of just how much time had passed since Nufal had known civilization. Looking between the mountains that flanked the eastern pass, Dreibrand beheld the sky over the Wilderness. The clouds hung mostly over the Rysamand, and it looked like it might be brighter out over the desolate plains.

Dreibrand turned to Miranda and they shared the same thought. Both were eager to go to their new home.

The Atrophane waited in a clear area where several old growth trees had finally succumbed to the elements. Two trunks lay on their sides attended by tiny pines, and one mighty trunk remained standing, but the winter winds had started to strip the dead bark away.

When the Atrophane came into view, Dreibrand saw three rys soldiers standing next to Lord Kwan. Shan halted his party before reaching them and dismounted.

"Dreibrand, wait here until I call for you," he instructed.

Dreibrand nodded and tried to stay relaxed. He could feel the tension rising among his warriors who examined the force of foreign warriors. Most of the Atrophane had not seen any of the people of the west, and their curious stares were evident across the glen.

Quylan and Shan walked toward the Atrophane, and behind them, one rys soldier led a horse laden with two boxes.

Tytido tore his eyes from the easterners and asked, "What will you say to your countrymen?"

"I—I do not know," Dreibrand admitted. "But remember Tytido, I have a new country now."

Tytido pondered this. He loved his homeland, but a thirst for new things compelled him to leave. Although he had not entirely admitted it to himself, he considered having a new country too, which meant he might eventually leave the Hirqua Domain for the rest of his life.

Homesickness swelled in his heart, but as Tytido looked back at the Atrophane, who looked so different, he pictured again the largeness of the world, and he had to see more.

Timidly, Tytido asked, "Would you introduce me?"

Dreibrand hesitated to answer because he had only thought of speaking to Kwan alone.

Proud but defensive, Tytido challenged, "Would I embarrass you?"

"No, of course not!" Dreibrand said sincerely. "Never think such a thing, Tytido. Of course you want to meet Lord Kwan. I apologize for not thinking to invite you."

Dreibrand then turned to Miranda and asked her if she wanted to come.

A wave of deferential shyness flashed across Miranda's face when she first thought about meeting the famed Hordemaster. Once, the Atrophane had represented all that was rich and powerful, and she had fled before their conquering greatness. But this passed. Miranda was no longer that woman. She was free and the friend of the most powerful being in the world.

"It would interest me," she replied calmly and waited eagerly with Dreibrand for their turn with Lord Kwan.

When the King of Jingtten reached the Atrophane, Kwan bowed respectfully to the new rys monarch, and then he bowed happily to Quylan.

Shan said, "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me again. It seems you are in a hurry to leave, so I will not delay you long. Of course, if you wish to stay, every luxury of Jingtten is at your disposal."

Kwan listened closely and interpreted most of Shan's meaning. "Thank you King Shan, but we should go while the summer is young."

"As I thought. Did you get the provisions I sent?" Shan asked this only to mention his largesse because he certainly knew the supplies had been dutifully delivered.

"Yes, thank you again, King Shan. And..." Kwan searched for a word to say congratulations but he did not know it. "...I am happy for your victory."

"The passing of Onja has improved our lives," Shan acknowledged.

"And brought a new age for rys and humans," Quylan added.

"Which means I must discuss a few things with you before you leave, Lord Kwan," Shan said.

A rys spread rugs for the important people to sit on. Shan produced a map scroll that featured the Wilderness, and he discussed the boundaries of his kingdom. Kwan was surprised that Shan included almost half of the Wilderness and the entirety of the lesser chain of mountains to the east, which Kwan learned, were called the Tabren. Kwan did not argue with the boundaries of Shan's territory, but he did wonder why it included so much. With his own eyes he had seen the untouched ruins of Nufal and knew that rys never went there.

"You may keep this map for your reference. I am sure the Atrophane Empire will find it helpful," Shan said while proffering the scroll.

Accepting the map, Kwan understood the sterner implications of Shan's statement.

Shan continued, "Now I have a gift that I would like you to give to your ruler, the Darmar, I believe he is called. Let this represent friendship and respect between Jingtten and your Empire."

On cue, the attendant rys handed a plain black box to Quylan, who presented it to Kwan. The Lord General gingerly took the box, remembering a crystal once brought to him by the Tatatook, and he dreaded that Shan now would control his mind with a similar charm.

Sitting beside Kwan, Sandin wanted to seize the box and hurl it back at Shan. He could tolerate the Jingtten Valley not a day longer, and all he saw were more rys tempting them to stay.

Their reluctance to even look in the box was evident to Shan. Quietly, he said, "Lord Kwan, if I wanted to hurt you, you could not stop me."

The words were not so staggering to Kwan because it was a lesson he had already learned. Flipping back the latch, he opened the plain box. Even on the cloudy day, the contents sparkled furiously. On a bed of black velvet lay the wondrous diamond headdress of Onja, dazzling in its perfection and antiquity.

Sandin gasped for he had never seen the treasures of Jingtun, nor looked upon the treacherous splendor of the rys Queen. The magnificence of the gift overwhelmed Kwan. A king did not give away such things. This was not tribute sent to please the Darmar. It was a token of superiority.

"I saw Onja wear this," Kwan recalled in awe.

"Then it should satisfy you to carry it back to your homeland and know that she is vanquished," Shan responded.

Although Kwan could only believe that Onja's evil clung to the net of jewels, he did feel some satisfaction.

"Remember what we discussed with the map. I would not have my borders ignored," Shan said. "Now I offer you and your men a slight reparation for your losses."

Distracted by Shan's reiteration of borders, Kwan did not catch the last statement and his expression remained guarded as a rys brought over the horse that was loaded with two boxes.

"It is treasure for you," Quylan said and smiled reassuringly. "That is why your army went on such a long trip, is it not?"

A rys unloaded one chest and pulled it open. Kwan and Sandin blinked at the shining contents of the chest. They had given up hopes for profit on this expedition beyond life itself.

Finally, Kwan laughed and laughed heartily. It was his first moment free of crushing stress since Onja had first snared his wits. His expedition was actually going to be a success. When he presented the wonderful headdress to the Darmar, Kwan could retire even more famous than he already was. He now understood much of the appeal Dreibrand had in serving this great being.

"This chest is from me. The other one is from Dreibrand. I regret that my business with Onja was not finished before you arrived in my realm," Shan said. "Then your visit to Jingtun would have been much more pleasant."

With his mirth fading into serious thoughts Kwan agreed, "I regret it too."

Shan focused on the ivory handled dagger in the belt of the Lord General. "I see you have Dreibrand's dagger," he commented.

Sandin heard the name Dreibrand and wished he knew what was being said.

"Did he ask for it back?" Kwan asked.

"No, but he did ask to speak to you. May he?" Shan said.

Kwan agreed, and Shan sensed an increase in the emotions from the Lord General.

Shan then took his leave of Kwan and bade him and his men to have a safe trip home. When Kwan and Quylan spoke their goodbyes, he bowed to her again and thanked whatever God had made him trust her. Expecting that he would never see her again, he drank in the sight of her dark eyes and delicate blue face so that when he was home, in far away Atrophane, he would still have her image in his mind. Despite the hard lessons Kwan had learned about himself since entering the Wilderness, seeing Quylan had been a privilege.

As the rys withdrew, Kwan noted that this parting was much better than any scenarios he had visualized during his long winter of powerless despair.

When Dreibrand approached with his companions, Kwan reminded himself to forget the past and look to the future because things were different now. Dreibrand was different now.

"Let me do the talking, Lieutenant," Kwan said.

Sandin hissed a protest but Kwan snapped, "This is important for Atrophane."

They said no more because Dreibrand was now close enough to hear.

When Dreibrand saw that Sandin was firmly in place next to Lord Kwan, he was glad that Tytido and Miranda were with him. Ignoring the cold reception, Dreibrand started introducing his friends.

The thrill of meeting the important Atrophane warriors showed clearly on Tytido's face, and he beamed as Dreibrand introduced him.

"And this is Miranda," Dreibrand added.

She inclined her head with a cool regality, and the two Atrophane regarded her with astonishment. They obviously wondered when and where Dreibrand had come by her, especially because she appeared to be of eastern origin.

Kwan considered her quite attractive and Sandin, with his usual arrogance, dismissed her in his mind as slave stock.

After acknowledging Dreibrand's associates, Kwan focused on his former officer. The braids had been combed out of his hair, making him look more like when Kwan had known him. The Lord General noted the scabs and bruises on Dreibrand's face.

"The battle for Jington must have been hard indeed," Kwan commented.

Knowing the evidence of a bad beating still showed on his face, Dreibrand said, "Actually, Lord Kwan, I have you to thank for this. When you took my horse and weapons I was waylaid by enemies."

"Do you expect me to feel guilty?" Kwan scoffed, and he thought it was interesting that Dreibrand had enemies.

Tytido turned curiously to Dreibrand. Even without understanding the words, Tytido knew a hostile tone when he heard one.

"Of course not. I only told you for your own satisfaction," Dreibrand explained.

"I have ceased to look to you for that," Kwan retorted.

Listening to Dreibrand gave Sandin a bad taste in his mouth. "My Lord, let me kill this criminal. The sight of him is an obscenity," he growled.

Contemptuously, Dreibrand smirked. "And nice to see you, Sandin. You used to think I did not deserve success, now you think I do not deserve life."

"And do you?" Sandin demanded. "An officer does not abandon thousands of soldiers on the day of a battle and expect to live."

"What battle? I no longer felt inclined to crush pitiful towns to enrich the likes of you!" Dreibrand countered. "I knew my fortune was in the Wilderness, and I would waste no more time playing games in Atrophane."

"Your ambition is no secret," Kwan interrupted calmly, diffusing the tension between the two men. *Some things do not change*, he reflected. "Now what have you come to say to me? I have seen the box of treasure that you hope will mollify my disgust."

"Perhaps your disgust has no price, Lord Kwan, but I would have the debt for my commission settled beyond any doubt," Dreibrand responded proudly.

"The treasure is a great ransom and I will not say that I do not appreciate it," Kwan conceded. "Is

there anything else? We are anxious to go.”

Dreibrand nodded and tried to sound casual when he asked his question. “What are your intentions in the Wilderness, Lord Kwan?”

Kwan studied his errant officer and suddenly understood many things without having to be told. He ended his silence after glancing toward Shan, who waited on the road. “According to King Shan, the Wilderness is his. Therefore, I have no intentions there.”

Dreibrand rolled his eyes in disbelief.

Kwan shrugged and a distant look entered his eyes as he explained, “Dreibrand, honestly, I will retire and never lead my armies again. My time as a Lord General has passed.”

Even though Dreibrand could not quite conceive of Kwan as anything except a Lord General, he suspected his former commander actually meant what he said. But when Dreibrand looked at Sandin, he did not see the face of a man who thought about retiring.

Before Dreibrand could ask, Sandin said flippantly, “Maybe I can become Shan’s friend too.”

“Do not set your heart on it,” Dreibrand warned quickly, disturbed by Sandin’s comment.

Sandin contemplated Dreibrand’s implicit challenge, but he laughed instead of growing angrier. “You are so proud to be Shan’s slave,” he sneered.

These words made Dreibrand seethe, and he lurched forward intending to grab his old rival, but he aborted the effort. His quick prideful temper had almost plunged him into disaster with Kalek, and Dreibrand restrained himself from making more trouble that Shan would not appreciate.

“You know nothing,” Dreibrand growled.

“I am too old to listen to you two exchange insults,” Kwan decided. “Lieutenant Sandin, that will be all. And Dreibrand, let me tell you something. Do not place all of your trust in the rys of Jingten. I can see that Shan is a great friend of yours, but remember rys have ambitions and they consider themselves naturally superior. Onja had plans to take over Atrophane. She was training Quylan to be an ambassador to Atrophane, so she could intimidate our homeland with her magic.”

“That was Onja. Shan wants to be left alone in the Rysamand,” Dreibrand defended, although the news about Quylan’s training was quite new.

“Shan is a king now. He may think about new things,” Kwan mused.

“Others have tried to poison my mind against Shan before, but I am not interested,” Dreibrand maintained.

“Dreibrand, you miss my point. I do not suggest you forsake your friendship with Shan, but you should also consider your homeland,” Kwan said. “I have learned that rys have advantages over us. You should translate your favor with Shan into favor for Atrophane.”

“I do not follow you,” Dreibrand said and looked at Sandin, who seemed antagonized by Kwan’s statement.

Kwan continued, “What I mean is that you could forge a favorable alliance between Jingten and Atrophane. The border of the Empire could be secured, and you could convince Shan to grant us concessions in the Wilderness.” Kwan said. “The rys do not use the Wilderness, and we could.”

“Why would I support the interests of a homeland that censures my family?” Dreibrand asked tentatively.

“Because the interests of Atrophane sometimes outweigh the disgrace of an officer. These rys are dangerous—I will always believe that.” Kwan paused and he held out his hand in friendship. “Dreibrand, you can come home. On the official report I listed you as missing in action.”

Time stopped and the bluster of the wind through the mountains retreated from Dreibrand’s hearing. He only saw the weathered face of his Lord General, and he suddenly longed for the days of trust and glory between Kwan and him. A few raindrops were loose on the wind now, and they spattered Dreibrand’s face.

Wiping the cool water from his brow, Dreibrand forced his excitement aside. With calm disappointment he said, "Lord Kwan, you listed me as missing only to conceal the disgrace I brought you."

"There certainly were no worries about ruining your reputation back home," Sandin interjected but Kwan scowled at the unsolicited comment.

"And I had no worries about breaking my mother's heart," Dreibrand added bitterly, discounting his own concern for the matter.

Lowering his hand, Kwan said, "You are astute to see my reasons, Dreibrand. But it does not change the record. You should come home. I will make up some story to explain your long absence. Maybe I will say I sent you on a secret mission to the west."

"And you would agree to this?" Dreibrand asked Sandin.

No hint of agreeability showed on Sandin's face, but he looked to Kwan for his answer.

"Sandin will continue to keep the secret, if for no other reason, to protect my reputation. In return I will see that he is elected Lord General when I retire," Kwan said.

"I deserve Lord General anyway," Sandin remarked.

"You will do this one thing to make sure you deserve it," Kwan insisted. His recommendation would make or break the most worthy of candidates.

Still hiding his feelings, Dreibrand said, "There would still be rumors that would taint my name more than it already is."

"Forget your family. You are a close friend to the magic ruler of the west. You could do great things for the Empire. You could represent our interests in the Wilderness to Shan," Kwan proposed.

Dreibrand remembered the great cities in Atrophane, and the blooming countryside of his youth, and the sea. He looked to Miranda and then Tytido. Both of them clearly wondered what he discussed with his former comrades, and he appreciated their patience. He thought of Miranda as a woman of wealth and power in the Empire and how much she might enjoy the leisure and luxury of joining the ruling class of Atrophane. *But would they really accept her?* he thought. He knew what the high class Atrophane women would think of her. He already knew what they thought of him.

It helped Dreibrand to know that Kwan could forgive him. Dreibrand trusted that Kwan would do as he said, but Dreibrand would never trust Sandin, and he did not want to live in a world in which Sandin possessed the rank of Lord General and control of his secret.

"Lord Kwan, why do you give me this second chance?" Dreibrand whispered.

"Because you are Atrophane. The Empire was not created by us working apart. Atrophane serve Atrophane for Atrophane. It is our way, and you know it. I understand your dissatisfactions and I will try to have them alleviated," Kwan promised. "I love Atrophane too much to see her lose your talents."

For a moment the emptiness of Nufal could not compare to the civilization of his birth, but it passed. Yes, Atrophane was tempting, but Dreibrand decided to leave his old problems in the past and look to his future. An offer of reconciliation did not compare to his dream.

"I have chosen my path. If I return to Atrophane, it will be on my own terms," Dreibrand announced.

Kwan straightened his shoulders proudly, recoiling from the refusal. His offer to welcome Dreibrand back to Atrophane society with improved status had been generous, and a Lord General was not used to having his favors declined.

Of course, Dreibrand read these feelings on the face of the Lord General, and he could not resist seeing how far Kwan would go with his newly developed generosity.

"Make me Lord General and I will return to Atrophane," he offered.

Indignation clenched Sandin. "How dare you!" he exploded.

Tytido and Miranda reached for their weapons at the same time in expectation of an attack from the hostile Atrophane. Dreibrand chuckled as he subdued the defensive moves of his companions. Sandin did nothing except glower with ominous intentions.

"Do not make me send Miranda after you," Dreibrand goaded Sandin.

The degree of the insult reddened Sandin's face.

Kwan knew Dreibrand only meant to upset Sandin. He noted the readiness and devotion that the other man and the woman had shown when they thought Dreibrand was threatened. They were truly loyal.

"Dreibrand, you ask the impossible," Kwan rumbled with displeasure. "I will not punish Sandin to please you."

"That has been made clear to me before," Dreibrand said bitterly. "But think no more of it because my answer will not change. But I do thank you for the offer, Lord Kwan."

Recovering from the rejection, Kwan inquired, "Tell me Dreibrand, what are your intentions in the Wilderness?"

Dreibrand heard the suspicion in Kwan's voice. Dreibrand had meant to use this meeting to personally tell Kwan about his acquisition of Nufal, but now he realized that he had only wanted to brag. Half of a smile tugged at Dreibrand's lips, but he would give no answer.

Almost exasperated, Kwan made a guess and said, "Do not be foolish. What could you hope to do? Are those the only warriors you have?" He gestured to the group of Yentay.

"I think of other things than war," Dreibrand said and gently clasped Miranda's hand.

Kwan regarded Miranda, and he was still puzzled by her presence and even more confused by Dreibrand's show of familial love.

"I thank you for your time, Lord Kwan. I will wish you farewell now," Dreibrand concluded.

"You better wish you never see me again," Sandin snapped and narrowed his gray eyes meaningfully.

"Get the men ready to ride," Kwan ordered.

"Yes, my Lord. I do not ignore my duties," Sandin snarled and spat at Dreibrand's feet.

Tytido stirred with offense but Dreibrand remained calm as Sandin stomped away. With good humor, Dreibrand commented to Miranda and Tytido, "Not everyone from my country is as nice as me."

Kwan did not seem to share in Sandin's anger either and he discarded all the hurtful troubles between him and Dreibrand. He did not want to leave on bad terms.

Kwan removed the ivory handled dagger from his belt and dropped it on the ground. "Do not forget you are Atrophane, Dreibrand Veta," he said. He nodded politely to Miranda and Tytido and strode away.

Surprised, Dreibrand picked up the dagger, which was not too far from Sandin's glob of spit.

The gloomy clouds sprinkled the woodland, and Dreibrand blinked in disbelief. It felt strange to watch Atrophane soldiers assemble for departure and not be a part of the group. He saw Sandin glaring at him with that familiar contempt, and his regret lessened for his lost opportunities with Lord Kwan. The Lord General had respected him enough to invite him home and perhaps that was all Dreibrand had needed to hear.

"Well, what happened?" Tytido said.

"Kwan asked me to go home," Dreibrand replied.

"What did you say?" Tytido cried, although it was fairly obvious that goodbyes had been said.

"Maybe later," Dreibrand said cheerfully.

"That Sandin did not act like he wanted you around," Tytido noted. "Why does he hate you?"

"He is my old rival. I once wanted his position in the military, but that was not meant to be. I have found a new path," Dreibrand said.

Miranda slipped a hand around his arm. "Are things better now?" she whispered.

"Yes, I have no regrets," Dreibrand answered, and Miranda thought he looked happy.

"This is a cold rain. Can we go?" Miranda urged after her practical fashion.

She held a hand over her forehead to block the rain, and Dreibrand remembered when that arm had been broken. He did not want her to be cold and uncomfortable. Shan and the other rys were already mounted and waiting to leave. Dreibrand waved to them, indicating that he was ready to go.

All of the riders started toward Jingtun and the Atrophane were wasting no time in their departure either. Once Dreibrand was in the saddle, he told Tytido to lead the men. With the warriors riding by, Miranda stopped next to Dreibrand.

"Go on. I want to be alone for a while," he ordered.

Thinking only of getting out of the cold summer shower, Miranda almost complied, but then her green eyes glanced suspiciously at Dreibrand, who realized what things must look like to her.

"I promise I will never desert you," he whispered. "I love you, but let me be alone right now."

Despite his sincerity, the fear did not dissipate from her heart. The part of Miranda that could feel love trusted him, but she had another part that only knew betrayal and pain. She wanted him to come back, but if he did not, she would live with it. Too proud to confront him about her insecurity, she steeled herself for the worst and rode away.

While watching the expeditionary force of Atrophane move up the mountainside, Dreibrand came completely to terms with his decision. For a time the forest concealed the Atrophane before they emerged farther up onto the meadowy slope. Only the orderly line of riders revealed the forgotten road to Nufal. Beyond the tree line the blue stone of the Rysamand soared toward the snow covered peaks that overlooked the ridge of traversable rock that was the eastern pass. Dreibrand remembered the first time he had looked over that ridge and beheld Jingtun, and now his blood ran hot with eagerness to go back to the Wilderness and claim his prize.

The drizzle of rain increased but Dreibrand did not turn until the last of the Atrophane disappeared into the pass. Once they were out of sight, he let out a long breath.

Lost in thoughts of his future, Dreibrand turned Starfield around. A Kezanada lounging against a tree surprised him and he jerked the reins and caused his horse to rear. Protected from the rain by the dripping pine bows, the Kezanada made no move and in the shade of the gloomy day, he could have been mistaken for a large burl on the tree.

The Kezanada laughed while Dreibrand calmed his mount. Dreibrand looked around quickly, seeking more dark masks in the woodland.

"You will not see them," the Kezanada stated.

"Faychan?" Dreibrand demanded.

"Yes, my friend," he replied pleasantly, stepping out of his hiding spot.

"How long have you been there?" Dreibrand asked.

Pushing back his visor, Faychan said, "To that question, I reply that I'm always there."

"Since when did you become a rys?" Dreibrand mocked. "What do you want?"

"Oh, this is just a social visit. Now that we are friends, we can do that," Faychan said.

Dreibrand heard the noise of approaching riders and he put his hand warily on his sword.

"Just a couple of my men bringing my mount," Faychan explained. "If you are so worried, I thought

you would have learned not to be alone in the forest.”

Dreibrand frowned at the reference.

“I heard about the excitement last night. You paid Kalek back for his rudeness. But why did you let him live?” Faychan said.

“He is not worth my time, and his father was good to me and Miranda,” Dreibrand answered.

Two Kezanada galloped up the road leading a horse for their master.

“I think you made a mistake,” Faychan remarked after he got on his horse.

“Lucky me, I get your opinion for free,” Dreibrand grumbled.

“A benefit of friendship. You know, I could keep an eye on Kalek for you,” Faychan offered.

“You would watch him anyway, but I assume you want me to pay you to do so,” Dreibrand surmised.

“It could be money well spent, especially for a family man,” Faychan said.

“What do you mean by that?” Dreibrand hissed.

“I mean, the home you made with the Temu has become hostile, and I imagine that you have need of a secure place to live. I could help with that. Jingtun is no place for humans,” Faychan said.

“You are not interesting enough to talk to in the rain,” Dreibrand complained and urged his horse onward.

Faychan moved alongside Dreibrand but signaled for his men to hang back and give them privacy. “You are not very friendly considering the favor I did you,” he observed.

“If you have come to collect your favor, then state it,” Dreibrand said.

“You misunderstand me, Dreibrand. My purpose is not so formal. I only wanted to know what your plans are. I can see for myself that you did not choose to go back with your countrymen,” Faychan said.

Dreibrand looked forward to making his home in Nufal, far away from Kezanada plots. He hesitated to even mention to Faychan where he was going, but it was no secret.

“Dreibrand, just tell me,” Faychan urged with friendly exasperation.

“I have acquired land from Shan in the Wilderness and I will establish a human settlement there,” Dreibrand finally answered.

“Really? So Shan is granting land in the Wilderness?” Faychan said with interest.

“To me,” Dreibrand snapped. “For my loyal service in the war.”

“You sound defensive,” Faychan commented.

“Wouldn’t you?” Dreibrand countered.

With an agreeable grin, the Kezanada asked, “May I visit?”

“I suppose I cannot keep you away,” Dreibrand admitted.

“Oh, you make me feel so welcome,” Faychan laughed.

During the ride back to the city, Dreibrand answered some questions about the Wilderness and Faychan discussed his ambition to overthrow Benladu. It was pleasant small talk mostly, but Dreibrand remained wary of the Kezanada. When they neared Jingtun, Faychan pulled his horse to a stop and a serious expression settled on his face. Dreibrand stopped but looked toward the city impatiently.

“You were there when Onja died, weren’t you?” Faychan whispered a little reverently.

Dreibrand avoided his intense gaze and said nothing.

Undaunted, Faychan asked urgently, "What was in the tower?"

After a moment of reflection, Dreibrand looked guardedly at the Kezanada. He believed that Faychan could read on his face that he knew something remarkable, but the secret had to be kept.

"I am bound by another friendship not to discuss that," Dreibrand explained.

Faychan deduced that Dreibrand was referring to Shan, and he knew that he could not goad the man into betraying an oath to the rys—at least not in a day. However, Faychan had confirmed that Shan definitely wanted something kept secret.

"It must have been a privilege to see the old Queen fall," Faychan said.

"She was hard to kill," Dreibrand recalled. He looked at the city again and a rider was approaching them.

It was Miranda and a damp hood drooped over her face because she had been waiting in the rain the whole time.

When she arrived, Dreibrand whispered in her language, "See, I came back."

Her lips curved in a brief indication of pleasure, but then she looked at Faychan with an austere expression.

The Kezanada greeted her and she acknowledged him with a perfunctory nod.

Dreibrand said, "You will have to excuse me, Faychan, but your company cannot compete with Miranda."

"I suppose I cannot argue with that," Faychan admitted.

After a moment of hesitation, Dreibrand said, "Good luck becoming Overlord."

Faychan pushed his visor down and chuckled. "Good luck in the Wilderness."

The Kezanada watched them ride into the city. Although Dreibrand's choice to ask for land in the Wilderness now seemed obvious, Faychan had not thought of that option before. He was a little disappointed because he had been sure that he could convince Dreibrand to ride to Do Jempur with him this time. With a sigh, Faychan resigned himself to actually having to earn the favor of Jingtēn's new King.

~

The rain cleared the next day and fluffy clouds cruised across the tips of the Rysamand. Dreibrand and Miranda decided to take a ride east for the day. They wanted to gaze upon the Wilderness once by themselves before they started coordinating their colonization efforts.

The wind was cold in the pass but the sun was hot on their faces. Dreibrand saw some tracks from the passing of the Atrophane the day before and he was visited by the wistful thoughts of an expatriate, but he did not say anything.

As they descended the ridge, Jingtēn disappeared behind them and the pine and birch forest of the eastern slopes spread out before them. From their vantage point, they could see the plains of the Wilderness. Even farther, they could see the line of dark mountains that had once cradled the civilization of Nufal. They paused at the tree line where their view was unobstructed.

"I cannot believe we came across all of that," Miranda said.

"It does look daunting from up here, but such distances can be crossed. Atrophane is as far from Droxy as Droxy is from here," he said.

Miranda contemplated the distances. Crossing the Wilderness had given her a much better grasp of the size of the world and she tried to imagine twice that distance.

Taking his eyes from the vista, Dreibrand asked, "Why did you think I wouldn't come back

yesterday?"

Miranda reflected on her sudden fear that he would leave with the Atrophane and replied, "Mostly because you are good to me and it is hard to believe that something good can happen to me. And when you were talking to Lord Kwan, I saw that you wanted to go with him."

"The temptation to return home was fleeting," Dreibrand explained. "Kwan only wanted to bring me back in line with Atrophane society. Like always, he wanted me to keep my place. He seeks to take advantage of my friendship with Shan, as any good Lord General would do."

"But there are things you miss from your home," Miranda surmised.

With objective honesty, Dreibrand agreed that he sometimes missed his culture but he insisted it was only the natural longings of the heart. "But a little homesickness does not compare to you," he added warmly.

His words were kind and Miranda was glad that he was with her. Looking across the landscape, she wanted to go live in the empty land with Dreibrand. Then, her guilt over Elendra's death returned with a sharp emotional pain and she tried to summon the strength to live with it. As much as she missed her daughter, she could not regret her decision to flee into the Wilderness a year ago. As much as she hated to think it, almost any price was worth living free of Barlow and not having to dread every day.

"I think I can feel that the Deamedron are gone," Miranda observed.

Dreibrand nodded. "And this land will rejoice to have life in it instead of death," he predicted.

"I wish we could go now," Miranda said.

"Be patient. We will be there soon enough and then you will miss the comforts of Jingten," Dreibrand said.

"Jingten gives me little comfort," she growled.

"Then let us spend the day here and leave Jingten in the Rysamand," he proposed.

They entered the woodland and wandered at a leisurely pace, enjoying the sight of the occasional animal and remembering how such things had once been their only food. The forest was idyllic, and it soothed both of their hearts to know that Shan ruled the slopes now and not his evil predecessor.

From Jingten, Shan observed his human friends on the eastern slopes of his realm. He remembered watching them approach the Rysamand the summer before and fearing for them. Shan lamented briefly that he did not act then to protect them from Onja, and perhaps spare them so much pain, but maybe if he had taken that course, then Onja would still be Queen. After all, he had not been able to defeat Onja on his own. He pondered the fact that Onja had compelled the humans to come to her and that they had been the catalyst of her demise. After searching for a lesson in this, Shan decided that Onja had mistaken her superiority for invincibility. As always, Onja was his teacher.

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Excerpt from Judgment Rising

Shan and Tempet tumbled down the slope, bound by their unrelenting grips. Shan kept his shield pressed against his opponent even as they struck rocks and flopped through thorny shrubs. The shield channeled Tempet's energy into Shan and insulated his body from damage.

Shan gasped when Tempet finally lost his hold and rolled past him. Lightning crashed above and the pouring rain cooled Shan's hot face. His eyes matched the flashing sky and the discovery that his shield could steal power exhilarated him. With a cry of corrupted delight, he sprang to his feet. Tempet was running away but his lifeforce could not elude Shan's aroused senses.

Shan chased him, gambling that the other attacker would disengage from the humans in order to help her companion. Beckoned by his enemy, Shan ran faster and his suede-clad feet left only the occasional mark in the damp soil. Wet leaves slapped Shan's face as he instinctively avoided the tree trunks hidden in the dark.

Tempet turned abruptly to face his pursuer. Breathing hard, he held his bitaran up and encased himself in a shield spell. No words were spoken when Shan met his challenge and they exchanged blows with furious speed. Tempet was careful to avoid contact with the shield because he now recognized the enchanted device that weakened him like starvation. Many tabre had withered before Dacian's shield.

Shan forced his foe to give ground. Magic blazed around their weapons and in their eyes. Their physical confrontation was so intense that neither of them bothered to use an attack spell. Gripped with a battle rage that had not been seen since Jingtun and Nufal had warred long ago, they swiped at each other, determined to douse an enchanted weapon in blood.

Shan scored the first wound, slashing Tempet's chest. A long stripe of blood dripped over Tempet's pectorals and the pain was acute because Shan's sword had been created as a bane to the Nufalese.

As Tempet cringed, Shan slammed his shield across Tempet's arm, and the flower of Tempet's strength bloomed in Shan's body again. Clearing his mind of the unrefined desire for brutish combat, Shan blasted Tempet to the ground with an attack spell. With his perfect blade, Shan would have cut the aggressive stranger in half if Alloi had not entered the battle from afar. Demolished by her attack spell, Shan fell to the ground hard. He barely resisted the paralyzing effect of the spell.

Another attack spell exploded around his body as he scrambled away, but his shield spell did not buckle. Shan sent his mind toward the female and viewed her lifeforce with clarity for the first time. She was a brilliant creature, imbued with intellect and power, and Shan felt admiration before fear.

Intrigued by her quality, Shan wanted to communicate, but a renewed assault from Tempet forced him to run. Leading the chase now, Shan spread his mind over the land and saw the female trailing them. While she was still trying to catch up, Shan stopped to exchange blows with Tempet, but then the female hit him with a spell and he had to run again.

He ran deep into the forest before his endurance flagged. The forest enveloped him like a hangman's hood. *I have gone too far*, Shan worried.

Deciding he had to even the fight, Shan stopped and frantically cast a spell. Only his great power and skill allowed him to create a spell so quickly and aim it so precisely. The harassment from the female had to end before he could finish Tempet, but Shan did not launch a lethal spell at her. He had yet to attempt communication with the female and his heart demanded that he give her a chance. Perhaps she would be more open to reason than her raving companion.

Alloi tried to repel the spell that hit her like the crashing roof of a burning building, but the strain of fighting such a strong ryl had weakened her. She regretted that she and Tempet had not taken more time to recuperate before striking offensively. When her defenses folded, she screamed with pain and lost consciousness. The wet forest did not muffle her cry but instead transmitted her wail of dismay to her brother's ears. Tempet's emotions rioted when he realized that his sister had been hit.

The ryl King will pay! he promised the world and descended on Shan.

The intense desire to bring pain to his enemy reinstated Tempet to his full knowledge in the use of

his weapon. The bitaran spun in his hand—its jagged head a blur of blunt force. When the spinning weapon stopped, it was in a position to strike Shan on his unshielded side. Shan blocked with his sword and then tried to ram Tempet with his shield. Tempet avoided the leech-like shield and hopped back, guarded by his whirling weapon.

Shan shot an attack spell at Tempet, but the fiery blue explosion did not fell Tempet this time. Inspired by his anger, Tempet charged. Shan caught the sparkling head of the bitaran on his hilt and pushed it up beside his head. At the same time, he tried to apply his shield to Tempet, but the male ducked inside his shield and they grappled chest to chest with weapons locked.

Tempet snarled and his wild eyes blazed with fury. If holding Tempet at bay had not completely taxed Shan's strength, Shan would have shuddered at the sight. Onja had educated Shan about evil, but now a leering mask of pure hate confronted him, and he doubted that he could ever negotiate with this creature.

Tempet spat in the face of the rys King and poured his power into the bitaran. He transformed the shaft of the weapon into a molten mass and reshaped it. Flowing over the bottom warding crystal and consuming its fierce glow, the shaft became elongated and plunged toward Shan's side like a spear. It hardened just before it reached Shan's jacket, and the enchanted point pierced the delicate fabric of Shan's body.

Shan gaped with shock. The intense pain drained all sound from his scream. Tempet twisted the bitaran and snarled with perfect satisfaction. Shan reacted with the strength that only severe crisis can inspire. He pushed Tempet back, which tore the bitaran out of his flesh. Before Shan's blood hit the ground, he released a massive attack spell.

The explosion embraced Tempet with fire that clung to his body and dissolved his shield spell. The flames burned brighter when they reached flesh and did not wither until Tempet's head and neck were charred. His screams cracked his crisp lips and he writhed in agony on the ground. Resisting the total oblivion that the pain demanded, Tempet began to crawl blindly away.

Despite the success of his spell, Shan had no energy left to make the kill. Drained by the blood gushing from his side and down his leg, Shan reeled into a tree. Only now was his mind processing what had happened. He would have never guessed at the ability of the weapon that had devastated his flesh. Clutching his side, he had to watch Tempet crawl away into the forest.

Even with the incredible pain of his wound exceeding the endurance of his nerves, Shan felt the craggy bark of the tree scrape his back. He had faced many trials in his life, but he had never felt more condemned than at this moment. The grim legacy that his race had inflicted on Nufal tainted the land beneath his feet. Generations of old growth held down the dust of a ruined civilization with their roots, and Shan sensed the living forest judging him harshly.

"It was so long ago. I did not do it," he whispered and slid to the ground.

The rain had ceased but a gentle drip from the leaves persisted. Wet with water and his blood, Shan shivered, which frightened him because rys were resistant to cold.

His mind veered from the extraordinary conflict that had dragged him into the inner sanctum of the Wilderness. He pictured the Jington Valley and imagined the sweet scent of his native forest. If he were there, the burning agony in his torso would not be happening. Instinct compelled his mind to journey to his home mountains, and his vision of the Rysamand beckoned him. Then his mind was traveling the skies and the pain faded. Lifting above Nufal, Shan headed west eager to leave the land that permanently resented him.

As the plains between the mountain ranges opened beneath him, Shan gradually noticed that his mental journey was slightly different from usual. His soul had completely detached from his body and followed his mind over the land. Shan had encountered the souls of the dead enough times for him to recognize when he was one.

In the west, the shimmering Rysamand blurred and Shan saw the portal to the next world. The pull was strong—warm and pleasant, like the bliss that animals know in the womb but are condemned to forget. Leaving the violent, scheming, greedy world would be easy, especially when the Nufalese soil was soaking up his purple blood.

But Shan's powerful mind had journeyed this close to the next world before, and he resisted the welcoming whirlpool of death. Shan was the King of Jington, the most powerful rys, and some unknown savage in a loincloth would not strike him down.

Shan's soul plummeted back to Nufal. Like falling into a bin of cockroaches, the ancient land that his kind had destroyed swallowed him. The dark canopy of the forest blotted the stars from his vision.

The pain returned and it was an even greater torment after his visit to the threshold of the next world. He took a slow rasping breath, expanding his dormant lungs that had been filling with fluid. Shan moved his arms and flexed his hands that were stiff from the low amount of blood in the veins.

With a mastered discipline, he found a path through the pain and began to apply healing magic to his wound. His feeble attempt to fix his flesh achieved about as much as a lifeboat of people stranded on the open sea sharing insufficient water rations. Shan could patch the hole in his side, but the damage within was not mended.

With the agony under control, he struggled to function. Tempet had to be incapacitated as well, and Shan knew he might never get a better chance to defeat him. Rolling over, he willed his torn body to his feet.

The path taken by the crawling Tempet was easy to see and Shan limped down it. He wondered how long he had been in his death-like state. In reply to his question, the long night relented and the trees filtered the first gray hint of dawn.

Shan probed the forest with his advanced senses. After his ordeal, it was difficult to focus, but he managed to locate his enemy. The female had joined her partner, which caused Shan to pause. In his condition, he doubted if he could confront them both, but he did not want to lose the opportunity that Tempet's injuries provided.

I must finish him now, Shan thought feverishly and pushed on.

Aware of his intent to kill Tempet, Shan recalled the guilt that Dacian had expressed about his role in the destruction of Nufal. Killing Tempet would be like finishing the crimes that Dacian had begun, but Shan saw no way to avoid the deed. Tempet was a fearsome beast uninterested in peace and Shan felt the yoke of his duty settle on his shoulders. As King, he had to protect his people, both rys and humans. For their sake, he had to accept the burden of guilt.

Shan had shed his commitment to non-violence in order to become King. At the time, he had hoped that using his power to kill was only a temporary necessity, but now he could not cling to that fantasy. Sternly, he hauled his compassion to its holding cell and plodded toward his enemy with greater haste.

Fixing his mind on the brutal task ahead, Shan held up his shield and sword and closed the final distance. The songbirds inspired by the dawn silenced themselves when Shan went by.

When Shan reached his enemy, he saw him laid by a spring with the female tending his wounds. The water gurgled up pleasantly into a forest pool dotted with lily pads. With violence boiling in his heart, Shan was immune to the tranquil beauty of the spot, but he had no resistance to the sight of the female. She rose from the side of her partner and faced Shan. Lightly, she gasped at his appearance, and the wondrous note created by the air passing through her lips halted Shan.

Her loveliness transfixed Shan and the brilliance of her being diminished his cruel resolve. A golden streamer of sunlight slanted through the tree branches and glowed on her perfect face and the soft edges of her full lips. He stared at her fine face that was crowned with a glaze of short white locks. Shan did not consider the sheepskin shift covering her body to be primitive, but rather, it was privileged to touch her ideal curves.

A spear of emotion struck his chest with a force similar to the bitaran that had nearly killed him. His sword drooped and he did not advance. The fire to slay his enemy was smothered by the female, who confronted Shan like a dream that he had never had, but now that she occupied his mind, he never wanted to wake up.

A different sort of shock had frozen Alloi. She had passed Shan in the forest on her way to help her brother and she had thought that the rys was dead. Fear made her quiver with vulnerability as she realized the extent of his power. He appeared able to ward off death.

With her brother depending on her, Alloi braced herself to face the challenge. She abandoned her tradition and scooped up the bitaran with the speed of a striking snake, but Shan did not react. Assuming that the King of Jingten intended to toy with her, Alloi stoked her powers. White light filled her eyes as she attempted to be intimidating.

Seemingly impervious to her threatening posture, Shan whispered, "Who are you?"

His calm respectful voice could have lulled Alloi if she were not looking upon a rys. Her enemy was before her and she ignored the confusion that the sight of the strange male aroused. If before waking in this time, she had not seen her whole world overrun by holocaust, she might have been inclined to appreciate this powerful male. A tiny rebellious portion of her soul even pitied the rys's terrible wound.

But Tempet moaned and reminded Alloi of her loyalties. The wonderment she felt was probably caused by a rys trick. Perhaps this rys had insinuated himself into her mind and sought to make her weak by exposing her kindness.

Shielding magic glowed around Alloi's body, but Shan did not attack. He could not attack. Now that he physically saw the female, he intensely regretted the spell that he had stunned her with earlier. Shan could reason that the murderous Tempet deserved his lethal judgement, but the mysterious female sapped him of his will to do harm. Despite her hostile stance, Shan sensed an endearing gentleness at the core of her powerful soul.

Although puzzled by the immobile rys, Alloi chose to take the inexplicable opportunity to retreat. Bending down, she placed one of Tempet's arms around her shoulders and hoisted him to his feet. He was only semi-conscious and his eyes were closed shut. Alloi backed away with her groaning brother.

Although Shan knew that he should kill them, he watched them disappear into the forest. Too exhausted to pursue them now, Shan sunk to his knees and dipped his fingers into the pool. He imagined the female's hands cupping the water from the spring to soothe her companion. An intense jealousy clawed at his heart as he longed for her to minister to his wound.

"Who are you?" he murmured and passed out.

When he awoke the sun was much higher and sparkling on the pristine pool. Shan took stock of his appearance and was appalled. His clothes were ruined, smeared with mud and blood, and sprinkled with forest litter. Painfully, he removed his jacket and examined the hole where the bitaran had gone through. He was still trying to understand what the weapon had done to him, and his mind automatically devoured the concept of using magic to rapidly reshape metal objects.

Setting the jacket aside, he rolled up his sleeves and began to wash the blood and dirt from his hands. His thoughts returned to the female and his ridiculous mercy. He pictured her reflection in the water and savored again her beauty that he had seen so briefly.

Then Shan realized that he was not merely imagining her, but sensing her. The female's magic was upon the land, and Shan crushed his soft thoughts and sat up. He instantly covered himself with a shield spell.

The distant howl of wild animals in the forest drew his attention, and Shan cast his perception toward the sound. When he saw his men battling the fenthakrabis, he realized that the female was controlling the beasts with her mind and using them to prevent the men from reaching him. Fortunately, the men were strong and well armed and they quickly dispatched the beasts before Shan needed to intervene.

When he saw that his men had come looking for him, Shan felt a great love for those who were loyal to him. Knowing that his isolation would soon end eased his pain, and he was about to contact Dreibrand when a heavy force hit his body.

Shan's mind dashed back to his body and discovered that a panther had attacked him. White light blazed in the large cat's eyes and long claws pierced his flesh, pinning him for the slaughter. As the strong jaws descended, Shan forced his thoughts into the mind of the animal. He had the ability to communicate with animals although he had not pursued the skill to its fullest potential.

His new female opponent, however, was adept at using dangerous animals as her weapons, and Shan met her mind within the mind of the panther. They vied for control of the feline's killer instincts, but Shan's power and proximity allowed him to prevail. The panther relented after a hot blast of magic and its snarl changed into a shrill yowl. Without planning its retreat, the panther leaped into the pool. Distressed by the pain and then the water, it splashed to the opposite bank. The white light faded from its eyes and the wet predator with singed hair looked thoroughly confused by its condition.

Shan grabbed his sword, leveled it at the panther, and yelled. Without the desire of another mind

pushing it to attack, the panther accepted that the rys was not as vulnerable as he appeared. It roared once with its ears back and then ran away.

Shan stayed alert to his immediate surroundings, but he no longer sensed the powers of the female prowling the land. When he tried to stand up, he found that his exhaustion would not let him. He settled for crawling to a tree and propping himself against it.

The panther had torn up his left arm and his right shoulder, and Shan gradually used his healing magic to stop the blood flow. Internally his pain was flaring up again because the impact from the large animal had jarred the delicate stability that he had imposed on the severe injury. Knowing that he needed help, Shan mentally beckoned Dreibrand.

With guidance from Shan, Dreibrand had no need to follow the erratic trail left by the night-long duel, and he reached Shan quickly. Dreibrand cried out with dismay when he saw Shan propped against the tree. Expansive stains of blood darkened his clothes and his sword and shield were lying across his legs. The rys looked like a man, who having suffered a mortal wound, had dragged himself to the side of the battlefield to perish.

"I am done dying," Shan whispered when Dreibrand reached his side. The rys smiled weakly as he appreciated his private joke, but Dreibrand's concern was not alleviated. Shan looked pale, like the thin winter daylight on the Rysamand.

"What happened? Did you kill them?" Dreibrand asked.

"No. But the male is badly wounded, perhaps even worse than me," Shan replied.

Dreibrand's eyes darted over the sprays of blood on the ripped clothing, wondering where to begin. He settled on the right side of Shan's torso, which the rys covered protectively with his arm.

"Let me see," he said and pulled Shan's arm and shirt out of the way. Dreibrand recognized the tender lavender flesh that indicated that healing magic had sealed the wound, but the patch was incomplete and blood had started to seep again.

Looking over his shoulder, Dreibrand ordered his men to build a fire and post a guard.

"Thank you for coming," Shan said. "I could not have hoped that you would be so close."

"As soon as it was light, we got on your trail. But we lost Pel Ton last night," Dreibrand said.

"I had hoped that no one was hurt," Shan murmured.

Dreibrand retrieved his saddlebags and worked quickly to prepare some bandages. "Do you know how close they are? I believe one of them used magic to direct some fenthakrabis to attack us," he said.

"That was the female," Shan explained. "She is very powerful, but I am not sure where they are right now"

Dreibrand said, "Let it suffice for now that they are not here." He helped Shan sit forward and began to wrap a bandage around his torso. "How closely did you see them? Are they rys?" he inquired while he worked.

"I think they are rys. They certainly have intelligence and magic," Shan answered. "I tried to communicate with the male, but I learned only that his name is Tempet and he possesses an intense hatred for me, as you can see."

"So it was this Tempet that did this to you?" Dreibrand said.

"Yes. He is very dangerous. Never let him get close to you," Shan warned. "His power allows him to change the shape of his weapon, so there is no knowing what its reach is. That is how this happened."

Dreibrand glanced at the other men. They were hovering nervously. Like him, their relief from finding Shan had been deflated by the rys's bad condition.

Lowering his voice, he said, "Shan, this looks bad. How long do you need to recover?"

"No time. I can still fight," Shan said. "We must continue the pursuit."

"Are you sure?" Dreibrand said skeptically. Even if Shan was immensely powerful, Dreibrand had seen Shan take a bad wounding before and the rys had been down for days.

Shan was not so quick to reply again. The pain scoffed at his previous confidence and he confessed, "Dreibrand, I need to enter a hibernation state so I can get this injury under control, but I dare not. If Tempet and the other one come back, you will need me."

Remembering the death of Pel Ton, Dreibrand tended to agree with Shan's assessment, but allowing Shan to languish in disrepair would not serve them either.

"Shan, you said that you hurt Tempet badly. Then it is logical that he will go lick his wounds until he is ready to face you again. So you must do the same. You must get your health back as quickly as possible. Enter your healing sleep and we will watch over you," Dreibrand proposed.

Shan hesitated to accept the idea. He hated to gamble with their lives.

"Your wardings helped us when the female attacked," Dreibrand added.

Shan begrudged the time needed for his recovery because it would allow Tempet to do the same, but he had to admit that his condition prevented him from making another choice.

"I must accept your wisdom, my General," Shan said.

"General? You have not called me that since the war," Dreibrand remarked.

"I think that the war has started again," Shan said and shut his black eyes.

Dreibrand wanted to question him about the ominous comment, but Shan was already entering the deep rest that would allow him to mend his body. Spreading out a bedroll, Dreibrand placed Shan on it and covered him up. The breathing of the rys was dwindling, but Dreibrand knew not to be alarmed because the slowed respiration was a part of Shan's natural healing process.

Secure in his faith that Shan would be renewed in two or three days, Dreibrand looked up from the serene face of the rys King. Warm light that was tinted green by the foliage dotted the forest floor and pushed aside the shady chill that clung to the web of old tree roots. A couple dragonflies hummed over the spring-fed pool, but the idyllic surroundings could not soothe Dreibrand's nerves. His beloved Nufal had suddenly turned hostile, and although it was not confirmed, he believed that his new rys enemies must have emerged from hibernation. And apparently they deeply resented his presence. When he had decided to settle Nufal, he had thought he was occupying an empty land. Dreibrand had expected competition for the Wilderness from outside the region, but now he was challenged from within.

Even if this is their land, they have no right to kill us. If they will not let me return civilization to Nufal, then they are no better than Onja, he thought.

Hunkered on the damp ground, Dreibrand draped his arms over his knees and hung his head. For the moment, he did not care if he looked weak in front of his men. The Wilderness had not been cleansed as he had believed. Perhaps he would have to win it all over again.

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Appendix A ~ The Worship of Onja ~

Soon after Onja's total victory over Nufal in the Great War, she proclaimed herself to be the Goddess of all surviving peoples of Gyhwen. The human warriors who had served her and Dacian in the war did not resist her announcement of divinity. Indeed, so in awe of her terrible power were the humans on the side of the rys, that they believed that she had to be Goddess. At the conclusion of the Great War, Onja and Dacian had cast a mighty spell that killed many of the Nufalese warriors and enslaved their souls. The captured souls were transformed into vicious wraiths that Onja set loose upon the inhabitants of Nufal. Dacian was horrified by her vindictiveness but she was not prevented from completely destroying all Nufalese.

Because Onja had the power to seize and manipulate souls, the humans bowed down to her and returned west to their tribal kingdoms to spread the word of Onja's coming as the Goddess Queen of the world. The human religious establishment and the beliefs of the common people at first scoffed at the rys Queen's audacity, but she tolerated no disbelief. Casting her magic from Jingteng, she attacked temples, towns, and castles with fireball spells until her will was widely accepted. Onja's powerful mind was also able to spy on the activities of distant humans without leaving Jingteng, and she continually detected heretics and destroyed them with her magical attacks or sent her minions to kill them. With her power so apparent, humans began to volunteer to her cause, and Onja instituted her priesthood, the rismavda, and commanded them to build temples throughout the western kingdoms. No religion besides the worship of her was to be condoned, and for generations rebellious heretics were rooted out and horribly persecuted by the rismavda, tribal monarchs, and the Kezanada. Any holy writings and philosophies predating Onja's ascendance as Goddess were meticulously destroyed along with the art and architecture of dozens of tribal religions and cults.

In addition to establishing temples and eradicating all other faiths, Onja required that the human kingdoms deliver tribute to her in Jingteng every year to display their gratitude and faith.

The tenets of Onja's religion were simple: total belief in her power, obedience to her will, and gratitude shown in tangible offerings of tribute. Onja imposed nothing new to the existing moral codes of the tribal societies, but she did over the centuries cast herself in the role of the creator mother who made the world, made crops grow, commanded the seasons, controlled fertility, and who guarded the passage of one's soul at death. Her ability to prevent a soul from reaching the afterlife and joining the ancestors was important to her power. No human would want to anger her and have his or her soul imprisoned in enchanted torment.

Spoken prayers were addressed to Onja, but people retained their old ways of calling upon their ancestors, although never in a public settings. After the first century of her rule as Goddess Queen, people learned not to petition Onja with their prayers and problems when they delivered tribute. Onja was notoriously capricious, always finding a way to condemn a human's greed for her undeserved favor.

For example, in the twenty-sixth year of the Age of Onja, King Eljetter of the Nurati Tribe asked a boon of Onja upon delivering his tribute. He complained of raids from nomadic tribes that were terrorizing his people and reducing the harvest of crops and livestock. He lamented that his warriors had been ineffective in curtailing the growing boldness of the marauders, and Eljetter prayed at the base of Queen Onja's dais for her to see into the minds of his enemies and then give him the visions of their plans so that he would know where to defend his domain next. Eljetter was sincere and humble in his pleading, and indeed Onja truly did have the power to aid him as he asked, but she was not inclined. Onja scoffed at his proposal that she use her great mind to help him with his petty problems. Her magical vision was not to be wasted on the likes of him. To punish Eljetter for his ridiculous request, Onja blinded him. She reasoned that since he was blind to the strategies of his enemies, perhaps in true blindness he might be undistracted and therefore able to reason through his problems.

In a more shocking example, two years later, in the twenty-eighth year of the Age of Onja, King Mem Doh of the Patharki Tribe prayed to Onja to heal his sick daughter who suffered from an unknown disease. Although she was only a girl, Mem Doh adored her to the point that he dared to ask his Goddess Queen to cure the wasting body. Again Onja was cruel. She struck dead Mem Doh's other eleven healthy children and chastised him for not thanking her for the health they had enjoyed. Mem Doh soon after committed suicide and his tribe withered from history.

To worship Onja, it was best not to attract her attention, and the people of the west fell into uncomplaining subservience. They paid their tribute, honored her temples and priests, persecuted lingering heretics, and believed wholeheartedly in Onja's power for it was real and insurmountable.

Appendix B ~ The Status of Women in the West ~

The tribal kingdoms west of the Rysamand Mountains are entirely patriarchal. Women have few rights and by law and strict cultural norms they are controlled by the rule of men. Polygamy is also practiced although plural marriage is usually the domain of the wealthier classes and of course the ruling elite. Poor and middle class men generally lack the means to support more than one wife.

Women have almost no accepted roles outside of marriage, with the only notable exception being a healer woman who has professionally devoted herself to the care of others instead of producing children of her own. However, even she is expected to defer to the control of male relatives and, the same as other women, she cannot own land or property.

With the prohibition on owning property, women cannot inherit any of their father's legacies. Male heirs are all important, and a family with only daughters will have to transfer inheritance to sons-in-law.

Women have no power in the political affairs of society, except the wives of particularly powerful kings or large landholders. Such elite women are sometimes granted a limited role in economic affairs and dispute resolution, but they never make laws. These few privileged women are usually only able to exercise their small powers when their husbands are absent. And only first wives are allowed such privileges. Secondary, tertiary, and subsequent wives lack any role outside the female household.

Except for healer women, there is no formal employment for women. Their work is confined to the household and farm. They produce numerous crafts and textiles, but are never compensated financially. In the lower levels of society, however, economic necessity will often prompt women to work in the public arena such as working in a vendor stall at market or serving food and drinks in a tavern. This activity is always part of a family business and the operation cannot be entirely women-run. On the fringe of society, some women belong to performing troupes and work as actresses, acrobats, and dancers, but this occupation is considered akin to prostitution. No one would tolerate their daughter working as an entertainer, although the entertainment troupes are universally enjoyed by society even though the individual members are looked down upon.

The language of women also tends to be limited to their native tongues. A common language exists among the western tribes that allow inter-tribal communication, but this is generally learned only by men who have the freedom to travel, or at least speak socially with travelers. Sometimes female members of elite households will learn the common language because their existence is slightly less isolated than the average woman and to aid her in communicating if she is married to a man outside her tribe for political purposes.

The western societies have almost no tolerance for women who deviate from the patriarchal rules. Out of wedlock pregnancy will result in a family casting the woman from her home. Such women usually expose their infants and then commit suicide, which is expected of them. Some will be defiant and raise their children and turn to prostitution, which is the only avenue of existence open to them. Rape victims face a similar fate and are expected to kill themselves.

Despite the harsh laws and expectations placed on women, the societies formally behave respectfully to women. Except in the lower classes, social gatherings require segregation of the sexes and men are expected to limit eye contact with females outside their family and never touch them.

Folklore and rumor of course tell stories of women functioning outside their accepted roles. Abundant are tales of women who run wild in the deep forests and live free of men although they sometimes seduce a traveler in order to conceive children. Many a Kezanada Overlord is said to have been birthed by such women. Numerous legends continually insist that female warriors have even joined the ranks of the Kezanada. The secrecy of the Kezanada, who mask their faces, encourages this persistent rumor because a female could pose as a warrior. As with all things with the Kezanada, this has not been confirmed.

About the Author

Tracy Falbe has been an enthusiast of fantasy stories since childhood. She was born in Michigan in 1972 and grew up in Mt. Pleasant. In 1995 she moved to Nevada and currently resides in Northern California with her husband, son, German shepherd, and black cat. Her hobbies include being a news junkie, archery, baking, and gardening.

In 2000, she earned a journalism degree from California State University, Chico. She considers writing a necessary activity that she enjoys. She has the most fun writing in the fantasy genre. She finds inspiration in history and likes to contemplate warfare before gunpowder and life without modern technology. Placing characters in an elder world fantasy setting fascinates her and allows her to explore age-old notions of bravery when combat was often done face-to-face. Magic is another story element that adds to the pleasure of writing in this genre.

Tracy's first published work was the non-fiction title "Get Dicey: Play Craps and Have Fun" based on her years working as a craps dealer in Las Vegas. Since learning to read and write as a child, Tracy always knew that she wanted to write novels. The Rys Chronicles represents the efforts of many adult years.

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