

Judgment Rising

The Rys Chronicles Book III

Tracy Falbe

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To Nancy

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Prologue

Life stirred in a forgotten bunker. Locked in hibernation seemingly without end, it had taken refuge in cold stone to escape a freeze beyond the scope of mere winter. After the thaws of five springs unblighted by Onja’s magic, cells began the sluggish return to life.

The dark rock of the Tabren Mountains soaked up the warmth of the sun, and the elder slopes recalled their children who had once played at civilization on the knees of the world. At first, only a few grains of granite came loose from the mountainside. It was a minor loss to the mountain, yet it was different than erosion.

Then, with the sun at its zenith, smoke curled from where the grains had fallen. The rock began to glow red like the iron in the forge until a circular patch burned away. In the small hollow appeared two rows of teeth. Air hissed into the mouth as the life took its first greedy gasp after long centuries of deprivation.

For days nothing happened except the occasional rasping of air across the dry teeth. The spring advanced and the sun stayed longer with each passing until the snows dripped all day and a tiny stream channeled into the mouth. Then rain came and filled the imprisoned vessel to overflowing.

On the next morning, the rock had swollen and an organic form bulged forth from the secluded mountainside. As the day continued, heat radiated from the bulging shape until its outer shell evaporated in a thick steam. What was revealed had the same steel gray color as the remote mountain.

The body was perfect with broad shoulders and sculpted pectorals above a well-defined abdomen. A bald head with a slack face stared vacantly from the high lonely place. This statue carved from the mountain was male and he reclined against the Tabren like a young God from the beginning of the world.

When night came and the constellations wheeled across the sky, his eyes began to sparkle. The lights in the heavens, after crossing space for eons, on this night discovered a purpose and re-ignited the soul in that forsaken body. Gradually, his eyes gathered the white light until their glow illuminated his naked body. He lifted his hands and looked at them.

The fingers, with their sensitive tips, told him that he possessed a physical body. He could feel the blood pulsing inside the flesh, but then, as he continued to stare at his hands, he began to scream. The scream lashed out at the night and filled the chasm that separated him from the next mountain. After the wretched sound reached a peak of volume, the wailing faded and he was left with pain in his throat.

Pain?

It was a thought and it made him realize he had a mind. But more thoughts were not forthcoming. He experienced only the animal desires of an animal existence. Hunger, pain, fear. Perhaps without

hunger, there would be no pain. And perhaps without pain, there would be no fear. And when that was gone, maybe there could be other things. Like memory. Like language.

But until then, there was only flesh that needed to be fed.

1. Voices in a Dream

The heavy rumble of moving rock and soil shook the mountainside. A group of riders on the road held their startled horses steady and looked fearfully up the slope. Ahead of them, dust blasted around the bend in the road, but the perilous slide missed the riders and spared them a hard painful death.

As the rattling of rocks and pebbles diminished, Dreibrand Veta cautiously urged his horse forward to inspect the damage. He contemplated the unstable boulders and mounds of soil blocking the ancient road. For over two thousand years, the road had been untraveled and clear, and when Dreibrand considered that he had depended on the route for only five years, its sudden disrepair annoyed him.

He looked at the twenty men behind him. They were already turning their horses around in anticipation of a lot of backtracking. Dreibrand told them to find a stable spot where they could take a break.

Tytido moved up beside Dreibrand and viewed the obliterated road. "We can go back and find the lower trail that Chilo scouted last year. We can still reach Elendra before nightfall," Tytido said, trying to be positive even as his dark eyes watched the slope above them.

Dreibrand calculated the distance of the detour to the summer settlement named after his wife's late daughter and nodded in support of Tytido's estimation.

Noting his friend's disappointment, Tytido said, "We could have been under the slide instead of inconvenienced by it."

Dreibrand agreed. They were very lucky that the shifting effects of the spring thaw had collapsed the slope before they reached it, even if the timing had been close.

"May our luck continue on the lower trail," Dreibrand said as he eyed the dense deciduous forest where they now had to venture.

A thick and intimidating forest filled the circular valley that bulged into the Tabren Mountains from the prairie. The valley had once been the heartland of ancient Nufal, and next to the lake at its center, rose the towering ruins of a city. Dreibrand and the settlers had not penetrated the forest yet and explored the city.

Until five years ago, Nufal in its entirety had been perilous to human travel. Dreibrand had known of the vacant land as only the Wilderness, and no one, human or rys, had lived there for over two thousand years. The original civilization had been eradicated by the immensely powerful rys monarchs, Onja and Dacian, who had lived in the neighboring Rysamand Mountains. Possessing magical powers superior to their enemies, Onja and Dacian had destroyed the Nufalese army with a mighty spell that seized the souls of the warriors and transformed them into enslaved wraiths. Bound to the will of the rys monarchs, the wraiths had been forced to kill every living being in Nufal, leaving the cities littered with corpses.

Onja had then disposed of Dacian and made herself the sole ruler of the rys and the human tribes that lived west of the Rysamand. Her reign endured for twenty-two centuries until another powerful rys, Shan, had defeated her after a bitter costly war. Dreibrand had served Shan as a general of human warriors, and his loyal service to the new rys King had earned him title to the Wilderness.

Dreibrand planned to build a new civilization in Nufal and be the ruler of the kingdom that he created. He knew it would take the rest of his life to transform the long-abandoned wilds into

towns and farmlands. He and the other settlers had only begun the process. They still relied on the remnants of civilization left by the first unfortunate Nufalese, such as the road carved into the mountainsides that they called the High Road.

A ring of ruined cities was connected by the High Road that encircled the valley just above the forest canopy. Despite the sad history evident in the broken streets, the settlers had already reoccupied two of the old sites. Because the High Road created easy access, the settlers had explored the cities above the forest before attempting to reach the ruins at the overgrown center of the valley.

Only last year had Chilo, with companions of course, discovered an old trail through the forest between Elendra and the southeastern loop of the High Road. It was a short trail that only dipped into the forest, but Dreibrand considered it a good beginning. He knew in time that they would overcome the dangers of the forest and make many paths across the valley.

And now they would prove his belief and use Chilo's trail. They were a large enough group to cope with a fenthakrabi attack if it should occur.

While everybody took a break, Dreibrand asked Chilo to guide them on the forest trail. Chilo, a middle-aged man from the Nuram Tribe that dwelled west of the Rysamand, had joined them three years ago, and he was pleased to take the lead.

"Can we reach Elendra before sunset?" Dreibrand asked.

"Oh yes, Lord Dreibrand," Chilo answered. He tended to address his leader with careful formality although Dreibrand did not insist upon it. People close to him openly used only his first name, and the other settlers generally called him Sir. Dreibrand saw no need to require more when he lived the same as any of them.

Eager to see Chilo's trail, Dreibrand called an end to the rest and they started backtracking. Chilo did not have trouble finding what he said was the beginning of his trail. If, in ancient times, a marker had been placed at the junction, there was no sign of one now, but Dreibrand trusted Chilo. The Nuram man was at ease in the empty land and had a talent for finding paths. The year before, while hiking into the mountains east of Elendra, Chilo had seen a city perched on a cliff above a chasm. Because of its hidden location, everyone had taken to calling the place the Secret City. Dreibrand planned to visit the remote ruin for the first time in a few days.

As Dreibrand rode down into the valley, the ruins rising from the forest were directly in front of him, teasing him with mystery. When Dreibrand had first occupied Nufal five years earlier, he had been surprised by the amount of ruins in the valley. He had not seen evidence of such extensive building in the Jington Valley, where the rys lived in the Rysamand Mountains. He had wondered if Nufal was the older civilization. When he had asked King Shan about this, the rys had said that he did not know, but then, somewhat reluctantly, he had agreed with the theory.

The group followed Chilo under the canopy of climax growth and Dreibrand lost sight of the ruins. The bright budding foliage on the old trees softened the cranky aura that seemed to radiate from the valley. Like many of the other settlers, Dreibrand attributed a dark mood to their land, but he was not afraid. He loved Nufal and some day new settlements would replace the haunted ruins and revive the land. Much like himself, Dreibrand knew that the land only needed a new way to live so that it could forget its hard history. He had faith that he and his descendants would heal Nufal of the memory of genocide.

Already this place was the home of his children. Deltane, his son, had been born during Dreibrand's first year in Nufal. The winter that year had been the hardest, and Deltane had arrived during the last blizzard of the long season. Dreibrand had feared terribly for his wife Miranda, but she had been fine, especially with help from Jolen, the rys physician who Shan had assigned to their household. Dreibrand remembered Tytido trying to ease his nerves at the time. Tytido was from a western tribe called the Hirqua. He had told Dreibrand that the Hirqua believed it was a good sign to have a son born during a storm. It meant the child would be strong.

Deltane was a healthy boy, but in the glow of his new fatherhood, Dreibrand had credited that to

his parentage and not the storm. Now, just four months ago, his second child had come. A girl, Victoria, and he hoped that the new daughter might make up for the one that Miranda had lost during the war. In Dreibrand's homeland of Atrophane, it was considered lucky for his second child to be a girl. He had not mentioned that to anyone though. He had been reminded of that cultural convention enough while growing up as the unwanted second son.

Although enthusiastic about the potential of his new home, Dreibrand never discounted the dangers of the Wilderness. It was a fact that fenthakrabi lived in the valley, and the vicious beasts had killed three men since settlement had begun. Dreibrand and the other men stayed quiet and watchful as they rode deeper into the woodland. If a fenthakrabi attacked, they would have little warning. The warm sunlight filtering through the leaves offered them little reassurance. By all accounts the bold animal was the most active during the day.

Chilo halted the group. "Lord Dreibrand, I wanted to show you the old bridge," he explained and pointed at a row of tumbled stone blocks that were overgrown with moss and shoved around by tree roots.

It did not look like much now, but Dreibrand could discern that a structure had once spanned the area.

"As you see, the stream has changed course since then. Probably after the bridge broke down and blocked it," Chilo said.

The stream could be heard gurgling a small distance away in its new location.

Chilo's trail disintegrated as they broke through the foliage on the banks of the stream. With the water's change of course over the centuries, the original portion of the trail that had connected with the bridge had disappeared, but Chilo assured everyone that it reappeared a little farther east.

From the break in the forest created by the stream, Dreibrand could see Elendra on the eastern slope above the valley. The summer settlement still looked like a forlorn ruin from this distance, but he could see the sharp edges of the few terraced fields that they had remade by the city.

With his goal in sight, he called for a break to water the horses.

While the horses drank, Chilo, Tytido, and four other men dismounted and splashed upstream to look for a better fording place. Dreibrand stretched his legs with the other men and waited for them to come back and report. When he squatted to fill his canteen, he stared at his reflection in the water. His blue eyes looked back at him and strands of his long blond hair clung to his short beard. He brushed the hair away from his face and thought that he would shave soon.

Dreibrand looked up because Tytido was hurrying toward him. Dreibrand disapproved of people moving about alone in the forest, or even at its edge, and he frowned.

"Where are the others?" Dreibrand demanded irritably, hoping that he did not have to be worried.

With a jerk of his head, Tytido indicated that they were still upstream but he put a finger to his lips, and all of the men took notice. Dreibrand widened his eyes with his unspoken question, but Tytido shook his head once to reply that it was not a fenthakrabi. He silently mouthed the word "bear."

"How close?" Dreibrand whispered.

"Just upstream. I came to get you because I thought you might like to see her," Tytido whispered back.

Dreibrand nodded appreciatively and they started upstream, hugging the foliage along the bank. Chilo and the other men were crouching behind a boulder at the water's edge, and they joined them. The stream at this location was a perfect place to cross except that a large brown bear prowled the opposite bank and probed the rushing water for fish. Two small cubs, fresh from the winter den where they had been born, toddled behind her, slapping at the water and at each

other. The mother bear was a magnificent beast, ferocious in her femininity and the very spirit of maternal strength.

"Time for a bear hunt," Chilo suggested.

Dreibrand ducked behind the boulder and agreed. He had no overwhelming desire to kill the bear and condemn her offspring as well, but safety demanded action. She was too close to the summer settlement where people would be working in the new fields until the autumn. Also, bear meat was good and he and his men could feast on it.

The men put their heads together and furtively began to plan an attack. As if overhearing their conspiracy, the bear reared onto her hind feet and roared across the water. Gasps replaced the whispers of the seven men, and they peeked over the boulder, much like boys interrupted from mischief by the shout of a mother.

At her full height, the bear was impressive and her twins cowered in the shadows of her great haunches. Another heavy scream of challenge erupted from the great animal's throat, but the bear targeted her rage upstream of the hiding humans. With two leaps, she plunged to the middle of the stream and then stood again to flail the air with clacking front claws.

A fenthakrabi jumped from a thicket of young willows and met her in the water. The bipedal beast with a shaggy mane and long-snouted face looked thin next to the bear, but it did not act intimidated by the weight difference. The shriek of the monster buried the pleasant burbling of the snowmelt, and it snarled and swiped at the bear. They met like rival creatures out of a myth that must always fight when their paths cross.

Without consultation the men reached a unanimous decision and fled. One man lagged because of his terror and Dreibrand grabbed him as he retreated. Dreibrand heard deep growls swell into the howls of a bestial brawl. The horrendous noise peaked and then ended with a squeal. Dreibrand looked back and saw the bear score a mighty blow across the fenthakrabi's neck, tearing a chunk of golden mane away.

The men dashed down the stream as quick as the current. One man slipped on the wet rocks and flew face first into the water, but he pushed himself along as if he had become an otter for an instant, and then regained his feet.

The other men downstream were already on their horses and rushing to help after hearing the wild animals roar.

"Just cross! Cross now!" Dreibrand shouted, waving them back.

His men circled in confusion while he mounted his black horse. Dreibrand gave his order again and led them into the center of the stream. The water was deep but not particularly treacherous, and they rushed across, suffering only the consequence of wet pants.

Dreibrand called for Chilo. "Find that trail again. Now!"

"Yes, Lord," Chilo cried and charged into the woodland.

Instinct, luck, and sheer will combined and Chilo speedily located the path that he had discovered the year before. The group of modern Nufalese followed him quickly away from the stream. They were ascending the steep trail out of the valley before they began to feel secure again.

"Perhaps we should not hunt this mother bear," Dreibrand suggested to Tytido. "The fenthakrabi was losing to her."

"I say give her a chance to be a good neighbor. She saw the beast first and may have saved some of us," Tytido said. He still showed how shaken he was. He had taken a chance and walked alone briefly, and with hindsight, he regretted his confidence.

"We must sing loud enough tonight to scare all the wild animals away," Dreibrand announced and

several men shouted their approval.

They returned to the High Road just north of Elendra and by sunset entered the ruins from the opposite direction that they had intended. A wall of tightly fitted stones had once surrounded the old city, but it was now tumbled down in several places. Although people had come here for the last three summers, most of the repairs and new structures had been done inside the ruins. Other work had been done on the slopes outside the city where new terraces were being shaped into the land.

Last year, before the settlers had returned to the permanent settlement at Vetanium, winter wheat had been planted and it was coming up nicely now. A decent crop appeared likely even though the random curves of the mountainside seemed surprised by the rectangles of soft green plants.

Miranda had also planted flowers in the new fields on the other side of Elendra. The plants made good fodder for the horses, but she had also meant for the bright blooms to greet Dreibrand in the spring. Her plan had not worked because of the detour, but he climbed to the top of the south wall as soon as he entered the settlement and looked down on the colorful field beside the dim line of the old road.

He smiled, thinking fondly of his wife. He was proud of Miranda for struggling through her grief over Elendra's death and taking her place beside him as a leader of their people. Together, they were committed to building a great legacy to give to their children.

Even with such ambitious plans between them, these years had easily been the best of their lives. Miranda treasured her freedom and Dreibrand could see that she appreciated the love and kindness that had entered her life. And, after so much war and killing, Dreibrand enjoyed the peace the last five years had given him.

Sometimes he marveled at the changes in his life. Once he had led armies and proved his courage and strength at the front lines. For a time he had craved such glory, and then for a time, the activity had been necessary. Now he had concerns like making fields for his people to till, breeding livestock, finding trails, building shelters, and raising a family. This was an infinitely more satisfying life, but in his heart, Dreibrand knew that harsher trials than city planning waited in his future.

The setting sun bathed the mountain overlooking the settlement with orange and golden light. Across the valley, the two mountains that flanked the opening where the valley met the prairie cast their broad shadows over the forest. At midsummer, the sun could be seen from Elendra setting exactly between the mountains.

Although the beautiful vista inspired Dreibrand, his thoughts turned to worry. As five years had gone by in Nufal, he imagined what was happening in Atrophane. Despite the distance, he estimated that the appetites of the Atrophane Empire would be craving to make a main course of the Wilderness. Over the past two summers, Atrophane envoys had gone to the city of Jington to open relations with the rys. Dreibrand and his people had avoided them while observing their passing.

Although by birth Dreibrand Veta was an Atrophane noble, he had chosen to live in exile. He expected that Atrophane encroachment on the Wilderness would eventually lead to conflict, and the thought of confrontation with his estranged countrymen troubled him deeply.

But tonight was not for plotting his international affairs. He and his companions focused on the more primal task of reasserting humanity to the Wilderness. The men were already piling the firewood left from last year in front of the old city walls for a bonfire. Their informal revels were developing into rituals, and Dreibrand had no doubt that they would make quite a spectacle tonight.

The dancing and singing had emerged out of a larger need than wanting entertainment, although it was that too. The settlers had needed a way to believe that they had some protection from the old spirits of Nufal, who had died in the ancient holocaust. Every settler had helped to give a decent burial to the bits and pieces that they often found where long ago a life had been claimed by the wraiths, or the Deamedron, as they had been known.

Tonight, when their voices filled the valley up to the stars and the bonfire blazed inside the ring of dancers, they would announce to the land that people had come back to live in Nufal. Hopefully, the noise and energy of the ritual would convince the old spirits to move on and inform the wild animals that humans had come to take territory.

Dreibrand walked along the top of the old wall until he reached a gap in the western side. The broken stones had been piled into crude steps and he descended to the ground. A broad ledge in front of Elendra overlooked the valley, and it was here where the men were building the bonfire. Tytido was planting a few torches in the ground near the edge so they could be lit later and mark the precipice.

Dreibrand acknowledged the greetings from a few men who were constructing the bonfire while he walked toward Tytido. His friend was working hard thrusting the torches into the damp rocky soil. Sweat glistened on his brown skin and the fringe of his short black hair stuck to his neck.

"Not taking any chances I see," Dreibrand said.

Tytido smiled sheepishly. Last year, during the dance of arrival, he had actually gone over the edge when the dance had reached a frenzy. Luckily the men nearest him had noticed his disappearance. Intoxicated by physical exertion and alcohol, the men had cried out that Tytido had vanished. As their alarm ground the dance to a halt and the drumming ceased, Tytido's cries for help were heard below.

Fortunately, Tytido had not fallen down the entire cliff into the forest but had landed on another ledge. He had broken his arm though, and some men had to climb down to retrieve him, which had taken until daybreak. The injury had been a nasty compound fracture and men had gone immediately to Vetanium to get Jolen.

When the rys physician arrived four days later, he had used his healing magic to speed the recovery of the flesh and inspect the setting of the bone. Jolen had said the arm would be fine but the disapproval on the rys's face had been clear. Dreibrand was convinced that the rys physician mindread his patients during examinations, but at least Jolen had spared Tytido a lecture about drinking and stupid accidents.

Tytido placed his last torch and then announced that everyone should be careful to stay away from the edge. Everybody laughed.

Kashil, a runaway Bosta slave who had joined the settlers the year before, joked, "But, Tytido, I bring extra ropes just for you!"

This brought another laugh from those who had an ear for Kashil's thick accent. Because most of the settlers were from the west, the western common speech was generally used, and Kashil struggled for fluency with it. However, he enjoyed being able to speak his native language with Dreibrand and Miranda and the few other people who had come from the east.

"Nobody is going over the edge—that's an order," Dreibrand added.

After everyone ate and stabled the horses inside the walls, they began their dance of arrival. Three men had made new drums for this year, so they could make more noise than ever before. It started out much like a regular party. They drank strong liquor imported from the west and a few pipes were passed around. Every man in turn toasted the spirits of Old Nufal and asked for the privilege of bringing civilization back to the land. By the time this was done, the bonfire had grown huge and the drummers were starting the rhythm that would guide them through the night.

Eventually the dancing began and they pranced in a circle, singing and howling. If a man had thought up a song, he would teach it to the others and they would sing it over and over until someone started another song. It did not matter what anyone wanted to sing as long as it was done loudly.

The drummers became lost in their own world and their thumping took over the bodies of the dancers. With increasing joy and abandon, the men danced harder and faster, until they tossed

aside their shirts and their sweat glistened in the glare of the roaring fire.

Dreibrand loved it when it was like this. Surging with energy from the physical exertion, he was free from thought and worry. He was alive and the land was alive around him and all of them were alive together. Lost in the ecstasy of dance and song, they all had one voice and they were all in one place. Whether they had been born in the west and called the life-giving world Gyhwen or they were easterners who named the world Ektren ceased to matter. The ritual bound them and made their various homelands and mother tongues seem less important. It made them Nufalese.

The dance of arrival continued until dawn, like it always did, and then the men began to collapse with exhaustion. The drummers, their hands red and tired, stopped and the morning was quiet for a few perfect moments before the birds dared to twitter.

Dreibrand was on his knees, panting and dripping sweat. He looked across the valley at the mountains, the forest, and the lake.

It is mine. It is my dream come true and I will never give it up, he thought.

His stamina was spent and he sprawled onto the trampled grass.

Nufal. He considered it a beautiful name and it whispered through his mind as he fell asleep.

He did not guess that the wild songs of his men had prevented them from hearing the shrieks erupting from the mountains.

2. Blessings of the War God

We commend the noble class for its allegiance to us that binds society in lawful peace. By granting us the power to chastise those nobles who stray from our laws, you have avoided civil war and thereby created our Empire that flourishes and expands. — Zemthute II, Darmar of Atrophane, excerpt from speech given to the Derataem, year 785 Atrophane calendar.

Although Sandin Promentro knew that he lived a life worthy of the Gods, he took today to show the divine powers his gratitude. The primary temple to Golan, the God of war, was in Cros, the capital of the Atrophane Empire. Golan's house clashed with the other temples on the Holy Avenue. Gleaming white marble steps, facades of columns, and wide open doors served no purpose for Golan. Anything less than the circular stone fortress that Sandin approached would offend the master of war.

The chariot wheels beneath Sandin erupted into a clatter when they hit the bridge. The driver, who enjoyed the rare times when the archaic vehicle was used in a ceremony, turned to Sandin and grinned as they crossed the temple's moat. Sandin maintained his aloof Lord General's demeanor and did not return the smile although he felt exceptionally pleasant. The blue pendants toted by his honor guard waved sublimely in the sunny spring morning, and the fruit trees bloomed heavily on the Holy Avenue.

At the entrance to the temple fortress stood a dozen black-robed priests in front of the grim lattice of the portcullis. The foremost priest had a long white beard that stood out against his robe like strong waves crashing on black rock. Placing one hand on the hilt of his sword, he raised his other hand as if to bar the way. The chariot halted and Sandin's mounted honor guard waited behind him.

"Who dares to storm the gate of Golan's temple?" demanded the priest.

Sandin stayed in his chariot, and with a haughtiness meant to impress his patron God, he began to list the details of his identity.

"It is Sandin of Clan Promentro who dares. Welcome me with the honor I deserve for I am Lord General and Hordemaster of the Atrophane Empire, Lord of Balustra, Gedam, Hemsdar, Athelna and Hekpont, winner of seven campaigns, and newly appointed Darhet of the Western Frontier."

Satisfied by the immense response, the priest announced, "Golan welcomes Atrophane's highest warrior!"

All the priests and the honor guard cheered, and Sandin accepted their adulation with a regal wave. The chariot driver held back the quartet of horses that shifted with excitement. With parade precision, the priests turned toward the temple and the portcullis began to groan upward.

When the chariot followed the priests inside the temple, the pace seemed impossibly slow to Sandin after roaring through the center of Cros in a grand display. The ceremony ahead would be much more tedious than idling behind some plodding priests, but he anticipated the reception afterward.

The interior of the temple was not nearly as austere as the high granite walls indicated. Statues, tapestries, and fine paintings filled the temple to the point of clutter. Works of Atrophaney masters were present as well as art taken from conquered lands and given as ceremonial booty to Golan by generations of military men. But Sandin had a much finer prize to offer his guardian religion than the bauble of some foreign genius.

Attendant priests draped a black silk cape over Sandin's shoulders and led him into the sanctum, where high small windows rationed the sunlight. Flaming braziers spilled their orange glare onto Sandin's armor and he pulled the cape tighter around his chest. The black fabric symbolized the raven's wing and was meant to remind all warriors that war was more than the glory of shining armor. Victory was achieved by the leave of the carrion crow.

The grim statue of the anthropomorphic God of war sat across from Sandin behind the altar. Carved of black basalt, the indifferent face of the harsh God gazed beyond the ceremony taking place at his feet. Driven by desire that could never be fully satisfied, Golan surveyed Ektren with roving eyes that did not blink, not even when confronted by the worst mayhem.

Standing before the altar, the high priest wore a shining black robe and a headdress emblazoned with flames in gold leaf. Sandin approached the elderly lord of the temple, who was bent with great age and a great contradiction to the young men sent to serve Golan's cravings.

After all the other priests kneeled, Sandin dropped to his knees before the high priest. Despite having a body withered by age and not wounds, the high priest had a strong voice that filled the sanctum.

"Great Golan, brother of civilization, look upon a warrior who comes to honor you. He is the best among the men of your chosen country, but even in his success, he knows that he is just your agent. He knows that your greatness gave him the courage to defeat his enemies."

The priests responded together. "Golan, giver of victory, hear our praise."

"And continue to bless Clan Promentro's finest son with the banner of victory," the high priest added.

"May my body and mind never waver and thereby prove worthy of Golan's rewards in this world and in death," Sandin said.

"Hear the pledge of the warrior and be pleased, great Golan, for there is no higher warrior in all the world," the high priest declared.

"Golan, giver of eternal paradise, accept our warrior," the priests intoned.

A gong was struck and the note quivered in the air like a battle cry. When it faded, the high priest continued. "Lord General, rise and present your gift to Golan, the most generous and wanton of Gods."

Sandin obeyed and drew forth a scroll from the pouch on his belt. Although tied with a golden ribbon, it appeared an insignificant thing next to the treasures that littered the temple. Mere words on parchment seemed unbecoming the extreme appetites of war. But with the document, Sandin delivered up great wealth—an immense prize for both God and temple.

The high priest opened the scroll and after scanning the contents, which he of course already had knowledge of, announced, "Lord General Sandin has given the region of Belesti and the Pandovelari city-state of Koreltia to his patron God. From this moment forth those properties are now in the stewardship of the temple. In the name of Golan, I praise the Lord General for his mighty gift. We shall keep his name in our hearts and on our lips. Atropane will not forget him or ignore his titles while he is away doing the work of our God."

"I thank you for your praise, high one," Sandin said.

"And with our praise comes honor," the high priest responded. "Like the Lord Generals before you, Sandin of Clan Promentro, we shall bestow on you the Rod of Golan, the greatest honor outside the priesthood."

An attending priest brought forth a long black box and another priest opened it. The high priest picked up the heavy golden rod and presented it to the kneeling warrior. Sandin kissed the huge blood red ruby ring on the gnarled hand of the high priest and accepted the venerable token that would serve little purpose outside the ceremony. Any meaning that Sandin derived from the symbolic gift resulted from the fact that Lord Kwan's hands had once received the rod.

The high priest faced the altar and led the group through prayers to the staring statue. Time slowed and Sandin's knees began to ache, but he tried to pray diligently. Although he was not disposed to putting his faith in an abstract divinity, he tried to believe that a greater power added to his own power. In two days Sandin would depart for the west, and in the five years since leaving Jingteng, he had not forgotten the real power living in the Rysamand Mountains.

At last the ceremony ended and the congregation came to its feet. Sandin glanced at the shadowy statue of his patron God. Smoke from the braziers curled around the smooth head with black stone lips. Sandin imagined that he had Golan's blessing as he left the sanctum.

They went to the temple's grand banquet hall that had been filling with guests during the ceremony. When Sandin entered, he raised the Rod of Golan and the hall erupted with cheers. It was a wonderful moment for him, especially now that the better part of the day had begun. An excess of blue Clan Promentro banners hung from the ceiling, and their golden eagles within sunbursts flew over the elite of Atrophane. The lavish clothes of the guests were dazzling after the gloom of the Golan's lair.

Finally Sandin chose to subdue their applause and the high priest declared that the reception should begin. Musicians started playing and servants dispensed drinks and set the tables for the feast. Sandin's wife, the Lady Haley Triesto, approached him and he offered her his arm.

She expertly snapped her fan shut and quietly commented, "I thought your knee bruising would never end. I have been waiting in here for an hour."

"I am touched that you gave up so much of your schedule for me," Sandin said.

Haley reached over, stroked the golden rod, and gave him a quick lewd look. "Oh, I wouldn't miss this," she said.

"For the sake of the stars, woman, at least fake some respect while you are in this temple," Sandin scolded. "And stop hogging my attention. Can't you see my lieutenants want to congratulate me."

Haley rolled her blue eyes with light-hearted contempt. Her fan burst open and she placed it in front of her mouth as if a barrier were needed to could keep her words inside.

Sandin's officers were at the fore of the group of lords and ladies waiting to congratulate him. Sandin looked at the lieutenants in their shining chestplates of armor and blue uniforms. He remembered twenty years ago when he had been among them and watched Lord Kwan enter the banquet hall.

Sandin's best friend Carfu was in the group. Although Carfu still possessed his military rank of lieutenant, he had been made the Governor of Phemnalang the year before. He would soon assume his full-time duties in that civilian post. Along with the other officers, Carfu saluted with a beaming smile on his face.

Sandin held up the rod and said, "Here it is, gentlemen. Take a good look. I shall be too busy to carry it around after today."

"My Lord, what a life for you. Last week the Darmar pronounces you Darhet of the West and today you get the Rod of Golan," Carfu said happily.

"I hope I do not hear jealousy in your voice, Lieutenant," Sandin joked. "If you had graduated a year ahead of me inside of a year after, our places might be switched."

Carfu looked down, a little embarrassed. He had not meant to imply dissatisfaction with his current rank, which Sandin had generously arranged.

"My Lord, I am not jealous and nor would I disagree with the judgment of our mentor and

commander who named you his successor. It is a shame that Lord Kwan did not come. I have missed him these past few years," Carfu said.

Haley interjected playfully, "I heard he could not be bothered to leave his country estate because he has roses to prune."

Sandin managed to conceal most of his displeasure but Haley felt his arm tense reproachfully beneath her hand.

"I have no need to intrude upon Lord Kwan's retirement," Sandin said. "He made the Empire what it is today and he deserves to live his autumn years as it pleases him. Here, let me toast my predecessor."

Sandin beckoned the nearest server with a tray of drinks. The servants were temple virgins and Sandin admired the teenage girl in her gossamer shift as he took a glass from her tray. Her nipples poked pleasingly through her flimsy garb and she dipped her head respectfully to the Lord General before distributing wine to his officers.

Glasses were raised and Kwan's name was praised.

Then Carfu and the other officers each toasted Sandin, but every time Sandin drank, he thought about Lord Kwan. He thought about what had happened in the Wilderness and especially in Jington, and he vowed to prevail where Kwan had faltered.

Haley squeezed his arm. "We should have a dance after we eat," she suggested.

"Yes, I must enjoy the fineries of civilization while I can," Sandin agreed.

With his wife, Sandin proceeded through the crowd toward his honored seat at the central table. On the way, he graciously acknowledged the unending congratulations from lords and lord deratas and their splendid wives. When Sandin had first returned home from the historic journey into the unknown world, the attention and respect from his people had been welcome, but now he was anxious to return to the Wilderness and leave their awe behind. Their curiosity had grown tiresome after five years and the same barrage of excited questions was hitting him again.

"Lord General, are the western creatures really magic?"

"Lord General, what does a rys look like?"

"Lord General, will you make a treaty with these magic creatures?"

"Lord General, is the King of Jington as great as I have heard?"

Sandin looked directly at the person who asked that question and said, "Greater than you can know."

The people who heard his answer paused thoughtfully as if trying to imagine something they could not.

Finally, he reached his table and settled down with his close associates, who were more accustomed to his fame. He held the chair for Haley, and, as she sat down, he noted the silver that now mingled with her golden curls. He wondered if any of the gold would be left when he returned to Atrophane. Even at mid-life, Haley was a beautiful woman and Sandin was proud of her. She maintained their political connections superbly and she raised their son well. Haley really embodied his Atrophaney existence, but he could never fully join her. Nothing heated his blood like empire building, like claiming foreign lands and soaking up the power of leading an army and knowing that he was the ultimate law. He imagined it as being Darmar without most of the hassle.

Servers came by with more wine and the first course of food.

Watching the girls go by, Haley commented, "I suspect that these temple virgins may not be as chaste as their title implies."

Carfu, who sat on the other side of Sandin, joked, "Why Lady Triesto, I believe that is covered by the don't ask, don't tell policy."

Sandin shared in their laughter but then scolded his wife for starting rumors.

"I never started a thing with a temple virgin," Haley insisted and got another laugh.

Enjoying himself now, Sandin lifted his glass and toasted his wife. "To Lady Triesto. I shall miss her bright conversation while I am away."

The other officers dutifully toasted their Lord General's lady, who graciously dipped her head.

"I shall name the second fort I build in the Wilderness after you," Sandin proposed.

The sentiment truly touched Haley but she shielded herself from her soft feelings with a flippant comment. "Then I shall have a statue of me commissioned so you can set it up by the gate."

Sandin chuckled. "You are much ahead of yourself, wife. It will be some time before works of art grace the Wilderness. I do not even expect my first fort to be completed when I arrive this summer."

Haley sighed and started picking at her food. She said, "Lord General, must you really go? As you said, there is nothing there."

"Which is precisely why I must go. Already I have stayed in Atrophane too long. The Empire must exert its presence in the region before others do," Sandin explained. He wondered at his wife's sudden pouting over his impending departure. Whenever he had left on campaigns before, she had always seemed eager for him to go. He suspected Haley was attempting to manipulate him for something, but he knew how to redirect her protests. "Lady Triesto, it sounds like you are going to miss me." He glanced at Carfu and then announced, "I shall just have to take you with me. It is a bit unprecedented but I can arrange it."

Haley actually gasped although she knew he had to be teasing.

Sandin continued, "I am sure you could learn to cook for the soldiers. It would be good for morale to have you serve them."

"Stop!" Haley ordered. "You cannot make me go anywhere. If you must waste your life in the west, then so be it. I shall laugh at you from the comforts of Atrophane."

"And I will be comforted knowing you are comfortable," Sandin said.

Haley made a sour face but dropped the subject. She focused on the fine meal and the entertainment and left her husband to his soldierly conversations.

The temple virgins were dancing for the guests now and their toned bodies swayed precisely with the music.

"Lord General, have you prepared a speech for after the dinner?" Carfu inquired.

Sandin smiled to the dancer in front of him with the half of his mouth farthest from his wife. Casually he replied, "I shall just say what I think of when the time comes. These people think anything I say is some kind of revelation anyway."

"Because you have seen great wonders, my Lord, and they can only experience them through your words. I have never been farther than Droxy and have not truly seen the Wilderness, so when you talk about Jingtun, I too am enthralled," Carfu admitted.

"Careful what you say, Carfu. I just might send you to Jingtun someday," Sandin warned pleasantly.

Carfu grinned a little awkwardly to his commander and friend. He hoped that his rough days in the field were over and he was keener for tales of adventure than firsthand experience. "My Lord, I am at your service, of course, but I think being Governor of Phefnalang is enough of a challenge for me."

"And you are suited to that task. I swear, I would execute half of those corrupt Phefnalang bureaucrats within a week," Sandin said.

Carfu nodded with agreement. "Yes, the whole place is frustrating. But at least the bureaucrats have a price. They can be reasoned with. It is their religions that drive me crazy. They have probably added three more religious holidays since I left last year. I tell you, my Lord, it is impossible to get any work out of them."

"And I am glad to leave Phemnalang in your capable hands. It is the Wilderness for me. Open beautiful country and no civilization to distract the slaves from their work," Sandin said.

"I suppose the western wilds do have romantic appeal, my Lord," Carfu conceded. "Remember the night before we took Droxy when Veta went berserk because he could not go on the expedition? I wonder whatever happened to him?"

The Lord General's gray eyes narrowed, crushing his good mood. Carfu sensed that he had upset his lord and apologized, "My Lord, forgive me. I thought we could share a laugh over the memory. You used to make much sport of Veta."

Swirling his wine in its fine crystal glass, Sandin said, "Yes, I did. Lord Kwan should have never commissioned someone censured by the imperium and I never kept that opinion secret."

"Well, my Lord, Veta proved your judgment correct that night. Remember how he challenged you to a duel and cited the Galmonlay tradition?" Carfu recalled.

Sandin chuckled lightly, savoring the memory of how he had made Veta lose his temper.

"It was strange how he disappeared that night. You know, my Lord, I heard a rumor once that he was still alive," Carfu said.

Trying to sound casual, Sandin responded, "Soldiers brought back many tales from the west. Perhaps you should compare notes with Lady Triesto. Gossip comes easily to her ears."

Haley wiped her mouth with a napkin while trying to judge her husband's mood. She knew he did not like this subject and she decided to be evasive. "I believe you told me that he was reported missing in action," she said.

"Perhaps Lord Kwan made him disappear," Carfu theorized suggestively. "The Hordemaster was terribly angry with him."

"Yes, you could say that Lord Kwan made him disappear," Sandin growled. He loathed how Kwan had been lenient with Veta for deserting, and Sandin hated even more that he had to be complicit in the lie for the sake of Kwan's honor. Sandin knew that Veta was somewhere in the Wilderness, doing the Gods knew what. Churning with resentment that his old rival was alive, Sandin hoped that once he reached the Wilderness he could ferret out his renegade countryman. This time Sandin would have total authority and he intended to punish Veta if he got the chance. Out past the fringes of civilization, if Veta met the fate he deserved, then few would know what actually happened and Kwan's honor would not be blemished.

When the guests had finished the exquisite meal, Sandin gave a speech about making the Wilderness safe for settlement and creating a great legacy for the Empire. Along with enthusiastic applause, the Lord General received many flattering toasts afterward.

The music began again and the guests assembled for a dance. Sandin indulged his wife with several dances, holding her hand while they precisely stepped to the music in the formal routine of the ruling class. Surrounded by dancers in silk and jewels moving together with the complex music, Sandin soaked up the moment. This was Atrophane, the greatest society in the world. Wealthy, beautiful, immersed in the arts, and sophisticated at statecraft, the Atrophane deserved the Wilderness and he would give it to them.

That evening he rode home with Haley in a closed coach, enjoying the privacy after the intensely public day. A cool coastal breeze was coming up the Phol River delta from the Gulf of Beldet and Sandin leaned toward the window for the fresh air. The lights of Cros spread out before him as the coach lumbered up the hill to Clan Promentro's capital city palace. A quarter moon glinted on the dark band that marked the Phol, where waited the boat that Sandin would soon take to Phemnalang.

Haley reached over and pulled his light brown hair free of its ponytail. She ran her fingers through it, noticing that his sideburns had begun to gray.

"As always my wife is kindest to me when I am leaving," Sandin commented.

Haley withdrew her hand. "And as always my husband suffers no hardship in leaving me," she complained.

Sandin faced her. He really had not expected her to fuss over his leaving like the woman of a

common man. "You knew what you were doing when you married a military man. You wanted to avoid the extended bother of a husband always at home," he reminded.

She squirmed a little and said, "I am not dissatisfied with my decisions, but—but must you go for so long? You said you might be as many as five years away."

"Maybe more," Sandin added with no gentleness.

Frowning, Haley continued, "You have never planned to be gone so long at once."

"You are only bothered because I have been home for so long this time," Sandin said.

Haley sighed. "But Sandin, your son will become a man while you are away."

"I am not a family man," Sandin snapped.

Haley argued, "Then think of yourself and—"

He cut her off. "I think of the Empire!"

"Please!" she cried indignantly.

"I have explained to you how important this is," Sandin said. "The Empire must not be left to age into dotage. It must thrive and claim the Wilderness while it may. I have told you that kingdoms lie beyond the Rysamand. If the Atrophane do not take the west, how long do you think it will take other peoples to expand into the new land? Then they would be in a position to ally with Jingten and threaten the Empire. You can't know how powerful the rys are."

"Yes, you are fond of telling people that they cannot understand the wonders of the west, but I can see how powerful the rys are by the toll that experience took on the former Lord General," Haley declared. "Kwan came back a broken man."

"Do not say that!" Sandin yelled. "I will not hear you condemn that man for retiring again."

"He was broken. I could see it in his eyes," Haley insisted boldly.

Deciding not to rebuke her again and certainly start a fight, Sandin grumbled, "It was not easy for any of us."

"I know," Haley agreed softly, thankful that her husband curtailed his anger. "And I do not want worse things to happen to you than already have. Think, Sandin, all the weight will be on your shoulders this time and you could pay the prices that Kwan had to."

"Onja is gone. Things will not be as terrible as they were," Sandin said rigidly, remembering the terror of the Deamedron when the vicious wraiths had assailed his men.

Haley proposed, "Husband, go to Phemnalang and assign a subordinate to oversee the building of your Wilderness fort. Then come back to Atrophane and enjoy an easy life."

Sandin snorted, contemptuous of her suggestion that he idle away his middle years as a bored aristocrat. Being home the past few years had been pleasant, even renewing, but the business of the Lord General was in the west. How could she expect him to stay home when a whole new world waited for him out there?

"Haley, wife, you have my respect, but I am shocked that you think you can change my mind in this," he said.

Finally, with a hint of misery, Haley admitted her feelings. "Sandin, I am worried. I have a bad feeling about this. Do not go."

"You have a bad feeling!" he scoffed. "And how did you feel the first time I disappeared into the Wilderness? Did you have a bad feeling then? By the Gods, you should have."

"I was dreadfully worried when there was no report of you for so long," Haley defended.

"But I came home," Sandin countered.

"I have a bad feeling," Haley insisted.

"Fear cannot keep a warrior at home," Sandin said. Seeing that she was not comforted, he tried to share his enthusiasm with her, telling her to imagine the cities that would evolve from the forts that he would establish. His name and hers would mark the region for generations to come.

Haley conceded that it was an appealing idea, but she would not let go of her premonition.

"Enough of this!" Sandin commanded. "I am the Lord General and I must attend to my duties. Now, let us forget this argument and spend our last day together with some pleasure."

The coach slowed when it reached his palace and the driver hollered for the gate to be opened. Haley heeded her husband, knowing that she could not convince him to forego his trip into the Wilderness. She was a little embarrassed about bothering him with her vague feelings. Although she wished for her husband to find success and glory, she believed that the Wilderness had more trials with which to test him.

3. The Secret City

Primal hunger sparked the instincts of the being newly born of the mountains, and the naked male hunted a mountain sheep. He did not need to think when he saw the fleecy animals grazing on the new grass. The very flesh of the animal beckoned him. He chased the ram up a steep slope, and with the beating of the animal's heart thudding in his ears, he blasted the chest of the ram apart in an effortless burst of magic.

Destroyed from the inside by a predator that it could not elude, the ram crashed into the mountain and skidded down the slope in a small landslide of gravel. The being pounced on it. In the first frenzy of the kill, he ripped into the warm flesh, feeding on the bloody meat and organs. The food broke an interminable fast and every cell in his body quivered with need for nourishment.

The herd watched him consume its master from a distance before moving on.

Despite the gruesome blood smearing the being's face and hands, the food brought order to his mind, and each gulp of meat that slid down his throat reduced the bestial darkness that ruled his impulses.

Three days later, the being remained in the same spot, feeding on the carcass and dozing. After so long locked in the stone of the Tabren, the being was surprised that he wanted to sleep, but after each rest, he felt calmer and more mentally complete. When his hunger finally subsided after many feedings, he attempted to grasp the meaning of his existence. He still had no knowledge of his identity but the surroundings did not feel alien.

Vultures circled above him, waiting for the dark predator, whose skin matched the mountains, to move away from the torn carcass. Finally, one of the malignant bald birds flew lower, urging the voracious predator to move on and let them cleanse the bones.

When the vulture swooped over the being, a sudden surge of emotions assailed him. He gasped, unable to comprehend his feelings that caused him pain far worse than his hunger. The carrion eaters filled him with an acute desolation.

In a shift beyond his control, the tumult of his emotions coalesced into an aching depression. He longed to know what he was and why he was. If he was no more than a lonely predator, he almost wanted the ugly birds to rip him apart.

One of the vultures landed, and as it folded its wings, it squawked at him irritably. He sat up to face the animal but made no threatening gestures. The other birds began to land and press closer. Their patience had worn thinner than their necks and they would now test the resolve of the strange new denizen of the mountains.

The being retreated. He was no longer hungry and the loathsome soiled birds revolted him. The vultures erupted into a sick chatter as they converged on the carcass.

Reeling with intense emotions that tortured his mind, he staggered down the slope. Below him the mountain gave way to a broad canyon where flowed a swift river. He stumbled toward the edge of the canyon. Without hunger to motivate him, he did not know what to do next and he did not know how to alleviate his rampaging emotions.

Before reaching the canyon cliff, he flung himself to the ground, unable to go any farther. He knew

now what he was contemplating but he longed to understand why he had the urge to destroy himself. What was the reason for the unbearable grief inside him? Why had he awoken to this suffering?

Looking at the dried blood on hands, he remembered tearing at the flesh of the sheep. It seemed that he should be so much more than a slaving beast.

The howling din of his thoughts quieted, and his keen ears heard voices that gathered the pieces of his shattered mind. He gazed up from the pit of his wretchedness and his senses leaped beyond his eyes. Approaching along the edge of the canyon, he saw things with bodies the same shape as his and they were on top of four-legged animals. The riders made noises with their mouths and seemed to be communicating with each other.

He scrambled behind a boulder so they would not see him. His heart pounded with excitement that mercifully distracted the despair that wracked his soul.

Voices! He remembered that once his mouth had made such sounds.

His lips moved between each shaking breath, but he did not know what to say. Crouching lower, he watched the riders come closer. Their lifeforces made him ache for companionship but he dared not reveal himself. With no knowledge of his own identity, he was too insecure to attempt to communicate with them.

Suddenly, fear joined his chaotic feelings. The lifeforces of two of the riders were indistinct images that shifted continually in his mind, and he could not focus on them. He had not guessed that his perception could be blocked. After sorting through the sensations, he realized that energy barriers confused his mental powers. An eerie familiarity crept over him, and he felt threatened.

They rode by his hiding spot, and he discreetly followed them, still savoring their words and struggling to understand them.

"No, no, no. Your accent is terrible, Tytido. You are slurring the sounds. I can't understand you," Dreibrand criticized.

"Why put such strange sounds together? Your language is stupid," Tytido complained. They had been practicing Atrophaney since breakfast while riding the trail to the Secret City, and he was not alone in his frustration as Dreibrand introduced new lessons and linguistic nuances. The other four men chuckled timidly in support of Tytido's bold complaint.

"Perhaps that is enough for now," Dreibrand conceded. "But I only teach you the language of my people for your benefit. The Empire has designs on the Wilderness and we must be able to understand our rivals."

Kashil, who related to Dreibrand's concerns about imperial encroachment better than the others, asked, "But, Sir, what will we talk to them about? I don't remember the Atrophane having much to say when they came to conquer my homeland."

The apt question disturbed Dreibrand. He owed Kashil an apology for the past as much as an explanation of future plans. Dreibrand had still been an officer in the Atrophane military when the Empire had conquered the Bosta Territory, where Kashil was from. Although Dreibrand had been directly responsible for the eradication of Bosta independence, Kashil had not placed the blame for an entire country's aggression on one man. Instead, the runaway slave had been pleased to find refuge from his oppression in the Wilderness. And if the leader of the Nufalese settlers happened to be Atrophaney, then he considered it simply one of those strange quirks that made the world so interesting.

"We shall have to think of something to say," Dreibrand said ominously, without looking at any of them. "Because we certainly have no army to make them go away."

No one responded to the depressing fact. Although the core of the community that followed Dreibrand consisted of warriors who had served him in the war against Onja, they were hardly enough to defend the great expanse of land that Dreibrand wished to turn into a kingdom. Although the population of his primary settlement, Vetanium, rose steadily every year, it had only reached two hundred fifty. Most of the settlers were men in the prime of life, and roughly seventy of the settlers were women or children. Dreibrand privately struggled to develop his strategy for maintaining their security in Nufal.

His desire for a place to retreat to had prompted him to restore the innermost ruin on the High

Road instead of a place closer to Vetanium. If the worst happened, Elendra made a place to fall back on that was difficult to reach and easier to defend.

And now Dreibrand was visiting the Secret City in order to learn better the forgotten trails that went even deeper into the Tabren Mountains. Fascinated by reports of the isolated ruin, he had brought the best climbing gear he could buy in Jingten, and tomorrow they would attempt to cross the chasm and scale the cliff to the Secret City.

As they rode along the canyon rim, Dreibrand's companions continued to think about the war-like easterners who their leader said would someday challenge them for control of Nufal. Despite the risk and seemingly poor odds, the bold-hearted men craved to defend their claim to the land. As the first to occupy a new land, they would have the chance to establish themselves as lords and landowners. They and their descendants would be the ruling class of a new civilization, and Dreibrand's descendants would be what he called the "executive" family of the country. They all considered it a strange word but they understood what their leader meant.

None of them begrudged Dreibrand his position and they were comfortable in their loyalty. Dreibrand was smart, bold, generous, the victor of countless combats, and most importantly, beloved of King Shan.

They followed Dreibrand along the rim of the canyon and camped at sunset. They could smell the moisture of the river and hear its dim roar as it rushed below them. The Secret City was still a couple hours away, but it would not serve their purpose to reach it in the dark.

After eating, they lounged around the fire and shared a pleasant pipe. Their faces were perfectly warm in the glow of the fire but the chill of a mountain night tickled their backs. The conversation often lulled because they would spontaneously pause to admire the brilliant stars, which were in such glittering abundance, that it was like looking at a thousand heavens.

Neighing horses disturbed one such reverie. The men instantly became alert and Dreibrand went to his feet. He listened as the horses' agitation subsided.

"I don't like it," Chilo said, getting up as well.

Dreibrand put a finger to his lips so no one else would speak and then he signaled to Chilo that they would check on the horses together. The mounts were tethered just outside the small circle of firelight and none of the horses had broken free. The two men petted the animals while listening to the darkness, but they heard nothing.

Dreibrand eyed the night warily as he returned to the fire. He knew there was a fine line between being overly nervous in the wild night and not surviving. Even so, he reasoned that a small animal had startled the horses and nothing more.

When he stretched out in his bedroll, he unbuckled his swordbelt and positioned his excellent blade alongside his body. The weapon had been a gift to him from Shan during the war. Heavy enchantments enhanced the sword that had been made specifically for Dreibrand. A crystal orb known as a warding crystal was mounted on the end of the pommel, and faint blue light always swirled inside its core.

As sleep dragged Dreibrand's eyes closed, he thought that the light inside the crystal seemed a little brighter than usual.

In the morning, they looked for tracks but the canyon rim was rocky and the hard trail showed no sign that anything had come near them in the night.

Before continuing, Dreibrand, Tytido, and Chilo inspected their ropes and climbing gear. Shan, who had more experience climbing than any human, had advised them to go over their equipment before reaching their climbing site. It would help them to be patient and attend to detail without being distracted by their goal. Of course, they would check everything again when they reached the chasm. This would be the most difficult rappel and climb that any of them had attempted and no one wanted to get hurt because of carelessness.

While the climbers repacked their gear, the other three men stood at the edge of the canyon and looked down at the raging river. The snowmelt was rushing faster with every day and the river churned and foamed.

"We should name this river today," decided Ven, a Hirqua cousin of Tytido who had joined the settlers four years ago.

"I say call it Bosta River," Kashil said.

Ven and another man from the west, Bian of the Nuram Tribe, wrinkled their noses at the idea.

"That's silly. It flows in the opposite direction of your homeland," Bian pointed out.

"But this is the eastern side of the world," Kashil defended.

"We could call it the Tabren River," Ven proposed.

"Oh, that's creative," Bian moaned.

"What your idea, Bian?" Kashil demanded.

"I'll name it after your ass because I'm going to throw you in," Bian retorted.

Chilo intervened. "Enough of this, or I'll name it after your mother, Bian, because she was always so good to me."

Bian looked aghast but the other men laughed.

"Time to go," Dreibrand announced as he mounted his black colt named Astar.

After a short ride, they reached the chasm that guarded the Secret City. The river canyon curved abruptly to the east where the chasm intersected it with a small whitewater tributary. They turned south and rode along the narrow western lip of the chasm.

Everyone was quiet as they entered the curving chasm between the mountains. The roar of the river remained loud within the chasm that amplified its elemental voice. The men did not hear each other's quiet gasps of wonder when they saw the Secret City. The dilapidated walls of the stone city glowed with bright green moss and lichen. Beautiful even in ruin, the stubborn foundations still remembered their palaces, and the trees that grew out of the collapsed roofs mimicked thoughtful landscaping. This place hidden in the dark mountains embodied every mystery of the ancient civilization of Nufal. The men tried to picture the place thousands of years ago when the walls had been clean and whole, and ryls and perhaps humans had come and gone on now unknown business.

The trail abruptly ended, taken over by the steep slope of the mountain. Spreading veins of silvery ore adorned the rock and sparkled in the morning sun.

Where the trail stopped, the stonework remains of a bridge teetered on the edge of the cliff and a corresponding ruin clung to the opposite side of the chasm. The cliff that the men overlooked was sheer in all places, except beside the remnant of the bridge, where the stone face had cracked and crumbled all the way down to the bottom. By Dreibrand's feet, he noticed a curving lip of old stonework right at the top of the crumbled area. He ran his hand along the half-circle of cut stones.

While bent down, Dreibrand checked his warding crystal in the shade of his body. It was a little brighter, which indicated that an enchanted item must be nearby. Most likely warding crystals were in the ruins of the Secret City, but they would have to be powerful to affect his sword from across the chasm.

Dreibrand glanced at Tytido, who also wore an enchanted sword. His sword had been made in ancient times and six oblong crystals were inlaid on the hilt and handle. Because of the bright morning sun, Dreibrand could not tell if the twinkling crystals were any brighter. He decided not to ask Tytido about it yet. They had their climb to focus on, and speculation about relics in the ancient city would be distracting.

Tytido looked down at the water bashing its way through rounded boulders. "Crossing that stream might be the hardest part," he commented. Worrying about the stream helped take his mind off the climb. He had been practicing his mountaineering skills since moving to Nufal, but this would be his biggest test yet.

"There's an easy to place to cross upstream a little," Chilo explained, pointing to a group of boulders that held their heads above the water. The Nuram scout was confident. He had been climbing for thirty years and he was excited to have the gear that Dreibrand introduced into the equation.

The other men were dismounting and setting up a little camp. Three of them would stay behind

while Dreibrand, Chilo, and Tytido attempted the climb.

Turning to Ven, Dreibrand said, "I want you in your harness before we go. If we need you, we'll need you quickly."

"Yes Sir," Ven said. Although he was the least experienced climber, he was competent to go down to them if there was an accident and they needed help.

"Chilo, check him out before we go," Dreibrand added and the Nuram nodded. He would make sure his young pupil was rigged properly and unlikely to hurt himself.

Dreibrand took off his riding boots and started putting on the superbly supple suede shoes that were rys-made and designed for climbing. Next, he buckled on his harness that fit around his waist and legs. With an array of carabiners jingling from his hips, he draped a coil of rope across his torso.

Tytido took off his multi-colored cloak that signified his clan and carefully folded the garment. After putting on his gear, he strapped on his old war helmet. Dreibrand and Chilo put their helmets on as well, and Dreibrand thought they all looked vaguely ridiculous.

"Good thinking, Tytido, to suggest we wear our helmets," Dreibrand commented.

Tytido was about to thank him for the compliment, but Chilo piped up and said, "Well, Tytido is our expert on falling down cliffs."

Tytido frowned. The joke was getting old.

Dreibrand smiled sympathetically to his friend. "We are all remembered for our mistakes," he said quietly.

The three climbers began driving their pitons into the rock and then attaching the ropes to the metal rings. They tossed their ropes over the edge at the same time, and the sturdy cords dropped into the chasm like a dream of snakes and ribbons.

They drank water from their canteens before beginning and then pulled on the gloves that they would wear for the rappel. Turning their backs to the Secret City, they secured their ropes to their harnesses and backed over the cliff. The rappel went well. The gear worked superbly and each man knew what he was doing.

When they reached the bottom, Chilo said cheerfully, "Well, that was the easy part."

They left the ropes dangling from the cliffs. Ven waved down to them. The sun was climbing over the bulky mountain to the east, and Dreibrand could see the envious look on Ven's face. Depending on how the day went, Dreibrand decided to let the young man practice a rappel and climb if there was time.

They hiked upstream looking for the safest place to cross the bouncing snowmelt. Most of the boulders and rocks were damp and slippery even at the place where Chilo proposed they cross. Dreibrand knew that it would be easier to cross at the end of summer when the water was lower, but he doubted he would have the time then.

"I'll go first," Dreibrand decided.

The men connected themselves with a rope and Dreibrand hopped onto the first rock. He wobbled just a little before finding his balance. The wet rock felt cold through his delicate shoes. He called for them to give him more rope and went for the next boulder. This one was higher and dryer and he landed precisely, but the next step would be a tricky jump. The water surged by with insistent force, deep and not stopping for anything. The shaggy strands of algae hanging from the rocks rippled furiously.

Dreibrand calmed himself with the knowledge that, if he fell in the water, Tytido and Chilo would pull him out. Trying not to think about how cold that would be, Dreibrand leaped for the next boulder. His first foot landed well, but as his other foot came in, his first foot slipped out from under him. His forward momentum sprawled him over the rock and caused him to bash a knee when he landed. A fat bundle of Atrophaney curses dropped out of his mouth as he clutched his leg.

Tytido called out to him with concern but Dreibrand answered that he was all right.

"When are you going to teach me those words?" Tytido asked. "Whose son and what about your mother?"

Despite his discomfort, Dreibrand had to laugh. He picked himself up and finished crossing the stream. Tytido came next at the center of the lifeline, and then Chilo came over. Hopping as nimbly as a mountain sheep, the Nuram did not even get his feet wet.

They were too close to the cliff now to see the Secret City at the top, and the sheer rock looked down at them like an angry father. Dreibrand ran his hand tentatively over the rock, focusing on the flecks of blue and white in the predominantly dark gray flesh of the Tabren Mountains.

No one was sure where to start. Dreibrand proposed that they just look around and he started walking toward the ruin of the bridge. He scanned the ground for artifacts, but saw only the typical talus at the bottom of a cliff. When he reached the area where the broken bridge hung overhead, he noticed a gap in the cliff that no one had seen from the other side. He approached it and found an alcove.

Dreibrand had a twinge of apprehension when he stepped into the alcove and the mountain closeted him. Above him, a tunnel rose inside the cliff and a distant circle of day light hung over him like an eye. Dreibrand shivered briefly, wondering if he was actually feeling the power that he suspected the tunnel possessed. But his feet stayed on the ground, and for a human, the Secret City remained out of reach.

"What is it?" Tytido asked. He and Chilo were waiting outside.

"It's a—" Dreibrand paused. If the shaft was what he thought it was, a rys would be able to harness the invisible energy focused at this point and levitate up to the Secret City and down again. But Dreibrand did not mention any of this to his friends. On the day Onja died, Dreibrand had encountered a levitation shaft inside the Tomb of Dacian, but he had given Shan his word that he would never discuss what he had seen or experienced inside the tomb.

"It goes all the way to the top," Dreibrand said, and the other two men poked their heads inside.

Chilo exclaimed with surprise and Tytido wondered if it was a natural formation.

"No, I don't think so," Dreibrand said.

"Is there a ladder?" Chilo asked eagerly, stepping inside the alcove. He ran his hands up the sides of the tunnel but the rock was smooth, thoroughly polished long ago.

Tytido plugged the entrance and ran his hands curiously up the smooth stone wall. "It would be harder to climb in here than outside," he commented.

Completely blocked inside the alcove, Dreibrand asked, "Are you going to let me out?"

"What do you think it is?" Tytido asked again, not moving.

"A sewer," Dreibrand joked, and Tytido pulled his hand away with predictable revulsion.

They exited the alcove and the sun was beginning to brighten the chasm as it glided higher. Dreibrand looked across the stream and reconsidered the broken cliff face with the curved stonework at the top. He guessed that a similar shaft had been on that side as well. He imagined rys using the levitation shafts to come and go from the Secret City, and he supposed that humble humans had used the bridge.

"Do you really think it was a sewer?" Tytido asked, rubbing his hand on his pant leg.

"No," Dreibrand laughed.

They hiked back up the chasm and found a place to begin the climb. A long crack up the rock face gave them a crevice to anchor their ropes.

Tytido went first. An edge of rock jutted out right at the bottom and provided Tytido with his first step up. It would be the only bit of help from the mountain. Feeling along the crack, he found a modest handhold and pulled himself above his friends. Although still close to the ground, he would have to be careful until he placed his first anchor for the safety line.

Right from the beginning, Tytido felt like he was going too slowly. He wanted to impress Dreibrand

and Chilo, but once he gripped the unreceptive stone, he knew he would not be scuttling up the cliff like a spider. Every hold was meager and debatable, but Tytido knew when he could commit his weight, by either experience or faith.

He tried to remember to climb with his feet as much as possible and use all of his body's strengths. The crack narrowed and he could no longer wedge a foot into it and obtain a decent foot hold, which forced him to probe the rock wall with his toes and bargain for a purchase.

Tytido began installing the gear that would allow him to affix his safety line. He also started building a permanent climbing line for the others to use. They had judged that the cliff could be climbed in three pitches, one for each man. This would allow each man his space to free climb the rock and conserve their strength in case repeated attempts were necessary.

As Tytido neared the end of his pitch, he looked upward. The grand landscape of the Tabren had been reduced to one wall of rock and the sky above, making it appear as if he climbed toward nothingness. Deciding to go another body length farther, he sucked the blood off a bleeding finger and began another tiny quest for a hold.

He suddenly heard the rattle of pebbles cavorting down the cliff. He resisted the urge to look straight up, which was wise, because a sprinkling of dirt and pebbles clattered on his old war helmet. After the brief shower passed, Tytido looked up again, but there was still nothing to see. If he had not known better, he would have guessed that someone from the top had kicked the gravel down at him.

Tytido reached his goal and then climbed down the rope. His shaky muscles had a lot of climb left in them, but they were ready for a break.

"Thanks for getting it started for us, Tytido," Dreibrand said.

Tytido nodded with appreciation and took a swig from his canteen.

Dreibrand went next with Chilo behind him. Tytido followed them, hoping that they would have as much success on their pitches as he had. Dreibrand now wagered his skill against the smooth expanse of stone that guarded the Secret City. The cliff was like a guardian at a bridge who demanded the answers for riddles in exchange for passage, and each little hold was an answer to a riddle.

Dreibrand was a little heavier and taller than the other two men, but he had the strength to haul his athletic frame up the mountain. He knew he was in the prime of his life. Just shy of thirty, he had shed the bluster of youth but was yet to be blunted by age.

Like Tytido, he found the cliff to be a challenge. The rock provided holds grudgingly and Dreibrand imagined the cliff actively debating whether it would tolerate the indignity of being ascended.

He reached up and convinced his fingers to bear his weight on a thin hold. It worked for a while, but his foot took too long finding its next spot, and his fingers began to slide off the tiny edge. Dreibrand saw his fingers forsaking him as his foot flopped against the cliff, begging to be accepted.

Then he totally lost it, and he heard Chilo yelling, "There he goes! Brace yourself."

Even knowing that his safety line would catch him, Dreibrand still experienced a surge of fear as instincts cringed from the sensation of falling. His body slammed into the cliff and lurched uncomfortably inside the harness.

Dreibrand regained his breath and told Chilo that he was unhurt and could continue. Trying to picture success, Dreibrand struggled up the rest of his pitch.

The afternoon was half gone when he completed his climb. He had taken more time than he wanted but the cliff had demanded extra caution. Clipping himself to the climbing rope, he swung off to the side a little and let Chilo pass him and prepare for the final pitch. The Nuram was ready to go. As the most talented climber, they had decided he would attempt the highest part and it looked like his expertise would be necessary. The crack that had provided the majority of their holds tightened to a hairline just a little higher up. Pitons to affix the climbing rope and safety line would have to be pounded into the tight crack and Chilo would have to search the sheer wall for all his holds.

Tytido moved up past Dreibrand, who would take a break at his current position. Just above Tytido,

Chilo began his pitch tentatively, and after flirting with a few holds, he made his decisions and, in a spurt of effort, he climbed rapidly.

Just when Dreibrand and Tytido were starting to feel jealous because Chilo made them look like clumsy oafs who had no business on a cliff, Chilo stalled. He had covered half his distance, pausing to drive the pitons into the crack and attach the ropes. For quite a while, he poked and prodded the cliff, testing holds but without satisfaction.

Finally, Chilo demonstrated flexibility that defied his forty-three years and hitched a foot up almost as high as his armpit. He pushed himself up the cliff and grabbed the handhold that had been teasing him from above.

At a slower pace, he crawled onward, stretching for the next hold, conning it into letting him climb. He had not stopped to place any safety gear for some time, because his holds were too precarious for him to do anything but cling to the unfriendly stone. The top was getting closer. Chilo imagined the smell of the green grass that was growing up there and how wonderful it would feel to run his tattered fingers over the soft vegetation. With this picture to encourage him, he sought the next hold.

A lip of rock pouted from the cliff. Relieved to have a decent grip that would give him the stability to attach a new anchor for his safety line, he hauled himself up happily.

But halfway into the pull, his hold gave out. It did not break off, but rather it disappeared. To Chilo, it felt like the edge receded into the smooth cliff, as if someone had pulled a chair out from under him as he sat down. Chilo's hand smacked at the cliff uselessly, disbelieving that the hold was no longer there, but gravity took no pity on his antics, and he swooped backwards. Headfirst, he arced away from the cliff, drifting on his safety line that was attached too far down.

Chilo returned to the cliff with a clang as his metal helmet chimed against the stone. The safety line jerked violently when it stopped his weight. He hit hard and bounced a couple times. Dangling like a wet scarecrow, Chilo did not move.

4. Revisit the Apocalypse

"Chilo! Chilo!" Tytido yelled, already starting to climb.

Dreibrand came up the rope swiftly behind him.

"How bad is he?" Dreibrand asked.

Chilo moaned when Tytido reached him. "I...I don't know," Tytido said as he pulled Chilo closer for examination.

Blood trickled from under the helmet and Chilo's eyes were only half open. Tytido examined Chilo's limbs and quickly discovered the exaggerated slouch of a dislocated shoulder. Chilo yelped with pain when Tytido touched it. He reported the problem to Dreibrand.

"Well, fix it," Dreibrand ordered irritably. He wanted to join his hurt man, but with only one line and rare holds, he was forced to wait below.

"What do you mean fix it?" Tytido asked with a squeamish pitch to his voice.

"Brace him against the cliff and use your weight to pop it back in," Dreibrand directed.

Chilo was starting to become coherent and squirm feebly inside his rigging.

"Go on," Dreibrand encouraged. "Do it now before he wakes all the way up."

After checking his safety line, Tytido swung out around Chilo and positioned the man between himself and the cliff. Tytido took a deep breath and then threw himself against Chilo's side and forced the shoulder joint back together. Chilo came awake with an awful cry.

"Sorry, sorry," Tytido apologized. "I had to do it."

Dreibrand unbuttoned his jacket and from an inner pocket withdrew a small ceramic bottle. Inching up closer to Tytido, he held the vial out.

"Give him some tah," Dreibrand said.

Tytido accepted the vial. He tapped Chilo's face trying to get his comrade to focus on the little bottle. Tytido gingerly splashed a few drops of elixir into Chilo's mouth.

"Careful," Dreibrand warned. The tah elixir imported from Jington was an antidote for sho poison, but if sho was not in a person's system, tah had to be used with great care. Too much tah could be fatal, but a proper dose alleviated shock and pain.

Stashing the vial in his jacket, Tytido eased Chilo's helmet half way off. Beneath the dent on the helmet, the temple was cut. The blow had probably caused a concussion.

The tah was acting quickly, increasing the heart rate and blood flow to the muscles and blocking pain. Propelled by the stimulant, Chilo became lucid.

"It's not my fault," he whispered.

Simply pleased to hear the man talking coherently, Tytido joked, "So I suppose you are going to blame me for falling."

"No," Chilo said, almost apologetically. Then his pain distracted him and he complained about his shoulder.

Overhearing this, Dreibrand called, "Try to move that arm. See if it's working."

Chilo complied but his range of motion was small. The swelling and stiffening were setting in rapidly and he would need a long time to heal.

"We have to get him down," Dreibrand stated the obvious. "I will drive some more pitons and anchor a rappel line." He was already fiddling at his cluttered belt for more equipment.

While Dreibrand pricked the mountain with more bits of steel, Tytido started to make a sling for Chilo's arm. The hurt man had stopped moaning and was suffering quietly. Despite a many-layered headache, he was replaying the fall in his mind, trying to find his mistake. Chilo wanted to admonish himself for using an inadequate hold, but he was convinced that the hold had been great—until it disappeared.

Although the others were focused entirely on him, Chilo stared upward at his unattained goal as Tytido lowered him to Dreibrand. Chilo had so wanted to walk through the Secret City today, and he had been so close, but the Secret City did not want him. Contemplating the edge of the cliff, which now seemed innocently unaware of any mishap, Chilo clenched and unclenched his hand. He knew what he had felt and he would not deny his senses even if he had knocked his brain into the back of his head. The hold had disappeared beneath his grip as if the cliff had suckered him.

With his good arm, Chilo held a line as Dreibrand assisted him down the cliff in a gentle rappel. When they reached the bottom, Chilo was able to stand and he walked with them to the stream. Dreibrand soaked a rag in the cold water and applied it to Chilo's swelling head.

Tytido yelled to Ven to come down and help them.

"Thank you, Lord Dreibrand," Chilo ventured, a little embarrassed to have his leader tending him.

"We all need help sometimes. This could have just as easily happened to me today," Dreibrand said.

Although grateful for Dreibrand's compassion, Chilo was angry inside. He should not have fallen. He noticed his lord's blue eyes straying wistfully toward the mossy emerald walls of the Secret City. Dreibrand most likely wanted to attempt the climb again. It irked Chilo to realize that he would not be climbing for quite a while. Once the tah wore off, his shoulder would certainly start lecturing him about the aging process.

Although Chilo acknowledged his jealousy toward the other men who could still climb, he felt compelled to warn them against another try.

"Lord Dreibrand, leave it alone, at least for now. I think magic is working against us," he said.

"How so?" Dreibrand inquired. He placed his full attention on Chilo.

Chilo explained his belief that he should not have fallen, that the hold went flat beneath his hand in an unnatural way.

"It could have broken off," Dreibrand suggested.

"But, my Lord, it did not!" Chilo insisted, but speaking firmly made his head hurt more, and he winced. He realized how skeptical the others would probably be about his explanation. Chilo imagined the younger men accusing him of scrounging for an excuse.

"You might be right, Chilo," Dreibrand said speculatively.

Chilo brightened to hear Dreibrand express respect for his judgment. "You think so, my Lord?" he said.

Dreibrand did not reply, but he added Chilo's comment to his own insight. *If that is a levitation shaft, then all kinds of enchantments could be protecting this area. Maybe the cliff does resist us,* Dreibrand thought. He suspected the Secret City really had a secret.

He saw that Ven was already rappelling into the chasm. Dreibrand scanned the mountains looming over him and he suddenly had an uneasy feeling. He held a hand over his warding crystal, trying to shade it from the sun and determine if the blue light had increased. Chilo saw him do it, but because Dreibrand did not say anything, Chilo did not inquire.

"Let us get you out of here," Dreibrand said.

With additional help from Ven, they assisted Chilo cross the stream. Chilo did not want to submit to the indignity of having the younger men hoist him up the cliff in a harness. He was adamant and claimed that with another swig of tah he could climb up himself.

"Another swig of tah so soon might give you a seizure and any climbing will only aggravate your injuries. Stop complaining. It is getting late," Dreibrand said.

Chilo would not argue after his lord had been so direct, but as he was lifted out of the chasm, he imagined how the others would repay his teasing, especially Tytido.

But the younger men did not pounce. They liked the elder Nuram enough not to kick him when he was down, and they expressed their concern over Chilo's injuries.

"It could have been worse," Dreibrand said. Although Chilo was banged up, it was good that no bones had been broken.

"So the climb is as tough as it looks, Sir?" Ven asked.

"More than tough," Dreibrand said.

"Can I climb with you tomorrow?" Ven asked eagerly.

Dreibrand paused. Normally, he would aggressively meet the challenge offered by the cliff and keep climbing until he reached the top. But as Dreibrand had emerged from the chasm, he had reached a decision. He accepted that instincts had prompted his choice more than reason, but he would not go against his gut impression. Before they climbed again, he would hire a rys to come back with him and assess the area for enchantments.

"I think we will give this up for now. Maybe come back later. The climb is clearly too dangerous," Dreibrand said.

Dreibrand's abrupt change of mind disappointed Ven. Two days ago his leader had been totally interested in the Secret City and said that they would spend a few days tackling the cliff if need be.

Tytido gently expressed his cousin's dismay. "Dreibrand, we only tried once. We will surely get up there tomorrow."

Dreibrand considered again what Chilo had said and knew that Chilo would not speak of magic lightly.

"I do not want to see any more injuries," Dreibrand said with a note of finality and started unbuckling his climbing harness.

The decision was clearly unpopular but no one else argued with him. They moped about packing up their gear, but Dreibrand knew that they would get over it. He began to saddle Astar. After cinching the saddle tight, Dreibrand scratched the colt on the neck and undid a tangle in his long black mane. Then he noticed that the colt's ears were cocked as if monitoring something.

Kashil interrupted Dreibrand's interpretation of the colt's posture. "Sir, Bian found something while you climbing. It slipped our minds when Chilo got hurt, but I'm sure you will want to look at it," Kashil said.

"What is it?" Dreibrand asked.

"A skeleton."

"Really?" Dreibrand responded with interest. Although bones were a common discovery, there was always the chance of finding an interesting artifact near the remains.

Kashil led him to a heap of gravel that erosion was piling up along the trail. The other men followed and Ven and Bian informed everyone of the discovery.

It was not obvious at first, but when Kashil pointed at the round smooth object jutting out of the talus, they all saw the skull. A recent heavy rain had exposed it.

With his hands and the point of his hunting knife, Dreibrand brushed the gravel away from the skull and pried it loose. He turned it over in his hands and found himself thinking about the brain that had once pulsed with personality inside the dried out vessel.

"It's human," Dreibrand said and the others murmured with agreement. They had enough experience cleaning bones out of the ruins to know the differences between rys and human skulls.

Dreibrand handed the skull to Kashil who passed it around to the others. Dreibrand pushed more gravel away from other bones.

"Start collecting some stones so we can build him a cairn," Dreibrand instructed.

It had become the norm to properly set to rest any remains that were found, especially when masses of remains had to be removed from ruins that the new inhabitants chose to occupy. By consensus, the settlers had decided that it was the right thing to do. It showed respect to the ancient Nufalese and hopefully helped their spirits to rest.

As the men collected stones, Dreibrand uncovered something curious near the skeleton. Gently his fingers dug out a circular piece of glass bound by a corroded ring of metal, perhaps bronze. He lifted it up and looked through the glass. It was just a little larger than his eye, but it was so horribly scratched, he could discern nothing through it. With his thumb, Dreibrand wiped the glass partially clean. Beneath his thumb he could feel the curving surface of the glass.

Intrigued, he quickly searched the area and found another metal-bound glass identical to the first one. After sifting through the gravel again, Dreibrand located a heavily corroded metal ring without any glass.

He was puzzling over the three objects when Tytido lugged over an armful of stones and asked Dreibrand what he had found.

Dreibrand handed the ring and glass pieces to Tytido, who after examining them, asked, "Do you think it was part of an enchanted thing?"

"It does not look like any kind of warding crystal. I think it is just glass," Dreibrand said.

Tytido checked them out. "Just some cheap jewelry," he guessed.

By now enough stones had been collected to build a cairn, and the other men examined Dreibrand's find. No one had any idea what the items might be, but they agreed that they were unlike anything that had been found before.

Dreibrand tucked the items into the small pocket inside his jacket. He believed that they were more than mere baubles. When he went to Jingtun, he intended to consult Shan about the strange pieces of glass.

Before they started building the cairn, Tytido tried to coax Dreibrand into climbing the next day.

"Dreibrand, I really think we should try the climb again. You haven't given it a chance. And we have gear half way up the cliff," he said.

Dreibrand understood that the men were not accustomed to him making strange decisions. They wanted him to reconsider or at least give them an explanation. He could see that the men wanted to make better use of their trip, except for Chilo who appeared slightly worried that the subject had come up again.

"I know this seems like a waste of time to only try for one day, but I really think I need to come back here with a rys. Perhaps when I am in Jington, I can hire someone to come back here," Dreibrand explained.

"What do we need a rys for, Sir?" Ven asked.

Although Dreibrand was thinking mostly of the possible levitation shaft, he would not mention it. Openly seeking Chilo's support, Dreibrand answered, "We need a rys to assess the area for enchantments. Chilo believes his fall was not due to human error alone—or perhaps not at all."

Everyone turned to Chilo now, and the Nuram nodded solemnly. With some uncharacteristic humility toward his younger associates, Chilo said, "I know what you're thinking: the old man wants to blame his fall on rys ghosts. But, I had a great hold and it melted beneath my hands." With his good arm, he pointed at the cliff and added, "Something is just not right about that wall of rock."

Tytido was about to argue with him, to say that he had not noticed anything unusual, but then he thought about the spray of gravel on his head. Like a bank of clouds moving swiftly in front of the sun, his opinion changed abruptly, and he did not say anything.

"Maybe I am being overly cautious, but we all have plenty of other things to do. I made this trip half for sport anyway," Dreibrand concluded.

With the matter closed, the men began setting the stones over the man who had died without ceremony. Dreibrand replaced the skull where he had found it, fitting it back on top of the lower jaw that was still embedded in the ground.

When the cairn was complete, they stood in a semi-circle around the pile of stones. Dreibrand asked the spirit of the ancient Nufalese man to rest in peace and forgive him for pilfering the artifacts. Then Dreibrand expressed their wish for the man to find a new home in the next world.

It was a brief ceremony but each of them felt a moment of sadness for this stranger who had seen the terrible destruction of his homeland. Most likely, the Deamedron had throttled the life out of him.

They mounted their horses, and after one last look, they turned their backs to the Secret City. The shadows were deepening quickly in the narrow chasm and the ruins faded in the dusk.

From a craggy place above the old trail, black eyes had observed the men all day. So much about the riders had seemed familiar to him although he had come to realize that they were not exactly like him, that they were a different sort of creature.

As he studied the men and listened to their words, he discovered that he could sometimes sense the thoughts behind the words. He began to associate meanings with the sounds. All day he whispered words, learning how to shape the sounds with his mouth.

He craved language. Each word activated his mind and brought him closer to the consciousness of a higher animal. But his joy for communication collapsed when a word was spoken that slapped him.

"Rys," the tall man with lighter hair said.

Rys! The little word assaulted the being as if vicious fighting dogs had dragged him into their blood-spattered pit. He vividly perceived the image associated with the offensive word in the man's mind. Although brief, the view of a rys with blue skin scalded the being's awareness like a mad delusion that cannot be escaped. Now, he saw one who was as he was, but instead of being pleased to know that others like him existed, he grated his teeth with severe dislike.

Still reeling with distress, the being watched the men cover the bones that they had been

examining. When they conducted their brief memorial, the harsh feelings of the being ebbed momentarily. He suddenly believed that they were showing a tremendous kindness to one who had suffered.

I suffer. The thought startled the being. His self-awareness was emerging but the reasons for his misery were still out of reach. There was only pain without understanding.

Now, the men were leaving and riding just below his hiding place. Their sweaty odor wafted up to the unseen nostrils and the smell tantalized his memory. Yes, he had once known of these things and he remembered that they were humans. Even with recognition, his feelings toward them were mixed. It seemed that perhaps they might be friendly, that he could go talk to them, but their casual reference to rys angered him deeply.

He had disliked their attempt to reach the city as well. His mindless awakening had occurred near the ruins, and his heart urged him to protect the place.

Their leader had been wise to withdraw.

As the men disappeared down the trail, the being processed the other things he had noticed about them. The men covered their bodies with various constructions of fabric and leather, which made him aware of his nakedness.

But clothing was not the foremost of the being's new desires. He had seen the swords, daggers, and bows that adorned the men, and he coveted them. His longing was so intense that it almost drove him to go take a weapon from one of them, but two of the swords were imbued with powers, and the being remained cautious.

He gave into his next urge and went to investigate the newly assembled cairn. The bones beneath beckoned and he began to remove the rocks. With his curiosity mounting rapidly, he flung the rocks aside.

Although touched earlier by the simple funeral, he had no consideration now for the desecration. Abruptly, the skull was exposed and he pulled back his hands with a startled jerk. Then, he braced himself mentally, as if preparing to plunge his hands into boiling water, and picked up the skull.

The craterous eye sockets stared at him and the brow ridges arched with such intense familiarity that it triggered a myriad revelations all at once for the being. Memories returned like a lightning strike. Total agony filled every crevice of his soul, blasting away the emptiness with overwhelming knowledge. His suffering was far worse now that he understood its cause.

To his vision, the dingy skull became covered in flesh again. Tanned skin with a lined forehead revealed the man's face. His expression was resigned to his grim fate. The being recognized the man and remembered how and why he had died at this spot.

The knowledge was unbearable and the being clutched the skull to his chest as he convulsed in horror. It was all coming back: the Great War, the rys, Dacian, Onja, the most tragic of defeats when the Nufalese Army had been transformed into the abomination of the Deamedron. Then came the worst part. Nufal had not survived. It had been utterly crushed. Onja's power had swelled and her sweeping spells had broken through most Nufalese wardings, leaving them exposed to the Deamedron.

Here, on this trail, the last stand had been made, without any hope of victory or escape. Time had been purchased for his benefit so that he could conceal himself in the mountainside. He remembered arguing with his comrades because he wanted to continue the fight. But they had prevailed in the argument because already so many of their best had fallen. He should not discard his immense talent in a fight he could not win. As the last of their kind possessing sufficient powers, he should use his magic to conceal his hibernating lifeforce. They reasoned that someday Onja and Dacian would weaken, and then he could rise to avenge them all.

He remembered now that his kind were known as tabre. His name was Tempet. In his last memories he saw the extinction of his kind and the death of the man whose skull he held. When Tempet had faded into the oblivious depths of a radical hibernation, the man across the chasm had watched Tempet sink into the rock of the Tabren Mountains. Then the man had signaled to the tabre struggling at the canyon entrance to hold the Deamedron at bay until Tempet was properly concealed. Believing that the time capsule of their vengeance was complete, the tabre defenders had committed suicide instead of letting the Deamedron take them. A killing spell from one tabre had mercifully been directed at the loyal human to spare him a painful death.

Then Tempet knew only darkness. There had been no consciousness during his hibernation because that had been the only way to elude Onja's mind that roved the land century after century.

Collapsing onto the disturbed cairn, Tempet began to scream. He hurled the skull into the chasm in an attempt to separate himself from the knowledge of the holocaust. His scream peaked in a soul-damning shriek for revenge. All that was left was to revisit upon the loathsome ryls the apocalypse that they had brought to Nufal. A malice beyond insanity radiated from Tempet and rode the sound waves of his cries. Stones and pebbles rattled down the mountains, and the screams echoed in the chasm like the judgment of the Gods.

Tempet would have launched onto the path of revenge right then if one more memory had not called him back from the demands of his murderous lust. He was not the only one who had entered hibernation. His beloved twin sister, Alloi, had entered hibernation at his side.

Alloi, sweet Alloi, I must find you!

Although Dreibrand had allowed little debate about his decision to abandon the climb, he regretted leaving as well. His muscles ached and his scraped fingers were tender, but it had been good to climb. The riskiness of clinging to the cliff had been exhilarating.

Dreibrand knew that he was drawn to the thrill of pitting his body against a physical challenge. He recalled how Miranda had scolded him for climbing. She had said that without a war, he seemed determined to find other ways to risk his life. Dreibrand imagined that she would be pleased with his prudence and restraint today.

A scream yanked him from his wandering thoughts. The narrow chasm that they had just left reverberated with terrible hellish shrieks. The sound was worse than the cries of a mortally wounded man on the battlefield.

Stones started bouncing down the slope and the mountain threatened the riders with a rockslide.

"We shouldn't have touched the bones!" Bian shouted in fear.

"It must be a fenthakrabi," Ven declared.

"By the Gods, it's more than that!" Dreibrand countered, but then checked his panic and took control. "Keep going! Quickly!" he ordered and moved aside on the trail so that his men could pass. Dreibrand drew his sword in case some unknown monster came around the bend.

His horse neighed with fear and fought at the bit. "Steady, Astar, steady," Dreibrand said to soothe the juvenile steed as he mastered the colt with a firm grip on the reins.

The warding crystal on Dreibrand's sword flared with cold blue light. Tytido noticed the sudden flash and looked at his own sword. The crystals on his ryl-made sword were inflamed as well. Alarmed, Tytido stopped beside Dreibrand.

"Our swords," Tytido whispered fearfully.

Before Dreibrand could comment, a sharp pain bit his right hand.

The screaming ended and the echoes finished. The last of the stones tumbled down the slopes and a little dust drifted out of the chasm and over the trail.

"Dreibrand, what's wrong?" Tytido asked.

Dreibrand sheathed his sword and yanked off his glove. His palm was cut, and the seeping blood transfixed him as he remembered when blood had flowed last from that spot. He had used that hand to anoint his sword with blood when Shan had presented it to him. Shan had cut his hand on the blade as well and their blood had flowed together before Shan's magic sealed the wound. But now Dreibrand's hand was split open and hurting like it had never hurt before.

"How did that happen?" Tytido asked with shock.

Clenching his fist against the spilling blood, Dreibrand said, "Chilo is right. There is magic back there."

"But that screaming?" Tytido said.

Dreibrand's brow became drawn as if a thousand terrible memories crowded his mind. He said, "We must leave. We'll ride all night. I am going to Jingteng as soon as possible."

5. *The Name of Gratitude*

A river can bribe the sea with water.

— *Phemnalang proverb*

The scent of Phemnalang was in the air. From offshore, Sandin sniffed the distinctive odor that testified to the mass of humanity deposited at the delta of the Ramrai River. The voyage across the Gulf of Beldet had been smooth, but Sandin was ready to have land beneath his boots.

Seeing Phemnalang again excited him. The old urban center waded at sea level where the land and sea met in a slow sloppy kiss, and Sandin recalled his visits to the city like dirty thoughts. The decadence of the people had an undeniable appeal, and the place was exotic, sometimes even audacious, and it always made Atrophane seem a little boring.

From the finer districts of the city rose polished domes and palaces of bright white stone quarried upriver far from the muddy fertile flats. Serpentine silk banners waved in the sea breeze and draped the colorful hulks of temples that dotted the city and catered to every taste in worship. Dingy clusters of mud brick buildings sprawled over most of the other areas.

Phemnalang had suffered a long siege before falling to the Atrophane, but its resistance had not left it resentful of its current masters. Despots had ruled here for centuries and the people were nearly indifferent to who occupied the seats of power.

Although titillated by the voluptuous culture of the delta, Sandin was just as often irked by the free-minded inhabitants who by natural disposition acted impervious to order and law.

Sandin did not plan to stay long in Phemnalang. He would sail soon up the Ramrai River toward the Wilderness and his destiny.

Carfu stood beside Sandin on the bridge of the ship. He heaved a sigh and braced himself on the railing of the deck. "Back to work," he observed tiredly.

"Are you complaining about the position I have given you, Governor?" Sandin rumbled reproachfully but in a teasing tone that his friend recognized as not serious.

"Not at all, my Lord," Carfu responded and smiled toward the gaping port that ships large and small filled like shark's teeth. "Phemnalang...she is a disrespectful lazy servant, but she is mine," he declared.

"She is yours," the Darhet affirmed. "Phemnalang is a nice place to visit but I would not want to live there."

"My Lord is welcome to visit me any time," Carfu said. "I expect when winter comes that the Wilderness will lose its appeal."

Sandin's gray eyes focused beyond Phemnalang and he said, "The Wilderness will not lose its appeal until it is conquered."

Carfu noted the subtle venom behind the words of his Lord General, as if a secret vendetta continued in that distant place.

"You shall accomplish your task easily, my Lord," Carfu said cheerfully. "No peoples wait to defend the land, and, as you have told me, the terrible things are gone from the Wilderness."

But there are terrible memories, Sandin thought and allowed himself to indulge in a moment of personal spite for the rys and their lovely city of Jingteng. All of them had been his jailers as much as Onja had been the warden.

"There is more there than empty land," Sandin muttered, still thinking of Jingtun and his unrealistic dream of revenge. Even with the imperial authority to raise a Horde, Sandin knew he did not have the resources to attack Jingtun and punish the rys who thought that they were so superior.

Sandin cleared his throat and breathed deeply of sea air. He had to stop lingering on his resentment toward the rys. He would be dealing with them again very soon, and doing so diplomatically. A military engagement with the powerful King Shan would be foolish. As had been the case for Lord Kwan, Sandin had no advantage against the rys.

You only have a chance if a rys likes you, Sandin thought although he did not like the idea.

No, there would be no war. Atrophane would occupy the Wilderness one fort and one settlement at time through attrition.

"My Lord, put your gloominess aside. Phefnalang awaits you. Look. Deputy Governor Artesh has prepared quite a reception for you," Carfu said.

The boat was deep in the harbor now and the captain started issuing orders although his crew knew what to do. With people crowding the dock, the captain did not want to miss one of his rare opportunities to show off his authority. The crowd stretched back beyond the sheds and into the markets. Sandin could hear the music now.

"Deputy Governor Artesh had better prepare a reception fit for the Darhet of the West," Sandin said.

"Yes, that would be prudent," Carfu said knowingly. "And, my Lord, I think that you have been looking forward to this. I believe I even noticed you preparing a speech."

Sandin glanced at his friend. "I find sea voyages very boring," he explained.

"Oh yes, I am looking forward to your speech. You are quite good at them. You should think about going home and becoming a derata," Carfu suggested.

"Then I would have to listen to other deratas give speeches," Sandin complained and they laughed because it was amusing to imagine Sandin sharing rank and authority with other men.

Once the impressive hulk of the sailing vessel was secured and the ramp in place, a brassy fanfare of trumpets greeted the Darhet along with the rumble of drums. Rows of soldiers stood at attention and the officers gleamed in armor that servants must have polished all night.

The formal display of the local garrison did not outshine the Darhet. His jeweled helmet was dazzling in the midday sun and two diamond broaches on his shoulders secured a flowing cape of black silk. The design of his new chestplate of armor was simply a representation of a man's muscular torso. Sandin had chosen the design because he knew that no insignia or symbol would impress a rys. It was best for him to be reminded of what he was. He was a man and he would draw his pride from that.

Beneath his armor, his blue uniform was perfectly tailored and the dense weave of the silk rivaled the clothes of any other man in attendance. Around his waist, a heavy belt of the finest tooled leather held his sword. The weapon had been in the Promentro Clan for generations and Sandin took a particular pride in bearing it across the world and further glorifying his family name.

With Carfu and an entourage of guards behind him, Sandin descended the ramp. His boots hit the dock with the purposeful thud of a leader. Deputy Governor Artesh greeted him, and on behalf of the entire city administration, he knelt to his Lord Darhet.

After Sandin bade the deputy governor to rise, Artesh led his high-ranking guest to the podium that had been set up for the occasion. Pungent bouquets of flowers surrounded the podium and an imperial flag, black with a white horse and chariot, hung from a brass rail along the front of the podium. The mass of civilians began cheering. Those foremost in the crowd were resident Atrophane officials and their families as well as merchants who had moved into Phefnalang to take advantage of the business opportunities that the military had opened up to them.

In his speech, Sandin flattered the people of Phefnalang by saying that their great city added more than territory to the Empire. The city-state had much to offer the world and it was worthy of everyone's respect.

Carfu maintained his dignified expression but smiled inside. His master was adopting the guise of a

ruler and lulling his subjects with kind words.

Then Sandin promised the Atrophane increased prosperity from the opening of the Wilderness. Traffic would rise through the ample port of Phemnalang as the wealth of the new western provinces began to flow down river and adventurers and entrepreneurs traveled upriver.

To conclude, Sandin introduced Carfu as the Governor of Phemnalang because Carfu had been on holiday in Atrophane for a year. The applause for both of them was appropriately enthusiastic. Artesh signaled to his attendants to bring the coach forward.

Sandin was grateful to enter the shady enclosure of the coach. It was always humid in Phemnalang and the spring day was whispering its promises of a stifling summer. Carfu and Artesh seated themselves across from Sandin and the coach pulled away from the dock. They entered the open markets that ringed the docks, and the going was slow. Hundreds of soldiers sweated to push back the multitude and clear a path.

Once the coach reached the streets, the continued slow progress stressed Artesh, who glanced incessantly out the window. He had wanted everything to go smoothly for the arrival of the Darhet and he had made every conceivable preparation for taming the crowds, but as usual, the inhabitants of Phemnalang remained obtuse to direction. Arguably, every resident was in the streets or hanging out of balconies, hoping for a glimpse of the passing Darhet. Street musicians were playing for coins, vendors sold snacks, children and silly adults rattled noisemakers, and drinks were splashing out the doors and windows of taverns and private parties.

"Have you declared a holiday, Artesh?" Sandin inquired.

The luxurious coach ceased to be comfortable for Artesh. He could not lie. He dare not. He glanced hopefully to Carfu because surely the Governor of Phemnalang would have some sympathy for the situation. When Artesh's mental groping yielded no decent excuse, he said, "No, I have not declared a holiday, my Lord Darhet, but... but one seems to be occurring anyway."

Sandin frowned and Artesh envisioned his career spiraling into disgrace, but the Darhet's words were generous. "At least everyone appears to be in a good mood. You must have done something right in our absence," Sandin said.

"You know the Phemnalese—any reason for a party will do," Carfu added, which relieved the deputy governor greatly.

Their crossing of the city remained slow, especially when the soldiers had to interrupt two parades by religious organizations that were flaunting themselves.

Deciding to display that he possessed some competence, Artesh said, "My Lord Darhet, I planned a banquet for you and the Governor this evening. Also, reports have arrived from the Wilderness concerning the progress of the fort and news from the diplomats who went last year to Jingteng and currently await your orders in Holteppa."

Sandin's eyes lit up with intense interest. "Give me a couple hours to settle in and then have these reports presented to me," he said.

After the coach crossed three bridges over canals, it entered the estate district of the city and sped up because the traffic thinned. Exquisite residences lounged behind large shade trees on the avenue leading to the administrative palace. Most of the homes were now occupied by wealthy Atrophane but they had been built by the old noble families of Phemnalang. A few of the native elite still lived here—those who had been willing to concede gracefully a portion of power to the conquerors.

The architecture of the administrative place was of pre-imperial Phemnalang as well. Three levels of verandas insulated the white stone building from the sun and the arches became smaller and more abundant with each level. The blood red tiles of the roof rose above the lush green landscaping that was thick with glossy-leafed orange trees. The palace contained bureaucratic offices, guest suites, resident quarters, and more than enough ballrooms to accommodate the most lavish parties, which was the point of most large-scale Phemnalese constructions.

Carfu faced his official residence with mixed feelings. He looked forward to being Governor but he had very much enjoyed his year in Atrophane. Duty was not to be avoided though, and the stamp that Atrophane wished to press into the hot wax of Phemnalang had to sink in deeper. Carfu was supposed to begin building a new administrative palace in the Atrophaney style, but he longed to postpone the project. Ruling from the old Phemnalese building appealed to his nostalgia for the

conquest when he and Sandin, under Lord Kwan, had taken this place as their own.

The palace staff turned out to greet the Darhet, and Sandin graciously acknowledged them when he alighted from the coach. Carfu and Artesh followed.

Speaking to Artesh beneath the noise of cheering and applause, Carfu said, "Relax, Artesh, you have done fine."

Artesh gave his Governor a grateful look. He was glad that his superiors had arrived in a good mood. He knew that if the Darhet's thoughts turned to criticism, then anything could happen.

The cheering crowds had been gratifying for Sandin, but they accomplished very little, and he enjoyed a peaceful afternoon in his private chambers. His squire, Recey, was preparing his evening dress uniform and polishing his armor although it still gleamed. The polishing cloth whispered affectionately over the metal, and two slave boys unpacking the rest of the Darhet's wardrobe were only a rustle in the background.

A bath and a good lunch of local delicacies had made Sandin feel wonderful, and he lounged in a loose robe. Sinking into a deep chair, Sandin sipped his wine and cleared his mind. Focusing on the taste of the fine Atrophaney vintage from one of his own country estates, he loosened himself from the fetters of the world.

His concerns returned to him as gently as the breeze tickling the curtains over the open patio doors. Then he finished the wine with a business-like gulp, which Recey recognized as a signal that action would soon be required.

As the attentive servant had anticipated, Sandin ordered, "Recey, go to Governor Carfu and inform him that I am ready to see my reports."

"Yes, my Lord." Recey said and precisely put away his polishing kit and left on his errand.

When Recey returned with the Governor, Carfu was mildly surprised to see his Lord still in his robe. It was an uncharacteristic display of informality, but Sandin showed no sign that he was conscious of his sudden lack of ceremony.

Without a word of greeting, Sandin reached for the imperial courier's pouch that Carfu held under his arm.

"Recey, we require privacy," Sandin said.

The squire gave his standard response, collected the slave boys, and exited.

As they went out the door, Sandin was already at his desk and opening the pouch. He gestured tersely for Carfu to pull up a chair but he did not look up from the wax-sealed bundles and scrolls that spilled onto the desk.

"Did the courier give you any preliminary reports?" Sandin asked.

"Yes, he said that the news is good, my Lord," Carfu replied happily.

Sandin cracked the diplomatic seal on the bundle that he knew came from Jingtun. He absorbed the contents of the letter greedily, like a hungry dog at the bowl.

When satisfied that he had gleaned the details from the letters, he looked up at Carfu. Sandin's patrician features beamed with genuine happiness.

"It is good news," he confirmed. "Shan accepted our plan to build two forts on the southern border of his Wilderness territory. I have even been granted an open invitation to Jingtun if I wish to personally further the relationship between the rys and the Empire."

"Will you go?" Carfu asked.

"I do not know. Perhaps," Sandin said. "I think I will send another ambassador and seek to establish a permanent diplomatic post in Jingtun first."

Turning to another page in the bundle, Sandin continued, "It says here that 'King Shan is not

opposed to the concept of human settlement of the Wilderness.”

“Empty words really,” Carfu commented.

Sandin nodded in agreement. “At least it sounds positive.”

Next, Sandin delved into the military dispatches. His hopes were fulfilled and the construction of the first fort had already begun. The news from the territories of Ciniva, Kulan, Revena, and Bosta was as good as could be expected from the uncouth frontier. Martial law still secured the Bosta Territory, but the other places were adjusting to imperial control and the activities of rebels and bandits had been curtailed.

“Everything appears to be in order. It would seem that the Empire has only brought improvement to the west,” Sandin concluded.

“One does wonder why they even resisted us,” Carfu said.

“I suppose they resented the distraction from squabbling among themselves,” Sandin responded absently while placing the reports back in order. “Carfu, is the courier who brought this package still in the city? I would like to speak with him myself.”

Carfu nodded. “Yes, my Lord. Actually, he very much wants to speak with you.”

“Has he been given a verbal message to relay?” Sandin demanded, upset that he had not been informed earlier of such a communication.

“No, not exactly. He wishes to speak to you for his own reasons,” Carfu explained. “When I assigned him last year as courier to the group going to Jingten, he applied for a commission. I told him I would think about it, and now I believe he would like to directly ask you to commission him.”

“Who is he?” Sandin inquired, mildly interested.

“Ambio Nateve,” Carfu answered.

The name stumped Sandin and he said that he did not recognize it.

Although Carfu was arguably one of the few people who were at ease around the powerful Sandin Promentro, he showed some discomfort now. “He is Cinivese,” he said.

“What?!” Sandin snarled. “You gave a non-Atrophaney the responsibility of conveying reports from Jingten?”

“My Lord, we can trust him,” Carfu said quickly. “He has been coming up through the ranks of our mercenary recruits from the western territories. He has quality.”

But Sandin was unappeased. “How could you even consider letting a non-Atrophaney carry my dispatches? What is wrong with you?” He was beginning to yell.

Carfu rose to his defense. “My Lord has trusted my judgment before and I do not believe I deserve this criticism.”

“Do not argue with me,” Sandin snapped.

“Yes, my Lord, I will,” Carfu insisted, and Sandin paused, admittedly shocked that his friend was showing so much resolve. It was rare that anyone stood up to him.

Collecting himself but still obviously simmering with disapproval, the Darhet said, “What reason do you have to be so bold with me on behalf of some Cinivese?”

Carfu exhaled carefully, reminding himself not to obliterate his very worthwhile friendship with the Lord General. “It is not so much on his behalf. I am forceful with my Lord because it is my opinion that my Lord is too quick to dismiss the talents of our subjects,” Carfu explained. “We are too far from Atrophane to ignore men who could be useful to us simply because they are not Atrophaney.”

“You are beginning to sound like a traitor,” Sandin warned.

It was a stinging comment that roused some anger in Carfu. He was a patriot as much as any man could claim to be. Perhaps he was not the genius of any battles and his military rank did not

necessary match his talents, but Carfu understood how to be a Governor, and he wanted the Empire to flourish—not be a glorious military expansion that quickly rotted.

Keeping his words calm and persuasive, Carfu continued, “It is only practicality that urges me to include non-Atrophaneys in the upper ranks. You, my Lord, have made the Empire large and many diverse peoples are now under our rule. If we arbitrarily exclude all subjects of Atrophane, their resentment of conquest will never fade. But if we assimilate some of them, then it will strengthen our authority. It will allow our subjects to learn the benefits of living under the Empire. They will experience the superiority of our ways.”

Carfu recognized that Sandin was listening to him, albeit reluctantly, and the conviction of Carfu’s beliefs gave impact to his final words. “My Lord, the wars are over. It is time to build a society.”

Sandin mulled over his argument, frowning as if he had a mouthful of medicine. It was hard for the Lord General to embrace the concepts that Carfu put forth. But Sandin was an intelligent man, and he would not ignore the logic of his trusted associate.

“You never were much of a warrior, Carfu. But perhaps you have saved your wisdom for greater things,” Sandin murmured.

Even though Carfu was a career military man who had just been told he was no warrior, he was honored that his Lord had actually called him wise. Trying to ease Sandin’s distaste for his ideas, Carfu said, “My Lord, I am not talking about passing out favors to anyone. This man, Nateve, he is from a landowning family; he became an imperial citizen three years ago; he has been serving in the mercenary corps for five years, and as an uncommissioned officer he has proved himself a capable leader. I think we can make better use of him.”

Sandin poked thoughtfully at the reports on the desk. The seals had appeared uncorrupted, and if he had not learned that a Cinivese had been the courier, then he would not have worried that the documents had been compromised.

“Are you endorsing this Nateve?” he inquired.

Carfu squirmed ever so slightly in his soft chair. It was time to act upon his beliefs, but even his prejudices were stubborn and difficult to overcome.

Finally, he said, “Yes, my Lord. I think he would serve you well in the Wilderness. He has served me well already. He knows the dialects of the western territories and he has crossed the Wilderness, been to Jingtun, and seen the rys as you have.”

Sandin looked thoughtfully out a window. Fluffy white clouds hung over the treetops like baskets of cotton picked from the fields. Carfu was right. The wars were over, and Sandin understood that he would have to adapt. He still believed that the nation of his birth endowed him with a natural superiority, but he entertained the notion that he must not be so blatant with his prejudice.

“I will see this Nateve,” he announced. “But I promise nothing.”

An hour later, Sandin received the courier. Ambio Nateve had anticipated this interview for over a year, but when it finally occurred, it exceeded his worst imaginings.

Sandin, outfitted now in his formal regalia, stood in front of his desk and Ambio knelt before him. For long stressful seconds, Sandin did not speak and Ambio resisted his desire to look up at his Lord General.

While Ambio remained on his knees, Sandin dragged the empty courier’s pouch off his desk and flung it in front of the mercenary officer.

“Is this the bag you brought me?” Sandin asked and it sounded terribly like an accusation.

Ambio reached out, turned the bag over in his hands, and recognized the embroidered white horse and chariot that was the emblem of Atrophane. The worn edges of the bag that had been to Jingtun and back were very familiar to Ambio. He had guarded the bag with his life for many weeks.

Daring to look up, Ambio’s eyes passed over polished black boots and the metal musculature of the Darhet’s body armor. Then, Ambio looked upon the face of the second most powerful man in all the Empire, and certainly, the most powerful man outside of Atrophane where the mysterious Damar Zenthute II lived cloistered inside a special city of fabulous palaces. Sandin’s mouth was a blank line that showed no emotion. His cold eyes hinted that a dangerous personality prowled behind

them.

"Yes, my Lord," Ambio answered. He could feel that the bag was empty and he wondered if anything had happened to the contents after he had delivered it to the Governor just hours ago. Ambio had not been willing to relinquish his precious burden to anyone until the arrival of Governor Carfu who had been generous enough to initially entrust him with it.

"The Governor and I found the dispatches tampered with," Sandin stated.

Ambio's brown eyes turned inward as he instantly retraced every step of his journey. Feeling his panic rise, he reached the awful conclusion that the Atrophane Governor must have been treacherous and destroyed his one chance to prove his worthiness to the Darhet even after his assurances of help.

Still, I must explain that I am innocent. That I have done my duty, Ambio thought. "My Lord, I did nothing to your reports and I allowed no one to touch them. I took the sealed papers from the hands of your diplomats and officers on the frontier and placed them in the bag. I never took them out to handle them. Never."

Ambio hated to be issuing desperate explanations while on his knees. He wanted to stand and face his great leader and impress upon Sandin that he was worthier than most men. Gathering his courage, Ambio dared to imply that the blame belonged to another Atrophane lord. "My Lord, I had the Governor inspect the sealed reports in front of me when I delivered them. We both saw that nothing had been broken."

Sandin studied the supplicant before him. The Cinivese mercenary, although young, looked like a man who thrived in the harshness of the wilds. His longish light brown hair curled around the edges of his face that was tanned from living out in the field. But Ambio did not look like a peasant in Sandin's estimation. His trim strong body had been forged by sport and exercise and not hard work. The Cinivese spoke Atrophaney well, and Sandin was able to forgive the foreign accent.

Despite the terror that his false accusation had to inflict upon the courier, Sandin observed that Ambio faced his trial with courage. He was afraid but still thinking.

Without acknowledging any of Ambio's explanation, Sandin sauntered around his desk and sat down. "You may stand," he said.

Ambio got to his feet cautiously. Although unable to conceal his nervousness, he suddenly grasped that he had been tested. He wet his lips and asked, "My Lord, why do you accuse me of things that you know are not true?"

Ah, so he is smart, Sandin thought. A tiny speck of respect settled inside the Darhet. It was a rare man who would actually call him on one of his deceptions.

"I am not as comfortable entrusting my reports to a Cinivese as the Governor was," Sandin said. "I wanted to see if an accusation would reveal any guilt in you."

Quelling his offense, Ambio proudly stated, "I performed my duty as well as any imperial citizen would."

"That is for me to judge," Sandin said. "I personally do not agree with the recruitment of mercenaries in the western territories, but in my absence, my associates seem to think that necessity requires it."

"My Lord, my record is exemplary. I beg my Lord not to fault a warrior for serving the strongest side," Ambio said.

Sandin resisted the passionate words of the Cinivese and suspiciously asked Ambio how old he was when the Atrophane conquered his home.

"Fifteen, my Lord," Ambio answered easily, revealing no resentment of the occasion.

"And did you oppose the Atrophane as many of your countrymen did? I saw their bodies bloating in the fields," Sandin recalled in order to impress upon Ambio that he stood before a man who had personally attacked Ciniva.

There was a pause as Ambio measured his words. He chose to speak with candor. "I wanted to, my Lord, but only because the heart of a warrior beat inside the body of a stupid stripling. But my

parents were wiser. My father is a lord in Ciniva, and seeing that we had much to lose, he prevented me from joining the defense. He said it was foolish to fight a battle that we could not win, and he was right. The Nateve family accepted the Empire and gave its pledge of loyalty. And the Atrophane were merciful with my family. We retained most of our lands and prestige, and I am grateful to you and to the wisdom of my parents, who saved me from destruction and gave me a chance to have a future in the Empire."

Sandin was not sure how impressed he was with the story. Some would think that the Nateves were cowardly traitors, but Sandin could not honestly condemn them as such. They were correct to acknowledge the superiority of their Atrophaney conquerors.

Changing the subject, Sandin said, "Speak to me of your recent travels in the Wilderness and to Jington, Nateve, for that is why I choose to listen to you at all."

This was an easy subject for Ambio. The memories were vivid and he had scarcely gone a moment without thinking of Jington since leaving the homeland of the rys. Such wonders! Only a few years ago he would have never imagined or believed that magical beings lived in the world.

Now he imagined many things, especially for himself.

Ambio recounted his experiences while traveling with the Atrophaney delegation to Jington. The imperial diplomats had been well treated but the great King Shan had stalled granting an audience. Representatives from other human nations had been present as well, but Shan had at least seemed to ignore all of them equally.

Sandin interrupted, "Do you think, Nateve, that the Atrophane should be treated as the equal of other nations?"

"Clearly Atrophane exceeds all nations," Ambio answered readily and correctly. "But in the view of the rys King, we are just humans like any others."

He speaks plainly with me, Sandin thought and continued to measure the worth of the Cinivese.

"So what does that tell you?" Sandin asked.

Ambio faltered and blinked with uncertainty. He had not expected the Darhet to ask him for interpretation.

Hoping that it was a good sign, Ambio mustered another frank response. "That the rys are dangerous." He spoke softly as if Shan were actually bothering to listen.

With a very small nod of approval, Sandin leaned forward. Folding his hands and resting his chin on his knuckles, he said conversationally, "The reports of the diplomats did not mention having to wait to speak with Shan."

Ambio raised a cynical eyebrow. "My Lord, the diplomats always attend to their images."

"What else has been edited from their official correspondence?" Sandin inquired.

After carefully replying that he was not privy to the exact contents of the reports, Ambio said, "I might venture that the delegates did not mention that King Shan took several weeks before condoning the proposed building of your forts. I remember the delegates being frustrated every night. We always ate together because only we spoke Atrophaney and they told me their problems."

So much for diplomatic security, Sandin remarked to himself, noting that half the Empire seemed to trust this Cinivese.

"You have been helpful, Nateve," Sandin said. "Dismissed."

"My Lord, may I have permission to speak?" Ambio asked.

"I said 'dismissed,'" Sandin repeated with evident displeasure, straightening his shoulders.

"Then, may I speak on my way out?" Ambio offered with a hint of urgency.

Sandin chose to suffer the young man's attempt to be ingratiating. He granted permission but looked toward the timepiece on the wall as if suddenly anxious to go to the banquet.

"My Lord Darhet, I wish to speak to you regarding my application for commission. I understand that a lieutenant's position is open for your current expedition to the Wilderness," Ambio said.

Sandin did not bother denying the fact and dashing the man's desires with lies. Indeed, the lieutenant's position on his expedition had not been snatched up. The last few years of military expansion had fattened the noble class of commissioned officers, and the unpredictable dangers of the Wilderness and the rys had not attracted any applicants – until now.

Instead, Sandin feigned a little disappointment, as if even his great hands were bound by higher traditions. "A commissioned officer comes from either a noble Atrophaney House or Clan and has usually graduated from the Darmar's military academy," he explained.

"I come from a good family and I can pay your price," Ambio insisted.

"You come from Ciniva and you do not know my price," Sandin said.

Ambio said, "But I have experience. I have commanded soldiers for three years now."

"I am aware of your record," Sandin said, standing up. "Your boldness is losing its charm, Nateve."

"I have resources. I can pay your price and I know the region," Ambio argued, desperate not to be brushed aside by the powerful Lord.

"It simply is not done," Sandin snapped.

But Ambio rejoined, "I am sure that my Lord can do as he pleases. I will serve you better than any other, my Lord. I have the strength to endure the Wilderness and I want to be there."

At last, Sandin relented in his rejection, deciding to amuse himself by stringing the man along with promises. "I will consider it."

Ambio's eyes lit up with delight. Many had told him that Sandin Promentro would never give him a chance, that the Lord General would laugh in his face. But Sandin had not laughed and now Ambio drew real hope from the gruff acknowledgement of his application. Suffused with enthusiasm, he would double his efforts toward obtaining his goal. He bowed out of the room.

In usual delta style, the banquet went late into the night, and when Sandin returned to his chambers, he was exhausted. Recey promptly removed his chestplate and Sandin shrugged happily out of his uniform jacket. He sank into a chair and laid back his head that was warm and fuzzy from drinking wine all night. His squire pulled off his boots.

When someone knocked on the door, Sandin shut his eyes and ordered Recey to send away whoever was disturbing him.

Sandin had nearly dozed off when he heard his squire tell the person at the door to wait a minute. Sitting up, Sandin glared at his servant.

Approaching hastily in the hopes of defeating anger with speed, Recey whispered, "My Lord has been sent a gift."

"Then just accept it," Sandin snarled. He rolled his eyes wondering why his squire was suddenly behaving so stupidly.

As Recey returned to the door, Sandin reclined again but sat right back up upon hearing his squire invite someone inside.

He will need the back of my hand for this one, Sandin decided.

Fortunately for Recey, Sandin forgot his anger as soon as he stood up. Recey was holding the door for a beautiful young woman, who promptly dropped to her knees. Looking up at Sandin with doe eyes, she proffered a small scroll and whispered, "My Lord Darhet."

Sandin did not conceal his appreciation for her looks, allowing himself to be stimulated by her coppery hair and creamy skin. Her short tight dress left her sculpted shoulders bare and the perfect sweep of her collarbones crowned her luscious breasts. A dozen golden bracelets covered each wrist, indicating that her value had been purposefully enhanced.

Sandin took the scroll from her but his eyes lingered on her body a moment more before deigning to read the letter.

To my Lord General, Darhet of the West:

Please accept Valay as an expression of my gratitude for the indulgence you showed me this afternoon.

Ambio Nateve

6. Hard Memories

As a slave, I learned about power. As a free woman, I took power. It is precious and the only thing that can protect my good life – Miranda, diary entry from 20th day of High Summer, Year 3 Nufalese calendar.

All the dwellings were dark when Dreibrand entered Vetanium, except for the one lamp burning in the front room of his home. A waxing moon had allowed him to push on after nightfall, and he was relieved to be at his door. His stomach tingled with anticipation for his reunion with Miranda.

The front door opened and Zannah stepped outside with the lamp. The female rys had been the nanny of Miranda's children, Elendra and Esseldan, when they were captives in Jington, and her continuing devotion to Esseldan had compelled her to move to Nufal. Miranda had accepted the help because Esseldan loved the female rys and thrived in her care.

Zannah welcomed the master of her house. The lamplight created hard shadows across her face and accentuated her angular features and long nose. Her black eyes reflected the orange flame, and her sky blue skin shimmered in the warm light. She offered to stable Dreibrand's horse.

Dismounting, Dreibrand said, "I would appreciate that, Zannah. Thank you." He traded the reins for her lamp. She did not need light to see in the dark, and after she handed away the lamp, tiny blue sparkles in her eyes showed her inner power.

Astar, despite his drooping head, whickered pleasantly when Zannah patted his face. Two days of hard riding and then pressing on tonight for several extra hours had wearied the normally energetic colt that now looked forward to his oats.

"How are things?" Dreibrand inquired.

"All is well, Sir, but everyone is asleep," Zannah replied and led the horse away.

Dreibrand murmured good night to Tytido and Kashil, who had returned with him. They were tired and wasted no effort on words before going to their rest.

As Dreibrand entered his home, he thought about the men who had stayed behind in Elendra. He was not certain if he should have allowed his people to stay at the settlement when the threat from the Secret City was a dangerous unknown. He and the others had discussed in council what should be done. Most of the men who had not been with the climbers had assumed that a fenthakrabi had made the frightful noises in the canyon and their comrades were unduly concerned.

Although Dreibrand disagreed, he had decided not to evacuate the settlement and squander time that needed to be spent developing the area. Without mentioning his more dreadful suspicions, he ordered that the area of the Secret City be shunned until he returned with a rys to help him explore.

Chilo, who had also rejected the fenthakrabi explanation, had opted to stay behind. Dreibrand privately suspected that the Nuram man had stayed to keep the others serious about the mysterious threat.

Dreibrand shut the door behind him and resolved to leave his worries outside for the night. The familiar scents of home and hearth greeted him, and his eyes scanned affectionately the furnishings of his front room. He saw the little cloaks that belonged to Esseldan and Deltane hanging next to the door. The fabric looked suspiciously clean and he doubted that even the threat of rys magic had been able to compel the boys to wear their cloaks in the mild weather.

Dreibrand took off his jacket and hung the significantly larger garment next to the boys' cloaks. The

deerskin jacket was now polished by several seasons of wear, but all the stitches were still as perfect and strong as when Miranda had put them there.

Some water remained in the basin and he washed his face and hands. He lit a candle off the lamp and went to check on Esseldan and Deltane. Cradled by an oblivious sense of security, the boys slept peacefully, each in a little bed. Dreibrand adored the beauty of their innocent sleep, and his eyes lingered on his son. He let a little more candle light leak in from the hall so that he could admire the familiarity of Deltane's tender face. Every time Dreibrand looked at his son, he felt a sinful pride. The ache of his love made him gape with vulnerability, but it was a burden that, once strapped on, Dreibrand could not even contemplate going without.

Esseldan snuggled in his covers and Dreibrand quietly shut the door to avoid disturbing the boys at this late hour. He continued down the central hall of his strange house that was half built of relatively fresh timbers, newly mortared stone, and the remaining two walls of an ancient structure. The room that he occupied with his wife was in the corner where the two old walls met and a faded wall painting could still be seen on the worn stone.

The old strokes of some forgotten master had left behind a group of rys gathered around a central rys standing on a platform. The fine nose and lips of the central figure had remained distinct over the centuries. He was a male rys with dark gray skin who looked down from the wall with dignity and power. In the background, a few patches of paint retained the brightness of their original colors, and a city overlooking the plains could be discerned. Graceful stone structures with impossibly thin columns and arches adorned the gentle slope of the mountain as it diminished into the grasslands. Vetanium now squatted on the ruins of the place depicted on the wall.

When Dreibrand entered his bedroom, the darkness hid the ancient painting, but his eyes sought valuables other than art. First, he determined that Miranda was in their fine bed imported from Jingtun and then he went to the crib. Here was placed his finest treasure.

Standing over the crib, Dreibrand looked down upon Victoria in the shaky candlelight. Plump and vital, she appeared to her father as the most beautiful baby ever. He saw in her divinely miniature form, the beauty of Miranda, and the thickening swirl of hair on her little head was showing some curl, just like her mother.

Dreibrand gazed upon his infant daughter and was struck by the intensity of his responsibility to Victoria, who was so small and helpless. He knew that her mother had suffered many abuses before meeting him, and when Dreibrand imagined such harm coming to his daughter, a brutal paternal power ignited inside him.

I will not fail you, he silently vowed and the courage to face anything drenched his spirit.

Dreibrand longed to pick her up, but he prudently decided not to rouse the soundly sleeping girl.

Glancing toward Miranda, he was mildly surprised that she had not woken up. It was not like her to sleep so heavily and so trustingly. When he approached the bed, the candlelight played across her head that tossed in the tenacious depths of a dream.

He set the candle down and gently touched her hand that lay on top of the covers. After he whispered her name twice, her green eyes popped open and she cringed with alarm.

"It's me. It's me. I am home," he soothed, not letting go of her hand.

Miranda recognized him and exhaled with relief. The shock of waking up to him by her side had not been as bad as the intense emotions that her dreaming had forced on her. A primal fear clung to her damp skin and her heart pounded.

Despite her agitation, Miranda was pleased to see her man. She breathed his name affectionately and he kissed her hand.

"What is wrong, Miranda?" he asked, easily sensing her state.

Sitting up, she brushed her curly light brown hair out of her face and took a deep breath to steady herself. Her fear was fading because she could not remember the dream. It was like one scream in the black night. A terrible sound but its source could not be determined.

"I do not know, Dreibrand. Just a bad dream," she answered.

Although concerned for her, Dreibrand had no reason to badger her with questions about a

nightmare. He was tired and the sight of his wife after two weeks in the mountains with only men was extremely pleasing for him.

Dropping onto the thick mattress, he gathered her into his arms and kissed her. His passion and her joy at having him home quickly banished the harsh emotions that the nightmare had created.

Playfully, after several kisses, Miranda pushed him away. "You are too grubby. I should not let you in this bed," she teased.

"But you will," he responded, and she did.

Dreibrand slept late, appreciating his bed as only a warrior who has known many marches and battlefields can. No war horn or drum roused him from sleep. Instead, the elated cries of little boys summoned him to parental duty.

"Father! Father!" Esseldan cried and he was complemented by the slightly smaller and younger voice of his half-brother Deltane, who cried the same refrain.

They jumped into the bed and bounced on both sides of Dreibrand. Having no choice but to hear them coming, Dreibrand had kept his eyes shut and feigned sleep until the boys tugged at the blankets and slapped him impatiently. Then he exploded into action and seized both children, making them squeal as they protested their sudden captivity. He easily restrained them with his strong arms and even managed to scrub their heads with his knuckles. They howled and pleaded for him to stop, which he did and hugged them both.

"How are my boys?" he asked.

As he expected, he received a disharmonious eruption of answers from both children as they competed for his attention.

"I dug open an ant hill to see where the ants live," Esseldan said.

"I learned how to play with mud," Deltane said.

"Father, I saw Gretho kill three chickens and their legs kept twitching," Esseldan reported.

"I saw it too!" Deltane yelled, clearly jealous that he had not said it first.

"But Gretho let me help," Esseldan countered.

"No he didn't!" Deltane insisted. "Father, I helped Mama plant beans."

Dreibrand smiled helplessly at their excited chatter. When the boys finally took a breath at the same time, he interrupted. "Have both of you been good for your mother?"

Esseldan and Deltane nodded solemnly, each not wanting to consider the consequences of upsetting their mother and having their father find out.

Zanah entered. "I am sorry, Sir. Miranda said to let you sleep, but the boys got away from me," she said.

"Zanah-nana!" Esseldan shouted happily and rushed to the side of his adored rys nanny.

"We had to wait all morning," Deltane explained, and Dreibrand was impressed with his restraint. Hours were as days to little children.

Ruffling his son's curly blond hair, Dreibrand looked to Zanah and said, "It's all right. They wanted to see me and I should be up anyway."

When he got out of bed, Zanah cast her eyes away from his nakedness and cried with disapproval, "Great Dacian! Put some clothes on."

"I am trying. You could have waited outside," he grumbled.

She stepped into the hallway while Dreibrand searched for some clean clothes. His sense of modesty around the rys female was minimal because it did not seem necessary when she could see

him in her mind from the other end of the house if she wanted to.

After he put on a pair of pants, he asked Zanah to come back in and heat a basin of water for him, which she did with a quick heat spell. Esseldan stood at her side as she did it, and a satisfied little smile crossed his face.

"Do you boys want to watch me shave off my beard?" Dreibrand inquired.

Of course they were more than interested in this ritual of manhood and they watched studiously as Dreibrand carefully applied the straight razor to his face. Being a little out of practice, he nicked himself a couple times and he informed the boys that this was a common hazard. When the beard was gone, he ran his hand over the renewed smoothness of his chin and cheeks. It was the traditional style for an Atrophane man of his age to keep his hair long and his face shaved. In the mirror, he looked at his heavy-browed but handsome face framed by straight blond hair and he thought of his homeland. Back in fashionable Atrophane, he would have never allowed his beard to grow for an entire season.

Deltane interrupted his thoughts. "Mama's mad," he said.

"About what?" Dreibrand asked sharply.

Esseldan answered, "She's fighting with a man."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Dreibrand admonished.

The boys looked at each other and then confessed that it had slipped their minds until this moment.

"Where is she?" Dreibrand asked and they replied that Miranda was at the town square.

Dreibrand immediately finished dressing and buckled on his sword belt. He paused to look at the warding crystal on the sword and the healing cut on his palm. He clenched his hand shut. That problem would have to wait while he dealt with whoever was upsetting with his wife.

He strode to the town plaza with the boys rushing behind him on their considerably shorter legs. In ancient times a fine square paved with granite flagstones in a grid of mosaics had been at the heart of the town, but now most of the stones were cracked and shifted after countless seasons, the mosaics were disintegrated into crude pebbles, and the statues were tumbled and broken. Even so, it remained a natural outdoor gathering place, and nearly fifty people occupied the plaza under the noon sun.

His people promptly parted for him and he reached the center of the crowd where Miranda confronted a man. Three women of eastern origin stood behind the man. Dreibrand recognized him as a man from the Tacus Tribe who had lived in Vetanium until last year. His name was Gefin and he had left to see the east, which was unknown to him. It was a natural enough thing to do, but his return did not surprise Dreibrand either. Although Dreibrand had not particularly liked the man, he could not guess why his return had angered Miranda.

Gefin's eyes lit up when Dreibrand arrived. "Finally, someone I can talk to," he said and gave Miranda a disgusted glance.

"What is the problem, Gefin?" Dreibrand said. "You left us on good terms."

"Sir, the problem is, your woman—"

Dreibrand narrowed his eyes instantly. "You will refer to Miranda with proper respect," he commanded.

Acknowledging his blunder, Gefin apologized but Miranda did not allow him to continue.

"Dreibrand," she said. "He has brought these women here as slaves." The last word was bitter in her mouth and none who heard her say it had any doubts about her distaste for the concept.

Gefin started to defend himself, but Dreibrand silenced him. Turning his attention to the three women, who upon closer inspection were actually teenage girls, Dreibrand judged them by their olive skin and darkish hair to be from the Delta region far to the southeast, maybe even all the way from Phemnalang. They were thin and evidently traumatized by what for them had probably been a terrifying journey across the Wilderness. They huddled close to each other and glanced warily

toward the crowd of mostly men who observed them intently.

Dreibrand spoke several languages but his delta dialect was quite rusty. After a little thought, he recalled how to ask the girls where they were from. Shyly one explained that Gefin had purchased them at a slave market in Holteppa. Her fearful looks toward Gefin caused Dreibrand to guess that the girl had known the back of his hand more than once.

"See, I told you!" Miranda exclaimed. "And now he wants to sell them here." She choked on her anger, momentarily mute with disgust.

Appearing bewildered by her opposition, Gefin said, "But Sir, I just brought them back to make a profit from my travels. There are so few women here and so many there." He looked to the crowd for support. Although no one said anything, there could be little doubt that a few men would be interested in some female company.

Dreibrand shook his head reproachfully. "Gefin, you knew when you left that there is no slavery here."

"But Sir, you talked yourself about how the civilization of the east will come to the Wilderness, and slavery is as much a part of the east as is the rising sun," Gefin said in a spurt of eloquence.

Dreibrand quickly rejoined. "But I have also said that we will build a new society here—where east meets west. And there is no sale of human property in Nufal."

Gefin briefly locked eyes with Dreibrand, but he had not been gone long enough to make him forget who was the undisputed leader in Nufal. Trying to retreat without sounding like he lost, he announced, "Then I will take them elsewhere." He furtively scanned the crowd, seeking men who did not want the women to leave and who might react to his ploy.

Miranda pounced. "No, you don't! You are not taking these women with you." She walked up to the girls and placed herself between them and Gefin.

Galled by her action, Gefin demanded of Dreibrand that his property be respected.

Dreibrand scowled. He did not like Gefin making him look as if he disregarded a person's property, and he plotted his response carefully, as a good leader must.

Kashil stood in the crowd near Miranda and he stepped forth to speak his mind. His strong voice, although hindered by a language foreign to him, still conveyed his passions. "I am not the only one who finds freedom here. I say you have no rights to them. I will not stand by and see slaves where I live free."

The crowd began to murmur and a few shouts of agreement erupted from the people who had traveled the same road as Kashil. Two rugged men came to stand beside Kashil. Like him, they were runaway slaves from the east who clearly intended to defend the girls from Gefin's possession of them.

Encouraged by the support from the former slaves, Miranda longed to add her terrible story to the confrontation but she would never publicly admit to her bondage.

Anointed by the authority of the agreeable crowd, Dreibrand said, "As you see, Gefin, there is no slavery here. Renounce your claim to the women and let them choose their own paths."

Gefin snarled with contempt and dared to hurl insults at Dreibrand. "Hypocrite!" he charged. "You outcast Atrophane. I have seen your people and they are all slavers. Every one of them! You favor only yourself and take from others as you please."

The harsh words ignited Dreibrand's temper and fired his limbs to action. He sprang toward Gefin, who stumbled back in fear. Dreibrand grabbed one of the man's arms and spun him around. Twisting the arm behind Gefin's back, Dreibrand marched the man straight toward the edge of town.

The crowd, now wide-eyed and excited, yielded before Dreibrand and Gefin. At the edge of town with the empty grasslands of the Wilderness yawning between the mountains, Dreibrand flung Gefin from his grasp. The man turned on him with a vengeful gleam in his eye but did nothing.

Forcing aside the wounded anger that Gefin's words had caused, Dreibrand offered Gefin a last chance. The would-be slaver had lived with them for three years, and Dreibrand did not want the

relationship to go completely sour.

"Gefin, stop angering me. You knew we had no slaves here when you left. You were gambling to think you could sell those women here, so accept the loss and live here in peace."

Gefin had no desire to reconcile with the generous leader of Nufal. The failure of his investment bothered him too much.

"I can have lords steal from me anywhere!" he spat. Lifting his empty hands, he backed away from Dreibrand as if purified by his poverty. "Look, you have stolen everything from me now," he proclaimed righteously.

The crowd had followed Dreibrand and he told the nearest man to bring Gefin's horses and gear.

Then Dreibrand said, "Gefin, you have lost only what you had no right to. Do not let me see you again."

Unhinged by his loss, Gefin yelled in protest of his banishment. Dreibrand ignored the nasty man and turned away from him. Dreibrand avoided eye contact with everyone, and his eyes were drawn to his flag flying over the square. The banner of the House of Veta with its black stallion galloping on a field of green announced that he was Atrophane. Although he claimed to be different, he could understand why Gefin compared him to the lords of the Empire when he clung so blatantly to his heritage.

As Dreibrand walked back to the square, Tytido rushed up to him.

"We might expect trouble from him," Tytido whispered.

Dreibrand grunted in agreement. "Can you make sure he stays away from town?" he said.

Tytido nodded, already deciding who he would send to oversee Gefin's departure.

In the town square, Miranda and Kashil were attempting to explain to the frightened girls what had happened. Miranda greeted Dreibrand with an approving glance. Watching him assert his power excited her, especially when he defended her opinion. As always, Dreibrand treasured the loving light in her green eyes, but he noted that her cheeks were still flushed from her recent anger. Nothing upset her more than the institution of slavery.

Miranda said, "Take the boys home while I talk some people into taking these girls in."

Dreibrand nodded absently. "Have Jolen check them out," he instructed.

He left without even glancing at the newly liberated girls, but he had no need to look upon them. Dreibrand had sent many such huddled groups to the horrors of the slave markets when he was an officer in the Atrophane military.

Preoccupied by hard memories of his past, Dreibrand returned to his house with the boys trailing behind him respectfully. They were impressed anew by their father's latest display of strength and authority. Inside, Dreibrand heard Victoria crying, and the sound jerked him away from his troubled thoughts.

Bursting through the door, he startled the wet nurse, Sahleen.

The young woman from the Temu Tribe yelped, which only made the baby cry harder.

"Lord Dreibrand, you scared me," Sahleen scolded and then dutifully began to soothe his cranky daughter.

Dreibrand mumbled a half-hearted apology to the young woman, who more often than not, he regarded as a burden. During his first year in Nufal, Shan had sent Sahleen to him because her parents had cast her into the street because she had given birth to an illegitimate child. Redan, the faithful archer who had died in Shan's service during the war, had fathered the child and Shan had felt obligated to see that the child was well cared for. As a favor, Shan had asked Dreibrand to provide the small family with a home.

Initially, Dreibrand had pitied the teenage girl who had been spurned by her family, but she had quickly become a trial to him. Sahleen had a typical Temu temper and the experience of being spurned by her parents had made her resistant to all authority or good advice.

Over the past five years, Dreibrand had often felt like her father, but his limited paternal experience provided him with no reference for guiding a recalcitrant teenage girl into adulthood. For the most part, Dreibrand had concluded that he had failed. Sahleen had three children now, the third just newly born, and Dreibrand doubted he would ever be free of her. At least the turbulence of her late teen years was behind her now and Dreibrand was allotted some peace. Lately, there had been no screaming fights with boyfriends for him to break up.

Miranda often insisted that he judged Sahleen too harshly, but he countered that he had a right to be annoyed because she came crying to him when some man broke her easy heart. Miranda would then tell him to be patient and that the girl needed them to be her family.

Victoria finished crying and returned to suckling happily on Sahleen's bulging breast.

"What was all the excitement about, Lord Dreibrand?" she asked.

Dreibrand looked at the floor, wishing she would cover herself a little better. Each pregnancy left her a little plumper than the last, and he really had no desire to see any of her unclothed.

Mercifully, Sahleen decided that she had made him uncomfortable enough and she adjusted her shawl over her chest. Dreibrand explained what had happened and that three new women now lived in Vetanium.

"Slaves! How terrible," Sahleen remarked. Her own infant began to cry and she rocked the cradle to quiet her new baby boy.

Sahleen's two older children, a five-year-old girl named Rayda, and a three-year-old girl named Ocelia came running into the house and Esseldan and Deltane immediately joined their friends for play. Like a herd of miniature buffalo, the children thundered into the yard.

Dreibrand watched them go, noting that the population of Nufal was expanding in many ways.

It was a couple hours before Miranda returned. She happily relieved Sahleen of Victoria and told the wet nurse that she could go home for a while. The children were still stampeding about but no one told them to calm down. Dreibrand and Miranda were lenient with them, knowing that with the spring weather, the noise would not stay inside for long.

As Sahleen returned to her home next door, the rambunctious rabble stormed outside. Dreibrand and Miranda sat down to enjoy their baby, and Dreibrand was glad to have his home alone with his wife.

"Ella and Meshal are going to give the girls a place to stay," Miranda reported.

Dreibrand nodded approvingly, inwardly relieved that Miranda had not brought them home to stay with them. "Ella and Meshal should give them a good home although Meshal will probably want to get some work out of them," Dreibrand commented.

"Well, not for a while. Jolen said they need food and rest. They are malnourished and one is pregnant," Miranda said.

"I expected as much," Dreibrand muttered.

Miranda was disturbed to think how Gefin must have treated them. When she had been their age, she had walked in their same shoes.

"They all want to go home," she said.

Dreibrand rolled his eyes with exasperation. "Well, that will not happen any time soon. Anyway, they will settle in soon enough. Three young women will have no trouble finding friends around here."

"Yes, I am sure you are right," Miranda conceded and then with a little smile, she added, "Kashil is still over there making himself useful."

"He's a good man," Dreibrand noted, but the new girls barely occupied his mind. It was time he talked with Miranda about other concerns.

He stared at the cut across his palm. The dry scab clung to pink healing flesh. "Did you see this?" he asked quietly.

Miranda shifted her daughter in her arms and answered absently that she had.

Wanting her to recognize it, he held it closer and Victoria reached out and wrapped her tiny fingers around her father's pinky.

"Did you cut yourself climbing?" Miranda asked, dutifully showing concern.

Slowly he shook his head and Miranda noticed his deadly serious gaze. Then, she recognized the cut. She had been present when Shan and Dreibrand had anointed his enchanted sword with their blood. The bloodletting had enhanced the spell that Shan cast on the sword to complete its warding magic. But the cut on Dreibrand's hand had healed that day, sealed by Shan's magic.

Dreibrand pulled his pinky away from Victoria's dainty grasp and closed his fist. "Miranda, do you remember the Tomb of Dacian?" he said.

Automatically, Miranda held her daughter closer. Dreibrand had never brought up that painful subject before.

"Why do you speak of that?" she asked in a small voice.

He gazed upon her apologetically because he had to pursue the subject. "Do you remember that shaft that Shan took us down? His magic allowed us to float down many levels without getting hurt. Do you remember?" he pressed.

"Of course I remember," Miranda snapped. Her expression was stricken.

"I think I found another one. At the Secret City," Dreibrand whispered.

"So?" Miranda demanded bitterly.

Dreibrand recounted what had happened to him when he explored the area around the Secret City. He confessed to his beliefs that he had triggered some ancient enchantment meant to guard the place, or worse yet, awoken some ancient rys left behind as a guardian.

Miranda slowly looked away from Dreibrand and fidgeted with the front of her daughter's dress. The things Miranda had seen in the Tomb of Dacian replayed in her mind. She had seen Dacian rise from his cracked sarcophagus.

"Miranda, there was magic. I felt it," Dreibrand insisted and held forth his cut hand again as evidence.

She met his eyes and knew in her heart that anything could be back in the mountains. "What should we do?" she whispered.

"We are going to Jingtun immediately. I need to talk to Shan," Dreibrand said emphatically.

"I do not want to go," Miranda stated.

"I want you and the children with me," Dreibrand said.

Miranda looked at Victoria and felt panic rise in her chest. How could she take her new daughter to the place where she had lost her first daughter? Logically, she had no reason to fear. Onja was gone, gone forever.

"But there are fields to plant. I need to be here," Miranda argued.

"Leave instructions. Our people will plant the fields," Dreibrand said. Knowing that the memory of the horrible fate that had consumed her first daughter caused Miranda's resistance, he offered more encouragement. "Indulge me, Miranda. You have not come to Jingtun with me for two years. Come, grace the court with your beauty and wear your jewels for me."

His sweet words lulled her as they usually did.

"And Shan would love to see you," he added.

"Shan," Miranda whispered affectionately. Thinking of the special love and trust that the powerful rys blessed her with, she agreed.

7. Troubled Happiness

Road was too strong a word for the trail developing between Vetanium and The Rysamand Mountains, but civilization had given the wild place a scratch.

The advance of spring lavished the rolling Nufalese plains with a thick blend of green grass and wildflowers. The young of deer, antelope, and buffalo were past the spindly uncertainty of their early spring birthing, and the lively juveniles frolicked among the herds.

Along this route, thirty warriors escorted a small caravan of five wagons. Dreibrand called an early halt when they were a day and a half out of Vetanium because he had his own herds to inspect. Cattle and horses now mixed with the wild things of the prairie, and Dreibrand went to meet with his herders who had taken the stock out to pasture weeks earlier. Deltane sat in the saddle in front of him, and sharing his father's high seat delighted the boy. Astar pulled at the reins. The sleek sable colt had been born on these plains and he wanted his master to let him run at top speed.

"Not much farther now, Sir," said Hareth, the chief herder who rode beside them.

After topping another rise, they saw a horse herd. A low copse of trees shaded a spring-fed pond, and about two dozen horses of mostly black and white grazed nearby. The stallion of the herd had a flowing black mane and tail and a dappled gray body that rippled with muscles. He was Starfield, the warhorse that had carried Dreibrand all the way from Atrophane. Upon noticing the riders, the dutiful stallion snorted and rushed to place himself between them and his mares and foals.

Astar neighed loudly, perhaps knowing that his sire confronted him.

Dreibrand stopped a short distance away. "Starfield. Starfield!" he called.

The stance of the stallion became a little less intimidating. Starfield remembered his companion of several years. The fine warhorse had carried his noble partner through many battles and never faltered in the charge. As reward for glorious performance, the stallion had been put out to stud and lived free upon the prairie. Dreibrand had decided that his beloved warhorse would never taste of the bit again. He took pleasure in allowing the horse the freedom of retirement in the prime of life.

"Sta-fed," Deltane called, mimicking his father.

"Starfield," Dreibrand corrected and Deltane practiced the pronunciation.

Dreibrand asked the herder to hang back and then he dismounted with his son. Slowly, he approached his old steed, whose speed and training had given him an advantage over his enemies many times. Deltane walked quietly beside him, silenced by the hope that he would be able to touch the marvelous animal.

Starfield put his ears forward in a friendly gesture and Dreibrand pulled out a couple pieces of carrot that he had brought with him. When he proffered the treat, the stallion gave up his suspicion and came to feed from the hand of his fond master.

Slowly and tentatively, Dreibrand ran his other hand along the horse's face and stopped to scratch below the ear. Crunching on the carrot, Starfield snuffled Dreibrand's sleeve with his dark velvety nose in search of more treats.

"He 'members you, Father," Deltane said.

Starfield shied away when the boy spoke and then galloped around his herd, checking its status. Dreibrand lifted his son into his arms and called to the horse again. Satisfied that no treachery had been committed, the stallion circled back. Another carrot had indeed been waiting in Dreibrand's pocket but he gave this one to his son, instructing him to be careful not to get his fingers in the way of the horse's large teeth.

This time Starfield approached with more caution, but memories of trust lingered in the heart of the fine animal and he could not resist the offer of a second treat. Deltane giggled when the soft lips plucked the carrot from his hand. Then the boy got his wish and petted the stallion.

Dreibrand murmured in his native language to the horse, telling him that he was a good horse. When the carrot was gone and Starfield tired of the humans' touches, he cantered back to his herd.

Father and son began to discuss the herd and point out to each other the new crop of foals. Dreibrand was pleased by the results of mixing the Atrophane stallion with the broodmares that he had bought from the rys.

Setting his son down, Dreibrand kept a knee on the ground so he could address Deltane at eye level. "You like the horses, don't you?"

Deltane nodded. "I wanna ride 'em like you do."

"And you will," Dreibrand promised.

"Mama says I'm too young," Deltane added with a perfect pout.

"Not so young. In a couple years, you will be riding by yourself and feel the wind in your hair," Dreibrand said.

The boy's blue eyes lit up with joy and love. "Now, Father. Can I ride now? Let me ride Astar."

With a fatherly shake of his head, Dreibrand said, "No, not Astar. He is too much a child himself to be trusted alone with a boy. You can practice on old Smiley, but only with an adult leading."

Deltane frowned dramatically, resenting the refusal after being excited by hope.

Dreibrand distracted his son from the disappointment. "Deltane, our family once bred the finest horses in all of Atrophane. Starfield is of that lineage that once grazed in the pastures of our estates." He did not mention that he had had to purchase Starfield from another family because the best stock of the Vetas had been lost along with their estates where the breeding had been done.

Pride stirred inside Deltane's young heart and he had no doubt that his father's horses were the best.

"And I will ride them?" he said, steering the conversation back to the subject that interested him most.

Laughing, Dreibrand assured him that he would ride them like Equelas, the Atrophane God of horses who could lose no contest of riding.

"Already you have been in the saddle at a younger age than I, and you will learn as easy as you grow," Dreibrand explained.

The boy was placated somewhat by the thought that he had started riding horses before his father had.

Dreibrand counted the new foals and assessed the health of the herd. He saw no marks from any predators, which meant that the herders were doing their jobs.

Deltane tugged at his hand and asked, "Father, when can we go see our horses in Ato-Atophan?"

A moment passed before Dreibrand responded to his son. He did not want to explain to Deltane that the Empire censured all members of the House of Veta. An assassination scandal caused by Baner Veta, Dreibrand's grandfather, had ruined their noble House. Dreibrand wanted his son to live a while longer without the scar on his self esteem that the censure would inflict. Being born a Veta meant that the other members of the Atrophane ruling class turned their backs on you, that there were no lines of credit, that the deratas did not take your side, and that a political career was prohibited. The temples were still open but they were of little use when donations were heard by priests and priestesses who had no ears for prayers.

"I said we once bred the finest stock in Atrophane. Not any more," he answered tersely.

When the inevitable "why" came, Dreibrand sighed. It would be easy to dismiss the child's questions with lies or silence, but he doubted he could afford to shelter his son too much from the realities that might one day reach out to grab him.

"Deltane, things are difficult for our family in Atrophane. That is why we live here," he said.

As the little boy processed this information, his soft face grew serious beyond his years. Dreibrand often spoke of his homeland but he had never told Deltane things of this nature. Although disturbed, Deltane was eager for information. "Father, do we have more family there?"

Dreibrand nodded and told Deltane about his grandmother and grandfather who lived on a remote estate in a region of Atrophane called the Outer Coast. He did not mention that this was the only land left to the Veta name. Although it was a fine piece of land, it hardly compared to the vast holdings on the Atrophane Peninsula that had once been the wealth of the House of Veta.

Then, with a voice wearied by a thousand annoying memories, Dreibrand added, "And I have a brother, who would be your uncle." Mentioning his brother made Dreibrand want to grind his teeth. The ways and whims of his older sibling often required tolerance, and there had been many disagreements between them.

The news of more relatives delighted Deltane, who instantly thought of their welfare. "We should go help them, Father," he said.

Dreibrand ran his hand approvingly over his son's curly blond hair, pleased that his son's loyalty to his family was instant. Sadly, he admitted, "Yes, we should—but I would not know what to do."

This candor surprised Deltane, who had been operating under the assumption that his father knew everything.

Dreibrand regretted bringing up the subject of his distant family. He figured that they presumed him to be dead and he imagined with his old familiar bitterness that they were quite over the loss—if they even regarded it as such.

"Deltane, do not worry about our relatives in Atrophane. They are fine. Think about Nufal because this is our home. Nufal," he insisted.

The boy nodded readily. He did not need to be told where his home was when he had no concept of anything else. As far as Deltane knew, the whole world was open grasslands and forests free for living in.

Standing on the land of his dreams with a promising son at his side, Dreibrand would have been deliriously happy if not for the foreboding that clung to his heart like the ache of an old injury. Admitting the censure to his son bothered Dreibrand deeply and aggravated his concerns about imperial encroachment.

I will never let the Empire keep my son from his noble birthright,

Burying his troubles, Dreibrand winked at his son. "How about we head back and give you a practice ride on Old Smiley," he proposed.

Deltane clapped his hands and shouted with approval.

The next day, as the caravan rolled onward to Jingten, Dreibrand trained with his warriors. They galloped and sparred within sight of the slower wagons, yelling, charging, and brandishing weapons. Dreibrand engaged in the rowdy cavalry training because Astar was far from being a trustworthy battle mount. The colt balked and bucked when Dreibrand would sweep his blade by the horse's head, and when he charged an opponent or was charged, Astar would panic, resist the reins, and be creatively unpredictable.

But Dreibrand did not hurt the beast, understanding that the violent clash of weapons was foreign to the animal. Patience and repetition would win the colt over, and by the end of the day, Astar showed signs that he had the mettle for battle.

By the fifth day of travel, the caravan entered the forested foothills of the Rysamand. The unrivaled peaks towered above the ancient road that was the only pass on the eastern side of the mountain range. The pass led to the Jingten Valley that split the glacier-clogged Rysamand. On the western end of the valley, one more pass allowed passage through to the western kingdoms. The valley's green sanctuary of land provided the only route through the mountains.

As Dreibrand and his caravan approached the high pass, they encountered workers. Shan had hired people from the western tribes to rejuvenate the old east road that had all but disappeared after centuries of neglect. Although Dreibrand and his people would benefit from the improved road, he was not so self-centered as to think that it was done entirely for his sake. Shan had most likely concluded that a ruined old path represented Jingten poorly, particularly to Atrophaney delegates.

At the entry to the pass, looming over the incomplete roadwork, stood a new monument. Where the narrow pass into the Jingtun Valley began, a blue stone sphere hovered a massive stone hand that spread its fingers just beneath the floating sphere. The hand was as large and tall as one of the self-important pines in the virgin heart of Jingtun's alpine groves.

The Nufalese travelers exclaimed with wonder. No one was more surprised than Dreibrand, who had gone through the pass just the previous autumn and the monument had not been there. Shan had not hinted at any plans to mark the spot with a potent sign of his magic either.

Eager to see the fabulous creation close up, the people labored eagerly up the final switchbacks. Their excitement helped alleviate the strain that the thin mountain air put on their bodies. They stopped at the base of the hand and examined the amazing monument. Nothing could be seen that explained how the giant stone sphere, polished and shining in the sun, could float. Truly, only a spell cast by King Shan, the most powerful of rys, could buoy the great stone.

"Shan has been busy," Dreibrand commented to Miranda.

"I wonder what it is?" she asked. Her nature demanded that she seek practicality in things.

"It is a message," Dreibrand surmised. "To forewarn travelers that they enter the realm of a mighty race."

Miranda looked the monument up and down with a critical eye. Dreibrand's explanation seemed likely, and even she had to admit that the overt display of Shan's magic impressed her.

"We should go. It will be night before we reach the city as it is," she said and steered her horse toward the pass.

The daylight faded as the travelers emerged from the other end of the pass. The great peaks farther west blunted the blaze of the setting sun, and soft golden light splashed over the deep green of the Jingtun Valley. Below the eastern pass, the city of Jingtun appeared like a mysterious burst of civilization amid the jagged skyline of the ages-old pine forest. The blue stone of the buildings and green-stained copper roofs complemented the mountains and trees, except for the occasional freshly polished roof that flashed in the parting sun.

If not for the sorrow that Miranda had endured in Jingtun, she would have agreed with the common wisdom that the world was more beautiful in the rys homeland. The rys name for the world was Rystavalla, and they said that humans never truly saw the beauty of the world until they had visited the Rysamand.

The road was good within the valley, and they could travel without fear in the night. As they descended into the rys homeland, they observed a multitude of lights sparkling along the shores of Lake Nin. Torches blazed around the construction site of Shan's future palace, and the fires blinked as workers passed in front of them, still active even under the starry sky.

Before Dreibrand and his entourage reached the outskirts of the city, a squad of rys soldiers rode into the fragrant alpine forest to meet them. The blue-skinned rys in their green suede uniforms were slender and strong, and their large white horses moved with a powerful grace.

By their all-black hair, Dreibrand could tell that they were youthful, although youthful for a rys could mean up to age four hundred. He did not recognize any of them by name.

But even an average rys assumed his name would be important to humans, and the squad leader did not waste time in introducing himself. "I am Tulair, and I have been sent to greet Lord Dreibrand on behalf of King Shan."

Dreibrand expressed his appreciation for the formal escort and asked to be taken to the King.

"King Shan awaits you," Tulair responded and the humans who followed Dreibrand grinned with pride. The King of Jingtun awaited no one and the immediate audience was a great honor.

The rys soldiers led them around the city on a newly constructed beltway. To their right, lights marked the windows of the large stone houses that the rys lived in. Miranda focused on the freshly laid stones of the new road and resisted the urge to look for the dark bulk of Onja's old Keep that dominated the center of the city. Many hard memories were lodged in that ancient structure, including torture.

Miranda inhaled deeply and forced her eyes to stay dry. She was an important person now and on

her way to meet the most powerful being in the world. She would not represent her people with her sadness.

The activity and energy of the work site granted her a welcome distraction. It was so unlike Jingtun in its former days when it had been calm and aloof, needing to prove nothing and therefore doing nothing. By torchlight, human workers moved blocks of quarried stone on sledges. The groan and grind of their labor mixed with the work songs of the diggers. Tulair explained that Shan had decided to run three shifts of workers since the snows had left the valley.

The torches and bonfires revealed a few glimpses of the palace's rising walls. Just beyond the work site, a pavilion had been erected on the shore of Lake Nin. Glowing crystals hung from the eaves of the pavilion on silver chains, lighting softly the platform from which King Shan observed his grand building project.

The rys King had watched his human visitors approach in his mind. He was especially delighted that Dreibrand came with his entire family. Shan waited on the top step of the pavilion as his Nufalese guests drew closer. His awesome appearance befitted the ruler of the rys. Atrophaney delegates had gifted him with several bolts of exquisite white silk, which before the fall of Onja had been unknown in the western world. His tailors had created for him a lavish white suit with large cuffs and collars that exaggerated the eastern style. Sapphires sparkled darkly on the buttons of his jacket that had been adorned with heavy embroidery and beadwork after the fashion of western tribes. But Shan's feet walked in the shoes of his kind, who wore soft suede boots that were supple yet durable.

Since his war with Onja, the white streaks that had once accented his black hair had completely taken over. The chin-length white hair flowed back from Shan's face as if permanently windblown by the forces of the cosmos. A serenely neutral expression was fixed onto the refined features of his face that looked as if it had been carved from blue stone by the most brilliant of masters.

The visitors entered the aura of Shan's power. The King of Jingtun sensed the respect from the humans and his rys soldiers. All who looked upon Shan believed in his superiority. Shan valued their loyalty and admiration, which were great gifts that taught him the powers of kindness and generosity.

Dreibrand dismounted as his wagons rolled to stop behind him. When he looked at Shan, he noted the blue sparks of magic that glinted briefly in the rys's black eyes. Shan smiled with genuine pleasure, which warmed his previously rigid features with joy as if a bare mountainside had suddenly bloomed with rare flowers.

Dreibrand assisted Miranda down from her horse. Together, they kneeled before their King, and their attending warriors followed their humble example. Shan hurried down the steps with open arms.

"Welcome to Jingtun! Please, no need for this kneeling," Shan said. He had excused his human friends many times from such an open display of homage. Even unasked for, the kneeling touched Shan deeply because Dreibrand and Miranda bowed to no other.

The humans came to their feet. Shan and Dreibrand clasped forearms in greeting, but Shan did not hold him at a distance for long before embracing his friend. Shan showed his affection so freely because human friends had to be appreciated as much as possible. He sadly acknowledged that he would face many years of existence without Dreibrand because human lives were so much shorter than rys lives.

Next, Shan hugged Miranda and kissed her on the cheek.

"More beautiful than ever," he murmured and she almost blushed.

Despite the emotional difficulties that Jingtun inflicted on her, Miranda was glad to see Shan. His pure love always made her feel safe and special.

"And you have brought your children. Please, may I see your beautiful new daughter?" Shan asked.

Miranda signaled to Sahleen, who climbed down from the wagon and brought Victoria to her mother. Beaming with maternal pride, Miranda presented her newest child to Shan. The rys did not take the baby in his arms but he touched her gently on the temple. The infant's lifeforce was so brilliant and new that it invigorated him just to be near her.

Shan smiled to Miranda, sharing in her happiness. "I am so glad that you have been blessed with a

daughter." For an instant the horrible memories of Elendra's death passed between them.

Briskly, Miranda said, "Shan, what have you put in the pass? That hand-ball thing was quite a surprise."

Amused by her blunt description, Shan explained that it was a marker for the border of the rys kingdom. Its purpose was to alert travelers that they had reached a portion of the world where his hand ruled.

"Or, that your hand holds the world," Dreibrand commented.

"Dreibrand, please, do not encourage my ego," Shan admonished. "I did not mean it that way."

"How long will that huge sphere stay in the air?" Miranda wondered.

"I expect for at least two thousand years. Until Rystavalla stops agreeing with my will," Shan said. "But please, let me bore you with the details later." Always a gracious host to his friends, Shan gestured to the gathered warriors and invited them to stay at the Keep, where there was ample lodging for all and a feast prepared.

The Nufalese warriors cheered and thanked their rys King for his hospitality. The soft pleasures of the city were a welcome break from coarse living in the Wilderness.

Shan noted Miranda's sullen expression. He understood her reasons for disliking the Keep because he had no love for dwelling within Onja's former seat of power either. Trying to encourage her, he said quietly, "Miranda, I know that the Keep is not your favorite place to be, but with so many workers in the city, it is the only remaining place where I can lodge all of you in comfort and security. Do not shun the luxury of the Keep. It is an incredible building and perhaps we should enjoy it while we can because it will be torn down when my palace is ready."

"When will that be?" Miranda inquired, obviously hoping it would be soon.

"Oh, very soon. Maybe in only five more years," Shan answered.

His estimation of what was the near future disappointed Miranda, but she tried to focus on the positive attributes of the Keep. The warriors would enjoy the fine lodgings and the boys were old enough now to appreciate its grandeur.

Miranda forced a smile as she struggled to overcome her terrible memories about the building. She said, "Shan, I would be happy to accept your finest guest suite."

Shan chuckled, "Nothing less would do for Nufal's finest lady. I would hardly ask you to camp by the lake as I have been."

"The King camping in his own capital?" Dreibrand remarked. "I thought you lived at Quylan's house."

"Mmm, not now," Shan said evasively, and Dreibrand noted that Quylan was not around. Normally, she attended Shan almost constantly.

"Let us go to the Keep. I shall have to wait until morning to show off the progress on my palace," Shan announced, and people started getting back on their horses.

As Miranda returned her baby to Sahleen, Dreibrand leaned close to Shan and asked in a conspiratorial whisper, "Are any Atrophane in the city?"

Miranda overheard the question and she glanced back in time to see Shan shake his head. She supposed she was happy that no imperial representatives were present although she was uncertain about the strategy of constantly avoiding contact. Dreibrand had often insisted to her that the longer they could delay confrontation, the stronger they could become in peace, but Miranda was more inclined to force the issue. She wanted Shan's public proclamation that he supported Dreibrand's claim to the Wilderness above all others. She knew that the rys King preferred to exhibit indifference toward human affairs, but his desire for neutrality would not serve her family forever.

Despite her concerns, Miranda was willing to accept the adequacy of their policy toward Atrophane at the present. It would be best not to tire the rys King with her opinion until his favor was needed, which she hoped would not be for a long time.

8. *A Soldier's Tale*

Before leaving the Jington Valley, I met with Shan, the new King of the rys. He was generous with us but made certain that we understood the boundaries of his kingdom. He is a mighty being with whose will the Empire should never trifle. Those men who serve the rys King are blinded by his kindly displays, but I am not so convinced of his benign nature. – Lord General Kwan Chenomet, Hordemaster, report to Darmar Zemthute II, year 780 Atrophane calendar.

A pleasant breeze from the Gulf of Beldet jingled the chimes outside a Cros gambling house. It was an elegant old building, but the prestige of its clientele had dwindled over the years and the carpets were thinning beneath the tread of many unlucky feet.

Upstairs, guest rooms accommodated the more fortunate patrons. Two men stood in the hall, and when one of them knocked on a door, he heard a command to wait a moment.

On the other side of the door, a man pulled a silver snuffbox out of his vest pocket and provided a nostril with a pinch of powder. He sniffed deeply several times until his face tingled and his mood experienced the desired elevation.

The zeppa was derived from the nutshells of zeppalone trees that were cultivated commercially on nearby coastal islands. Although most of society criticized it for its addictive nature, zeppa enjoyed an enduring popularity, especially among the noble class.

The man replaced his snuffbox into his pocket and patted it once for peace of mind. He considered the detrimental side effects of the drug to be dismissible, as long as he had some. He was a man who had entered his middle thirties although he would probably not admit to it. He was tall and would have been handsome if not for the hard living that bagged his blue eyes and the extra pounds at his waist that pressed against his belt like a swollen river on a weak levee. His long blond hair resisted baldness with a thick widow's peak.

Opening the door, he greeted his companions with an artificially happy smile.

"Heldy and Rord, how are my good fellows?" he beamed.

"Never better, Sir," Rord responded.

"And what is your pleasure tonight, Sir?" Heldy asked.

"Oh, I need to put a couple hours in at the rikrik game while my good luck lasts," he answered. Glancing up and down the hall, he lowered his voice and added, "There's been this derata's son in the game with a couple of his friends, and they make bets like they don't even know what the cards mean."

Heldy and Rord grinned, happy to hear he was on a winning streak.

"Now to make those smiles sincere," the blond man announced and drew forth his purse. "You fellows have been so good about not sweating me for that back pay. Here's a little extra for your patience." He distributed coins of silver and gold mixed with a few gaming tokens from about three different establishments.

Pocketing the pay, Rord said, "Oh, Sir, we knew you were good for it. It has never been a secret that your finances suffer the extremes of all climates."

The blond man laughed and then coughed, but he did not chide Rord for his plain speech. His serving men were his trusted friends and he forgave the reference to his volatile income.

"Then, I should attend to the harvest while the fair season lasts," he said. "Have a bottle of something good sent to the rikrik room and then meet me there in a couple hours, which will give me an excuse to leave. Maybe we should go catch a show later."

"Excellent, Sir, we will see you then," Heldy said.

"May the Gods smile on you," Rord added.

Their master snorted with contempt. "I would do better, I think, if the Gods ignored me," he grumbled.

When he entered the rikrik room, he was pleased to see that his beloved son of a derata was already in attendance with his companions. All three picked up the cards that had just been dealt to them and studied their hands like kittens finding their first mouse.

Their daddy's money has not given them every advantage, the blond man thought as he took his seat. The card dealer nodded to him in greeting. The son of a derata paused from his contemplation of his cards to look at the arriving blond man with dislike. No doubt his first loss four nights ago had prompted him and his companions to keep returning to this gambling house where dwelled the taker of their gold.

The blond man smiled back with innocent politeness as if he were acknowledging a passing stranger on the street. *He does not like losing to me,* he thought with satisfaction.

As he was dealt into the next hand, a servant delivered the requested bottle of wine. Noting that it was nestled in a bucket of ice, which was brought down from the mountains and very expensive, the man studied his cards with renewed diligence. When he gave Rord and Hedy leave to spend money, they were certainly obedient.

"Please, everyone have a drink on me," he announced.

The derata's son and his faction glared at him suspiciously but the other players were cheered by the offer. A servant distributed the decent vintage and as the bottle ran low, the blond man ordered another. There was no sense in letting the ice go to waste. He noted that his adversaries accepted the wine, despite their suspicion, presumably because they wanted to take something from him.

When he noticed that the servant was leaving with the bottle that was not quite empty, he plucked it out of the servant's hands. Lifting it to his lips, the blond man drained the bottle and then gave it to the servant to take away.

Focusing on the game now, he made a bet and discreetly assessed his opponents. In addition to his wealthy and youthful new friends, there were two men who frequented this rikrik room as often as he did, plus two sailors, and one man who he did not recognize. This man had a soldier's scars on his forearms and one cheek, and the blond man guessed that the new face was a recent retiree from the wars.

As the game went on, the fortunes of the blond man languished in stalemate. The derata's son appeared to have learned a little caution after four expensive lessons, and he kept his money back, waiting for the object of his revenge to bet first. The dismal action grew tedious for all the players, and the man with the scars took it upon himself to entertain those present. The expensive wine had warmed his tongue and he began to relate his adventures in foreign lands.

As the blond man had guessed, the talkative man proved to be a retired soldier named Lendel. This was not the first time the blond man had heard the braggings of a veteran. Normally, he tuned out such alcohol-enhanced stories, but Lendel absolutely seized his attention when he mentioned that he had personally served the Lord General Kwan Chenomet.

When Lendel added that he had been part of Kwan's now famous expedition into the Wilderness, the other players at the table became interested. The stories of distant and magical Jingteng energized conversations throughout the Empire, and to actually hear a firsthand account was a welcomed opportunity.

Warming to his attentive audience, Lendel described the beings known as rys and what he knew of their magical qualities. The dealer shuffled slowly between hands, obviously listening as Lendel recounted the horrible Deamedron attack that had slaughtered many of his brave comrades. His voice quavered a little when he remembered his own terror.

But Lendel quickly recovered from the memory and changed the subject. He remarked upon the differences in appearance between the humans of the west and east. Then, after saving the best for last, he said that he had actually seen the rys King Shan. Although he admitted that it had been at a distance, he had indeed witnessed the meeting of the rys King with Lord Kwan before the surviving Atrophane departed the Rysamand.

It was quite a story, and Lendel had been more than happy to recount it. His pile of money had grown a little during the telling as his words had distracted the players.

One of the rikrik room's regular players commented, "Lord Atarek, didn't you tell me once that your brother was one of Kwan's officers."

The blond man looked sharply at his acquaintance. All this talk of the Wilderness had stirred emotions that he constantly struggled to avoid. Atarek simply nodded and returned his attention to his mediocre cards.

Hungry for more information, the player asked, "So how fares your brother? Does he still serve on the frontier?"

Atarek gritted his teeth. Keeping his eyes down, he said, "My brother has been lost in the service of the Empire."

The other player apologized, clearly embarrassed by his insensitive blunder. Atarek ignored him and tried to bury himself in the action of the game. The derata's son was betting now and Atarek thirsted for the pleasure of taking more money from him. Winning this hand would help drive away the thoughts that now clamored inside his head.

He vividly remembered the day when the letter with the imperial seal had arrived. Atarek had been home at his family's only estate. Usually official correspondence did not bode well for the Veta family, but Atarek had dearly hoped that it was some word from Dreibrand. When he had viewed the written condolences to the family, his denial had been instant. Missing in action! It could not be true. Atarek remembered that his mother had started weeping. If only Dreibrand could have been there to see that his mother's heart had harbored love for him all along.

Atarek made a bet and received another card. It was a good card. He would have more money from that son of a derata's bitch very soon.

Despite the necessity of observing his opponents during the next round of betting, Atarek's mind lurched back to his grief. Upon receiving the bad news, he had immediately gone to Cros to verify the report. What did missing in action mean? Was his brother captured? A sour-faced bureaucrat had tersely explained that it basically meant that the body had not been found.

Dreibrand! Foolish Brother, why did you run away? I miss you.

"Sir, would you like to bet?" the dealer inquired.

Atarek returned from his mental drifting. The son of the derata was the only other player still in the hand and he was staring at him intently. The mound of wagers that had built between them beckoned. Carelessly, Atarek tossed in his bet that included a raise in the stakes. His opponent met the bet and revealed his cards.

Atarek cursed with great vehemence and tossed his vanquished cards at the center of the table. With his depression now complete, he eyed everyone at the table. He would not have stayed in the hand if he had not been so distracted by the subject of his brother. He wondered if the veteran and the other player had conspired to upset him. Paranoid theories came easily to his mind because it would not be his first misfortune caused by conspiracy. It had not been the will of the Gods alone that hurled the House of Veta from its lofty status.

The victor pulled his pile of winnings toward him. With a wicked grin, he said, "I would have thought the heir to the Veta fortune would be used to losing." His cronies chuckled appropriately.

Atarek's comeback was particularly vulgar.

"Watch your mouth, Veta," the derata's son warned.

The dealer shuffled the cards and his eyes darted between the antagonists, wondering how this episode would end.

Atarek reiterated his vulgar suggestion.

"Your speech proves the decline of your noble blood," the derata's son sneered.

Atarek's chair tumbled backwards as he sprang to his feet. He might be a censured and ruined lord but he was still well fed and well bred and over six feet tall.

Things no doubt would have turned very ugly, but Hedy and Rord showed up and instantly moved to restrain their lord. While Hedy gathered the small remainder of Atarek's money that was on the

table, Rord grabbed his master's arm and announced that it was time to go.

Atarek surrendered himself to their prudence. The last thing he needed to do was beat in the face of some derata's son.

Heldy and Rord ushered him into the street, and Atarek did not pay attention to where they took him. The upset of the rikrik loss and the rudeness of the derata's son compounded the grief that flared in his chest. Even after all these years, he wished that his brother's fate had not been so terrible. He had told Dreibrand not to go. When Dreibrand had entered military training, Atarek had repeatedly made his opinion clear. Atarek had pleaded with his brother not to serve the establishment that spurned them. But a disapproving brother had not been enough to distract Dreibrand from his dreams of winning a new fortune, and Atarek had watched him ride out with the soldiers in a grand parade through the city. It galled Atarek more than anything that Dreibrand had died for his country. It made the humiliation of censure burn deeper.

Music was playing now, and Heldy and Rord had him at a tavern. Atarek lifted his eyes from the pit of his depression and recognized the interior of the Cocky Mongoose, which was actually one of his favorite haunts, but at this moment, he was completely indifferent.

The place was crowded because Cros was filling up for the Jigglee festival that started in a couple days. While Rord searched for a table, Heldy and Atarek waited at the bar. Heldy ordered a round of drinks and shoved a glass into his master's hand.

"Come on, Sir. That brat was bound to win one hand eventually," Heldy soothed.

Atarek drained the glass. As the alcohol traveled down his throat, its false warmth mocked his attempt to ease the pain. "You should have let me go at him. He wouldn't look so high class missing a few teeth," he grumbled.

Refilling his master's glass, Heldy said, "Now, Sir, he's not worth your time. Anyway, you don't have to prove anything to anybody. We all know you could break him across your knee."

Heldy's flattery made Atarek feel a little better and he accepted the second drink.

"There, good ol' Rord has us a table. Let's go, Sir," Heldy said.

When Atarek reached the table, he noted that Rord had detained a female companion already. She greeted them with tipsy enthusiasm, but Rord pulled her closer and regained her attentions. Atarek ignored the girl and reached for his snuffbox.

When he lifted his head to survey the crowd, he was surprised to see the veteran Lendel standing by his table.

"What the hell do you want?" Atarek demanded, narrowing his eyes.

"May I sit?" Lendel inquired.

The sight of the veteran made Atarek revisit his emotions from the rikrik game. "No! You were in on it with them. Distracting me from my game," Atarek snapped.

For a moment, Lendel pondered the accusation. Then he dismissed it and continued, "Sir, you are Lord Veta, correct?"

"No, I'm the Darmar," Atarek said.

Lendel decided to consider this an invitation to sit.

Atarek rolled his eyes at the unwanted company. He gestured toward Rord and the girl and said sarcastically, "I guess you have come for the free show."

Taking note of the veteran, Rord stopped kissing the girl and said hello.

With exasperation, Atarek turned to Heldy, looking for support. While Atarek took another drink, Heldy said, "I don't believe Lord Veta asked you to sit with us."

"Tell Lord Veta that I have a business proposition for him," Lendel responded.

Without making eye contact with Lendel, Atarek chuckled bitterly. "Oh, yes, I am such a high profile

investor these days," he said.

Hoping to warm the cold reception by going straight to business, Lendel whispered insistently, "Sir, I overheard you say that you think your brother is dead."

Atarek faced him now and blinked stupidly. He wanted to slap this man who had already tormented him with hard memories, but he was too stunned to react.

Now in possession of Atarek's attention, Lendel offered, "For the right price, I could obtain information about Dreibrand."

Atarek gasped. He could not believe some stranger was sitting in front of him and talking about his brother. To actually be teased with news about Dreibrand, to actually think that he was alive, made Atarek feel more vulnerable than he had thought possible.

But Atarek would not bargain with this man. Atarek's worldview surpassed mere cynicism, and he could not see this man as anything but a swindler.

Boiling with offense, Atarek hissed, "How dare you try to extort me with your lies. Is this your racket? You go around telling people that their dead relatives are alive? You sicken me."

He sprang at Lendel. The upheaval of his emotions was too much to control and Atarek decided to vent on the pesky hustler. His hand flew by the top of his boot and came up with a dagger. If Lendel had not spent the best years of his life in combat, Atarek would have instantly seized him and had the blade at his throat. Instead Lendel reacted like a man who had helped build the Empire, and he grappled with Atarek and held the dagger back.

Heldy rushed around the table to assist his master, and Rord dutifully gave up the girl's embrace and jumped into action. Although Lendel was tough, he decided to retreat from a three on one situation, but his foot caught on his chair and he careened off balance. Heldy and Rord each caught one of his arms and put him back on his feet just in time for Atarek to land a hard punch to his stomach.

"Out back," Atarek ordered.

Lendel was strong and fought hard, but with his arms twisted behind his back, he could not stop Heldy and Rord from pushing him toward the back door. The patrons of the tavern watched the spectacle in a voyeuristic rapture.

Lendel's face opened the back door, and as he was thrown down the steps into the alley, he cursed his stupidity as much he tried to find a strategy for survival. He should have anticipated the possibility of Atarek becoming upset, especially after the display at the rikrik game.

His knees bashed into the cobblestones and the barking pain of impact made him conclude that four years of retirement from the military had made him as unaware as a schoolgirl. He should not have approached Atarek while the lord had two men with him, and Lendel had not even paused to think that Atarek would assume he was a swindler. Lendel had simply acted on an opportunity to maybe make some quick money.

The glow of the street lanterns beckoned from the end of the alley, but Lendel could not reach the safety of the sweet light. A boot crashed into the back of his skull and slammed him face-first to the dirty stones.

Atarek kicked him again in the ribs. Cringing into a fetal position, Lendel begged him to stop. Atarek paused, mildly placated by the whimpering.

With blood dripping from his split lips, Lendel saw that he was surrounded by the three men. Beyond them, a man and a woman who had been occupying themselves in the shadows hurried away and granted the trio some ominous privacy with Lendel. The dagger still flashed in Atarek's hand.

"Forget the money, Sir. I just thought you should know that I saw your brother alive, in Jingtun, five years ago," Lendel said.

"Liar!" Atarek thundered. He wanted to give into the oblivion of violence, but as much as he distrusted this veteran, he could not resist his message.

Dreibrand, alive?

Taking a step back, Atarek ordered his men to stand up their victim.

Without looking at the battered man, Atarek said, "Why are you saying these things?"

Knowing how his master had been wounded by the loss of his brother, Hedy slapped Lendel. "Who sent you? What's this about?" he demanded, assuming that one of Atarek's enemies had decided to torment him with hopeless rumors.

"Nobody sent me. Oh, how I wish that I had not come myself," Lendel lamented. "I just thought Lord Veta might be interested in the truth."

Hedy twisted his arm some more. "Sir, leave this bastard to us. He won't bother you anymore."

Atarek was touched by the loyalty of his men, and he knew that they would make this scoundrel regret his actions more than he did already. It would be easy enough to go back into the tavern and let Hedy and Rord have their sport. Atarek had no consequences to concern him. Although he was censured by the imperium, he technically remained a man born to the ruling class, which meant that he was allowed considerable freedom to use and abuse commoners and slaves.

As tempting as it sometimes was to vent frustration on those beneath his station, Atarek decided to stop indulging himself.

"Tell me what you know, and I'll let you go," he said.

Hedy and Rord widened their eyes, surprised by their master's sudden mercy after such fury.

Lendel spoke quickly. "Oh, thank you, Sir. As you know, I served Lord Kwan on his expedition into the Wilderness. Well, when we departed that place, the rys King met with Lord Kwan to see us off. And then, just before we finally left that accursed place, I saw Dreibrand Veta come to speak with my lord. All the soldiers saw him. And I have no doubt that it was him, because he had been Kwan's lieutenant for two years and I had seen him many times. How your brother got there, I don't know. He seems to be in the service of the rys King. But I swear to you by every God and Goddess that I have ever heard of that I saw your brother, Dreibrand, alive and well five years ago."

Atarek did not react. The news was even more overwhelming now that he was on the verge of believing it.

Misjudging Atarek's silence as a precursor to another violent outburst, Lendel added, "There were hundreds of soldiers who saw him. I'm sure many of them have now returned home over the years. You should be able to confirm my story."

"You saw him in Jingtun, five years ago?" Atarek asked.

Lendel nodded and again swore vigorously upon all the Gods.

Cruel hope lashed Atarek. Through the fluttering haze of his addled mind, he struggled to think.

"Who else saw him? I want the names of officers. People I can find," Atarek said.

"Lord Kwan and his lieutenant, Sandin Promentro, spoke with Dreibrand that day. They should know what he is up to," Lendel answered.

"And what else do you have to say?" Atarek said.

"That is all, Sir," Lendel replied meekly.

With a wave of his hand, Atarek said, "Get out of here."

Hedy and Rord released the veteran, who dashed away without looking back.

After an awkward moment of silence, Rord said, "Sir, don't believe him. He would have said anything to make you let him go."

"Yes, but he didn't say just anything. He said my brother was alive," Atarek responded. He started to walk down the alley, following in the path of the unexpected messenger.

"Where are you going?" Hedy asked with concern.

"Leave me alone," Atarek snarled with sufficient vehemence to make his men comply.

Solitude was not all that Atarek used to soothe his rampaging emotions. After five days of bingeing on alcohol and zeppa, he was reduced to a shabby sprawl on the bed in his hotel room. He awoke in late afternoon with a pasty mouth and a judgmental headache. In his first groggy moments, he noted that half of his clothes were mixed up with the bed sheets, and he cast his hands about for his vest. He plucked his snuffbox from his favorite pocket but it had nothing to offer him today. The dregs of a wine bottle on the night stand suggested itself but his nauseated stomach rejected the poor option.

Breaking out in a sudden cold sweat, he lay back on his crumpled pillow. Along with the hardships of a magnificent hangover, his mind was confronted by cruel sobriety. During his dedicated pursuit of intoxication, he had attempted to forget, disprove, and ignore the story from the veteran Lendel, but now Atarek admitted to himself that he believed. He not only believed because he wanted his brother to be alive, but he could easily believe that the Empire had lied to him. He could not guess what had happened to Dreibrand out on the frontier, but whatever it was, Lord Kwan was covering it up.

Anger surged in Atarek's chest. How he hated all those bastards! When he was born, the House of Veta had been great and powerful, but now all the ruling class thought they were better than he was. For the first time, he understood Dreibrand's desire to leave the fair shores of Atrophane. Why stay to suffer their scorn?

Atarek sat up and swung his bare feet onto the floor. The movement alarmed his swollen brain and he clutched his head. Despite the pain, he experienced his first clarity in a long time. He would tread in the high halls where he was unwanted and seek confirmation of Lendel's story.

Lady Haley Triesto emerged from her marble swimming pool and donned the loose white robe that two servants held up for her. They tied the garment around her waist and her wet body stuck to the cotton fabric. They retreated into her pool house, where the servants began drying and curling her hair. She was expecting her star reader and she wanted to be ready on time. Even for a woman of her high rank, it was considered bad luck to keep a star reader waiting, especially Eshbikelstan whose opinions on the future were well respected in Cros.

A servant held a mirror for her and she judged her appearance to be adequate because there was no more time. Eshbikelstan was approaching across the gardens from the main palace with three attendants. She slipped out of her robe and into a sleeveless lavender silk dress.

Haley shooed away her servants and ordered both her guards to leave. Eshbikelstan said too many watchers could skew his interpretation of the energies of the heavens. As the servants exited the pool house, they told the star reader that he was welcome to enter. The long gray beard of Eshbikelstan did not move with any acknowledgement but he wet his lips as if he were about to say something.

The attendant to the right of the star reader was tall and blond and the hooded robe of a journeyman star reader did not quite fit him.

"Of course the master has leave to enter," he said with exasperation. He grabbed the elbow of the elder star reader and forcefully ushered him through the double doors of the pool house. The other two attendants shut the doors behind them and quietly turned the lock.

Haley's high cheekbones glowed where they had been kissed by the sun during her swim. She greeted her trusted star reader with a pearly smile.

"My Lady, run!" Eshbikelstan shouted, but Haley merely blinked with confusion.

The star reader did not get another chance to warn his client because two attendants grabbed him and covered his mouth. The third attendant jumped forward and seized Lady Triesto. Caught completely by surprise, Haley had a hand clamped over her mouth before she could scream.

"Keep the storyteller quiet," her attacker ordered as he dragged her into another room.

Haley struggled but he was much stronger than she was and he soon had her forced into a chair. Holding her from behind, he kept a hand over her mouth.

"Lady Triesto, please forgive my intrusion. I truly have no desire to harm one of the most brilliant women in all the Empire," he said.

Haley stopped struggling although the hard grip on her body filled her with fear. Her bosom heaved below his arm that restrained her, and, for the first time, she wished that she did not look so pleasing. The scented oils that had been massaged into her skin that morning suddenly smelled stronger as fear heated her body. Despite her vulnerability, she was thinking again. She was a powerful woman and this man might want something from her besides her body. Dismally, she concluded that this was possibly an abduction.

Her attacker leaned forward and spoke into her ear. "I am Atarek Veta, and I give you my word as a gentleman that I will not hurt you," he said and took his hand off her mouth.

She immediately inhaled for a scream.

Urgently, Atarek covered her mouth again. He pleaded, "Please, Lady Triesto, I beg you. Just listen to me for one moment. It concerns your husband."

She nodded when he mentioned her husband. She would listen to what this Veta had to say about her husband before trying to alert her guards.

Atarek eased his hand off her face and came around the chair to face her. He took both her hands and leaned over her. His touch was kinder now but retained physical control.

"Forgive my behavior, but you have forced me to do this. Your secretary refused to give me an appointment three times and I have no time to waste," Atarek explained. "I only need a minute to speak with you and I know you will indulge me. The House of Triesto was once the friend of the House of Veta."

"That was a long time ago," Haley said. She studied his face and now recognized him. She had seen Lord Veta several times over the years. His reputation showed on his face, but his eyes blazed with some great purpose.

"My Lady, your husband served with my brother, Dreibrand, correct?" he said.

Narrowing her eyes at the censured lord, she demanded, "What of it?"

Atarek continued, "The Empire reported that my brother was missing in action, which I was told meant that he was presumed dead, but I now have reason to think this is not true. I have come to you to find out if your husband ever said anything about Dreibrand."

Haley did not respond right away. Indeed, Sandin had mentioned Dreibrand Veta. Despite her husband's public praise for Lord Kwan, Sandin had privately fumed to her on several occasions about Dreibrand. He resented Kwan's leniency with the deserter. He loathed Dreibrand for his disloyalty to Kwan, and he especially despised the success Dreibrand appeared to have found in the service of King Shan.

"Why should I tell you anything, Veta?" Haley demanded.

Atarek answered her with such sincerity and humility that he actually touched her heart. He even shed his threatening posture and dipped down to one knee. "Tell me what you know, my Lady, because I love my younger brother and I miss him. If you know that he lives, do not keep the information from me. I have lived in heavy grief for five years."

When he spoke of his sorrow, Haley glimpsed his desolation. The rumor that his lost brother might be alive was tormenting him, and she could pity him. His censure did not justify withholding the information about his closest relative, but Haley did not soften the details. "Your brother was not missing in action. He is a deserter." She hoped the words would sting Atarek and be a small revenge for his criminal intrusion, but they seemed to have the opposite effect.

Dreibrand finally stopped following their rules, Atarek thought with approval. "Go on," he said eagerly.

"He was reported missing in action to spare Lord Kwan the humiliation of having an officer desert him," Haley said. "According to Sandin, your brother serves the King in Jington and he was alive five years ago. That is all I know."

"Great merciful Simosha!" Atarek cried with elation. Lendel's story was confirmed. "Thank you, Lady Triesto, thank you. Now, I hope you will not hold this intrusion against me. If anyone is to blame, it

is your secretary for his prejudice against me.”

Haley scowled because she could not believe that Atarek actually expected her to forgive his manhandling and blame it on her secretary.

Turning up his charm, Atarek said, “Please Lady Triesto, forgive me.” He caressed her hands before letting them go, but kept one hand playfully on her knee.

Believing now that Atarek would not hurt her, Haley relaxed a little, but his persistent touch was distracting. “If I am to forgive this beastly act, you must promise me something, Atarek,” she said. “You must not tell what I have told you. Lord Kwan’s reputation must be protected. My husband owes him that, and,” she paused to let her lips quiver for effect, “And Sandin might just strangle me for letting the secret out.”

“Oh, I swear, I never heard this from you, my Lady,” Atarek said. Suffused with happiness, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. She stiffened into the back of the chair, unnerved by his presumptive display of affection.

“You know, with your husband away on his travels, I don’t have to rush out of here. I have plenty more thrills to offer,” Atarek proposed. It was quite exciting to have the Darhet’s wife all to himself, and who knew, she just might say yes.

Haley slapped him.

Atarek disregarded the peril of his actions. Laughing, he said, “I can go for rough stuff if that’s how you want it.”

“Unbelievable!” Haley thundered. “You better run now and run fast because I am going to have every soldier in the Empire looking for you.”

“Now, now, my Lady, don’t waste their time over my rudeness. I will go and trouble you no more. Just please forgive me,” he said.

“Forgiving you is not possible,” she insisted.

“Then, at least do not press charges. Sometimes I cannot help myself, my Lady. The Empire has never allowed me to be anything but a criminal,” Atarek said.

In essence, his statement was true, which again encouraged her pity. Haley accepted that she would not add to this man’s persecution. Perhaps his own life was punishment enough, and secretly his boldness today had been her biggest thrill in a long time. She agreed not to have him pursued.

After thanking her again, Atarek offered, “Let me give you some advice in exchange for your mercy. Stop wasting your time and money with Eshbekelstan. He certainly had no forewarning that I was stopping by his house today.”

Haley looked down, a little embarrassed. “I see your point,” she murmured.

Stepping away from her, Atarek said, “It has been a pleasure, Lady Triesto. I will carry the memory of your beauty and kindness into the Wilderness.”

9. The Grove of Leewhelen

When Tempet discovered Alloi, his tortured soul welcomed the blissful chance for companionship. Cradled by hope, his mind ignored the possibility that his twin sister would not rise from the mountain as he had.

Clutching the portion of stone that concealed her body, Tempet poured his magic into the mountain. Calling her name with his mind, he focused his lifeforce into her body that was as cold and hard as the stone that held it. He did this for days until he dropped from exhaustion. Upon waking, Tempet immediately renewed his efforts without knowing how long he had been passed out. He labored without food because he had no hunger beyond the mad desire to revive his sister.

Finally, under the light of a full moon, his efforts called life back from prolonged oblivion. Desperate to free Alloi from the stone and let her draw sweet fresh air into her stale lungs, Tempet pulverized

the rock that covered her. He clawed toward her softening flesh, and although he used his magic to crack the rock, he cut his hands in his haste. With fingers dripping blood, he touched the shoulders of the female tabre. The blood seeped into her dry skin and the influence of the vital fluid inspired her to function. Her lips pulled back from white teeth and air whistled inside her craggy throat.

Tempet pried her loose from the mountain and embraced her. Overwhelmed by passion and relief, tears fell from his eyes and splashed on her shoulders. Greedily her dry skin absorbed the tears like a parched desert basin.

He sobbed her name, begging her to respond. Air rattled into her convulsing lungs, but her eyes did not open. Tempet knew he had to get her to water. Tenderly, he lifted her into his arms and carried her toward the levitation shaft. She was as light and fragile as an eggshell and he took care not to bump her.

The levitation shaft speeded them safely to the bottom of the chasm and he brought her to the frothing stream. Handful after handful of water he scooped into her mouth. He did this until morning, stopping when the water ran out the sides of her mouth and mucus ran from her nose. Her body was hydrated now and the daylight revealed a lovely female. The flesh of her face was soft again, cushioning perfect features and filling out her lips. Her shriveled chest had been transformed into two luscious breasts. The well of her belly button was centered on her little round stomach, and her withered hips had been replaced with the curves of a healthy female.

Swaddling her with his magic, Tempet called her name again. Even if she was as bald as he was, she was still as beautiful as he remembered.

"Alloi," he pleaded and kissed her cheek. Keeping his lips against her face, he repeated her name.

When she coughed, Tempet lifted his head. Her eyelids fluttered and he held his breath. Alloi opened her eyes, and she stared at him sleepily. Even this scant sign of consciousness was the greatest pleasure that Tempet could ever remember knowing.

He continued to say her name until her blind black eyes were able to interpret light again. She focused on his face. "Tempet," she whispered.

He laughed and cried, delirious to be recognized. He asked her how she felt but she was too weak to utter another syllable. She needed food, and Tempet sprang toward the high grassy slopes where the mountain sheep grazed.

With frightful speed, he made a kill and dragged the animal back to his sister. He tore off a piece of flesh and was about to place the bloody mass in her mouth when he thought better of it. Scrambling about for tinder and driftwood, he built a fire and cooked the meat. He would spare the fair Alloi the beastly sensation of consuming raw meat. He was glad that he was there to ease his sister through the pains of awakening.

The smell of roasting meat wafted through the chasm, and Tempet started feeding his sister. As with him, her hunger was immense and he fed her for two days straight, letting her sleep between meals. At the end of the second day, he remembered to take food for himself. He had exhausted himself bringing Alloi back to life, but the deep fatigue was worth it when Alloi started to talk. Her mind was not clouded and blank as his mind had been at first, and she spoke in the tabre language that had not been uttered for twenty-two centuries.

"How long have you been out of hibernation, Tempet?" she asked.

Tempet thought her voice sounded more wonderful than the music of a genius, but to hear his native tongue reminded him of all the tabre who would never speak again.

Trying to reply, he stumbled at first, but then his native vocabulary returned to him like water flowing downhill. "Just a few more days than you, sweet sister. I am not sure exactly, but not long."

"How many years have we slept?" she asked.

Delighted by the lucidity of his brilliant sister, he answered that he did not know how much time had passed since they had sealed themselves away from the fate of the tabre. "But Drathatarlane has crumbled," he observed and gestured toward the ruins of the Secret City.

Alloi looked up to the place where she and Tempet had been born. Twins were very rare for tabre, and their birth had taken place on the most sacred altar in Nufal, attended by the elite of Drathatarlane society. The tabre leaders had been excited by the potential of the newly born duo.

With the proper nurturing and training, the little brother and sister squalling upon the cold black altar stone, slick from their birthing, would exceed their elders in the art of magic.

To Alloi, the yawning gap of time consumed by hibernation did not register. Their birth only felt as if it had been one hundred sixty-eight years ago. She remembered her tablinghood fondly because that was the time before the Great War. Her mind stopped. She would not look upon the bleak images of her adult years.

Calmly, Alloi focused on immediate needs. "Tempet, let us cover ourselves with the skin of this animal."

While Alloi used her magic to dry the skin, Tempet foraged for some stones that would suit him. When he found two that satisfied his conditions, he cast a spell on them. His magic fractured the stones to reveal sharp edges. With his new tools, Tempet cut the skin. Thinking back to the coarseness of his savage state, he made an effort to be precise. With a little strategy, he trimmed the skin so that Alloi could make herself a shift to wear and enough was left to provide him with a loin cloth. The white fleece looked bright next to their dark skin.

Pulling the crude covering over her torso, Alloi said, "Have you looked around Drathatarlane?"

Tempet shook his head, and she decided that they would explore their dilapidated home. The levitation shaft conveyed them to the lofty city with the smallest of efforts.

At the top, the strong wind felt cold on the edges of Alloi's ears. After being locked in the mountain, the touch of the elements startled her.

The mossy ruins of Drathatarlane offered no warm welcome. The toppled walls and vacant doorways stared at the twins like a senile relative who did not remember them.

Tempet and Alloi did not speak as they passed between the first buildings. The jagged shadows crossed their bodies and the desolate place snubbed them like defeated soldiers drifting home after losing the war.

When they turned down a side street, they held hands and approached the house where they had lived with their parents. The roof of the house was collapsed and a tree was growing out of the front room. Tempet and Alloi climbed the broken steps and entered the shattered dwelling of their lost lives. The furnishings had rotted away centuries ago. Only pottery and heavily corroded metal items remained. A few pillars still stood around the tree that now lived in the house. It was tall and its branches shaded the floor that was cracked by its roots.

"This tree is over one hundred years old," Alloi said.

"We have been gone longer than that," Tempet insisted. "Look at this place."

Alloi nodded. The ruin around her had obviously set in very long ago. When she had entered hibernation, their house and all of Drathatarlane had been lovely and in good repair, but the rubble disturbed Alloi the least. Her home had fallen to pieces in her heart when her parents had died. They had perished on the plains, turned into Deamedron.

With a gasp, Alloi shuddered, wrestling with the memory. The hideous history stormed at the gates of her mind, but she would not look upon the ugly horde that clamored for the chance to ravage her.

Tempet put an arm around her shoulders. "Do not hide from your feelings, Sister. I have cried. The mountains would still be ringing with my shrieks if I had not remembered you."

She sobbed once, touched by his loving words, but she would not face her feelings. They had to be held back because she did not know what the result would be from acknowledging her grief. Her wretchedness was like a huge boulder perched on a cliff. Once the edge gave way and the boulder fell, she would be pulled to the bottom.

Alloi returned to her calm assessment of the situation. "We need to determine how long it has been."

"How?" Tempet wondered.

"I will go to Leewhelen and count her rings," Alloi replied.

Tempet suddenly remembered something very important and said, "Let us search the city first. I want my weapon."

"Then do so. I will come back when I am done," she responded.

She turned to leave, but Tempet grabbed her wrist and asked her to wait for him. Realizing that he needed her, Alloi agreed to stay while he looked for his weapon. It had been thoughtless of her to rush away from him, especially when he had suffered for days alone. She had been fortunate to have him at her side when she awoke.

Delighted by her decision to stay, Tempet took her hand, led her out of their dismal home, and proceeded to the main building in Drathatarlane. The five spires on the five corners of the Pen'dalem had fallen and the huge dome over the council chamber of the Drathatarlane Sect of the Nebakarz had crashed to the floor, but Tempet sensed the magic that lingered beneath the ruins. Enchanted objects were buried within, and Tempet sought the armory where the tabre smiths had crafted the finest weapons in Nufal.

He thought about the enchanted weapons that he had seen in the possession of the humans. He was certain now that the weapons had not been of tabre manufacture. The pressure of his rage increased when he thought about the humans and how they had spoken of rys. Tempet began to tell Alloi about the humans he had seen.

After hearing a portion of his story, Alloi asked, "Were they our people?"

Tempet puzzled over her question a moment. It had been a long time and humans tended to look the same. Finally, he decided, "Two of them were. The others were of the west." He scowled, bothered by the fact that one of the men of eastern appearance had possessed an enchanted sword and spoken of rys.

"What are you not telling me?" Alloi pressed.

Tempet retracted his mind from her, sensing that his sister was prying at the edge of his awareness. Enforcing his privacy, he thought about the man he had seen with the long light hair—so like some of the warriors who had fought for Nufal in the last age. But Tempet believed that man belonged to the rys now, that he was a traitor to his ancestors, and a minion of Jington. Tempet judged that Alloi was not yet ready to cope with the news of an eastern human serving rys. She had always been so fond of her people.

"We will speak of it later," he replied tersely and marched into the rubble.

Drawn by the enchantment that he desired, Tempet pushed through the tumbled bricks until he exposed the broken entrance to the armory. A few iron brackets attested to the weapons racks that had been smashed beneath the toppled walls. Crawling under a leaning slab of stone, Tempet reached into the gloom for the object that he craved. His perception pulled him toward the weapon and its closeness tingled on his fingertips. His memory was strong now. He had left his weapon at the armory. In the frenzy before entering hibernation, he had not been able to think of a more creative place to stash his personal weapon.

In the tabre language, it was called a bitaran.

Stretching to the limits of his body, Tempet seized the cool metal handle of his bitaran and the enchantment flared through his body like the rush of a narcotic. He pulled on the weapon but its head was wedged beneath the rubble. Obsessed by his desire to possess his weapon, Tempet blasted the stubborn stone that restrained his prize.

Alloi cried out with alarm, convinced that her brother was going to crush himself before her eyes. She grabbed his feet and pulled him out of the unstable crevice. Tempet emerged with a satisfied smile and white light snapping in his eyes. He held up his bitaran. Superb crafting had shaped the metal into a sleek and elegant rod weighted at one end with a bulbous head. It was a simple bludgeoning device made especially cruel by the seven sharp ridges on the head. Diamonds cut as sharp as razors and strengthened even further with spells were set on the ridges and they glittered remorselessly in the sunlight. Two warding crystals were on the weapon, one at each end, and milky light swirled inside the smoky orbs, advertising the power within the weapon. It was an awesome treasure in any age of the world.

"So, amid this desolation, you think only of war," Alloi said quietly.

"Yes," Tempet proclaimed without any shame. "Onja might still be alive, and if she is, she is old and

weak, and the revenge of the tabre is long overdue." He brandished the weapon, thirsting for the violence that history required.

Alloi made no reply. She did not want to remember the horrors of the past and the thought of making more war had not crossed her mind. Hearing Onja's name spoken, however, spurred an undeniable hatred within Alloi. She believed that Onja and her mate Dacian were not worthy of forgiving or forgetting.

Swallowing hard, Alloi blinked back tears. She would not argue with her brother even if the nature of her heart urged her toward peace. The gentleness of her soul only added to her torment. Her conscience told her that revenge was pointless. The tabre civilization was gone forever. Even so, Alloi could not deny that the rys deserved to be punished. They deserved to suffer as if every sin ever committed was their doing.

"I will determine how long we have been gone and then we will seek our enemies," Alloi whispered.

"Yes, sweet Sister," Tempet agreed hungrily.

The tabre hiked above the city on what had once been a trail, until erosion erased it from everywhere except their memory. Crisscrossing the face of the mountain, they climbed until the ruins of Drathatarlane became small beneath them. The descending sun peeked over the mountain behind them, and a golden swath of light shone on the ridge that was their goal. Gnarled pine trees squatted on the ridge, stunted and isolated on the extreme of edge of the plant world. Beyond the trees, there was only stone, snow, and sky.

Alloi and Tempet pulled themselves onto the ridge and stayed on their hands and knees for a moment in reverence. This was the most sacred grove in the Tabren Mountains. The short thick trunks were smooth and golden and the scent of the sap seeping over the dainty cones was sweet to smell.

These trees lived longer than any trees, than any animals, sometimes even longer than a tabre. In tabre legend, it had been inside one of these high groves that the first tabre learned the magic secrets of the world. Only the ancient roots of the sacred trees could tap the hidden knowledge of the world. But the knowledge was of little use to trees, so they had waited until a creature who was worthy of teaching had come. When the tabre had arrived, the trees deemed them deserving of the gift of power. After bestowing the power, the trees had only wanted respect, which the tabre gave willingly.

The wind that usually whipped constantly at this high place died down, and in the hush of the sacred grove, Alloi imagined that the trees were surprised by the return of their lost disciples. She glanced at Tempet, who understood that she wanted him to wait behind.

She got to her feet and entered the grove slowly. The twisted hulks of the malformed trees seemed to take note of her, but it was like being watched by statues that had no eyes.

Alloi searched for a familiar pattern in the grove, but trees had sprouted and grown old since she had been in this place. Finally, with a stab to her heart, she recognized a tree, but it was dead. It had been one of the oldest ones when she was a tabling. Even in death, the former lord of the grove possessed an awesome majesty. Although bleached by the elements, the trunk was still upright and creating its own monument to its life that had grown on the mountain for three thousand years.

Using the dead tree as a landmark, Alloi located the tree that she sought. She had planted this one when the Great War had started. With a desperate prayer for peace, she had placed the seedling into the sharp gravel that by some miracle sustained these trees for centuries. She had named the tree Leewhelen.

She gasped when she saw Leewhelen because it was among the oldest trees now. An elder of the forgotten grove, Leewhelen was bent and sculpted by countless relentless winters and only two tiny patches of green hung from the weathered branches.

Alloi had been in hibernation longer than she dared to think.

Her desire to know the precise length of her hibernation turned to terror. The knowledge would force her to confront the fact that she was irreparably separated from her civilization. Only because she could not turn away from an available truth, Alloi put her hand upon the glassy bark of the tree.

The powerful lifeforce of the tree instantly grabbed her awareness, and because of her vast tabre perceptions, the experience was incredibly intense. She journeyed through every ring of the tree, experiencing the past, but only seeing it as Leewhelen had known it. Snow and stars and thousands of phases of the moon, rain and wind, blue skies, and fierce blizzards. The bliss of the warm sun every spring and summer.

It went on and on, over and over, with every nuance that nature had to offer, until Alloi hit the core. Upon reaching the cells that had composed the tender seedling, she had her answer. Nufal had been a desolate ruin for over two thousand two hundred years.

With a sob, she broke away from the tree. Wanting to flee from the knowledge, she stumbled and fell. Aware of the length of time that had passed, Alloi could no longer hide from the tragedy of her existence. She remembered the terrible end of Nufal and the insanity of damnation that the Deamedron had brought.

Heedless of the sharp rocks beneath her, Alloi cried uncontrollably. Tempet went to his sister's side and held her as the day turned into night. The black totality of the starry heavens finally soothed Alloi enough to let her speak.

Tempet was stunned when she told him how long it had been. After processing the information, he said with a hint of disappointment, "Then it is doubtful that Onja and Dacian are still alive."

Alloi agreed because not even the unstoppable monarchs of Jingtén could elude time.

"Then, those rys who live today will pay for the crimes of their ancestors," Tempet said. "A few generations does not cleanse the guilt of genocide."

Alloi was not sure if she accepted his opinion, but the trauma of her grief distracted her from her conscience. Perhaps the extinction of both Nufal and Jingtén would be just.

"Come, Alloi, let us seek the humans I have seen, so we can gather information about the rys." Tempet spat out the last word like rotten food.

Before they left the sacred grove, Alloi returned to Leewhelen so she could touch the wondrous tree again and convey her affection for the seedling that had grown so well. But her sadness became complete when she set her hand on the polished trunk. The lifeforce was gone. The sap moved no more. Leewhelen had died as she wept.

Devastated, Alloi allowed Tempet to lead her out of the grove. Feeling the warmth of his hand, she accepted that her brother was all that remained of the world she had once known. They had been concealed as a future vengeance upon the rys, and Alloi would let Tempet's hand guide her through her duty to their lost race.

10. Relics and Renaissance

The King of the rys surveyed his realm from the highest roof of the Keep. Beneath the bright stars, blue light flared in his dark eyes as his senses drifted over the city. Shan's great mind encompassed the workers laboring through the night, the rys living in their houses, and his Nufalese guests sleeping three levels below his feet. He could focus on any individual lifeforce or experience the humans and rys as a whole mass.

Shan deepened the meditation and reached beyond Jingtén. He grasped the powers of the world from the high ceaseless wind cruising over the snowy peaks down to the deep drowsy flexing of Rystavalla beneath her glorious crown of mountains. His awareness flew across the land.

The Rysamand gave way beneath Shan's mind as he descended the western foothills. The land was familiar and his mind sped over the forests and fields where he had traveled for many years and enjoyed many human friends.

Thinking about his friends, who over the centuries had lived and died, Shan became sad. Nothing ever seemed to change in the west. The tribal kingdoms had always been addicted to feuds and raids, and Shan feared that he had only given them more reasons to fight after nurturing a rebellion during his war with Onja.

Even now, King Kalek of the Temu Tribe plotted a campaign against his hated rival, the Sabuto Tribe. After the conquest of Jingtén, Kalek had set about consolidating his power so he could

eventually focus on the Sabuto. His first step had been to attack the Zenglawa Tribe that had served Onja in the war and been the enemy of the Temu. Weakened by the first war, the Zenglawa were defeated by the Temu a second time. Armed with his victory over the Zenglawa, Kalek had easily persuaded his lesser allies to accept his opinion on most matters.

In order to bind the northern tribes under his control, Kalek had focused their attentions on an element of society that was feared by all. An underworld society of spies, mercenaries, and assassins known as the Kezanada had existed for centuries as an independent power. The Kezanada had profited under the rule of Onja by executing her orders among the humans. Although this relationship had made the Kezanada wealthy and powerful, it had not endeared them to the tribal leaders.

Despite the cunning of the Kezanada, the war was not going well for them. The society was buckling under the unified attack from multiple tribes, and its influence was fading. The Kezanada stronghold of Do Jempur had provided the tribes with one obvious target, and a two-year siege of the fortified city had strangled the Kezanada.

However, the siege of Do Jempur had not completely cornered the Kezanada. Clandestine by nature, the Kezanada had always moved through any area of western society on their secret business. This made them a difficult quarry to catch on the open battlefield, and Shan knew that Kalek's forces persecuted innocents in the attempt to root the Kezanada out of society.

The dismal situation in the west was difficult for Shan to behold. Part of him longed to help the people. He wanted to use his power to make peace, but gruesome lessons in his past had taught him the folly of good intentions.

Disgusted by the violent quagmire of the west, Shan brought his mind back to Jingtun. Emerging from his meditation, he took his first breath in many hours and admired the rising sun. Although Shan was almost five hundred fifty years old, the sun presented him with a new version of beauty every time it came over the Rysamand.

For most of his life, Shan had rarely thought about what was beyond the snowcaps glowing in the dawn. The east had always been the Wilderness, an empty place haunted by the Deamedron. Sending his mind there during a meditation had always been terrifying. The wasting remnants of Nufal and the seething mass of malice created by the Deamedron had guaranteed a wrenching experience.

When Shan had broken the spell that bound the pathetic spirits to the living world, it had been a tremendously satisfying achievement. He had ended great suffering with that act, and now the Wilderness was cleansed of the Deamedron and fit for life again.

Shan was proud of what Dreibrand had already accomplished. His settlements were progressing faster than Shan would have predicted, and the hope for a bright future for Nufal had increased Shan's interest in the east.

Refreshed by his optimism for the eastern world, Shan prepared to receive Tulair, who was coming up to the roof.

When the youthful soldier emerged onto the windy platform, he bowed and said, "You have summoned me, my King."

"Yes, Captain," Shan said.

Tulair looked up sharply, and Shan enjoyed the surprise on the young soldier's face.

With a smile, Shan continued, "Tulair, I am promoting you to Captain of the Jingtun Guard. I know you will serve me and all the rys well."

At the age of one hundred eighty, Tulair had expected to serve much longer before gaining promotion. Stunned by his success, he spoke modestly. "My King, you are too kind. Taf Ila has many good years left in him and I would not presume to replace him so soon."

"Your respect for your elders is commendable, Tulair, but this has been decided," Shan said. "When Taf Ila comes to the Keep today, he will announce his retirement and name you as his successor."

Tulair nodded and thanked his King for the trust that he placed in him. Recovering somewhat from the shock, Tulair surmised the reason behind his accelerated promotion. Although rys barely whispered about it, the falling out between Shan and Quylan had been obvious, and it was no

doubt the source of Taf Ila's premature retirement.

"Now, Captain, I have business for you to attend to right away," Shan said. "Take soldiers to the western pass. I am expecting unwanted company."

"Who, my King?" Tulair asked with concern.

"Kezanada refugees," Shan answered. "Detain them in the western end of the valley. And if any tribal forces try to pursue them into the Rysamand, tell them that I forbid the entry of any party on violent business. They can do their killing on their lands but not on mine."

Shan dismissed his new captain and then returned to the work site to meet with the chief architect.

As Shan walked across Jingten alone, those rys who had risen early greeted their King with warmth and respect. Shan acknowledged them graciously, enjoying how the atmosphere of Jingten had changed since he became King. No one would have dared to say good morning to Onja, and she would have never deigned to simply walk down a street.

He accepted a sweet muffin from an elderly rys female, and he was munching on it when he reached the work site. Shan had just finished inspecting the progress from last night's work when Dreibrand showed up with his family. Excited by the masses of busy workers, his boys were running circles around their parents. Victoria had been left behind in the Keep with Sahleen and her children. It had been a difficult parting for Miranda, but she forced herself to focus on her trust of Shan. Jingten was different now and her daughter was completely safe.

Shan greeted them near the pavilion. "Dreibrand, Miranda, I trust you slept well and are refreshed from your journey," Shan said.

Miranda admitted with surprise that she had slept well and then playfully accused Shan of putting a spell of sleepiness on her.

"No, dear Miranda, I assure you that I did not aid your sleep," Shan said, happy that she was relaxed.

Dreibrand noticed that Esseldan had strayed from his side and he hollered at the boy to stay clear of the work. "Do you want to be crushed under a great block of stone?" Dreibrand demanded.

Esseldan said nothing and tried to appear impervious to the admonishment from his stepfather.

"Ess, stay by me," Miranda snapped.

"Let me give you a tour," Shan offered. "Dreibrand, you will be impressed by the progress that has been made since last year."

"Is it safe?" Miranda asked, taking Deltane's hand.

"Do not worry. We will stay out of the way of stone blocks," Shan assured her.

They circled to the other side of the work site where walls were beginning to rise from the foundation. Like everything in Jingten, the stones were cut from the Rysamand, but a quarry with an especially blue quality was the source for the wall stones. Shan explained that the outer walls would be polished to a high shine and he expected his palace to mirror the adjacent waters of Lake Nin.

He guided them through several partial rooms, describing the color schemes that were planned and asking them to imagine the high arching windows filled with stained glass.

"Oh, Shan, it is so beautiful already," Miranda exclaimed.

A satisfied smile flashed on the rys's face, and he continued, "I build this to inspire the rys. To give them a thing of beauty to be proud of. With every season, more rys come forward who want to work on the project. Rys are realizing talents they never thought they had. This palace is only the beginning. We are going to build a new identity and cast off the burden of our dark history. When this palace is finished, no one will even be able to think of Onja. This is no roof over a dungeon like the Keep."

Brimming with excitement for his vision, Shan took them to a work area where rys artisans sculpted

statues. The marble melted away beneath their gifted magical fingers, and statues of astounding perfection emerged from the stone. They made male and female figures that looked so real that the stone seemed to have actually been transformed into soft flesh.

Miranda held onto the hands of both her sons, not even daring to risk the chance of one of the boys knocking over a treasure.

Shan stopped in front of a finished statue, which they recognized as the lovely Quylan. Suddenly lost in thought, Shan stared at the image of the female.

Dreibrand and Miranda had noted the absence of the female who had been Shan's consort since the war. Indulging his curiosity, Dreibrand inquired about her.

Shan snapped out of his reverie and answered that she was at her house. Briskly he led them out of the sculpting area and said, "So how long are you planning to stay?"

"I don't really know, Shan. I was just told to come here," Miranda commented and flipped Dreibrand a look. She released the boys from maternal restraints and they ran ahead.

"You could mention that I asked nicely," Dreibrand defended. "We will be here at least three or four days. We have supplies to purchase at the markets, and...I have to talk to you about something."

Shan noticed the ominous tone of the vague statement but assumed that he knew the source of his friend's troubled mind. "Yes, I know, Dreibrand. The Atrophane. I have observed them in the south and can confirm that a fort is being built. But I ask you not to worry about it for now," Shan said.

Dreibrand did not consider this good news, but it was no longer the subject foremost in his mind. So close to revealing his disturbing news, Dreibrand did not want to do it now. Shan seemed so happy and at peace. "Shan, it is about something else," he said.

The rys cocked his head thoughtfully and pried a little deeper into Dreibrand's feelings. Worried by what he sensed, Shan looked to Miranda.

"You need to hear his story," she said.

In the privacy of the Keep's vast royal apartments, Dreibrand recounted his trip to the Secret City. Leaning forward from his chair, Shan examined Dreibrand's palm. The cut had healed since it had mysteriously split, but Shan stared at it intently, exploring it with his multiple senses. While listening to the details of Dreibrand's experience, the rys had clearly grown concerned.

Tracing a finger along the faint scar, Shan asked again, "And you said the crystal on your sword flared?"

Dreibrand nodded, "And Tytido's sword as well."

"And you have not experienced anything like this before?" Shan asked. "There could be many old wardings buried around Nufal."

"I know, but nothing like this. There was something there. It screamed," Dreibrand insisted.

Shan sat back slowly and pondered the disturbing possibilities.

Impatient for Shan to comment, Dreibrand dared to voice his theory. "Could it be a Nufalese rys? One that has been in hibernation since the Great War, like Dacian?"

"Dreibrand!" Shan cried as if a great secret had just been announced to the world.

"Forgive me, Shan, but we must speak of this. Something is there," Dreibrand said.

Miranda intervened gently. "Shan, we would not bring up this subject if we did not have to."

The rys regained his composure and murmured an apology for his harsh tone. He trusted these humans with the secrets behind his ascension to the throne, but even hearing a word uttered about what had happened in the Tomb of Dacian had startled him. Shan had never revealed to the rys that their revered King from the last age had been imprisoned instead of interred in his tomb.

Dacian had only lived briefly after Onja's defeat, but the old King had proved that a rys could hibernate for thousands of years.

"I suppose it is possible that a rys has survived there," Shan conceded reluctantly. "I cannot deny it, but—but it could be anything."

"I know," Dreibrand agreed. "But I want to know what it is. I need to hire a rys to come back to Nufal with me. A rys could probe for enchantments and use the levitation shaft, if that is what it is. Then we could explore that place and find out what is really there. Can you recommend anyone?"

Shan was quiet for a long time and his human guests assumed that he was going over likely candidates and assessing who would be trustworthy.

Finally, Shan announced, "I will go myself."

Dreibrand was surprised. Shan had not left Jingtun since becoming King and Dreibrand had ceased to expect him to ever leave the Rysamand. Many times he had invited Shan to Vetanium, but Dreibrand had received the impression that Shan did not desire to enter the Wilderness.

"You honor me, Shan. You honor all of us," Dreibrand said humbly, deeply touched by the concern shown by his rys friend but also aware of the prestige that the royal visit would bestow on him.

"Do you really think it is that serious?" Miranda asked. She had been hoping that Shan would assuage Dreibrand's fears about what had happened in the mountains.

"I hope not," Shan said confidently, trying to dispel her worry. "But it is likely that old enchantments from the Great War are guarding those ruins and they may be very powerful. If so, I could learn a great deal from studying such relics."

Miranda recognized that Shan shaped his response to comfort her more than explain his full opinion. She thanked him for offering to help. His presence in Nufal would be her greatest comfort.

Dreibrand was visibly relieved that Shan would investigate the disturbing mystery and he thanked the rys as well.

"You would agree that I am overdue for a visit to your new home, Dreibrand," the rys said. "But before we leave, perhaps you can help me with something."

Shan was generous and powerful, but despite his awesome resources, Dreibrand knew that the rys could still ask for huge favors. "Anything," he said.

"I am expecting Kezanada refugees. The Confederacy has brought them to their knees, and I suspect that someone may want to talk to you," Shan said.

"Faychan?" Dreibrand asked with a sinking feeling.

When Shan nodded, Miranda spoke her mind. "Shan, turn him away. Let him face the enemies that he deserves. We left those troubles in the west."

"Miranda, I have little pity for Faychan, but I have no wish to see his followers slaughtered at the gateway to my kingdom. I ask both of you to consider the options," Shan suggested and gave Dreibrand a meaningful look.

But Miranda wanted to avoid the issue of the Kezanada entirely. "Shan, how can Faychan dare to seek your protection? He profited from our enemies during the war as much as from us. Turn him away," she urged.

Privately, Dreibrand admired her merciless suggestion. Sometimes he found her coldness so attractive because he knew that her warmth was reserved for him.

Shan, however, had a compulsion for compassion. His power and authority gave him an awesome sense of his responsibility not to be cruel. He had grown up watching Onja be cruel because she could be, and he did not want to degenerate into a being that thrived on the abuse of power.

"Miranda, I would not close the door to those who run from danger," Shan said.

Her hard-line attitude wilted. Miranda reminded herself that she was alive because of Shan's kindness.

The rys King continued, "Please, Dreibrand, come with me to speak with him. That is all I ask."

Avoiding eye contact with Miranda, Dreibrand resigned himself to a meeting with the Kezanada because it was Shan's wish.

For two days, Shan prepared quietly for his trip to Nufal and did not mention his travel plans to anyone. The impending journey weighed heavily on his mind. Although the blood from the total conquest of that ancient kingdom was not on his hands, he still felt guilt as the King of Jingten. Even if he had brought destruction down on Onja, he was her heir.

As a precaution, Shan would travel east well armed. He had an enchanted sword that had been forged in ancient times to be used against the Nufalese rys. Although Shan wanted to hope that only a strange beast lurked in the Tabren Mountains, he inwardly acknowledged the elements of Dreibrand's story that pointed toward the existence of a magical being.

Only the magic of a rys could have ruptured his hand, Shan thought again and again. He further speculated that whatever force had opened the old wound had specifically targeted the lingering rys presence in the hand. Shan's blood had flowed over Dreibrand's cut when Shan had bound the sword's enchantment physically to Dreibrand.

Wary of what he might encounter, Shan unpacked an enchanted shield to carry as well. Like his sword, the shield was a product of the last age, and its powers were yet to be tested. Shan had found the shield in the ruins of the Tomb of Dacian, but only after a diligent search.

When Shan had first become King, he had placed guards on the tumbled tomb until he completed his exploration of the rubble. Securing the area had proved wise because he had discovered several more enchanted swords. After gleaming the swords from the rubble, Shan had lingered over the site, nagged by an unusual sensation.

Eventually, after blasting apart tumbled blocks, he had located the shield sealed inside solid rock. While looking at it for the first time, his image, distorted by the curve of the shield, had stared back at him from the mirror-like surface, but when he probed it with his magical senses, his reflection had blurred.

Its enchantments had eluded his understanding. Shan had taken the shield back to the Keep and locked it in his deepest vault. Occasionally, he would go to the vault and ponder his new possession, but he had yet to discover its secrets.

Taking the shield from its vault, Shan started up the many stairs toward his living quarters. His steps slowed in the empty corridor leading to his innermost apartment because he sensed Quylan outside his bedchamber. Shan had adopted a policy of avoiding her because it was easier than coping with his conflicted feelings toward the youthful rys female.

He glanced at the shield and had the impulse to hide it again. Quylan would no doubt be curious about the artifact because she was curious about everything. *She has certainly noticed that I am carrying it*, he thought and braced himself mentally for the encounter.

Quylan stood in front of the dark wooden doors to his bedchamber. The deeply carved images of rys on the doors were inlaid with gold and silver, and the precious metals glittered a little brighter because her lifeforce touched them. Her beauty demanded a physiological response from Shan, and his heart quickened. Every line and curve of her slim tall body commanded attention. Strings of alabaster beads were twined throughout her thick black hair that cascaded over her splendid shoulders.

Shan looked into her black eyes that reminded him of the surface of Lake Nin on a moon-bright night.

"I see you let yourself in," he said coolly.

Quylan took one step toward him. She wanted to fling herself at his feet and beg him to describe the nature of the offense she had caused. She had to know why his adoration had turned to indifference.

Instead, she maintained her dignity and said, "We must talk."

"Then talk," Shan said. His body language indicated that he expected her to be brief.

Stung deeply by his apparent annoyance, Quylan wondered how the love and joy that had resulted from their union five years ago had declined into this unhappiness.

Thriving upon Shan's adoration, Quylan had expected to be named Queen of Jingten. When Shan had shown no signs of formalizing their relationship, Quylan had decided to gently urge him. Reposing in the arms of her royal lover, she had whispered of her longing to be declared his Queen.

At first, Shan had been receptive to her wishes, but with hindsight, Quylan realized that he had only been feigning acceptance in order to postpone her disappointment. A gulf had developed between them since that time, and Quylan did not understand why he viewed her love as ambition. Shan had no reason to be threatened by her because his powers exceeded her abilities.

Looking at Shan's impassive face, Quylan felt her frustration double. Why did he reject her? She was the most powerful female and the logical choice for Queen.

But that was no place to begin the conversation. Miserably, she spoke of what had finally motivated her to swallow her pride and seek out her estranged lover.

"Shan, do not make my father retire because you no longer care for my company," she said.

"Taf Ila was Onja's captain. Tulair shall be mine," Shan stated.

"But Tulair is young. There is no need to make my father retire so soon. He has always served Jingten with perfect loyalty," Quylan persisted.

"The only reason I did not ask your father to retire the day I became King was because of my love for you," Shan said.

Quylan gasped lightly because he mentioned loving her. As much as she wanted the words to please her, they only added to her hurt. "Why do you speak of love for me?" she demanded. "You have made it clear to all that I am a discarded toy."

She had not intended to blurt such strong words but it felt good to confront him.

Shan allowed his normally rigid features to reveal emotion. "You are not a discarded toy, Quylan. Forgive me. I will cease to be so unkind to you," he said.

The words delighted her battered feelings and she moved a little closer. "Oh, Shan, what is wrong?" she asked.

His eyes swerved from her bewitching gaze. He unconsciously held the half-forgotten shield a little closer. Shan regretted hurting her so much and he tried to think of a way to spare her any more upset.

"Quylan, our relationship was inappropriate. I should have resisted your advances. You are too young. Taking you as a lover was scandalous and I should not set such an example for our society," he explained.

A smile bandaged Quylan's injured expression. She was relieved to hear that his reason for shunning her was so simplistic. It was just like Shan to try to do the right thing.

"Shan, what are a few years? I know I am technically still a rysling, but I am mature. No one is upset by our relationship, and even if they were, who would dare complain? Is this why you have distanced yourself from me since I asked you about being your Queen? Because I am not quite one hundred years old? Did you fear that the other rys would disapprove of me because of my youth?"

Shan did not reply. Letting her believe the reasons that she proposed was better.

Assuming that she was correct, Quylan tried to remove Shan's doubts and return to the happiness they had once shared. "My powers are recognized. I am expected to become your Queen, but if you do not want me to speak of this until I reach adult age, I will refrain," she said.

Although her assumptions still made Shan uncomfortable, he would never tell her his real misgivings about making her Queen. Shan cared for her deeply and his desire for her was very tangible, but he feared that his feelings made him vulnerable. And vulnerability made him paranoid. He had not forgotten Dacian's admission that Onja had lured his trust with false love.

Shan hated to compare Quylan to Onja, but Quylan had been devious enough to hide her true beliefs from Onja, and if Shan allowed himself to truly fall in love with Quylan, then she might be able to dupe him as well. As ugly as the thought was, he was afraid to accept her as Queen because she might one day decide to replace him.

From his own experience, Shan knew that youth could make the whims of the heart volatile. When he was her age, he had been devoted to Onja, but that had quickly changed. Therefore, Shan had decided to remain cautious. He had risked so much and caused so much suffering to gain his throne, and he did not want to jeopardize his position. Being the leader of the rys brought him pleasure and satisfaction as well.

He asked, "Are you really so sure you want to be Queen? You are young and you could change your mind. Perhaps you should find another lover before continuing a relationship with me."

The suggestion slapped Quylan, especially after regaining the hope that their relationship was about to be mended. "No male would compare to you," she insisted.

"Then you only love my power," he accused.

"That is not fair!" she cried. "Your power is who you are, and I love everything about you."

Shan turned away from her and set his shield on a bench. "Quylan, do not be hurt by the freedom I offer you. Do not be so quick to want to be Queen. It may seem like an easy thing now, but no one knows what the centuries will bring," he advised.

Quylan's hurt feelings turned to anger for solace. She was tired of his attempts to divert her from her destiny. "Do you think I am unable to be Queen?" she demanded.

Shan ran his hand along the edge of the shield and said, "Quite the contrary. I expect you to take care of Jingtun while I am away."

Without looking at her, he detected her excitement. Analyzing her emotions, however, required that he tune his mind to her lifeforce. It triggered his familiar urge to hold her.

She asked him where he was going.

"I will deal with the Kezanada who have come through the western pass, and then I will go to Nufal," he replied.

"Really?" She would not have imagined that destination for him.

"Yes. And if anyone must know, you will say that I am conducting an official tour of the new settlements," he instructed and then quietly explained his real reason for heading east with Dreibrand.

Quylan contemplated the news. It terrified her to think that an unknown magical force had been discovered in the Tabren Mountains, but she had faith that Shan was more than capable of dealing with it.

"What is that?" she inquired with a gesture toward the shield.

Shan hesitated, but then realized that acting like he had not brought an ancient and mysterious enchanted object into the room was ridiculous. He picked the shield up to show it to her.

"I found it in the Tomb of Dacian."

"You never told me about this," she commented. After his excavation of the rubble, Shan had begrudgingly mentioned the other swords that he found, but Quylan had always suspected that he had been holding something back. On all occasions, Shan had flatly refused to tell her what had happened inside the tower when Onja finally died. The subject of the tomb was cloaked in his mind, and Quylan had concluded that he was keeping something very important from her.

Happy for an excuse to come close, she approached him and reached out for the shiny metal.

"What does it do?" she wondered. The aura of its power was evident, but the enchantment was unrecognizable.

Her hand touched the cool disc and she immediately gasped with alarm and staggered back a step.

A slight jolt of energy jumped along Shan's nerves. He put the shield back on the bench and went to her side.

"Are you all right?" Shan asked.

Quylan rubbed her temple to ease her sudden dizziness. "It did something to me," she whispered. "I felt weak, but it is passing."

"It has never done anything to me," Shan remarked.

"Maybe it was because you were holding it when I touched it," she speculated. "Here, let us try it again."

"No," Shan said sternly. "It is obviously not something to be experimented with carelessly." He grabbed the shield, stalked over to a cabinet, and locked it inside.

"There you go hiding it from me again," Quylan said.

Shan gave her a skeptical look and discreetly cast an extra holding spell over the lock.

"Did you feel anything when I touched the shield?" she inquired.

Shan mentioned that he felt some energy but then quickly chose to distract her from the subject. Taking her hand and pressing it to his lips, he told her that he had missed her.

Quylan melted against him and savored the gentle pleasure spells that caressed her body. Relieved that his rejection had finally relented, she focused on the ecstasy that they would soon build between them.

11. The Kezanada Unmasked

Deltane tugged on his father's sleeve. Dreibrand meant to order his son to be still so he could continue his discussion with Afa, a rys glassmaker, but then he saw why Deltane wanted his attention. With the same unabashed curiosity displayed by Deltane and Esseldan, Dreibrand stared at the rysling in the doorway Afa's studio.

Afa looked up from the glass artifacts that he was studying. "You have never seen a rysling so young," Afa surmised.

Dreibrand shook his head.

Setting down a glass disc that was crusted with corroded metal, Afa proudly said, "Ranu is the first rysling born since Shan became King."

Dreibrand guessed how special Ranu must be to his father, and indeed, to his whole race. Ranu would not have the tyranny of Onja stamped upon his psyche, and a whole future full of Ranus was waiting to be born and live in a world that had been made better.

Looking upon Ranu's large dark eyes and chubby blue cheeks that contrasted with the sleek features of the adults, Dreibrand felt immensely satisfied. He had helped win the war, and surviving to see the good things brought by peace was a blessing.

"Ranu, say hello to the humans who have come to do business with your father," Afa instructed in the rys language.

Ranu blinked with the haughtiness of an old cat and said nothing.

"He has only just started seeing humans," Afa explained.

Esseldan, who had a tremendous ease around rys, promptly introduced himself.

"Ranu, take our guests to play in the backyard," Afa instructed.

Ranu considered the order. After seeming to find it acceptable, he jerked his head toward the back door, which was apparently an invitation to follow.

Deltane glanced at his father, more for reassurance than permission. With a discreet wink, Dreibrand let his son know that it would be fine.

As the boys filed into the hall, Afa called sternly, "No magic!"

Ranu did not respond, but Afa seemed not to require any acknowledgement. Returning his attention to his customer, he confided, "He is in that fire-starting stage."

Dreibrand raised his eyebrows with mild surprise, but he smiled politely and tried not to worry about the boys.

Afa resumed his study of the Nufalese artifacts that Dreibrand had asked him to examine. Shan, who had sensed nothing extraordinary about the glass discs or guessed at their purpose, had recommended the glassmaker. Dreibrand scanned studio. On the crowded shelves, vases blown in the traditional human method were alongside glass figurines that had been shaped with rys magic. With heat spells, Afa manipulated the glass, and the forms had taken shape with the fluid artistry of rys talent. His powers also allowed him to create many colors within the glass and manipulate hues with astounding subtlety.

Afa repeatedly lifted the glass pieces to his eyes and peered through them at the ceiling or out the open window. He lined both discs up in front of an eye and looked rather ridiculous as he held them apart at various distances. Finally, he set them down beside the metal ring that had been found with them.

Dreibrand leaned forward, eager for the report.

"I believe these were once parts of a device for helping humans to see things that are not close to them," Afa said.

Dreibrand's forehead wrinkled with confusion, and he waited for more information.

Afa continued, "I have to assume it was for humans because a rys would not have need for such a thing. Especially because it could not have had a very significant range."

Dreibrand mentioned that he had found the artifacts next to a human skeleton. Afa nodded, happy to have more evidence for his theory.

"However, I do not believe that I can demonstrate my explanation right now," Afa warned. "These glasses are so scratched that they are useless, but I can easily replicate the glass pieces. How long will you be in Jingten, Sir?"

"I will be traveling with the King tomorrow morning, but then I will be passing back through Jingten in, I suppose, three or four days," Dreibrand said.

"Yes, that will give me sufficient time. Visit me when you return to the city, and I should have something to show you," Afa said.

After Dreibrand paid the rys's fee, he noted with satisfaction that Afa remained distracted by the artifacts. Dreibrand anticipated his return to the glassmaker's house.

He collected the boys and started up the street toward the Keep. Its tiers of dark stone cut a harsh profile over the city.

"So, was Ranu any fun?" Dreibrand inquired.

When the boys looked at each other before replying, he knew that something had occurred.

"He started a fire," Deltane whispered.

Dreibrand stopped in his tracks and looked back toward the home they had left, expecting a column of smoke.

"I put it out," Esseldan assured him. He obviously thought that his six years conferred upon him significant maturity.

"So, you did have fun," Dreibrand declared, turning back around. "But maybe we should not mention the fire to your mother."

They returned to the Keep. After many visits Dreibrand had become accustomed to its formidable interior, but the sight of the boys racing up wide granite steps reminded him of the small feeling the building imposed on humans. The boys scampered between dark polished columns and crisscrossed the chunks of sunlight streaming down from the high skylights without any concern for the history of Onja's ancient lair.

Dreibrand had first entered the Keep as Onja's prisoner, but the building now protected many spoils of his victory over her. Dreibrand was unique among men because Shan had shown him the deep vaults that contained staggering amounts of treasure. In addition to title to Nufal, Dreibrand had been rewarded with an impressive amount of gold, silver, and gems at the end of the war. He still kept a significant portion of his wealth on deposit in the Keep although he did have stashes around Nufal.

Watching Deltane and Esseldan race each other down a hall made Dreibrand smile. His son did not realize that in vaults below his pattering feet an inheritance lounged that made him wealthier than any young Atrophane lord.

The size of the Keep wore down the boys before they reached the guest suites. Their racing and play declined until they quietly walked on each side of Dreibrand. At an intersection of halls, they encountered Sahleen walking slowly with her head bent over a piece of paper that she was reading.

When the boys hollered a greeting to her, she looked up and politely greeted them and her lord.

"What are you looking at?" Dreibrand inquired.

Sahleen explained that Miranda had sent her to check on a delivery of goods from a merchant and confirm the bill. Because Dreibrand had noted her studious expression while reading the bill, he asked if she saw a problem.

"No, Lord Dreibrand. It is just that I have trouble with the rys handwriting," she explained.

Dreibrand glanced over the bill. "The amount owed is clear enough," he mumbled.

"I do know what was ordered, and it was all there," Sahleen offered.

"Very well," Dreibrand said. He knew that if Miranda trusted the young woman to inspect the merchandise, then Sahleen was capable of doing a thorough job. Miranda, who had been born and grown to adulthood under the lash of poverty, watched every expense diligently despite her current wealth. He took the bill from Sahleen's hand. "I suppose I shall have to pay this. The merchant is no doubt waiting inside," he said.

Dreibrand entered his quarters with Sahleen and the boys, and as he predicted, Miranda had detained the merchant until confirmation of a complete delivery. Miranda greeted them happily, and her sons rushed to give her a hug. They started to blather about their morning while she listened to Sahleen's report about the merchandise. Miranda then told her sons that after so much excitement in the city they needed to go with Sahleen to take a nap.

Dreibrand paid the rys merchant and thanked him for so quickly collecting such a large order of various goods. The rys said that he had learned to anticipate the needs of the Nufalese settlers and assemble their goods for the spring purchase.

After the merchant left, Dreibrand kissed Miranda and told her she was beautiful. He ran his fingers over her astounding necklace of emeralds. The green stones were large, but too lovely to be gaudy. The stones had been found in the ruins of Vetanium, and Dreibrand had paid a rys jeweler three years ago to restore the wire and clasp that held the emeralds.

"I swear the old Nufalese Gods cut these gems for you," he said, admiring their green that enhanced her eyes.

Miranda touched his hand that lingered against her collarbone. She enjoyed the treasure around her neck, but she loved most the power that she shared with her husband as rulers of Nufal. Authority and respect had far more value than any pretty stones.

Dreibrand started to tell her about his visit to Afa's house, but a knock on the door interrupted him. When he opened the door and saw an elderly rys female with wispy white hair and her male servant, Dreibrand gladly ushered them inside.

The male rys carried a small wooden box, stained black and polished glassy smooth. Dreibrand and Miranda seated their guests in a parlor and they engaged in pleasant small talk before getting to business. Dreibrand and Miranda opened the box together and viewed the fine darts of black wood with metal tips. Each tiny missile contained sho, and if the points broke the skin of a human, a temporary paralysis would instantly overcome the person. Rys were less susceptible to paralysis, but the sho still caused them impairment. The rys had developed the sho poison as a weapon for non-lethal control, and rys soldiers had carried sho dart pistols for centuries. The formula for sho was a closely guarded rys secret that was not shared with humans—ever.

Humans could only purchase sho darts with permission from the rys King, which Dreibrand had. The darts were a frivolous expense, considering that the potency of sho only lasted two or three months, but the darts were a status symbol for Dreibrand. He, Miranda, and Tytido owned pistols and they refreshed their supply of darts on every visit to Jington.

The rys female set two small bottles of tah on the table as well.

"Would you like to test the goods?" the old rys female asked with a crooked smile. Dreibrand wondered how many centuries she had been cracking that joke.

"Is that why you brought your apprentice?" Dreibrand said, and the young male rys seated beside her shifted uncomfortably. Everyone chuckled except for him.

Dreibrand said, "You have the endorsement of King Shan, so I have no doubt in the quality of your product."

She dipped her head proudly and stated her price, which Dreibrand paid. It would be ridiculous to bargain for sho. As he showed them out the door, he worried that this time he might actually have an occasion to use the darts.

He rejoined Miranda on the sofa. She was staring out a window at the snow-bound peaks of the Rysamand. Their bright whiteness was as pure as their slopes were perilous.

Dreibrand picked up a dart from the open box and contemplated its sharp point.

Without looking away from the mountains, Miranda said, "You best load your pistol for your visit to the Kezanada."

Her tone made clear her persisting dislike for Shan's request. Dreibrand assured her that he would be in little danger in the company of Shan and rys soldiers.

Turning toward Dreibrand now with an earnest expression, Miranda said, "Dreibrand, it is not too late to get out of this meeting with Faychan. Go to Shan and ask to be excused. Shan has no love for the Kezanada, especially Faychan. Or, let me go speak with Shan. I can persuade him that Faychan is a threat to us."

Although Dreibrand shared some of her misgivings about Faychan, he responded, "How can you begrudge Shan this favor when he is coming to Nufal to help us?"

"But Shan is just dumping this problem on us," Miranda complained. "What if Faychan asks for some huge favor that he thinks you owe him?"

"I do owe him," Dreibrand countered. "Faychan saved my life when you asked him to. He did not have to do that."

She bit her lip as she recalled the desperation that had driven her to seek Faychan's assistance. Taking another approach, she said, "I suppose Shan has only asked you to talk to Faychan, but please, deny Faychan whatever he asks of us."

"Miranda, you should not be so quick to turn away an opportunity," he scolded.

"How can you see it like that?" she argued. "Faychan would deceive and betray us if it suited him."

"But I do not think that it will suit him," Dreibrand said. "I know you are looking out for us, but I owe Faychan. He saved me from Kalek. It is that simple."

Frustrated by his honorable attitude, Miranda huffed, "I do not want those masked warriors around."

"Nor do I," Dreibrand agreed. "And I promise you that we will not have masked warriors among us, but I will meet with Faychan as Shan has asked. He is a smart man and perhaps we could use his talents."

"How so?" Miranda said with some interest. She admonished herself for doubting that Dreibrand had no plan beyond merely fulfilling the obligations of honor.

Dreibrand explained that if Faychan were truly defeated, as Shan said, then it would create the opportunity to forge a beneficial relationship with the clever Masterspy.

Dreibrand took Miranda's hand. "I will do what is best for us," he promised.

Ultimately, Miranda trusted Dreibrand. He would never waver from protecting her, but Miranda suspected that larger concerns made Dreibrand see potential in a relationship with Faychan. "You hope that if you help Faychan now, his warriors will aid us if we are troubled by the Atrophane," she said.

"Perhaps," Dreibrand said. Until he assessed Faychan in person, Dreibrand had no solid plans, but he would be honest about his fears. "I know the last few years have been good, but I must warn you, my love, that I believe some difficult days are ahead," he confessed.

Knowing that Dreibrand relied on her to be brave, she sought to comfort him.

"Dreibrand, things are not so bad. Whatever is prowling back in the mountains, Shan will find it and take care of it. And the fact that Shan is coming to Nufal will impress upon the Atrophane that Nufal is under Shan's protection," she said.

"Yes, it should," Dreibrand agreed. Thinking about his trip in the morning, he expressed his regret about leaving her and the children again so soon.

Miranda kissed him. She appreciated his devotion every day. "Tonight we can be a family. You can play with the boys and hold your daughter, and then make a little time for me before you go," she whispered.

"Make more than a little time for you," he promised playfully.

During the two-day trip to the encampment of Kezanada refugees, the overcast sky obscured the mountaintops, and drizzling rain chilled the alpine valley. Riding at Shan's side, Dreibrand contemplated his meeting with Faychan. The Kezanada Masterspy had been his enemy and his ally, and Dreibrand was never sure how to judge him, but he was curious to see the wily mercenary in defeat. He never would have guessed that Faychan would meet such an ignominious end.

Perhaps he has not come to that yet, Dreibrand thought.

Ahead on the side of the road, Dreibrand saw Tulair emerge from the forest on a white horse. His white cape billowed from his shoulders as he galloped toward his King. Dreibrand recognized the newly appointed captain's enthusiasm and remembered what it was to be a young officer eager to serve his lord.

The rys captain reported that he had detained the refugees and turned back their pursuers as instructed.

"Did Kalek give you any trouble?" Shan inquired. He had observed the spiteful Temu King personally trying to capture the routed Kezanada as they fled into the pass.

"Yes, he did, my King, but he turned back when I explained that you would not let him enter your realm with violent intent. But, even with his word not to defy your wishes, I left soldiers to guard the pass," Tulair replied. "I did, my King, agree to relay a message. King Kalek asks you not to give sanctuary to his enemies."

Turning to Dreibrand, Shan commented, "I see Kalek has still to learn the benefits of mercy."

"Nor any restraint in choosing enemies," Dreibrand added tersely.

"At least he respects my boundaries," Shan commented. "Now enough of the hostile Temu King. Dreibrand, let us go hear what Faychan has to say for himself."

Dreibrand said nothing as they continued on the road with Shan's entourage. Dreibrand had lived in the west long enough to hear the adage that a Kezanada debt never went unpaid.

A man appeared at the side of the road. The distinctive metal grate visor on his helmet marked him as a Kezanada and hid his face. The mysterious mercenaries rarely showed their faces to people outside their society, and if one did, he would still be in disguise. In this way they had moved within a larger society and conducted their secretive business.

The Kezanada by the road waited with his arms folded. His leather shirt was open over his tightly-muscled chest and three gold chains were bright against his dark skin. The faceless warrior radiated confidence like a supernatural sentinel, but when Shan neared, the Kezanada bent to one knee with uncharacteristic humility.

"I shall walk from here," Shan announced to his captain.

Without a word, the Kezanada left the road and Shan followed him, accompanied by only Dreibrand and Tulair. They followed no trail through the pines because a Kezanada would rarely walk the same path twice, especially around one of their camps. When they reached the refugee encampment, it was not what Dreibrand had imagined. He had expected weary warriors, but the presence of women and children surprised him.

"Perhaps you can see why I asked you to come," Shan murmured.

Dreibrand nodded as he passed the ragged and tired families lounging listlessly by their scant possessions.

The guide led the rys King into a mossy grove of bent pines where skins were draped between two trees to make a shelter. Beneath the skin roof, a man lay on some blankets. He wore the same garb as the other warriors, but his visored helmet was off. The empty grate of his face shield stared at him as if confused to be sitting at his feet.

The prone man had short black but graying hair with one long braid growing from the top of his head. He sat up, but he did not come to his feet.

When Shan reached him, the man waved the other Kezanada out of earshot. It meant a lot to Faychan that so many men had remained loyal to him, but he would not let them hear him beg for their future.

"Forgive me, my King, if I cannot greet you properly," Faychan said.

"Has the physician I sent helped?" Shan asked.

"Yes, my King. He saved my life," Faychan replied. He touched his side where the arrow had stuck in his flesh. He had ridden with the shaft drinking of his life for more than a day, but rys healing magic had lessened the deep pain. Despite his discomfort, the sight of Dreibrand brightened him considerably.

"Greetings, my friend," Faychan said.

"Hello, Faychan. I was not told that you were hurt. What happened?" Dreibrand responded.

A smile tugged on Faychan's lips. His cynical sense of humor emerged from dormancy and the aging mercenary joked, "Some would say I got what I deserved."

"Many would say that," Shan corrected.

"My King speaks truly," Faychan conceded. When he considered the grudge Shan had against him, it was a tribute to Shan's kindness that he helped at all.

"Because Kalek is the cause of your suffering, you have my sympathy," Dreibrand declared.

"Ah ha! We are united by a common enemy," Faychan said warmly. "And of course by our loyalty to King Shan."

Faychan stretched painfully toward a teapot sitting on a bed of coals that was perilously near his blankets. He invited his guests to sit and have some tea with him, but Shan declined to join the defeated Kezanada at his fire.

"I have no use for your charm, Faychan," Shan stated. "I have come to ask you why you are here?"

"My King, as you can see, I had only your strength and mercy to shelter my people who I have led to ruin," Faychan said.

"Yes, but you cannot stay here," Shan said bluntly.

Faychan accepted the rejection stoically, but within his deepest thoughts, he allowed himself to complain that Shan sounded as terse as Onja. "My King, I ask only for time to recuperate in your sweet forest and then please allow us to pass out of your kingdom and into the east." His dark eyes darted to Dreibrand for his reaction.

Dreibrand had expected to hear as much, but he kept his face neutral. Shan was being harsh with the defeated leader and Dreibrand would let his rys friend continue to soften the vulnerable man.

"I do not allow armed forces to cross the Rysamand," Shan stated.

"But we are in retreat. We have quit our battles and seek only escape," Faychan insisted.

With regal compassion, Shan relented. "For the sake of your families, I am willing to make an exception, but only if Dreibrand is willing to accept you in Nufal. He is my friend and I would not inflict outlaws upon him without his consent."

Why don't I feel like I have a choice? Dreibrand thought.

"I am sure my friend Dreibrand will gladly consent," Faychan said. Even in his humble position, he managed to be demanding.

"My consent is to be negotiated," Dreibrand said.

"Then I will leave you to your discussion," Shan declared. "Dreibrand, when you are finished, meet me at the road."

Without a polite word, the rys King departed with Tulair. As Shan strode across the camp, he was aware of the authority that he exuded over the unfortunate refugees. Despite his cold demeanor, he felt a sincere compassion for them. The human penchant for spreading misery frustrated him, but he withheld displays of pity lest he encourage more refugees to seek his realm.

Dreibrand held his sword out of the way as he took a seat next to Faychan's fire. "Shan does not seem to be showing any signs of forgiving you," he commented.

Faychan snorted. "I suspect he only came here to witness firsthand the revenge he has worked upon me."

A quizzical look came to Dreibrand's face because he was unaware of any plot Shan had against the Kezanada.

Faychan said, "Let me tell you, Dreibrand, of my downfall."

He started to pour the tea, but even the small pot of water was a strain to him and Dreibrand took it from him and finished the task. "Usually, you drink stronger stuff than tea," he said.

"Well, I didn't say we were ready yet," Faychan grumbled and withdrew a flask from his jacket. He poured a hefty shot into his cup and then gave Dreibrand a dose.

They sipped the spiked tea until Dreibrand said, "So, how has it come to this, my friend?"

Faychan raised a hopeful eyebrow when Dreibrand called him a friend. After a sigh and an apologetic glance across his camp of vanquished followers, Faychan told the tale of his defeat. After Shan had become King, Faychan had successfully overthrown Benladu and become the Overlord of the society. At first, things had been good. The Kezanada endorsed their new Overlord, but Faychan had a secret obligation to Shan that he had to fulfill. Shan wanted to see the ancient Kezanada records that went back thousands of years to the inception of the secret society. Onja had censored rys history, and Shan craved knowledge from the last age.

Faychan had copied most of the records and smuggled them to Jingtun. Unfortunately, this act was a difficult secret for even Faychan to keep buried, and when the rumor demanded the attention of his Kezanada brothers, a faction rose in opposition to his Overlordship.

This blow to his authority had occurred at the same time that Kalek had organized the Confederacy to make a combined assault on the Kezanada. As the war worsened and Do Jempur became sieged, the faction that opposed Faychan turned on him. The leader of the rival faction had wanted to make peace with the Confederate forces by surrendering Faychan and hopefully negotiating a treaty. Faychan knew that this meant certain death for himself because Kalek personally loathed him.

Unable to command the entire society as he once had, Faychan decided to flee. Those Kezanada who remained loyal to him had joined him on a stormy night when they broke through the siege of Do Jempur. From there, it had been a desperate flight to the Rysamand with pitched battles and heavy losses. Some Kezanada, who were hiding from the increasing persecution that was sweeping the tribal kingdoms, had joined them along the way.

Faychan finished his tea and then washed it down with another shot of liquor. "After twenty two centuries, I was Overlord when the Kezanada fell apart," he lamented.

The story disturbed Dreibrand. Would he spend his life plotting, dealing, and fighting only to be overwhelmed by his enemies and have a majority of his followers reject him as a failure?

"How many people are with you?" he inquired.

"I have eight hundred warriors and six hundred family members and servants," Faychan responded.

The numbers troubled Dreibrand because they significantly outnumbered his people. "So, what will you do in the east?" he asked.

"I do not know," Faychan confessed. "I have lived my whole life knowing as much as possible about my world. I even knew this war with Kalek was possible. But now I must face going to a place where I know nothing."

I am sure you will learn quickly, Dreibrand thought.

As if to confirm Dreibrand's prediction, Faychan said, "Now tell me what has been happening in your life, Dreibrand? It has been a few years."

Mostly to delay the difficult decisions that would soon have to be made, Dreibrand described the settlements that he had started and his family.

"Two children!" Faychan said with approval. "And you have a fine woman for their mother. I am sure that Miranda is looking forward to seeing me."

Dreibrand frowned at the ridiculous statement. "No, she is not," he corrected. "Now, what are we going to do, Faychan? I will not have Kezanada lurking about my land."

"But I am told that the Wilderness is big. Certainly a little corner can be spared to give us a place to start over," Faychan said.

Dreibrand was quiet for a long time. The thought of the Kezanada establishing a separate colony in the east was intimidating. *But if these warriors would join me, I would be much stronger,* Dreibrand thought, deeply tempted.

Faychan broke the silence. "Dreibrand, you cannot be thinking of denying my request? You owe me."

"I know I owe you," Dreibrand snapped. "And I am ready to make things even between us, but there can be no Kezanada in Nufal. You will join my settlement at Vetanium. There will be no mask wearing and secret society. You will become Nufalese and recognize me as your leader."

Taken aback, Faychan said, "I don't know if that is possible."

"If you want to have a future, it is," Dreibrand said sternly. "Nufal is not a place for old traditions. It is a place for new beginnings. I welcome you to join me, but I will not let you be my rival."

"You ask too much," Faychan said. "I saved your life, and now I ask you to repay the favor by telling Shan to let us through to the east. There should be no bargaining beyond that."

"But there is," Dreibrand insisted. "I understand that you want to start over, but there is only one

way to do that. Do not think that you will be so much stronger than I am in Nufal. If you will not accept my authority, then we will just be two weak cells of settlers that will have no chance at a real future. Already, the Atrophane are building forts in the southern Wilderness, and some day they are going to come north. And they will not care if you are with me or against me. You will just be another foreigner to press beneath their boot heel. But together, we will be stronger—and there will be land enough for all of us.” Dreibrand extended a hand to Faychan and continued, “You will still be a lord, Faychan. Agree to my terms and come to Vetanium. Shelters will have to be built before winter if your people are to have a home.”

Faychan looked down. Water dripped from the edges of the sodden skins over his head, and a beetle crawled along the edge of his blanket. He knew he would find no shelter in the west and Shan only provided a temporary respite from his fate. Dreibrand’s offer was generous, and Faychan understood that he would never get any better for his loyal followers.

The Masterspy and former Overlord took Dreibrand’s hand and accepted the offer.

“Now gather your warriors so that they can swear their loyalty to me,” Dreibrand instructed.

“Right now?” Faychan asked.

“I have business to attend to in Nufal and must leave here before the day ends. So this must be done now,” Dreibrand said.

“But I am not fit to travel,” Faychan protested. He did not want to start his new life this minute.

“I will arrange a line of credit for you in Jingten. When you are ready to travel, purchase your supplies and come to Vetanium,” Dreibrand said.

“Dreibrand, I don’t know if my warriors will accept this,” Faychan admitted. “You are asking them to shed every thing they believe in. The mystery of our society is a great source of power to them.”

“It does not seem to be working for them lately,” Dreibrand observed. “Now, quit stalling, Faychan. This must be done.”

Faychan ran his fingers through his salt and pepper hair and told himself to go on despite failure. With a small gesture, Faychan summoned the warrior who had led Dreibrand into the camp. Dreibrand got to his feet when the warrior walked over.

“Help me,” Faychan whispered and reached up to Dreibrand, who assisted him up.

“Gulang, take off your helmet,” Faychan ordered.

The shoulders of the warrior tensed. Dreibrand imagined the questioning look that had to be on the man’s unseen face. With obvious reluctance, the warrior obeyed and pulled off his helmet. Gulang had the brown skin and black hair that was characteristic of the western peoples. His hair was short except for a small topknot. He was young and his features reminded Dreibrand of Tytido.

“You know of Dreibrand Veta?” Faychan asked.

Gulang nodded. “You did not live in the west for long, but in that small time, you made your name well known. The Kezanada regard you as an equal.”

“You will now regard him as your master,” Faychan announced. He drew a knife, and Dreibrand had to consciously prevent himself from flinching. Faychan lifted the blade over his head and sliced away his braid. Gulang gasped with dismay. Faychan tossed the braid onto his campfire. As the stinky smoke rose, he said, “Gather the warriors. I suggest that all our brothers elect Dreibrand Veta as our Overlord so that we can live in the east.”

Startled, Gulang looked at Dreibrand and then back at Faychan. He had remained loyal to Faychan through the worst of times and he was not ready to serve another. Tears shone in his eyes but did not fall.

Faychan encouraged his favorite young warrior. “Gulang, respect my wisdom as you always have. Allow me the privilege of declaring my successor.”

Dreibrand said, “Faychan has bargained a better deal for you than you could have hoped for. You and the others can come live in Nufal and forget your old enemies. To accept this deal, you and the others need only give me your pledges of loyalty because, in Nufal, I am the highest lord.”

"Go on, Gulang, gather the others," Faychan urged.

Gulang's emotions played out on his exposed face. It was difficult to contemplate moving to the other side of the world and serving a new master. During the flight from Do Jempur, he had managed to save his young wife but his infant son had not survived the ordeal, and Gulang wanted to go back and fight his enemies. He wanted revenge upon all of the tribes that had made war on the Kezanada and especially on those vile Kezanada brothers who had wanted to surrender Faychan to Kalek. But despite the violence that Gulang's angry heart cried out for, he considered what it would be like to have a new home and forget his enemies, as this eastern man proposed. He thought about his brave wife who deserved a safe home and a second chance.

Falling back on his trust in Faychan's judgment, the young warrior obeyed. A short time later, all of the warriors were gathered before Faychan's small shelter. The ranks of Kezanada stretched back into the pines, and they all looked much the same with their visored helmets crowned by black horsetails. Behind them stood the other refugees, whose fates were tied to the warriors they loved or served.

Faychan addressed his people. The discomfort of his wound sapped much volume from his speech. He started out by thanking his followers for their devotion, and although their suffering had been great, he was pleased to announce that they now had a bright future. He assured them that settling in the Wilderness would be far better than the destruction and betrayal that had consumed them in the west.

"Some of you have come to know the name of Dreibrand Veta," he said. "And he is known to be a great warrior and a dear friend of King Shan. Through my friendship with Dreibrand, he has agreed to welcome us into his kingdom. Give him your vote to be your Overlord and love and obey him as you do me."

Surprise murmured through the crowd as visors turned toward each other. The uncertainty of Gulang was repeated eight hundred times.

Faychan continued, "When we reach the east, we will cease to be as we have been. No more will we wear our masks and live apart from the other people. We will have faces and names and our neighbors will know us."

A few shouts erupted now because Kezanada were men who coveted their alternative lives.

"I know it is hard," Faychan agreed. He winced slightly because projecting his voice aggravated his wound, but the pain reinforced his decision. "But perhaps we each know in our hearts that our society has ceased to serve us well. Our separateness gave the Confederacy an excuse to hate us. Now, do not dispute me. Follow my example and show Dreibrand Veta that you want to be a Nufalese."

Faychan turned to Dreibrand and painfully dropped to one knee. Dreibrand extended a hand and when Faychan grasped it, he declared, "I shall obey Dreibrand Veta as my Overlord and be his loyal brother." It was the traditional Kezanada pledge to an Overlord and after Faychan had given it, he instructed his men to do the same.

Some of the warriors were stunned by Faychan's example and some were inspired by it, but no matter how each man felt, they lined up to give their pledge. The experience massaged Dreibrand's ego considerably. He had commanded loyalty for most of his life, but he had never had so many men at once individually pledge to serve him. Each man kneeled to him, took off his helmet, introduced himself, and then repeated Faychan's words.

Dreibrand believed that most of these warriors would serve him well, but he would still have to be cautious of Faychan. Once Faychan's body healed, he might seek to reclaim lost glories. And having Faychan say that Dreibrand was the new Overlord did not mean so much. Dreibrand knew that Faychan prized covert control as a strategy. In fact, Dreibrand was counting on it.

And, of course, Dreibrand had his friendship with Shan that would encourage Faychan to remain friendly.

When the last warrior gave his pledge, twilight darkened the rain clouds. Dreibrand decided it was best to begin exerting his new authority as soon as possible. He asked for two hundred volunteers to return with him to Nufal immediately.

He received his volunteers quickly, which was reassuring. Those men who did not have families were the first to volunteer, and many of the others were simply eager to move on. The thought of

seeing the Wilderness was exciting and they knew that their presence was not wanted in the Rysamand.

As an afterthought, Dreibrand specifically requested that Gulang accompany him. The warrior had seemed especially attached to Faychan, and disrupting the bond suited Dreibrand. Faychan poorly hid his annoyance with the request.

When Dreibrand was ready to leave, Faychan returned to his prone position on his blankets. "Thank you, Dreibrand," he whispered wearily.

Uncertain of his sincerity, Dreibrand responded, "There is no more debt between us. Only friendship."

"Yes, my friend. I always knew we would be stronger together. You know that, which is why you trust me now. I look forward to learning about your side of the world," Faychan said.

"And I look forward to your arrival in Vetanium," Dreibrand said.

"Vetanium," Faychan chuckled. "No modesty there."

Dreibrand allowed himself a slightly embarrassed smile. "It was the best choice," he insisted.

"I'm sure," Faychan agreed.

Dreibrand returned to the road and tried not to reveal his apprehension by looking back at the Kezanada following him out of the woods.

By the Gods, I am gambling now, he told himself.

12. *Gambling for Support*

We labored in long battles as we served the greatness of our rys King and Queen. When human despair clutched our hearts, Dacian and Onja ordered our retreat. Bloodied and spent, my Kezanada brothers quit the battlefield, but Dacian and Onja went forward and worked their power in the coldest fashion. Our enemies died badly. – Urlen, Kezanada chronicler, year 6 of the society.

An army of standing stones occupied the ancient battlefield called the Quinsanomar. Shan strolled among the monoliths that marked the Nufalese plains where Dacian and Onja had defeated their enemies with a hideous spell. For over two thousand years, the individual stone prisons had held the enslaved souls of the Nufalese warriors that had been compelled to slaughter the remainder of Nufal's population.

Shan had ended the years of unspeakable suffering with his greatest act of magic. He had unwound the web of wretchedness that Onja had spun around the condemned defenders of Nufal. His power had released the souls from her bondage and sent them on the journey to the next world that had been so long denied them.

But Shan had never visited the place where the wraiths had languished upon the plains. Many of the stones were cracked and tumbled now, and the debris created a somber monument to a genocidal past.

Although misery lingered on the lonely place, Shan felt that the malice of the tortured souls was dissipating. The grass was growing greener and the wildflowers that had shunned the tainted soil were returning. He could believe that someday the deeply haunted ground would heal entirely.

Shan turned around and looked at the caravan arching over a hill. Supplies loaded Dreibrand's wagons and two hundred former Kezanada swelled the ranks of his entourage. The riders and wagons waited on the boundary of the ancient battlefield, and Shan did not blame them for staying back. Even he had dreaded this place rotted by Onja's evil.

With a sigh, Shan took what comfort he could from sending the lost souls of Nufal back into the eternal workings of the living cosmos. The loss of the ancient kingdom was such a tragedy. Even

after studying the fragmented Kezanada texts, Shan did not know what had started the Great War. In the texts, the war simply existed and Nufal was the enemy.

Although Shan had not gained much knowledge from the ancient Kezanada records, he did not regret the trouble that his demand to see the texts had brought to Faychan. Arranging the migration of the refugees to Nufal assuaged Shan's conscience as much as it needed to be.

Leaving the monoliths, Shan climbed the hill toward the patient caravan. He cast his mind over the group of former Kezanada and assessed their mood. They were uncertain but Shan judged them to be reliable. The rys was glad that Dreibrand had taken the hint and accepted the Kezanada refugees. Shan knew that Dreibrand needed more settlers and warriors if he were to hold his territory, and if Shan wanted to avoid direct involvement.

While Shan approached, Dreibrand observed him with his new toy. Before leaving Jingtun, Dreibrand had gone to his second appointment with Afa, and the glassmaker's study of the artifacts had yielded delightful results. Afa had replicated the curved pieces of glass and determined that the curvature gave the glass the ability to enlarge the view of objects. Afa had called the glass pieces lenses.

Inspired by the objects, the rys artisan had made several prototypes of telescoping devices. For Dreibrand, he had constructed a device that he could use to see details at distances beyond human vision.

When Afa had told Dreibrand the name he had given the device, Dreibrand had thought it was a name that Faychan would appreciate. Afa had called it a spyglass.

Dreibrand watched Shan within the circle of glass. The fine features of the rys's face and even the strands of his white hair lifting in the breeze were clear. Shan had shed his regal garb for the trip. A belt of intertwined steel and silver chains was slung around his waist where he secured his ancient enchanted sword. Although he wore the green suede jacket that any rys soldier would wear, he still radiated power as if he wore the full trappings of the King of Jingtun.

Dreibrand brought the wooden tube that housed the precious lenses down from his eye. The spyglass collapsed neatly to half of its size for storage and Dreibrand admired Afa's handcrafting. Viewing Shan through the device had been a delight, and the thrill made the eye-opening price that Afa had charged seem reasonable.

When Shan arrived, Dreibrand tucked the spyglass inside his deerskin jacket and patted the pocket affectionately.

Amused by Dreibrand's pleasure with the spyglass, Shan commented playfully, "I suppose you feel like a rys now that you are able to see far away. Do you want me to walk back over there so you can keep looking at me?"

"That's a good idea," Dreibrand agreed. "That way I can see you but not have to listen to you make fun of me."

Shan's laughter jingled gently. "Forgive my fun, Dreibrand. Afa has made a marvelous thing and you are right to be happy with it. A rys would have never bothered to be so creative or openly do business with a human before I was King."

"I noticed that rys naturally know how to make a profit," Dreibrand said.

"Well, even rys have to eat," Shan conceded. With a lower voice and furtive look toward the wagons, he added, "Did you tell Miranda how much you spent on it?"

Dreibrand frowned and suggested that they get moving. Shan laughed again.

With Shan's detour over, the caravan continued. The humans wanted to put some distance between themselves and the Quinsanomar before stopping for the night.

They made camp on fragrant grassland that had forgotten ancient battles. Suppers were cooked and eaten around the fires as the world turned one cheek away from the sun and the stars filled the sky between the mountains.

While the women put the children to bed, the men shared pipes around the fires. Dreibrand invited a few Kezanada to sit at his fire and get to know some of his warriors, but they were only achieving an awkward silence. Shan sat at the fire as well, and the men did not share Dreibrand's ease

around the rys King, which added to the discomfort.

Deciding to confront the tension, Dreibrand gently initiated conversation. "Tell us, Gulang, what do you and your friends think of Nufal so far?" he asked.

Uncomfortable with the direct question, Gulang looked at the three former Kezanada comrades sitting with him. They were unmasked, as he was, which made even their familiarity strange because of the proximity of the other warriors. Gulang's comrades stared back at him, waiting to see if he would respond. A Kezanada rarely answered a question from an outsider.

Gulang gave his comrades an apologetic look because he had to answer. His pledge of loyalty to Dreibrand required it.

In a soft voice that contrasted with his athletic warrior's frame, Gulang said, "My Lord, ah, I grew up knowing the Deamedron ruled this land, and I pictured a blackened waste, but I am very relieved to find the land so pleasant. The emptiness is strange to me though."

"Yes," Dreibrand agreed. "But that is why I welcomed you and the others. You will help us occupy fair Nufal and make her ours."

Gulang noted Dreibrand's inclusive language and recognized it as an attempt to diffuse potential aggression. Although Gulang did not know the exact numbers that dwelled in Vetanium, he assumed that he and his fellow warriors threatened the settlers. Even so, his analysis of the situation did not compel him to make enemies of the Nufalese. He felt acutely out of his element, as did all of his comrades, which was an uncomfortable situation for Kezanada warriors. And Dreibrand's obvious need for more settlers did not necessarily mean that Dreibrand bargained from weakness. Shan sitting at his side indicated the contrary.

Dreibrand guessed at how the wheels turned in Gulang's mind, and he intended to keep them rolling the right way. He reached into a saddlebag slumped by his leg and withdrew a bottle of particularly expensive western liquor. His Nufalese warriors recognized the quality of the drink and murmured with happy approval. Dreibrand unsealed the bottle and passed it to the next man after filling his cup and Shan's cup.

As the men finished pouring their drinks, Dreibrand proceeded with his toast. "First, let me praise our King, whose power has allowed us to live in Nufal."

The men cheered the toast and lifted their cups. After viewing the Quinsanomar that day, everyone was aware of the inhospitable state that had so recently ruled the region.

Shan graciously thanked them. Their loyalty made him feel good.

Dreibrand exhaled dramatically as the drink warmed his chest on its way down. "For my second toast, I welcome Nufal's newest settlers," he said and bobbed his cup toward the former Kezanada men at the fire and said each of their names.

The second drink was consumed, and Gulang thanked his lord for the toast.

Shan made the third toast. He advised the humans to remember the troubles that plagued the west and to value Dreibrand's vision of a unified and peaceful society where immigrants from all tribes could live well. "To Nufal!" Shan declared at the end of short speech, and Dreibrand repeated the phrase with enthusiasm.

Every man around the fire took another drink and believed in the potential of the emerging society. Gulang, who was unaccustomed to being privy to the rys King's wisdom, took the message to heart. He suddenly wanted very much to belong to the group that offered him a chance to start his life over.

For Shan, however, when he sipped the liquor, a chill tickled his neck. *Who am I to toast Nufal?* he wondered.

Distracted by heavy thoughts, Shan decided to seek solitude. He told the others to enjoy the evening and departed. With a thoughtful look, Dreibrand watched Shan slip into the night.

Gulang, encouraged by the alcohol and his sense of fair play, decided to ask a question of his new leader. "My Lord, why is King Shan traveling with us to your settlement?"

While Dreibrand considered his answer, he noted the curiosity on the faces of his warriors who had

been living in Nufal for years. He supposed that they had heard rumors about what had happened near the Secret City, and linking the event to Shan's extraordinary visit would not be a big leap.

Carefully, Dreibrand replied, "The ruins of an old city, a place we call the Secret City, has aroused Shan's interest. We are going to investigate the ruins. I believe, Gulang, that you are aware of Shan's interest in ancient lore."

"Yes, my Lord," Gulang said, subdued by the reference to Faychan's disastrous choice to share Kezanada records with the rys King.

Deciding to dodge any more questions on the subject, Dreibrand stood up and swung his saddlebags over his shoulder. "I will go help my wife put our children to bed. I suggest you men make friends." He gestured to the half-consumed bottle and added, "I am sure Pel Ton can tell a funny story about me behind my back and you can all share a few laughs."

Pel Ton, who had served under Dreibrand in the war and lived in Nufal since the first year, sputtered with good-natured offense. "Sir, every move you make is perfect," he insisted.

"That is right, Pel Ton," Dreibrand said. He told them good night, and left them, hoping that a session of gossip would bond the newcomers with the current settlers.

Dreibrand expected that his children were already sleeping and he looked forward to snatching some time alone with Miranda. He found her sitting on the back of a wagon, enveloped by a golden sphere of lantern light. The small flame warmed the edges of her nose and lips as she wrote inside a small journal. When Dreibrand put a hand on her thigh, she smiled up to him and placed her inky quill aside.

"I have made a lot of progress on my lessons during the trip," Miranda said.

"Why don't you study during the day? When you can see the book?" Dreibrand asked.

Miranda shook her head. She was careful to hide most of her studying. She was intensely private about her lifelong illiteracy that Dreibrand had cured over the past five years. He had taught her to read and write the Atrophaney language and she studied diligently because she knew that the children would have to learn next. Esseldan and Deltane had already started on the rudimentary lessons, and Miranda worked hard to stay well ahead of them.

In small diaries, Dreibrand would write lessons for her and stories that he remembered from his childhood. He wished that he could obtain better materials, but manuscripts available in Jington were in western languages, and Miranda agreed with him that it was best to focus on Atrophaney because it was the ruling language of the east.

Dreibrand admired the dedicated efforts of his wife to learn his language, especially in written form. It had been hard for her to admit her illiteracy, especially when he had been educated in Atrophaney schools and studied the classics of his culture. Despite her initial difficulties, Miranda was a successful student and her script was refined and handsome upon the page. Proud of her skill, she took care to form each letter with as much elegance as she could.

Miranda flipped back a few pages in her lesson book and pointed to a word that had been new to her and asked Dreibrand to explain it.

"Pai'voilance," he pronounced. "It is the concept of overstepping your abilities. Action misguided by anger or pride. Like what the prince did in the story. That is what makes it sad."

Miranda murmured the word a few times. It was beautiful to hear and to say. "It was a sad story," she agreed. "I don't know if I will read it to the children. I would rather read them the happy ones."

"Better sad stories than sad lives," Dreibrand said.

Evading sad memories from her life, Miranda changed the subject. "How are things with your Kezanada?"

"Former Kezanada," he corrected gently. "I am encouraging them to mix with our warriors."

"I truly hope that you are right about this," Miranda muttered. She ran a finger along the edge of her book. If only the difficulties of life were as easy to decode as the words on the page. "But what of Faychan?" she said. "He is dangerous."

Already aware of her concerns, Dreibrand said, "We will have to be vigilant with Faychan for sure. But we must focus on the larger problem. This influx of refugees might be difficult for our people to adjust to. I will need your support completely. Especially to convince Tytido to accept them. He is used to me discussing important matters with him and I wish I did not have to make this huge decision without him. I think he will be angry about it."

"You did not listen to me, so why are you worried about what Tytido will say?" Miranda complained.

"I listened to you," Dreibrand insisted. "But you understand why I made my decision."

Putting her book away, Miranda conceded that the new warriors might be good to have.

Dreibrand smiled with satisfaction. He had known that Miranda would not turn away good fighters.

Miranda slipped her arms around her lover and said, "We will give Tytido his chance to yell and then we will convince him that you made the right choice."

"I didn't say it was the right choice," he murmured into her curly hair. "But it was the choice I had to make."

"Are there any other kind?" Miranda whispered. She lifted her head to kiss him but then Victoria started to cry. The baby was in the interior of the wagon with the other sleeping children.

Dreibrand released Miranda and she climbed over some baggage to retrieve her fussy girl. She murmured for the other children to go back to sleep and sat back down on the wagon's open gate. She cuddled the baby, speaking soothing words, and Dreibrand entertained the girl in a fatherly way. Satisfied by the attention, Victoria soon quieted in her mother's arms.

Dreibrand and Miranda paused to enjoy the nocturnal chirping and singing rising from the black grasslands. The air was pure and cool and for a moment the whole world was perfect. Dreibrand and Miranda equally appreciated the Wilderness that they had chosen to make their home. The land filled them with vitality, and its beauty and fertility always outweighed its harshness and occasional rage.

Dreibrand suggested, "Let us have Sahleen watch the baby. Then we can take a walk. Get away from everybody."

Miranda flashed him a naughty look, but she declined. "Sahleen went to sleep early. She needs her rest."

Suspicious of the comment, Dreibrand demanded, "Is she pregnant again?"

"No, no," Miranda assured him.

Recovering a little from his sudden concern, he mumbled, "You have talked to her about those things, haven't you?"

"Yes," Miranda said with a little exasperation. "But you know, she gets lonely, just like anybody."

Dreibrand sighed. "I know. But her reckless choice of lovers causes problems," he complained.

"That is so unfair," Miranda scolded. "She does so much for us and she needs a home."

Reminded of the refugees, Dreibrand said, "I hope the Kezanada are less trouble than her."

"I hope the Kezanada are as much help as she is," Miranda countered. "I swear, Dreibrand, your heart is so hard with Sahleen just because she is Temu."

Privately, he wondered if that were the source of his annoyance with the girl, but he concluded that her tribal origin was only a minor thing when compared to the headaches that she had caused him.

However, he understood that Miranda benefited greatly from having Sahleen as a servant, and he forced his heart to remain charitable toward her.

"Sahleen will always have a home, but you must at least let me complain about her," he said.

Miranda laughed. "You are only bothered by her because life has been so good and our problems few."

When the caravan reached Vetanium, Dreibrand wished that his settlement looked better than it did. He detected a hint of disappointment on the freshly uncovered faces of his new men. Dreibrand had spent five years nurturing and building his settlement, and to his eyes, it had always been the delightful beginning of his kingdom. But today, he looked upon it with a critical eye and saw scrappy buildings among ruins, like barnacles on a leaky ship. Even the fields that expanded and produced more each year looked insignificant between the rolling plains and the wild dark peaks of the Tabren Mountains.

Shan noted the sudden insecurity in his friend. "Dreibrand, you have done well in so few years. Show them your pride in it," he encouraged. "Look, here comes Tytido to welcome us."

Dreibrand watched the twenty riders speeding down the hill and expected that it was more than an ardent desire to welcome him home that made Tytido move with such urgency. The night before, Dreibrand had sent two men ahead to inform Tytido of the developments.

When Tytido reached them, Dreibrand saw on the face of his friend the hot words forming in Tytido's mind. But Tytido restrained his fury until he completed his paramount duty, which was greeting the rys King.

The warriors who accompanied Tytido were thrilled that Shan had come to visit. It was a great honor and the men saluted him reverently. Many of the men were from the west and had seen the rys King before, but Kashil had never been to Jingtun and his awe was evident. His loyalty to Dreibrand, which until now had merely been convenient, grew deeper roots as he saw the renegade Atrophane at the right hand of the wondrous King of Jingtun.

"King Shan is kind to come down from his high place to visit us," Tytido announced.

"Greetings, Tytido of Clan Gozmochi. It is good to see you well." Shan responded.

Tytido dipped his head to the rys King. He had served Shan during the war and been rewarded handsomely for his courage. Tytido then turned a completely different gaze upon his local ruler and said, "Welcome home, Sir."

Sir, is it? Dreibrand thought. Addressing the group, he said, "Send to the herders and have them bring ample cattle to Vetanium to slaughter tonight. The momentous visit of King Shan requires a proper banquet."

The men cheered, but Tytido remained unimpressed. As he escorted the caravan into the settlement, he openly glowered at Dreibrand.

"Tytido, please, speak your mind," Dreibrand invited confidently.

Tytido looked over his shoulder at the column of warriors but held back on his necessary tirade. "We will speak in private. At my house," he said. Snapping the reins, he deserted the welcoming procession.

When the caravan entered the settlement, Dreibrand issued more orders and instructed his two hundred volunteers to make camp next to the settlement. Moving through the bustle and excitement, he made his way to Miranda who was unloading the children in front of their home. He told her that he was going to Tytido's house and that he wished for her to come by there as soon as she could do so.

"I wanna go!" Deltane shouted with innocent enthusiasm.

Esseldan whirled away from Zannah's side and jealously asked, "Where are you going?"

"You are going to the bath tub," Zannah declared.

Miranda set Deltane on the ground and said, "Zannah, please get this boy in the bath too."

Frustrated to have his request ignored, Deltane shouted, "I wanna go with Father!"

"Not now. Get cleaned up. We are having a party tonight," Miranda said, trying to distract him.

Deltane pulled his hand away from his mother and darted toward his father. Dreibrand was still in the saddle, and when his son grabbed a stirrup, Astar was startled. Fortunately, the colt did not do

anything dangerous, but Dreibrand was not happy about his son's stupid behavior around the horse.

"Deltane!" he said sternly. The willful child exacerbated his problems.

The little boy stepped away from the skittish colt and looked up with a stunned expression. His adoring father had never used such a harsh tone with him before.

"Obey your mother," Dreibrand ordered and headed toward Tytido's house.

Deltane blinked, trying to hide his hurt feelings. To be rebuffed confused him, but he clung to his immature dignity. He joined Esseldan, who had a satisfied smirk on his face.

As Dreibrand hurried to meet Tytido, he regretted snapping at his son. He knew that Deltane only wanted his attention, but he had important business and nothing would change that.

The door of Tytido's house was open and his saddled horse stood in the yard. Dreibrand went to the door and saw his comrade on the other side of the room looking out a window. Tytido had a modest shelter with a bachelor's furnishings. The remains of an interrupted breakfast were still on the table and the muddy tracks from Dreibrand's messengers had dried on the threshold.

"Hello," Dreibrand said.

Tytido glanced over his shoulder, but he did not make eye contact with Dreibrand. "Is it true? Is Faychan coming here?" he demanded.

"Yes," Dreibrand answered simply. He stepped inside and shut the door.

Tytido snarled with disgust and looked at Dreibrand now. "I can't believe this. How could *you* have done this? I was told a thousand more are coming!"

"Six hundred more warriors and just as many of their families and servants," Dreibrand said.

Tytido lifted a hand to his temple as if he were in increasing pain. "How could you? That's more than enough men to wipe us out. Faychan can just set up his own little world on our burnt-out homes. You have given Nufal away!" he fumed and batted a cup on the table across the room. The metal utensil clanged against the wall beside Dreibrand.

Remaining calm, Dreibrand started to explain. "Tytido, the war against the Kezanada has broken them. Faychan's faction fled to the Rysamand seeking sanctuary from Shan. Faychan is wounded and can barely stand. There are women and children with no homes to go back to because they are despised for who they are. I could not turn them away, and it was Shan's wish that I accept them."

Dismayed, Tytido said, "Because they are desperate you take them? Their desperation will only make them more dangerous."

"I have already separated two hundred of the warriors from Faychan. We will assert our authority and we will keep it," Dreibrand said.

"I see you have already asserted your authority," Tytido sneered. "Let us see how well it works for you when Faychan comes to kill your family."

"That will not happen," Dreibrand barked.

"And how can you be so sure?" Tytido countered. "The Kezanada only care about themselves. Or maybe you are one of them now. Did you become a Kezanada while you were away?"

"Would it matter if I did?" Dreibrand retorted as his temper staked a claim.

"Damn you! I am better than that trash. I am not a criminal. I never hired myself out for assassinations. I never took work to go massacre a village that did not pay its taxes," Tytido said.

Dreibrand rolled his eyes, unimpressed with Tytido's morality. "I am not so naïve as to think that I am better than the Kezanada. What do you think we did to the Sabuto during the war? Whether it is war or terror makes little difference in the end. Now Tytido, put aside your prejudice. The time is coming when we will not have to look for enemies."

Tytido scoffed, "And I am not so naïve as to trust Kezanada." Tytido was a warrior and his blade

had claimed many lives, but he could not so easily lump all violence together as Dreibrand did. He wanted to separate his actions into a different category than the business of the Kezanada.

"What would you have me do, Tytido?" Dreibrand asked. "Faychan saved my life. You know me as my closest friend. Would I turn my back on someone who did that?"

A painful expression gripped Tytido's face and guilt flared in his chest. "I should have gone to save you that night and not let Faychan do it. Curse my cowardice for fearing what the Temu would do to my tribesmen," he lamented. "Now I have brought ruin on us all."

"That is not so," Dreibrand insisted. "This will work to our advantage."

"Enough!" Tytido declared. "This is not the vision for Nufal that we discussed. You have made a whole new strategy with Faychan." Pointing a finger at the door, he added, "Get out of my—"

A knock at the door interrupted him, and during his pause, Tytido looked into Dreibrand's eyes. He saw the pain that his anger had put there. Dreibrand had been his friend for years, and Tytido had trusted the easterner with his life on many occasions.

There was another knock and Miranda called, "Tytido, let me in."

Tytido groaned, knowing that Dreibrand's reinforcements had arrived. He turned to the window again as if the view of his neighbors' dwellings, a chicken coop, and the closest mountain were a refuge from his turmoil. Dreibrand got the door. Miranda flashed him a concerned look and went immediately to Tytido's side.

"Tytido," she purred, taking his arm. "I can hear you two fighting from outside. This will not do. Come sit." Tytido did not resist her gentle guidance toward a chair at the table. Dreibrand admired her takeover, knowing that when Miranda came to get her way, her powers of persuasion were well practiced.

Miranda pulled a chair up next to Tytido. Keeping a hand on his wrist, she began her entreaty. "I was angry too, Tytido. I told Dreibrand that I was against this, but he would not listen to me either. But now that it is done, it is more important than ever that we maintain our bonds of trust that support our power. Please, Tytido, accept what Dreibrand has done. I know that he regrets making this decision without you. He has dreaded your anger the whole trip home."

Tytido glanced up earnestly, and Dreibrand nodded.

Miranda continued, "Dreibrand had to make this decision because it was Shan's wish. And we cannot refuse Shan's request. None of us would have what we have now if it were not for Shan's blessing."

"And Shan hopes to make us stronger by giving us these refugees," Dreibrand added. He sat down on the other side of Tytido. "We need these extra warriors."

Miranda jumped in. "Already the Atrophane are building forts in the south and someday they could threaten us."

"They would not dare do such a thing under Shan's nose," Tytido argued.

"We cannot entirely afford to rely on their fear of Jingteng's power to protect us," Dreibrand said. "Shan prefers his own business in Jingteng, and when the Atrophane learn about our settlement, they will desire to exert their control, believe me."

"Then what is Shan doing here?" Tytido demanded.

Dreibrand and Miranda looked at each other and their sudden silence allowed Tytido to detect their apprehension.

"Shan is coming with me to the Secret City. To find out what is back there," Dreibrand finally explained.

"Is it that serious?" Tytido whispered although Shan's presence meant that it was.

"You were with me. What do you think?" Dreibrand said.

Tytido did not answer. Whatever Dreibrand and Shan thought the problem was, evidently it was

worse than what Tytido had imagined.

Dreibrand returned to his first subject. "Tytido, listen to me. The former Kezanada warriors have all sworn loyalty to me personally. Now we must give them a reason to believe in that loyalty. They all need homes because the opposing faction of Kezanada, their own brothers, betrayed them, which has made their loyalties vulnerable. It is important that you welcome these refugees as we would any other people. It is up to us to make them Nufalese, so we must show them no hostility."

Miranda continued, "We must combine our efforts to outmaneuver Faychan's authority over them. Like you, I think they are heartless criminals, but that life is behind them and people can change. The warriors that came with us rode into Vetanium with their masks off. Already we are remaking their identity."

Tytido threw his hands up in a defensive gesture. "Fine! I cannot fight you both. What is done is done."

"Then what do you advise?" Dreibrand inquired.

Exasperated by the question, Tytido complained, "Dreibrand, you are not from the west like me, and you have not known the Kezanada your whole life. I warn you not to trust Faychan. I'll admit it is possible to convert his warriors to our side, and I will sincerely put my effort into that, but Faychan will always be a threat. By the sun and the moon, he has been Overlord these past five years. Do you think he is just going to start farming and chopping wood?"

Dreibrand shifted with discomfort. "I will make a place for him that befits his talents," he said, expecting this detail to set Tytido off again.

Tytido winced, imagining how Faychan would comport himself as a lord. Struggling to work past his anger, Tytido considered the situation. He accepted that they did need more people, especially warriors. Gambling for support from Kezanada refugees would not have been his first choice, but Tytido admitted to himself that their options were limited.

Looking to Miranda for approval, Tytido lowered his voice and said, "If Faychan is wounded badly, perhaps his recovery should reverse itself when he gets here."

He did not exactly see agreement on Miranda's face, but he could tell that the idea had some appeal to her.

When Dreibrand did not say anything, Tytido added, "Dreibrand, these Kezanada warriors of yours might expect you to do this. They like a clear-cut succession of leadership."

"Stop it," Dreibrand snapped. He slammed a hand on the table. "No more such talk."

Defying his decree, Miranda said, "Dreibrand, it may be necessary and it would probably be for the best."

"No!" Dreibrand stood up and almost pointed a finger in her face before belying the rude gesture. He chose instead to pace and dispel his agitation.

They are suggesting too much, too soon. I must give Faychan a chance, he thought.

Dreibrand said, "Faychan is intelligent and talented. I would like to learn from him if I can. And I would ask you to remember, that since we started dealing with Faychan, he has done right by us."

"That we know of," Tytido said skeptically.

Dreibrand conceded that there remained an element of doubt with the mysterious Masterspy and fallen Overlord. "But there will be no more talk of murdering a man who saved me when he did not have to," Dreibrand concluded.

The sounds of the bustling settlement drifted in from outside. Hearing the added noise of two hundred new warriors making camp nearby, Tytido said, "Dreibrand, are you sure?"

Dreibrand sighed, but refused to voice his doubts. "I am sure that Faychan will avoid angering our dear protector King Shan," he said.

Miranda and Tytido could both accept the point about Shan's influence acting as a restraint upon Faychan.

When no more comments were forthcoming, Dreibrand continued, "Your suspicion will serve us well, Tytido, especially because I do not know if I will be here when Faychan arrives."

"What?" Tytido cried and Miranda shared his worry.

"I do not know how long I will be back in the mountains with Shan," Dreibrand explained. "So I am trusting you and Miranda to deal with Faychan if he gets here before I return. Keep him as a rather pampered guest, if you get my meaning. And, Tytido, I ask you to attend to the security of my family." His tone was humble for the last request, but as always, Tytido was honored by the trust Dreibrand showed him, especially so soon after the exchange of hot words.

Disturbed by the dangerous possibilities for the children, Miranda proposed that she take the children to Elendra and stay hidden from Faychan in case he attacked.

Without hesitation, Dreibrand said, "I want our children to stay here. I do not know what Shan and I will find near the Secret City, but I fear it more than Faychan."

Although Miranda had not been present for the event that had disturbed her husband so greatly, she accepted his decision that the children would stay in Vetanium. Dreibrand was a brave man and his anxiety was evidence enough that something dangerous had surfaced in the remote depths of Nufal.

Knowing that his decision had left them with a difficult task, Dreibrand said, "I will give you this promise: If Faychan makes himself our enemy, then I will take care of him."

The words were soft but Tytido and Miranda knew the lethal strength behind them. Dreibrand was kind and generous, but capable of being very dangerous.

Miranda stood up and said, "And I will do my best to foster the friendship you want with Faychan because you value it, Dreibrand."

A disgusted look remained on Tytido's face, but he grudgingly understood the reasons for what had happened. "Your strategies have not failed me before, Dreibrand," Tytido said. "I will do as you ask."

Miranda announced, "If you two are done yelling at each other, I would like to get ready for the banquet tonight."

Tytido went to the door to see her out politely, making up for his lack of welcome when she arrived. When Dreibrand started to leave, Tytido gestured for him to stay.

Once Miranda was gone, Tytido shifted his feet awkwardly as if uncertain of the ground that he stood on. Finally, he committed himself to an apology. "I lost my temper. I should not have been knocking things at you."

"Especially your own dishes," Dreibrand added.

Rolling his eyes with embarrassment, Tytido said, "Forgive my outburst. I trust you."

"There is nothing to forgive. You are right, Tytido. I am taking a terrible risk. Know that I did not want it this way, but we will make the best of it," Dreibrand said.

"I suppose we shall have to," Tytido said. They had quarreled over dealing with the Kezanada during the war, but Tytido had to admit that somehow Dreibrand always made it work to their advantage. He offered his hand to Dreibrand, and they were bonded again.

"I was so rude in front of Shan," Tytido moaned.

Dreibrand grinned and slapped him on the shoulder. "Come, you can make it up to him. Tonight, we will celebrate. Our rys King has come to visit and we must prove to him that the Wilderness is hospitable," he declared.

13. The Inheritors of Guilt

Spring wrapped the somber slopes of the Tabren in an abundant garland of green leaves and flowers. It was an easy place to forget duties and desires, and Tempet and Alloi lingered around the broken city of their birth. After so much time in hibernation, consciousness was distracting and the days slipped by.

Their purpose to punish the rys was not forgotten, but they were not physically or mentally ready to undertake their vengeful journey to the Rysamand. Their ability to cast complex spells had grown rusty. Meditation, food and exercise were needed to rebuild their powers.

Tempet's talent had always been greatest in physical performance. His magic provided his body with strength and speed, and he focused his spells through his hands and especially his bitaran. He moved fluidly in conjunction with the weapon. Moving through fighting forms, he practiced day and night. His mind was re-learning how to attach itself to the unseen properties of his weapon, and his returning powers exhilarated him.

He had been a mighty warrior during the Great War. Many rys and their human minions had died from the dreadful strike of his bitaran. And his shielding spells had been powerful enough to protect him from the initial creation of the Deamedron that had consumed the vast majority of the Nufalese forces in one great stroke of magic. His elders, the few who had survived that awful blow, had dragged him from the Quinsanomar. He had opposed retreat, slashing futilely at the wraiths of his comrades.

That had been the worst part. Recognizing his kin and allies among the enslaved souls who were in the thrall of his mortal enemy.

The terrible experience was his fuel now. Tempet forgave the spirits of his comrades who had been forced to turn on their people. The rys were the cause of the suffering, and he pictured them now, with their ugly blue skin, as he swiped and hammered the air with his glittering bludgeon. Tempet regained his old strength with each day, and soon he would turn loose his hatred.

Weapons were not the tools of Alloi. Tabre females shunned the use of weapons, which were the affectation of males. Her magic could blast with accuracy and shield her body, so she had not studied the gruesome art of tearing flesh with material objects. Alloi had trained her mind to control the minds of others and her clairvoyance had an impressive range. She meditated every day, expanding her mind and reclaiming the discipline to see far beyond her physical shell.

Alloi surveyed her surroundings tentatively. She was afraid of what she might see. What if rys cities now dotted Nufal? She was not sure if she could bear the sight of her conquerors loitering upon her beloved birthland.

Despite her disgust for the possibilities, she had to find their enemies and cleanse Nufal of its rapists. The tabre, who were lost forever, especially her adoring parents, deserved to be avenged even if her heart abhorred the violence that duty demanded.

When her mind discovered the small settlement on the other side of the mountain, she understood better her brother's thirst for action. She saw the western people making homes upon her land. She saw the people whose ancestors had served Onja, and their occupation of Nufal sickened her.

After Alloi coped with her revulsion, she noticed that the settlement was a recent development and that the surrounding lands had been ruled only by nature for a long time. There was no sign of a long term occupation by the westerners, whose crude dwellings were dwarfed by the ruins of U'telmeran, and no rys were present. Alloi was slightly relieved to see that the rys had not overrun her homeland, but the emptiness of Nufal also puzzled her. It seemed to her that with the passing of so many centuries that a whole new civilization should have grown to replace her civilization. The evidence that Onja and Dacian had destroyed the Nufalese without the purpose of expansion added to the tragedy.

Emerging from her meditation, Alloi sought her brother. She left the ruins of her home, which despite its excessive disrepair still compelled her to occupy it. Tempet prowled between the cracked and mossy walls of Drathatarlane, stalking his imagined enemies as he perfected his war games.

As she approached his position, she remembered his prowess and bravery upon the battlefield. Her brother had been at the fore of the forces that repeatedly repelled the invasions of Onja and Dacian. Alloi had been proud of her brother despite her horror at the pointless conflict.

Tempet landed in front of her on the weedy street. Rabbit skin shoes now covered his feet and he had braided a leather strap to secure his weapon over his back. Beads of sweat clung to his chest after his long work out.

Alloi said, "I have found those humans that you spoke of. Perhaps we should go investigate their settlement and see what we can learn."

"Where are they?" Tempet said hungrily.

"On the western slope of Mount Hon," she answered.

Looping a thumb in the braided strap across his bare chest, Tempet said, "Good. I can go test my bitaran on them."

Alloi cast her eyes down. She did not wish to argue with her brother but she felt the need to delay his desire for combat. "Tempet, I saw no rys there. Only humans. It is possible that they do not even know about the war and what happened here. It has been a long time. We will just go there to learn what we can. I think you should not assume that we go there to kill them."

Tempet hid his disappointment. He treasured his sister's kindness and he would not criticize it.

"Shall we get started?" he proposed. "We have haunted our home long enough."

Alloi agreed and scratched her head. Her hair had started to grow back, but it was growing back in all white, which upset her. Tempet told her that she was lucky to have her hair come back at all because he remained quite bald.

After packing their meager possessions into one sack, they went down the levitation shaft and crossed the stream at the bottom of the chasm. Because the corresponding shaft across from the city had crumbled, they were obliged to climb the cliff, but tabre were better climbers than humans and they reached the old trail without the use of any ropes or gear.

The warm day was near its end, but they hiked through the night and into the next day before pausing to camp. They were on a shoulder of Mount Hon where the old trail arched briefly above the tree line. To their right, the canyon with the river veered to the north and disappeared between the mountains, and to their left, the slope descended into the oval valley that had once been the beating heart of Nufal.

Tempet and Alloi stood side by side and viewed the lush forest below. They saw the lake at the center of the valley and pointed to the tall ruins beside it.

"I do not think anyone has been to Kwellstan since we left," Alloi commented.

Tempet turned south and pointed to the city that they knew as U'telmeran. "And that is where the humans are," he said. His eyes narrowed slightly, hinting at his sinister intent.

Alloi stated her desire to meditate before they continued. While she explored the land with her mind, Tempet foraged for their dinner. For the moment, he was content to gather food. Although he was capable of meditation, he rarely had the patience for it.

When Alloi completed her assessment of the valley, she was pleased to open her eyes and see that her brother had prepared supper for her. He had found berries and greens to make a salad and ventured down a stream to obtain freshwater shellfish for the main course. Alloi wished that they could derive more joy from the simple pleasure of the meal that Nufal provided, but the scars on their souls prohibited it.

After finishing the meal, she reported her news. "A hunting party is between us and U'telmeran right now. They have been hunting in the edge of the forest all day."

"Did you see any rys?" Tempet hissed.

"No. The valley is empty except for our wild animal cousins, but there is another human settlement where Kahtep used to be," she replied. It was difficult to refer to cities that she had known as thriving communities in the past tense, but she forced herself.

"Have you looked farther? To the plains? To the Rysamand?" Tempet asked.

"No, not yet. Give me time, Brother," Alloi said.

Tempet apologized for demanding so much. He understood that a lifetime's worth of training and development took more than three weeks to reclaim. "Then let us intercept this hunting party and capture one or two humans and read their minds. If Onja and Dacian still live, they have to be

aware of it," he decided.

Alloi was not eager to interrogate people, but she believed that it was necessary. Her study of the nearby humans had let her determine that they were not born of Nufal. They were recent immigrants and therefore the descendants of her enemies, which allowed Alloi to distance herself from her concern for them as living creatures.

Chilo stopped so suddenly on the trail that Ven bumped into him.

"What's the hold up?" called one of the men farther back who was taking his turn carrying the deer that had been slain in the forest.

"I thought I heard something," Chilo whispered and scanned his surroundings warily. Actually, the unsettling sensation of being watched had abruptly assailed him, but he did not want to mention it and sound silly. He obliged the hunters and continued. Nervous in the forest already, the men followed him at a fast pace even.

They hunters had taken longer than they had expected to make a kill. The deer had proved elusive until the men hiked deeper into the forest and located a juvenile buck in a private forest meadow. The day was fading and all the men knew that the dead deer hanging from its carrying pole could attract a fenthakrabi. At least Elendra was in sight again, and they were now climbing out of the thickly wooded valley.

"Chilo, why are you going this way?" Ven asked after noticing that their route was steeper than the way they had come that morning.

Annoyed by the question from the younger man, Chilo was ready to snap grumpily until he noticed that he had made a wrong turn. He stopped again and appeared a little befuddled.

What was I thinking? he wondered. He knew the easiest way up the slope, but he was not taking it. He supposed the pain in his slowly healing shoulder and the spreading ache down his back had distracted him.

The hunting group consisted of eight men and when they all stopped for the second time, the two men bearing the deer set down their load.

As Bian straightened after setting down the deer, he complained, "What's with this stopping? I want to get up the hill. I don't need a rest."

"Chilo took a wrong turn," Ven laughed.

Chilo sent him a withering glance and considered saving a little face by saying that he had meant to test a new route, but he decided against it. "It's nice to see that you are paying attention for once," he said to Ven sarcastically.

Flapping both hands at the group, Chilo commanded them to go back. "Go on. This way is too steep. The way we came this morning is much better. Our trail is right over there a bit."

Bian and his partner lifted their load again and Bian commented, "I thought it just seemed steeper because I had this to carry."

One of the men laughed as the group turned around and headed back into a thick patch of pines that they had just exited. Chilo stomped around the edge of the group, intending to take the lead, and Ven hustled to catch up with him. As Chilo entered the pines, he scanned their footprints out of habit and wondered again why he had veered off course.

"Chilo!" Ven shouted with alarm.

Looking up, Chilo gasped with fear because eyes gleaming with cold malice confronted him. The man-like creature was camouflaged by his dark skin beneath the shady pines as if the gloom had conceived him.

Chilo went for his knife and heard his companions yelling with shock, but no one could have reacted in time. Tempet lunged at Chilo, seized the man's shirt, and flung him to the ground with great force. Chilo bounced once and was stunned.

A man shot an arrow, but Tempet pulled his bitaran from the sheath on his back and deflected the arrow with the head of his weapon. He moved with incredible speed and smashed another arrow from the air. The warding crystals and diamonds on his bitaran were a shiny blur in front of him.

Tempet shrieked at the men, who trembled with terror at the inhuman sound. Next, the tabre sprang toward Ven, and as he blocked an attack from another man, Tempet kicked Ven on the side of the head. Frightening pain shook his skull, and Ven dropped to the ground. The tabre bent down, grabbed Ven's belt, and tossed the man next to Chilo, who was beginning to stir.

The hunting party, driven by rage and fear, rushed Tempet, but their brave effort collapsed when a white flash akin to lightning flared forth from the pines. Alloi emerged from her hiding spot and began to tie the hands and feet of Chilo and Ven.

Tempet cradled his bitaran contentedly as he stepped over the humans who had been felled by a spell of sleepiness. Standing in the middle of the crumpled group, Tempet's eyes roved the men as if looking for something.

His bitaran erupted from its resting position and splatted one of the human's skulls like a pumpkin. The blood and brains sizzled on the warding crystal and flaked off as ashes. Tempet felt the soul lift from the corpse and his mouth hung open from the pleasure of removing one of the invaders. He braced himself for the pleasure of crushing another skull, preparing his mind to savor it.

"Tempet! No," Alloi commanded. "I will not watch you do this. Now help me."

Tempet considered killing one more man just to annoy his sister, but he reluctantly chose to honor her wish. Returning to her side, he grabbed Chilo and Ven each by one leg and started to drag them away. Alloi led him to a secluded spot where she would conduct the interrogations.

Tempet propped the men against a boulder. Both of them were stirring and when their eyes focused on their captors, they cringed with fear.

"What are they?" Ven whispered.

"I don't know," Chilo said and struggled in his bonds.

Tempet pressed his bitaran against Chilo's chest and ordered him to be quiet.

Ven squirmed in his bindings and flopped a small distance away. Alloi ignored him for the moment, knowing that he could not get away.

"I do not understand their language," she said.

"That doesn't matter, does it?" Tempet asked.

Alloi answered no but added that it would take longer.

"Let us start with this one," Tempet said.

The evil leer from the tabre made Chilo lose hope. Blood was seeping into his shirt where the hot stinging points of the bitaran injected him with terror.

Alloi kneeled beside the pinned man and placed a hand on his skull. Chilo's eyes bulged when she touched him but then his stiff body went slack and he was incapable of struggling.

"Let me link with you and read his mind as you do," Tempet proposed.

"Then do so," Alloi responded, irritated by his interruption.

Tempet tapped into the thoughts of his twin sister. Initially, he saw disjointed images from the man's life, but they began to make more sense as Alloi steered the man's memories toward what she sought. Mentally, Tempet could hear his sister questioning the man, bombarding him with the names of Onja and Dacian. Even if the prisoner did not understand her language, he should recognize names.

The name of Dacian yielded no images although the emotions of the man indicated recognition along with his desperation to comply with Alloi's demands. But when she searched his mind for Onja, she began to receive actual memories. Chilo had gone to Jingteng several times with the tribute caravan from his tribe, and he had physically seen Onja.

Alloi and Tempet hissed simultaneously with distaste as they recognized Onja even altered by age. For Tempet, the rys Queen had once been an unattainable target across a battlefield and her image blurred into a red boiling rage. With a battle cry, he thrust his bitaran through Chilo's heart.

Alloi lurched back and shuddered from the shock of being inside the man's mind when he had unexpectedly died.

As the next world snatched the confused spirit away from the wreckage of its flesh, Alloi smacked her brother on his arm. "Why did you do that?" she snarled. "Never kill someone when I am probing his mind."

Abashed, Tempet apologized. His thoughtless outburst had endangered his beloved sister, and he was instantly punished by his guilt. *I need to maintain control*, he admonished himself.

Sensing his genuine remorse, Alloi was quick to forgive him. "I know you will not let it happen again," she encouraged.

He shook his head meekly, still upset with his blunder. Alloi moved toward the next prisoner, who was yelling and sobbing at them with grief and anger.

"Chilo, Chilo. Damn you things," Ven moaned.

He kicked his bound legs at the female creature. She dodged the swipe of his boots, and pointed a finger at him to aim her spell. The flash of light blinded Ven momentarily, and when his vision cleared, he could not move. His attacker laid a hand on his head.

Ven's interrogator intruded his thoughts. White light filled his vision and he could not track the time that passed.

When Alloi finished extracting information, she cast a spell of sleepiness on her subject. His head lolled away from her hand with an imposed expression of serenity.

Standing, she glanced at her brother, who had observed patiently from a discreet distance. From her look, Tempet derived that he should not kill this man.

"Dacian and Onja are dead," Alloi reported. "I think that Dacian has been gone for some time, but Onja has only died recently. Both of these men confirmed that."

Tempet growled with disgust. "They have eluded us by dying! Where is our justice?"

Although Alloi shared some of his disappointment, she felt relief that the evil rys monarchs were dead at last. However, it was chilling to think that Onja had been Queen for over two thousand years.

"Perhaps, we only emerged from hibernation because Onja had finally died," Alloi suggested.

"Too late. Too late," Tempet lamented. "But there are still rys? The inheritors of their guilt."

"Yes, the rys still exist. They live in Jingtun as they did in our first life," Alloi responded.

Imagining his new enemies, Tempet suggested, "Then let us go to that settlement and purge U'telmeran of these invaders." He gestured to the sprawled captives with his bitaran. "These are not our humans. They are of the west. Onja was in their minds." He added with loathing.

Alloi frowned thoughtfully. She understood her brother's hatred, but his rush to violence disturbed her. "Tempet, I do not think that these humans even know what we are. They are only humans."

"They are our enemies," Tempet declared. "Just because we had to hide in the mountain to avoid destruction does not mean the war is over. Nufal has waited too long for her revenge."

"I do not want you to kill so wantonly," Alloi snapped. "The humans are lesser animals and punishing them has little value. We should travel toward Jingtun and seek rys who are more deserving of our hostility."

Reluctantly, Tempet agreed. A rys opponent was deeply appealing, but he thought that his sister was being too lenient by ignoring the nearby settlement. He searched the bodies of the prisoners, gleaning their tools and sidearms from them.

When they were done, they disappeared into the forest. The hunting party that had been left stunned began to recover, and soon their shouting disturbed the old land as they fearfully followed the trail left when Chilo and Ven had been dragged away. They found Chilo's body first and grief grabbed their hearts in a hard grip. No one had ever expected Chilo to get killed. Not clever Chilo who always knew more about what was going on than any one else.

They saw Ven next and feared the worst. Bian bent over his comrade and gently nudged Ven in order to determine if he was alive. A large bruise and laceration darkened the side of his head where he had been kicked.

Ven sat up with a scream. Bian grabbed his shoulders and held him still until Ven realized that he was with friends.

Thrusting his eyes fearfully into the trees, Ven demanded, "Where are they?"

"I don't know. They have gone," Bian said. "What did they do to you?"

"Oh, they killed Chilo," Ven remembered and tried to stifle a sob.

"We need to get out of here," suggested one of the other men.

The lengthening of the mountain shadows supported his opinion. The men gathered their fallen comrade and Bian helped Ven to his feet. They were practical and collected their slain deer on their way back to Elendra, but the festive evening that they had anticipated was now impossible.

14. The Partner of Courage

Bad news traveled through the night. Shan jostled Dreibrand insistently until he opened his eyes. He came awake with a start; his nerves primed for action.

"Three of your men are approaching from the direction of Elendra," Shan said.

Sitting up, Dreibrand said, "The trail is too rough here to risk traveling it in the dark."

"But they are doing so all the same," Shan said.

Dreibrand grabbed his canteen and swished some water through his mouth. After spitting, he braced himself mentally for the problem rushing toward him across the darkened landscape.

I have taken too long to return, Dreibrand worried. He and his companions were still a day away from his second settlement, and he suddenly wished that he had traveled to Jington and back with more haste. He should not have bothered with the luxury and encumbrance of his family.

Dreibrand pulled on his jacket that was armored with overlapping plates of black metal that mimicked feathers. The design gave him substantial protection while maintaining high flexibility. He had not worn the armor much since the war that had put Shan on the throne, but it still held his body with the eerie thrill of an old lover.

"Gulang," he called to the warrior on watch. "Build up the fire nice and bright. We have friends coming and we must let them know that we are here."

"Yes, my Lord," Gulang responded.

Dreibrand had selected Gulang to accompany him on this trip in order to build a relationship with the warrior, who the other refugees obviously respected. Dreibrand hoped that inclusion on this critical mission would teach Gulang how to work with his new Nufalese comrades. Dreibrand had also brought three thoroughly trusted men, Kyel, Aubren, and Pel Ton, who had served him since the war.

Quietly, Dreibrand asked Shan if he had seen anything else.

"No," Shan said. "But I have not looked beyond the road. I will do so now."

"Wait," Dreibrand advised. "We will have our news soon enough, and that may allow you to target your meditation."

"I see you have not forgotten how to use my abilities with the greatest efficiency," Shan commented.

"I have learned when and how to ask for your favors," Dreibrand said.

While Gulang renewed the campfire, the other three men roused themselves from their bedrolls. They judged from Dreibrand's attentive stance on the edge of the road and his whispers to Shan that something important was happening.

The clatter of horse hooves came through the night, and Dreibrand shook his head. They were moving too fast. This portion of the High Road was the most dilapidated, except for the recent landslide on the southeastern loop. His worries mounted for the people that he had allowed to stay in Elendra.

When the riders arrived, the group proved to be smaller than it sounded. It consisted of four men with two horses each, so they could change mounts and travel faster.

Bian, the broad-chested Nuram, was in the lead and when he discerned who was beside the bright fire, he called back joyfully, "It is Dreibrand and King Shan!"

He jumped from his horse and ran the rest of the way. Dropping to his knees in front of Shan, he said, "I would not have hoped to find your greatness so close in our time of need."

"What has happened?" Dreibrand demanded.

After a nod from the rys King, Bian got to his feet and said, "Sir, strange creatures have attacked us. Chilo and Anglee are dead."

Dreibrand cast his eyes down with sorrow. He had lost men before, but it was much harder when they were more than soldiers in a command. The men that served him now were his neighbors, and he personally liked many of them.

Ven was with the arriving group as well. Flying off his horse, he scrambled toward Shan and tumbled to his knees. The rising firelight revealed an ugly bruise on the side of Ven's face as he pleaded for help.

Bian grabbed his shoulder. "Ven," he whispered sternly, and Ven assembled his wits. Since the attack, his mind swung between coping and panic. Getting to his feet, he returned to coping.

"I have come to help," Shan assured him.

"You must explain. What strange creatures?" Dreibrand asked.

"Sir, I think—" Ven paused and appeared suddenly wary of Shan. "I think they are rys," he finished cautiously.

"Rys?" Shan cried. "Are you sure?"

Ven and Bian looked at each other, but then shook their heads.

"They had magic. We had no chance," Ven said. "Their bodies were like yours, my King, well, except for the female. She was like a female rys."

"Female?" Shan asked. Aside from Zanah, he knew of no rys females that were traveling outside of Jingten.

Dreibrand told the newcomers to sit by the fire and tell their news from beginning to end. He hoped the story did not get any worse.

The attack on the hunting party had been two days ago. Bian explained that everyone had decided to stay and defend the settlement, despite the power of the rogue rys, if that was what they were, and send a small group to Vetanium with the news.

Dreibrand was proud of his people for staying at the settlement even if he feared for their safety.

After Bian and Ven had imparted most of the incident in the forest, Shan questioned them.

"So, there are two. A male and a female?"

"Yes. And the male is the cruelest. He killed Chilo. I saw it!" Ven paused as the image blazed vividly through his mind. Taming his grief, he continued, "The female only touched us on the head. I think she was in my mind."

"You say the female was in your head. What did she do?" Shan pressed.

Ven's eyes shifted as he tried to organize his thoughts. The death of Chilo had been extremely distracting and he was still very upset.

"I do not know," he said. "I think she was asking me questions. I don't know if I understood her. Something about Onja and Dacian, I think."

Shan did not instantly come back with another question this time, as if he had suddenly acquired too much information. The fire snapped in a gust of wind and orange cinders swirled past Shan's face but he did not blink.

Bian decided that he had an important conclusion to make. "King Shan, if they are rys, I do not think they were from Jingten."

Still withholding comment, Shan exchanged a concerned look with Dreibrand.

Because the leaders were not saying anything, Kyel chose to argue with Bian's opinion. "How can a rys not be from Jingten?" he demanded.

"Their skin was darker. Not blue," Bian defended. "And rys used to live here, so they must be from here."

Kyel scoffed. "We would have seen them before now, and anyway, the Deamedron would have killed anything like that long ago."

"You weren't there," Ven snapped. "I think Bian is right."

"Stop arguing," Dreibrand ordered. He said it softly but the men obeyed as if he had yelled.

"I think that Bian is right as well," Shan announced, which forever buried Kyel's denial of the situation. "I must seek these...rys."

"And we will go with you," Dreibrand said. "They have killed two of our people and I will see that they answer for it." He laid a hand on the hilt of his sword. The warding crystal glowed faintly across his knuckles, and the men who had just come from Elendra were relieved to be with their leader who was endowed with protective magic.

"I will go back with you," Ven volunteered.

"No, your group needs to continue to Vetanium and deliver this news," Dreibrand decided firmly. His family needed to be warned.

"The others can go," Ven said quickly. "But you will need someone with you who has seen them." He then added "Sir" because he was a little shocked by his boldness.

Realizing that Ven had a good point, Dreibrand considered his proposal. Although he valued Tytido's cousin, he could tell how the trauma of the rys attack had rattled Ven's mind. Yet, Dreibrand believed that fear was more the partner of courage than its enemy.

"Sir, I will go back with you instead. I have seen them as well." Bian offered because he believed that Ven should go to Vetanium and recover from his ordeal.

Reaching a decision, Dreibrand said, "I appreciate your bravery, Bian, but I will entrust you to get this message to Vetanium. Ven, can stay with us if that is his wish."

Ven thanked his leader and then quietly said to Bian, "Do not worry about me. I'd like to think that I have already been through the worst of this business."

Bian nodded. He understood now Ven's desire to go back into danger. Some fears only worsened if left unchallenged.

Addressing Dreibrand, Bian stated that he would get back on the road.

"Wait," Shan interjected. "Take some rest. I will prepare warding crystals for everyone. You may need the protection."

It was an ominous thought, but all the men murmured agreeably. They were tremendously honored to have Shan take the time to make them each a warding crystal.

Shan moved away from the group. Making eight warding crystals, which was a task beyond most rys, would take several hours. He begrudged the delay because the Nufalese rys needed to be located, but for the sake of the humans, he thought the precaution was warranted.

They are murdering the humans, Shan thought as he slid into a cross-legged position. This startling fact pushed his mind into an unsettling region. He had to find the strange rys, confront them, and control them. He was their King and he had to make them stop killing people.

What if they will not obey me? Unsettled by this insidious whispering thought, he imagined his dirty hands poised over a basin of sin.

He took a deep breath, tasted of the winds of Nufal, and opened his mind to the powers that bound the cosmos. After connecting to the energy that flowed through creation, he funneled it through his mind, where he could refine the power into a spell and then forge an enchanted object. Normally, he would convert a portion of the power into the matter that formed the crystal, but after an abrupt inspiration, he reached out and filled his hands with the gravel and soil of the Nufalese mountainside. Shan knew little of the rys whose civilization had once flourished here. He acknowledged his ignorance and let the soil in his hands direct his mind. He would use the land of his unexpected enemy to help him construct a crystal that might be more effective.

It was morning when Shan let the last smooth orb roll out of his hot hand. The horses were grazing on the slopes and the men were lounging around the camp, except for Dreibrand who paced beside the road, anxious to get started. Shan could feel the emotions tearing his friend in two directions.

Shan picked up the last orb and set it in the row of other warding crystals.

Enough with the crystals. You know what you really have to do, he thought. With his mind poised at the edge of valley, he realized after a painful moment of hesitation that he was afraid to make contact with the strange rys. Although Shan knew what it was to have a dangerous foe, he did not know what to expect now. When he had battled Onja, he had always known who she was. He had grown up at her side. But the pure mystery of who he now sought was more intimidating than he would have guessed.

Transforming fear into caution, Shan sent his mind over the valley. His awareness poked below the old growth canopy, tentatively exploring but taking care not to make his presence too obvious.

When his mind glimpsed lifeforces similar to his own, his excitement nearly distracted him from the spell being aimed at him. Although his physical body did not flinch, he mentally recoiled from the attack and encased himself in a protective spell.

White-hot duels with Onja had forged his powers of defense and his shielding magic deflected the attack. Although startled by the sly punch, Shan regained his focus and followed the spell to its source. When he was just about to see his mysterious attacker, spells clouded his vision. He was unaccustomed to anything dodging his perception and the powerful eye of his mind darted about, seeking the lifeforce with frustrated urgency. Realizing that his surge of panic revealed his uncertainty, he halted his emotional blundering. He had a general location for his quarry and he decided that would suffice for now. He would let the strange rys think that they had tested him and seen his best.

Disturbed by the scope of his adversaries' powers, Shan returned to the confines of his physical body and opened his eyes. All of the men were on their feet, no doubt startled by the attack spell that had blazed around him. Dreibrand came forward to offer Shan a hand up.

As Shan rose gracefully to his feet, he leaned close to Dreibrand and confided, "One or maybe both of them sent an attack spell at me."

"We noticed, but I cannot believe anything would dare attack you," Dreibrand said, shocked by the audacity of the murderous rys.

"I was not in danger," Shan assured him, but it was not the truth.

"Did you see them?" Dreibrand asked.

"I know where they are," Shan said and pointed into the forest. "We must pursue them."

Dreibrand nodded and looked toward the lakeshore ruins at the heart of the valley. *Chilo would have liked to come on this trip*, he thought sadly.

Shan extended his hands toward the row of warding crystals on the ground and they flew into his palms.

Impressed, Dreibrand raised an eyebrow.

"As you see, I have not let my mind grow idle," Shan murmured and he beckoned the other men.

After Shan distributed the warding crystals, Dreibrand took Bian aside. "Tell Miranda and Tytido not to send help. Make this point clear to them. It would only give these rys more men to kill and weaken Vetanium. And tell Miranda to put our warding crystals on the children and that she is to carry her sword at all times," Dreibrand ordered.

"Yes, Sir," Bian said solemnly. "We will protect your family."

Dreibrand deeply appreciated the man's willingness to defend his family. He told Bian to be careful.

Bian and his partners departed at a gallop. Dreibrand envied the sound of the hooves pounding toward his home. He then faced northeast and contemplated his entry into the elderly tangles of the forest.

Light flashed across Dreibrand's face and he looked for its source. Beside him, Shan unwrapped his marvelous shield and the late morning sun blazed on its surface. A fabric cover had concealed the bright buckler as it had traveled innocuously with Shan's other gear, and Dreibrand had not guessed that Shan was carrying so intriguing an item. No scratch marred the smooth gleaming metal. Shan slipped the shield over his forearm and gathered the reins.

"Is that new?" Dreibrand asked.

Shan shook his head. "I cannot guess at how old it actually is," he replied.

"Is it enchanted?" Dreibrand said.

"Oh, yes," Shan said. He soon expected to learn more about the unknown properties of the shield.

As the group rode east on the dilapidated road, each member kept a wary eye on the valley, and although nothing happened all day, their troubled thoughts increased. Anger and grief over the deaths of Chilo and Anglee prodded their courage and compelled them to pursue the murderers of their comrades.

Because of the late start, it was dusk when they reached the intersection of the High Road and Chilo's trail. The shadows filling the forest seemed especially ominous, and Dreibrand paused at the trailhead. A spooky flock of ravens argued over roosts in a half-dead tree.

Normally, Dreibrand would not condone entering the forest at night, but the circumstances were urgent. He asked Shan if they should proceed.

With glassy eyes staring straight ahead, Shan analyzed his surroundings. He existed in tune with nature, always aware of the character of the land beneath him and drawing power from it. But from this place, he sensed an intensifying animosity. The valley was cooling as the sun set, preparing a frigid reception for the visitor from the Rysamand.

This land has not forgotten what Onja did here, Shan thought, and he hated his old nemesis all over again for her criminal legacy.

"Do you see them?" Dreibrand asked.

Shan suddenly thrived on the warmth and loyalty that he received from Dreibrand. "Not at the moment," he confessed. "Let us stay to the high ground for the night. We shall await them here."

15. *Exposed to the Enemy*

Dreibrand and his men built a fire and placed torches around the junction of the High Road and Chilo's trail. They tethered their horses in a tight group that they could guard closely, and in the twilight, the men ate dry rations. Chewing slowly and quietly, they listened for danger and the torches were bright and small upon the wide dark land.

Shan stood apart from his companions and entered a spellmaking trance. His fiery blue eyes raked the land for his challengers with unblinking magical vision. A blue sheen of energy rippled over his body whenever he intensified the spell.

During the war, Dreibrand had learned that Shan could become nearly blind to his immediate surroundings when he focused beyond his body. Although Shan could create spells that made armies retreat, he was not immune to physical assault when distracted by distant battles. Dreibrand, Kyel, Aubren, and Pel Ton had served Shan in the war and they were experienced in this protective role. Gulang, however, had never been so close to a rys casting battle magic. After Dreibrand explained to him that they would guard their King, Gulang looked to his companions for cues on how to position himself. He gained courage from their resolve and suddenly felt the unique thrill of serving at the side of King Shan.

The men ringed Shan protectively, and they watched the black border where the darkness defeated the torchlight. Clouds moved into the valley and obscured the stars. In the direction of Vetanium, where the mountains opened onto the plains, lightning flashed and Dreibrand imagined the raindrops that might be hitting his house. Thunder growled in the distance like a hungry stomach.

Dreibrand had placed Ven next to him, so he could monitor the condition of the man who had narrowly survived his first encounter with the Nufalese rys.

When Ven noticed that his leader was checking on him, he said, "I am ready, Sir."

Admiring Ven's steadfastness, Dreibrand said, "I know."

Shan derived strength from the lifeforces of the men around him. Faithful subjects believing in his power added to Shan's confidence, and making high magic required confidence.

His caution in the morning had given way to his desire to assert his authority. The Nufalese rys had dared to send an attack spell at him, and now he would show them who possessed the greater power. Shan's mind stormed through the woods and battered the spells that concealed his quarries.

The creatures were close when Shan finally yanked away the magical cloak that covered them. When Shan exposed his adversaries, their heavy malice assailed him.

Shan resisted the branding iron of fear that seared his courage. He saw clearly for the first time the male, whose loathing for him was shocking. He appeared to be like a rys, but as the men had said, his skin was dark. He was bald and white light blazed from his eyes. Confronted by Shan's mental assault, the male brandished his weapon and pushed back with shielding magic.

Absorbed by the threat from the male, Shan lost track of the elusive second lifeforce. Guessing that the two beings had separated on purpose, Shan expected that one would engage directly while the other attacked from a distance.

Urgently, Shan projected his image at the male and breached the defenses of his mind after a great effort.

"Who are you?" Shan demanded mentally. "You must stop killing my people."

"Who are you?" the other being retorted mentally. At first the language seemed strange to Shan until he grasped that it was a dialect of his own language.

"I am Shan, the King of Jingten," Shan said.

"I am Tempet and I will kill you!"

"No! Let us talk of peace. You must not kill any more people," Shan said.

Fueled by a sick blend of malevolence and glee, Tempet screamed. He discarded the current King of Jington's suggestion. Tempet presumed that his emergence from hibernation had probably alarmed the rys ruler so much that he had immediately come to Nufal to kill him.

"Peace! Ha! I shall have pieces of you!" Tempet hurled his answer into Shan's mind along with a terrible war cry. Tempet was delighted to have the highest rys within reach of his revenge. Starting at the top and working his way down the ranks of rys society until they were all gone had great appeal.

Angry now, Shan insisted, "*Surrender. Do not think you can defy me.*"

Tempet evicted the thoughts of the rys King. He would not allow himself to suffer the pollution of a rys attempting to communicate with him again.

Slashing at Shan's image with his bitaran, Tempet shouted, "Let us kill this fool!"

For a moment, Shan's perception reeled and his spirit projection faded. He was surprised to be forced out of the other rys's mind.

Although Shan valued good over evil, he knew how to deliver a harsh blow. His attack spell threw Tempet against the broad trunk of a maple tree. The burning spell singed the tree around his body and the damp moss smoked. Tempet cringed inside his buckling shield spell. It had been a long time since he had been in combat and his enthusiasm for revenge had made him forget how powerful a rys could be.

But his sister would not allow him to suffer. Alloi's reprisal cracked Shan with bullwhip precision. White light flashed around Shan's body and he staggered a few steps before dropping to his knees.

"Shan!" Dreibrand cried and jumped to his side.

"Stay back!" Shan warned. He quickly cast a shield spell over his entire party. A dome of white light flashed above them, but Shan's magic prevented the attack spell from harming anyone. He returned to his feet and drew his sword.

Streaks of white light split the sky and the men bent beneath the booming roar, but this time it was lightning and not battle magic. The storm had hit, and in a flashing moment of visibility, the tree tops below the ridge jumped up at them like an angry mob demanding a prisoner from a jail.

Carried on a surge of wind, the fat drops of rain pelted the road and the tethered horses shifted with agitation.

"What should we do?" Dreibrand asked.

The sputtering torchlight gave enough light to show Shan's stricken face. He disliked the answer he had to give, but the danger did not allow him to pander to the moral aspects of the situation. "Defend yourselves. And if you get the chance, kill them," Shan replied. "But I warn you, they are powerful."

Shan pushed a wet lock of white hair out of his face and searched the nightscape with his superior senses. His blood was charging through his veins with a feverish madness that he had not felt since fighting Onja, but Shan was not sure how to interpret his potent rage. With Onja, his desire to dethrone her had been very personal, but Tempet and his elusive companion were strangers, and Shan had no compulsion to hurt them beyond self defense. He wished for another chance to communicate.

The storm thrust down a hand of lightning and slapped the landscape with raw light. The humans saw a figure dart up the trail in the jagged flash.

The men pulled into a closer group with their weapons drawn. Ven held his hand over the pocket containing his warding crystal because he had no doubt that he would need it.

White fire erupted around Shan. Warding crystals flared in front of Dreibrand. The bright shaft of the bitaran was illuminated on both ends, and Dreibrand saw the rain glistening on the dark chest and shoulders of his attacker.

Dreibrand jumped back and brought his sword up. The bitaran blasted his sword aside and would have killed him with its next swipe if Pel Ton had not intervened. Pel Ton lunged at the attacker

with the point of his sword, but Tempet was too fast and avoided the blow.

With a snarl, Tempet slammed his bludgeon into Pel Ton's chest and angry magic exploded at the point of impact. The light dazzled the eyes of the humans, but Pel Ton's cry of agony was perfectly clear.

Tempet could have slaughtered the humans, but Shan threw off the attack spells from the other tabre and hit Tempet like a tumbling boulder.

Tempet parried the strokes of Shan's ancient sword that had been forged during the Great War. Each blow that Tempet blocked removed the centuries that separated him from his days as a warrior. The fury of the old battles goaded his hatred and made his reactions faster and faster. Finally, he answered the attack of the rys King and landed a blow of his own. Shan stopped the bitaran with his shield, and when the enchanted items touched, energy surged into Shan. Tempet gasped with dismay as the shield drained his power. The surface of the shield began to glow and Tempet and Shan saw each other's faces distorted with mutual rage.

Tempet wrenched his bitaran free of the shield, which seemed to cling to it with magnetic force. When the contact was broken, Tempet's powers returned to normal. Shan pressed his attack and Tempet gave ground. Tempet deflected the deadly point of the sword with his bitaran, but the shield slammed into him. Again the hungry shield sapped his strength and nurtured Shan, but with the hated rys so close, Tempet refused to sever their violent embrace. With his free hand, he grabbed the back of Shan's neck and tried to wrestle him to the ground.

Shan could not shake off the clamping hand that tore at his spine, so he pushed Tempet down the steep trail. They tumbled toward the forest, skidding on sharp rocks and crashing through a thicket.

Dreibrand was only half aware of what was happening to Shan. The thrashing and screaming of Pel Ton could not be ignored. Dreibrand dropped to the man's side and called his name. When he grabbed the flailing warrior he felt a slick abundance of blood and smelled the horrid odor of burned flesh.

The other warriors turned to Pel Ton's aid, but Dreibrand yelled, "Stay on guard! There is another."

The men obeyed, motivated by the weakening cries of their injured comrade.

"Pel Ton," Dreibrand moaned, knowing that the man, who had saved his life, was about to lose his own. The small light from the warding crystal on his sword allowed Dreibrand to glimpse the awful damage. Pel Ton's face was half burned away and his chest was a charred crater spewing blood. The man's warding crystal had been unable to tame the direct contact of the weapon. Dreibrand held the convulsing man to the ground that would soon consume his body. Excruciating pain forced the soul from the ruined flesh and Pel Ton's jerking ceased.

Then Alloi attacked. A sphere of white light flared around Gulang, who screamed as he was hurled to the rough ground. Dreibrand sprang to his feet. He recognized the perilous flow of panic drenching his nerves and commanded his mind to function. He had mastered the maelstrom of combat many times, but tonight, he could not see the enemy. When another blast of magic hit Kyel, Dreibrand glimpsed the female form of their tormentor. He ran at her, determined to end her aggression.

The female intercepted him with a spell. The force slowed Dreibrand, but his warding crystal was much more than a charm made in haste, and he was not stopped. Squinting through the glare, Dreibrand saw the female step back from him.

Her spell interfered with his attack. He swung his sword drunkenly and she dodged the blade. Enraged by Pel Ton's death, Dreibrand rallied his strength for another lunge. She used his effort against him, reversing the forces that opposed him and pulled him to the ground. Dreibrand fell hard and the next blast of magic sledgehammered his senses into a void.

The spell that had breached Dreibrand's warding had been sufficient to drop the rest of the men, and Alloi paused over the human who had challenged her so unexpectedly. From his looks, he reminded her of the men who had once lived in Nufal and served their tabre rulers with unswerving loyalty. She felt the urge to interrogate him and learn every detail that had caused his treason, but she could not dally with humans when Tempet was locked in a terrible duel.

She ran down the trail and left the men scattered on the High Road.

When Dreibrand managed to pull in a breath, he sucked in a rivulet of rainwater and started hacking. Finally he rolled over and used his sword to pull himself up. The storm was quieting and he could see nothing in the wet night.

Dreibrand called to his men and Ven was the first to answer.

"Where are you, Sir?"

Dreibrand yelled again so the sound would give his location as he moved toward where he thought Ven was. They met over the prone form of Gulang.

"Is he dead?" Ven asked.

"I don't think so," Dreibrand said while tapping the warrior's face.

Gulang moaned, and Dreibrand was further relieved when he heard Kyel and Aubren calling his name from nearby.

"Is anyone hurt?" Dreibrand asked, but everyone reported that they seemed to be uninjured.

Although glad not to have lost another man, Dreibrand desperately wanted to find Shan. Running down the trail, he yelled for his rys friend but received no answer. He lost his footing on the steep trail that ran with water. He swirled his arms, trying to regain his balance, but fell backward. The rocks jabbed his buttocks, but Dreibrand did not feel the pain because his fear was so profound. Shan was gone.

The threat of the unexplored forest became a meaningless fear when compared to the unknown peril to which Shan's disappearance exposed them.

"Shan!" Dreibrand screamed.

The rain pattered on the vegetation and some dwindling thunder grumbled at him like a crabby neighbor.

Dreibrand heard footsteps behind him and he lurched to his feet.

"Sir, it's Kyel," the man said leaning back from his leader's raised sword.

Retracting the weapon, Dreibrand said, "Did you see what happened to Shan?"

"I think he fell down here with that other thing, but everything happened so fast with Pel Ton and all..." Kyel trailed off because the reality of his comrade's demise had just hit him.

"We must find Shan now," Dreibrand decided firmly and started up the trail. "Let us get the horses. He cannot be far."

Scrambling up the slick trail, Kyel gently tried to ease his lord's mind toward a rational decision. "Sir, we can't take the horses down this trail in the dark. One is sure to take a spill in the mud."

"Then we will lead them down," Dreibrand snapped.

"Don't you think we should wait until morning so we can find some sign of where they went?" Kyel argued.

Dreibrand whirled on his man, ready to upbraid him, but then he realized that his emotions were provoking him to act rashly. Looking past Kyel, he scanned the dark dripping forest and longed for the flash of a spell to guide him because the ache in his heart gave him no direction. But there was nothing. If Shan labored against his enemies with his spells, the heavy foliage of the forest concealed the battle now.

And trying to force the horses down a slippery trail in the dark would probably cost them at least one good animal that they could not spare and obliterate any signs left by Shan's passing.

Stabbed by his frustration, Dreibrand said, "We will bury Pel Ton."

He dug the grave himself. The physical exertion provided his anxiety with an outlet. While the men gathered stones for the cairn and Dreibrand pecked at the rocky soil with his camp shovel, he recalled the image of the male creature who had loomed in front of him. His weapon had been

refined and beautiful but the being had been a wiry wild thing and naked except for a primitive bit of covering. This killer born of the Tabren was powerful, vicious, and utterly intimidating.

As Dreibrand shaped the grave, he wondered if Nufal's haunted past had coalesced into a monster. The sable creature that had confronted him was the incarnation of every strange noise in the night. It made real every tingle of superstitious fear, and Dreibrand believed that it threatened everything that he loved.

After they buried Pel Ton, Dreibrand kept a vigil at the trailhead. For the first time in his life, he envied Shan's power and wished that he were a rys so that he could send his mind over the land and find his friend. Repeating Shan's name in his head, Dreibrand clasped the warding crystal on his sword and hoped that Shan would answer him—that Shan could answer him.

Eventually, Ven joined him and offered encouragement. "Sir, perhaps King Shan has chosen to take the battle away from us for our safety."

"That is something Shan might do," Dreibrand conceded. Because Ven was comforting him, Dreibrand suddenly wondered if his stress was showing too much. Now that the attack had come, Ven actually seemed calmer and Dreibrand had a greater appreciation for the how shaken Ven had been before.

Ven continued, "King Shan will come back after he defeats them. He killed Onja. These monsters will be no match for him."

Dreibrand wanted to agree. Shan was powerful, but not above assistance. Dreibrand said. "If he is not here by daylight, we must look for him."

The rest of the night was a long famine to this slim hope, and Dreibrand began his search with the first light of dawn. Taking out his spyglass, he examined the forest below, looking for signs of damage left by attack spells. His men gathered behind him, holding the reins of their saddled horses and awaiting his command. For a long moment, Dreibrand appeared intent on a particular place that he viewed through his spyglass.

"My Lord, do you see something?" Gulang asked.

Dreibrand brought down the spyglass and pushed it closed. He had thought a burnt tree might have been caused by rys battle magic, but he had concluded that it was most likely lightning damage.

"No," he answered. "We must track him. But I fear that this rain will have washed the trail away."

"I will find the trail, my Lord," Gulang said confidently. "The soft soil will take tracks easily, even from a rys."

They started down the trail and Gulang diligently scoured the land. He soon shouted that he had found something. The fresh broken branches on the edge of a thicket indicated that something had bashed by recently, and just a little beyond the battered vegetation, Gulang located tracks where feet had skidded through the mud. The trail led into the forest, and when the men followed it, their urgency made them forget their fear of the brooding wood. Dreibrand used his sword to hack away low branches and vines until the climax growth deeper in the forest became more open. But the thick canopy felt oppressive and the elder trees of the violated land gave off a tangible sense of unwelcome.

They pushed on, heedless of getting lost. As long as another track could be found to reward their efforts, their only desire was to go forward. Although some things that Gulang insisted were tracks only looked like a random disruption of the forest litter, Dreibrand kept his faith in the former Kezanada's opinion. The Kezanada were famous woodsmen, who could use or not use roads as it suited them.

After one of the many pauses in which they had to find the next sign of the trail, the horses balked at continuing. Astar squealed harshly and reared. Dreibrand brought the colt under control, but he instantly knew that their horses were disturbed for a reason. The other men who had lived in Nufal for a while recognized the warning as well and quickly drew their weapons when Dreibrand did. Gulang, who was examining the ground, was slower to react.

"Gulang get back on your horse!" Dreibrand ordered.

The young warrior's horse had already started to shy away and Gulang dove for the dragging reins

and seized them just before the horse bolted. He barely managed to put one foot in a stirrup before a great shriek shook the forest. It was the sound of pure bestiality, of remorseless carnivorous hunger.

"Fenthakrabi!" Ven shouted.

Another cry that withered courage answered the first.

"There are two of them," Dreibrand said. "Stay together. Aubren, get that bow ready!"

The hulking bipedal beasts appeared on opposite sides of the small group. The splotchy shade obscured their bodies. With manes flowing and shaggy arms lifted, the beasts rushed the group. Dreibrand spurred Astar hard to make the horse intercept the fenthakrabi. Dreibrand lashed out at the snapping jaws. The yellow canines gnashed at his blade and sprayed stinking spittle. The fenthakrabi avoided the sword stroke and jumped behind his horse. With a hard pull on the reins, Dreibrand turned Astar fast like he had been training the colt to do, and he engaged the beast again. An arrow flew by but missed its target.

White light flared in the eyes of the beast and it avoided another hissing swipe of Dreibrand's sword. It lunged at Dreibrand's extended arm and grabbed him. Tearing him from the saddle, it plunged its jaws toward his throat. Even as Dreibrand fell to the ground, he focused utterly on getting the sword between him and the beast.

It shrieked when the weapon pierced its torso, and when Dreibrand hit the ground, the blade was driven deeper. He scrambled from beneath the shadow of the beast's teetering body and pulled his sword out. Then, with a graceful swing, he decapitated the thing. When the head hit the ground, the white fire in its eyes blazed for another instant before fading.

Dreibrand noted how the light persisted in the severed head but then whirled around looking for the other fenthakrabi because he was intensely vulnerable on the ground. His men had surrounded the other beast. Two arrows pierced its torso and it was slowing. Aubren nocked another arrow and the third shot plunged through a glowing eye and put it down. It flopped grotesquely a few times as if a force beyond its failing life drove the limbs to move.

Dreibrand approached it and chopped its head off. He did not want to take any chances that the thing would be able to rise again. He recognized that the weird light in its eyes was indicative of magic. Clearly, an outside intelligence had driven the fenthakrabi to launch a coordinated attack.

Hoping that he had to be getting closer to his rys friend, Dreibrand yelled, "Shan! I am here. Answer me!"

Birds squawked at the disturbance, and Dreibrand assumed bitterly that they were allied with the Nufalese rys because they had been silent when the fenthakrabi had come.

"I will make this place mine," he hissed at the spiteful woodland and retrieved his horse.

He hoped that the attack meant that Shan was alive and the other creatures were trying to keep him from helping him.

Shan, I am coming. I swear they will not stop me, he vowed.

16. Ridiculous Mercy

Shan and Tempet tumbled down the slope. 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. Wet leaves slapped Shan's face as he instinctively avoided the tree trunks invisible 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 the Shield of Dacian.

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 Jington and Nufal had warred long ago, they struck 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. 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. 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.

The rys King 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 rys had taxed 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 transmitted her wail of dismay to her brother's ears. Tempet's emotions rioted when he realized that his sister had been hit.

The rys 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. 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 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 Jingtun Valley and imagined the sweet scent of his native forest. If he were there, the burning agony in his torso would cease. 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 eagerly left the land that permanently resented him.

As the plains between the mountain ranges opened beneath him, Shan gradually noticed that his mental journey was unusual. 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 Jingtun, 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 swallowed him, and the dark forest canopy 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. He staunched the bleeding and 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 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 as 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 had warded 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 judgment, 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 cooked 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 sank 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 fenthakrabi, he realized that the female was controlling the beasts with her mind and using them to prevent the men from reaching him.

His loyal men prevailed though, and Shan felt a great love for them. 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 failed. 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. 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. He retrieved his saddlebags and worked quickly to prepare some bandages. "Do you know how close they are?" he said.

Shan replied faintly that he was not sure.

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. "Are they rys?" he inquired while he worked.

"I think they are rys," 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.

Lowering his voice, he said, "Shan, this looks bad. How long do you need to recover?"

"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 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 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 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 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 long 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. He would have to win it all over again.

17. Sweet Waters of Ruin

Tempet staggered blindly at his sister's side. Alloi tried to block some of his pain, but tricking his nerves into disregarding the deep burns was difficult. Despite the frightening damage, Alloi believed that she could restore her brother. It would take prolonged healing spells and she had to get him to the rejuvenating waters of Kwellstan.

The tabre had built the forest city around springs endowed with the power to renew health. The city's exquisite spas had once been the envy of the world, and tabre and humans had traded their riches to partake of the famous waters of Kwellstan.

As Alloi neared Kwellstan, she could feel the power percolating upward through the ground. She expected the dams and artificial pools to be broken, but the wondrous waters were still flowing.

"I must stop," Tempet gasped.

"You need to get to Kwellstan," Alloi insisted.

"It is too far," he moaned and sagged in her arms.

Holding him tight, Alloi kept his feet underneath him. "Keep going. We must get some distance from the rys King," she said.

Miserably, Tempet snarled. When he had believed that the hated rys was dead, his wounds had been tolerable, but learning that the rys King had survived scourged his blasted skin. Gripping his sister, he gave himself over to her guidance.

Night fell before they reached the ruins at the heart of the valley. Alloi smelled the water and her skin tingled as she looked at the stars over the lake. She was dragging Tempet now and his feet kept catching on the tree roots that had burst through the broken road into Kwellstan.

Despite the decay evident beneath her feet, Alloi imagined the city as it had been. Cloaked by the night, the dim outlines of the buildings that still lorded over the trees did not have to be ruins if she did not want them to be. The layout of the streets and buildings triggered vivid memories of visits to Kwellstan. She saw the faces of friends and family and heard their fair voices.

Alloi stopped. Closing her eyes, she let warm memories slip around her like the arms of an imagined lover. The comfort was brief. Fond memories were as a drug that has ceased to cure an illness. Alloi cursed time for dragging her forward, forever farther from the gentle days before the war and a tolerable life.

A moan from Tempet completed her journey to the present. She continued toward the gurgling springs and stopped picturing Kwellstan as it had been.

The encroaching forest now clogged the wide avenues instead of bustling traffic. At the center of the city, the Plaza of the Waters now matched its name more completely. The walls that had once contained the springs had cracked and the water streamed across the plaza on its way to the lake. The insistent flow had eroded the paving stones and carved channels into the ground. At the first stream, Alloi eased her brother down to the mossy bank.

So close to the spring water, Tempet sighed and extended a limp hand into the cold stream. Alloi scooped some of the water into her mouth. Not until the blessed water went down her throat did she fully realize her tremendous thirst. The water was as sweet as ever and it renewed body. Although the physical relief was welcome after the battle with the rys, her soul could gain nothing from the water.

Making a sponge from a clump of moss, she began to dab the water onto Tempet's wounds and

ease small drinks into his mouth. He moaned softly but gratefully.

"I will begin to heal you soon," Alloi promised. "Your eyes can be repaired, but you will need to sleep for several days while I work on you."

"Must find Shan," Tempet hissed, close to delirium.

Shan, she thought. *So that is your name.*

"No, you must rest, dear Brother," Alloi said. "The rys has not followed. You have hurt him as badly as he hurt you."

"Then I must go finish him!" Tempet said and actually tried to get up.

"Tempet, be reasonable," she insisted and easily restrained him. "If you do not let me heal you, then you will not live to fight another day, my brave warrior."

Mollified by her words, he accepted the limitations imposed by his injuries. When Alloi started her healing spells, the violent storm clouds passed from Tempet's mind, replaced by his soft appreciation for Alloi. Although the fate of the tabre tortured him, he thanked the cosmos that his twin sister had survived. As her power soaked into his damaged flesh, he drifted into a deep sleep that the pain could not penetrate.

Alloi worked her magic until exhaustion required that she stop. While repairing her brother, her focus on him had been total, and it was not until she stopped that she noticed that she was not alone.

A throaty growl greeted her from the darkness and cat eyes sparkled at her.

"Come here," she invited wearily and extended a hand.

The broad paws of the panther padded silently toward her and the animal placed its sleek head beneath her palm.

"Oh, did he hurt you?" Alloi purred and petted the large predator that was no threat to her. "I am sorry I made you attack him. I was afraid."

The animal rubbed her with its muscular shoulder and almost knocked her over with the force of its affection.

"Watch over us, my friend," Alloi instructed.

Stretching out beside her brother, Alloi went to sleep. The panther moved to the edge of the plaza, sprang to the top of a broken wall, and settled down to monitor the tabre.

When Alloi awoke, the sun was directly overhead and warming her dark skin. The panther was gone, but she had no doubt that it had watched over them through the night. She looked at Tempet, who remained deep in his healing slumber. Her strong spells had helped him immensely and already his skin was growing back. The ashy crust that had been his skin was splitting and revealing the tender new flesh beneath.

With Tempet's condition under control, Alloi decided to explore. She had been away for a long time and there was too much that she did not know. She needed to apply herself to learning more about what was going in the world instead of following Tempet on a violent rampage. Cynically, she admitted to herself that there was one thing that had not changed since her time, and that was the strength of rys. Alloi remembered that the tabre had looked down on the rys, but they had been wrong to think the rys inferior.

Alloi sat up and absently tugged on a lock of hair behind her ear while scanning the plaza. The gushing waters sparkled in their streams and flowering vines laced the sides of the ancient structures. Bees hummed over the sweet blooms in the hot sun, and Alloi envied their simple lives over the soft petals.

Across the plaza rose the Altular, which remained an imposing building even after centuries of decay. A broad flight of three hundred and sixty six steps allowed ascendance of the otherwise smooth and steep sides of the conical building that was quartered into tiers with the smallest at the top. Only Nebakarz priests of the Kwellstan Sect had been allowed to climb the Altular, which they did every four years for a day of meditation. Alloi supposed that there was no one to stop her

now.

She splashed across the plaza to the Altular. The fountain that had been at the base of the temple stairway was now a jumble of broken statues and shrubs. The faces of the fanciful tabre spirits and animals that had once frolicked over the spurting fountain had faded and the joy was gone from the art.

Alloi pushed her way through the gnarly vegetation that clustered around the temple and mounted the steps. Even if her civilization was extinct, Alloi still experienced a sense of awe as she climbed the holy building that had been forbidden to most tabre. The steps were steep and she felt the strain in her thighs. When she reached the top, a sheen of sweat glistened on her body.

At the top, a stiff breeze suddenly hit her as if she had startled the wind. A bare altar was in the middle of the platform and it reminded Alloi of an unwanted piece of furniture left behind by a family that has moved away. Even so, the weathered platform retained a hint of the ceremonies that had been performed there for many centuries. On the sacred day when the priests ascended the temple, the most powerful one sat upon the altar and led the meditation. In this ceremony and others like it, the Nebakarz priests had increased their power, or so they said.

As heiress to Nufal's future, Alloi had diminished respect for the forgotten tabre religion. During her former life, the state religion of the tabre had possessed an ultimate authority in her mind and deserved respect. The Nebakarz had sought to conceptualize the divine in its totality, but now reality convinced Alloi to reject their arrogance. They had not even been worthy of the humans who worshipped them. Their magic and their prayers had failed when the rys had dared to judge them.

Alloi hopped on top of the altar and experienced a slight thrill when she imagined how appalled the tabre priests would be if they could see her now. She settled into a cross-legged position facing west. Before, the Nebakarz priests had always begun their meditations facing east, but Alloi no longer had use for their tradition. To the west rose the Rysamand and it was in that direction that she sent her mind.

She dragged her perception toward the place that she dreaded to look upon, but she could delay no longer an inspection of the Quinsanomar. She expected to feel the mad despair of the Deamedron long before she saw them, but she encountered no harsh walls of suffering. The sight of the broken and tilting monoliths entered her mind, and she discovered that the Deamedron were no more. Far away in Kwellstan, tears fell from her physical eyes as she rejoiced in the knowledge that the souls had escaped their cruel bondage to the living world. The enslaved souls of her parents were free, and Alloi was spared the experience of encountering their condemned spirits.

With the horror of the Deamedron gone, a tiny portion of Alloi's emotional torment fell away.

Relieved, Alloi moved her awareness into the mountains of her ancient enemy. What Alloi saw puzzled her. The rys still lived in the Rysamand, but Jingtun remained the only city. After thousands of years, she had expected the triumphant rys to occupy and colonize the region. Even more puzzling was the work being done in the pass that entered the Rysamand on the east. Crews of human workers were repairing a ruined road that looked as neglected as the roads in Nufal.

Did the rys find no fortune in their victory? she hoped.

The absence of any civilization in Nufal, except for the smattering of humans by the mountains, confused Alloi as well. She knew humans to be prolific and insistent about occupying good land, and she searched for more signs of settlement on the plains. Her mind pushed south until she had stretched to the limit of her mental powers. The plains had just begun the transition into forests when she finally located more humans. They appeared to be in a military sort of camp and in the midst of building a large log fort.

Alloi observed them as they labored and eventually decided that all of them were descendants of the humans who had once lived with the tabre and served them. Apparently, the eastern humans were only just returning to the region of Nufal, and Alloi wondered if they were associated with the eastern man she had seen with western men. After more consideration, she concluded that the men in Nufal were obviously allied with Jingtun, as evidenced by their association with rys, and it was possible that the humans in the south were independent of them. No rys were present at the building site of the fort, and Alloi preferred to think that they were returning to reclaim what had once been their home.

Strained by the extensive mental journey, Alloi retracted her awareness and returned to her body. She stretched out on the altar to rest for a while and admire the expanse of forest encircled by the mountains. As the sun danced with golden shoes on the green forest canopy, she considered the

group of humans who guarded the wounded rys King.

Dreibrand dozed with his sword across his legs. Occasionally his awareness brushed with wakefulness and he would peek at Shan. After confirming that Shan was unmolested, Dreibrand's head would loll and he would fall back asleep. He had no cause to judge that the time was safe to rest, but he and his men were exhausted, and after the crazy night, he hoped that their enemies had to rest as well.

The freedom of sleep removed the distance between Dreibrand and Vetanium, and he dreamed that he was with his family. Being in a position to directly defend his family comforted him, and as always, he considered Miranda's beauty to be a worthy cause for his courage.

Her inspiring image faded when Astar pushed Dreibrand's head aside to nibble on the bark of the tree that he leaned against. Automatically, Dreibrand petted the nose of the colt and muttered agreeably to the animal.

Slanted lines of light strained through the trees, offering the forest a rosy farewell before the dusk. Gulang had stirred before the other men and was already scrounging through their rations to prepare some food for them. Dreibrand appreciated the attentiveness of the warrior and his consideration for his comrades.

"You should gather some firewood before it gets too dark," Dreibrand suggested.

Gulang hesitated before deciding to give his opinion. "My Lord, do you think a fire would be prudent?"

"They are rys, Gulang," Dreibrand said simply.

A little embarrassed, Gulang apologized and immediately started to gather fuel.

Aubren sat up next. "Kezanada like sitting in the cold dark, Sir," he said and rubbed his neck that had been resting on his saddle.

"I doubt they like it, and please do not call Gulang Kezanada," Dreibrand said.

"Yes Sir," Aubren said and reflected that it would be difficult to train his mind to avoid the label.

Dreibrand moved beside Shan. Pulling off a glove, he held a hand under the rys's nostrils but detected no air movement. It was distressing to see Shan so cold and immobile, and Dreibrand only had his faith in Shan's power for reassurance.

As the men divvied some rations, they wondered aloud how long their food supply would have to last.

"Unfortunately, I expect to be stuck right here for at least two or three days," Dreibrand explained. He was not terribly worried about their food. Nufalese were not skimping about packing provisions for any trip.

"At least we do not have to go far for water," Ven offered pleasantly. "And it's good water too."

"Yes, our King chose a good place to stop," Dreibrand agreed.

The men furtively glanced at Shan, and Kyel softly asked, "Sir, have you seen this before?"

"Yes. This is how Shan heals himself. He will recover," Dreibrand said.

"But what will we do about the other ones?" Aubren asked apprehensively.

Dreibrand cleared his throat, knowing that he needed to sound confident. "Shan has hurt one of them very badly, and our warding crystals will protect us from the female," he answered.

Aubren nodded and tried to think positively although his hand immediately went to the precious warding crystal in his pocket.

Despite their fears, the night passed quietly. The men took shifts at the watch, which allowed them to catch up on their sleep. In the morning, they were refreshed and spent the day fortifying their

position. After collecting saplings, they sharpened them into stakes and drove them into the ground around their camp. Angled outward, the points offered some deterrence to whatever might approach. They prepared spears as well. As the dusk inevitably approached, they collected their horses that had been browsing nearby and tethered them inside the protective circle.

Shan remained in his hibernating state. At the heart of their small camp, he lay on the ground looking like a sarcophagus of himself with his shield placed on his chest.

This night around the fire, the conversation did not turn toward their mysterious enemies. The hard work during the day had reminded them enough of their peril. Although a drink might have been nice to settle their nerves, Dreibrand refrained from pulling the bottle out and his men did not suggest it.

Deciding to take the opportunity to get to know Gulang better, Dreibrand asked, "Gulang, what tribe are you from originally?"

The former Kezanada automatically flinched a little when openly asked a personal question. After glancing at Ven, Gulang replied, "The Hirqua Tribe."

"I thought so," Dreibrand said, pleased with his judgment. "And what makes a young man decide to leave his tribe and join a mercenary society?"

Gulang shielded his shyness with cleverness and boldly rejoined, "My Lord, perhaps you already know. You have chosen to live apart from your people."

Dreibrand raised his eyebrows at the comeback and the other men chuckled.

"Very observant of you, Gulang. I can see why Faychan kept you close to him," Dreibrand commented.

"I strive to serve well," Gulang said, but he was troubled by his own words. He lowered his eyes and thought about Faychan. The fallen Overlord had personally recruited him a few years ago, and Gulang felt a little guilty about serving another lord, even if he had been ordered to do it. He wondered if he should have been bolder and presumed to advise Faychan against his resignation of power. But so far, Gulang had not seen any evidence that Faychan had made a poor choice in his deal with Dreibrand. In Gulang's estimation, the easterner was a worthy leader, who offered him opportunity, which he badly needed.

Dreibrand judged that he had been too intrusive with his question. "We all have things that are private, Gulang," he said.

The generous statement impressed Gulang because only a leader very secure in his power would bother to grant an apology to a man in his service. Gulang began to believe that Dreibrand did not want to force his loyalty, but instead, that Dreibrand expected to genuinely earn it.

Gulang was about to ask his lord to excuse his impertinence when a fierce gust of wind struck their position. The swirling spout of energy sucked their campfire into oblivion and sparks sprayed the men as darkness engulfed them.

Dreibrand was the first on his feet. "Arm yourselves!" he cried.

Steel slipped out of scabbards with a light ring and spears clattered as the men grabbed them off the pile that they had made. Dreibrand could see little beyond the dim glow of the warding crystal on his sword, but he heard the distressing sound of a large animal approaching through the crunching forest litter.

Dreibrand jumped closer to Shan and prepared to defend his ryl friend. The men ran to the edge of the small barricade and readied themselves to harass whatever was coming while it was stalled against the spikes.

As long as no attack spells hit them, Dreibrand hoped for a good chance, but when he saw white light blaze in the eyes of the horses, he recognized that disaster would consume them. He only had time to curse himself once for not guessing that the female would seize upon the minds of their mounts.

The horses squealed and pulled their tethers loose just as the beast reached the barricade. The white glow in its eyes revealed the massive head of a bear.

The men dodged the compressed stampede of possessed horses, and no one had a chance to spear the bear. The horses broke the barricade because the spikes were angled outward, and the mad rush of animals destroyed the meager protection that the men had labored on all day.

The bear entered the camp and the mighty beast charged straight for Shan's vulnerable body. Dreibrand used all of his human will to override his instincts and stand firmly in the path of the shaggy tornado of claws. Fortunately, the protective aura from his warding crystal interfered with the magic driving the animal to attack, and it faltered when it neared him. Dreibrand hacked at its broad skull. The bear had enough of its own sense to dodge the sword, but it did not see the spear that Aubren heaved at it with all his might.

The point lodged in its side, and the animal roared with pain and rage. The bear lunged after Aubren with awful speed, and he retreated. As the bear's jaws sought Aubren, Dreibrand slashed at the animal's side, but the heavy fur deceived his keen blade and the cut was shallow. The bear spun toward Dreibrand.

Fueled by intense courage, Dreibrand knocked back the swinging paws with his sword. Dreibrand had beaten down enemies on the battlefield many times, but he was no match for the bulky bear. The beast finally braved the enchanted steel with the full onslaught of its mighty frame. Its face and chest suffered two bad slashes, but Dreibrand was forced back until his heels were touching Shan's body.

Enraged by the smell of its blood, the bear roared heavily, and the outside mind compelled it to continue its mission. Dreibrand aimed for its heart with all his strength and dove into the bestial maelstrom. A powerful paw obliterated his charge and slapped him down. The bear would have instantly been on top of Dreibrand and ended the duel if the other four men had not stopped it with their spears. They attacked the bear from both sides almost simultaneously. Roaring in pain, the bear whirled one way and then another, unable to choose which way it wanted to retaliate first. Although it now bled from multiple wounds, the bear fought on, but the mind that had provoked the attack took pity on its powerful servant and directed the animal to withdraw.

The bear loped away with two spears hanging from its sides. The men did not have a moment to rejoice in their victory because an attack spell hit them. Their wardings protected them from death but they were thrown to the ground and stunned.

Dreibrand's powerful warding crystal prevented him from losing consciousness. Renewing his grip on his sword, he turned his head and looked at Shan. Lightning-like energy snapped all over the rys's stiff body like ants crawling on rotten fruit. Almost without thought, Dreibrand threw himself on top of Shan. He screamed when he landed inside the shell of magic that clung to the rys. Driven by the wretched pain, he reached for Shan's shield that had been knocked aside during the struggle with the bear. When Dreibrand dragged the bright shield over his head, he felt instant relief. Releasing his sword, he held the shield with both hands and covered his head and Shan's head with it until the terrible storm of magic relented and the torn camp was dark again.

Dreibrand sat up dizzily with streaks of light whirling through his vision. He twitched as energy continued to pluck his nerves at random. Finally, he succumbed and joined the others in unconsciousness.

The mind that had orchestrated the attack continued to labor in trance, but only to guide the horses and the bear to Kwellstan. Alloi was pleased to have deprived her enemies of their horses and looked forward to selecting mounts for herself and Tempet when the animals arrived. Alloi planned to heal the bear of its wounds as well. She lamented that she could not kill the vulnerable rys King, but his shield absorbed too much of her spell's power.

18. The Only Reward

Faychan has acted as a friend in the past, but trust is not a word I can put on him—Miranda, diary entry from 29th day of Planting, Year 5 Nufalese calendar.

Miranda sat in front of her house unable to enjoy the sunny day that lifted young crops higher in the fields. She looked up from her sewing after every few stitches to check the road. Since Bian had delivered his terrible news, Miranda had hoped for more messengers from Elendra, or even better, the return of Dreibrand.

But the road was as quiet as her daughter snoozing beside her in a basket. Miranda adjusted the shirt on her lap and moved to the next button. Sahleen had carved the buttons from cow horn, and when Miranda completed attaching them to the shirt, Dreibrand's new clothes would be done. Miranda had used prairie grasses to dye the cloth because he had wanted clothes that would blend into the land.

With each stitch, Miranda longed to do more for Dreibrand than pull thread through the fabric. A whole week had passed since she learned of his peril, and the silence from the valley screamed for attention.

Only Dreibrand's specific order not to send help kept Miranda from acting. Although his command was hard to obey, she understood his reasoning. After all, Shan was with him and the situation in Vetanium could not be neglected. The latest scouting report indicated that Faychan and the rest of the refugees would be arriving soon, and Dreibrand relied on her to represent Nufal. Miranda would have resented the precarious position that Dreibrand had left her in if she were not so desperately worried about him.

The boys came running around the house and Esseldan tackled Deltane. They tumbled in a disorderly tangle and their wrestling added to the dirt already on their clothes. Miranda frowned but resisted the urge to criticize the mess they were making of themselves. She had been keeping them in so much and they were at least playing near the house as she had instructed. But when Esseldan tore off the warding crystal that she had tied around Deltane's neck, her tolerance dissolved. The small beaded pouch that contained the crystal had barely hit the ground when Miranda yelled, and her oldest son instantly knew what his mistake had been.

Miranda scooped the pouch off the ground and scolded Esseldan as she tied the charm back around Deltane's neck. "Have a care for what you do, Ess. Your little brother will probably lose this thing as it is."

Deltane defended his youth. "I won't lose it. Father said I need it."

Her chest tightened with worry just like the knot that she put in the leather cord.

"Mama, I don't understand," Esseldan said. "Rys are nice. They won't hurt us."

His innocence saddened Miranda. Esseldan had only been an infant when Onja had held him hostage, and the boy had been too young to remember his sister who had been murdered by the rys Queen.

"We do not know these rys," Miranda explained. "They are not like Zanah, Shan, or Jolen. Now get inside."

"No!" Esseldan protested sharply.

"We've hardly been out at all!" Deltane added.

Miranda reached for Esseldan because he instigated the defiance, but the boy eluded her with well-practiced moves. Deltane scrambled after his brother and both boys squealed excitedly and ran around the corner of Sahleen's home.

Zanah poked her blue head out the front window and hollered at the boys to obey their mother. The news from the mountains had especially disturbed her and she took Dreibrand's warning to protect the children as seriously as Miranda.

Zanah offered to retrieve the boys but Miranda told her not to bother because she spotted Tytido approaching.

"Tytido, can you get the boys?" she called and gestured behind the buildings.

With important matters on his mind, Tytido took a second before he registered the small request. He nodded and began to track the boys.

Miranda appreciated Tytido's willingness to deal with them. With Dreibrand gone, the boys needed a little male attention to rein in their bad behavior. Miranda heard some good-natured shouting behind the house before Tytido returned, dragging a child with each hand.

"Uncle Tydo, take us fishing," Deltane suggested. He planted his feet stubbornly and left skid marks as Tytido pulled him toward his mother.

"Sorry, Deltane. There is no time today," Tytido explained. He sympathized with the small boy who could not quite grasp why the adults had become so serious and stern lately.

"Then let Ess and me go. We're old 'nuff," Deltane pressed.

Tytido glanced at Miranda, obviously wanting her to respond to the boy, but she chose not to add to her son's frustration with a verbal rejection. She picked up Victoria and opened the door for Tytido and her unruly sons.

To Tytido, she said, "He is just like his father. Only wants his way."

"I'd say he takes after both parents," Tytido said.

Predictably, Miranda appeared mildly offended by the comment, which amused Tytido. He deposited the reluctant boys in the house and Miranda followed them inside.

"I want to discuss Faychan," Tytido said.

The boys renewed their protest about having their play cut short, but Zanah intervened. Esseldan minded the scolding from his rys nanny and when he quieted, Deltane relented as well.

"Come boys. We will play a game in your room," Zanah suggested. "Your mother needs to talk about important things."

As the boys stomped down the hall, Miranda took a seat and settled her baby on her lap. Tytido told her that Faychan was close enough to be in Vetanium that evening. He added that his scouts were already in their lookout positions. If the Kezanada harmed him when he rode out to meet them, then Vetanium would have advance warning.

Miranda nervously fingered the ornate handle of her sword. After years of peace, the weapon felt unfamiliar at her hip. She would have preferred to leave the ancient weapon in its storage chest with her memories of war, but the presence of the keen blade sharpened her thoughts in this time of danger.

"In your honor guard, take half of our men and half former Kezanada," Miranda instructed. "Let them see that their brothers already serve us."

Tytido crossed his arms and complained, "So, Miranda, we are just going to keep pretending that everything is going to work out?"

"I am not pretending," Miranda said forcefully.

Determined not to have a hot argument with Dreibrand's wife, Tytido took a deep breath. "Take your family to the secret camp that I have set up until I see how Faychan is going to act," he said.

"I will go there if your scouts bring us a warning," she said.

"Why not just go now?" Tytido said, frustrated by her determination to show Faychan a fearless façade.

Miranda recognized that Tytido was sincerely trying to cope with a difficult situation that was not of his choosing. "Faychan has nothing to gain by hurting us. And if Faychan were to attack us, surely Shan would avenge us," she said.

"I would rather protect you than rely upon punishment if he does us harm," Tytido countered.

"And I thank you for your concern, but Tytido, you must believe that Dreibrand would not have made this deal if he did not think that Faychan would come in friendship," Miranda said.

"Why does he trust Faychan?" Tytido demanded irritably.

Miranda rolled her eyes with exasperation. She lost no love on Faychan either, but she could trust Dreibrand's judgment. "They see opportunity in each other and have a liking for each other," Miranda said.

Tytido growled with deep skepticism and turned toward the fireplace. The cold ashes did not inspire optimism.

Miranda continued. She pointed out that the wild rys were a certain danger and that Faychan offered only a possible threat. She added that, once Faychan arrived with the rest of the warriors, Vetanium would have many more defenders and then they could consider sending some men to find and aid Dreibrand and Shan.

"Brilliant female thinking," Tytido muttered.

Miranda narrowed her eyes but calculated her next statement instead of blurting with anger. Knowing how to manipulate his attitude, she calmly said, "You go hide, Tytido. I will go welcome Faychan and the new people to our settlement. I am not afraid to stand up and say that this land is mine. I accept that we do not have enough people to defend this place from anybody. Our only choice is to build upon what we have, and we cannot do that by hiding."

Tytido's upper lip twitched with great offense, but he did not immediately reply. No matter how much Miranda irked him, he always ended up respecting her, mostly because of the esteem that Dreibrand had for her, but also because she was brave and cunning.

Seeing that Tytido's reason would prevail, Miranda entreated him gently now. "I need your help, Tytido. With wild murderous rys upon the land, I cannot take my children and hide in the hills. I must have as many warriors around us as I can." She adjusted her squirming daughter in her arms.

Tytido's anger with her dissipated. She had made her point well, and he could not refuse her request for help.

"I will do my part, but I will only take two Kezanada in my honor guard, as a token," he said.

Miranda smiled, satisfied by his compromise. "Good. When you get back, bring Faychan here. We will hold him in this house," Miranda said. Her choice surprised Tytido, and he expressed more doubts.

"It will send a strong message of inclusion to the other Kezanada," Miranda explained although she clearly did not relish the thought of sharing a roof with the old Masterspy. "But of course he must be under guard."

"I shall guard you myself," Tytido said.

"We will prepare a large dinner while you are away," Miranda said.

"Finally something to look forward to," Tytido said and he headed out the door.

Tytido perceived nothing suspicious when he intercepted Faychan and his followers out on the plains. Half of the group consisted of women, children, and servants, and as Dreibrand had said, they did not appear as threatening as Tytido had imagined. Faychan was thinner than Tytido remembered him as well.

For the first time, Tytido could honestly appreciate the infusion of settlers that Dreibrand had obtained. This would give them enough people to start a third settlement next year, and Dreibrand had promised Tytido that the third settlement would be his estate.

Tytido scanned the Kezanada warriors throughout the group. Their black or gray garb was drab compared to his multi-colored cloak that advertised his Hirqua identity.

Faychan expressed his surprise that Dreibrand had not come to receive him, and Tytido enjoyed giving him a haughty reply. "My escort should be honor enough for you," he said.

Faychan, who rode with his visor appropriately raised, lifted an impudent eyebrow. "When one lives in the middle of nothing, he quickly assumes he is everything," he commented.

"It does not sound like you are impressed with the Wilderness, Faychan," Tytido said.

"Oh, I am impressed," Faychan insisted and gestured sweepingly at the plains and mountains. "Definitely plenty of land for everybody."

Tytido shot Faychan a look that told him not to presume too much. Tytido noted the cloak twined through Faychan's gear with its scarlet-dyed fur collar. The splash of color was an affectation reserved in Kezanada society for the Overlord. Tytido wondered if Faychan chose not to wear the

garment because of his resignation of rank or the warm prairie wind.

Faychan continued, "Now really, where is Dreibrand?"

"He is in the mountains with King Shan," Tytido answered.

"Oh, yes, the rys King has ventured down from the mountains. All of Jingtun is in quite a dither over his sudden departure," Faychan reported freely. "And what is Dreibrand doing with King Shan?"

"I thought you gave up spying," Tytido said.

"Who is spying?" Faychan retorted incredulously. "It's an honest question."

Tytido reminded himself not to be so antagonistic even if it came naturally when he was around Faychan. The news of their now common threat might actually prevent or at least delay an attack from Faychan.

"Faychan, we have problems," he confessed.

"We do?" Faychan said dramatically, more surprised by Tytido's use of the word "we" than the prospect of having problems.

Tytido paused, uncertain of how much he should say. He looked at the column of raggedy refugees weighed down with the supplies that they had purchased with Dreibrand's money. They did not appear appreciative of the delay while Tytido talked to Faychan. Despite the exposed faces of the warriors flanking Faychan, they intimidated Tytido because they still had the look of Kezanada.

Tytido realized that his actions at this moment would be absolutely critical to the opinion that the warriors would form of him. He forced himself to speak with candor.

"Rys have appeared in the mountains," Tytido said. "And they have already killed two of our men."

Faychan blinked with surprise. His complex mind had rapidly generated many guesses as to what Tytido might consider a problem, but Faychan had not expected it to be anything serious.

"What rys?" he said.

"Nobody knows. We believe that they are not from Jingtun, but from Nufal," Tytido answered.

Faychan was stunned.

"Aren't you glad you came now?" Tytido joked.

Faychan acknowledged the quip with a weak smile. "Well, it can't be that bad. How many rys?" he said.

"Two that we know of," Tytido replied.

Relieved by the figure, Faychan said, "Then King Shan should have them taken care of in no time."

"That is our hope," Tytido said. "But Lord Dreibrand has sent word to Vetanium that we are to be cautious. These rys are powerful. So we should get moving."

That night when the refugees entered Vetanium, the former Kezanada who had arrived earlier welcomed the rest of their group and helped them get settled in. For the most part, the reunions were happy, except for Gulang's wife, Tiah, who had to learn that her husband was on a dangerous mission. Despite the disappointment, she was proud of her man for being chosen to serve the new Overlord so closely.

When Faychan was informed that he would be staying at Miranda's house, he received the news happily and ignored the two men at his elbows. Tytido had chosen Kashil and Bian to help him watch over their notorious guest.

Miranda had arranged a formal greeting for Faychan because she had promised Dreibrand that she would foster friendship. She wore a new white summer dress that softly draped the curves of her body, but the sword that remained on her hip blunted her feminine aura.

She and Sahleen had prepared a good meal, and when Faychan entered, all of the children,

washed and well dressed, were there to meet him along with Zanah and Jolen.

"Miranda!" Faychan sang. He approached her, but with typical western manners, he did not touch her. "A pleasure to see you as always."

"Faychan," she said with considerably less enthusiasm.

Turning to Sahleen, he said, "And we have not been introduced. Dreibrand did not mention that he had two wives."

Sahleen blushed and stifled a giggle.

"This is Sahleen. She is a servant," Miranda said sharply.

"Oh, my mistake," Faychan apologized. He shot a wink at Tytido, who immediately overanalyzed the gesture for hidden meanings.

Miranda then introduced her children, Zanah, and Sahleen's children. "And this is Jolen, our resident rys physician. Dreibrand said that you were hurt badly and I thought that Jolen should attend to you," she suggested.

Jolen had a gentle face and tender hands. He was a truly kind being and he had always known that he would use his magic for healing. "Pleased to meet you, Faychan. How are you faring?" he said.

"Mmm, no one is throwing dirt on top of me yet," Faychan replied and gave the rys a critical look.

"Jolen is prepared to examine you now. Your wounds must be aggravated after your long journey," Miranda said. She glanced at Jolen because she wanted him to press the issue harder. Before Faychan had arrived, she had told Jolen to read Faychan's mind during an exam and attempt to learn if Faychan plotted any treachery.

Although uncomfortable with the concept of being her clandestine interrogator, Jolen dutifully inquired about the nature of Faychan's wounds.

"Later, Master Healer," Faychan responded. "This food smells so wonderful; it leaves me only with hunger pains."

Miranda hid her disappointment over not getting Faychan into Jolen's hands. "Sahleen, please serve us," she said and seated herself at the head of the table.

Zanah started herding the children into the kitchen where they would eat, but Deltane slipped away from group and approached Faychan who was seating himself at the table.

"Do you know my father?" he asked.

Faychan lured the boy closer with a beguiling smile.

"Deltane, come here," Miranda ordered.

Faychan detected the fear in her voice. It was good to know that he was still considered dangerous. Holding Deltane's attention, he replied that he was an old friend of his father's.

"Are you gonna live with us?" Deltane said as he imagined the impatient look on his mother's pretty face.

"Yes, but I hope to build my own house soon," Faychan replied.

"Oh, we build houses all the time. Where do you want it?" Deltane continued, but before he could get an answer, his mother said his name again sharply. Knowing better than to ignore her twice, Deltane sauntered over to his mother and leaned against her side. She put an arm around him, and Faychan noted the blend of Dreibrand and Miranda's features on the face of the boy.

The other men and Jolen took their seats, insulating Miranda from her guest. Sahleen placed several dishes of food on the table and then escorted Deltane back to the kitchen with the other children. Everyone began to pass the food dishes around.

While Faychan served himself from a bowl passed to him from Tytido, he said, "Because we are eating out of the same dishes, I can assume you have decided not to poison me."

"Not today," Tytido said before he could contain the little threat.

"Ah, there's the Tytido I remember," Faychan said triumphantly. "I was wondering why you were being so nice to me."

Miranda intervened, "Faychan, please, do not think such things of us. Dreibrand has welcomed you, and he regrets that he cannot be here to greet you."

"I am sure he does, especially because such pressing problems keep him away," Faychan said. "Tytido told me about these rys that are killing people."

"I see Tytido has informed you of our problem," Miranda said.

"It was important to make our new settlers aware of the danger," Tytido explained.

"Of course," Miranda agreed. Like Tytido, she found it difficult to share information with Faychan.

"I am appreciative of the warning," Faychan said. "But I am still not too clear on what is going on. Where could these rys have come from?"

Bian spoke up and explained that Dreibrand and Shan agreed with his belief that the rys were from Nufal and not Jingtun. He also related his firsthand details of the encounter with the male and female rys.

"They must have been living far back in the mountains," Tytido added. "When Dreibrand and I first heard them, we were in an area that we have only started to explore."

Faychan absorbed the information. After finishing a mouthful of food, he said, "So, Shan and Dreibrand are hunting down these rys right now. How many warriors do they have with them?"

Bian glanced at Miranda, who indicated that he could answer. "Four when I left them," he said.

"Four!" Faychan cried. "What are you doing here then?"

"Dreibrand said not to send help," Miranda said, although she shared in her associates' dismay over the order.

Faychan quickly unscrambled the dynamics of the situation. "You were worried that I would attack you. That is why you have kept all of your warriors here," he surmised.

Tytido concentrated on rearranging the food on his plate. Without denying Faychan's apt suspicion, Miranda responded, "There was the consideration that sending more men into the mountains would only provide the wild rys with more people to hurt. As Bian has said, they are very powerful."

Allowing a touch of offense to appear on his face, Faychan said, "Well, I have not attacked you, so I suggest you send more warriors to assist good King Shan and Dreibrand."

Worry for her husband strained Miranda's attractive face. She was not so certain that her resolve on this issue could withstand criticism. Not only did she fear for Dreibrand, but she also wanted to defend the second settlement because Elendra was her estate. Being bossed around by Faychan was not enough to change her mind though.

"I am not sure that I am ready to start keeping your counsel," Miranda stated.

"Why? You should know to do what I say by now," Faychan said.

Miranda resented his arrogance and corrected him. "And you should have killed Kalek when I told you to," she said.

Miranda's cold rejoinder forced Faychan to adjust his attitude. Even if he did possess more warriors, he noticed that he was Miranda's hostage and that he should not provoke her temper.

"Miranda," he purred. "You are quite right. But, I offer my advice in good faith. I have sincerely given your husband my pledge of loyalty."

"And what does your pledge of loyalty mean?" Tytido demanded because Faychan had lived most of his life profiting by serving opposing sides, spying on both, pulling strings for his own advantage when he could.

Faychan refused to be shamed by Tytido's incredulity. "Lord Dreibrand," he said with the emphasis on Lord. "Has bought food for my people and offered them shelter when I could no longer help them, so in this case, my pledge of loyalty means quite a bit."

Tytido rolled his eyes and shoved some food into his mouth. The only thing impressive about Faychan wrapping himself in selfless concern for his followers was his delivery of the words.

Deciding that the dinner conversation was growing surly, Miranda praised Faychan for coming to them in peace. She paused then to reflect on what she had said. If, as it seemed, Faychan was not going to attack, then she had obeyed Dreibrand's prohibition on sending help long enough.

She announced, "I think now that sending warriors to look for Dreibrand would be wise."

"You are wise to take my advice, my Lady," Faychan said. He patted the enchanted sword at his hip that was his souvenir from the war between Shan and Onja. "And I should be the one to go. I possess warding magic. And this blade was supposedly forged during the Great War to be used against Nufalese rys," he said.

"Are you up to the trip?" Jolen inquired.

"I made it this far didn't I?" Faychan grumbled.

The rys physician chose not to respond to the reluctant patient.

Miranda appreciated Jolen's attempt to corner Faychan again, but she accepted that Faychan was dodging her little plan. Pursuing the subject at hand, she said, "I thank you for your assistance Faychan, but the road that has brought you to my home has been long and hard, and I insist that you rest here as my guest. Tytido will send a group of warriors in the morning."

Her order clearly disgruntled Faychan, but he decided to let Miranda keep him hostage if it made her feel better.

Bian volunteered to lead the search party. Tytido approved, and he began to discuss with Bian the size and composition of the search party.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding Faychan, Miranda felt some relief now that she was sending men to look for Dreibrand. Mostly she hoped that Dreibrand was on his way home and the evening's entire conversation had been unnecessary.

Summery air pushed in from the plains, warming the lower reaches of the Tabren Mountains that normally cooled quickly with the night. Tempet and Alloi emerged from the edge of the forest. A few watch fires glowed in the distance around the human settlement on the ruins of Kahtep.

Tempet dismounted his black colt and absently stroked the neck of the animal. He had been pleased with the horses that Alloi had lured away from the humans.

He curled his lips as his senses analyzed the settlement. "There are rys here," he snarled.

"And a large group of warriors has arrived from the west," Alloi added.

"Soldiers from Jingtun have come to help their King exterminate us," Tempet concluded.

"Perhaps we should avoid them," Alloi suggested gently.

Tempet wheeled his black eyes on his sister. "No. We will attack."

"Are you so sure that you can kill a thousand men without getting us killed?" Alloi demanded.

"I have filled a thousand graves in my time," Tempet replied strongly. "But it is not the men I care about so much. It is the rys that I want."

Alloi scowled thoughtfully. She resented the nearby rys as well, but she was not so sure that they should attack a large armed settlement, especially when some of the humans possessed enchanted weapons.

"Tempet, as I have told you, I have seen human warriors in the south who I believe are not

associated with Jingtun. They are like the humans who once served us and no western peoples are among them. I say we seek them out and raise an army to take against Jingtun. Then we can concentrate on our rys enemies and let our humans deal with these humans," she proposed.

"I will not waste such time!" Tempet snapped. "I will not walk by and leave these rys to live. And we must press on to Jingtun now while its King is behind us. He has to be the most powerful rys, which means I can kill many of them before he catches up." Tempet smiled wickedly.

Although Alloi did not entirely agree with his impatient plan of attack, she accepted that they could not leave the two nearby rys unharmed. They were her enemies, and the collectively tortured soul of her whole race demanded blood.

Tempet knew that his sister was meant for better things than combat, but such a life was all that the cruel world had bequeathed them. Gently, he urged her to battle. "Dear Sister, I know you can feel the lifeforces of our loathsome enemies. They pollute our pure air with every breath. Come, let your grief taste of its only reward."

19. Attack on Vetanium

Five long days passed before Shan awoke from his healing hibernation. Although rys could live for over a thousand years and rarely felt pressed for time, Shan was appalled when Dreibrand told him how long he had been unconscious. Shan jumped to his feet urgently but grabbed his side after the sudden movement.

"Shan, take it slow," Dreibrand said and gently held his elbow.

Not until Dreibrand touched him did Shan realize that he swayed on his feet. He appreciated the supporting hand of his friend. He was relieved to see that no one else had been killed. The men were haggard and battered though, and Dreibrand's armored jacket had lost a few scales on the left sleeve. A bloody bandage peeped through the broken armor.

"Your arm," Shan whispered and reached for the torn flesh.

"I am fine for now," Dreibrand said. He was too happy about Shan's emergence from hibernation to care about where the bear claws had sliced his arm.

"My King, drink some water," Ven said and offered a canteen filled from the forest spring. "It is good water, very good water."

Shan hesitated, wary of the waters of Nufal. But he was dehydrated and had to drink. He quaffed the entire contents of the canteen, and even though he was born of the Rysamand, the splendid water renewed him. Gushing down to his stomach and soaking into his cells, the water summoned the image of the female he had seen beside the spring. She had dissolved his battle rage, and the water tasted sweet with the memory of her.

Dreibrand urged Shan to eat, and the rys accepted the strip of dried meat. As his body adjusted to a waking state, Shan's mind re-ignited with awareness and power.

"Where are the horses?" he cried.

Dreibrand recounted the bear attack and the madness that overtook the horses and made them stampede. They had tried looking for them, but the horses had fled the area and Dreibrand had refused to leave Shan in order to track them. Then Dreibrand described blocking the attack spells that had struck Shan. Fortunately, there had been no more attacks since that awful night.

"You absorbed spells meant for me?" Shan said with concern and touched Dreibrand's temple.

"I was a little scrambled the first day, but I am better now," Dreibrand answered. "Your wardings protect me."

Shan nodded reluctantly after judging that Dreibrand had not suffered any permanent damage. The memory of pain lingered in Dreibrand's mind, and Shan was grateful for the bravery of his friend.

"I will look for our horses," Shan announced. "And our enemies."

Shan was disturbed when he completed his search. He commanded the men to gather their gear

because they were going to start hiking west. He explained that he had located four of their horses and regained control of them. The animals were on their way to the meet them.

The men grabbed their saddles, excited to be on the move again.

"Did you see the rys?" Dreibrand asked.

"Yes, Dreibrand. They are riding west on two stolen horses. I am sorry, but Tempet has taken your favorite colt. We must hurry if we are to catch them before they reach Vetanium," Shan said.

Dreibrand's eyes flashed with fear for his family. "How far ahead are they?"

"Judging by their distance from us, I would say a whole day," Shan explained. He was jealous of Tempet who had the female to help him heal faster.

"Shan, use your magic to take control of their mounts and delay them," Dreibrand quickly suggested.

"I have tried!" Shan cried irritably. "They are beyond my control. Now hurry."

He started jogging westward but left his beautiful saddle behind to decay in the ancient forest. He had no need for it. He had seen the drying skeleton of his white Rysamand-bred horse outside the ruined city. Predators had depleted its flesh, and the message was not lost on Shan.

The group matched the fast pace set by Shan, who seemed to have shaken off all effects of his injury. When they intercepted the horses, they had to rotate riding double on the horses, which slowed their progress. The loss of Astar irked Dreibrand, but his desperation to protect his family drove him harder than his need to recover his colt.

Fueled by the hope of overtaking their enemies, Shan and the men rode day and night without hardly any rest. On the second night, they finally broke free of the forest and entered the hills east of Vetanium, but Shan halted the group. So close to his home, Dreibrand demanded the reason for the delay.

"Dreibrand, we cannot catch them in time," Shan said. His perception told him that Tempet and the female were only moments away from assaulting the settlement. Shan swung a leg over his horse's head and dropped to the ground.

"Damn you, ride!" Dreibrand fumed.

The other men contained their shock over the harshness of their lord's words with the rys King, but Shan forgave Dreibrand's wrath. Shan loved Miranda and her innocent children as well and he could see the danger stalking them.

"I must warn Miranda before it is too late," Shan explained. "Then I will intervene with my magic from here. You keep going. All of you keep going. They may need warded warriors to fight for them."

Dreibrand regretted his intense rudeness, but he had no time for apologies. Of course Shan had to warn Miranda. Dreibrand jumped off the horse that he shared with Gulang and seized the reins of the horse that Shan had been riding.

Refusing to accept the estimation that he could not reach his family in time, Dreibrand vaulted onto Shan's horse and immediately galloped off. With the image in his mind of his tender children in peril, Dreibrand spurred the tired mount relentlessly.

"Go. All of you, go!" Shan insisted and waved the other men onward.

They hurried to catch up to Dreibrand so they could help him fight.

Shan did not even watch them go. Already his mind was ahead of them, descending on Vetanium and focusing on Miranda's lifeforce.

Lamplight flickered on the ancient walls of Miranda's bedchamber and she viewed the rys painted on them with foreboding. For several peaceful years, she had slept with the faded rys faces watching over her, and she had imagined them encouraging her to revive their broken kingdom. But

Bian's horrible message had altered that perception. The painted rys, who had once appeared absorbed in their forgotten business, now seemed to eye her with unknown intent.

Sitting up in bed, Miranda adjusted Victoria at her side. She envied her sleeping daughter, who was unconcerned by the old walls that had overseen her birth. The sounds of Faychan and the other men talking in the front room had faded as they bedded down for the night. Miranda appreciated the security provided by Tytido and the others, but it did not compare to the innate safety Victoria derived from her mother's embrace.

Miranda hummed softly to her daughter in order to shield the baby from her nervousness. Once, as a new teenage mother, Miranda had hummed the same tune to her first daughter. Thinking about her old life always helped her deal with her current problems. She would never trade her new existence for her former wretchedness as a slave.

Calmed by her own melody, Miranda waded toward sleep, but she lifted her eyes to check the rys painting one last time before yielding to her exhaustion. Blue light illuminated the dim images and she gasped.

Clutching Victoria, she sprang to her knees on the bed. The light intensified, and a blue sphere formed within the glow. She grabbed the crystal-laden sword at her bedside, and the blue light gleamed on the blade that was always sharp and perfect. Miranda braced herself for an onslaught of rys magic.

The energy formed a translucent image of Shan, and she exhaled with relief as his mind wrapped her with his power. But her ebbing terror flowed back as Shan urgently conveyed his message.

"Miranda, they are coming to attack. Defend yourself. We are coming as fast as we can, but they will reach you first. They are powerful."

With his mind so intimately attached to her own, Miranda sensed that he was about to say more, but then his loving presence was ripped away.

"Shan!" she cried in panic.

His image disappeared and her mind felt like a tiny speck after being included in his vast awareness. Her bedchamber door flew open and Miranda threatened the intruder with the sword, but it was only Zanah.

Flinching from the blade, the female rys cried, "I sense them! They are coming." She clutched her head as if assaulted by a loud noise.

Miranda bounced out of bed and pushed her daughter into the arms of the rys nanny. Miranda yanked some clothes off a rack, and without letting go of her sword, she reclined on the bed and pulled on a pair of pants.

"Get the baby in her carrying sling," Miranda ordered as she got on some shoes.

With trembling hands, Zanah barely had the baby into her little harness before Miranda snatched the girl and started putting her arms through the shoulder straps.

"Get the boys. I'll get the men," Miranda ordered.

Fueled by the disoriented cries of her daughter, Miranda ran down the hall. Shan's urgent message replayed in her head. "We are coming," he had said, and she hoped that meant that Dreibrand was with him.

"What is happening?" Tytido shouted.

"Let go of me!" Faychan snapped because Tytido had instantly reached for him in the darkness when the commotion started.

Miranda reached back and stroked her daughter's head, trying to console the frightened baby. Speaking above the girl's whimpering, Miranda said, "Shan has just come to me in a vision. He says the rys are coming to attack and that he will not get here before they do."

Bian and Kashil roused themselves from the floor.

"We have to warn everybody quickly," Bian said. "They can strike us down in an instant."

Tytido said, "You and Kashil start alerting the settlement."

"Don't forget the Kezanada camp," Faychan added.

"They won't," Tytido grumbled as the men hurried out the door. He groped for a candle and hit his knee on a piece of furniture. "Damn! We need some light."

"Zanah will get it," Miranda said.

The rys nanny was right behind her, pushing two groggy boys down the hall. Miranda told Zanah to light some candles. The wicks flared between her magic fingers and the light revealed the terror on her face.

Deltane hugged his mother's leg and mumbled for an explanation of why he was out of bed. Esseldan hovered near Zanah and concern for his beloved nanny filled his dark eyes.

"I can sense them," Zanah announced fearfully.

"How close are they?" Faychan inquired.

"I don't know," she moaned. "But they must be close. I can't see far."

With the words barely off her lips, a spell hit the house. White energy climbed the walls and sputtered on the ceiling. Zanah screamed. She scooped up Esseldan and ran to Miranda's side.

"Your wardings are protecting us. Please stay close to me," the rys said.

Another attack spell battered the house, but the protective bubble created by the three enchanted swords in the room kept everyone from being hurt.

"Great Dacian!" Zanah shouted.

"We have to take the offensive," Faychan said. "We can't just stand here while they pound us with spells. Our wardings may not protect us forever."

"I agree," Tytido said as the crisis made him Faychan's comrade.

As if to confirm Faychan's fear, the third spell that hit the house was stronger and Miranda's senses reeled. When her disorientation passed, she heard shouting and screaming outside.

"I hear Sahleen. Help her!" Miranda ordered.

Tytido and Faychan rushed out of the house. Sahleen had been coming from next door with her children and the edge of the attack spell had hurled her to the ground with her baby. Faychan helped her up.

Inside, Zanah shrieked, "There is no place to hide."

"Get a hold of yourself. We will stand our ground," Miranda said sharply.

"What's happening?" Esseldan asked and his tremulous voice coaxed some control into Zanah's mind. The boy needed her to protect him.

"Rys are attacking us. Stay close to me and your mother," she said and took the boy's hand.

Tytido dashed back into the house. "You have to get out. The roof has caught fire." He grabbed Deltane and pulled Miranda out after him.

Miranda turned back as she stumbled over her threshold to make sure that Zanah was following with Esseldan.

Outside, people were arriving from all directions and Sahleen's children were crying in a disorderly heap next to their mother. Upon seeing Miranda, Sahleen ran to her mistress and grabbed her arm. Absently, Miranda held the young woman's hand, but her attention was on her home. Flames scampered along the edge of the roof and were spreading rapidly.

"Get water. Put out this fire!" she shouted.

Even as people ran to gather buckets, they asked each other if a rys attack was actually happening. Bian and Kashil were still running around raising the alarm, but the news was hard to accept. Between giving directions to fight the fire, Tytido constantly had to confirm that attack spells had struck them.

People came running out of homes and tents with every available bucket and two water lines formed from the well and the stream to the house. Miranda shouted orders as she passed buckets, but Faychan refused to be distracted by the fire. Warriors were arriving from the refugee camp and he rallied them to his side.

Before the warriors could even make a plan of attack, Zanah screamed. Her terrified cry startled the crowd and several people dropped their buckets when they saw the reason for Zanah's terror.

A dark figure had appeared at the edge of the firelight. A warhammer gleamed in his grasp and his bare chest heaved with bloodlust. Many people retreated with their forgotten buckets sloshing in their hands or splashing to the ground. Tytido did not quail from the threat and neither did Faychan. A few warriors overcame the scalding fear that the strange intruder poured on their hearts and bravely backed up the two men.

Zanah grabbed Esseldan and shouted, "Run!"

The intruder charged. The warriors moved to bar his way but he blasted them aside with his magic. With the hated smell of rys in his nostrils, the attacker hardly noticed the humans. It was enough to fling them out of his vengeful path. He could kill them later.

Miranda and Sahleen propped each other up and Deltane cowered between their legs. Even as the spell blurred her vision, Miranda saw Zanah run around the corner of the house with Esseldan in tow. She knew the rys nanny only took the boy because she cared for him so much, but Miranda doubted Zanah could offer the child any protection from the thing chasing her.

Miranda extricated herself from Sahleen's clinging embrace and slipped Victoria off her back. She shoved the baby girl into Deltane's arms and raised her sword. Almost devoid of strategy, Miranda followed the fearsome tabre and yelled for her oldest son.

On the other side of the house, the brief chase reached its terrible conclusion. With the male at her heels, Zanah flung Esseldan forward and turned to face her fate. The terrible sound of the attacker's snarl chilled Miranda with its malice. Despite her courage, she dared not intervene as predator overtook prey. She ran to Esseldan and plucked him to his feet.

The male rys struck Zanah across the thighs with his warhammer and she dropped to the ground.

"Zanah!" the boy cried with anguish.

Miranda held back her son who thoughtlessly wanted to jump to Zanah's aid. The hungry teeth of the warhammer had torn Zanah's legs apart and she cowered on the ground, unable to flee. One desperate heat spell sputtered over her hands, but her tormentor was impervious to her feeble defense. The next blow smashed her fine skull and her killer howled with triumph.

Miranda pulled Esseldan's face against her leg, trying to block the brutality from his mind. Zanah had to be dead, but her murderer plunged into a frenzy of mutilation. He bludgeoned her flesh into the ground. Blood splattered at his feet and a juicy crunchy sound proclaimed each blow.

Unable to take her eyes from the unholy spectacle, Miranda was momentarily frozen. When she did bolt, her movement attracted his attention. With unexpected speed, he leaped in front of her and raised his dripping warhammer.

Miranda shoved Esseldan behind her and readied her sword. Her only comfort was that she would die before her son.

But the attacker paused. He cocked his head and his white blazing eyes studied her. Although Tempet could not know that Miranda had suffered at Onja's hands, he intuitively sensed the kinship of a shared enemy with this foolish human who thought that she could fight him.

Miranda, however, had no powerful perception to hint to her that this being was driven to madness by Onja's horrible deeds, and she swiped at him with her sword. The rys enchanted blade sliced him above the knee and the magic of his sworn enemies burned his flesh. It was a minor wound, but the stinging spell sizzling on the edges of his torn skin crushed his flirtation with mercy.

He brought back his bitaran, preparing to swing at her, but his senses warned him of another danger. Tempet pivoted on his feet like a dancer and deflected the arrow coming at him. A former Kezanada warrior already had another arrow following his first shot. Tempet knocked that arrow to the ground as well. Miranda took advantage of the distraction and ran toward Tytido with her son.

A ring of warriors formed around Tempet, but he scoffed at their courage. Spinning his bitaran over his head, he waited for someone to take another shot. The archer obliged him, but the third arrow was defied by its target just as the first two had been. Although the proximity of enchanted weapons dulled Tempet's magic, the archer possessed no warding crystals, which left him vulnerable. An attack spell rolled off Tempet's free hand and a white fireball consumed the archer. He screamed horribly as he flew backward flailing his arms. The intensity of the heat burned him to death quickly.

Tytido covered Miranda's retreat. Tempet turned his white-hot eyes on the western man and stalked toward him. Without looking, Tempet deflected another arrow from a new archer and then struck at Tytido with his bitaran. The human blocked with his sword, but Tempet deftly controlled the connection of the weapons and spun the blade from his opponent's hand. His next blow would have felled Tytido but Miranda stepped up and blocked the mortal shot.

Tempet actually smiled at her effort as if he enjoyed killing more when it was not completely easy. But his gloating was premature and he looked away from his victims with surprise.

A rider galloped through the warriors and charged Tempet. Lather frothed off the heaving sides of the horse, and the maddened rider yelled a primal challenge as he drove his exhausted mount at his enemy.

"Dreibrand!" Miranda cried but he could not reply. He had pursued his enemy for too long to be distracted now, and he spurred his horse to its death. Tempet sidestepped to avoid the charge and aimed his bitaran at the rider's leg. Dreibrand pulled his foot from the stirrup, swung his leg over the horse's neck and onto the other side of the animal. The bitaran thudded on the horse's side, cracking ribs beneath saddle leather. The poor beast bellowed and lost its footing. Dreibrand abandoned the saddle with the ease of a circus performer and ran around his failing mount to confront his enemy. Holding his sword with both hands, he hacked and hacked at Tempet with such aggression that the speedy tabre was actually caught off balance.

Tytido pulled out a sho dart pistol and fired the sneaky missile. Absorbed in his duel with Dreibrand, Tempet did not feel the tiny point prick his skin, but when the sho drug began to flow through his veins, he gasped with dismay.

Sho darts dropped a human almost instantly, but tabre shared with rys a partial resistance to the drug. Although immune to the paralysis that sho caused in humans, Tempet knew that he would soon become impaired.

"Now we've got him!" Faychan shouted as he rushed into the fray. He tossed Tytido his sword, and along with Dreibrand, the three men pressed their advantage.

Tempet lashed out with an attack spell, but it flowed over the strongly warded men like flames around a cooking pot. Summoning the last of his endurance, Dreibrand stormed against the bitaran with his sword. He recognized that Tempet was slowing as the sho sabotaged his superhuman speed, and Dreibrand assailed the tabre with berserker strength. Tempet blasted the man back with another attack spell and fled before his growing impairment allowed the enraged human to prevail.

People fell back from the path of the tabre and did not block his escape. Dreibrand tried to follow him but stumbled with exhaustion. He pushed himself up with every intention of continuing, but his shaking muscles could go no farther. He was completely spent. Still down on one knee, he watched Tempet disappear into the night.

Failure scraped at his heaving chest until Miranda skidded to the ground next to him and wrapped him with a fierce hug. At least he had saved his family even if Tempet had gotten away.

The sword slipped from Dreibrand's hand although his fingers remained curled from the intensity of his grip.

"Are you all right?" he whispered and put a strong arm around Miranda.

Before answering, Miranda looked for Esseldan and Deltane, who were running to join her. Deltane dutifully clutched his wailing sister. Dreibrand lifted his other arm to include the children, and as his

family pressed against him, he shuddered with profound relief.

"We are fine," Miranda answered.

"Thank the Gods," Dreibrand said and his eyes were misty with joy.

"What has happened to you?" Miranda asked.

Dirt and sweat streaked Dreibrand's face and slicked his hair. Dark circles shadowed his bloodshot eyes and his face looked thin and hungry.

He was too tired to explain. The adrenaline that had kept him going as he had pursued Tempet and the female across the valley was depleted. He winced because Deltane clung to his left arm that was injured from the bear attack, but he did not complain. Having his son safe at his side was beginning to heal him already.

Miranda kissed his scruffy cheek and the brush of her soft curls against his face removed the torment of the past days.

"I will stay closer to you," he whispered.

"My love," she murmured back.

Tytido rushed up and asked if they should track the creature.

Prying himself from his wife's tender nuzzling, Dreibrand shook his head. "Do not chase him into the night," he advised with a knowing tone. "He is extremely dangerous. And even if that sho dart is slowing him down, there is another who will protect him. We must wait for Shan."

Tytido accepted the answer. They had all just come a little too close to dying. "Good to have you home, Dreibrand," he said and gave him a hand up.

Dreibrand got to his feet with Miranda supporting him under a shoulder.

"Thank you for protecting my family," Dreibrand said with utter sincerity. "I saw how you placed yourself before them."

"Thank you for protecting me," Tytido said, remembering Dreibrand's fortuitous arrival. Looking to Miranda, he thanked her as well for standing with him.

"We all saved each other," Miranda said.

"Except for Zanah," Esseldan said.

They looked down at Esseldan's teary face.

"What about Zanah?" Dreibrand asked because he had not noticed the body.

"It killed her," Miranda said and petted Esseldan's dark hair. The horrific killing had clearly traumatized the boy, and as Miranda's heart went out to him, she realized how much she had allowed him to rely on Zanah for affection.

Faychan walked over to them, and he moved stiffly as if in some pain.

"Faychan! Welcome to Nufal," Dreibrand said.

As they acknowledged each other with a firm handshake, the older man vented, "What is this madness? You never said anything about some damn rys war. One of my men just died."

"You mean one of my men," Dreibrand corrected and locked eyes with Faychan.

For an instant Faychan appeared offended but then he switched into the role that he had assumed. "Yes, Lord Dreibrand," he said with some drama.

"My house is on fire," Dreibrand suddenly observed. He had forgotten the sprouting flames that had caused him to lash and spur his horse in a terrible way that he would never normally condone. He had burdened the horse with his crushing need to get home, and the injured horse's only reward would be a mercy killing.

"We have to look for Shan," Faychan said.

"First, put out that fire. Then we will find Shan," Dreibrand decided.

20. A King's Duty

Shan barely imparted any information to Miranda before an opposing mind detected his magic. The female who he had encountered beside the forest pool grabbed his awareness with the severity of an abusive parent seizing a small child. The magical slap spun his senses, but Shan welcomed the confrontation.

It is time we knew each other, my beautiful enemy, he thought.

His great mind charged toward her, ready to discipline her. Because Alloi was pounding the settlement with attack spells, she could not hide. Shan found her in the dark fields outside Vetanium. He pinned her with his magic and halted the attack.

As she cringed from her mortal enemy, she had no expectation of mercy. She perceived him as a praying mantis ready to consume her with unblinking calm. Her vulnerability roused a beast of temptation inside Shan, and he suddenly wanted terribly to use his power.

The urge to kill her roused his blood, and an old memory from his life with Onja flashed through his mind. He heard Onja's seductive voice whispering. She told him to kill, that if he would not kill, then he would always be weak. Shan recoiled from the memory and blamed his harsh thoughts on the injured land beneath him. Nufal demanded that he be its enemy.

Increasingly he believed that the two rys who opposed him were from the original Nufalese kingdom and that they had been in hibernation since the Great War. It explained their power, their sudden appearance, and their total enmity toward him.

But Shan refused to harvest the hate that Onja had sown in Nufal. He would maintain his ideals because the rys of Jingten were essentially responsible for the deaths of all of their Nufalese cousins, and Shan could not add to that total—at least not yet. He would show the Nufalese female that she was wrong to project upon him the role of heartless killer.

When she expected his battle magic to strike, she received instead the soft blow of a spell of sleepiness. As soon as she slipped into a reluctant doze, Shan burst out of his trance and started running toward her position. She was much closer to the settlement than he was, but with his rys speed and stamina, he expected to reach her before she awoke. Shan wanted to capture her. Then he could make her listen to him and maybe make the peace that he desired.

Beyond this goal, the basic concept of possessing her powered his legs to run faster. She was a treasure that he had never imagined. Her knowledge beckoned and her beauty was a special magic all unto itself. Her captivating loveliness burdened his heart with impossible dreams.

As he ran toward Vetanium, the shrubs made tinging sounds against his shield and his soft boots mimicked a wind rushing through the grass. With a single leap, he crossed a small creek, and when he topped the next hill, he saw the flames in Vetanium. Shan did not have much time. His opportunity to capture the female was dwindling, but it might be his only chance to end the conflict.

When he reached the female, she was just emerging from her unwilling sleep. She awoke in a panic and scrambled backward from him with her long bare legs kicking through the grass.

Shan leaped on top of her as her magic flared. He pressed his shield against her body, and instantly, her power flowed into him. She gasped with alarm and her attack spells withered. With her power undermined, she had only her physical strength to resist him. Shan grappled with her fiercely. He hated to handle her so roughly. With her body before him and her soft skin beneath his fingers, his natural desire flared.

She cried out with dismay and pushed the shield away from her torso. With only her hand in contact with the voracious relic, some of her power returned and her attack spells began to sputter around Shan's body again.

"Stop, I will not hurt you," Shan said. "Talk to me. What is your name? Why do you attack me?" He ignored the mild sting of her anemic spells and wrestled her to the ground. Her attack spells stopped when he pressed the shield fully against her body again. Shan disregarded the thoughts

summoned by her body squirming and heaving beneath him. He longed for a different type of embrace than this rude struggle, and he banished the notion of deriving pleasure from the forced contact

Deciding that she may not be understanding his speech, Shan thrust his mind inside her thoughts, which he discovered were focused elsewhere. Presuming that she was calling to her companion for help, he interrupted the communication just as she had done to him earlier.

"Who are you? Tell me your name. I am Shan."

He waited for an answer, but she eluded the demands of her interrogator. Shan asked for her name again and added that he would not hurt her.

"Let me go!" she finally responded and Shan pounced on the portion of her mind that had formed the mental words.

"Are you from old Nufal?" he asked and she could not avoid revealing that truth.

"Nufal" her mind moaned like the wailings of every funeral that had ever been.

"I am not your enemy. None now live who made war with you," Shan struggled to explain but her animosity did not waiver.

"Time does not heal all wounds!" she replied.

Desperate to get through to her, Shan said aloud, "I will not hurt you. Please tell me your name."

She renewed her physical resistance and punched him in the ribs. Clinging to her, he remained determined to extract her name. Mentally, he pleaded again for her answer.

Driven by fear into a flailing frenzy, she beat on him and managed to push him half way off her. She cried, "Alloi! Alloi! Let me go!"

Tears streaked her face and the glistening rivers on her perfect cheeks judged Shan for his roguish behavior. He released her, hoping that his mercy would win her heart.

"Beautiful Alloi, make peace with me," he said, and as he looked upon her and spoke her name, he actually believed that she would accept his proposal.

But Alloi only saw and heard a crazy and cruel rys who toyed with her. Free of the terrifying impotency caused by his enchanted shield, she sprang to her feet. Alloi screamed and cast an attack spell.

Shan bowed beneath her fury but did not retaliate. He still had no desire to hurt her, and he had to wonder if his mind could even complete the thought of harming her. She seemed too rare a creature to send from the world. Shan wanted to apologize to her for how he had just treated her, but she fled, and he resisted the impulse to chase her again. He had been foolish to expect that one inflicted conversation could elicit a truce.

I must get to the settlement, he decided. Already Tempet's mayhem had been the price for the precious time that Shan had spent engaging the female.

When Shan arrived at Vetanium, he recognized the eerie calm that follows a swift destruction. Looking upon the smashed body of Zannah, he inwardly scorned his attempts at peacemaking. A miserable rage at Zannah's murderer and at himself for not protecting her took hold inside his heart. He was her King; it was his duty to defend her, and he had failed to fulfill his royal function.

The gruesome remains of the rys nanny blurred the image of Alloi in his mind. Shan could not contemplate both things at the same time. He looked at Jolen, who had been in the process of covering Zannah when he walked up. Shan did not see any blame in the eyes of Jolen, but he did see insecurity.

After Jolen placed the sheet over Zannah, Shan let his perception linger over the corpse, pondering the horrid details of her slaughter. He wondered if this was the only reply the Nufalese rys would ever have for him. As the smoke drifted by from Dreibrand's smoldering roof, Shan imagined how fresh the destruction of Nufal was in the minds of Tempet and Alloi. Shan was separated from the Great War by many centuries, and despite growing up under Onja's tutelage, Shan had been raised in a rys society that valued life. Dacian's Last Law had decreed that rys should never kill rys, and

after the demise of Onja, Shan had renewed his commitment to that ideal.

But with Zanah's blood soaking into a foreign land, he questioned that policy. Tempet and Alloi were perhaps incapable of putting their justified vendetta aside. Prudence compelled Shan to stop searching for an opportunity to negotiate with them. He needed to kill them and protect his subjects. As King, he was their protector and he should let the mantle of kingship flow around his shoulders, soft and bright, even if it chafed his neck and blackened his heart.

Shan hung his head and did not look up when Dreibrand and Tytido came over to him. Dreibrand coughed and his shoulders sagged, but his eyes still roved the darkness beyond the smoky air. "Where are they?" he asked.

Shan was quiet as he tracked the attackers with his mind. "They are riding west onto the plains," he answered.

"Can we still catch them?" Dreibrand said. The intensity of the hunt still commanded his mind and he disregarded his advanced fatigue.

"We have chased them enough for now," Shan decided. "Dreibrand, you need rest. I know it is hard for you to bear, but your stamina does not match theirs."

Dreibrand could not argue. He had poured the last of his strength into defending his family, and his physical and mental reserves were gone. He was only beginning to realize the furor with which he had engaged Tempet.

Shan continued, "I will contact Quylan and send for soldiers."

"What was that thing?" Tytido asked. There had been no time to consider what he was fighting, but now he wanted answers.

"A rys from ancient Nufal. There are two of them," Shan answered bluntly. "It is my guess that they have emerged from a long hibernation." He paused and looked at the heap that was Zanah. "And it appears that they want to continue the war."

For the first time, Tytido grasped how powerful his new enemies had to be. They were not common rys. They were gifted magic users who had survived the ages. Tytido was amazed that he had not been killed. "Where do you think they are going?" he said.

"Jingten," Shan said with certainty. "Tempet and Alloi will seek the rys and try to destroy us."

"Tempet and Alloi?" Tytido echoed.

"Yes, Tempet is the male. Alloi is the female," Shan explained.

"You communicated with the female?" Dreibrand said with surprise.

"I tried to...but I should not have wasted the time. I might have been able to save Zanah," Shan said.

"Maybe not, my King," Tytido said, hoping to soothe Shan's conscience. "That one you call Tempet went straight for her. He definitely wanted her."

"Poor thing. She would have never hurt anyone," Shan lamented.

"You will avenge her," Tytido said confidently. "And things would have been worse here if my King had not stopped the female. If the attack spells had continued to hit us, we never would have been able to fight Tempet at all."

Shan nodded although he looked unconvinced. He walked away after one more thoughtful glance at Zanah's body.

Almost every torch and lantern in Vetanium was lit, and the settlers crowded around Dreibrand's home. Across his yard, Dreibrand noted Gulang talking to Faychan.

"Has Faychan been giving you any trouble?" Dreibrand asked.

"He's been assertive. Acting like he is in charge," Tytido replied.

Dreibrand tried to process the information and make a judgment, but his rattled mind refused to focus. He mumbled that he needed sleep.

"I'll take care of things, Dreibrand. Get some rest," Tytido said.

Without another word, Dreibrand reeled into his home. The floor was slick with water and littered with a few buckets. The blackened rafters were dripping and half of the furnishings in the front room looked ruined, but he did not have the strength to care. After he staggered down the hall, he thanked the Gods of Ektren for sparing the roof over his bedchamber. He passed out and his deep sleep did not even flicker when Miranda came to relieve him of his boots, weapons, and armor so that he could be more comfortable.

When he finally woke up, he heard someone walking on the roof over his bed. At first, he had thought that he was still in the forest, striving to reach home, but the abnormal glow of sunlight from his hall and the noises of clean up and repair told him where he was.

Deltane walked through his bedchamber door, and upon seeing that his father was awake, he yelped with joy and flew to his father's bedside. Typically, he would have jumped into the bed and started bouncing, but today he was more reserved.

"Father, are you all right?" he asked and the concern in his bright child eyes touched Dreibrand deeply.

"I am now that I am home with you," Dreibrand answered. "Grab me some clothes."

Pleased to be of service, Deltane brought his father a robe. As Dreibrand slipped on the garment, the boy noticed the ugly bruise on Dreibrand's upper left arm and the scabs streaked across the bashed flesh.

"That is where a bear hit me," Dreibrand explained and his son grabbed the sleeve before it covered the arm so that he could look closer.

Dreibrand tenderly traced one of the scabs where a bear claw had torn him and explained in detail the bear attack. "It tore several scales off my armored jacket," he added.

"How d'you get so tough?" Deltane asked, clearly hoping he would be able to emulate his father.

Pulling the sleeve over his wound, Dreibrand leaned close to the boy and whispered, "I was picked on a lot growing up."

Deltane shook his head. No one picked on his father and he refused to believe it.

It pleased Dreibrand to see that his son held him in such high esteem. Hopefully Deltane would be able to grow up with the respect that he deserved instead of the stigma Dreibrand had faced. But after last night, Dreibrand could almost wish that his son lived in civilized Atrophane because social disgrace was not nearly as terrible as Tempet. Deciding that he should speak to his son about the recent terror, Dreibrand pulled the boy close and proudly noticed that Deltane hid well the trauma that he had to be feeling.

"And how are you?" he asked.

Deltane shrugged and looked down, failing in his boyish attempt to be stoic. "Will it come back?" he whispered.

"Not before Shan and I go hunt him down," Dreibrand said.

"But Mama said you were gonna stay with us," Deltane protested.

Dreibrand remembered telling Miranda that he would stay close and he had meant it so much last night. "I am always with you, even when I am away," he said, but Deltane frowned at the abstraction. Boys understood when their fathers were home.

Struggling to make his son accept the reason for another absence, Dreibrand said, "When I am away, it is because I am trying to keep danger away from you."

Deltane focused on the danger that had come perilously close and shyly asked, "Father, why did it kill Zannah?"

Dreibrand pondered his response. Was there a way to explain the violent wickedness of the world to a small child?

"Deltane, sometimes people kill each other. It is not right, but—but it seems to happen anyway." His words were lame. They neither sheltered the boy nor gave him a decent answer. "You must always be careful, my son. The world is dangerous."

Predictably, Deltane asked why.

His father sighed and admitted that he did not know, but then he offered one belief. "Some people think that there are Gods who play with us. They cause bad things to happen because our suffering amuses them."

"So there's nothing we can do?" Deltane quavered. He laid his head against Dreibrand's chest, hiding from his fear beneath his father's strength.

"We can be strong and try to live a good life. Do not give the Gods the satisfaction of making us miserable," Dreibrand advised.

"And that works?"

Dreibrand appreciated the critical question and imagined how Deltane's mind would sharpen with manhood. "It is just what some people think, but it remains good advice," Dreibrand answered. "Now, let us find your mother."

Standing, he took his son's hand and led him down the hall. His house was already mostly cleaned up and some men were beginning to pull tent fabric over the gaps in the roof. Kashil was in the front room, yelling orders up to the workers when he noticed Dreibrand.

"Hello, Sir. We'll have this covered up before dinner," he announced using the eastern language. "But some of the rafters will need to be replaced. I'll look for some good timber to cut tomorrow."

"Good job, Kashil. I appreciate your work," Dreibrand responded.

Briefly, Kashil beamed from the compliment, but the events of the night before soon pressed on his mind again. "Sir," he said. "What are we going to do about these wild rys that attacked?"

"We will defend ourselves and help defend Jington if need be," Dreibrand replied.

Although intimidated, Kashil nursed his doubts with a light comment. "And I was just starting to get bored around here, Sir."

Dreibrand grinned and hoped everyone could maintain an attitude like Kashil. Despite the attack on the settlement, Dreibrand doubted that the other people entirely comprehended the threat that Tempet and Alloi represented. The settlers had not seen Shan nearly slain by the fierce Tempet.

"Have you seen our King or Tytido?" Dreibrand inquired.

Kashil shook his head but mentioned that Faychan had stopped by twice.

"He can wait," Miranda announced as she overheard the news while entering the room. Victoria squirmed in her arms and a puffy-eyed Esseldan trailed at his mother's heels.

"Do you know what Faychan wants?" Dreibrand asked.

"Everything, I assume," Miranda grumbled.

Kashil nodded to her politely and then got back to work. He knew better than to slack around Miranda but he also wanted to give Dreibrand some privacy.

"Sahleen is heating water for your bath," Miranda said quietly and gestured toward the kitchen.

"How long has Faychan been here?" he inquired.

Miranda had to think for a moment. "Since yesterday," she replied and sounded surprised by the answer. So much had happened after his arrival that it did not seem possible.

In the kitchen, Sahleen was pouring a steaming kettle into the wash tub. Miranda deposited her

daughter with the wet nurse and asked her to go next door.

"Deltane, Esseldan, go to your room and play for a while," she said.

Esseldan stared at the floor and seemed not to hear, but after his brother tugged on his arm, he meekly walked away.

Dreibrand watched them go and he pitied Esseldan's grief. "He's so sad," he said.

"He will get over it," Miranda stated quickly as if trying to convince herself.

Dreibrand disrobed and got in the bath water. The hot water made him flinch at first. He was used to the perfect bath produced by Zanah, and he felt grief for her. Zanah had been extraordinarily kind to actually serve humans and she had not deserved to die.

Miranda kneeled by Dreibrand's bath and took up a wash cloth.

"Ah, the royal treatment," Dreibrand said and leaned forward to offer more of his back to his pampering wife.

"I should get Jolen to look at your arm," she said.

"Shan hit it with a healing spell. It's fine," Dreibrand muttered. As his wife bathed him, he informed her about his miserable trip.

"Shan was in a healing sleep for five days?" she remarked with shock.

Dreibrand hushed her and looked toward the door to see if anyone was outside in the hall. "Shan has asked all who were with him not to mention how terribly he was hurt by Tempet. He does not want the people to doubt his power," he explained.

Miranda recognized the typical Shan reaction. Even with his awesome power, he was always sensitive to the slightest shortcoming. "Do you think Tempet is more powerful than him?" she whispered.

After a thoughtful pause, Dreibrand said, "No. I think Shan could defeat him if there was not the other one. Fighting both of them is difficult."

"Do you think there are more of them?" Miranda wondered.

He answered that he did not know.

"I have sent scouts to Elendra to bring back more news," Miranda said.

"Good idea," Dreibrand said. "How long did I sleep?"

"All day. It will be sunset soon," she replied.

"And I needed it," Dreibrand said and slouched into the soothing water. Now that the toil and stress of trying to reach home were over, his body ached and throbbed, but the sleep had renewed him mentally. Closing his eyes, he draped the wash cloth over his face and tried to relax.

Although Miranda wanted to let him have some peace, she could not ignore the concern that stalked her mind. "You are leaving us again," she surmised.

Dreibrand sat up and let the cloth splash into the water. "Do you always listen through the walls?" he said.

"When there are walls," Miranda replied.

Ashamed, Dreibrand looked away from her. "I want to stay. I know I said I would, but...how else can I defend us? I think if Shan and I stay together, we will be able to kill them. Damn, we almost had Tempet last night when Shan had the female occupied. And if we can trap them between here and the soldiers Shan is summoning from Jingtun, we can end this."

"I know," she moped.

"Miranda, I must help Shan defend Jingtun. It is my duty. And we both know that the time may not

be far off when we will need his help to keep our settlements," Dreibrand said.

He did not really have to spell out his reasons because Miranda did not need convincing. Shan had never turned his back on her and she would not suggest that Dreibrand stay behind when Shan needed support.

"I know you must go with him," she said. "I only wish that I could go with you as well. I would help Shan against these creatures who attacked my home and family."

Dreibrand smiled to her. He thought she was the bravest woman in the whole world and he loved her for it. "You have had to fight enough already, my love. Stay here. The children will need you to protect them if something happens to me."

"No!" she gasped and reached out to him. It was not like Dreibrand to ever speak of defeat. An Atrophane warrior braced himself with supreme confidence.

He gently hugged her face to his neck, enjoying the soothing warmth of her mouth against his skin. He regretted adding to her worry by actual voicing the possibility that he would not survive, and he admonished himself for the lapse.

"I will come back," he declared in his usual manner. "Just a couple more weeks, at most, and we can have our life back. And I will take Faychan with me so you do not have to worry about him."

When Miranda lifted her head, her courage had returned. "I suppose I have winter to look forward to when we will be snowed in together," she said.

"And then you will get sick of me," Dreibrand predicted.

"Never," she proclaimed and kissed him.

Dreibrand finished his bath and joined Miranda in their bedchamber. As they held each other, they revisited the intensity of lovemaking that they had known during times of war. The physical closeness and reality of their love were made more precious because of the danger.

Their stolen moments proved to be a wise investment. Shan did not even wait for the night to pass before assembling a war party and riding west.

21. *A Queen's Defense*

Quylan's daydreams about becoming Queen seemed to have suddenly come true. Shan had only been gone a week before she decided to visit the throne room. The seat of ryls power had grown cold and dusty since the demise of Onja.

Like a child about to snoop through her parents' room, Quylan approached the doors. When she pushed open one heavy door, the hinges squawked with surprise. The throne room still pulsed with light from the four large crystal orbs mounted in each corner. On the walls, crystal mosaics sparkled in their enchanted blue glow.

At the far end brooded the vacant throne. Quylan walked toward the golden seat and her steps flustered the groggy quiet like an elderly person surprised out of a nap. She mounted the abandoned dais but then hesitated to sit in the broad chair. A coating of dust had settled on the hard seat and Quylan ran a finger through the film. She stared at the bright streak on the throne where her finger had cleaned the soil from the gold.

This is a throne without a queen and I am a consort without a title, she thought. Her bitterness prompted her to turn and lower herself toward the seat, but then she stopped, catching herself on the armrests worn smooth by Onja's caresses. Quylan recognized the action as immature and began to understand why Shan did not fill the void on the throne. Onja had been evil and Quylan did not want to sit on her throne. Shan was right to build a new palace.

But will I sit on the throne there? she wondered.

Looking at her finger, she noted how the blue light on her blue skin made the dirt look especially dingy. When Quylan had been Onja's pupil, Quylan had dirtied her hands with a bloody lesson. The horrible episode blazed through her mind, and she suddenly abhorred her ambition. The desire for rank and power could make her use her powers recklessly. Perhaps Shan was right to steer her

away from such temptations.

Afflicted with confusion, she ran from the throne room.

After that day she had avoided memories of the past or thoughts of the future. The building of the new palace progressed at a suitable rate and the time passed tediously. She missed Shan, and when his spirit projection appeared, she welcomed the communication.

But his terrible news stunned her. Quylan wanted to laugh and scold him for making such a poor joke, but she knew Shan would never joke about such a thing. Rys in Nufal! It was unbelievable and yet he urgently called for soldiers. The eastern pass needed to be protected and rys lives were at stake. Zannah was already dead.

"Beware these rys, Quylan. I will meet you on the plains." Shan concluded and he caressed Quylan's face with one brief pleasure spell before his presence faded.

Paralyzed by the news, Quylan focused on the lingering sensation of his affection on her cheek. Slowly she accepted what Shan had said and she sent a servant to get her father.

For several centuries Taf Ila had been the Captain of the Jingteng Guard, and surrounded by the grandeur of the Keep, the white-haired rys looked almost unrecognizable out of uniform. Quylan received her father with open arms, and Taf Ila gladly strode into the embrace. He had to admit that he was impressed with his daughter. Jingteng had been left in her care and his heart swelled with paternal pride.

However, his satisfaction did not blind him to her troubled expression. "What is wrong, Daughter?" he inquired.

Letting him go, Quylan began to pace and Taf Ila could not recall ever seeing her so agitated.

Although Quylan had been rehearsing her report, the words were still difficult to speak. Finally, the bad news flew off her lips in a flurry of information with each detail competing with the other details to be explained first. "Please, Father, help me," she concluded.

"Of course, my little treasure," Taf Ila responded quickly. Even if the circumstances were so terrible, it was good to have her need him again. She had left the nest so young, torn from his parental shelter by Onja, but Quylan had gone willingly, eager for power and responsibility. "I will take the soldiers east and defend the pass," he said.

The image of her father facing the danger in her place yanked Quylan from the clutches of her panic. "No, Father, I will not send you into danger," she said adamantly. "Shan would want Tulair to lead the soldiers, I am sure, and I will go because my abilities demand that I face our new enemies. You shall stay here and keep order in Jingteng."

Taf Ila scowled. He would never quite get used to taking orders from his daughter, especially when her attitude swung between that of a vulnerable rysling and a queen. He began to protest, but Quylan quieted him with her arguments.

"Father, I have been trained in battle magic, trained by Onja. Therefore, I will go east. And Shan has asked me to help him. He needs me," she added with more than a hint of satisfaction. "And who better than Taf Ila to maintain the order in Jingteng? All rys respect you and I would trust no one else with our home."

"And how shall I explain what you are doing?" Taf Ila demanded. "I do not quite understand myself. Where have these rogue rys come from? Who are they?"

Quylan explained, "Shan says that their names are Tempet and Alloi. He believes that they have been in hibernation in Nufal since the Great War. And they have awoken as the enemies of Jingteng."

"Hibernation for over two thousand years!" Taf Ila scoffed. "Impossible."

"That is what Shan has told me," Quylan said.

Taf Ila fell silent. His King possessed knowledge far beyond his own, and he considered the possibility that Shan was correct.

He said, "Daughter, if they have been hibernating for over two thousand years, do you know how powerful that means they must be?"

Looking past her father at the challenge that she had to face, Quylan murmured, "You see now why I must go."

Although instinct demanded that Taf Ila place himself between his rysling and danger, he accepted that his powerful daughter was compelled to defend Jingtun. It was the way of rys. The strongest protected the others. Because her duty was clear, he decided to advise his daughter to make the most of her bravery and talent. He had watched her suffer recently from the vacillation of Shan's favor.

"My treasure, I understand that you must face this terrible danger for the sake of us all, but do not let King Shan forget that it was your help that he asked for. When Jingtun is safe again, make him understand that it was a Queen who fought at the side of the King," he said.

Quylan was shocked to hear her father scheme. She had only known him to be a dutiful servant of the throne. His fear of Onja had made him tolerant of her harsh rule, and he had always advised Quylan to be cautious and obedient.

"Father! Do not make my private business yours," she said.

"I think that I must," he countered. "King Shan lived under my roof, turned my home into his royal residence so that he could consort with my underage daughter. Well, a father can bear such a thing if he expects to see his offspring become the Queen, but our King spurned you, left you crying in your room for days!"

"Things are better now. Shan loves me," Quylan cried.

Skepticism twisted Taf Ila's face. The anger that he had repressed over his daughter's inappropriate adult relationship was surfacing now that she was about to risk her life.

"Do not think that you can hide your thoughts and feelings from me. I know how you came here to throw yourself at him to try to get my position back," he said. "But I will not allow you to behave like that again. King Shan can have that upstart Tulair for a captain if he wants him, but you must not let him disgrace you further."

Shaking with embarrassment, Quylan snapped, "I am not disgraced!" Blue light flashed from her eyes.

Her flaring power startled Taf Ila, who regretted his rudeness toward her. Calmly, he said, "Quylan, I am sorry I said that. But please, remember my advice. Do not let King Shan put just one throne in his new palace if you truly want to be Queen."

"Shan loves me," she insisted.

"Then make the King give you the title that you deserve if he loves you so much," Taf Ila grumbled.

"He is only waiting for me to be one hundred," Quylan said.

"Well, that is the only thing he waited for," Taf Ila complained.

Quylan sputtered with indignation. "We are not having this conversation," she decided. "You will attend to Jingtun and I must go east. That is all that matters right now."

Sadly, he concurred. During their hard discussion, Quylan had stepped away from him, but Taf Ila closed the gap and took her hand. "My treasure, come back to me alive. That is all that matters to me every day."

"Yes, Father," she replied dutifully and leaned on his shoulder.

The human road workers in the eastern pass reacted quickly when they were told to evacuate to Jingtun. The urgency that fueled the war party of five hundred rys soldiers warned the humans that something was extraordinarily wrong.

As the men loaded up their tools without delay, one curious foreman paused to inquire about the reason for their sudden departure. Tulair answered as Quylan had instructed him to do, saying simply that King Shan had ordered a patrol of the Wilderness and that the roadwork could wait for now.

The creases on the face of the middle-aged foreman deepened as he pondered the lame response. Recalling his tribe's adage that an answer from a rys was usually not worth the bother of asking a question, he decided to get moving.

Quylan ignored the work gangs moving past her. She focused beyond the Rysamand. The plains unfolded from the hem of the mountains in a rippling expanse of grass. At this distance, the color of the land was a solid pale green, dappled by the shadows of the fluffy clouds moving overhead. Vast and unbroken, the Wilderness stared back at her like a local who is peeved by the presence of a stranger.

Shan is out there, she thought excitedly and urged her horse down the next switchback in the road. From the platform of land from which the road was carved, she launched her mind over the tops of the pines and birches.

Her powerful awareness gathered speed over the dwindling alpine forest and the plains blurred beneath her mind. Her desire to contact Shan made her recklessly fling her magic over the Wilderness without stealth, and the tabre detected her presence. Tempet and Alloi combined their minds and intruded the scampering thoughts of the rys female.

The well-aimed stone of their malice dropped her young mind from the sky. Quylan shuddered inside her trance, and her horse snorted and shifted its feathered feet with agitation. She draped her body in shield spells and tried to block out the leering hostility of the foreign lifeforces. Tempet spoke in her mind, and in her initial terror, Quylan could only interpret his message as mindless jabbering. Then the words began to take shape until she suddenly understood him completely. His shadowy bald head loomed in her perception and he snarled their nasty message.

"Wait there, young one, so I can kill you in your Rysamand."

"You will not kill me!" Quylan retorted and was surprised by her vehemence.

Asserting her power, she hurled the intruders from her mind. But Quylan realized that freeing herself had been too easy. The lifeforces of Tempet and Alloi became indistinct upon the open land because they chose to hide. Twice Quylan unscrambled their wardings only to have them cast a different spell that blinded her again. Finally, deciding that she would not play hide and seek, Quylan withdrew her mind. They were too far away for her to reach with attack spells anyway.

She ordered the war party to continue. They rode through the night until the heavy air of the plains filled their lungs. The peaks of the Rysamand towered behind them and drank up the pink light of the dawn when Quylan called a halt.

"What are we to do?" Tulair asked.

Tracking a slight prickle of magic that had brushed her senses, Quylan whispered, "We will wait here. They are close."

"And King Shan?" Tulair said.

"He is coming. We must delay his enemies here until he arrives," she explained.

Tulair was silent but an unspoken acknowledgement of their youth passed between them. Quylan recognized that not a single soldier with her knew how to proceed. Of course, the soldiers had controlled and threatened humans from time to time, but none of them had actually battled another magical being. Quylan had experienced Onja's attack spells, but Shan had been there to help her survive.

At least I know what it will feel like, she thought. As their leader, she accepted that she had to use her superior power to shelter her soldiers from this storm.

"Captain Tulair, I shall cast a shield spell over our force. When the strange rys attack us, you and your soldiers must strike them down and rely on my spells to ward off their battle magic," Quylan said.

Tulair did not voice his concerns. He understood that he should be thankful to have her power to support him, but he hoped that Shan would reach them soon.

His doubts ceased to matter as the mild morning suddenly changed to an icy wind through his skeleton. Tulair locked eyes with Quylan, who also sensed the onslaught of hate. She could spare no time to reassure him or the other soldiers. Without looking toward the lone figure that had

popped over the hill in front of them, she plunged into spellmaking. The rys soldiers felt her shielding magic slip around them like a mother's arms, but the confidence with which the swaggering figure approached them gripped them with nightmare fear.

With eyes blazing like two unholy stars fallen from the heavens, the tall figure, clad crudely in furs and stolen gear, showed no interest in parley. As if responding to some unspoken signal, the stranger began to run toward the rys war party.

Great Dacian! Tulair thought. *Has he no fear?*

Encouraged by the uncertainty seizing the rys ranks, Tempet issued his hellish war cry.

When Tempet raised his bitaran, Tulair's heart thudded with the blood of a warrior for the first time. "Fight!" he yelled and moved to intercept the shrieking thing.

Lowering his spear, Tulair galloped toward Tempet. With a matadorial sidestep Tempet eluded the point and shattered the spear with his bitaran. Then, as Tulair's horse passed him, Tempet struck the animal in a hind leg and sent it bellowing to the ground.

Tulair was still disentangling himself from the spill when Tempet pounced. The rys captain dodged the bitaran and yanked his foot out of the last clinging stirrup with desperate haste. Drawing his long knife, Tulair retreated from the swiping warhammer that pulsed with enchantments.

More rys assailed Tempet, who spun to face their spears. With frightening speed he bashed every spear aside. Tulair leaped at him with the intention of plunging his long knife into his back, but the bitaran suddenly extended itself. The enchanted metal snapped out at Tulair like a scorpion's tail. Tulair twisted hard and avoided the point that sought his vitals.

Even as Tempet's weapon shot out to defend his rear, he thwarted another spear in front of him. He cast an attack spell at the rider with the broken spear and blasted him screaming and smoking to the ground. Then, Tempet whirled on Tulair, ready to finish him.

He struck the rys captain on the chin with the shaft of his bitaran. Tossed backward by the blow, Tulair landed on his butt. He had neither time to move nor any hope of deflecting the bitaran with his comparatively puny weapon. A great resistance to his mortality swelled from his soul and Tulair cast an attack spell that he would not have guessed that he was capable of making. Magical fire blazed around Tempet's head and forced him back one step.

Tulair sprang to his feet, ready to use more of the power that he had suddenly summoned, but a powerful attack spell crashed over him like a collapsing cave. He bowed beneath the force, and terror constricted his body until he realized that the spell was not hurting him.

Quylan can protect us, he thought triumphantly because she had to be absorbing the lethal effects of the spell.

"Get him!" Tulair cried to the other soldiers.

Tempet dashed between the riders who could not react fast enough to strike him. He was disappointed that his sister's spell had not created the desired misery, and he now recognized that the female who the soldiers surrounded was shielding them.

Stymied by Quylan's power, Alloi altered her strategy. Instead of trying to crush Quylan's entire shield spell, Alloi directed her mind at one small vulnerable spot.

Quylan's horse started bucking. Unprepared for the violent outburst from her horse, Quylan was quickly thrown to the ground. When she landed, her concentration was destroyed and attack spells smacked her flat and blackened the grass around her.

Although the plains appeared to provide an unbroken view in every direction, a group could travel with stealth. Shan hid the advance of his war party visually by hugging the gentle dips in the rolling land that was deceptively flat to the untrained eye, and he supplemented his cloaking spell with the folds of the land.

Before entering the battle, the rys King stopped and quickly assessed the situation between his enemies and his reinforcements. Shan then paused to soak up the view of the Rysamand that rose from the plains like a gleaming island city in a sea of barbarism. Gazing at the warm sun on the

frozen peaks, Shan felt secure that he would win the day.

When he turned to face the men who had ridden with him from Vetanium, blue fire blazed in his eyes and he saw their awe and respect for his power on their faces.

"Dreibrand," he said, "You must go to the female and halt her attack. I will confront Tempet."

Dreibrand asked where he could find her. He blinked hard when the answer immediately entered mind. In an instant Shan had put the knowledge in Dreibrand's mind without wasting time on words.

"You must attack her," Shan continued for all to hear. "Your purpose is to stop the attack spells that she is directing at my forces."

"Yes, my King," Dreibrand said formally.

The war party advanced now without caution. The humans followed Dreibrand, who galloped toward Alloi's position with his sword drawn, and Shan rode directly toward the rys war party.

Alloi concealed herself in a gully half-choked with thorn bushes. As Dreibrand approached her hiding spot, he saw the two stolen horses, and his eyes latched thankfully on Astar.

I am definitely getting my horses back, he promised himself while his men occupied the higher ground around the edges of the gully.

"There she is!" Tytido cried and pointed at a dark figure among the thickets.

After a few quick hand signals to his archers, Dreibrand said to Tytido and Faychan, "Let us see how she fares when the battle is brought to her."

The enchanted swords that the three men possessed decreed that they would be the warriors to challenge the female. They entered the gully, and each man found his own path through the brambles. Faychan clicked his visor down to protect his face.

The archers released their arrows and the shafts hissed over the thickets. An arrow bit into Alloi's flesh where her collarbone met her shoulder. It glanced off the blunt bone but left dark blood flowing over her breast.

The attack diverted her attention from supporting Tempet against the rys soldiers, as it was intended, and she shifted her magic to a shield spell. A white aura glowed around her now and the other arrows that came at her withered in strings of ashes.

Incensed by the impudent humans, she prepared to blast them from the hill until she saw three men coming toward her through the vegetation. Warded by their fabulous weapons, the lifeforces of the three men could not be tracked by her mind, and she feared their attack.

Alloi dashed for the horses that were tethered loosely to a bush, but Dreibrand had anticipated her move and he cut her off. She fired a hasty attack spell at him, which burned his eyes with intense light but did no damage. His horse backed away, shaking its head and rattling the bit in its mouth. Holding his horse steady, Dreibrand watched the female dive into a thicket and scramble away below the thorns. He dismounted and crashed through the spiny shrubs in pursuit.

His armored jacket, leather chaps, and boots protected him from the thorns and he held an arm over his face and hacked at the branches with his sword. Dreibrand hollered to Tytido that he thought she might be coming his way.

Dreibrand glimpsed the female right in front of him. The fleece that covered her body protected her from the thorns but he noted a few scratches on her muscular thighs and shapely arms. He marked her movement by her short white hair that stood out from the surrounding hues of green and brown. When he caught up to her, she turned to face him with fiery white eyes.

Dreibrand charged recklessly and swiped at her with his enchanted sword. A thorn grabbed his arm where one of the armored plates was missing and he snarled at the pain. Alloi dodged the blade and cast an attack spell.

Although his wardings protected him from the magical fire, the dense vegetation around him possessed no immunity. Flames seized the dried twigs and dead leaves, and a quick hot fire surrounded Dreibrand. He cursed in Atrophany and leaped after the female.

She released another spell and set more of the thicket ablaze. The edges of the green leaves blackened and the dry litter on the ground burned and smoked. Dreibrand coughed but stayed on her heels.

The smoke thickened quickly over the gully and the archers hurried to make a few more shots before their view was obscured. Following the emerging line of fire and smoke across the thicket, Faychan hurried to cut the female off when she came out of the vegetation. An arrow whizzed by his helmeted head and he yelled at the archers to stop.

His voice alerted Alloi to his presence and she veered in a new direction. She burst out of the thicket with blood flowing from minor wounds. In her haste, she blundered into Tytido, who waited on his horse in a gap between the shrubs. He tried to run her down and swiped at her with his perilous blade, but she set more bushes ablaze and frightened his horse. While he fought for control of his mount, Tytido saw her run back into the burning thicket.

Alloi knew that shield spells would keep the flames from her flesh and she backtracked to elude her hunters.

Dreibrand ran into Faychan. "Did you see her?" he demanded.

From the higher view on his horse, Faychan pointed toward Tytido. "I think she is over there." Through the smoke, Dreibrand saw Tytido wrestling with the reins of his horse. Dreibrand realized that the female could be heading in any direction, but his battle-accelerated mental state quickly selected a best guess for her next move.

"Go that way," he ordered Faychan and gestured around the thicket.

Gulping a somewhat fresh lungful of air, Dreibrand turned and ran back into the burning thicket. He used the path that he had bashed through the ornery vegetation and ran through the fire.

When he came out the other side of the thicket, tears streamed from his eyes and his lungs burned. The horse that he had left behind had retreated from the gully, but Astar and the other stolen horse still lingered despite having pulled loose their tethers. Alloi no doubt convinced the horses to wait for her. Dreibrand ran to rescue his animals, and as he expected, he met Alloi. Her dark form slipped out of its smoky cloak near the horses that she planned to use for her escape.

"No!" Dreibrand rasped.

He startled Alloi, who had expected the fires to keep the humans back. Her beautiful face twitched with annoyance when she recognized the man who opposed her. He was the one who served the rys King and enchantments protected him like a falconer's glove. He could feel the claws of her magic but they did not hurt him.

Knowing that her brother needed her support, she refused to let this human delay her anymore. Alloi's magic exploded around Dreibrand, and the bright light dazzled his eyes so that he could not see her anymore. He struck out blindly with his sword but did not hit her.

Alloi ran to the horses, but Dreibrand staggered after her, squinting and blinking hard in an effort to clear his vision. Personal pride compelled him to reclaim his property, and he would not watch her take his horse again.

Astar went to Alloi, but Dreibrand grabbed the horse's dragging reins just as Alloi moved up to the colt. Astar reared up and Dreibrand had to dodge the flailing hooves. Alloi beckoned the other horse with her precise mind. When Dreibrand saw that she would still escape, he released Astar and tried to stop her.

Faychan and Tytido arrived from opposite directions. The smoke had forced them to abandon their mounts that refused to go near the fire. Faychan reached Alloi first. The vigor of his challenge belied the injuries that plagued his physique, and with his face covered by the gleaming visor and the black horsetail flying from the top of his helmet, he bounded at her as the perfect image of a marauder.

Backing away from his bright blade, Alloi gave up her claim to the second horse. After a few stumbling steps, Alloi stopped and lifted her hands. She posed defiantly before the enchanted blade that had been forged to slay her kind, and she ended Faychan's assault with an angry attack spell. He fell backwards and the horsetail on his helmet burst into stinking flames.

Another spell erupted over the entire gully and set on fire anything that had avoided the intense

heat until now. All the horses scattered and Alloi disappeared into the choking smoke. The men were forced to the higher ground where the other riders circled helplessly.

"Catch our horses," Dreibrand coughed and three warriors went to gather the loose animals.

Faychan staggered up behind Dreibrand. After so much exertion, his limp had returned and his hacking cough yanked at his tender vitals. Still gripping his sword, he pulled off his smoldering helmet and gave a cry of relief. When the helmet hit the ground, its heated metal ignited a few dry blades of grass. Faychan kicked the thing aside and stomped out the tiny fire. His helmet looked disgraceful covered with soot and the horsetail decoration was reduced to a charred bristle.

A cry arose from the archers as they spotted Alloi. Dreibrand looked where they pointed and saw the female running out of the smoke. With impressive speed she topped the next hill and then dropped out of sight.

Tytido yelled for the war party to assemble ranks, and Dreibrand gave the order to pursue as he ran to intercept the warrior who was bringing him his horse. Dreibrand noted that Astar had also been retrieved, which gave him some sense of accomplishment.

Faychan scooped up his helmet that had cooled enough to be used again and accepted the horse that a warrior returned to him. "She must be heading toward the other rys," he cried as he joined the galloping riders.

"Then may we drive her to her death!" Dreibrand said.

Tempet felt the magic of his sister recede from the battlefield like a warm blanket being torn from his body on a cold day. Although alarmed because she was being attacked, Tempet could not forego his opportunity to kill rys. The soldiers who opposed him were woefully inexperienced, and he began to kill them as he drove toward the powerful female who had just been thrown from her horse.

Two soldiers charged Tempet, but the spears aimed at his heart caused him no fear. Just before the metal points reached him, he vaulted into the air, and with one wide sweep of his bitaran, he struck both rys soldiers in the head and killed them. Pleasure from the violence fueled his body and spirit as he landed on the ground. Invigorated by the spatters of rys blood that had sprinkled his skin, Tempet blasted the next three soldiers who opposed him with his magic. The attack spells exploded upward from the ground, mangling the horses and riders. Chunks of turf flew in every direction and a couple pelted Tempet. The damp pieces of Nufal congratulated him as they struck his chest. His homeland was proud to lend its weight to his destructive acts.

The stunned rys soldiers fell back from the incarnation of certain death. Laughing at their fear, Tempet stalked toward the female who was only beginning to shake off the attack spell that had battered her.

Quylan gasped when she sat up and saw her enemy looming over her. His bitaran was still in its extended state and he raised the stake-like end and thrust it through her right shoulder. Throwing his weight into it, he pushed her flat on her back and pinned her to the ground. His ruthless mind flowed through his enchanted weapon and he formed little barbs on the shaft inside her body. Quylan screamed when he twisted the sinister weapon.

Tempet yanked the bitaran out and her purple blood gushed up in a pleasing quantity. He prepared himself for the joy of forcing out her hated soul with the next descent of the stake, but he received pain instead. An attack spell clawed at his spine and he turned and saw Tulair.

The rys captain threw his knife at Tempet, but the tabre deflected it with an automatic twitch of his bitaran. Weaponless now, Tulair cast a tentative shield spell. He faced Tempet with determination but did not know what else he could do.

Tempet was about to be amused by the cocky rys soldier who presented himself for execution, but a metallic flash made him forget Tulair. A white-haired rys had arrived, and he flew from the saddle and ran directly at Tempet. The enchanted shield glowed on his arm and his sword pumped back and forth with each swift stride.

"The King!" Tulair breathed with relief as Shan ran past him.

Shan and Tempet embraced their duel like passionate lovers who have ended a long separation.

Spells and weapons crashed against each other in quick succession. A swirl of heated air formed around the magical fighters and a sphere of attack spells enclosed them, forcing the rys soldiers farther back. Shan pounded Tempet away from the bleeding Quylan who writhed on the ground. Each time Shan blocked the bitaran with his shield, he drained some of Tempet's strength. The bitaran shrank to its original size and Shan drew blood as his sword caught Tempet across the stomach.

Tempet fell back, stumbling with pain, but he would not turn away from the hated the rys King. His mortal enemy could cut him a thousand more times and he still would not relent from the fight.

Shan slipped free of the restraints of his kind nature, and a zealous craving for violence claimed his mind. Mentally, he was Tempet's equal at this moment and he beat upon his enemy with a profound hatred. It was not the hatred that Shan had possessed for Onja. What he felt now was a pure desire to cause damage for its own sake.

Shan flung Tempet back with a potent attack spell. Buoyed by the shield spell that saved his life, Tempet skidded across the ground. As Shan approached his sprawled victim, terrible thoughts surged in his head. Shan possessed the ability to make Deamedron and it occurred to him to incinerate this awful creature and then capture his soul so that he could devote a lifetime to inflicting delicate tortures on Tempet's spirit. The hideous idea came to him as if he had been bred to hate this being.

And Shan might have done it and forsaken any pretense at being better than his evil predecessor, but an attack spell hit him, which returned his thoughts to only survival. Alloi had come, and when Shan turned his head, the dreadful sickness that Tempet had infected him with went away. Dark as the best fertile soil, Alloi stood upon the green plains like a Goddess, and Shan was struck by the desire to worship her.

Even as Shan admired her, he knew his thoughts were misguided. Her attack spell blazed over him until he lifted his shield.

Alloi shied from the sparkle of the dangerous shield, and she ran to her brother. As she helped him to his feet, she noted the blood running down his crotch and thighs. Combat had made Tempet impervious to the serious wound, but Alloi instantly recognized that they had to retreat. With the rumble of Dreibrand's war party shaking her ears, she dragged her brother from the battle.

Rys soldiers joined the human riders as they galloped toward Shan. Dreibrand saw Tempet and Alloi turn and run. Shan gestured toward them with his sword and launched the pursuit. Shan ran alongside Dreibrand, keeping pace with the galloping horse. With the rys King racing at his side, Dreibrand felt anew the excitement of battle.

A rys soldier galloped beside Shan and extended an arm to his King. Shan took the hand and sprang into the saddle behind his loyal soldier. Then, in an exhibition of typical rys grace, the soldier quit the saddle and the horse did not slow at all.

The riders began to gain on the fleeing duo. As the twins ran, they linked minds and Tempet bitterly opposed his sister's decision to retreat, but Alloi made him see reason. Their attack was poorly planned and she had seen him failing against the rys King. Even with her help, she was not certain if they could defeat the King with all his soldiers. Plus Tempet was hurt and they needed to escape.

Begrudgingly, Tempet accepted his sibling's assessment. They turned to face their pursuers and combined their powers. Shan barely managed to shield the riders from the hellish force that blocked their path. A dome of flashing energy formed over the riders, who circled back from the white-hot wall of magic. Where Shan's magic met the attack spell, a line of fire feasted on the underlying layer of dead grass, and the riders milled inside their zone of protection.

When the spell finally faded, Tempet and Alloi were no longer in sight.

"We can still catch them!" Dreibrand shouted, but Shan shook his head.

Shan did not fear to continue the chase, but he had noticed the lifeforce that was fading upon the plains.

"Quylan is dying," he said. "I must go back and you must not pursue them without me."

Disappointment dragged Dreibrand's face into a frown. Why did they always get away? But he would not argue with Shan. Dreibrand had not known that Quylan was hurt and if he had left

Miranda behind bleeding to death, he would go back as well.

When Shan returned to where Quylan had fallen, he found Tulair cradling her. The captain held a blood-soaked cloth over her chest and another soldier held an equally bloody cloth to the exit wound on her back. Her black hair dangled from her limp head, but her eyes opened when Shan arrived.

"The King is here," Tulair whispered to her.

The captain and the soldier transferred her body to Shan. Expelling all other concerns from his troubled mind, Shan gathered his power to make healing magic. He clamped a hand over both wounds and blue light began to pulse over Quylan's body.

With his mind entrenched in the rent tissues, Shan mended and renewed the flesh. The process took a long time and the others began to quietly attend to the fallen rys. Seeing rys slain upon the battlefield was an odd sight for the humans who were accustomed to the superiority of rys. But the bloody bodies proved that magical ability did not always make the flesh invulnerable.

When the healing spell finally ended, Quylan had the strength to speak. "I tried my best, Shan," she murmured.

Guilt trampled Shan's other emotions. "I should not have put you in such danger," he said and touched her face.

Kissing his finger, she said, "For Jington I came."

Shan swallowed hard. The King would not shed tears before his soldiers. "Quylan, listen to me. You need to enter a healing sleep. Without it, you will never recover. I can only do so much."

"I do not know how," she said and fear joined the pain in her eyes.

"Yes you do," he encouraged. "And you must. Do not be afraid. I will be here."

"I will not wake up," she worried.

"Yes you will. I will show you how. Meditate with me," he said and tried to dispel her fear with a courageous smile.

His mind reached out to her, but Quylan responded with more words. "Tell me I am your Queen," she said.

Shan hesitated but her grievous injury demanded the proper answer.

"Yes, of course," he said.

Quylan shut her eyes and allowed him to guide her into partial hibernation.

22. Unexpected Tranquility

Shan washed the blood of his lover from his hands, and prepared to pursue his enemies as only the King of Jington could. He sat down cross-legged upon the prairie grasses that were soft and green after a wet spring. He arranged his sword and shield in front of him and touched the center of the shield. The cold metal had sapped energy from Tempet and Alloi and their essences lingered within the enchanted relic. Shan still was not certain how the shield worked, but he suddenly imagined Dacian carrying it into battle.

Withdrawing his hand, Shan pushed the image of Dacian from his mind. For his whole life, he had been taught that Jington's ancient victory over Nufal had been total. Now, it had become unfinished business.

Guided by his supreme senses, Shan's mind crossed the prairie like a grass fire. He located his enemies to the south. Alloi had stopped to nurse Tempet's wound, and Shan observed the bleeding gash with satisfaction. He owed Tempet more discomfort than that one wound, but Shan did not attack for the sake of just his revenge. Grievous fury for the dead rys fueled his perilous magic.

When his attack spell hit the tabre, Alloi collapsed across her brother's chest. Her power shielded

them, but she could not maintain their protection indefinitely. They needed distance to insulate them from Shan's battle magic, and Alloi decided that she and Tempet must retreat completely.

But the range of the rys King extended farther than they could run in a day. Shan hounded them through the day and into the night. He resisted the exhaustion clawing at his body and mind. A half moon rose and he watched them flee across the velvety grasslands. They staggered beneath his attack spells, but Alloi's shield magic did not break as she protected herself and Tempet, who clutched his unsealed wound in mounting pain.

When Alloi screamed defiantly at the sky, Shan hardened his heart to her misery and cast another attack spell.

Shan continued his onslaught into the next day, but he failed to smite them. Like the starving wolf outrun by his prey, his pursuit slackened until he was forced to stop with the jaws of his anger hanging open, empty and unsatisfied.

Shan returned to his body, and without a word to the rys soldiers and humans who camped around him, he collapsed into a deep sleep.

His followers were impatient to hear his report, but no one disturbed the slumber of the rys King. Although their campsite had the ominous feel of occupying a no man's land between opposing mountain ranges, the rys and humans tried to rest as well.

Shan slept for an entire day before stirring, and Faychan noticed immediately when Shan sat straight up and then moved on his hands and knees to check on Quylan, who did not stir.

"Shan is awake," Faychan announced to Dreibrand, who was busy tending his recently recovered colt.

Dreibrand nodded but did not look away from Astar. He was gently pushing a currycomb over the colt's sleek black coat and he did not want to be distracted. The colt had been as a wild horse after its abduction, and only that morning had Dreibrand been able to rekindle the animal's trust. Tentatively, he groomed the animal, soothing it with the primping and massages that only a human hand could provide.

Like Faychan, other people were excited by Shan's rising, and Astar snorted at the suddenly noisy camp. Dreibrand quickly grabbed the soft halter that he had coaxed onto the animal's head after a difficult struggle to remove the bridle. The colt jerked a few times against the hold of his master before yielding to control.

Satisfied that the colt was over his skittish fit, Dreibrand released him. Astar galloped away a short distance before joining some horses grazing nearby.

Faychan walked up to Dreibrand. "Aren't you worried that your precious horse will run off again?" the older man said.

Dreibrand replied with confidence, "I am sure Shan has given our rys enemies more to think about than my horse."

"And I am ready to hear what that is," Faychan said. "A whole day in trance and then another day sleeping without a word to us."

Dreibrand sympathized with Faychan's frustration. "Sometimes Shan does not keep us as informed as we would like," he said and walked over to his gear.

He knocked the horse hair out of the comb and the black strands floated on the breeze. While putting the comb away in a saddlebag, he finally looked toward the rys section of camp. Shan was kneeling beside Quylan.

"Are you going to find out what is happening?" Faychan said impatiently.

"I will wait until Shan wishes to talk to me," Dreibrand said, concentrating on the saddlebag buckle now.

Forced to wait, Faychan pulled a flask out of a pocket and tossed a couple swigs of liquor down his throat. He offered the flask to Dreibrand who shook his head.

They watched Shan for a while until the rys appeared to enter another trance. "I think we will have

to wait for news a little longer," Dreibrand concluded. He sat down and started poking through his rations.

Faychan plopped down across from him, but nourished himself from the flask. Relaxed by what he now referred to as his medicine, Faychan said, "So, Dreibrand, is Gulang to your liking?"

Dreibrand munched on some stale bread and washed it down with water before answering, "He is a good man. I can see why you had him serve you so closely."

Faychan muttered something under his breath in the Kezanada language.

"What was that?" Dreibrand asked.

Choosing to share his complaint, Faychan said, "You wasted no time in depriving me of my best." *Or what is left of my best*, he thought.

Dreibrand lowered the canteen from his mouth and looked Faychan in the eye. "I would not have you feel that way. Gulang serves us."

"Do not try to smooth talk me, Dreibrand. I have deceived a thousand people a thousand times. I know the sound," Faychan said.

"Which brought you ruin in the end," Dreibrand said plainly. He plugged the canteen and gave Faychan his complete attention. "I would have you and I trust each other as Tytido and I do. You can be a lord in Nufal. I do not fear it."

"Stop it. I can see that I am a disgraced exile. My men were glad to give you their loyalty," Faychan said.

"They follow me because you do," Dreibrand said. He expected to cultivate true devotion from his new warriors, but he knew that the Kezanada had initially given their pledge to serve only because Faychan had done so.

Faychan took another swig and sighed as the liquor seeped into his system.

Dreibrand was not sure if he believed Faychan's sudden self-deprecation, and he decided to discourage the discontent brewing inside the ruined Overlord.

"Faychan, I think that you are the best man that I have gained from the refugees. I value your knowledge and cunning, and I would learn from you," Dreibrand said quietly.

Faychan raised his eyebrows skeptically. "So I am to be the elder counselor because I am too old to be much else," he said.

"Do you really expect me to believe you when you belittle yourself?" Dreibrand said. "You fought as hard as me or Tytido the other day. And I am sure that you are as lethal as a dozen young men."

"Maybe I still am," Faychan admitted and looked down modestly.

"I thought it would suit you to be my counselor, the voice that whispers in the ear of the throne," Dreibrand said.

"Oh, I didn't see the throne. Where is it?" Faychan joked. He covered his eyes and scanned the sunny plains as if he must have overlooked a capital city.

"Use your imagination," Dreibrand suggested tersely.

Faychan chuckled before apologizing. "Excuse me. I am still not used to your grand schemes. A few years ago you left me with the impression that you were retiring to a simple life in the Wilderness." He reclined and absently rubbed his side. "So what do you want advice about, my Lord?"

Dreibrand readily replied that he wanted to hone the fighting talents of his warriors and to learn techniques for traveling with stealth, which was an infamous Kezanada skill.

"I always knew you wanted to be a Kezanada," Faychan teased.

"Mmm, I think I am over that phase," Dreibrand said.

I guess I am too, Faychan thought with more than a little bitterness. He had been a member of the Kezanada society since the age of fourteen. When he was eighteen, he had survived the trials necessary to be declared a warrior, and then at age twenty two, he had gained the rank of assassin in the usual manner. After becoming an assassin, he had rapidly achieved the title Masterspy. For many years, he had served his society as chief information gatherer and creator. Then, he had disposed of a rival and become Overlord, which had not brought him the success that he was used to having.

The loss of his identity was difficult to cope with and Dreibrand's solicitation of advice almost sounded like an act of charity. With depression hanging from his heart like an attack dog, Faychan tried to clear his head and resist the charm of his flask. Contemplating past glories and failures would not help him and perhaps it was good to be needed. All his scheming mind had ever needed was an opportunity.

"You know, Dreibrand, I am the first *living* retired Overlord in history," he said.

They laughed and Dreibrand smacked Faychan's boot and said, "Let us hope that you saved some of that good luck for all of us."

This made Faychan laugh harder because calling his decline lucky was ridiculous.

They chatted about Nufal, and Faychan listened carefully to the details that Dreibrand offered about his new home until a rys soldier walked up to them.

"The King wishes to see you, Lord Dreibrand," the rys said.

Dreibrand twisted in his sitting position to look for Shan and, for the first time, appeared impatient to speak with him. Dreibrand stood up quickly and left with the rys.

The rys soldier who had summoned Dreibrand dropped back when they neared Shan, and Dreibrand advanced alone. The rys King stood with his head bowed. The long days of struggle had taken a toll on him. Although Shan had obtained clean clothes in Vetanium, he still wore his suede jacket that was scorched and bloodstained, and when Shan lifted his head, Dreibrand was disturbed by his rys friend's expression. His onyx eyes were dull and looking inward.

In a tired but sincere voice, Shan expressed his deepest thanks to Dreibrand and his men for their efforts in the battle.

Dreibrand dipped his head in modest acknowledgement. "You know I serve you gladly, and I will tell the men of your gratitude, but I wish that we could have accomplished something." Revealing his frustration now, he fumed, "We tried. We had her surrounded, but we just could not touch her. She always gets away."

"You helped save Quylan's life. Take some satisfaction from that," Shan said gently.

Subdued, Dreibrand asked about her condition.

Shan heaved a sigh and answered that she was healing. "But I have to take her back to Jington where she can recuperate properly," he added.

"You will take her back?" Dreibrand said. "But what about Tempet and Alloi? Did you kill them? Where are they?"

"Alas, my friend, they have eluded me," Shan admitted. "They were fleeing south and I beat on them until I had no strength left. But after I rested and entered trance again, I could not find them. They must be hiding under a heavy cloaking spell."

"You are not sure?" Dreibrand asked with some alarm. "Shan, we have to pursue them. We must not tire of the chase. They have to be stopped."

"I know," Shan snapped with royal intensity. "I do not need to be told the obvious."

The outburst startled Dreibrand but offended him as well. "I am not used to my advice angering you," he said.

Shan regretted his tone. "Forgive me, my friend. After so many struggles, I can only think to lash out."

"I have been guilty of that once or twice," Dreibrand said forgivingly.

Rubbing his temple, Shan said, "I have to take dead rys back to Jingten. I have only been King a mere five years and I have already failed my kind. I did not have the strength to defeat Onja and now this."

Recognizing that the confidence of the rys King had been shaken, Dreibrand quickly sought to buoy his spirits. This was why Shan favored humans with friendship. A rys King could not admit weakness to another rys, but with a human friend, who would always consider him naturally superior, Shan could expose the vulnerabilities of his soul.

"It is true that you needed help to overcome Onja, but it could not have been done without you. Like we did then, we will defeat the new enemy," Dreibrand stated firmly.

Shan did not argue but neither did his despondence lessen. Fresh graves in the Jingten cemetery had not been in his vision of a rys renaissance and he had never dreamed that the ancient sins of the rys would return to condemn them. The sympathetic ear of his human friend was a flimsy refuge from his horror.

"Eat with me, Dreibrand. My soldiers have slain an antelope and we are to have fresh meat. I am hungry," Shan said.

Although Dreibrand itched to continue their important conversation, he forced himself to remain patient. Dreibrand realized that injury and the prolonged use of battle magic had drained Shan, who had not shared in the calm of the past two days. This was Shan's first chance to catch his breath after an extended crisis, and he had just started to count his losses and cope with the emotions of failure.

The dinner was delicious. Days of dusty rations added to the flavor of the flame-kissed game. Shan ate slowly as if relearning the process of eating. They did not talk and the silence possessed an unexpected tranquility.

Eventually, Shan sank back on his elbows, satisfied by the food. The powers that he commanded could only sustain him for so long before his flesh demanded a conventional source of energy.

Shan had pondered his decisions while eating, trying to make a better plan, but the delay had not inspired him. The expectant gaze of Dreibrand's blue eyes coaxed Shan to share his thoughts.

"I will be returning to Jingten with Quylan and my dead. I ask that you send Zannah's body from Vetanium," Shan said.

Dreibrand frowned. "She is probably buried by now."

"Then have her exhumed. I will not have a rys interred in the land of our blood enemy," Shan said, soothing himself with vindictive prejudice.

"Very well," Dreibrand said and made a mental note to make sure Esseldan did not witness the process.

Shan continued, "I need to return to Jingten and reassure my citizens. These events will be difficult for them to bear. I will be blamed for the deaths of my soldiers."

"Shan, you are the King. Part of that means accepting blame, but do not be ashamed. You did not use your soldiers frivolously. You had to make sure that Tempet and Alloi never made it to the Rysamand," Dreibrand said.

Although Shan believed that Dreibrand was right, it did not excuse the failure. With guilt clawing at his mind, Shan shook his head. "The rys have been spoiled by a lack of enemies. They are unprepared for this shock," he said. He scanned the soldiers encamped around him and felt an intense affection for them. "Although security has made my kind soft, these soldiers were brave. They fought Tempet in all his terribleness," Shan said.

"And what am I to do if Tempet comes back and attacks?" Dreibrand said, guiding the conversation toward his urgent concern. "How long will you be in Jingten?"

"I have not forgotten you, Dreibrand, nor your dear family," Shan said. "I will leave Captain Tulair and most of these soldiers with you. Return to Vetanium with them. I know you want to be near your family. Tulair can organize patrols from your settlement and watch for Tempet and Alloi."

"That is it? Go home?" Dreibrand said.

"For now, yes."

Dreibrand blinked, uncertain if he was angry or afraid. He did not want Shan to leave, and he definitely wanted to take action instead of waiting to be attacked again.

He tried again to persuade the rys King to heed his advice. He urged Shan to hunt down Tempet and Alloi while they were hurt and not give them a chance to recuperate.

"But I need a chance to recuperate, and so does Quylan," Shan insisted. With her suffering foremost in his thoughts, he could not discount the danger. "I may appear healed to you, but I need to go home. I need to breathe the high mountain air and be comforted by my homeland so that I can gather my powers for the final battle."

Dreibrand could not dispute the fact that Shan had been grievously injured. It was a testament to Shan's power that he had come this far and fought so hard already. Perhaps there could be no victory until Shan was fully recovered. Reluctantly, Dreibrand said that he would go home.

"Good. I will watch over you, and I will return to finish the fight, Dreibrand, I promise," Shan said and extended his hand. Dreibrand took it and felt his palm tingle with the warmth of his rys friend's magic. He had complete faith that Shan would fulfill his pledge.

Shan continued, "I will wait until morning before waking Quylan for the trip home. But you may go now. Send Miranda my love," Shan said.

"I will," Dreibrand said and they both stood up.

"I wish the circumstances had been better, but it has been nice to see you, my friend," Shan said.

"Just like old times," Dreibrand chuckled.

"A little too much," Shan said.

Before parting, Dreibrand saluted his King for a formal farewell. Shan smiled. It was nice to know that he inspired genuine respect.

After Dreibrand walked away, Shan summoned his attentive captain. Tulair listened to his instructions carefully but he hesitated when his King dismissed him. Shan had expected Tulair to have something to talk about, and he encouraged him to speak.

"My King, during the battle, I—I think I used battle magic. Maybe. I am not sure." Tulair halted, uncertain of what else to say.

"All rys have magical abilities," Shan stated.

"But I did more than the others," Tulair blurted.

"And it surprises you that, when confronted with death, you drew upon your natural powers in order to survive?" Shan asked.

Looking upon the patient face of his King, Tulair's confusion started to melt away. "My King, I do have powers."

"A few rys have more than others," Shan said.

"You knew, my King. You knew even when I did not know. That is why you made me captain," Tulair surmised.

"Tulair, I had planned to educate you about it. I never imagined that any of this would happen," Shan said with a fatherly tone. "But this crisis has brought out the best in you. We must part now, but think about what happened on the battlefield. And practice casting shield spells again. Try some attack spells, but be careful of others."

Tulair attempted to process the advice. "Why did you wait to tell me, my King?" he asked.

Shan replied, "Because I promoted you young and I wanted you to develop the confidence for command from a modest outlook. If you had already considered yourself superior, your resulting

cockiness may not have endeared you to the others. This way, the soldiers respected you before, and after your performance on the battlefield, they will be very loyal."

Tulair nodded, impressed by the wisdom of his King. Softly, he asked, "But why did I not know myself?"

"Perhaps you did not want to know," Shan suggested. "You grew up with Onja as your Queen. Rys lived in fear of her and never wanted to be noticed. I have freed the waters of our society from the dam of her oppression, and only now are many rys discovering their talents."

Tulair knew it was true. He had become a soldier merely because there was not much else for him to do, but now that he had a new King serve, his duties had begun to have meaning. In a fit of adoration, Tulair dropped to one knee, seized one of Shan's hands, and pressed it to his lips.

"We did not deserve you, my King," he murmured passionately.

Gently Shan eased his hand away from the loyal grip. "You did not deserve Onja," he corrected and commanded the captain to stand. "Tulair," he said with gentle affection. "It is your duty to protect my human friends while I am in Jington. Forgive me for leaving you with such a difficult assignment."

"My King has nothing for me to forgive. I accept your orders gladly," Tulair said.

"Captain, do not speak foolishly," Shan admonished. "You have seen how deadly Tempet and Alloi are."

Tulair's enthusiasm faded. Death had tickled his sides and the cold fingers had only withdrawn because his King had arrived.

"I will be cautious, my King," he said, understanding that he was being left to defend a hostile frontier.

23. *A Rough Voyage*

Rys powers can both hurt and heal. My Lord General's squire was tortured by the burning magic of their terrible Queen, but then another rys saved his life and restored the flesh. – Excerpt from "A Year in the Wilderness: A Collection of Soldiers' Tales" published year 782 Atrophane calendar.

Atarek hung over the railing of the ship. The small part of his mind not consumed with suffering pondered the mystery of how a thoroughly emptied stomach could still heave.

His voyage to Phemnalang across the Gulf of Beldet had given him a better appreciation for the definition of gulf. In the four days since he had left Atrophane, time had slowed until finally stopping. Each minute hobbled through his perception like an insect with half of its legs torn off.

Atarek now regarded the enjoyment he had once found in coastal pleasure cruises as absurd. A sea voyage was not an afternoon of boating and he felt like he was in a windy prison open to the sky.

He wiped his chin with a handkerchief and pulled his eyes out of the swelling waters. Turning away from the railing, he slid down to the deck.

"It is peculiar to see someone get seasick in the middle of a voyage."

Not inclined to move his head, Atarek lifted his eyes to see who had spoken. Three of the Atrophaney passengers were standing in front of him. He had noticed the woman with her teenage daughter and young son before, but he had not spoken to them. Atarek lacked the strength to express his offense at the mother's sarcastic tone. His pounding head dragged his gaze back to his rumpled lap and he hoped that his audience would simply go away.

"Lydea, take your brother and finish getting some air," the mother commanded. "I will see what assistance this man requires."

The daughter moved on with the pale boy. Atarek glanced at her ankles as her skirt swished by, but he was too ill to get the pleasant feeling that the attractive girl usually caused.

Propping her parasol against the railing, the mother stooped beside Atarek. Protected from the punitive daylight by the parasol, he looked at the woman who for some unknown reason chose to pay attention to him. Her broad-brimmed straw hat shaded her kind face and long green ribbons cascaded from the hat and stopped at exactly the same point as her chin-length brown hair. A fine dress that signified some wealth clothed her matronly figure. Its design and her hairstyle marked her as merchant class.

Her pale blue eyes assessed his disheveled form with a knowing sweep. Her lip twitched with mild disapproval before she spoke to him in a firm whisper. "I have overheard your speech with the others during this trip and you have the accent of a nobleman. I suggest you get up because this is a disgraceful way to represent the Empire. The sailors are laughing at you."

"Typical," Atarek grunted.

The woman frowned. She had expected shame to motivate him. "Allow me to help you to your cabin, Sir," she said.

"Go away," Atarek said but then a chill shook his body and he looked especially pathetic.

The woman sighed as if resigning herself to her maternal instincts. She plucked up her parasol and grabbed one of his arms. "Sir, you must come to your cabin," she insisted.

Atarek tried to shrug her off, which only made her pull harder.

"You need to get to your cabin," she hissed and Atarek found himself obeying her.

Although he managed to stand, his legs were shaky and he leaned on the woman more than he should have. "I am only seasick," he said.

"Hmmpph," was the woman's only response.

As she hauled him to his cabin, she maintained her dignity with an ingrained poise that the sagging man on her arm could not dislodge. After she dumped him in his bunk that was slightly smaller than his frame, Atarek decided that she had been right to take him to his cabin. The cramped bunk accepted him like a coffin. Atarek shuddered and had no hope that he would ever rise.

With his vision swimming, he felt a hand lifting his head. A cup of water was pressed to his lips but he pushed it away, knowing that it would surely make him vomit again. He did not remember much after that moment, and he certainly ceased to care about the stranger who came and went. His health was so shattered for the next three days that he hardly acknowledged the nursing he received.

Finally, the feverish raving and tossing abated and he entered a sound sleep. When Atarek awoke, he was alone and the warm light projected by the porthole actually felt comforting. He still had a dull headache but his stomach actually had a sensation reminiscent of hunger.

When he discovered that he was naked under the covers, he wondered if the woman had undressed him. The thought did not really bother him. Being undressed by a woman was normally acceptable, but his inability to remember it happening attested to the intensity of his sickness.

He cursed as he sat up. Grabbing the water jug that hung from the wall, he gulped down water until his shriveled stomach threatened to heave again. Exhausted by the slight activity, he lay back and fell asleep again.

The click of the latch on his cabin door roused Atarek the second time. The woman entered along with a male crewmember who attended the passengers. Atarek tried to sit up but failed because he was as weak as a bird beaten down by a strong wind.

The woman ordered the servant to bring food and shut the door behind her.

"You are back with us," she said and pulled a small stool up to his bunk.

"And who is us?" Atarek said.

His tone made her face flash with displeasure as she settled onto the stool. "Your seasickness seems to have passed," she said.

Atarek ignored the suspicious way she said seasickness. Sitting up after his second attempt, he

said, "Actually, it must have been a fever."

"That is plausible. You certainly seemed to have pretty good sea legs when we left Cros," she commented while pouring him a cup of water.

As Atarek accepted the drink, he thanked her for taking care of him.

"You can thank the steward as well when he comes back with the food. Attending you was a large job and he assisted me," she said.

"Which one of you took my clothes off?" Atarek asked with compulsive naughtiness.

The woman scowled sternly. "You are a scoundrel," she said.

"Now that I have been identified, what is your name?" Atarek said.

The steward arrived at the door and delayed her response. He swung into the cabin, keeping the food tray level with the fast ease of a dolphin. Hot broth steamed on the tray and the scent widened Atarek's eyes. Everyone heard his stomach rumble.

"I am Madame Fayeth," she finally said as the steward set down the food. She secured the bowl against sliding and prepared to feed Atarek. With one gesture from her eyes, she dismissed the steward.

"And you are?" Madame Fayeth prompted.

"I suppose you have already asked the captain about that," Atarek said. He was still a little muddled and trying to remember the name that he had booked passage under.

"The captain of this vessel is a discreet man," Madame Fayeth said.

That is good to hear, Atarek thought. Hedy had paid extra for the privacy that Atarek desired. Crossing the Empire would be easier for someone who was not censured.

Thinking about the magnitude of his journey, Atarek felt acutely alone. Hedy and Rord had wanted to come with him, and he still marveled at their eagerness to join him, but even in his ignorance of distant lands, Atarek had known that the journey would be dangerous. He had paid his dear serving men a severance and left them to their merry lives in Atrophane.

Sickened and being tended by a stranger, Atarek was oppressed by his vulnerability. Far from Atrophane for the first time, he wondered if he could succeed in finding his brother without any help along the way.

"Carl Traylor," Atarek said once the name popped into his mind.

Madame Fayeth considered the name a moment and commented that she had never heard of any noble house or clan by the name of Traylor.

"Why are you convinced that I am noble born?" he said and occupied himself with eating bread.

"You have the accent of the ruling class and your rings are not indicative of a common man," she said.

Atarek flexed his left hand and his sapphire ring twinkled at him. His other ring bore the insignia of the House of Veta. The horse carved in jade was worn by the Veta heir. *I wonder if Madame Expert recognizes it?* he thought.

"I won these in a rikrik game," he said, which gave her reason to reconsider her assumptions. "And I thank you again for your help. If you had left me to the sailors, they probably would have taken my rings for sure. I swear, I have never been that sick. I guess I am lucky to live through such a fever."

Madame Fayeth rolled her eyes. "Yes, indeed, Master Traylor. And it is a good thing your sickness is not contagious. I feel fine and the sailors were not worried. Usually they are quite nervous about picking up a fever in their travels."

"You seem to know a lot about sailors," he snapped.

She bristled with indignation before slamming down his broth. "That is enough of this," she declared, and the sloshing soup punctuated her statement.

Atarek regretted his rude words. Although he was physically improved, his attitude was still mired in a fen of irritability. Even so, his clearing mind was grasping the fact that Madame Fayeth probably had money and knowledge of Phefnalang, which made her an excellent prospect for a friend. He scrambled to apologize.

"Madame, forgive me. I am not used to being around nice people and I guess I do not know how to act." He feebly grabbed her wrist when she got up to leave. "Please, I am in your debt. Tell me how I can return your kindness."

"I doubt that you are even capable of returning kindness," she retorted.

"For you I am. Please, Madame, give me a chance. Why are you so short with me now after helping me when I was at my worst?" he said, attempting to tap back into her sympathies.

Madame Fayeth narrowed her eyes. "I took care of you because I pitied you and because I wanted to spare my children the sight of your withdrawal," she replied and clearly took some satisfaction from speaking plainly.

Atarek looked confused. "I do not know what you mean," he muttered.

"Oh, please. I know a zeppa addict when I see one. You obviously did not stock up when you left Cros," she said.

Atarek took a bite of bread. After Madame Fayeth had done so much for him, he thought that the least he could do was not to lie to her, which left him with nothing to say.

"Well?" she demanded.

Her angry tone prodded his headache and he winced. Talking about zeppa was the last thing he wanted to do. The subject aggravated his craving.

"What do you want me to say? I thanked you for your help. Tell me what you want, and I will try to repay you," he said.

"You have nothing to give," Madame Fayeth said. "Your type just takes. As my last selfless act of kindness toward you, I will leave you with this warning. Phefnalang is going to eat you alive."

Madame Fayeth gathered her skirt for her final departure from his cabin. But Atarek could not allow her vision of his squalorous demise in a Phefnalang slum to go unchallenged. He wanted to make sure that she did not think she was right about everything.

"Phefnalang is not my destination. I am going much farther than that," he said.

Surprisingly, Madame Fayeth instantly stopped and looked over her shoulder. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"What do you care?" Atarek said and grabbed his soup bowl before it slid off the table.

"I do not care, but I am curious because I am going much farther than Phefnalang," she replied.

After spooning some broth into his mouth, he said, "Really? You look like you have a rich merchant husband in Phefnalang."

"I used to, but I just took him back to Atrophane so he could be put in his family mausoleum," Madame Fayeth explained, sounding as if she had delivered flour to a bakery.

"Oh, I am sorry, Madame," Atarek said. "So, where are you going?"

"I asked first," she reminded.

Atarek heard footsteps outside the door. "See if that is the steward. I want more food," he said.

Grumbling that he could certainly give orders like a noble, Madame Fayeth opened the door and ordered more food. Then she returned to the stool.

Atarek mopped the last of the broth up with bread. He could feel his body already greedily soaking up the calories. His headache, however, persisted.

Forcing himself into a congenial mood, he decided to talk to her because he needed a friend. *Maybe she does too*, he thought. *She really must if she is wasting her time with me.*

"My younger brother was in the military and a few years ago I was informed that he was missing in action and presumed dead on the frontier. But now I have reason to believe that he is alive, so I am looking for him," Atarek explained.

The search for his brother redeemed him slightly in Madame Fayeth's eyes. "Is that Dreibrand?" she asked. When Atarek gaped with surprise, she explained that he had been raving that name for three days.

"Three days," he murmured. Atarek had not realized that he had been out for so long. Although it was common knowledge, he had not expected that his attempt to give up zeppa would sicken him so seriously.

"Today makes four," Madame Fayeth corrected. "We should be in Phemnalang in the morning."

"Thank the Gods," Atarek said.

"You must have been close to your brother," she commented.

Atarek shrugged. "We were close. I suppose we had our disagreements, but he was my brother. He is younger and I used to watch out for him. Of course, he thought I was a loser," Atarek laughed because Madame Fayeth could probably agree with that opinion. "Well, we have established what my stupid quest is, so what is yours?"

A severely sad expression transformed the woman's face. Madame Fayeth folded her hands in her lap. "My stupid quest is to save my son's life," she said. "You see, Master Trailor, my son, Hanshen, is dying and none of the physicians or healers can do anything about it. Some of them tell me he might have a turn around, but that is only after I pay them." Her voice wavered before she renewed her grip on emotional stability.

"What is wrong with him?" Atarek said.

Madame Fayeth shrugged. "They tell me all kinds of things so they will sound smart, but none of them really know. It is just that sometimes people get sick and die. Sometimes little boys."

Atarek recognized that her outer strength floated on a sea of misery as surely as the boat rocked in the waves. He tried to offer comfort. "It cannot be that bad. I saw him walking around on deck with you. He could grow out of it."

"I would like to believe that, but I gave birth to him and I can see how a little bit of him slips away every day," she said.

"So what is your plan?" Atarek asked.

The steward arrived with more food and Madame Fayeth gave him a coin out of her purse. After he left, she resumed helping Atarek with the full bowl of broth and answered, "I am sure you have heard of the rys in the Wilderness. Well, according to the stories that the soldiers brought back with them, the rys are magic and they have healing powers. So I am taking Hanshen to the city of Jingtun."

"Do you know where it is?" Atarek asked eagerly.

Madame Fayeth said that she was not sure, but that the military was building a fort in the Wilderness and that diplomatic envoys of the Empire had journeyed to Jingtun and back. "I am hoping to join one of these diplomatic missions. That way I could travel with military protection. Because I am Atrophaney born and merchant class I can think of no reason why my request would not be honored. Master Trailor, you said your brother was in the military. Perhaps you have some military connections that could ease the way for me." She looked at him hopefully.

Atarek tried to put together a response that would appeal to her. "I was opposed to Dreibrand's joining the military, so I do not have connections to his colleagues, but I think I might be going as far as Jingtun myself. I was told that my brother was last seen with the rys King."

"Really?" Madame Fayeth said, deeply impressed, but Atarek hastily diverted her from asking for more details. If he was going to hook up with a diplomatic envoy, it was more important than ever that he conceal his identity.

"Madame Fayeth, what makes you think the rys can heal your son?"

Her eyes turned inward as she examined her reasons for the thousandth time. As an intelligent woman, she could recognize that her plan was ridiculous. Even so, sitting at home and watching her son die were intolerable as well.

"I do not know for sure, of course, but I believe the stories of rys healing powers. They are magic. That much is true," she said firmly.

She pushed another spoonful of broth toward his mouth as if feeding him would prove her point, but Atarek declined the food. A dull nausea had replaced his hunger. He pulled the covers over his chest and vowed to himself that he would keep the food down.

"Do you believe the rys are magic?" Madame Fayeth said, clearly wanting some support.

"Yes. I have never heard anyone say otherwise," Atarek said, but when he saw the hope she derived from his opinion, he decided to caution her. "But who knows what magic is? You are a nice lady and I know you mean well for you son, but are you sure you have thought this through enough?"

"It is all I have thought about for months," she insisted.

In a strange attempt to repay her kindness, Atarek chose to question her decision in order to prevent her from doing something stupid.

"Well, say the rys are magic and can heal your son. How do you know that they will do it? What do you have to offer them?" he said.

A merchant class woman knew well the realities of trade and she readily replied, "I am an experienced accountant and the rys are said to have vast wealth, which are two things that go well together. Also, I could counsel their merchants about the business practices of the east. Their knowledge of us has to be very limited. I would serve them the rest of my life if need be."

Although impressed by her skills, Atarek remained concerned. "Madame Fayeth, have you considered how dangerous this journey will be? Jington is on the other side of the Wilderness. Such a hard trip could kill your son."

Her fortifications cracked and tears pooled in her eyes. She wiped them quickly away and said, "I have discussed this with Hanshen. He would rather die seeing the world than deteriorate in his bedroom. So I will show him the world."

Such logic was hard to dispute. Atarek had to admit that he would not deny a boy some adventure when he would have no chance to seek it as a man.

"And what about your daughter?" he murmured.

Madame Fayeth replied that Lydea wanted to stay with her brother.

"Have you considered what taking her into the Wilderness might mean?" Atarek asked ominously.

Madame Fayeth had already taken the difficult topic into account. She cleared her throat bravely and said, "I have considered our safety. When we reach Phemnalang, I intend to hire bodyguards to travel with us."

"Expensive," Atarek murmured.

"Wealth ceases to mean much when your son is dying," she explained.

Now that Atarek had attempted to talk her out of her plan, he accepted that he would pluck his opportunity. "You could hire me," he said. *I could make some spending money until she turns back, at least,* he thought.

Interest lit up Madame Fayeth's face but then faded into second thoughts. Atarek imagined her reviewing his scoundrel status.

"I would feel better with an Atrophaney bodyguard," she admitted although she was really thinking about what he had said about his brother and the rys King.

"That would be a good idea once we are deep into the frontier," Atarek encouraged.

She nodded. "I would have hired men in Cros except my late husband's family was very much against this trip, and they made doing business there very difficult. Actually, I had to rush out of town."

Atarek smiled, trying to reclaim his charm. "You seem too proper a lady to skip town," he commented.

Receptive to the flattery, Madame Fayeth indulged him with details. "They would rather that Hanshen's inheritance be preserved for their benefit instead of a trip across the world, but I have legal control of the Fayeth fortune while Hanshen is a boy. And I have earned the right to spend it after putting up with the late Master Fayeth for so many years."

Her lack of grief over her husband's passing amused Atarek. "Sounds like he was not very nice to you, which I find hard to believe by the way," he said.

She shrugged. "Oh, I suppose he was not so bad to me when you consider how he treated other people." Although Madame Fayeth did not quite understand the candor she was showing this wretch, she did take some comfort from his company. Sadly, she confessed, "Sometimes I worry that Hanshen's illness is punishment from the Gods for my husband's poor practices."

"Oh, do not believe that stuff," Atarek said carelessly. "What was so awful about your husband anyway?"

"He was unscrupulous in his business deals in the provinces with the native residents, and well, he made a great deal of our fortune from the slave trade." Madame Fayeth leaned over slightly to indicate the importance of her next statement. "Some people believe that slavery is morally wrong, even if slaves do get so much work done."

Atarek had never really thought about the subject before, but moral issues rarely crossed his mind. He chose to keep his focus on the emotionally vulnerable Madame Fayeth and secure a position on her well-funded expedition. He told her not to fret over her husband's misdeeds because he was dead, which she could consider his punishment from the Gods if she wanted to.

"Oh, I do," she said emphatically. "I only pray that the Gods will forgive Hanshen and I allow me to reach the rys."

"They will. I believe your kindness will more than make up for your husband," Atarek said. "It takes an extraordinary person to show me any pity."

Charmed by his compliment, Madame Fayeth said, "Perhaps when we reach Jingtun, the rys will cure you as well."

Atarek laughed. "I know what will cure me."

When Madame Fayeth immediately frowned, he realized his blunder. "Of course, after what I just went through, I can value the clean life. I will keep my head clear if you hire me as a bodyguard. I know you have seen me at my worst, but I am a big tough guy and good in a fight. And as you said, you could use an Atrophaney companion. Who knows what kind of cutthroats you are going to find in Phefnalang."

With a thoughtful scowl, she studied him. "Do you promise to stay sober?" she asked.

It was a staggering request and Atarek struggled to hide his distress. *Why not ask the sky to give up blue?* he thought sarcastically. "I promise, Madame Fayeth. I let myself run out of zeppa on this voyage on purpose because finding my brother is what matters to me now. I truly want to travel upriver with your group and I swear to protect you and your family. That is the very least I can do for the comfort you have provided me these past days," He extended his hand to affirm the deal.

She noted the slight trembling of his fingers, which enhanced some of her doubts, but she believed that he would honestly protect her. "Only because you owe me," she said and shook his hand. "We depart upriver in four days on the vessel *Dreaming Dolphin*. I have already booked passage for my party. If you are not there, I will not wait."

"I will be there," Atarek said.

She rose and announced that she needed to get back to her son. Grabbing a beam on the low ceiling to counteract the constant sway, she added, "I will be watching you, Master Trailor."

"You can call me Carl," he said and flashed her a smile.

Madame Fayeth repressed her surprising urge to smile back and departed.

24. *The Favorite Bodyguard*

Atarek began his journey upriver with renewed vigor. Four days in Phemnalang had removed the despair that the open sea had inflicted on him, and the exciting sights of a foreign land had made him feel like he was getting closer to his brother.

The Ramrai Delta stretched northwest in a flat green expanse that made glorious Atrophane seem small. Fluffy clouds cushioned the blue sky and at night thunderstorms rolled over the land in a display that ranged from gentle to fierce. A vast area of cultivation occupied the floodplain, and the efforts of the olive-skinned women, who tended the crops, fed the Empire. Draped in boldly patterned cloth of green and white, the women in the fields sometimes blended with their plants like camouflaged grasshoppers among the weeds. They revealed themselves when they turned their curious faces to watch the *Dreaming Dolphin* cruise by.

Atarek spent most of his time on deck with the half dozen bodyguards that Madame Fayeth had hired. Four of them were delta born and the other two were Atrophaney commoners retired from the military and working as mercenaries. Atarek sensed their uncertainty about him because he had never been a soldier. He was fresh from Atrophane, but did not appear to have any occupation, and his story about looking for his missing brother scored more points with Madame Fayeth than with the bodyguards. They clearly assumed that Atarek was running from legal trouble in Atrophane.

After spending a couple of days decoding the slang used by his new companions and their thick delta accents, Atarek began to win them over. Atarek knew how to pass the time pleasantly, and the bodyguards eventually accepted his company. They spent most of their time slapping at mosquitoes and gambling their money back and forth with the crew.

The strict flatness of the delta gave way to rolling hills that curved the course of the Ramrai. Madame Fayeth and her children regularly ventured out of their cabin to enjoy the scenery. While they walked along the rail, Hanshen leaned on his mother who shielded his sickly face with her parasol. Although Hanshen did not appear to be in pain, Atarek did not doubt Madame Fayeth's estimation that her son was slipping away.

With each day, the winds pushed harder and carried the boat farther upriver. In the summer, the winds were suited for traveling inland, and then they reversed themselves in the fall. The *Dreaming Dolphin* was laden with manufactured goods and various urban luxuries, which would be traded for the cruder but valuable raw materials of the interior provinces.

They passed into the region known as Revena. A burned out fortress atop a hill attested to the conquest that was only a few years old. Atarek spotted the ruin and dropped out of his card game. Thinking of his brother, he stood at the railing and wondered if Dreibrand had been with the forces that defeated the stronghold.

Maybe Dreibrand fought a battle right there on that riverbank, Atarek thought and a severe longing to see his brother assailed him. By the Gods, it has been eight years.

"You look sad, Carl."

Hanshen's small voice startled Atarek, but he immediately mustered a smile for the boy. He liked the child and made a point to joke with Hanshen every day and sneak him manly advice when his mother and sister could not hear. Hanshen appreciated the attention and sought Atarek's company more and more.

"I was wondering if my brother was in the battle that took that castle," Atarek said.

Hanshen looked at the broken stone walls with the daydreamy gaze of a nine-year-old boy. "I wish I had been born years ago so I could have fought for the Empire," he said.

"Oh, that stuff is nonsense, Han. The military is all risking your life and 'yes sir, yes sir,'" Atarek grumbled.

Hanshen frowned thoughtfully. He still thought being a soldier sounded exciting but he did not want to discount Carl's opinion either. In his limited experience, Hanshen had only known fattened merchants and spineless servants. He had never met anyone like Carl before, and Hanshen especially respected Carl's views because his mother admonished him not to listen to him.

Atarek looked around, and as he expected, Madame Fayeth observed from across the deck. She appreciated the kindness that he gave to her son, but she obviously did not think Atarek was the best company for Hanshen. Atarek waved to Madame Fayeth and made sure not to let his eyes linger on Lydea.

"Carl, I came to ask if you would go into the city with us. The ship is going to dock," Hanshen said.

"Sure," Atarek said. He knew he had to go anyway because he was a hired bodyguard, but it was nice that Hanshen actually wanted him to come along.

The *Dreaming Dolphin* squeezed into the crowded docks of Holteppa, which was considered the last genuine urban center before entering the rougher provinces near the Wilderness. All manner of vessels crammed the waters beside the city including tree bark canoes, reed boats, wooden boats, and the refined commercial vessels from the south that towered over the local traffic. Some of the tiny boats were so laden with goods that the river water flirted aggressively with the edges of the overworked vessels.

While the captain of the *Dreaming Dolphin* occupied himself with trading, Madame Fayeth intended to visit the office of the provincial governor and seek advice about traveling to the Wilderness. Along with Atarek she had four of the other bodyguards accompany her, which left two on the boat to make sure that none of her baggage got traded.

Walking ahead of Madame Fayeth, Atarek parted the thick crowd for the woman and her children. If his broad shoulders were not enough to make people move, an insistent nudge from his quarterstaff made his point. He had picked up the weapon in Phefnalang. It was a cheap and common weapon, but Atarek knew how to use it and he liked spending his money on other things. If any real trouble started, he had his knives. One was displayed on his belt and the other was tucked in his boot.

Holteppa was a busy place and Madame Fayeth needed her four bodyguards to make sure she could walk on the boards instead of the mud. Hanshen teetered on the boards between his mother and sister, making a game out of it, until his brief energy waned.

As they neared the center of the city, they found some paved streets, which were a relief, but they were even more crowded. In order to navigate the tangle of people, flapping cages of chickens and ducks, carts, and horses, Atarek started warning the people ahead of him to make way. He noted how the heads turned when they heard the Atrophanean language. A hint of nervousness flashed on peoples' faces and Atarek guessed that they expected to turn around and see soldiers.

Memories of the conquest have not faded, he thought. Although Revena was no longer officially under martial law, he suspected that the military still made many decisions.

When they reached the city square, the crowd finally had room to spread out. Scaffolding covered the administrative offices of the governor as the building received its imperial facelift. A fresh statue of the Darmar lorded over the square and imperial flags with their white horses drawing winged chariots waved insistently from every building.

"A little home away from home," Atarek commented to Madame Fayeth.

"Yes, indeed, Carl. The Empire is a grand achievement," she said.

"I have seen more of the Empire than any of my schoolmates," Hanshen announced.

"And you are going to see the rest of it," Atarek added.

Hanshen beamed happily and he skipped a couple steps before his feet started dragging again.

The guards outside the administrative building gave them no trouble, and when they entered, the hammering from the workers faded a little. The entrance hall seemed dark after so much time outside. When Madame Fayeth's eyes adjusted, she spotted the reception clerk and proudly walked over to him. Her business-like bombardment soon drew out a much higher ranking bureaucrat.

Atarek listened to the man tell her that she could not possibly speak with the governor on such short notice. As he attempted to crush her hopes, the bureaucrat frowned at her travel-stained bodyguards. Five soldiers appeared, no doubt summoned by the clerk, and the bodyguards perked up. Atarek remained calm, confident that no harm would actually come to the Fayeth family. The soldiers' uniforms, however, reminded him of Dreibrand even if they lacked the fine regalia of an officer.

Madame Fayeth recognized the drama that the bureaucrat was creating, and every member of the merchant class knew what part to play. With a discreet flourish, her purse came out and her clear blue eyes fluttered charmingly.

"Sir, I am sure you would want to win the gratitude of an imperial citizen. I am only in Holteppa for the day and I require a meeting with the governor," she said.

The bureaucrat pursed his lips thoughtfully as if he were coordinating the impossible. After heaving a sigh, he replied that the deputy governor was available. His practiced hand rose to receive the purse, but Madame Fayeth retracted it.

"A deputy governor does not cost as much as a governor," she stated and removed an appropriate amount of gold coins. She slipped him the gleaming images of the Darmar and snapped the purse strings tight.

He bowed with mock graciousness and said that he would arrange the meeting.

"And we require a proper waiting room with refreshment," she added.

Her boldness annoyed the bureaucrat, but after glancing at Lydea and Hanshen, he decided to be hospitable.

"But I do not know where you got those bodyguards," he said. "I insist that the soldiers stay with your party."

Offended, Madame Fayeth huffed, but the bureaucrat quickly snapped, "This is not Atrophane. Security will be maintained."

She submitted to the indignity, and the soldiers led her group to a nicely furnished waiting room. Madame Fayeth took off her hat and made Hanshen comfortable on a sofa where he soon fell asleep. When a slave arrived with a tray of tea, she eased her son's head off her lap and took a cup.

Her summons to meet with the deputy governor came rather quickly and she set her unfinished tea aside. While telling Lydea to watch her brother, she paused in front of a mirror to make sure that her hair looked nice.

Atarek stepped behind Madame Fayeth and asked quietly, "Should I accompany you?"

She looked at him in the mirror as if grateful for his concern. "I will not require any assistance," she said. Her head was high as she was escorted out.

The hours dragged by while she was gone. Even Hanshen woke up before his mother returned. The soldiers made themselves comfortable and traded news with the bodyguards. The Darhet of the West, Sandin Promentro, had passed through Holteppa just weeks earlier on his way to the Wilderness. Atarek listened closely and considered how he would proceed once he reached the Wilderness. He wanted desperately to speak with Promentro about Dreibrand, but he feared that the Darhet would be hostile to a Veta.

As the conversation shifted to news from the delta, Atarek ceased to pay attention. Unable to relax, he paced impatiently. He had not expected to be stuck in a waiting room all day. He was anxious to scour Holteppa for someone who sold zeppa. He had run out again and it was imperative that he find more before they left the city. As he traveled north, zeppa became

increasingly difficult to find and expensive, and he worried that Holteppa would be his last chance to find any of it.

He stopped at a window that looked onto an interior courtyard. It was a pleasant sanctuary of manicured gardens, and he saw Madame Fayeth strolling arm-in-arm with a man who was presumably the deputy governor. She clung to him pleasantly as if he was a dear old friend, but Atarek doubted that she knew him. Atarek decided not to mention the sighting and let the sheer curtain slip back into place. He imagined that she did not want her children to be aware of the methods she employed to get favors from the deputy governor.

By now the polite restraint of the soldiers had eroded and they were engaging the attractive Lydea in conversation. With an arm around her little brother, Lydea sat on the sofa and answered their questions. She seemed to enjoy the attention from the reasonably handsome young men, but in Atarek's eyes, her ring of admirers accentuated her innocence.

"Miss Lydea," a soldier asked hopefully. "What is your business in Holteppa? Will you be settling here?"

"We seek news from the Wilderness," Lydea replied. "We are on our way to Jingtun."

"Jingtun!" the soldiers exclaimed in military unison.

Because she did not want to embarrass her brother by talking about his illness, Lydea said, "The Fayeth family has heard that the rys are fabulously wealthy, so where better to seek business opportunity?"

Astonished, the soldiers all glanced at each other. The soldier, who had initially asked her about her business, grinned and said, "Miss Lydea, you should stay here. You can make lots of money in Holteppa."

She smiled to him and her curving lips pulled him closer. The soldier boldly claimed the remaining space on the sofa.

"I could show you around the city tonight," he suggested.

"I am sorry, but I think my boat is leaving right away," Lydea said.

"Oh, you won't sail till morning," he said knowingly. "I get off duty at dinner time. Let me take you out."

The other soldiers drifted away from the sofa so as not to interfere with the efforts of their comrade. Each one looked disappointed about not making the first move.

Atarek plopped into a chair and watched the young people flirt. Hanshen quickly tired of his sister's game and hauled himself over to Atarek.

Hanging on the armrest, Hanshen said, "Carl, when is my mother coming back?"

"Soon, I hope," Atarek mumbled.

"What if something happened to her," Hanshen worried.

"Your mother is fine. Do not worry about her, Han," Atarek said.

He gave his chair to the boy and resumed pacing. He checked the window again but saw no one in the garden.

Another hour passed before Madame Fayeth returned with a bundle of letters in her hand. Hanshen jumped up with actual energy and ran to greet her. After giving him a quick hug, she said, "Time to go."

Lydea and her new soldier friend got up from the sofa together and she presented him to her mother.

"This is Mitch. He has offered to take me to dinner—"

"Absolutely not!" Madame Fayeth snapped with complete authority and narrowed her eyes at the eager soldier.

The man dipped his head politely and started to defend himself. "Madame, I assure you I am a gentleman..."

Madame Fayeth did not listen to him at all. She swept her gaze over her bodyguards and stopped on Atarek. "What am I paying you for?"

Unintimidated, Atarek said, "We are bodyguards. Not chaperones. No one touched your daughter."

"Not yet," Madame Fayeth said. She grabbed Lydea's hand and repeated her order to leave.

"Mother, I want to see the city," Lydea protested.

"This is not a pleasure cruise," Madame Fayeth hissed and her daughter cringed a little. "And you are not here for the entertainment of soldiers." She stabbed Mitch with her eyes and yanked Lydea toward the door. The teenage girl looked back at the soldier with apologetic longing.

Madame Fayeth's contempt offended Mitch and he said, "Oh, I'm not good enough for you, is that it? Well, you merchants would not even dare poke your high noses this far upriver if it was not for the military."

Madame Fayeth did not respond. She was already planning her lecture for Lydea about men. The bodyguards dutifully followed the Fayeths into the hall, except for Atarek who decided to soothe the soldier's ego. He did not want Mitch and his comrades to come down to the docks when they were off duty and make trouble.

Confidently, Atarek stepped up to Mitch and put a friendly hand on the soldier's shoulder. "Hey, nice try. She is a pretty girl and I do not blame you," he said. "But Madame is under a lot of pressure, so forgive her manners."

Mitch's face sagged as he accepted that the pleasant tingle of anticipation for his date with Lydea would go unfulfilled.

"You tell that old bag she better give more respect to the military if she really intends to go upriver," Mitch advised.

Atarek disliked anyone referring to Madame Fayeth as an old bag, but he hid his offense. Getting the soldiers to forget the incident was more important. "I will remind her," he said and saw himself to the door.

His tardiness perturbed Madame Fayeth when he caught up to her outside in the square. "You are expected to accompany us," she snapped.

"That soldier needed a little petting to get the fur on his neck to lie back down. Keep talking like that and you will get the *Dreaming Dolphin* impounded by the military," he warned.

"I have everything under control," she said.

Atarek leaned under the brim of her hat and whispered intimately, "The deputy governor is not the only one who requires a light touch around here."

Madame Fayeth's nostrils flared but before she could think of anything to say, Atarek scooped up Hanshen. "How about a ride on my shoulders? You are too droopy to walk all the way to the dock."

The view from Atarek's high shoulders delighted the boy, and Atarek was glad to bear the burden because it forced Madame Fayeth to be silent. She could not scold him while he was spoiling Hanshen. Atarek also reasoned that the quicker he got the Fayeths back to the boat, the quicker he could attend to his own business.

When they reached the dock, Madame Fayeth announced to her bodyguards that she had important matters to discuss with them. "However, I must speak with my daughter first. I will be with you shortly."

Atarek put Hanshen down and the sick boy was content to follow his mother to their private cabin. Lydea straggled onto the boat, trying to delay her lecture. The two bodyguards who had stayed on the boat met their returning associates and one asked what was going on.

The door to the nearby Fayeth cabin closed and maternal snarling immediately started within.

"Madame is in a *mood*," Atarek said. "I say we go get a couple drinks while we can and let her cool down."

His companions hesitated. Even mercenaries have a sense of responsibility, but the cabin door barely muffled a retaliatory shriek from Lydea, which indicated the two women were really going to have it out, and the resolve of the bodyguards weakened.

"I will buy the first round," Atarek added and the men were tavern bound.

The next morning the wind filled the sails of the *Dreaming Dolphin* again and the smoking chimneys of Holteppa were left behind. A disgruntled but composed Madame Fayeth assembled her band of bodyguards on the deck. After a very enjoyable evening in Holteppa, the hungover bodyguards were prepared to face the displeasure of their employer.

Having obtained a fresh supply of zeppa, Atarek now possessed an attitude that would shield him from consequences. He felt good and really did not care what Madame Fayeth had to say.

Hanshen had stayed in his bunk, but Lydea stood behind her mother. Puffy eyes marred Lydea's lovely face, and the morose girl silently contemplated the injustices of parental control.

Madame Fayeth did not begin her meeting with the expected tirade. Instead, she proceeded as if the meeting had taken place when she had scheduled it. "From this point on, I expect vigilance from you. The civilized areas of the Empire are behind us, and despite the supremacy of Atrophaney control, the regions ahead are not without danger. The deputy governor in Holteppa has warned me that rebellious bandits haunt the region and some raiding has taken place up north."

Although no one commented, Atarek noted the disgruntled tension on the faces of the other bodyguards.

Madame Fayeth continued, "I realize that my journey is difficult and that seven bodyguards are not enough to protect me from every threat, and that is why I have looked into bettering our arrangements. I have obtained from the deputy governor letters of introduction to a Commander Fanlyre and Lieutenant Parlim. From them I hope to obtain a modest military escort to the Wilderness fort. Once there, I shall endeavor to get an audience with the Darhet and plan the trip to Jingten."

Her good planning and confidence improved the outlook of the bodyguards. Atarek's mind wandered to the possibility of confiding in Madame Fayeth about his true identity and having her try to get information about Dreibrand when she spoke with Promentro. His plotting was interrupted when Madame Fayeth finally addressed the uncondoned shore leave.

"Now, I would like to know whose idea it was to have your little holiday last night?" She scanned the men but her eyes hit Atarek more often than the other men.

Atarek was pleased that no one fingered him, and, buoyed by zeppa, he thought he would spare them the interrogation. "Even slaves can get a day off sometimes," he said.

"Are you saying you started the little insurrection last night, Carl?" Madame Fayeth said.

"Yes. The way you were screaming at your daughter, no one wanted to be next on your list," he said.

Lydea perked up when she detected a scrap of sympathy.

Although Atarek had ingratiated himself during the trip, Madame Fayeth channeled her disappointment into anger and confronted him. "I remember you promising to stay sober when I hired you," she said.

Atarek felt a twinge of guilt but did not respond.

"You are fired. You can get off this boat the next time it docks," Madame Fayeth decided.

He shrugged. "I am going to Jingten whether you pay me or not. So I guess you are stuck with me."

"Oh, I know how to get rid of you," she retorted triumphantly. "Grab him!"

The bodyguards hesitated because they liked Atarek. He looked at them with confusion. Madame Fayeth repeated her order and rushed him herself. Caught off guard by her action, Atarek tried to keep her hands off his torso. The bodyguards reacted to the physical confrontation and assisted Madame Fayeth.

As Atarek struggled, Madame Fayeth said, "I will not have some addict distracting my bodyguards from their duties." She snatched the snuffbox from his vest pocket. His eyes bulged as she lifted the prize and the two bodyguards on his arms had to double their efforts to restrain him.

"You will keep your promise one way or another," she declared and hurled the snuffbox into the Ramrai.

One watery splook announced the river's receipt of the silver box. To Atarek, it sounded like the door of a dungeon slamming shut.

"You BITCH!" he thundered and broke loose of the bodyguards.

He lunged at Madame Fayeth but stopped himself before actually laying hands on her. With clenched fists, he ran to the railing of the boat as if he could somehow save his snuffbox from the river. The rippling surface of the water pushed south without any recognition of his loss, and Atarek cursed at the world. When he finally quieted, he noticed that the other bodyguards had surrounded him.

Madame Fayeth glared at him from behind the human barrier. "I am in charge, Carl. You should not have lied to me."

A terrible anger contorted his face. "You had no right," he snarled and took an involuntary step forward.

A bodyguard put a hand on Atarek's chest. He batted the hand away but made no other move. The bodyguard asked Madame Fayeth for orders, expecting to have to beat his former comrade.

"As long as he leaves us alone, do nothing," Madame Fayeth said. "In another day he will not be much of a threat to anyone."

Atarek sucked in a big breath, intending to shout obscenities, but Madame Fayeth's stern face silenced him. Suddenly he could not bear the contempt for him that was on her face. His own self-loathing subdued him, and his morning intoxication began to fade quickly. The zeppa that tainted his blood seemed almost eager to depart and leave him to his suffering. He meekly turned his back on her and leaned on the railing. The bodyguards drifted away and left him alone. He stared hopelessly at the river and waited for the inevitable punishment.

Atarek did not get as sick as the first time, which mostly meant that he was conscious throughout the shivering and nausea. For the next two days it rained and he sheltered himself in a cargo hold so the bodyguards and the crew would not be troubled by his wretchedness. When the weather cleared on the third day, he ventured onto the deck and found a place to sit in the sun. It hurt his eyes but his shattered body needed the warmth.

The bodyguard named Clayle, who was one of the Atrophane veterans, stopped by to check on him and apologized for what had happened.

"Carl, I didn't want to grab you, but well, I thought you might hit her," he mumbled awkwardly.

"Do not worry about it," Atarek said graciously.

"But we all went drinking. Not right for just you t'get the bam from the boss," Clayle insisted.

"I do not care about getting fired. I am going to Jingtun no matter what she says," Atarek said. "She was mad at me about the zeppa anyway."

Clayle nodded. He and the other bodyguards had been aware of Atarek's clandestine use the whole trip. "Are you feeling any better?" he ventured.

Coughing, Atarek nodded.

"Me and the boys were just going t'have a bit to eat," Clayle offered.

Atarek joined the bodyguards for lunch, and the fact that he was not ostracized helped him feel

better. He nibbled tentatively at his food and mostly drank water. His bloodshot eyes surveyed the deck continually because he expected the fine day to draw out Madame Fayeth. Eventually, he asked about her.

"The boy has gone a bad way," Clayle said. "Madame and her daughter are in the cabin nursing him."

Atarek finished his food in silence. He regretted how he had spoken to Madame Fayeth when he imagined how much Hanshen's illness already tortured her. He pulled himself to his feet with his quarterstaff and gathered his strength for the journey across the deck.

When he reached the door to the Fayeth cabin, his hand paused before knocking. After reconsidering, he accepted with great personal surprise that he had to do the proper thing.

Madame Fayeth answered the door and her tired face immediately stiffened with displeasure. "What are you doing here? We passed a town last night. I thought you would be gone," she said.

He let her disgust wash over him and said, "I came to apologize."

"Why? I will not give you a second chance," she said, unmoved by his humility.

"I do not want my job back, and I know I am not worthy of your kindness, but I regret what I said to you. I wish that I could make things up to you. I will help you get to Jingten," he said.

"I do not want your help," she hissed.

With his flesh crawling with desire for zeppa, Atarek knew that Madame Fayeth was right to judge him harshly, but he would not let his weakness stop him from finding his brother. "But maybe I need your help," he admitted.

Madame Fayeth stepped out and pulled the door halfway shut behind her. "I should not have wasted my time helping you when it is my son who needs my attention. Hanshen has no choice but to be sick, but you choose to be sick."

Her words finally forced him to feel shame for his behavior. Atarek had always avoided the feeling before. His censure had made him bitter, disillusioned, but never ashamed.

"How is Hanshen?" he asked.

Madame Fayeth blinked hard so she could resist the tears. "Go away," she whispered.

Atarek did not argue. He deserved rejection. He would have left if a small voice had not called for Carl from the cabin.

Lydea pried the door out of her mother's hand. "Hanshen wants to see Carl," she said.

Madame Fayeth rubbed her temple and sighed. "Only because it pleases him."

Atarek felt unworthy of the invitation, but he was worried about Hanshen and the boy's request to see him was deeply endearing.

Madame Fayeth moved out of the doorway and indicated that Lydea should join her outside. Atarek entered the tiny cabin crowded by bunks on three sides. Hanshen sat up in the bunk directly across from him and smiled.

"I thought I heard you out there, Carl," Hanshen said.

Atarek stepped around the chests of the Fayeth possessions and squeezed by the little table at the center of the cabin. The river vessel lacked the better passenger suites that had been available on the larger ship that crossed the gulf, and this was the best that Madame Fayeth had been able to arrange to take her this far upriver. Atarek and the bodyguards camped on the deck.

"Hi, Han," Atarek said pleasantly as he lowered his aching body onto the edge of Hanshen's bunk and leaned his quarterstaff in the corner.

The boy's light brown hair was lank and his eyelids were heavy, but he tried to perk up to receive his company. He sat up farther and hugged his knees. A nightshirt hung over his thin shoulders and looked too big on him.

"Carl, you do not look so well," Hanshen observed with concern.

Atarek chuckled and rubbed his scruffy chin. He stretched out his left hand to judge his shakiness and the jade stallion on his ring jumped.

Closing his hand, he said, "I am fine, but what about my boy? Why are you stuck in bed?"

Hanshen lowered his eyes and fidgeted with the edge of his blanket. His illness had never been a subject of conversation between them before, and he shyly began to describe it. "Sometimes, I get really tired and do not want to move. But I always snap out of it."

Atarek asked him if he had any medicine.

"Nothing helps," Hanshen said, and his tone indicated that he had endured a variety of treatments.

"You will get better," Atarek said automatically.

Hanshen touched Atarek's jade ring with a slender finger. "What happened to your other ring?" he asked.

Atarek contemplated the groove on his middle finger where he had worn his sapphire ring for years. "I lost it gambling back in Holteppa," he lied. Blaming the loss on that bad habit seemed better than explaining the vice that had really consumed it.

Focusing on the remaining ring, Hanshen said, "It looks like a male heir ring. You must be the eldest son in your family."

"Yeah, I am the oldest," Atarek said and pulled the ring off so Hanshen could look at it.

"When I reach the age of manhood, I can wear my father's ring." Hanshen said while studying the jade. He then asked Atarek what business his family was in.

"Ah, real estate and things, but not so much anymore," Atarek said.

The vague reply seemed to satisfy the boy, whose fingers spun the ring in front of his face. "You and Mother are fighting," he said and handed back the ring.

"Well, I am not the best behaved person," Atarek admitted.

"But things are better now, right? I want you to come with us to Jingten," Hanshen said.

"Your mother is still mad at me, and rightly so, but I will still travel with you. I have to look for my brother," Atarek said.

"I will tell Mother not to be mad at you anymore," Hanshen decided.

"You do not have to stick up for me," Atarek cautioned. He felt intensely undeserving of the boy's support. Outside he heard the women talking but could not distinguish any words.

"Lydea thinks you are the nicest bodyguard," Hanshen said.

Well, that gives me the strength to go on, Atarek thought playfully.

"And she says she feels the safest with you," Hanshen added.

"That is weird," Atarek chuckled.

"Tell me you and Mother are done fighting," Hanshen said.

Although Atarek remained doubtful about gaining any absolution from Madame Fayeth, he promised the boy that he would not upset his mother anymore.

"Mother is very nice and she will forgive you," Hanshen predicted.

"Yes, your mother is a very nice person," Atarek agreed. "But you should concentrate on what is important and that is feeling better. The toughest part of the trip is ahead of us, and you have to stop being so lazy if we are going to get you to Jingten."

Hanshen smiled sheepishly. He liked the concept of blaming his condition on mere laziness. "I will get there, if only to be the first boy in the Empire to see a rys," he said.

"You will make history," Atarek said and scruffed up the boy's hair. "Now get some rest, Han."

"You too, Carl," Hanshen said.

Atarek mimicked a military salute to show his eagerness to obey. Hanshen giggled.

Lydea popped open the cabin door and Atarek stood up to leave.

"See you later, Carl," Hanshen said and snuggled under his blanket.

Atarek navigated the luggage and furniture again and squeezed past Lydea to get out the door. He indulged himself by looking down into her eyes and enjoying the thought that she liked him even if it was ridiculous.

Madame Fayeth intercepted him when he exited the cabin, and Atarek expected another bout of criticism.

Instead, she spoke softly. "I accept your apology, Carl."

Although far from redeemed, Atarek was pleased that Hanshen's prediction had come true. "Thank you, Madame Fayeth. I hope there can be peace between us because I would like to continue traveling together," he said.

She looked skyward as if annoyed with herself. "I suppose I could give you another chance," she said.

"You do not have to pay me anything else. I did not make a very good employee. But you know my motivations. I am crossing the Wilderness, so you know you can count on me," he said with great seriousness.

"You mostly did a good job," she murmured. "Carl, I am sorry I was so hard on you. I should have known that you would have trouble resisting the zeppa. I should have helped you again instead of letting my anger leave you in the cargo hold to suffer."

Recognizing her familiar compassion, Atarek stopped her. "It was not as bad this time. Do not apologize. I deserve worse than you know."

"But, Carl, I threw your little box in the river. I had no right to discard your property. I could have emptied it out," she said.

Atarek smiled. A merchant class woman would look back and think about the property loss. He resisted mentioning that the silver snuffbox had been a gift from his father.

"Madame Fayeth, no one has ever cared enough to do what you did. Least of all myself. So I thank you. I should have given up the stuff a long time ago. I want to find my brother and a thing like zeppa is not going to hold me back," he said.

"Oh, Carl, I am so glad to hear that," Madame Fayeth said, allowing herself some delight at the prospect of his reformation.

Patching things up with Madame Fayeth comforted Atarek and helped him not hate himself for being so rude to her. He wondered if she would remain charitable if he informed her of his true identity. It would mean admitting that he had lied to her, and experience had taught him that, although the merchant class often cozied up to the ruling class, his censure made him as appealing as venereal disease.

Madame Fayeth said, "Thank you lifting Hanshen's spirits, Carl. He has been asking for you all these days."

"I guess I will have to start setting a better example for the kid," Atarek said.

"I am hoping so," Madame Fayeth agreed.

Atarek excused himself before he managed to obliterate her forgiveness. Madame Fayeth watched him cross the deck and join the other bodyguards. Although he had severely angered her, she was

relieved to have received and accepted his apology. Carl, with his automatic kindness to her son, eased the burden of her constant desperation. She suspected that there was much more to him than the reckless hustler that he pretended to be, and she did not want to lose his support.

25. *Frayed Edges of Empire*

The *Dreaming Dolphin* went only as far as Ciniva because the river ceased to be accessible to large traffic beyond that point. The route to the Wilderness was overland from Ciniva although the Fayeths would actually cross the Ramrai again when they reached the Bosta Territory.

Madame Fayeth joined Commander Cevlead Fanlyre's military supply caravan bound for Fort Promentro, which pleased her immensely. She bought a wagon and a team of horses so that Hanshen could ride in some comfort and she purchased horses for her bodyguards.

The veneer of civilization thinned after each day of travel. Fields and villages interrupted the forest less often, and the town buildings were smaller and cruder than they were in the southeast.

The night before the caravan reached the ferry that would convey it over the headwaters of the Ramrai, two bodyguards slipped away. Both of them were delta born, and when confronted by the frontier, they had apparently decided to return to their coastal home. Madame Fayeth was furious, especially because they had taken the horses that she had paid for.

Atarek advised her to forget their defection. Although Madame Fayeth wanted to hunt them down, she heeded his suggestion. Viewing her remaining bodyguards with suspicion, she cynically wondered when they would abandon her. Shaken by the loss, she valued her decision to tolerate Carl even more.

When they reached the Ramrai River again, they could perceive how far they had traveled during the past month. The small river with its heavily wooded banks did not seem capable of producing the vast delta in the south or the wide course that had brought the *Dreaming Dolphin* to Ciniva.

The military had constructed a ferry operation with four large barges that were pulled from bank to bank. Even with the luxury of the ferry, it took the best part of a day to get the caravan across. While Atarek watched the soldiers load their wagons onto the barges, he eventually noticed the shifting mood of the soldiers. Before launching across the water, they tended to check the buckles of their chestplate armor or the chinstraps of their helmets. Often, as their expressions conveyed the acceptance of duty, the men touched their weapons for reassurance.

Atarek looked across the smoothly flowing waters at the opposite bank. The wagons were rolling off barges beneath an imperial flag that rippled in the wind in the opposite direction of the flowing river. The horses and men traveled into the dark welcoming shade of oak trees, and Atarek saw nothing threatening.

As a low priority, the Fayeth wagon went last. Atarek held his horse steady and idly watched the water flow around the barge. He had no way of knowing that his brother had crossed in this spot when the Atrophane Horde had first conquered the Bosta Territory.

Traveling with the military caravan stimulated Hanshen, and during stops, soldiers often took a moment to talk to the boy and wish him luck. In the evening, Commander Fanlyre usually invited the Fayeths to have supper with him. He was a newly commissioned officer fresh out of the Darmar's military academy and he was on his way to be posted at Fort Promentro. He was young and excited to serve the famous Darhet, and he enjoyed the company of the Fayeths because they eased his natural homesickness for Atrophane.

When Fanlyre visited Madame Fayeth, Atarek was careful to hang back or occupy himself with important business in his saddlebag. Clan Fanlyre belonged to the ruling class, and Atarek did not want to risk being recognized. As a cadet, Fanlyre would have been in Cros for the past three years, and it was possible that someone might have pointed out the censured Lord Veta to him.

As a precaution, Atarek stopped wearing his ring when they joined the caravan. When the observant Hanshen asked him about it, Atarek cryptically said that he would explain later and asked the boy not to bring it to anyone's attention. Hanshen said he would not mention it but he

expected an answer at some point.

Two days after crossing the river, Commander Fanlyre called on Madame Fayeth as the caravan made camp for the evening. She received him with business-like charm and promptly offered a cup of tea.

Fanlyre declined the tea and apologized, "Madame, you must forgive me but I will have no leisure time to dine with you and your family this evening."

"Oh, I knew you would get bored with us eventually," Madame Fayeth said pleasantly.

"Not at all. I have been grateful for your company, but I must attend my responsibilities tonight. Actually, I came to warn you that we might have some trouble," Fanlyre said with a hint of embarrassment.

"Trouble?" Madame Fayeth echoed.

"Yes. As you know, the Bosta Territory remains under martial law and there is a reason for it. Bandits and rebels continue to harass us even if there is no hope of dislodging Atrophaney authority. We are nearly to Droxy and my scouts have reported signs of rebel activity. We have a lot of valuable goods, which unfortunately could tempt them," Fanlyre explained.

"Surely no one would attack a military caravan of this size," Madame Fayeth said.

"Well, that is the theory," Fanlyre said, sounding doubtful of what he had been taught in military school.

Concerned, Madame Fayeth complained, "What has the Empire been doing all these years? Why are there rebels to threaten us?"

"Madame, please try to understand that civilization comes slowly to the uncouth peoples of the west," Fanlyre said. "We have squeezed the rebels from four territories into this region, and we will eventually clean them out. But it takes time and these woods are thick. And, I am told, they disappear into the Wilderness half the time."

After glancing at her children, Madame Fayeth asked what she should do.

"If any trouble starts, you have my protection," Fanlyre said confidently.

After Madame Fayeth thanked him for the warning and he left, Atarek appeared. He had been sitting on the other side of the wagon cleaning some gear and listening.

"This does not sound good," he said.

"I am sure the soldiers can more than handle anything that happens," Madame Fayeth said.

When Clayle walked up, Atarek explained what he had heard. As a veteran, Clayle had a low opinion of the greener soldiers in the caravan and he shook his head. "A hundred soldiers is not much in this armpit of Ektren," he commented quietly. "And these Bostas are tougher than shoe leather on a barbecue."

"What are saying, Clayle?" Madame Fayeth demanded.

"Well, all these supplies look awfully juicy," Clayle said.

"So you think it will be a big attack?" Atarek asked.

Clayle shrugged. "It's all speculation until it happens."

"This is ridiculous. These people are conquered," Madame Fayeth said. Although she had been forewarned in Holteppa of rebel activity, she preferred to deny the reality now.

"Mother, I am sure Commander Fanlyre has things under control," Lydea said.

Everyone looked at her because she rarely intruded on her mother's conversations. The attention made Lydea think that she should expand her statement, and she added that the military would surely have its supplies adequately protected.

"Yeah, their supplies," Atarek said. "But I say we best watch out for ourselves." He was not inclined to put his faith in imperial institutions.

Madame Fayeth saw her son sit up in the wagon and look at her. She did not want to accept that she had dragged her children into danger, but neither could she be foolish with Hanshen looking to her for protection.

"Clayle, you are familiar with this region. What do you recommend?" she said.

He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Madame, you and the kids should bed down in the wagon. If the rebels hit this caravan like fleas on a whore's cat, excuse my language, you could get trampled sleeping on the ground," he said.

Atarek added, "And we will defend you."

Without more options to discuss, the Fayeth party ate a somber dinner. A few supplies were unloaded from the wagon to make room for three people to lie down in it. While the women spread their bedding in the wagon, Hanshen slipped close to Atarek, who was sharpening one of his knives on a stone.

"Carl, will the rebels try to kill us?" Hanshen whispered.

"You have bodyguards and a hundred soldiers to protect you. Do not worry," Atarek said.

"But they must hate the Empire. They probably want to kill Atrophanes," the boy said.

Atarek slipped the knife into a boot and pulled the other one out. He spit on the stone and started working the blade through the moisture. He wanted to dispel Hanshen's fears but it was hard to divert the concern of a boy who had to contemplate his mortality every day.

"Our supplies will serve them better than hurting little boys," he finally said. "So do not get between a rebel and some supplies."

Hanshen looked at the dusky forest that pressed close to the road. "Do you think they are watching us right now?" he asked.

Atarek scanned the area warily and wondered if Hanshen actually welcomed the danger. "They may not even be there, Han."

"They are there," Hanshen declared with the same certainty that little children have about monsters under their beds.

It was a perfect summer night with a cool steady breeze pushing through the fragrant foliage. The moonless night provided the bodyguards with many stars for their minds to wander among as they sat watchfully around the Fayeth wagon.

The first sign of trouble was subtle. Atarek attributed the whiff of smoke to the watch fires that the soldiers had built, until he saw the stars dimming overhead. The breeze was pushing a heavy cloud of smoke out of the forest and choking the road.

Hanshen started coughing just before soldiers shouted with alarm. The smoke thickened quickly and blurred the light from the watch fires. Atarek guessed that the rebels must have ignited bundles of damp vegetation upwind of the caravan. Just as he squinted into the stinging smoke, two figures ran out of the forest and right past him.

"We have company!" he shouted and probed the hazy night with his staff.

Hanshen coughed harder and his mother and sister tossed a blanket over his head to protect him from the pollution.

"We cannot stay in this smoke," Madame Fayeth shouted.

"Stay where you are!" Atarek shouted. "It cannot get any worse. Our attackers have to leave themselves something to breathe."

Upon mentioning the attackers, Atarek became a target. A man with a spear appeared in front of

him. Atarek deflected the spearhead with one end of his staff and then struck with the other end of his staff. The man blocked the counterattack with the spear shaft and they began to trade blows.

Atarek dodged the jagged spearhead sloppily and lost his balance. He lashed out with his staff when he hit the ground and struck his opponent in the ankles. Diving across the ground, Atarek tackled the man. The hardened rebel caught Atarek under the jaw with his spear shaft and pushed him back. Atarek yelled with pain as the shaft crushed his throat. He struggled mindlessly for a moment before his hand went to his belt and drew a knife. One thrust and the spear shaft sagged. Another thrust and Atarek came to his feet but his opponent stayed on the road.

The smoke had thickened. Atarek heard more shouting as soldiers encountered rebels. Waving at the smoke in a futile effort to clear the air, Atarek discerned the Fayeths climbing out of the wagon.

Madame Fayeth shouted for her men to grab the horses that were panicking in the smoke.

"Carl, help us," she cried as Lydea handed Hanshen down from the wagon.

"What are you doing?" Atarek said.

"We cannot take this smoke," Madame Fayeth said and Hanshen's hacking and wheezing supported her decision. "Head that way," she ordered and gestured up the road.

Atarek grabbed Hanshen and draped him over a broad shoulder. Lydea jumped from the wagon and took her mother's hand. Atarek shoved his bloody knife into Madame Fayeth's other hand and started running.

The caravan was in disarray. The thick smoke was forcing the soldiers away from their posts around the supply wagons. A masked figure kicked apart a watch fire in a sudden blaze of light. Embers sprayed from his boot and he seized the largest log and scattered the coals. Other masked men tore at the wagons in a frantic effort to steal supplies. Raiders dashed between disorderly knots of combat.

Atarek beat a path with his staff. Driven by Hanshen's weak wheezing, he batted at obstructions indiscriminately, defying rebels and prodding panicked horses. He was sure he even knocked aside a few soldiers.

When they reached the point on the road where the smoke thinned, Atarek sucked in a sweet breath. He blinked at the tears blurring his vision and saw two torches scarring the murky dark. Commander Fanlyre bounded at him from between the torches and Atarek barely stopped himself from striking.

"Madame Fayeth!" Fanlyre cried, ignoring Atarek and focusing on the women staggering to a stop behind him. "Thank the Gods."

"They are raiding my wagon!" Madame Fayeth said. Her other bodyguards rushed by with the horses.

"They will not get much," Fanlyre said. "The smoke is thinning and I am regrouping my men to clear them off the road."

The officer shouted orders to nearby soldiers and pointed down the road with his sword. Before leading them onward, he added, "Keep moving up the road and you will get out of the smoke."

Atarek took off again and the women hurried behind him. When they hit clear air, he stopped and set Hanshen down on some soft grass on the side of the road. The boy was choking on phlegm and Madame Fayeth shoved Atarek aside. Grabbing her son's shuddering body, she noticed the bloody knife in her hand for the first time. The moist blade made her grasp the magnitude of her situation and she pushed back her hysteria.

She set down the knife, rolled Hanshen onto his side, and told him to spit. A fit of coughing jerked his body and caused him to wretch. Madame Fayeth wiped his mouth with her sleeve and then blew air into the boy's lungs.

Lydea watched in terror. The possibility that her brother might die distracted her from the battle burning behind her. Wounded soldiers or those overcome by the smoke staggered by, and the bodyguards fought to calm their horses.

The drama of watching Madame Fayeth fight to help her son breath mesmerized Atarek until Lydea

screamed. He looked up just in time to see her dragged from the road by two dark bodies that had ambushed her. Her hazel eyes flashed at him with desperation. Atarek shouted for the other bodyguards to help him and dashed after her.

"Lydea, fight!" he hollered.

She screamed again, and he hoped that she was increasing her struggles and slowing her abductors. Running toward the scream, Atarek stumbled in a shallow ditch but recovered instantly. A tree bough smacked him in the face as it swung back after being pushed aside by Lydea's abductors, and he knew he was only a step behind. Atarek charged into the forest and overcame the rebels struggling with their female prize. Holding his staff with both hands, he slammed the nearest man across the middle of his back.

The blow made the man release Lydea, who promptly threw herself to the ground now that she did not have two men to hold her up. Her effort dragged the other rebel to a stop, and he had to let her go in order to defend himself from Atarek. Lydea screamed again, which allowed Clayle and two soldiers to locate her.

Atarek fought blindly with the rebel as each tried to land a lucky blow in the dark. When Clayle and the soldiers arrived, the rebel relented and the dark forest absorbed him and his partner instantly.

"Carl," Lydea sobbed. She grabbed his leg and pulled herself up.

Atarek stomped around for a moment, looking for the rebels.

"Get back to the road!" Clayle shouted. He had no desire to linger in the dark domain that cloaked the rebels.

"They are gone," one of the soldiers decided.

Atarek grudgingly gave up his search and followed everyone back to the road.

Madame Fayeth cried out with relief when she saw her daughter. Lydea rejoined her mother and brother and they hugged each other with joy. Hanshen was breathing better, and Madame Fayeth was released from the agony of watching her son fight for life and seeing her daughter dragged away.

The family cowered on the road as the battle continued. One more wave of rebels crashed over the caravan. Rebels engaged the soldiers and bodyguards while other rebels seized what supplies they could carry. They were setting fire to wagons now in order to deny the Atrophane what they could not steal.

When the ordeal was over, Madame Fayeth had lost two bodyguards. One had been killed instantly and the other lingered for an hour before dying. Atarek and Clayle put the fire out on her wagon in time to salvage most of the supplies that had not been stolen. Until morning, Madame Fayeth helped wounded men, including Commander Fanlyre who had been hit by an arrow in the shoulder.

The dawn revealed a disgraceful caravan. Although only about a tenth of the supplies had actually been stolen, half the wagons and supplies had been damaged, and Fanlyre contemplated his first report to the Darhet with more discomfort than the wound in his shoulder.

Madame Fayeth appeared outwardly calm as she stared at the remnants of her well-stocked little expedition, but Atarek knew trauma inspired her silence.

"We can get another wagon and supplies in Droxy," he consoled. "And we still have our horses."

She said nothing.

"Hanshen is doing better," Atarek added.

She looked at her son, who was wrapped in blankets and curled up asleep with his head on his sister's lap. Lydea was awake, however, and exhaustion marred her youthful beauty. She stared at the ground as if reviewing the possible fates that could have befallen her in the night.

Wringing her hands, Madame Fayeth said, "I should have left Lydea in Atrophane."

"Do not think that way, Madame Fayeth. We have come too far for you to start regretting things,"

Atarek advised.

Almost mumbling to herself, Madame Fayeth said, "I was selfish. I dragged her here because I needed her."

"She is a grown girl. She came because she wanted to," Atarek said.

Madame Fayeth clutched her skull in a desperate attempt to contain her turmoil. "I could not leave Hanshen when those awful people grabbed her. I was torn between my children and I had to choose which one I could help. I do not ever want to feel that way again," she moaned.

Gently Atarek pulled one of her hands down from her head. Madame Fayeth had helped him in his time of need and he wanted to return the favor. "That is why you hired bodyguards. Because you knew you needed help to keep your family safe. You have to give Hanshen your attention. Do not feel guilty about it."

Madame Fayeth looked deeply into Atarek's eyes and felt his hand holding her hand. Despite his flaws, she trusted him, and his caring presence renewed her strength.

Easing her hand out of his grasp, she said, "Carl, you saved my daughter. I thank you."

"It was the least I could do for you, Madame Fayeth," he said. "You know, most women do not put up with me at all."

She tightened her lips with mild disapproval and looked like her old Atrophaney self again.

Atarek considered it a sign that he had cheered her up and said, "I hear we can reach Droxy by night if we hurry. And that means a bed for Hanshen tonight."

As Atarek predicted, Hanshen did sleep in a bed that night. Commander Fanlyre provided the Fayeths with lodging at the military base. All the buildings in the military complex were new, built since the conquest. An occasional piece of Atrophaney furniture mixed with the blunt frontier furnishing and offered the weary travelers some reassurance.

Atarek and the remaining two bodyguards, Clayle and Danlel, were offered floor space in a barracks, but they opted for finding a place to sleep in the shantytown that surrounded the military complex. The original fortress town of Droxy had been breached during the conquest, and the old town had been gutted for materials to build the new fortress.

The bodyguards paid for a room at a busy tavern. The place was grimy despite the newness of the cheap wooden building, but the exhausted bodyguards hardly cared and they slept soundly even with the boisterous drinking downstairs.

As an adept late sleeper, Atarek had to be roused by Clayle and Danlel the next morning. They had been up for a while talking before they decided to get Atarek moving. When they crossed town to rejoin the Fayeths, Atarek felt nervous entering the military area. He was constantly tempted to ask questions about his brother and hopefully hear news or rumors, but he did not want to reveal his identity either. Thankfully, Madame Fayeth asked him to stay with her children while she went shopping with the other two bodyguards, which allowed him to hide indoors.

Hanshen was sitting up in bed and looking better. Atarek spent the morning playing cards with the boy while Lydea washed some clothes.

At noon, Madame Fayeth came back with replenished supplies. Lydea greeted her mother and tossed the last bit of laundry over a drying line. Madame Fayeth appeared to be in a good mood even if she was complaining about the prices.

Clayle, who had been driving the wagon, shoved the brake in place and glanced at Danlel while Madame Fayeth climbed down. When Atarek came outside, Madame Fayeth brightly announced that everything was back the way it should be.

"Maybe we are over the worst part," Atarek said.

Clayle and Danlel jumped down from the wagon. "I know we are," Danlel said.

Madame Fayeth whirled on them, her cheerful demeanor departing as fast as a dandelion seed in

tornado. "What?" she said.

"We quit, Madame," Clayle said. "We decided this morning. Me and Danlel saw enough fighting when we were soldiers. We're going back to Phemnalang and getting some easy security work. I had no idea things were still so rough up north here."

Madame Fayeth crossed her arms. "So, one fight and you are quitting? I wish I had never paid your sorry asses a penny," she spat.

"Mother!" Lydea gasped. She had never conceived of her mother using anything less than proper speech.

"Why did you even agree to the job?" Madame Fayeth demanded.

Danlel shrugged. "I wanted to see Jingtun, but...not so much anymore."

"I thought you would have turned back a long time ago," Clayle admitted.

Madame Fayeth flinched with disgust. "Get out of my sight," she decreed. "And take my damn horses too. I hope they buck you off and break your necks." She spun a haughty step, gathered Lydea with a jerk of her head and went inside. Atarek stepped out of the doorway to let them pass and then approached Clayle and Danlel.

"Why don't you come back with us, Carl?" Clayle offered. "We would all do well in Phemnalang."

"If you stay out of the zeppa," Danlel added.

The comment did not offend Atarek, who doubted he could shun zeppa if he returned to civilization. "Thanks, but I am going to see Jingtun," he said.

"Well, good luck then, Carl," Clayle said and extended a hand. "Good fight the other night too. You missed your calling as a soldier."

Atarek shook his hand and laughed. "If I keep hanging around these military boys, I just might end up one," he sincerely worried.

He shook hands with Danlel next, who reminded him not to take any orders.

"And you watch out for rebels on the way back," Atarek said.

He was glad to part company with Clayle and Danlel amicably. He had appreciated their friendship during the trip, but he had not been tempted to go back to Phemnalang. Searching for Dreibrand gave Atarek a sense of purpose, which had always been lacking in his life before.

Thinking of his brother, he went inside to see Madame Fayeth.

"Carl!" Hanshen cried and Atarek flashed the boy a quick smile. It was nice to be wanted.

Atarek asked when they were leaving for Fort Promentro.

"In the morning," Madame Fayeth murmured vacantly. "With the caravan."

"Are you going to stay with us, Carl?" Lydea asked hopefully.

"Of course he is!" Hanshen said.

"If you can keep up with me," Atarek said, but then he faced Madame Fayeth, and with considerably less enthusiasm, asked to speak with her privately.

Lydea bit her lip nervously and suggested to Hanshen that he join her outside for some fresh air.

After they left, Atarek rubbed the back of his neck and glanced twice at Madame Fayeth, trying to gauge her mood. Clearly, the latest desertion of bodyguards had wounded her.

"I suppose you are going to tell me to turn back," Madame Fayeth said.

"Is that what you want?" Atarek asked.

She shook her head with determination, upset that she had even spoken the words. Bracing herself, she said, "What did you want to talk to me about, Carl?"

"Actually, it is more like a confession," he said. Atarek dug into a pocket and removed his jade ring. Pressing his thumb over the carved horse, he cleared his throat and said, "I did not win this ring in a rikrik game."

"What else have you lied to me about?" Madame Fayeth asked.

"My name," Atarek said.

She rolled her eyes. "The one bodyguard I have left is a lying addict who uses a false name," she complained to the world.

"Forget the bodyguards," Atarek said. "Two men will not matter. We obviously have to stick with the military now."

"So what is your name?" she asked.

"Atarek Veta."

She pondered the name a moment, and then her eyes widened with recognition of his notoriety.

Atarek added, "I am the heir of the House of Veta. If you wanted, you could call me Lord Veta."

"I knew you were a noble," she said triumphantly.

"Well, technically," Atarek muttered.

"Yes, the censure," she said, knowing that it impeded the privilege of his birth.

"Which is why I have traveled under a different name. In a way, it has been quite nice being Carl Trailor, but mostly I have reason to think that our military friends will not like hearing my real name," he explained.

"Why is that? As ruling class, your brother must have been a commissioned officer," Madame Fayeth said.

"He was and he served with Sandin Promentro under Lord General Kwan, but I gather that Dreibrand and our dear Darhet did not get along," Atarek said. He related the story told by the veteran Lendel and then the information provided by Lady Haley Triesto. Atarek, however, did not relate the exact circumstances of his conversation with Lady Triesto. "So, you see, all these years, I thought my brother was dead, but apparently he deserted the Empire. He was last seen in the service of the rys King."

Madame Fayeth was shocked. "Surely an officer would not desert. They must still be lying to you."

"I might desert, especially being censured," Atarek countered. He was not ashamed of the possibility that Dreibrand had deserted. In fact, he was eager to see how well his brother had fared outside the Empire.

As a loyal Atrophane, Madame Fayeth would have normally loathed anyone who deserted his duty to the Empire, but the possibility of obtaining a direct link to the rys leadership erased all sins.

"Do you really think your brother serves the rys King?" she asked.

"I have heard it from more than one source," Atarek replied. "But I need your help to find out more. I dare not ask Promentro myself. Dreibrand and I clearly look like brothers and the Darhet might recognize me. If he hates Dreibrand, then who knows what he might do to me. That is why I am telling you all of this, Madame, because I need to keep a low profile. But I want you to try and get some fresh news about my brother."

"How am I going to do that?" she said.

"You said you are planning to ask for an audience with the Darhet, so you can get a military escort or join a diplomatic mission across the Wilderness. Talk to him about it then," Atarek suggested.

"Oh, and I am just supposed to start asking questions about some man the Darhet hates," she

said incredulously.

Atarek rubbed his temple, trying to think through his dull headache. "No, be subtle. Ask something like, do you know of any Atrophanes in Jingten?"

Madame Fayeth sighed. She had not expected to be traveling with a censured lord who the Darhet probably hated.

"If we do find your brother, and he does serve the rys, will he help me?" she said.

"Of course he will. He will do anything I ask," Atarek said with complete confidence.

"Mmm, perhaps the Gods have sent you to help me," she mused.

"Then I suggest you pray harder," Atarek said.

Frowning at his comment, Madame Fayeth decided that she would learn what she could from the Darhet.

"Oh, thank you," Atarek said, gushing with sincerity. "And remember, I need to keep my identity hidden."

"Yes, Lord Veta," she said and noted the shy gratitude that crossed his face when she acknowledged his nobility. Madame Fayeth finally felt like she understood her companion. Learning that he was the Veta heir explained a lot. Because he was a member of the ruling class but stripped of power, she could sympathize with his self-destructive behavior. A scorned life would not be easy to live.

"The censure has been difficult for you," she surmised. "Your family was very powerful a generation ago."

"I was a little boy when everyone turned against us. I guess I am used to it by now," Atarek said, uncomfortable with his emotions.

"You are still a noble, Atarek. They cannot take that from you," she encouraged.

Atarek snorted. "Oh, yes they can. The censure is for seven generations, but it will not take that long to destroy my family. The money will run out in my lifetime."

"There must be something you can do? You could petition the Darmar for a pardon," Madame Fayeth suggested.

When pride is gone, spite remains, and Atarek dismissed the idea. "I will not beg for a pardon from any of my enemies. Half the ruling class betrayed my family because they were jealous of our success." He turned to the window seeking to avoid the old resentment that so often clogged his mind. "But I do not care about any of that now. I just want to find Dreibrand."

26. Punishment Duty

Ambio Nateve slapped the dust off his thighs before entering the Darhet's headquarters. Fresh from the field with news to report, Ambio bounded up the steps of the two-story wooden building at the hub of Fort Promentro. Behind him, three soldiers matched his fast pace and reminded Ambio of his newly elevated rank.

Inside the Empire's newest military post, two female slaves scrubbed the lobby floor. They scrambled out of the path of Ambio and his soldiers who left muddy footprints on the wet wooden planks.

Ambio stopped in the open door to Sandin's office and scanned the empty room. An ornate desk and leather chair had been banished all the way from Atrophane to occupy the crude room that still smelled of freshly cut wood. Two maps and a couple small scrolls cluttered the marble desktop.

"Upstairs," Ambio said knowingly and started back to the lobby.

The slaves made way for the soldiers again. They watched the boots leave another row of tracks and hid their annoyance with downcast eyes.

A double staircase connected the lobby to the second level where the Darhet had his private apartment. A balcony surrounded the entire second level and provided a view over the stockade. Ambio heard music and headed toward the sound that came from the north-facing balcony.

Sandin lounged on an upholstered chair while Valay plucked pleasantly at a small harp in her lap. She sat near the balcony railing with the green and gold grasslands of the Wilderness unfolding behind her. To the west, rose the mighty Rysamand, and to the east, rose the lower and darker peaks of the Tabren. Such natural splendor provided an appropriate backdrop for the copper-haired beauty, who had been transported across the Empire to serve her powerful new master. A braided coil secured most of her hair on top of her head, except for a dreamy long lovelock that curled over her right breast like a blossom-laden branch hanging over a sparkling stream.

When Valay saw Ambio, her hand halted over the strings. Their eyes connected for the briefest of moments before Ambio tore his gaze away. His bribe to the Darhet had worked so marvelously that Ambio dared not risk the peril of letting the Darhet see desire in his eyes. Of course, no man could look at Valay without feeling desire, but it was wise to hide it from the Darhet.

So beautiful, so expensive, so worth it, Ambio thought as he dropped to a knee.

Sandin had heard the boots banging up the stairs and striding along the balcony, but he only now turned his head to acknowledge his kneeling visitors. Sitting up, Sandin assumed the demeanor of the Darhet and shelved the part of him that merely wanted to listen to the music and enjoy the afternoon with the lovely young woman.

"At ease, Lieutenant."

Ambio rose and pulled off his helmet. His light brown curls promptly popped out around his face. He dipped his head politely and then delivered the news that the supply caravan was approaching.

"Good. It is nice to see that Commander Fanlyre can keep to a schedule. I suppose he learned that much in school." Sandin said. He stood up and dismissed Valay with a wave of his hand. He tended to limit the time that other men could view her up close.

Sandin continued, "That is why I like you, Lieutenant Nateve. You have not been spoiled by the academy. Fanlyre is going to think he knows everything until I knock a little sense into him. Maybe you should take him under your wing for a while. You both would benefit. You could learn a little refinement and he can learn how to survive."

"Yes, my Lord," Ambio said while hiding his disappointment. His praise had been poisoned by the Darhet's prejudice, and he worried that the new officer might threaten his position.

Later that evening, when the supply caravan arrived, Ambio was able to dismiss any concerns he had about the Darhet favoring the new Atrophaney officer. The bad news that Commander Fanlyre had to report instantly wrecked the Darhet's first impression of him.

The lamp light in Sandin's office flickered as he slammed his hand on his desk and stood up.

"Inexcusable!" he thundered and leaned over the desk. He appeared ready to reach out and pull Fanlyre toward him like a crocodile snatching a hapless fawn from the riverbank.

"I am absolutely sickened that you allowed rebels to burn and steal my supplies," Sandin said.

Fanlyre had been dreading this moment all the way from Droxy, but he tried to defend himself.

Gesturing hopefully with his hand that was not in a sling, Fanlyre explained, "My Lord, we fought hard and made them pay dearly for the few things they got away with. I killed many of them myself. If I had been assigned more soldiers, they would not have dared to attack."

"You should have used the soldiers that you were assigned better," Sandin declared.

Standing at attention to the right of the Darhet's desk, Ambio watched the exchange between lord and underling. He privately enjoyed seeing the Darhet rage at an Atrophaney officer. Ambio was glad that he had never let rebels get the best of him.

Ambio considered speaking up and supporting Fanlyre's excuse that he should have had more soldiers to protect such an important caravan. Placing the new officer in his debt might be beneficial, but Ambio discarded the idea as too risky. Leaving Fanlyre to cook in the fires of the Darhet's anger would be best. *It will enhance the Darhet's opinion of me, and I can manipulate Fanlyre*

later, he thought.

Sandin glanced at the ceiling, exasperated by the trials that the Gods inflicted on him. He came around his desk and got into Fanlyre's face.

"At least you took a wound to prove to me that you tried," Sandin sneered. "I suppose I should thank the Gods that I was not sent an officer even more incompetent than you, who could have lost the entire caravan."

The junior officer kept his face rigid and received the insult stoically. Fanlyre understood now that he had no defense.

"Your scouts warned you of the rebel threat, and so close to Droxy, you should have kept moving through the night," Sandin lectured. "It is a decent road. Traveling in the night is possible. Better than making camp, unhitching your wagon teams, and leaving the caravan vulnerable."

"Yes, my Lord," Fanlyre said.

With a snarl, Sandin returned to his seat and decided that he had been disgusted enough. "Leave, Fanlyre. I will assign you an appropriate punishment duty as soon as I think of one."

Fanlyre bowed awkwardly because his right arm was in a sling and then departed swiftly.

After a gesture from the Darhet, Ambio relaxed and moved in front of the desk.

"I think, Lieutenant, that I have to send you back into the woods to thin out these rebels again," Sandin said.

"Yes, my Lord. It sounds like they have drifted back to Droxy now that our forces have moved out here," Ambio said. "But I will find them. I know their ways."

"That is why I choose to value you, Lieutenant Nateve," Sandin said.

"It is my desire for my Lord to value me," Ambio said.

"Yes, indeed," Sandin muttered. "Now, Lieutenant, when you get to Droxy, increase my supply order for the fall shipment to make up for Fanlyre's losses. I do not want rations running low this winter. And assign two hundred and fifty soldiers to the next caravan. You may go."

"Yes, my Lord, but I should mention one more thing," Ambio said. "Some civilians came in with this caravan."

"Civilians?" Sandin repeated with surprise.

"Yes, Atrophanes. A merchant lady and her children. Forgive me, my Lord, her name slips my mind at this moment. And some man is with her. He is a servant, I suppose," Ambio explained.

Merchant class? Sandin thought. "What is she selling?" he asked.

"I do not think she is selling anything, my Lord," Ambio answered although it was a surprising notion. "She told me she is on her way to Jingtun and would like to speak to you about what assistance you could offer her."

"Really?" Sandin said and leaned back in his chair. *And her children are with her?* "Why does she want to go to Jingtun?"

"She would not tell me. She said she wishes to speak to you, my Lord," Ambio said, clearly just as puzzled as Sandin. "She does have letters of introduction from the deputy governor in Holteppa and Lieutenant Parlim in Droxy." He dug into his jacket and brought out the documents. After flipping one open, Ambio read her name, "A Madame Rose Fayeth."

Sandin accepted the letters and perused them with curiosity. "Well, I am here to civilize the Wilderness and expand the Empire. I must admit that I did not expect the merchant class to get here already, but I will be accommodating. Bring me Madame Fayeth," he decided.

Madame Fayeth was pleased that the Darhet summoned her to his office on the same night as her

arrival. The Darhet listened to her story with genuine interest although she could tell that he was a little astounded by her plan to take her sick boy across the Wilderness. Madame Fayeth humbly requested information about the rys. When Sandin confirmed for her that rys did possess healing magic, and that he had seen it for himself while in Jington, Madame Fayeth began to weep with joy and relief.

Uncomfortable with her emotional outburst, Sandin quickly summoned Ambio to his office. Madame Fayeth accepted a proffered handkerchief from the attentive Cinivese lieutenant. She was ashamed by her lack of control, but receiving some affirmation of her hopes overwhelmed her.

"Now, now, Madame, come with me. You have had a long day," Ambio said and started coaxing her toward the door.

Realizing that her tears were prompting her removal, Madame Fayeth instantly collected herself and jerked her arm away from the lieutenant. "My Lord Darhet, so you will help, yes? I need a guide and an escort across the Wilderness. My bodyguards, except for one, have abandoned me and some were killed in the attack on your caravan," she said.

Sandin glanced at Ambio, who gently tugged the female guest.

"Please, my Lord, as a loyal Atrophane, I ask you to protect me. I swear to be a fitting representative of the Empire in Jington," she said while stalling Ambio's attempt to show her the door.

"Madame, you will control yourself," Sandin said sternly.

Madame Fayeth pressed her lips shut, forcing back her pleas and desperate demands. She had to obey the Darhet if she were going to get what she wanted. She murmured her thanks for the audience and turned toward the door with sagging shoulders.

Sandin took some pity on her dejection and said, "Madame, it is late. Get some rest. I invite you and your family to dine with me tomorrow night. I would enjoy some civilized company and we will discuss this."

"Oh, my Lord, thank you," Madame Fayeth cried and was finally content to be escorted out.

When she returned to where her family had pitched a tent inside the stockade, she gushed her news to her children. Hanshen hugged his mother with joy as she described that the Darhet had *seen* the healing powers of rys. The boy's faith in the journey was utterly renewed, and his eagerness for the adventure ahead combated the disease that weakened his body.

"And we are all invited to dine with the Darhet tomorrow evening," Madame Fayeth added triumphantly.

Lydea gasped with delight. She had never dared to expect such a privilege.

"Except, I suppose Atarek does not want to come," Madame Fayeth added and looked at him questioningly.

"No, I best not," Atarek said from where he sat just outside the firelight.

"Oh, Atarek, I wish you could come," Lydea said. "You are a lord. You can show us how to act in front of such high company."

He gently shushed her, and she covered her mouth guiltily because she understood how important it was to protect his identity.

"You are a high class girl, Lydea," Atarek said. "You know how to behave. Old Sandin Promentro is going to love you."

Madame Fayeth frowned. She wanted Lydea to charm the Darhet with her beauty, but not too much.

"Madame, did you talk to the Darhet about anything else?" Atarek asked.

"No, Atarek, I am sorry. But I promise to try tomorrow," she said sincerely.

"I know, but be careful," Atarek advised. "I will ask around myself. I think some of the men around

here have been to Jingtén.”

The next evening, Sandin strolled the catwalk of the stockade. He had just concluded his dinner with the Fayeths and wanted some fresh air to clear the wine from his head. A turquoise remnant of daylight lingered along the Rysamand, but otherwise, stars twinkled over the plains. Soldiers snapped to attention as he passed them on his solitary patrol.

He often spent time on the catwalk or on the balconies of his residence so he could ponder the Wilderness. Tonight, though, he pondered what to do with the Fayeths. He considered Madame Fayeth slightly crazy for wanting to drag her children into the wilds, but if she wanted to go, he really had no cause to prevent her. When the attractive daughter, Lydea, had respectfully asked for his help, Sandin had found it hard to stall his response. The bright hazel eyes and golden hair of the Atrophaney maid almost automatically compelled a man to agree. But Sandin also felt the urge to ship the girl back to Atrophane and protect her from the madness of her mother. When considering her brother, however, it was difficult to deny the sickly boy a chance to reach a rys physician. Sandin supposed it was possible that rys magic could cure the child.

Although he sympathized with Madame Fayeth, he was reluctant to assign some of his men to assist her. He had other uses for his soldiers, especially with the rebels back to their old tricks, and the slave crews finishing the fort needed to be guarded.

Even without his sanction or assistance, Sandin had received the impression that Madame Fayeth would proceed to Jingtén anyway. Over dinner, she had asked if there were any Atrophanes in Jingtén or the region who she could contact when she arrived. Sandin explained that he had sent a diplomatic group north weeks ago and that they would be in Jingtén all summer. He could tell that she was disappointed to have missed the departure of the diplomats.

Yet Madame Fayeth refused to be discouraged and inquired if she could expect to find any other Atrophanes in the region. Sandin was annoyed to be asked the same question twice, especially because it reminded him of an even greater annoyance. Dreibrand was supposed to be in the region, but Sandin did not know where Dreibrand was and he certainly would not mention the deserter to her.

Sandin had dismissed the Fayeths from his table without any promises. Although he believed that Madame Fayeth would only be deterred if he assigned soldiers to drag her back south, which would probably be more inconvenient than just escorting her north, he did not want to make any commitments yet.

Descending the catwalk, he turned his mind to other matters. He noticed light in the window of Ambio's quarters that were adjacent to a barracks and decided to visit his lieutenant. They could go over some strategies for dealing with the resurgence of rebels around Droxy before Sandin retired for the evening.

As he crossed the compound, soldiers saluted him. About half of the men still camped outside while the rest of the barracks were under construction and the compound was crowded with tents. When he neared Ambio's door, Sandin paused because he overheard Ambio talking to someone.

Along with a light chuckle, Ambio's voice came through the window. "Oh, I would not pay too much attention to the stories soldiers tell. Veta was a popular officer, I guess, so the men like to imagine some grand life for him instead of accepting that he is dead. His body probably fell into a river during some battle."

Veta? Sandin thought angrily but kept listening. He heard a second voice, one that spoke Atrophaney with a ruling class accent, one that sounded vaguely familiar. "So, Lieutenant, when you were in Jingtén last year, you are sure that you never saw or heard of Dreibrand Veta serving the rys King?"

Dreibrand! Sandin fumed and decided that he was done eavesdropping. He had to know who was talking to Ambio. He burst through the door.

Although startled, Ambio stood up and saluted. "My Lord, what is wrong?" he asked, almost expecting the fort to be under attack.

Sandin ignored him and latched his eyes onto the other man who jumped out of a chair. He had a short beard and long blonde hair, balding into a widow's peak. His clothes were a little loose and his belt was tightened past its worn hole. His eyes darted to the open door as he contemplated

making a dash for it, but he had no place to flee to even if he did get out the door.

"Who are you?" Sandin demanded.

"Carl Traylor."

"Who?" Sandin snarled and drew his sword. Leveling the blade at the man's chest, he added, "Do not lie to me."

Ambio explained, "This is Madame Fayeth's bodyguard. He was asking me about Jingtun because I have been there."

"He was asking you about Dreibrand Veta!" Sandin said. "Get his weapons."

Ambio did not let his confusion slow him down, and he quickly snagged the knife from Atarek's waist. The experienced Cinivese then frisked him and pulled the second knife from the boot.

"What is this about?" Atarek dared to ask as Sandin stared at him with predatory intensity.

"Why are you asking questions about Dreibrand Veta?" Sandin said.

Atarek tried to muster an innocent response. "I heard some soldiers say he was an Atrophane who lived in Jingtun."

"What soldiers?" Sandin said and glanced suspiciously at Ambio.

Atarek said nothing.

Ambio acted quickly to clear himself of any blame. "He asked me about him, my Lord. I was just telling him to disregard silly rumors."

Sandin scrutinized Atarek again and yelled for soldiers. Seven men quickly clogged the entrance to Ambio's quarters. Sandin ordered them to seize Atarek and search him. Atarek automatically backed into a wall but he knew his situation was futile and hardly struggled when the soldiers dragged him outside.

This is going to be bad, Atarek predicted.

After being roughed up by soldiers and stripped of everything except his pants, Atarek was tied up and flung onto the floor of an empty room down the hall from the Darhet's office. Sandin, Ambio and several burly soldiers surrounded Atarek as he tried to sit up, which was an awkward procedure with his hands and legs bound.

Sandin suddenly assisted him by grabbing his hair and hauling him upright. He shoved the jade ring into Atarek's face, pressing the carved horse between his eyes.

"I know you are Atarek Veta. You look just like your wretched brother," Sandin said. "Now admit it."

"I am Carl Traylor. I won that in a rikrik game," Atarek said, hoping that his reputation was bad enough for someone to believe that he would actually gamble away an heirloom of his House.

"Tell me your name is Carl one more time and I will have you castrated," Sandin declared and smacked Atarek back to the floor.

Atarek shut his eyes because he could not think while looking at the hard boots that ringed him like a pack of hyenas. He had an urge to relate to Sandin how he had accosted his wife and held her down in her private chambers. But even Atarek was capable of prudence now and then, and he refrained.

Just admit who you are, he decided. He might not actually kill a noble—I hope.

Opening his eyes, he twisted his head so he could look at Sandin. "That is Lord Veta, if you do not mind," he said.

"Stand him up," Sandin ordered.

The soldiers handily presented Atarek to their Darhet.

"Why are you here?" Sandin demanded. "Did Dreibrand send word to you?"

"So he is alive!" Atarek cried with delight as if he were not being interrogated.

Sandin scowled, wishing he had phrased his question better.

Atarek gushed with honesty, hoping it would end his detention. "My Lord Darhet," he said forcing himself to be respectful. "I only came looking for my brother. I believed all these years that Dreibrand was dead. By the Gods, I just want to see him."

Sandin then demanded to know how Atarek had found out that his brother was alive. Atarek explained how the veteran in Cros had mentioned it over a rikrik game. Sandin was disgusted to think that Lord Kwan's secret was leaking all over the place. Thankfully, only Dreibrand's pathetic brother cared.

"Well, now that we have things cleared up, may I go?" Atarek asked pleasantly.

A glance from Sandin caused a soldier to punch Atarek.

"Tie him to a slave pole," Sandin ordered.

Atarek was taken outside and slammed into one of the poles used for the punishment of slaves. His hands were tied as far above his head as his arms would stretch, and Atarek was left to hang for the rest of the night. He heard Madame Fayeth protesting his treatment, which was endearing, but guards prevented her from approaching him.

By morning, his shoulders were knotted with pain that only worsened when he shifted in his bonds. His mouth was pasty with thirst and he blearily watched some soldiers escort Madame Fayeth into the Darhet's office. Mixing her up in his problems enhanced his misery and he severely regretted confiding his identity to her. He only hoped that Sandin would not be cruel to her and that she would convince him that she had no idea that Carl Traylor was Atarek Veta.

Lydea and Hanshen straggled after their mother helplessly, but Madame Fayeth ordered them to stay behind and said that things would be fine. Her confident voice could not diminish their worry as their mother disappeared inside.

The morning dragged on, and Atarek actually dozed off until he heard Hanshen sobbing. He turned his aching head and saw the Fayeth children only a few steps away. A soldier was keeping them back and Lydea was arguing with him, insisting that she had to bring "Carl" water.

Atarek hoped that Hanshen was crying for effect and not truly suffering on his behalf. A little water sloshed out of the cup in Lydea's delicate hand, and Atarek watched the drops hit the dirt with longing.

He tried to speak but had to clear his crusty throat before getting any words out. "Do not get in trouble over me, Lydea. Just do what they say."

Because he displayed concern for her amid his suffering, she turned admiring eyes on him. "Mother is going to get things taken care of, Carl," Lydea said.

He nodded gratefully and Lydea continued to plead with the soldier to let her give the prisoner water. Unfortunately, despite the sympathies of the soldier, Lydea was turned away. She could only hope that her mother was making better progress.

Madame Fayeth was spared the discomfort of Atarek's interrogation room, but she was sweating through accusations in the Darhet's office. Sandin insisted that she had conspired to hide Atarek's identity, but Madame Fayeth never flagged in her denial of knowing him by any name other than Carl Traylor.

Eventually, Sandin accepted the old adage that the merchant class never backed down from a lie. When he relented in his accusations, Madame Fayeth began her begging.

"Please, my Lord Darhet, let Carl go," she said.

"He is Atarek Veta!" Sandin cried with frustration, wondering if the woman had been listening to anything he said.

"Yes, of course, as you said," Madame Fayeth deferred. "But he is the only bodyguard I have left.

He saved my daughter during the rebel attack and we need him. Please, you cannot deny me the protection of even one man when I head into the Wilderness.”

Sandin rubbed his temple and decided that he was not going to waste any more time with the Fayeths. All his anger was just his old disgust for Dreibrand, and he needed to direct his energy in that direction. Atarek presented an excellent opportunity to possibly antagonize Dreibrand.

Placing both hands on his cool desktop, he collected himself and said, “You have made your point, Madame. I accept that Veta misled you and I will not hold his presence against you. In fact, you can take him with you because I certainly have no use for him.”

“Oh, thank you, my Lord!” Madame Fayeth said. She would have lavished more gratitude on him, but he waved his hand as if slapping at a buzzing insect and she took her cue to escape. She trotted out of the main building, buoyed with relief that the crisis was ending. As her children joined her, she told the soldiers that they could release Atarek but they ignored her and waited for orders from their superiors.

“It will not be long now, Carl, I mean Atarek,” she called. “The Darhet has agreed to let you go.”

Atarek twisted toward Madame Fayeth and murmured his thanks, and then privately, he actually thanked the Gods for providing such a tremendous woman to counteract his stupidity.

Although his vision was getting spotty, Atarek noticed his guards snap to attention. Squinting past the Fayeths, he saw the Darhet approaching. The bright sun glinted off his armor and jeweled helmet. When Atarek heard Madame Fayeth cry out with dismay, he realized that his ordeal was not finished.

A hushed crowd of soldiers and slaves gathered quickly as the protests of the Fayeths increased. A heavy whip uncoiled from Sandin’s hand.

Atarek cursed and turned his face back toward the pole. *This is not possible*, he thought but his scream announced the reality and the ripping pain across his back stabbed all the way to the pit of his stomach. The whip hissed and circled back to gather speed for a second strike.

Atarek screamed again and did not hear Lydea shriek on his behalf. Madame Fayeth clutched her children and tried to silence them. She had never expected the Darhet to perform such a wicked act, but she would not risk her children upsetting him now. A grim calm had settled on Sandin’s patrician features and he aimed the whip like an artist executing the next stroke on a canvas.

Crack!

Atarek had his teeth clenched this time and he stifled his scream. Groaning, he fought the urge to puke.

Crack!

He screamed again.

Sandin rested his arm a moment, allowing the pain to subside from his victim before refreshing the sensation.

Madame Fayeth turned Hanshen’s head away and told him not to look any more. The crowd watched in shock. No one had ever expected the Darhet to persecute one of his own people. None of them would ever question him about it though.

By the tenth lash, Atarek sagged in his bindings, only semi-consciousness. Sandin coiled the whip neatly and approached the pole. He had a soldier splash water on Atarek in order to revive him.

Shuddering, Atarek glared at his tormentor.

Sandin leaned close and said, “Consider this a little gift for your brother, Veta. In his absence, I thought I would give it to you. I assure you this is only a fraction of the punishment your traitorous brother deserves.”

Atarek responded with a choice vulgarity.

Sandin slammed the whip handle across Atarek’s nearest kidney, which made him cry out pitifully. He would urinate blood for a week afterward.

Content with the damage, Sandin strode past Madame Fayeth and said, "Now you can have him."

She looked down and a tear rolled off her lip and hit the ground. Not until Sandin mounted the steps to his residence did she rush to help Atarek.

Once Sandin reached his desk, he summoned Commander Fanlyre. After the Darhet's display, Fanlyre contemplated his second audience with more apprehension than his first. He worried that he would be blamed for unwittingly bringing Atarek Veta to the fort.

When Fanlyre presented himself to the Darhet, Sandin appeared calm, even satiated by the abuse he had inflicted upon Atarek. Sandin's helmet and gloves were tossed into a chair by his desk, and his long brown hair was free of its usual ponytail. After letting Fanlyre stew for a moment, he interlaced his fingers and began speaking in a charitable tone.

"Commander Fanlyre, if I am to accomplish anything in these wilds, I must develop my officers properly. To provide you with some badly needed education, I am sending you to Jingten."

The prospect of seeing the magic city excited Fanlyre, but then he wondered if this was somehow the "punishment duty" that the Darhet had referred to earlier.

Sandin continued, "My officers need to be aware of what the rys are. I intend to push the Empire all the way to the Rysamand in my life, and perhaps even..." he trailed off as if he said things that he tried to avoid thinking about. "At any rate, if you can survive the Wilderness and keep your head from being scrambled by some damn rys, you might actually turn out to be a worth your commission."

"My Lord honors me with this opportunity," Fanlyre said and discovered that he was almost breathless.

"I know," Sandin said impatiently. "Now, your orders are to take twenty men and escort the Fayeths to Jingten. She is an Atrophane and we have a duty to protect her. And we can hope that the rys will redeem themselves to humanity and actually help her unfortunate son."

Sandin stood and turned his back on Fanlyre. A large imperial banner hung on the wall behind his desk, and Sandin studied it thoughtfully.

"And that censured excuse for a nobleman will be going with you," he added. "The Empire will be better off without the Veta heir around. In my next correspondence to the Darmar I will recommend that his exile be made permanent. But the formalities do not concern you, Commander Fanlyre, because you will make sure that his exile is permanent, correct?"

He faced his junior officer now. The vindictive gaze of the Darhet disturbed Fanlyre deeply. Both appalled and desperate to understand his orders, he whispered, "Do you mean that I should kill him, my Lord?"

"I mean that he should not come back," Sandin said with an encouraging smile.

"Yes, my Lord," Fanlyre responded firmly although he remained uncertain about his options.

"And there is something else," Sandin said. "What I am about to tell you is NOT to leave this room." Sandin pursed his lips for a moment as if removing a bad taste from his mouth. "Atarek Veta has come here looking for his brother, Dreibrand. Although Dreibrand Veta is officially missing with the presumption of being dead, he is in fact alive. I have reason to believe that he is living in Jingten or perhaps the northern Wilderness. I want you to find out exactly where he is and how many men serve him. Return before winter with that information, and I will be pleased with you, Commander Fanlyre. Pleased." He emphasized the last word as if pleasing him were a heretofore unattainable goal for Cevlead Fanlyre.

"I will find him, my Lord," Fanlyre answered.

After dismissing the junior officer, Sandin spun the jade ring on his desk. *When I know where you live, Dreibrand, then I can make plans to hurt you,* he thought.

27. Setting the Pawns

Sweat streamed down the bare backs of the slaves who deflowered the virgin forest near Fort

Promentro. Watchful Atrophane soldiers avoided the punishing summer sun and monitored their labor from the shade. They controlled the logging slaves, who worked with axes and saws, by placing them in small chain gains. When that did not suffice, recalcitrant slaves were shot in the stomach by a crossbow, tied to a tree, and left to die a slow death. After a few such examples, the slaves chose to cut trees.

Despite their oppression, the slaves started each day with work songs to encourage themselves, but the hard work and heat had dried their throats, and they labored silently now.

Atu, the sergeant of the logging crew, knew it was time for a water break, but he was delaying the chore in order to listen to the latest gossip. Jal had just arrived with the supply wagon, and the news he brought was much more interesting than usual.

"The Darhet flogged an Atrophane?" Atu said with surprise.

"Not just an Atrophane, a noble. Heard from one of the fellows who helped with the interrogation that it was Atarek Veta," Jal explained.

"Veta? Is that the censured House?" Atu said.

"Censured, yes, but still noble," Jal said. "Never thought I'd see such a thing. A nobleman flogged. I guess the Darhet must be bored out here."

Atu rubbed his chin and imagined the spectacle. He was sorry to have missed the entertainment. "You know," he said. "I heard a story about Dreibrand Veta not too long ago."

"Vetas all over the place it seems," Jal remarked.

Atu continued, "I got this barbarian slave from west of the Rysamand who insists he knows him. Hates his guts though."

"How did you get a barbarian on your crew?" Jal said, eager to hear the story if there was one.

"Oh, he showed up late this spring. His name's Gefin and he came out of the Wilderness half-starved, so he actually asked me for food," Atu had to chuckle. "So, I slapped some chains on him and told him he could earn his food. Then, of course, he gets all upset. Says he's no slave. Says he's been east before, all the way to Holteppa and he is on his way back there. Now, I suppose I believe all that because he does speak Bosta, or at least tries to. His accent is terrible. Well, since then, at least once a week, he freaks out and says he needs to talk to the Darhet about Dreibrand Veta."

"Hmm, maybe we should actually tell the Darhet about this," Jal proposed.

"Maybe. I never thought much about it until you brought this news about the Darhet hating Vetas," Atu said. "Go ahead and take Gefin back with you if you think you can score some points with the big boys. I don't care, except I'll miss the entertainment of him begging for his release."

Jal grinned wickedly and said, "I know what I'll do. I'll tell him on the way to the fort that he is going to be set free."

"Oh, very nice," Atu complimented.

Sandin climbed the stairs to his residence beaming with satisfaction. His conversation with the barbarian logging slave had been an unexpected surprise. With Jal serving as interpreter, they had gone over the details that Gefin provided many times. Because Gefin hated Dreibrand and referred to him as a "thief," Sandin had no trouble obtaining the location of Dreibrand's settlement. It would be easy to find. Follow the eastern mountains north until they opened into a valley and Vetanium would be there overlooking the plains.

Despite his delight for the information, it grated on Sandin's nerves that the settlement was called Vetanium.

Sandin approved of Jal's ruse of offering the slave his freedom because it had loosened his tongue entirely. Before learning that he was being taken back to the logging camp, Gefin willingly revealed that Dreibrand only had a couple hundred warriors but that his alliance with Shan was very strong.

Encouraged to learn that Dreibrand had so few men, Sandin started scheming for a way to punish Dreibrand without angering the rys King too much. *Dreibrand's settlement is small and remote. I might be able to attack before Shan noticed what I was doing, he thought. Or, I could perhaps inform the rys King that Dreibrand is a criminal and I want him turned over to imperial justice. If Shan knew that Dreibrand was a deserter, he might not like him so much.*

Excited by the possibilities, Sandin wanted to assemble a war party immediately, but he knew better than to act so rashly. Lieutenant Nateve had most of his forces chasing rebels around Droxy, and it would be best to wait for Fanlyre to bring back fresh reports.

But biding his time would not be so difficult now that information had started to flow. Sandin had known that moving to the Wilderness instead of staying in Phefnalang would put him in a position to uncover news about Dreibrand, and the hardship of frontier life was easily combated by indulging in one of Phefnalang's finer comforts. Valay met Sandin on the balcony, and her soft white dress draped her curves in a perfect use of fabric. The intense red of the setting sun shimmered on her hair. Free from braids, the copper locks flowed around her face in luscious waves.

Sandin hugged her and danced her a couple steps until they were inside the door. Kissing her neck, he breathed deeply. "You smell good."

"I had the kitchen slaves gather flowers for my bath," she said.

"You have gotten good at giving them orders," he commented.

"I have had a good teacher, my Lord," Valay said.

He flashed her a semi-critical look but could not get angry. Sandin released her and walked across the room, looking for his squire, Recey. "Where has that fool gone to?" he wondered.

"I sent him to get a bottle of wine for your dinner," Valay replied.

"I want to take my armor off before I eat, Valay. You should let me decide the order of his tasks," he scolded.

"I can help my Lord with his armor," Valay said and moved close to him again. The Darhet's good mood had been impossible to miss when he arrived, and she was not worried about sending Recey on an errand.

Sandin gave up trying to tame her with his trifling reprimands and wrapped his arms around her. Valay received his deep kiss readily and his hands caressed her back and buttocks.

Deciding to leave his passion until later, he loosened the embrace and ran a hand over her stomach, trying to judge if he could detect any change. "Are you sure you are pregnant?" he asked playfully.

"Yes," she answered with some exasperation. "My Lord sounds like he wants me to get big and fat."

"Until I see some results, I am going to keep making sure," Sandin promised. He gave her stomach a little squeeze and then slipped his hand over her hip. Kissing her again, he basked in the pleasure of possessing her. Although Sandin had dabbled in the occasional affair or sexual dalliance, he had never kept a pleasure slave before, and the youthful Valay made him wonder why. Of course, Valay was meant to please. Sold by her parents at puberty to the famous Shexi School, she had been educated to serve a high class man as a bound mistress. To be purchased by the Shexi was an honor, if a slave could be honored by a purchase, and at the specialty slave school in Phefnalang, Valay had studied music, dance, art, literature, philosophy, and erotic nuance. She pleased Sandin immensely, and he was sure that Ambio must have mortgaged half of his inheritance to buy her. After becoming acquainted with Valay, Sandin concluded that she was the most splendid bribe that he had ever accepted.

Recey banged through the door, trying to announce his intrusion. The Darhet released his pleasure slave who then straightened her clothes.

"You know better than to run errands when I am expecting you to be here," Sandin said.

"Yes, my Lord," Recey said with an automatically apologetic tone. He handed the wine to Valay and resisted displaying his annoyance with her.

Recey attended the Darhet and hung his armor and weapons on their racks. The squire was then dismissed without any thanks for his efforts.

Sandin finished his good day by bedding Valay. She incited an unfamiliar passion in him, especially with the news of his virility so fresh in his mind. Their frequent couplings made him feel powerful, and the child growing inside her fascinated him. Sandin had been at war during Haley's pregnancy and the birth of their son, and fatherhood was a remote experience for him. He looked forward to the child that Valay would produce for him although he was undecided about claiming the bastard.

It was midnight when he rolled off Valay's receptive body. Tingling with pleasure, Sandin caught his breath. He touched her stomach and wiped his sweat that had pooled in her belly button in a wet line between her breasts.

"It is hot tonight. I will open the doors," he murmured.

The night air flowed through the double doors at the foot of the bed, gently cooling his skin and enhancing the last fleeting glow of his ecstasy. He admired how the thin moon near the horizon reflected on the clouds. Just enough moonlight snuck inside to reveal Valay's serene face on the pillow. Sandin imagined that she was supremely pleased that he found her desirable.

The bed accepted him easily, and he soon entered the black bliss of deep sleep. Tonight, Sandin's head did not toss with the pressures of his position or horrible memories of Jingtun. He reposed perfectly until sudden dread twisted him out of his sleep like water being wrung from a rag. Sitting up, with his heart hammering hard, he saw a tall figure in the doorway. The body was black against the faint orange light from the torches burning along the stockade. Sandin wanted to cry out a challenge, but the sound stuck in his throat. For a moment that lingered like the introduction of a jury's verdict, the intruder did not move. The face of the masculine form was featureless in the dark, and he blocked the breeze with unknown intent.

He entered the room silently. Lights twinkled behind his head and revealed half his face. The enchanted light touched the sharp edges of his brow and long nose and glinted on his perfectly bald head.

"Golan," Sandin whispered, astounded by the possibility.

Valay awoke with a gasp and grabbed her master's arm. Sandin lurched forward, but his muscles quickly melted. He sank back in a heap with Valay. His drooping eyes could barely track the intruder, who moved around to Valay's side of the bed.

Sandin struggled to use his watery body, but his brain could no longer prompt a physical response. Valay whimpered once, and Sandin wanted to protect her, but he was helpless.

White light flared from the eyes of the intruder, and Sandin recognized that he was in the grip of magic. His soul slid down an impaling spike of panic. This was the loathsome impotence that he feared, the opposing force that he could not conquer.

Rys, he thought and his guts tightened with the memory of being mastered.

The bed dipped next to him from the weight of someone sitting down. His lethargic vision had not noticed the arrival of a second intruder until she loomed over him like a nurse. He hauled his eyes toward the female, who was indistinct except for the locks of white hair the curled toward her cheekbones. She leaned over Sandin and he absurdly wondered if she were going to kiss him. In his last moment of independent thought, Sandin recalled the myth about evil beings that posed as lovers and sucked a man's life away.

A spell of sleepiness subdued Valay, and the male intruder looked up from her lolling head. "Alloi, let me see in his mind while you explore it," Tempet said.

"You will control yourself?" Alloi asked bluntly.

"I only want to learn his language as you do, Sister. There should be no chance of my being angered because you say that he is not our enemy," Tempet said.

"I can tell already that he will serve us," Alloi said and traced Sandin's lips with one delicate finger. She sensed with certainty that he was descended from the humans who had served the tabre. It soothed her to see that some of the humans who had fought for them so bravely had survived the downfall of Nufal.

Her adept mind infiltrated Sandin's mind, seeking the places that governed speech.

When Sandin's awareness was released, the obscure landscape of the night was being reborn with the dawn. Each blade of grass, tree leaf, and wildflower achieved a special clarity in the first tentative light of day.

Briefly, Sandin felt like he was hovering the land until he opened his eyes and found that he was still in the gloom of his bedchamber. The intruders had not been a dream and they were still in the room. The magical paralysis was gone and he pushed himself up onto his elbows. Vaguely he wondered why his reaction was so timid.

They are controlling you, his mind whispered, but it was hard to listen.

In the daylight, he studied the creatures. Sandin assumed that they were rys although he had not seen their particular skin color before. Their crude garb provided by the Wilderness was not something he had seen worn by the rys in Jingtun either, and he guessed that they had to be from outside the city. The male wore a scattering of furs that left most of his lean and strongly defined physique bare. The primitive appearance clashed with the gleam of the magnificent warhammer strapped across his back.

Sandin sat up farther, and the male moved to the doors and shut them. As the second door closed, the strengthening sunlight was reduced to a thinning line that blinked out with a click. Sandin's intuition fluttered with warning when the male looked at him.

Retreating from eye contact with the male, Sandin turned to the left and saw the female sitting beside Valay. The pleasure slave appeared to be sleeping peacefully and the female was toying with the ends of Valay's hair.

With a peculiar accent, the female began to speak in Atrophaney. While still focused on the long human hair, she said, "She is unharmed. I keep her asleep so she will not be afraid."

Alloi let the copper hair slip from her fingers and she looked directly at Sandin. Drawn into the abyss of her eyes, Sandin remained silent.

"I would not want to upset this woman who you have put a child inside," Alloi said. She lowered her eyes to the vessel of fertility reclining beside her. Alloi bore a profoundly sad expression. Only a genius artist could have captured the unwillingly marriage of beauty and tragedy on her face.

Free of her eyes, Sandin wet his lips and said, "Who are you?"

Tempet stepped closer to the bed and answered. His movement was as startling as a panther dropping from a tree. He introduced himself and his sister.

Alloi rose from the bed and went to her brother's side. "And you are Sandin Promentro," she said. "Our business should interest you."

Sandin jumped to his feet, feeling more like himself all of the sudden. "What business? Where have you come from? I have never seen rys like you."

Insulted, Alloi looked away with revulsion. Tempet hissed and his hands twitched. "Tabre!" he snarled. "We are tabre, not rys."

Sandin shook his head and apologized. "I have never heard of tabre. Where did you come from?"

Recovering from the shock of being called a rys, Alloi collected her emotions and said, "We will await you in your drawing room. Dress yourself and then we will answer your questions."

Sandin had forgotten his nakedness and felt ridiculous. Tempet and Alloi headed into the adjoining room. As Tempet held the door for his sister, he advised Sandin not to summon his men.

"What have you done to my soldiers?" Sandin demanded boldly.

"Nothing," Tempet answered. "Some took a nap last night so we could visit you without any disruption."

"We expect you to be our friend," Alloi added.

When they shut the door, Sandin checked on Valay. Her grogginess was thick and he could not

rouse her.

I will make sure these rys wake her, he decided. *I mean tabre. Tabre. I must never make that mistake again. They do not like rys.* That deduction made him realize what his new friends might want to talk to him about, and he dressed.

When Sandin entered the drawing room, Tempet was assessing an upholstered chair as if he had never encountered such a thing. Tempet touched the armrests carefully and bounced slightly in the seat, appearing uncertain if he was using it correctly.

Sandin detected an outdoorsy smell clinging to them, as if they rose from the dewy grass every morning. "You have been in the Wilderness for a while," he said.

Tempet settled into the chair and Alloi said, "It has been some time since comforts such as these were available to us."

When Alloi sat down, she tried to appear more at ease than her brother had, even if bending her body into the chair felt vaguely foreign. Over two thousand years encased in cold stone had erased the familiarity of furniture.

Tabre, Sandin thought again, trying to educate his mind to recognize the beings sitting in front of him. "Will my woman be all right?" he asked.

"Yes, her sleep will wear off in a couple hours," Alloi said. "Forgive my presumptive use of magic, but we required privacy for our first contact with you."

"Why is that?" Sandin inquired and glanced at Tempet.

"We are strange to you," Alloi explained. "We did not want to frighten your people. When afraid, humans can often become violent without thinking. We have no desire to hurt any of you. If fact, we have much to offer you, Sandin Promentro."

Sandin decided to take a seat. It was not like him to be standing at attention for anybody. He was about to ask what they had to offer, when he heard footsteps approaching on the balcony.

Alloi turned toward the entrance and Sandin heard the latch click. The footsteps stopped and the door rattled against the lock.

"My Lord?" Recey called after knocking.

"Go away, Recey. I do not need you this morning," Sandin said.

Without question, Recey turned and his footsteps faded toward the stairs.

"My sister tells me that you dislike Jingtent?" Tempet said abruptly. He had wearied of her slowness getting to the point.

Sandin clenched his fists and an instant layer of sweat wetted his palms. "You have read my mind," he stated, struggling to contain his anger over the violation.

"That is how we learned your language," Alloi explained as if it made it all right.

Sandin cast his eyes down to the carpet and remembered how Onja had taken control of Lord Kwan's mind. *Am I to have the same fate?* he wondered, and fear hit his nerves like a sudden strong wind snapping a sail. *But what do they want to offer me?* Curiosity seemed like a decent shelter from the ominous storm hanging on the horizon of his mind. Sandin looked at Alloi.

"We will treat you with respect, Sandin Promentro. Your ancestors were once our allies," Alloi said.

"My ancestors?" Sandin repeated.

Alloi explained where she and Tempet had come from, the length of their hibernation, and her belief that Sandin and his people were descended from humans who once occupied Nufal.

"Have you heard of the Great War of which I speak?" Alloi said.

"Only since I came to the Wilderness. There is no knowledge of it among the Atrophane as a history," Sandin answered.

"It was long ago," Alloi murmured. Humans could travel far and forget much of their origins as their short generations slipped through the centuries. And perhaps they had wanted to forget.

Sandin continued, "I have seen a ruined town on the plains where many people died all at once. And the Deamedron are from your Great War, right?"

"You saw them?" Tempet said.

"They killed many of my men a few years ago," Sandin replied.

"Where did they go?" Alloi asked with grief for her parents chewing on her heart.

Sandin glanced upward and said, "Away. I am not sure, except they have been gone since Shan became King."

"Shan," Tempet spat with disgust and touched the fresh scar on his stomach. The wound had been slow to heal after Shan had hounded him and his sister across the plains with relentless attack spells. Eventually, they had reached an outcropping of rock, hidden themselves in the safety of stone, and eluded the far-reaching fury of the rys King.

After a week, they had emerged from hiding, and Tempet had wanted to resume his advance on Jington, but Alloi had persuaded him to adopt her plan of raising an army. He had conceded because Shan carried the Shield of Dacian, and Tempet accepted that he needed a better attack plan than hurling himself against that dark magic defense. How many of his comrades had he seen overcome by that parasitic enchantment? Alloi was right that they needed humans to fight for them and bolster their natural powers with their nourishing servitude.

"We have met the new rys King," Alloi said.

"And what did he have to say?" Sandin said.

Tempet and Alloi looked at each other as if sharing a joke. "He wanted to make peace," Tempet answered with obvious contempt for the notion.

Although Alloi believed that Shan had attempted to deceive them, her brother's contemptuous tone clashed with her memory of Shan's kind words. "*Beautiful Alloi, make peace with me.*"

More memories gushed into her thoughts. Grappling with Shan, the Shield of Dacian pressing against her body, making her vulnerable. He could have killed her. *But he did not*, she thought, still unable to understand her escape.

Alloi drew a deep breath and set her mind in order. Rys were evil and she must not dwell on King Shan's trickster words.

"Would you like to conquer Jington?" she asked.

Sandin actually laughed. He had devoted a lot of rational thought to debunking that daydream.

"Does not the thought of plundering rys riches tempt you?" Alloi urged.

"Very much, but a man has to be realistic," Sandin said.

"If you will not oppose Jington, then you are its servant already like the other humans in the Wilderness," Tempet accused. His words were like icicles crashing on flagstones.

"I am not the servant of Jington," Sandin said adamantly. "I admit I seek coexistence, but the Atrophane Empire is independent. Do not accuse me of serving the rys just because I am not foolish enough to attack them."

"Very well," Alloi said. "My brother is only suspicious because we encountered a man like you, who was of the eastern peoples, and he was very close to the rys King."

"Dreibrand Veta," Sandin surmised.

"You do not like him, do you?" Alloi said.

"Why do you ask me questions when you have already read my mind?" Sandin complained.

"He is right, Sister," Tempet said. "He will be an old man before you ever make your point. Sandin Promentro, we know you hate this Dreibrand Veta and we know you resent the rys because their power is greater than yours. Jealousy is a trait that humans and tabre have in common. We have come to you because we require an army to aid us in punishing Jingten for what the rys did to us. With our magic we will make your army strong enough to oppose Shan. You will be able to hurt this Dreibrand as much as it pleases you, and you will have the riches of Jingten."

Sandin was quiet for a long time. These creatures offered him so much. They were tempting him with his most fanciful ambitions, but because he was sane, Sandin was wary of them. As refugees from a two thousand-year-old holocaust, they had to be mad. They wanted to resume a war that no one on his side of the world even remembered. Could it be true that the ancestors of the Atrophane had come from the Wilderness and that they had fled the Deamedron all the way to the Atrophane Peninsula? Would he really pick up where his distant ancestors had left off?

Sandin recalled the bone heaps in that sad ruined town on the plains, and he imagined the total desire for vengeance that had to consume these mysterious tabre. They hated the rys a thousand more times than he possibly could, which meant that they could provide him with the ultimate opportunity.

"How do I know you are powerful enough to defeat Shan?" he finally responded.

Tempet sprang to his feet so abruptly that his chair fell backward. In the small instant before the chair hit the floor, Tempet drew his bitaran and magically extended the shaft. The chair banged on the floor, and Sandin flinched from the needle sharp point of enchanted metal that had stopped just beyond the eyelashes of his left eye.

Tempet retracted the weapon to its normal shape. "I could have just as easily sent that through your brain," he said.

Sandin let his breath out, genuinely impressed with Tempet's display, but it did not mean that he surpassed Shan.

Alloi spoke. "Your question is quite in order, Sandin Promentro. You wonder how a human army can help us against the rys? You think that if we had the power to kill Shan, then we would just do it."

Sandin nodded, and Alloi proceeded to explain her reasons. As he listened to the female tabre, he often glanced at Tempet, who remained standing in front of the overturned chair. Alloi said that they would make wardings for his soldiers that would give them a fighting chance against rys soldiers. She needed soldiers to protect her from the harassment of enemy soldiers so she could direct her attack spells at Shan while Tempet fought him in direct combat. Shan was powerful, but a combined assault from a direct and a remote source would eventually overcome him.

"Essentially, we need soldiers to protect us from his soldiers while we conduct our magic battle," she concluded.

"I am not available to fight other people's battles," Sandin said. Although he expected Tempet to skewer him for the negative declaration, he had to make clear to the tabre that he was no one's tool.

"But it is your battle," Alloi insisted. "The rys made many Nufalese humans into Deamedron as well. People of the same blood as you suffered in limbo as slaves of Jingten."

Sandin saw her point but the injury was not so fresh and personal for him.

"When Jingten is defeated, it will mean that your Empire will be the supreme nation in the world. No superior beings looking down on you," Alloi said.

"Except for you," Sandin countered. "I imagine that you will set yourselves up as masters of the rys and enslave them, and maybe the Atrophane as well."

Alloi folded her hands in her lap and stared at them.

Tempet responded. "No, we will kill the rys."

"Kill them all?" Sandin asked incredulously.

"Yes, kill them all," Tempet said firmly and his eyes flickered with white light as he envisioned the bloodbath that he would deliver. "How else can genocide be avenged except with genocide? Alloi

and I are the last of our kind. And if there can be no tabre, then there shall be no rys. Help us and humans will inherit the world."

Astounded, Sandin shook his head. It sounded too good to be true. "Why would you offer me so much? No one wants to conquer the world just to give it away."

"Our world is gone, Sandin Promentro," Alloi whispered.

"All we want is to remove the rys from yours," Tempet said. "When that is done, Alloi and I will just be two lonely beings waiting to join our kin in the next world."

And we will wait, Alloi, Tempet added mentally for his sister. He had detected her shy thoughts of suicide. After the rys were destroyed, she wanted to end her life, but he would not let her.

Tempet continued, "We will not care what you do with your Empire, and it will be YOUR Empire."

Sandin could not argue with that. If he did conquer Jingten, his wealth and power would be incredible, even compared to what it already was. What man would not want to serve him? The Darmar in Atrophane would be meaningless. Sandin could seize the title if he chose.

"The rys would kill many of my soldiers in this war you propose," he said.

"Soldiers die," Tempet stated without emotion.

Despite being a callous aristocrat, Sandin believed that the supremacy of the Atrophane military resulted from upholding the ideal that the ruling class must use its forces with wisdom. Yes, soldiers died but they were not to be squandered.

His guts told him not to be deluded by offers from these crazy creatures who had stole into his bedchamber. Onja had told Lord Kwan that she needed soldiers. Humans were pawns for rys, or tabre, as they called themselves.

"Alloi," Tempet said impatiently.

She sighed and lifted her gaze from her lap. Magic transformed her dull eyes into pits of white fire.

Later that morning, Sandin agreed to their requests.

28. Coronation

Rys shall not kill rys

– Dacian's Last Law

From the high shoulders of Mount Curlenfindi, the Jingten Valley looked like a liquid emerald poured into a bowl of jagged blue crystal. Curving threads of snowmelt, glistening like veins of silver, streamed across the flowering highland meadows, and, with the majesty of a vast columned temple, the ancient forest surrounded Jingten, whose blue stone buildings reflected on the deep waters of Lake Nin.

In no other place in the Rysamand did the jutting mountains and relentless glaciers give way to the softer world of vegetation. The Jingten Valley provided the only safe route through the mountains, and the rys had occupied the region for as long as rys or humans could remember.

Pungent with conifers, the warm air of the lower elevations greeted Shan as he descended Mount Curlenfindi. For eight days he had retreated into the frozen craggy heights of his favorite mountain where the extreme elevation enhanced his magical senses.

Drifting in and out of meditation, Shan had lingered at the pinnacle through two days and nights. Meteors had streaked the starry nights. One had gone by quite close, in a trailing flash that turned from green to blue. Shan had followed it with his mind until it hit in the southern reaches of the Rysamand, vaporizing ice and smashing rock.

Ah, such power. He sighed at the memory. He had needed the escape after the hard days that

followed his return to Jingteng. His ryls had been panicked. Families were shocked to receive their dead sons, some of whom were horribly blown apart. Taf Ila had been the worst, actually daring to launch a tirade at Shan for risking his daughter's life. Taf Ila's squalling had ignited Shan's fragile temper and caused the ryl King to stun him with a spell of sleepiness.

But Shan forgave the former Captain of the Jingteng Guard for reacting so badly. Quylan's torn body had been a terrible shock to him. Disturbed by guilt for calling her to battle ill-prepared, Shan had stayed at her bedside for two weeks. Quylan had been in pain, even after her healing hibernation that should have stopped it, and Shan had used spells to block her pain until she begged him to rest. Only when her healing outstripped her suffering did Shan take some time for himself.

Although his trip to the mountaintop had renewed him physically, the excursion had not been for recreation alone. From the slopes of Curlenfindi, his mind had gathered speed and glided across the Wilderness until he located his enemies.

He returned to Jingteng disturbed by what he had seen.

Shan quickened his steps when the sharp broken face of Curlenfindi yielded to meadows. He still had hours to walk before reaching Jingteng. He expected that Quylan would be better after the passing of so many days. Cynically, he imagined that he would return to find her holding court.

Despite her quality, Shan was still adjusting to the concept of sharing the monarchy. He knew Quylan had every right to claim the title, and considering the developments in Nufal, Jingteng needed a Queen.

When Shan reached the city, he checked in with his building supervisors and inspected the latest work on the palace before going to the Keep. He found Quylan busily directing servants for the preparation of her coronation ball. She was in the state dining hall, walking around the great table and pointing at places on the bare expanse of polished wood. A steward followed her and listed who was invited to the royal table. With relief Shan noted her strong posture and healthy glow.

Quylan waited until he was close before turning to greet him. "The King is home!" she announced and held out her arms.

Shan took one of her hands and gave it a reserved kiss. "You are better," he said quietly.

"Yes," Quylan said. She dismissed the list-taking steward and the other servants.

As they drifted out on their errands, Shan sat at table and swung his soft boots onto the gorgeous hardwood surface. A fine blend of grit from the mountains, mud from the construction site, and a few pine needles coated his boots and dirtied the table. Besmirching his predecessor's state dining table pleased him.

"Are you better?" Quylan asked and set a hand on his shoulder. During the days he had soothed her with his magic, she had noticed the terrible wound that he had sustained in Nufal. She admired him for healing the damage with his own power, and she respected him more than ever.

"Yes, much better," he said absently.

"Except....?" she prompted, wanting his news.

"I have seen Tempet and Alloj. They have gone southeast to the imperial frontier. They intend to enlist the Atrophane to serve them," he reported.

"But the Atrophane are only humans," Quylan said.

"Humans with many resources, an appetite for conquest, and now two very powerful ryls to tell them what to do," Shan clarified.

Quylan feebly resisted the consequences. "But the Atrophane diplomats will be here soon. We will make a treaty," she proposed.

"Yes, that will work. Treaties avert wars," Shan spat bitterly.

"It could help," she murmured.

Shan sighed. "Those diplomats cannot even know about Tempet and Alloj, who skulked across the Wilderness, hiding from my mind. They only just reached the southern fort."

"Then we will send the diplomats back with a peace proposal. It might give us a way to communicate with them," Quylan said.

"Yes, we can try," Shan agreed wearily. He was pleased that she thought of communication before retaliation. "But I do not think they want to listen to us. You have seen the fury of Tempet. He has come back to punish us for what Onja and Dacian did to Nufal."

"You think they want a war?" Quylan said. After the trauma of what had happened on the plains, she wanted to believe that the worst was over.

Shan hung his head and clasped his temple in an uncharacteristic display of despair. Quylan glanced quickly at the dining room entrances, wondering if anyone was noticing his lapse. Normally, Shan was so careful about appearances.

"I do not want this," he moaned. "I would never have wanted this. How can I make them understand that we are not the ones who crushed Nufal? That we would never do such a thing."

"We will tell the diplomats," Quylan said but Shan hardly listened.

"It is so awful," he continued and shut his eyes. "I must go fight them. I must go finish Onja's battle." He said her name with such revulsion that Quylan actually sensed his stomach churning.

Quylan tried to comfort him. "Shan, we will make our peace offer, and if they will not accept it, we will do what we must. At most, they will only have a human army. What can they hope to accomplish with a few Atrophane?"

Shan responded, "I conquered Jingten with a human army."

"Yes, but it was you who defeated Onja. The humans were only to keep the others busy," she said.

Shan lifted his head suddenly and his eyes focused on a distant scene. Quylan sensed that he was not with her, sharing in her hope. Something drew his mind to another place and time, and for a flickering instant, Quylan glimpsed the memories that he would not share. Something about his final battle with Onja had jumped into his mind, but he squashed it back like a defender on a castle wall pushing back an invader's ladder.

What happened that he will not tell? she wondered. He had never related the details of Onja's demise. He had in fact refused to answer her direct questions about it, and those memories were always secured in the deepest vault of his mind. Today was the closest she had ever gotten to them.

Shan took his feet off the table and straightened. Forcing his heavy mood aside, he took Quylan's hand again. She pressed close to him, sitting on the armrest.

"Do not discount the humans, Quylan. They can be strong and brave creatures, and the belief that they serve a higher power brings out the best, or perhaps, the worst in them. And remember that Tempet and Alloi will be made more powerful by their servitude. They will not feel so alone," he explained.

Quylan nodded with understanding. Magic was wonderful, but power over others was even more. "You will not be alone, my love. I will help you," she promised.

"Let us discuss such strategies another time, Quylan," he decided. "The Atrophane diplomats are still a few days away. Let it suffice that we will make our peace offer soon. For now, you have your coronation to enjoy."

Gladly distracted by that topic, Quylan began to explain her plans to him. She had almost everything arranged already, and she had only been waiting for him to return from the mountains so the event could be scheduled.

"We should do it immediately. In three days?" he said.

"Really?" She said with surprise. "But that will not give Dreibrand time to come. I thought you would invite your human friends."

Shan said. "You have waited long enough. We will make it a rys-only ceremony."

Delighted by his kindness, Quylan slipped into his lap. "Thank you, Shan, but I do not think that we

can manage so quickly. I have no crown," she said.

"Yes, you do," Shan corrected. "When I first brought you home, I took the liberty of commissioning one for you. You were so hurt and in pain. It helped give me hope to have it made, so I could surprise you with it when you were better."

After discouraging her from being his Queen for so long, his preparation of her crown mended many of Quylan's fractured feelings.

"Then let me show it to you," Shan said. He gave her a little push so he could get out of the chair. "It was finished just before I went mountain climbing."

"Oh, how do you keep such secrets from me?!" she scolded. She followed him with dancing steps, and Shan enjoyed her youthful gaiety. Although glad to see her happy, he wondered if she was happy to be with him or because she had gotten what she wanted from him.

The entire rys population gathered at the Keep on the special day. The human workers had been given a holiday, and they enjoyed their parties around the city, drinking and ridiculing the snobbery of the rys and their rys-only coronation. The insult was minor though. People contented themselves with imagining the spectacle of the coronation. The "pretty little rysling" as they commonly but quietly referred to Quylan would wear a beautiful gown and a treasure of jewels the envy of the ages would no doubt adorn her body. People whispered about the magic that might be part of the ceremony. Did the rys do something secret? Something wonderful? What manner of spells would anoint Jingten's new Queen?

"Jingten has not been without a queen long enough," was a common statement among the human revelers, but some of the workers were more generous toward King Shan. "King Shan deserves his 'pretty little rysling' after only having Onja to look at all those years," some people said.

To the rys population gathered inside the Keep, the speculations and grumblings of the humans were of low interest. After reeling from the deaths of soldiers and the well-liked Zanah, the rys needed a state spectacle to buoy their spirits, and the addition of a Queen to the side of their enlightened King renewed their sense of security.

Quylan had known better than to suggest using the old throne room for the event, and the coronation took place on the third tier of the Keep's cavernous main entry. Rows of columns flanked the staircases like great trees shading old avenues. Rys packed the lower halls, filling every space between the columns and overflowing into adjoining rooms and outside into the courtyard. Skylights beamed down upon the gathering on every level.

The elite of Jingten surrounded the King on the third level. Shan waited beside a velvet draped pedestal where set the box containing the crown. Singers and musicians crammed roped-off platforms, playing for the crowd and waiting for their cue to play their bombast when the Queen entered.

All rys congregated for the ceremony, and they had never known such a communal energy before. Shan loved the excitement and wished that Jingten could stay in this moment for the rest of his reign. Everyone in their finest clothes. Jewels twinkling. The suggestive glow of enchanted crystals reflecting in the eyes of common rys. The rys had come to be with their rulers because they trusted them, and Shan soaked up the glory of his achievement. Today was as rewarding as the funerals had been devastating.

Why did you wait to do this? he asked himself. The heavy mob of adoration thronging the old halls medicated his doubts about Quylan. Today was the image of his renaissance. Out on the plains, twisted hateful minds smeared his vision of the future, but they could not touch this present. Today was safe and perfect.

Shan heard Quylan's voice rustle outside the gate of his mind. "*I am ready,*" she said, communicating from her staging area on the next level.

"*I will begin,*" he responded simply. The guests nearest Shan quieted when they noticed the onset of his spellmaking. Bright blue light consumed his eyes and the air around him sparkled. The excited murmurs of the crowd that had been gradually building into the noise of a high wind were replaced with eager silence.

When a sphere of blue energy formed near the ceiling, the audience collectively gasped. The music

stopped and the light organized itself into an image of Shan's face. Hovering his subjects, his face surveyed the crowd and he cast his mind into the minds of every rys.

"Rys, you are the highest beings in the world, blessed with powers not given to the other animals that share our life. Be thankful for your position but occupy it with responsibility. We can achieve so much and add so much goodness and beauty to the world if we try. As your King, I hope to inspire you toward this goal. Today, I introduce your new Queen. Her youth represents our rebirth. Her beauty shows us that it is easy to love. And her power protects us from the dark enemies of peace and perfection."

Shan withdrew from the minds of his subjects, knowing that each of them would always remember that moment shared with their King.

His spirit projection collapsed into a simple sphere of light that moved to the fourth level balcony and embraced Quylan in its cool glow. The rys cheered for her and Quylan raised her arms to acknowledge them. The music started again with a regal blast and then a chorus of one hundred rys singers tamed the music into a sweet melody.

Quylan mounted the platform that was connected to the balcony railing. When she walked to the edge, the crowd cheered harder as they realized that she was about to do something amazing. Magical fire blazed in Quylan's eyes as she joined minds with Shan. For the past two days they had been practicing the levitation spell, and she stepped out into the thin air with confidence. Connected to the buoyant force that Shan created with his magic, she achieved a smooth and flawless descent to the floor.

A clear aisle had been preserved for her arrival, and Quylan walked between the rows of soldiers toward Shan. He bowed deeply to her when she reached him and then removed the crown from the box. Lifting it over his head, he rotated so the audience could admire its dazzle. A thick circlet of gold formed the structure of the crown, and thousands of hair-thin golden chains hung from the circlet. Only a rys could have worked gold on such a fine scale and the chains fluttered and shimmered like real hair. A great tear-shaped diamond was set at the fore of the crown. Its facets were as varied as the twinkle of bright winter sunshine through a frozen waterfall.

When Shan had been a rysling, Onja had shown him the diamond. The diamond had not been haphazardly tossed in one of Jingten's treasure hoards. It had been in Onja's private collection, closeted in a secret compartment that only a rys with significant power could see. The late Queen had shown the diamond to Shan only once and she had not explained its origin, except to give its name. The Eye of Onja it had once been called, but Shan left its name in the past.

Shan presented the crown to Quylan. Sunlight from a skylight passed through the diamond and dotted Quylan's body and face with rainbow sprinkles. Locking eyes with Shan, she accepted her crown. Rys monarchs crowned themselves.

She raised the crown but waited for Shan to deliver the words they had planned.

With his physical voice, he announced, "As is our way, the most powerful female in Jingten shall crown herself Queen and defender of the Rysamand. Look upon Quylan the First!"

Quylan lowered the crown onto her head. The gold chains settled over her free-flowing black hair and mingled with the silky strands. Upon her glossy mane, the gold chains were bright enough to enflame greed in the most modest heart. Her powerful aura began to burn with a brightness that consumed the dazzling gem.

Shan hung back, not using any magic. This was Quylan's moment to shine. The cheering audience swung between roars of delight and sighs of awe. Quylan turned so she could acknowledge every part of the throng. When she stopped, she faced her family. Taf Ila was there with her mother and brother. Quylan was not as close to her mother and brother as she was to her father, who she had chosen to live with since the separation of her parents, but Quylan soaked up the pride displayed by her entire family.

Shan offered Quylan his arm and she took it gladly. She had waited for years to have the arm of the King of Jingten and be his Queen. They began their procession toward the outer doors.

Quylan's family and a squad of attendants fell into place behind the rulers. At intervals, Quylan paused the procession and descended swiftly into trance. She clasped her hands for a few seconds, and then with a flash, a new warding crystal bounced between her palms before she tossed it into the audience. She did this many times, generating tokens of her magic that would be souvenirs from this extraordinary day for the common rys. They were trifling little warding crystals, but they contained a protective enchantment that no common rys could make. Eager hands flailed

above heads where the crystals flew, but the rys were an orderly species and no one was pushed or offended. Afa, the glassmaker, plucked one of the crystals from the air. It was still hot but did not burn his skin. He handed it to his rysling Ranu.

A pavilion had been set up in the courtyard, where Shan and Quylan took their seats to preside over feasting, performances, and dancing for the rest of the day. When evening came, the King and Queen went inside with their select guests for a leisurely state dinner and ball.

The next day Quylan awoke in her canopied bed. Heavy bolts of velvet wrapped the bedposts and curtains of lace dangled from the canopy like the delicate edge of a snow bank sculpted by the mountain winds. She caressed the many layers of silk bedding and rubbed her cheek against the splendid fabric.

Although rys did not need to sleep every day, Quylan had collapsed with exhaustion after the ball that had gone into the wee hours of the morning. Working so much magic during her coronation had tired her, and she barely remembered the servants removing her fine gown and leaving her in a soft chemise for sleeping.

She saw her crown on the bedspread. The diamond lay on the mound of gold chains like a cat nestled in straw. Apparently, Shan had not joined her in her bedchamber.

She stretched her arms and a sharp pain poked her back where the exit wound had been. Quylan had not mentioned the lingering pain to anyone. The discomfort only hit her once or twice a day and she expected that it would fade with time.

Quylan cast her mind through the Keep, searching for Shan. When she did not detect his familiar lifeforce, she knew where to look next. She found him at the work site of the new palace. The holiday was over for the human workers, and Shan was overseeing their labor as usual.

Trying to avoid being bothered by his absence, Quylan scooped up her crown and strolled to a mirror. She settled the crown onto her head. Lifting her chin, she smiled at her haughty image, but her amusement was fleeting. The diamond scoffed with an angry sparkle at the mere glass of the mirror.

Quylan removed her crown. At first, the remarkable gem had pleased her but now she thought it was too large and overpowered her face.

And it reminds me of Onja, she thought suddenly. The case that the crown had come in had been brought to her chambers and Quylan put it away.

She started to dress herself, not bothering to summon servants. Buttoning her shirt in solitude, she realized that she had not imagined that her first day as Queen would be so mundane. She began to wonder if Shan had purposefully left her alone to contemplate her new status.

But her thoughts did not dwell with her royal title. Shan's absence felt awfully familiar, and she feared that he was forcing a schism between them again.

Without waiting to find out how long Shan intended to ignore her, Quylan rode across the city to the construction site. Shan sat in his lakeside pavilion and he only acknowledged her arrival with one quick glance.

"I would speak with you, my King," Quylan said.

He poured wine into a golden chalice and said, "About what, my Queen?"

Quylan chose to be blunt. "A Queen does not expect to wake up alone after her coronation," she complained.

Shan sipped his wine. Appearing amused, he scolded, "Quylan, have you been reading human love stories? I did not realize you wanted me to play the role of the anxious bridegroom."

"Forget it," Quylan snapped. "Ignore me. We have been through this before."

"Except you have what you want now," Shan noted.

Quylan's temper prodded her powers, and her eyes flashed. As she suspected, Shan had withdrawn into his private existence that had sheltered his ambitions for so long. Quylan remembered how unattainable he had once seemed—a remote and powerful rys, who she had

ached for, who she had always loved.

Her eyes went back to normal, and she moved closer to him. "Shan, I only have what I want when you are close to me," she said.

He brushed a long lock of white hair behind his ear. Dropping his rude demeanor, he removed his gaze from the palace and looked at her. He apologized for leaving her alone and explained that he simply did not like spending time in the Keep.

"It is Onja's," he whispered. "I grew up in there with her." He shut his eyes and reflected that five centuries with Onja had not prepared him to have a functional relationship with a female rys. Hoping to soothe Quylan's feelings, he said, "Quylan, if you want my company, camp beside the lake with me for the rest of the summer. I know you find the Keep exciting and probably want to hold court there, so I will compromise and stay there with you this winter."

Quylan had her arms around him now. "Oh, Shan, it must have been so horrible for you all those years," she said sympathetically.

Shan marveled at her willingness to make excuses for him.

Quylan turned her head toward the rising palace where the humans worked like ants at a picnic. With her cheek snuggled against Shan's shoulder, she felt his power soaking into her skin. She sensed his turmoil as well. "I will stay here with you, Shan, if that will make you happy," Quylan said.

"All things aside, that would make me very happy," he murmured.

Quylan moved to another chair at the table. She wanted to show him affection, but the Queen should not so publicly fawn over the King, especially in such a rysling-like way. "You are worried about Tempet and Alloi," she said.

He hesitated, as if pondering a secret, and then nodded. Shan drank more wine before continuing. "If our peace offer fails, then we will wait for Tempet and Alloi to attack. Whether they have a human army does not matter. They will never breach the Rysamand."

"Then, we should practice battle magic together," Quylan stated with a bit of excitement.

Shan agreed although he was reluctant to place Quylan in danger again.

"For now, I place my hopes on peace," Shan said. Intellectually, he believed the chance for peace was slim, but he was determined to make a serious offer. Pulling his mind away from Quylan's ever-sensitive perception, Shan pondered again the puzzling dream he had experienced that morning. Shan had not intended to sleep, but in the quiet before the workers sluggishly gave up their holiday, the gentle lapping of the lake on the smooth gravel beach had lulled him.

Despite all the rage over his dead rys, Shan had dreamed of Alloi. In his vision, she was not his enemy and her soul radiated a love for life and gentle beautiful things. He had encountered her on the Nufalese plains, and she had beckoned him like sweet bright petals attracting a hummingbird. The Rysamand were a blue haze in the background of a hot summer sky. He had presented his peace proposal in an excited rush of sincere words. He could forgive her attack. It was a misunderstanding. He could never make up for the tragedy of the past, but he would welcome his Nufalese cousin.

"*Can you forgive Tempet?*" she asked, and Shan saw tears running down her face.

Shan had not answered. Her question severed his heart along the line between love and hate, and he had awoken with an icy feeling in his chest. Could he really offer peace and forgive both Tempet and Alloi? Or was his peace proposal just an arrogant gesture meant to polish his conscience while he prepared for war?

29. *Noble Ideals*

Atarek bore the humiliation and discomfort of his whipping well. The morning after his ordeal, he began his journey into the Wilderness lying on his stomach next to Hanshen in the wagon. Although stung by constant pain, Atarek had little pity for himself. Instead, he reflected on the people who he had abused. A thoughtless cuffing of a servant and barroom brawls started for

stupid reasons easily came to mind. Atarek moaned when he remembered having Lendel knocked around.

Hanshen, his partner in incapacity, attributed the moan to pain. "Can I get you something, Atarek?" the boy asked. A broad straw hat of the type worn by Bosta farmers teetered on Hanshen's head, shading his sensitive papery skin. The hat was too big, making Hanshen look even more wasted.

"No, Hanshen, but thank you," Atarek answered and took care not to groan in front of the boy again. Because the rent skin on his back would mend, Atarek did not want his misery to trouble Hanshen, who slipped deeper into his illness every day.

As Atarek quietly suffered, he gained some respect for Dreibrand, who had sought out and endured many challenges. Atarek remembered when Dreibrand had entered the Darmar's military academy. Some senior cadets had severely beaten Dreibrand. It had been more than typical hazing. It had been a brutal message that a Veta had no business becoming a commissioned officer. Atarek had tended his injured brother and advised him to give up his silly attempt at a military career. But Dreibrand had been resilient and returned to school. With the lesson of Sandin's whip fresh on his mind and body, Atarek wished that he had not ridiculed Dreibrand's devotion to rebuilding their family's prestige.

After each hard day of travel, Madame Fayeth changed the dressing on Atarek's back and rubbed salve on the angry welts. While flinching through her ministrations one evening, Atarek blinked back a couple tears and joked that he actually had a medicinal use for zeppa now.

"Oh, Atarek, if it would help, then I wish you had some," Madame Fayeth said, too upset to scold him. She then started to apologize in a womanly fit of self-blame. She lamented that she had not obtained the information that Atarek needed. If she had tried harder, then he would not have dared to talk to the Atrophane soldiers so openly. And she wished that she had done more to convince the Darhet to leave him alone.

"Oh, you wish you could have done it yourself," he attempted to tease, but he could not mask the pain in his voice.

"That is not true," she insisted.

"Madame Fayeth, it was a joke," Atarek said. The events at the fort had stunned her badly, but he wanted her to get over them. He had caused her enough trouble already.

After a bemused pause, she smiled with relief as if remembering the concept of humor.

He thanked her and suggested that she apply her energy to Hanshen. Madame Fayeth nodded wearily. She needed to wash and feed her son. The daily battle against his waning appetite should not be delayed.

After a week of travel, Atarek was out of the wagon and riding again. His back was still a scary scabby place, but the skin was healing and the pain had subsided. It was good to feel better, but while riding in the wagon, he had been insulated from the twenty Atrophane soldiers who escorted the Fayeths. Now, Atarek had to endure their rude comments and hostile glances. On the second day that Atarek was out of the wagon, he noticed Fanlyre looking at him strangely.

Atarek urged his horse alongside the commander and asked Fanlyre what his problem was.

Becoming pointedly interested in the horizon, Fanlyre said, "I do not have a problem."

"Well, I do," Atarek said. "I think you should enforce some discipline on your men. I don't like how they look at me."

"I cannot change the look in their eyes," Fanlyre said dismissively.

Atarek snorted with contempt. Projecting his voice for the others to hear, he said, "I know you think you can ridicule me because of what Promentro did. But he had no right to treat me like that. I never even met Sandin Promentro before."

The soldiers did not remark or make eye contact.

Feeling as if he had salvaged a scrap of dignity, Atarek steered his horse in front of Fanlyre and cut him off. "Underling," he sneered. "I bet you can't wait to get back and kiss Promentro's ass."

Anger twisted Fanlyre's tanning face, but he found himself without any words to defend himself. The insult burned him like hot wax splashed on the skin that clings until it is cool and brittle.

Atarek returned to his position next to Madame Fayeth's slowly rolling wagon. From her seat next to the wagoner, Madame Fayeth admired Atarek's blatant attempt to reclaim his pride. He had proved his nobility to her with his brave actions during the rebel attack, and she disliked the disrespect shown him. Atarek appreciated the encouragement he saw in her lovely blue eyes.

When they camped that evening, Hanshen worsened and distracted Madame Fayeth from Atarek's problems. Hanshen's breathing was strained and sometimes he hacked on mucus for a frightening length of time until he could finally draw a real breath. Madame Fayeth cradled him in her lap, easing his misery as much as she could.

Atarek and Lydea sat by helplessly. During Hanshen's worst coughing fit, Lydea broke down and buried her face in Atarek's shoulder. He petted her soft hair while she cried. He sensed that she had given up hope, which was terrible with the Rysamand Mountains rising higher every day. The rys homeland could only be a couple weeks away, and it was unbearable to think that Hanshen might perish so close to their goal. Of course, there was no certainty that rys magic could even help the boy, but Atarek saw no sense in thinking about that now.

"We will get your brother to the rys," he told Lydea. "I will make sure of it."

She slipped a grateful arm around him, and Atarek felt a sudden rush of masculine urges. The scoundrel inside Atarek gleefully salivated for the emotionally fragile teenage girl. He swallowed hard and tried to think clean thoughts.

Loosening the lovely Lydea from his body, he said, "Hey, Lydea, keep it together. You need to stay strong for you mother."

"I know," she muttered and sat up. She pushed her golden hair out of her teary face and glanced shyly at Atarek, wondering if he minded her touch. She had liked crumbling against his broad shoulder. Hard travels and terrible worry had left her craving comfort and her mother was too busy to give her any.

Atarek stood up abruptly and went for a walk so he could think. Soldiers looked up from the fires as he walked by but no one challenged him. Out on the dark plains, wolves started howling and Atarek imagined them circling, working their way closer to their intended victim, much like the disease stalking Hanshen's life inside his body.

When Atarek drifted back to the Fayeth fire, Hanshen had weathered his latest fit and was sleeping quietly. Lydea was resting as well, but Madame Fayeth sat up poking at the coals of the dying fire. She stared intensely at the hot specks of red, and Atarek guessed at the dark content of her thoughts.

He squatted beside her and she snapped out of her daze. Rubbing her face, she explained that Hanshen was doing better.

"Good," Atarek said. "And I have decided that we need to travel faster. Starting tomorrow, I will ride ahead and scout for a place to camp and gather some fuel for the cooking fires. That way you can keep going after sunset. There is no reason we have to stop before dusk to do these things when I could be doing it while you travel in the wagon. This way we can travel farther each day."

Madame Fayeth agreed eagerly.

"Now, Fanlyre is not going to like my idea, so you will have to convince him to keep going tomorrow night," Atarek said.

"Oh, I will," Madame Fayeth said.

"I am sure you will," Atarek said with a knowing grin. "Shame him if you have to, but I doubt that Fanlyre really wants to keep your son from reaching help. Even I can believe that."

"Thank you, Atarek. I think your plan will help us," she said.

"I hope so, Madame Fayeth. I want you to get what you need. I know now that I am going to find my brother. My buddy Sandin confirmed for me himself that Dreibrand is alive and out here somewhere," Atarek said.

Madame Fayeth could hardly believe that Atarek could refer to the Darhet so casually, and she vented her disgust. "How can you even mention that awful man without getting mad?"

Atarek shrugged and appreciated the ability to shrug without biting pain. "Well, I am mad, but I suppose you might agree, Madame Fayeth, that I deserved a good lashing."

"Never, Atarek, never. You did not deserve that," she insisted generously.

"But you have only seen me on my best behavior," he said.

His humor could not provoke Madame Fayeth to give up her vindictiveness toward the Darhet. "I hope Sandin Promentro gets what he deserves some day," she said.

Atarek appreciated her support. "Can I ask you a favor?" he said and waited for her nod before going on. "If you are with me when I find my brother, please do not mention what happened at the fort. I want to try to keep it secret from Dreibrand."

"Of course, Atarek. I mean Lord Veta," she added because she could tell that it helped him to have someone acknowledge his nobility.

The next morning, Fanlyre exploded when Madame Fayeth told him that Atarek had left early to scout out their next campsite where they were to rendezvous with him.

Madame Fayeth let him finish yelling about how they would not use any campsite that Atarek found, and then she said, "Commander Fanlyre, how can you expect me to dawdle at the slow pace you set when my son is so ill? We need to get to Jingtun as quickly as possible. I cannot believe that you would hinder our progress just because your pride is stung by Atarek's initiative."

Fanlyre did not respond quickly. He hated how he seemed lately to have nothing to say for himself, and he felt bad about yelling at a woman.

"Very well," he spat.

After that day, he assigned soldiers to ride ahead and establish a camp that they could reach after sunset. Atarek accompanied the scouts every time. Although irked by Atarek's presumptive actions, Fanlyre noticed that Atarek's choice to separate himself from the Fayeths presented a great opportunity for Fanlyre to fulfill the Darhet's order that Atarek not return from the Wilderness. Fanlyre then considered the distasteful details of how best to attack Atarek, who was a big man. Although the censured Lord Veta had been deprived of weapons, traveling the Wilderness was building him up, reviving muscles and removing the fat laid down by debauchery.

But as Fanlyre contemplated the task, he realized that he had not been delaying action because of his uncertainty about the method. Deep down, Fanlyre could not find a personal reason to harm Atarek Veta. Fanlyre had to wonder if sullyng his hands with the dirty assignment was required for career advancement. Already, his military performance had fallen short, and the ideals of his noble class, with which he had been raised, were seemingly naïve.

At least the unending Wilderness offered an excuse for postponing a decision.

Although the Fayeth party began to cover more ground, the grueling travel schedule started to take a toll. The horses were tiring and a couple went lame. Then, after a three-day bout of thunderstorms, the mud claimed the supply wagon. The axle broke with a loud snap that scoffed at the horses and men who had labored to remove it from the mire. Most of the supplies were transferred to the Fayeth wagon, which left Hanshen squeezed into a corner.

Despite the bad luck, Hanshen's condition stabilized for a time, and he would sit up in the wagon and enjoy the scenery. The wild animals delighted him. The mighty buffalo impressed him with their shaggy bulk and he liked to make up names for the antelope, deer, rabbits, and birds that he saw, giving each species a designation, such as tweeters, brown hoppers, and horned runners. His family and some of the soldiers would use his names to refer to the fauna in order to please him.

His enthusiasm for the adventure, however, could not combat his disease for long, and after a week of relative health, a severe lethargy overtook him. He did not have any coughing fits because his body became too weak to struggle so mightily for air, and his lungs were reduced to a lazy rattle.

The worsening condition of the boy distracted Atarek so much that he did not give it a second thought when Fanlyre decided to join the scouting group one morning.

After riding together for half the morning in silence, Fanlyre commented, "You are worried about the boy."

Atarek did not bother to answer. He had little interest in Fanlyre's lame attempt at conversation. What interested him today was the obvious gap in the lofty façade of the Rysamand, which he had been told marked the pass to Jingtun.

"Do you know what is wrong with him?" Fanlyre asked.

"You ask now after all the time we have spent traveling together," Atarek criticized.

"I did not want to add to Madame Fayeth's distress by bringing it up," Fanlyre explained, and it was the truth.

"I do not know," Atarek said. "She said she took him to many physicians in Atrophane but they did not know anything." He glanced suspiciously at Fanlyre, finally wondering why he had come along for the day.

Realizing that Atarek intended to avoid conversation, Fanlyre tried a more personal topic. "I did not agree with what the Darhet did to you," he said. Finally speaking his true opinion blunted the teeth of the dark thoughts that had been gnawing at his conscience.

"Oh, so you submitted a written protest then?" Atarek sneered.

"You know I could not dare," Fanlyre said, hoping to present himself as just a helpless bystander.

Atarek snorted. "For all I know, you stood by and said 'give him another good one, my Lord.'"

He did not bother listening to Fanlyre's denial. It did not matter. Atarek clenched his left hand, feeling his bare fingers inside the glove. *Will I ever have my ring back?* he wondered, hating himself for losing it. Briefly, Atarek soothed himself with the image of reclaiming the jade ring from Sandin's dead body, but Atarek did not believe in vengeful daydreams. There was nothing he could do about what the Darhet had done just as there had never been anything he could do about his censure.

"Gods of Ektren! Look!" Fanlyre cried.

Atarek snapped out of his distracting depression and saw, in the distance, riders and wagons.

Fanlyre shaded his eyes but the group was too far away to identify. "Maybe we are about to find your brother," he speculated cheerfully.

The sudden possibility seized Atarek's hopes like a rough lover. He loosened the reins and yelled at his horse to run. Fanlyre and the two soldiers with him did the same. As they neared the group, Atarek's excitement dwindled when he saw that it was only more Atrophane traveling south.

"It is our diplomats," Fanlyre said and waved. "But why are they returning so soon?"

The wagons eased to a stop while Fanlyre introduced himself to the officer in charge. From a canopied wagon, two thin academic-looking men flanked a portly man whose white silk shirt was splotted with sweat. His imperial blue cloak and jacket were set aside because of the heat, and disorderly wisps of graying blond hair fluttered around his bald head.

"You, Commander, come here," said the overweight diplomat. His sour expression and surly tone contrasted with the silky speech that he used when representing the Empire to the rys.

Atarek hurried to reach the diplomat before Fanlyre.

"Who are you?" the bald diplomat demanded. He was confused by Atarek's lack of military uniform and apparent presumption of authority.

"Lord Atarek Veta. Who are you?"

The diplomat leaned out of the wagon and his head was shiny in the sunlight. His associates remained in the shade of the canopy.

"I am Sir Eddleket," he answered and squinted suspiciously at Atarek. "Did you say Veta?"

Fanlyre interrupted, "Sir Eddleket, I can explain."

"Fanlyre, give me a moment," Atarek said irritably. "Sir, have you been to Jingteng?"

"There is certainly no other place to go on this side of Ektren," Eddleket complained and tugged at his collar.

"Sir, I am looking for my brother, Dreibrand Veta. He is supposed to be in the service of the rys King. Did you see or hear of him?" Atarek's mouth instantly went dry as he waited for an answer.

Fanlyre suppressed his fury over Atarek's disregard for his authority because he wanted to hear the reply as well.

"No," Eddleket said quickly without giving it any thought.

Atarek blinked. After coming so far, he had not prepared himself for blunt disappointment. "Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes, I am sure," Eddleket said with offended conviction. "Who are you again?"

One of the other diplomats finally spoke. "He said Veta. The censured House."

Recognition lighted Eddleket's face. "Who sent you?" he asked with disdain.

"No one sent me," Atarek said. "I came looking for my brother." He felt his focus slipping. *They have not heard of Dreibrand at all?*

"Well, I certainly have more important business than tracking down the strays from your ruined family," Eddleket puffed. "Commander, who are you?"

Fanlyre introduced himself and tried again to explain his mission, but Eddleket kept asking questions. "Are you bringing word from the rys, Commander Fanlyre?"

Confused, Fanlyre stared at the Darmar's official servant and said nothing.

Fanlyre's blank expression caused Eddleket to rethink his assumptions. "Were there any rys at the fort when you left?" Eddleket asked.

When Fanlyre answered no, the supercilious diplomat seemed puzzled. Dropping some of his condescending attitude, Eddleket explained to Fanlyre what had happened in Jingteng. "When we reached Jingteng, we received word that the King wanted to see us immediately."

"And Queen," the second diplomat added apparently to annoy Eddleket with an interruption.

"We thought such an immediate audience was a good sign," Eddleket continued. "I dared to hope that we would make some progress this summer on our treaty for joint use of the Wilderness. But the King, he would not have a word of it. He informs us that two rys are at Fort Promentro and in league with the Darhet. Shan says that they are his enemies. And, by the Gods, it is true. There are fresh graves in Jingteng. Rys have been killed, so something has the King off balance. Then, he gives us a peace proposal written in his language and Atrophaney and dispatches us back to the fort post haste."

"Do you know what he is talking about?" Fanlyre asked.

"No! I thought you would know. I have had no indication whatsoever from the Darhet about his allying with any rys. But I can tell you this: It is about time we had a card to play with Jingteng. I have never seen someone shove a peace offer in my hands so fast!" Eddleket declared with some delight.

The developments astounded Fanlyre, who chose to function on the level of his mission. "Sir, are Atrophanes still welcome in Jingteng?" he inquired because he was worried about the plight of the Fayeths.

Eddleket laughed. "Why, I think we can pop in for tea any time."

The third diplomat who had not spoken yet interjected, "Do not make fun of King Shan's friendliness. He deals from strength."

"So do the Atrophane," Eddleket said. "Now, Commander Fanlyre, what are you doing here if not rushing to inform us of the Darhet's new strategies?"

As Fanlyre explained about the Fayeths, Atarek drifted away from the wagon and started asking the soldiers about Dreibrand. Although the news from Jingtun was vaguely disturbing, Atarek decided to worry about rys when he saw one. Finding his brother was his concern, and his diligence finally extracted a drop of positive news.

"If your brother is supposed to be in the Wilderness, he might be living in one of the settlements," a soldier suggested. "I heard there were settlements somewhere around those mountains." He pointed to the dusky peaks of the Tabren in the east.

Atarek pivoted in his saddle and looked east, trying to recall if anyone had mentioned the name of the other mountain range. Compared to the nearby grandeur of the Rysamand, the eastern mountains looked dull. Atarek had not considered the possibility of searching to the east, and he was torn. Jingtun was still the logical place to inquire about Dreibrand, and the Fayeths needed urgently to go to the rys homeland.

"Could you give me directions to the settlement?" Atarek said because he valued all information.

"Never been there," the soldier replied.

Atarek asked if anyone in Jingtun would know how to get to the settlement.

"Probably," the soldier said with a noncommittal shrug. After Atarek thanked him for his help, the soldier added, "Good luck, Lord Veta."

It pleased Atarek to be shown some respect. This soldier's mind had not yet been tainted by the Darhet's recent actions.

A soldier shouted and drew everyone's attention to three riders that had abruptly appeared on the eastern horizon. Fanlyre quickly inquired of the other commander if he had any men on patrol. His answer was no.

Atarek was excited all over again, but when the riders came closer, and he saw that they were not human, fear and awe mixed into an entirely new emotion. No one spoke as the three rys arrived.

They were lightly armed, but their black glassy eyes assessed the humans with heavy confidence.

The rys with a white cape draped over his green suede uniform announced, "I am Tulair, Captain of the Jingtun Guard."

Tulair sensed the emotional hum of quiet apprehension among the humans. The easterners had yet to develop any ease around the rys, but Tulair expected no difficulty dealing with the humans that Shan had sent him to inspect.

Tulair concentrated on the minds of the people around him, trying to tune into their language. His use of the eastern language had improved over the past weeks because he had been studying with Dreibrand, but this would be his first real test.

Three days earlier, the spirit projection of the King of Jingtun had appeared to Tulair and commanded him to confront the newest group of Atrophane. Tulair already had two hundred of his soldiers detaining the other group while he checked on the diplomats.

"Who is in charge here?" Tulair demanded haughtily, pleased with his pronunciation.

Eddleket and the commander of his escort answered simultaneously and then glanced at each other with annoyance. Fanlyre said nothing. He was too involved in his first encounter with rys.

Tulair cared nothing about their hierarchical confusion and scanned the rest of the group quickly. A blond man with no military uniform stood out, and Tulair paused to study him.

Atarek and Fanlyre stared at the rys soldiers with equal wonder. The experience of seeing another intelligent species was both profoundly disturbing and delightful. The rys were so like humans in form but so completely distinct that Atarek felt briefly unhinged from reality. He wondered how a man could keep his wits about him while looking into those dark disarming eyes. To behold the existence of rys was magic in itself.

Atarek claimed his tongue sooner than Fanlyre. "May I speak to you?" he asked. Although Atarek had only heard about rys magic, his instincts warned him to be polite, which was a rare thing for him.

"You will have your chance," Tulair said and then promptly commanded his two rys soldiers to segregate Fanlyre, Atarek, and their two companions from the diplomatic group. Tulair then asked Eddleket what business had brought the other group into the Wilderness. Eddleket protested the intrusion of his diplomatic affairs. The urge to attempt a paralysis spell and intimidate the man flirted with Tulair's mind, but he resisted his impatience. It would be reckless for him to jeopardize the King's peace efforts with aggressive behavior.

"I mean no offense, Sir," Tulair explained. "This other group of Atrophane was not expected and King Shan does not want your mission delayed. You carry important correspondence."

"I have no intention of delaying my trip," Eddleket said.

"Why has this group come to meet you then?" Tulair asked.

"Their business does not concern us. Actually, they were surprised to run into us," Eddleket said.

After Tulair pressed for details, Eddleket decided that what he had been told about the Fayeths was not a state secret and he shared the information.

Hearing about the sick child, Tulair was initially concerned and then a bit suspicious. Would a group of Atrophane actually cross the Wilderness for one child or was it a ruse of some kind? He thanked Eddleket for his answers and said that the diplomatic group could continue shortly.

Tulair interviewed Fanlyre next and was swayed by the sincerity of the man when he described the quest of Madame Fayeth. Tulair had never considered the possibility that easterners would come to Jington seeking the healing powers of rys physicians. The westerners had never done so, but perhaps that would change as well now that Onja was gone. Upon learning how ill the boy was, Tulair thought of Jolen.

Tulair was uncertain if Dreibrand would approve of bringing even a small group of Atrophane soldiers to the settlement. Tulair suspected that Commander Fanlyre harbored a hidden agenda because of the human's fluttering nerves, and he chose to delay his decisions until he met the Fayeths.

"Excuse me, Captain Tulan?" Atarek said.

"Tulair," the rys captain corrected irritably.

"Yeah, sorry. You are in the service of the rys King, correct?" Atarek asked.

The question annoyed Tulair and he did not deign to answer.

Atarek wet his lips expectantly, believing that this rys would have to know something about Dreibrand. A cold dread frosted Atarek's stomach as he feared that the rys would tell him he had never heard of Dreibrand.

Atarek scrambled to keep the rys captain's attention. "I am Atarek Veta. I have come to your land looking for my brother, Dreibrand Veta. Have you seen him?"

Although Tulair only hesitated a couple seconds before answering, the pause tormented Atarek, who braced himself for complete failure.

"Yes," Tulair said simply.

"What?" Atarek cried. "You have seen him?" His outburst startled his horse and Atarek had to calm the animal.

"Yes, I saw Dreibrand Veta only days ago." Tulair said, accepting the man's claim of relation to Dreibrand because of the strong resemblance.

Atarek laughed with joy, and his longing to find his brother transformed into perfect impatience. "Take me to him. Tell me where he is," he begged.

Tulair's calm contrasted with the exuberance of the human. *I did not know Dreibrand had a brother*, he thought as he tried to make some decisions.

"I will take you to your brother, but first I must inspect your group and see what can be done for the sick child," Tulair said.

A mushroom of guilt pushed aside Atarek's elation. Hanshen was suffering. "Yes, of course," he said quickly. "Can you help him?"

"I do not know," Tulair said conservatively.

After a cursory apology to the diplomats for the inconvenience, Tulair urged them to proceed. Later that day, when Tulair met the Fayeths, he was saddened by the condition of the boy. The life force of the child was weak and a complete deviation from the energy that normally radiated from children. The eyes of the mother stared at him with naked desperation. Constant stress had milled the woman's strength into dust, and an unfamiliar compassion ignited within Tulair.

With tears brimming, Madame Fayeth said, "Please, I have heard you have healing powers. I will pay you for your help. I will find a way to give you anything you desire, I swear." Her sharp negotiation skills were obliterated. She would have sold herself into slavery a thousand times to cure her son.

Tulair searched the faces of the rys nearest him but saw no volunteers. They were soldiers not healers, but he was reluctant to explain that magic varied among rys. It was best to leave the humans guessing about the extent of rys powers.

Determined to do something for the sick boy, Tulair groped for confidence in his abilities. Rys physicians possessed specialized techniques that took years to develop, and the battle magic that Tulair had been practicing was meant to hurt people. The thought of laying hands on the human boy and trying to heal him was intimidating. The process had to be terribly delicate, but perhaps he could give some energy to the boy, nourish his sabotaged flesh, and boost his strength.

"I will do what I can," he decided, inspired by his pity for the small suffering family.

Madame Fayeth nodded quickly. She automatically trusted the mysterious being and she did not hear the uncertainty in his voice.

Atarek lifted Hanshen out of the wagon and set him on the ground. The trampled grass cushioned him beneath the blanket. Tulair kneeled beside the boy and felt like he was observing himself from a remote location. He had never dreamed of attempting such a thing.

When Tulair brushed the boy's hair off his forehead, Hanshen opened his eyes and said, "Are you King Shan?"

Tulair suppressed a nervous laugh and said, "No. I am his servant." He motioned for the mother and Atarek to stay back.

Hanshen shut his eyes again, too tired to worry. Nothing happened for several minutes. Tulair appeared to be concentrating very hard and then suddenly blue light emanated from his hands and encased the boy. All the humans gasped. Madame Fayeth and Lydea held onto each other, breathless with anxiety. Atarek watched, astounded by what he saw.

Hanshen suddenly opened his eyes wide and tried to sit up. His limbs jerked and he started to hack and gurgle. Tulair removed his hands and sat back on his heels. Trying to interpret what he had just done, he feared that he launched the boy into a lethal seizure.

Crying her son's name, Madame Fayeth crashed to his side. Gathering Hanshen in her arms, she sat him up and held him while he coughed. Hanshen grabbed her sleeve and the strength in his fingers delighted her.

"Thank you. Thank you," she beamed to Tulair, who realized he needed to draw a breath.

Lydea moved forward cautiously and put her arms around her brother. Coughing forth mucus, Hanshen shook in the embrace of his mother and sister. His declining body that had ceased to perform the basic function of moving fluid out of his lungs suddenly had the strength to clear his air passages.

Hanshen hacked frightfully for several minutes until he started breathing evenly again. His chest rose and fell with grateful vigor, dragging oxygen into his body in a quantity that had been denied him for many days. The tears on the faces of Madame Fayeth and Lydea matched his runny nose.

Tulair stood up and brushed off his knees. Although relieved that his good intentions had not killed the boy, he was determined to get the boy to a physician.

"The boy should be able to travel," Tulair announced although he really had no idea. "I will take you to a rys physician now."

"You will take us to Jingten?" Lydea asked eagerly, wiping her cheeks. Her mother was too overjoyed to respond as she cradled Hanshen and celebrated his merciful improvement. Spots of color had appeared on his cheeks and his lips had brightened.

Tulair considered his next move and decided, "Jingten may not be the best choice. We must travel the mountain pass to get to my homeland and the thin air might be too hard on the boy. But I will take you to Jolen. He is a skilled physician who knows a great deal about treating humans. And he lives only about three days away." Looking at Atarek, Tulair said, "He lives with your brother in Vetanium."

"Vetanium?" Atarek repeated with obvious delight. He slapped Fanlyre on the shoulder like he was a boyhood friend and said, "We are going to Vetanium!" Atarek laughed. He did not feel censured when he was going to a place named after his family.

Tulair addressed the Atrophane officer. "You can take your soldiers and join the diplomats. Go back south."

Fanlyre refused to miss his chance to locate Dreibrand. Although Fanlyre had decided that vague hints from his Lord Darhet would not provoke him to murder, he hoped very much to fulfill the part of his mission regarding Dreibrand Veta. Gathering information was a proper military activity that Fanlyre could condone. "I was assigned to escort Madame Fayeth and protect her. I will not abandon her to strangers," he insisted.

"She came looking for rys. Now she has found us. I say your part is done," Tulair said.

"She and her family are imperial citizens. It is my duty to protect them. I will go with you," Fanlyre said. His firm tone pleased him although he quivered inside with insecurity. He had seen the power flowing from the rys's hands and wondered what else that power could do.

Tulair did not want to force the soldiers away and influence the crucial peace offer carried by the diplomats with an angry incident. Tulair wished he was capable of projecting his spirit to Jingten so he could consult the King, but he lacked that level of power. He would have to make the best decision that he could. Perhaps he should keep the Atrophane soldiers with him in case the King wanted to send another message to the Atrophane leader. Also, Tulair could send a rys ahead to inform Dreibrand of the situation. Then Dreibrand could decide if he would receive the Atrophane soldiers before they arrived. If he did not want them, then they could be detained on the plains.

"You may come," Tulair said.

Atarek whooped. "We are going to Vetanium!" he cried again, rubbing it in the faces of the Atrophane. They would all have to respect him now.

30. Guiding Loyalties

Lying on a mountainside, Dreibrand shaded his eyes with his forearm. The sun was warm on his chest and stomach, but a breeze always came along before the heat became uncomfortable. He explored the soft edges of the cumulous clouds that cruised the big sky. The clouds reminded him of a meringue topping on a dessert he had eaten long ago at a reception in Atrophane.

Since Tulair had gone to inspect a group of Atrophane, Dreibrand's mind had been on his homeland. Dreibrand had considered going with Tulair, but he could not justify advertising his presence, and it was good to stay home.

He rolled over. Miranda was beside him on the blanket. He ran his hand along her arm and his fingertips just barely brushed the soft skin of her torso. They had hiked up the mountain overlooking Vetanium for a picnic and some time alone. Shan had recently communicated to them the whereabouts of Tempet and Alloj, and upon learning that the malicious rys were far away, Dreibrand and Miranda had felt safe leaving their children in the care of servants. Although disturbed by Shan's report, they had seized the chance to relax while the settlement was not threatened by an immediate attack.

Dreibrand carefully noted the experiences of this day with his wife, storing the memories for when happiness would not be so easily at hand. The exertion of the hike that morning had pushed their cares back. While following Miranda up a steep slope, Dreibrand had playfully grabbed her butt. As she scrambled ahead, her ticklish laughter had only encouraged his fondling.

Lunch and lovemaking had left them drowsy and sunbathing for the afternoon. Dreibrand looked at Miranda and imagined a simpler life. He wondered if every day could be like this one if they just disappeared and gave up their ruling ambitions. It was a nice fantasy, but he suspected that in reality, such a life would be menial and boring. There would be no thrill of victory, no satisfaction from carving a destiny and endowing your descendants with power. He wondered if Miranda would even love him as a regular man, and he smiled when he concluded that she might not. Miranda understood well the extreme drudgery of an unvalued existence and she was not going back. Dreibrand loved that about her. Although it was for her own reasons, she shared with him the tenacious desire to better their status.

Miranda yawned and Dreibrand moved in for a kiss. Their lips parted with smiles and Miranda sat up. She pulled her under vest over her head and started lacing it up the front. As she pulled it tight, Dreibrand admired the way the undergarment shoved her breasts into an enhanced position.

Next, she shook her underpants to make sure that ants had not taken up residence. With her underclothes in place, she took a break from getting dressed and leaned over his body. She kissed his stomach and rubbed her nose on the fine hairs that gathered in a line down his abdominal muscles. Gently she gave him one last little kiss on the long scar on his side.

"Do not stop there," he coaxed.

"If we do not leave now, we will not get home before dark," she said.

Dreibrand sighed as if resigning himself to her harsh regime. Grabbing his pants, he said, "I suppose I am getting a sunburn."

Miranda finished dressing and began to pack away the picnic gear. Dreibrand pulled on his beige homespun shirt and shrugged into his new jacket. He appreciated the fit of the garment and the careful work that Miranda had put into its construction. The light jacket was just right on the breezy slope above the summer-hot prairie. He scooped his sword belt off the ground and swung it around his hips.

While folding the blanket, Miranda asked him what he wanted to do the next day, but he did not respond. She looked up and saw that he had paused in the middle of buckling his belt.

He did not mean to ignore her question and be rude, but the familiar weight of his weapon on his hips filled his mind with dark thoughts. In the privacy of the wild lands, he would confide in his wife.

"This news that Tempet and Alloi have gone to the Atrophane means there will be war," Dreibrand said.

Miranda had been waiting for him to discuss the subject. Dreibrand had been carefully silent after Tulair had related the information sent by the far-seeing rys King. "Shan said that he will pursue peace with all his heart," Miranda said. She smoothed the final fold in the blanket carefully, wanting it to be perfect.

Dreibrand finished closing the buckle and then shouldered his backpack. He turned so that Miranda could tie the blanket on top of the pack.

"I know that Shan wants peace. I do not doubt that," Dreibrand agreed. "But all the sorrow of ancient Nufal is embodied in those two rys. I have looked into the empty eye sockets of many crumbling skulls and been sad. But now I have looked into the living eyes of Nufalese rys and am afraid. Tempet and Alloi will come for their vengeance. I do not doubt that either."

Miranda set a comforting hand on his shoulder. They had not anticipated the threat of spiteful magical enemies, but they had faced worse in the past.

"Shan will defend us," she said as if the statement erased all possibility of worry.

"And I should serve at Shan's side, but to do so will break my heart," Dreibrand confessed. He faced her now, and she saw revealed on his face the great dismay that he had been holding inside. "I should have pushed Shan harder to pursue Tempet and Alloi instead of letting them get away. Now they have joined with the Atrophane, and I do not know how I will bear to face my own

countrymen in battle.”

“It may not happen like that,” Miranda said. “And, Dreibrand, have you not always said that the day would come when the Empire would confront us?”

“Yes, but not like this. Not now,” he said, and he raised a hand as if he could still grab the future that he had envisioned and make it happen. “I thought it would come in a few years when our settlements were larger. I had even hoped to reach some kind of civilized agreement. I am wealthy. I am sure that we could have ransomed our freedom. The Atrophane surely would rather fill their coffers instead of risk war with one of Shan’s allies, but now...Tempet and Alloj have thrown everything out of my reasoning.” He paced away from her and addressed the mountains angrily. “Why can’t they just stay away? I was not wanted, so I left. Why was that not good enough? Why now must I choose between my new home and hurting people that I have no desire to harm?”

Old scrappy pines and weathered granite looked down on him like a bored audience. Dreibrand hung his head and regretted his emotional outburst.

Miranda pitied his dilemma. Although Dreibrand had severed himself from the society of his birth and embraced that choice, he still loved his homeland and valued much of its culture.

“What will you do?” she asked.

When Dreibrand looked for his answer, his loyalties stared back at him. Dreibrand loved the life he had made for himself in Nufal and he loved Shan, who had made it possible. “I will serve Shan. If imperial forces join with Tempet and Alloj, I will fight them. Any nostalgia or affection I have for Atrophane is weakness,” he said.

“Shan may yet find a better way for us all,” Miranda encouraged. “Please, Dreibrand, you speak of things that may not happen as you think they will. Try not to be troubled, at least not today.”

Receptive to her optimism, Dreibrand removed his mind from images of grim deeds and said, “You are right, Miranda. I am here with you in Nufal. The two things that I desire most of all.” He returned to her side and gave her a long kiss before they started their hike home.

When they returned to Vetanium, Dreibrand looked, as he always did, at his flag waving over his settlement. A black horse on a field of green. The emblem of the House of Veta. He wished suddenly that his life fit the identity that his banner so plainly announced, but one simple symbol could not contain his mixed feelings about his heritage.

Crossing the threshold of his home alleviated his gloominess. Gulang’s wife, Tiah, who had recently taken a job in the household, reported that the boys had been reasonably well behaved and Victoria was content in the arms of her wet nurse.

Home with their children, Dreibrand and Miranda enjoyed a long summer evening. Gulang and Tytido were invited to dinner and, after eating, the men played with the children outside. When the women commanded the children to report for bed, the men stayed outside and Tytido started a pipe.

Dreibrand exhaled, enjoying the lingering pleasures of his good day. “How is your house coming along, Gulang?”

“Almost done, my Lord,” Gulang replied happily.

Tytido interjected, “Good. We will not have any more complaints about you and your noisy wife in your tent.”

Gulang suffered a brief embarrassment before retaliating, “You’re just jealous of what I have.”

“Not anymore,” Tytido shot back.

“Take that back,” Gulang demanded.

Tytido only snickered. “You do not have to be a Kezanada to sneak around.”

Dreibrand smiled discreetly as he puffed the pipe. He knew Tytido was sensitive about his lack of companionship, as any man would be.

Passing the pipe to Gulang, Dreibrand chided, “Tytido, leave Gulang alone. You will make him

wrongly accuse his wife.”

Dreibrand’s comment dissolved the sudden tension between Gulang and Tytido, who now regretted the rude remark and apologized for the crass joke.

Realizing that he had flaunted his good female fortune, Gulang offered, “You know, Tytido, my wife could maybe arrange for you to meet some of the available girls that serve the Kezanada.” He glanced quickly at Dreibrand and corrected himself, “I mean that came with the refugees.”

“Are any of them over thirteen?” Tytido asked skeptically because he had already assessed the situation.

“Um, well, next year,” Gulang said.

Tytido sighed with resignation and said, “It could be worse. They all could be old.”

Gulang chuckled and Dreibrand was about to comment on the promise of the future when the steady rhythm of a galloping horse tapped his hearing. He stopped lounging against his house and told the other men to listen.

They heard it too, and their knowing ears knew that it was just one rider, coming into the settlement at top speed. Dread scaled the walls of Dreibrand’s good mood. Dreibrand asked Gulang to get a torch. Outwardly, Dreibrand remained calm, the leader awaiting his report, but he was imagining his fears.

It is a soldier from Tulair’s patrol. Tempet and Alloj must be coming and...

He stopped himself. Whatever the news was, he would react and he would prevail.

When Gulang emerged from the house with the requested torch, the light revealed a rys soldier coming up the main route through Vetanium. Dreibrand hailed the soldier, who dismounted and jogged over to him.

“Good evening, Sir,” the soldier said as if he were strolling through a park without a care.

“Greetings,” Dreibrand said, automatically soothed by the rys’s demeanor. “And what brings you alone through the night?”

“Captain Tulair has sent me to collect Jolen. We are in need of a physician,” the soldier said.

“Who has been hurt?” Dreibrand asked.

“It is not an injury,” the soldier said. He explained that the diplomats had continued south, but another party of twenty Atrophane soldiers was with Tulair right now. Then he described the situation with the Fayeths and their reason for crossing the Wilderness.

“Captain Tulair wants to know how we should deal with the soldiers. Keep them away or allow them to come to Vetanium?” the soldier said. “And, there is a man with them. Atarek Veta. He claims to be your brother, Sir.”

The statement knocked Dreibrand’s concentration to pieces. “What did you say?” he asked softly.

The soldier repeated the news.

“You never told me you had a brother,” Tytido scolded, expecting that Dreibrand would be pleased by the news.

But emotions were starting to escape the bounds of Dreibrand’s mind like wasps from a shaken nest. “What makes you believe that he is my brother?” he demanded, sounding very defensive.

“He is Atrophane and he looks like you,” the soldier responded matter-of-factly. “And he was asking for you. The Captain thought you would want to see him, but what about the soldiers? What should I tell him?”

“I will go with you,” Dreibrand said and spun around. He stalked toward the house. Tytido gestured for the rys soldier to wait and went after his friend.

“I am going with you,” Tytido said.

Dreibrand grunted what sounded like approval and banged into his home. Miranda dodged the door and asked what was happening. Dreibrand grabbed his helmet as if he were going to a grim hopeless battle. Snatching his jacket from its peg, he shoved his arms into it and did not reply.

Tytido obliged Miranda with an explanation.

"Your brother!" she exclaimed. It was the last thing in the world she expected to hear. Dreibrand had mentioned his sibling to her once, not to say anything good, but she was at least aware of his existence.

"Tytido, get our horses, please," Dreibrand said without making eye contact. He had suddenly developed a fascination with the wall, seeking guidance from a knot in the wood paneling that apparently understood his problems.

When Tytido left, Miranda tried to guess at the reason for Dreibrand's dismay, "Are you worried that he is bringing bad news about your parents?"

"My brother is bad news!"

"Do not yell at me," Miranda said.

Dreibrand apologized and ran a hand over his face. His thoughts were scattering like seeds tossed over a field with birds landing to eat them. After so many years on his own, he felt too weak to deal with his brother.

Is it possible that Atarek is really here? he asked himself and chose the refuge of denial. *I will not believe it until I see it.*

"Is your brother really that bad?" Miranda asked because her husband actually looked pale. "Do you hate him?"

Dreibrand shook his head adamantly. "No, of course not. He is my brother. But it is not necessarily a good thing to love Atarek." He silenced himself after speaking his brother's name aloud as if the word was forbidden by the Gods and uttering it was punishable by permanent muteness.

Generously, Miranda said, "If he is half the man you are, I am sure he is good."

Dreibrand frowned. "We do not know if it is him yet. Now, what am I going to do about the Atrophane soldiers?"

His forthright question surprised Miranda. He valued her counsel and confided in her, but he rarely asked so helplessly for a decision. Dreibrand was the leader, the general, the lord, and he thrived in the position of command. With his eyes focused elsewhere, he waited for her response, and Miranda recognized that he was genuinely rattled. She had seen him like this before, with his emotions overtaking his intellect. It pleased her that he had decided to seek her advice instead of acting rashly.

Miranda considered her answer carefully. "Mmm, there are only twenty soldiers? Not much of a threat. I say we welcome them. If they are so close now, there is no sense in keeping them out. The Atrophane could locate the settlement if they wanted to. Perhaps they already have. And if Sandin does threaten us, perhaps they would be valuable as hostages."

"I doubt they are valued by Sandin, if he values anyone," Dreibrand grumbled.

Miranda pursed her lips and thought harder. Her eyes widened when she got a better idea. "We will be nice to them, get them talking so we can gather information about the situation in the south," she proposed. "Faychan can help us."

Dreibrand hesitated. Ushering Atrophane soldiers into his settlement threatened the isolation that he coveted, but he decided to trust in Miranda's wisdom.

He said, "Then I will bring them here. You tell Faychan your plan. He will need help. He has a language barrier to deal with now," he said.

Miranda wanted to discuss the matter further, but Dreibrand grabbed her for a quick kiss and then headed for the door. She stopped him because he had yet to consider something important. She said, "Dreibrand, do not let my question anger you, but if it is your brother, can you trust him? It might be some kind of trap."

Although appalled by her question, Dreibrand did not rebuke her. Instead, he respected her suspicion. "Atarek would not betray me," he said firmly.

Gently, she added, "It has been a long time..."

Dreibrand shook his head. It was impossible. "I am sure," he insisted.

Somewhat reassured, Miranda declared, "Then I look forward to meeting him."

Dreibrand pitied his poor innocent wife, who had no knowledge of Atarek. He wished he could shelter her from the disappointment.

Dreibrand joined Tytido at the horse corral. Tytido had gathered a few warriors to accompany them, and they were selecting mounts. Absently, Dreibrand slipped a halter onto Astar and took him aside for saddling. The colt had become much more manageable over the weeks, seeming to forget the time he had spent in the thrall of the enemy.

Paying little attention to task before him, Dreibrand tried to debunk the notion that his brother would cross the Empire and then the Wilderness. Atarek's sense of adventure was reserved for crashing posh parties or betting on a horse with poor odds.

"What are you doing?" Tytido asked. Stepping closer, he chuckled and pulled the saddle off the colt because it was on backwards. Tytido corrected the saddle and cinched it tight.

"Why did you never tell me about your brother?" he asked.

"It never came up. My family is far away in Atrophane and I accepted that I had made a life separate from them," Dreibrand said, and he felt like he was explaining it to himself as well.

"Why do you think he has come?" Tytido wondered.

Money, Dreibrand thought with automatic contempt until he recalled with an unwelcome pang of guilt that he owed his brother for his military academy tuition.. He answered that he did not know, and then added, "But I have yet to see if it is him."

"You sound like you do not want it to be him," Tytido noted.

"That is not true. I just accepted that I would never see him again," Dreibrand said and a part of him clung to that idea. It was easier.

As he rode out of the settlement, Dreibrand soothed himself with the thought that at least his parents were not coming.

Dreibrand appreciated the pure beauty of every Nufalese dawn. Under the glory of the rising sun, the Tabren Mountains, so easily labeled the ugly sister of the Rysamand, brightened and hugged the wide plains like a loving watchful mother. Birds sang as they clutched the swaying tops of tall grasses, and the sparkling dew sprinkled their flimsy perches with diamonds. Living in the Wilderness invigorated Dreibrand's spirit. He belonged here and he would have to make sure the Atrophane understood that he claimed this place.

"We must be getting close," Dreibrand said to the rys soldier riding at his side. The rys answered that Tulair's group was just out of sight about two hasas away.

"You go ahead with Jolen," Dreibrand said. "Delay them on low ground. I want to approach with stealth. Do not say that we are coming. I want to make an impression on the Atrophane visitors."

"As you wish," the rys soldier said. He continued with Jolen while Dreibrand paused to speak to his men.

Dreibrand pointed south and told Tytido that they would circle around and approach the Atrophane from the southwest.

"What do you have in mind?" Tytido asked.

"Nothing much. I just do not want them to see us coming," Dreibrand said. Turning, he included his other companions in the conversation. "Today, you meet the Atrophane. Our image must be of

strength and confidence. We need to show them that they are in *our* land.”

The warriors grinned and Dreibrand knew they were ready to display their sovereignty from the imperial easterners. Eager to execute their surprise entrance, they headed south.

Dreibrand had welcomed the distraction of planning his approach, but now that he was about to reach his goal, anticipation stretched his nerves like the skin on a drum.

Atarek.

The thought of seeing his brother consumed him, and Dreibrand had no perception of time until he topped the rise behind Tulair’s group. Then, acute uncertainty filled every second, and Dreibrand devoured the images. He saw hundreds of white horses and rys soldiers. The small cluster of blue Atrophane uniforms jumped out at him next. The familiarity of their presence removed the years since he had been in the military, and memories, good and bad, battered his thoughts. One wagon was at the center the group, presumably for the Fayeths. But at this distance, he could not spot Atarek.

“Ride!” Dreibrand commanded and they galloped down the hill with the speed of a battle charge. Tytido let out a war whoop for the fun of it, deciding the Atrophane should think that six Nufalese were not intimidated by a larger group.

They circled the group like racers doing a victory lap. Rys and human faces flashed by, but Dreibrand’s inability to find Atarek assaulted him with an unexpected and spiteful disappointment. Dreibrand stopped and scanned the people with a growing frantic desire. Eight years was a long time, but Dreibrand did not have a moment of doubt when he finally spotted the tall blond Atrophane rushing out of the crowd. The cluttered scene that had jammed Dreibrand’s sight dissolved, and there was only Atarek, looking happy, very happy.

Dreibrand got off his horse and ran a couple steps before his legs weakened. He stopped and braced himself for the impact of the big man coming at him fast.

Crying out with triumphant joy, Atarek seized his brother in a bear hug. He was slightly taller than Dreibrand and he actually popped him off the ground.

“Dreiby! Little Brother! You are alive. By the Gods, I found you!”

He clutched Dreibrand, slapping him on the back until he was convinced that the flesh was actually there. Finally, he held Dreibrand at arms’ length. Tears spurted from Atarek’s eyes and he indulged himself in another round of emotional outbursts.

“Dreiby, Dreiby, my little brother lives! By the Gods, look at you! You look great. Damn, I cannot believe I finally found you. Oh, Dreiby.”

Stunned, Dreibrand gaped like a broken doll.

“Say something,” Atarek commanded and gave him a shake.

“Atarek,” Dreibrand whispered. His voice was tiny and confused.

“Yes, it is me,” Atarek said and laughed. He released his brother and stepped back. Bowing slightly, he pulled back his hair to better display his encroaching baldness. “Maybe you do not recognize me. Look what you have to forward to.” He laughed again, a little hysterically, and wiped his eyes.

Confronted by a balding future, Dreibrand struggled to cope with the arrival of his brother. Accommodating Atarek required a lot of adjustment.

“Why did you come here?” he asked, still unable to speak above a whisper.

The question hurt Atarek. His jubilation receded and he replied, “I wanted to see you. Dreiby, I thought you were dead. Everybody said you were gone. I have been living the last five years thinking you were dead.” He sounded angry now. After all he had been through, all Dreibrand could ask was why he came. “Why didn’t you send me word? Let me know you were alive. Didn’t you think I would care?” he demanded.

Dreibrand searched for words. With Atarek standing in front of him, it was not so easy to dismiss the feelings he had for his sibling. There was a boyhood of looking up to his big brother, an adolescence of trying to impress his big brother. They had been there for each other, but...his big

brother's path in life had not been enough. Dreibrand had needed more. Dreibrand had needed dignity and self respect, maybe even a future—items that Atarek had seemed able to live without.

"I thought you would get over it," Dreibrand said. Then, after a life of boyish contests, pranks, wrestling matches, and ugly disputes, Dreibrand said what he had never said before. "Atarek, forgive me."

Atarek hesitated, but with Dreibrand in front of him, alive and well, he refused to be angry. He had what he wanted. "Damn, Dreiby, I know you will make it up to me." He tossed an arm around his brother's shoulders and turned him toward Tytido and the other warriors who had gathered to watch the spectacle of the reunion. "Now introduce me to your friends, so we can start having a good time. And by the Gods, tell me you have something to drink."

31. Unwritten Rules

A blur of introductions ensued. Atarek shook hands enthusiastically. Every time Dreibrand said his brother's name, he needed to look at his brother and confirm that Atarek was really there. Part of Dreibrand's mind insisted that he had to be blathering in the midst of a prolonged hallucination.

Curiosity and polite excitement beamed from the faces of Dreibrand's men. He had never mentioned his brother to them and they had never imagined that another man, so close in blood and appearance to their leader, existed. They received Atarek warmly, as an automatic comrade, and expressed in broken Atrophane their eagerness to know him better.

Insecurity flared inside Dreibrand. He did not want his people to think of him as "little brother," and, with the taller older Atarek exchanging pleasantries with everyone, an imaginary axe chopped at Dreibrand's ego. Already Atarek was charming them with his fun-loving confidence that had been forged over many rowdy years.

Damn you! Deal with this. Dreibrand commanded himself.

A man who Tulair had kept back during the reunion of the brothers shouldered his way forward. Dreibrand recognized him as a commissioned Atrophane officer.

Atarek enjoyed that Fanlyre had been skipped over in the commotion. With the eagerness of someone returning to a delayed game, Atarek said, "Dreiby, meet my dedicated military protector, Commander Fanlyre."

Dreibrand cast a disgruntled look at his brother. They would be talking soon about how he was to be referred to in public.

Fanlyre concealed his excitement over finding Dreibrand. He hoped he would be going to the settlement next, and then he would be able to gather information that would please the Darhet.

Extending a hand, Fanlyre said, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Dreibrand Veta. Finally, I see a man instead of a rumor."

Surprised by the friendly demeanor, Dreibrand accepted the handshake and inquired playfully, "Are the rumors about me good or bad?"

Fanlyre brought his hand back slowly while trying to measure the man's mood. "Neither, I mean, I am not sure," Fanlyre stumbled. "Of course, I knew that your brother was looking for you."

Dreibrand assessed the young man before him, whose military career had to be lean on experience. Knowing well the stress caused by a first encounter with ryls coupled with the intense remoteness of the Wilderness, Dreibrand detected the nervousness that Fanlyre was striving to hide. Although Dreibrand had been reluctant to encounter the Atrophane, he suddenly realized that he had a tremendous opportunity to present himself as a friend to this fellow Atrophane noble.

I have impressed a few rookie commanders in my day, Dreibrand thought.

"How fares Clan Fanlyre, Commander?" Dreibrand said.

"About the same as always," Fanlyre replied. *Better than House Veta,* he thought automatically even if that no longer seemed like a safe assumption in the Wilderness.

Dreibrand said, "As one noble to another, I extend to you and your men hospitality and shelter if I can have your pledge of peace during your visit."

Although Fanlyre doubted that his meager force offered much of a threat, he appreciated the respectful gesture from Dreibrand. "I grant that pledge easily. I have come with no hostile intentions. I was assigned to escort the Fayeths to Jingtun. I have only entered your, um, area because Captain Tulair said the detour would take us to the rys healer that Madame Fayeth needs," Fanlyre said.

"You were in my territory before your detour," Dreibrand stated. He looked at the Atrophane soldiers behind Fanlyre and announced, "I am the Lord of Nufal." He then described briefly the boundaries of his domain that stretched from the Rysamand foothills into the Tabren Mountains.

"I was not aware of that," Fanlyre said tersely.

"Now you are," Dreibrand said. "You should also meet Lord Tytido. He will be expecting you to keep your word as well."

Tytido kept his face in a steely pose, but on the inside, he was tickled to be introduced as a lord. There had been few occasions to express his noble ambition.

Fanlyre looked at the bronze-skinned warrior with shiny black hair and inwardly admitted that he felt threatened by the man's foreign appearance. Tytido appraised the eastern officer with a critical eye. The tailored style of his blue silk uniform contrasted with Tytido's loose multi-colored cloak, sleeveless homespun shirt, and hard leather bracers over his wrists. Tytido greeted him in Atrophane and was actually pleased to use the language that Dreibrand had insisted that he learn, especially when the officer surely had no knowledge of his native tongue.

Atarek was thrilled to hear that his brother was claiming so much territory, but he did not want to linger around Fanlyre. "Dreibrand, you just must meet the Fayeths. I probably would not have made it this far without Madame Fayeth." Strutting past Fanlyre with a smirk, he ushered his brother and Tytido toward the wagon. "Extraordinary woman," he continued. "Merchant class, so she can be a bit hard to deal with, but, hey, she puts up with me."

That statement roused Dreibrand's sense of humor. "She really must be extraordinary then," he said.

Atarek grumbled, "I guess I better be more careful. I am with someone who really knows me now."

"I sure do, At," Dreibrand said.

"I suppose you heard about Hanshen," Atarek said as they approached the wagon. "Is that rys healer you sent any good?"

"Actually, very good. He was assigned to my household by King Shan," Dreibrand endorsed.

"Then you do serve the rys King as I heard," Atarek said. They had so much to talk about.

"And I will serve no other," Dreibrand said.

Atarek detected extreme devotion behind the words, which surprised him. His brother really had abandoned the Empire.

"Madame Fayeth!" Atarek called.

She waved to him from where she was sitting with Lydea next to Hanshen. The boy was stretched out on the fragrant grass while Jolen examined him. Her desire to properly greet Atarek's brother allowed her to leave Hanshen's side. He was stable this morning, and she felt comfortable leaving Jolen with her son for a few moments. She had instantly trusted the kindly rys physician who had arrived with the dawn.

Madame Fayeth was in her best spirits in years as well. She had achieved her goal of getting her son to a rys physician, and the rys had proved very kind so far. They had not hesitated to help her and no payments had been demanded as of yet. They were beautiful beings, and she sensed from them a compassion for her son's suffering. Unlike humans, who were often afraid of Hanshen's condition, the rys seemed puzzled and concerned by his illness.

Lydea stood up first and gave her mother a hand getting up. Madame Fayeth secured her straw

hat in the gusting breeze. The ribbon was a bit frayed and the once crisp brim now drooped in places, but she still looked as presentable as possible after such a long trip.

Atarek trotted to her side and took her arm in a gentlemanly display that interested his brother.

"Madame Fayeth knows how much I have longed to make this introduction," Atarek gushed. "Meet my brother, the LORD Dreibrand Veta."

Madame Fayeth bobbed a curtsy. "Oh, my Lord, it is an honor to meet you."

"Thank you, Madame Fayeth. We have few visitors in Nufal and it is our pleasure to receive guests," Dreibrand said. "Traveling so far with my brother must have been a great trial."

Madame Fayeth laughed but the sound surprised her and she muffled it quickly. She flashed a semi-apologetic look at Atarek, who smiled tolerantly. Clearing her throat, Madame Fayeth said, "Atarek has served as our bodyguard. I cannot imagine what fate would have befallen us without him."

"He said the same thing about you," Dreibrand commented.

"Yeah, yeah. Can we finish the introductions," Atarek grumbled. "This is Madame Fayeth's daughter, the lovely Lydea."

His flattering introduction caused her to smile demurely. With a curtsy, she said hello to Dreibrand.

Gesturing toward Tytido, Dreibrand was about to introduce his friend, but Tytido asserted his own identity.

"Lord Tytido of Clan Gozmochi," he said and bowed deeply. Even while bent, he kept his gaze on Lydea. From the moment he had watched her stand and walk toward him, Tytido had decided to devote himself to possessing her. She was so beautiful. Her eyes enslaved his heart. They were such an enchanting but peculiar color that he would later learn was called hazel. The sun had sprinkled her light skin with a few freckles, and the foreign spots intrigued Tytido. The little bits of pigment gave her a mysterious feline quality. Her golden hair was as warm and pleasing as the summer sun on ripening wheat, and her body made the pit of his stomach burn like a forge melting iron. Her youthful perky breasts floated enticingly over her slim waist that begged him to put both hands around it and never let go.

But she was staring at him. What was that look in her eyes? She had to be looking upon a western man for the first time. What did she see? Was she shocked? Tytido tried to remember what he had thought when he first saw Dreibrand and Miranda. Had they appalled him with ugliness? No. But what did he look like to her? Tytido wanted desperately to look like her masculine ideal.

But Tytido realized that he was too thunderstruck to say anything impressive at that moment, and he prudently stayed quiet. With his blood rushing like the spring thaw, he was glad that he did not have to perform any important function besides saying his name to this girl, no, this woman.

The conversation continued around the mute Tytido. "How is your son?" Dreibrand asked.

Madame Fayeth's mood shifted. "Not well. I hope that Jolen," she said his name precisely as if mangling it or forgetting it would condemn her son, "can give him the help he needs."

"May I meet him?" Dreibrand said. He could see the boy reposing beside a thoughtful Jolen, and Dreibrand was instantly concerned for the pale thin boy. What if that was his son? It was a tortuous concept.

Madame Fayeth nodded and escorted everyone to her son.

Sticking close to his brother, Atarek said, "Hanshen likes me."

"Small children are easily tricked," Dreibrand said.

Atarek grinned. "I see you are getting warmed up, brother."

"I have eight years of insults to catch up on," Dreibrand said.

Tytido walked alongside Lydea, but she did not seem to be paying any attention to him. He longed to say something intelligent to her, but his mind was too glutted with desire and confusion. He had

no idea how to proceed. Tytido had been raised in a strict patriarchy in which men and women had limited interaction. He knew that the Atrophanes lived differently. Dreibrand possessed an enviable ease around women, even if it seemed to entail letting them do whatever they wanted. Tytido wondered how he should talk to Lydea to show her the type of respect that he guessed eastern women demanded. Then there were technical cultural matters. Would her family expect a brideprice? What was a proper avenue for expressing his interest? He needed to talk to Dreibrand.

When they reached Hanshen, Jolen looked up from the boy. A twinkle of magic flickered in the back of his black eyes.

"Hanshen, I found my brother," Atarek announced, but his voice was gentle, straining to be happy against his aching worry for the child.

Dark circles shackled Hanshen's eyes but he lifted an interested eyebrow. His mother sat down behind him and lifted his head onto her knees. Squatting beside the boy, Dreibrand introduced himself.

"You do look like Atarek," Hanshen commented.

Dreibrand chuckled. "That is why I have to admit to being his brother."

"Very funny," Atarek grumbled.

Jolen steered the conversation to serious matters, "Lord Dreibrand, this boy needs to be taken to Vetanium immediately so I can complete my assessment of his condition."

"Of course," Dreibrand said. "Madame, I extend to you my hospitality for as long as you require it."

"You and family stay at my house," Tytido blurted.

The generosity startled Madame Fayeth. "Oh, I do not mean to impose. Only Hanshen needs shelter," she said.

Tytido looked directly at Lydea, hoping to see her overwhelmed with awe and gratitude. He said, "I must have you."

"What?" she said, uncertain if she had understood him.

"Stay at my house," he added quickly. "Please. I welcome you."

Compelled to respond by his expectant gaze, Lydea said, "Thanks."

Tytido fumbled for something more to say, but insecurity strangled the communication center of his brain. *She wonders why I keep staring at her. Stop looking at her!* But Tytido could not follow his own advice.

"I will not delay you with any more conversation," Dreibrand said. "We shall have plenty of time to talk in Vetanium. And, Hanshen, I expect to see you feeling better soon."

"Yes Sir," Hanshen said, believing that he might be able to obey. Already Jolen had eased some discomfort, but Hanshen still felt as if a thick fuzzy blanket was gradually smothering him, coaxing his mind to relent and give up the allure of physical trappings.

Rising, Dreibrand glanced at his brother, still mentally confirming his presence, and then asked Tytido if he would escort the Fayeths. When Tytido took a moment to respond, Dreibrand finally noticed who was preoccupying his friend.

"Oh! Yes, yes," Tytido said, limiting his use of Atrophaney to short phrases in order to reduce his chances of violating the language.

While Atarek bundled Hanshen back into the wagon, Dreibrand ducked closer to Tytido. Switching to the western common speech, Dreibrand said in a conspiratorial whisper, "Now that you have given away your house, make sure you get what you want." He gestured discreetly to Lydea.

Tytido winced, skewered with embarrassment because his desire was obvious. Not looking at anyone, he went to get his horse. He passed Tulair and Fanlyre who were approaching.

Seeing that the Fayeths were packing up, Fanlyre informed Dreibrand that he was ready to proceed

to the settlement as well.

Noting his eagerness, Dreibrand said. "We shall catch up with them. You and I, however, have more to discuss before we go."

Dreibrand's calm yet insinuating tone disturbed Fanlyre, who was suddenly reminded of the Darhet. "Lord Dreibrand," he said, making an effort to be formal. "I am under orders to provide the Fayeths escort. I must accompany them if they are to continue immediately."

"Your devotion is commendable," Dreibrand said. "But I will not keep that poor child waiting while we get to know each other better. I would like you to describe the rest of your mission to me before I take you to my home."

"I have given you my word of peace," Fanlyre huffed. "And I might say I am ready to stop having this rys follow me about like my keeper."

Tulair regarded him with the disdain of a tom cat watching a kitten chase its tail.

"Commander Fanlyre, you would do well to realize that Captain Tulair does not have to walk around with you to keep you under his control," Dreibrand suggested.

Sobered by the warning, Fanlyre regretted his sore words about the rys captain. Fear of being made a prisoner was growing inside Fanlyre. His imperial ruling class mind was stumbling over the concept for the first time that the Empire had limits and that he had crossed them.

The Fayeths started to roll away, and Atarek waved to them. Because he was confident that they were in good company, he was staying behind with his brother. The departing wagon increased Fanlyre's nervousness, and he repeated his commitment to stay with the Fayeths.

"We will catch up to them shortly," Dreibrand assured him. "For now, you should introduce me to your men."

"You mean to interrogate us," Fanlyre surmised. With the women and children gone, he vividly imagined this censured and renegade lord torturing him and the others. Upon the lonely prairie, Dreibrand had complete privacy to act as he pleased.

Atarek said, "Fanlyre, you are too boring of a conversationalist to interrogate. I say send you home. You have exceeded your usefulness. Not that you were that useful anyway."

"You would know about being useless," Fanlyre shot back.

"You are going back," Atarek said, but Dreibrand instantly disliked the presumptive statement.

"No need to be rude, Brother," Dreibrand said. "It is good to hear my native tongue again. I wish to hear news of Atrophane. Commander Fanlyre, you have formed the wrong opinion. Forgive me if I made you feel nervous."

"Dreibrand, just get rid of these guys," Atarek growled and turned a cold shoulder toward the commander.

"The decision to invite the soldiers to my settlement is mine to make," Dreibrand said sternly.

Atarek rolled his eyes. "Military sure taught you how to give orders."

"It taught me discipline too, Atarek," Dreibrand snapped. "Something you know nothing about."

Fanlyre pounced on his chance to intimidate. "Speaking of your military career, just what happened to it, Lieutenant Veta?"

Does he know? Dreibrand worried. "I resigned my commission," he said. "For greener pastures." He gestured lovingly to the surrounding land.

Fanlyre raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Strange, considering everyone thinks you were missing in action. Even your brother thought you were dead."

Dreibrand was unaccustomed to his new sense of guilt about allowing his family to think he was dead. It had been easy until today.

"Apparently, Lord Kwan considered my decision to stop serving the Empire the same as dying," Dreibrand explained, pleased with how well he put it.

"So you admit that you do not serve the Empire," Fanlyre said.

"Now who is being interrogated?" Dreibrand said.

"But you cannot just stop serving the Empire," Fanlyre declared. Freshly graduated from military school and with the Darhet's dominance still cooling upon his mind, Fanlyre could not accept that a member of the ruling class, even from a censured House, would forsake Atrophane.

Amused by his difficulty, Dreibrand put him at ease. "Commander Fanlyre, we are not in the Empire, so serving it has no purpose, but I still love Atrophane and mean no ill will toward any of her people." *Well, maybe I can think of a few*, he amended mentally.

"Of course not," Fanlyre said, but even realizing he should be more careful, he still stubbornly added, "But I would just never give up my duty to the Empire." His sense of moral superiority comforted him, and, in his opinion, hiding from censure in the Wilderness was deviant. Universal loyalty among the ruling class toward the imperial state had fostered stability and allowed the Atrophane people to flourish.

Eight years ago Dreibrand had thought much like Fanlyre, but since then, he had learned that obeying imperial authority would never revitalize the House of Veta. Unflagging obedience was not a trait that always suited a member of the ruling class, but Dreibrand expected that Fanlyre had never needed to consider the unwritten rules of the nobility.

He questioned Fanlyre's narrow view. "Commander, if you consider my House's censure, why should I serve the policies of a ruling class that tries to force me out? Why would I serve the corrupt drivel that deratas call law or respect the ritualized arrogance of the Darmar's court?"

Atarek hooted with delight. "It was worth the trip to hear that," he said and slapped Dreibrand on the back appreciatively.

The blow from his big brother annoyed Dreibrand, but Atarek's supportive statement did remind Dreibrand of just how much he had in common with his brother.

Recovering from Atarek's interruption, Dreibrand said, "But all of that is far away, Commander Fanlyre. What concerns me are the rys who have gone to speak with Sandin Promentro. I would ask you to explain the situation in the south."

Still distracted by the sentiment of Dreibrand's speech, Fanlyre absently explained that all he knew about the rys was what the diplomats had told him, which was very little. He concluded that everyone seemed to be more informed on the subject than he was.

Dreibrand frowned, unsatisfied by the answer, but Atarek interjected, "Honest, Dreibrand, he does not know anything about it. Fanlyre has been with me the whole time, and we never saw a rys until Captain Tulair met us." His heart was beating hard, hoping he had placated his brother's interest in Sandin Promentro. Atarek did not want Dreibrand to pursue that embarrassing subject at all.

Dreibrand glanced quizzically toward Tulair, who nodded once to show his acceptance of Fanlyre's claims.

Knowing he would better his chances of getting information after he made the Atrophane more comfortable, Dreibrand dropped the subject. Instead, he had Fanlyre introduce him to the twenty soldiers, and then Dreibrand invited everyone to his settlement where they could feast as he celebrated the arrival of his brother.

After weeks of grueling travel, the soldiers clearly welcomed the chance to relax, and so far from imperial territory, hospitality from even an expatriate Atrophane reassured them.

Before they left, Dreibrand paused to speak with Tulair, and Atarek snatched the chance to confront Fanlyre. The officer was about to mount his horse when Atarek grabbed the stirrup off his foot.

"Listen, Fanlyre, if you or any of your men let my brother know what Sandin did to me, I will kill you," Atarek hissed.

"How dare you? I would remind you, Veta, that your brother and I have traded pledges of peace," Fanlyre said.

"Well, I obviously have given you a different sort of pledge. So you just mind your business." Atarek growled and walked away.

Why did I decide not to kill you? Fanlyre wondered, momentarily free of the moral revulsion that had stopped him before.

32. The Leader's Brother

Miranda waited for Faychan on a newly built wooden bridge. It connected the refugee camp with the main settlement by crossing the mountain stream that cut through the ruins. Mature trees, thick of trunk and burly of limb, grew along the stream and were descended from an ancient strip of parkland that had divided the town long ago. Smooth, moss-mottled blocks of an old containing wall slouched along the stream and tall lush grass and flowers padded the moist banks.

Miranda suspected that Faychan disliked her choice to meet with him in such public view, but she wanted to advertise his cooperation. It would help bind the refugees with the established settlers, and she had not wanted her servants or children to overhear her conversation. The noise of the flowing stream would give them privacy.

Only slightly late, Faychan sauntered casually onto the bridge. Because of the warm summer day, he wore a sleeveless tunic with his battered leather pants. The perfect metallic gleam and sparkling crystals of his enchanted sword contrasted with the worn garb of an overthrown Overlord.

"Good morning, Miranda," he said pleasantly.

She went quickly to business. She informed him that twenty Atrophane soldiers would be coming back with Tulair's patrol, and she explained her desire to gain information from the Atrophane visitors. Because Tempet and Alloi had become involved with the Atrophane, any news from the Empire could potentially have great value.

Faychan stared at her for a long time after she requested his assistance. Although he automatically wanted to barter for his help, he reasoned that the task served him as well. He needed contact with the Atrophane so that he could obtain knowledge of the eastern world.

Warming to the request, he explained to Miranda that he would instruct the former Kezanada warriors to fraternize with the Atrophane soldiers. Many of them had been trained to gather information with subtle techniques. Inviting travelers to share a drink would be easy, and games could be played. Stories of the east asked for and stories of the west told. But Faychan then warned her not to expect too much from one night of merriment, especially with a language barrier.

As he told her this, Faychan felt acutely aware of the language problem he now faced. His study of Atrophaney had just begun, but the new language did not flourish in his mind, as it would have in his youth. He would need to make an extra effort.

In consideration of the language issues, Miranda suggested that the western men team up the few eastern men in the settlement. She named likely candidates, especially Kashil, who had knowledge of eastern languages. Faychan approved and then told her how he would arrange for polite security of their military guests.

"Thank you, Faychan," she said with much sincerity. "I must go now. I am going to order the preparation of a community feast and get my family ready to meet Dreibrand's brother."

"So, you do not doubt that it is his brother who is coming?" Faychan asked.

"I have no reason to doubt the original rys report," Miranda said.

Privately, the chance to meet Dreibrand's brother excited Faychan. Until last night when Gulang had brought him the news, Faychan had not even known Atarek existed.

Faychan said hello to a man crossing the bridge and waited for him to pass before he spoke again. "Would I be wrong to guess that Dreibrand has a, well, bad relationship with his brother? He has never mentioned him, and obviously has not seen him for many years," Faychan said.

Miranda disliked granting Faychan information haphazardly. "Dreibrand is very private about his family in Atrophane," she said.

The aging Masterspy chuckled. "You don't know a thing about this brother do you?" he surmised.

A defensive flash from her green eyes confessed her ignorance, but she did not bother to voice her answer.

Faychan joked with her. "You must be looking forward to meeting this brother. You could find out the dark secrets from Dreibrand's youth." Faychan smiled dreamily already imagining the details he might learn about Dreibrand's personal life.

"Dreibrand and I are only interested in the lives we have had together," Miranda huffed. She had never encouraged any conversations about her life before meeting Dreibrand and they had always respected each other's boundaries.

"But you are Dreibrand's woman. You must be curious," Faychan insisted mischievously. "For all you know, he might have a wife and children back in Atrophane."

Her mouth dropped open as she contemplated the disturbing idea. "I cannot imagine Dreibrand abandoning his family," she finally said.

"What? He has already done that," Faychan laughed.

"Not his children," Miranda clarified. "Now, stop teasing me with your mean jokes, Faychan. You have much to do."

"And I go gladly to my work, my Lady," Faychan said.

"Only because it suits you," Miranda remarked, declining to be gracious toward his eagerness.

Although true, her comment wounded Faychan. After all this time she did not realize how much his sympathies for her had swayed some of his decisions.

As Miranda spent the rest of the day preparing her household to receive an honored guest, her anxiousness grew. The arrival of Dreibrand's brother and the other Atrophane would be the first time she had any prolonged contact with Atrophane people except for Dreibrand. Deep down, she wanted to make sure that she appeared worthy of her noble husband.

Late in the day, the lookout posted on the slope above the settlement blew a long welcoming note on his buffalo horn. Miranda's preparations had been finished just in time. Esseldan and Deltane were washed and dressed in good clothes, the house was clean, and Miranda had on a fine dress and her emerald necklace. Sahleen had embroidered the dress in traditional Temu designs that were adapted to the local flora and fauna of Nufal. She sat in a chair in the front room while Sahleen brushed her hair. The pull of the brush quickened when Sahleen heard the signal.

Deltane, with his curly hair drying fast in the summer heat, jumped up and down in front of his mother.

"Is Father here yet?" he shouted.

Miranda winced and told him to quiet down. "If your father was here, you would not have to ask," she said, but smiled at his enthusiasm.

Deltane redirected his energy to playing with Sahleen's daughters. He chased them under the dining table.

With time running short, Sahleen put down the brush and secured Miranda's hair away from her face with two silver combs. Miranda patted them, making sure they were stable, and thanked Sahleen.

"We have to get going," Miranda said.

Sahleen picked up Victoria who had been managing to nap in her basket by a window

despite the commotion. Tiah came out of the kitchen drying her hands on a towel and took Sahleen's infant son next door.

Esseldan straggled out of the hallway, and Miranda went to him and smoothed his dark hair over his head affectionately. Seeming to appreciate the attention, Esseldan followed his mother to the door. Deltane scampered from under the table, swished by Sahleen's skirts, and zoomed out of the house ahead of everyone.

At the town square, the excited settlers of Vetanium were gathering. With their long shadows mixing over the worn flagstones, they peered into the late afternoon sun looking for their leader and his guests. Gossip about Dreibrand's brother and the Atrophane soldiers bounced around in three languages. Miranda noted that Faychan had buried himself within the crowd so he could observe discreetly.

The crowd tightened as the riders reached the edge of town. The newcomers were hard to spot at first amid Tulair and the two hundred rys soldiers. One wagon labored up the hill behind a tired-looking team of horses.

Shielding her eyes from the bright shafts of sun glaring over the western mountains, Miranda discerned Dreibrand within the group. Her heart jumped with excitement as it always did upon his return, even after only a short separation. Next to Dreibrand, she saw the man who had to be his brother. The resemblance was clear, which made Miranda inclined to like him on first impression.

The Atrophane soldiers clustered around the single wagon. The block of blue uniforms distinguished them from the others, like a small lake surrounded by a forest of green rys uniforms. The group filled the main road and entered the settlement.

Miranda scrutinized the Atrophane soldiers and determined that the young man with long light brown hair and a nervous expression was most likely their commander. Beneath his shiny chestplate, he wore a quilted silk uniform jacket with insignia on the sleeves.

Many settlers spilled out of the square, inspecting the newcomers with open curiosity. The westerners noted how the Atrophane soldiers were indeed of the same people as Dreibrand, and they tried to reconcile Dreibrand's warnings of their aggressive attitude with their loyalty to their leader. The settlers of eastern origin, like Kashil, remembered the Atrophane as conquerors. Memories of slavery harassed Kashil's good nature and some guilt for fleeing his conquered homeland poked at his conscience. Gulang had told him that he would have to talk to the Atrophane. Kashil did not relish the thought of making friendly conversation, but he accepted that the settlement needed his knowledge of eastern language. A distaste for those who had enslaved him would not prevent him from doing what was best for Nufal.

Dreibrand dismounted and went to the stone podium that had been built on the ruins of an old reviewing platform. The authoritative height was appropriate today, and he was glad to have the freshly cut and polished stones to lift him over the otherwise aged square. His people looked especially alive among the toppled statues, and he enjoyed their expectant faces that urged him to speak.

He announced that he had invited the small force of Atrophane to stay with them and that pledges of peace had been exchanged. Then he explained that the Fayeth family had come seeking aid for its sick son, and Jolen would be attending to them.

Then, Dreibrand beckoned to his brother and introduced Atarek to the crowd. Atarek clambered onto the podium eagerly and waved to the settlers, but Dreibrand made sure it was an abbreviated display. He hardly wanted to encourage his brother to share his platform of authority.

"Tonight, we feast to welcome Lord Atarek Veta!" Dreibrand concluded. He grabbed his brother and yanked him down.

While everyone cheered, Tulair started directing the Atrophane to an area where they could camp, and the enchanted Tytido escorted the Fayeths to his home.

Still keeping a hand on his brother, Dreibrand steered him toward his family.

Politely, Dreibrand worked his way through the crowd, tugging Atarek who wanted to say hello to everyone. As people smiled to Dreibrand, he noted how their eyes bounced between Atarek and himself, making a conspicuous comparison. Jolted by juvenile insecurity, Dreibrand hustled his brother along.

The dawdling resistance from his debutant brother suddenly let go and Dreibrand was trundled forward by his brother's bulk.

Draping an arm around his shoulder, Atarek pulled him close and whispered, "Hey Dreiby, introduce me to those women. That curly-haired one looks fun."

Dreibrand spun in his brother's embrace and knocked the arm away.

Interpreting the intense flash of jealousy as only an older brother could, Atarek laughed and wagged a finger at his brother. "You had her," he surmised, delighted to have blundered upon a sensitive nerve.

"Think harder, Brother," Dreibrand growled.

"Still working on it then?" Atarek teased. Puffing out his chest, he headed straight for the attentive group of women and children.

Before Atarek said something inappropriate, which was likely, Dreibrand intervened. "Atarek, this is Miranda, my wife," he said.

Miranda stepped forward with an inviting smile. "How do you do—" she began, employing her best Atrophaney accent, but Atarek interrupted.

"Wife!" He laughed and flung his arms wide like barn doors flapping in a heavy wind. "Sister!" he sang and scooped Miranda off the ground. Atarek helped himself to a lusty handful of her left buttock and kissed her on the lips. When he put her down, she was wide-eyed and speechless. The pressure of his hand was still fading from her well-toned rear, and she was confused by her inability to react.

Dreibrand separated them and took possession of Miranda's nearest hand. He reproached his brother with a stormy look, which amused Atarek mightily.

"My children," Dreibrand continued. "Esseldan, Deltane, and my daughter, Victoria."

Sahleen tilted the baby girl upward for viewing. Victoria blinked patiently and a bubble sucked in and out at the corner of her mouth.

Atarek was taken aback by the concept of Dreibrand having children. "Yours?" he cried with disbelief.

Renewed by fatherly pride, Dreibrand continued, "Boys, this is Uncle Atarek."

Esseldan and Deltane battered him with greetings and invitations to go play games or view prized possessions. Atarek stared at them helplessly.

While Atarek was silenced, Dreibrand hurried through introducing Sahleen and her children.

"Come on, let us go to my house," he said.

Still holding Miranda's hand, Dreibrand noted how disillusion had soured her expression drastically. He stifled a nervous laugh.

"Did you know he would do that?" Miranda hissed.

"I knew he might," Dreibrand admitted. "Sorry."

By the time they reached the house, Miranda had decided to discard the role of courteous hostess and adopt the demeanor of aggressive mistress.

Inside the front room, Atarek's coating of Wilderness-strength sweat quickly squashed the pleasant scents of home and hearth.

"You need to wash," Miranda declared and ordered Sahleen to start a bath.

As the servant dutifully headed to the kitchen, Atarek inquired, "Does she come with the bath?"

"No!" Miranda said.

Atarek laughed and said, "Dreibrand, I thought you would go for a girl with a bit more sense of humor."

Dreibrand gestured quickly for Miranda to be patient. "If you said something funny, I am sure Miranda would show some appreciation for it," he said.

"Oh, marriage has made you so proper," Atarek said. He saluted Miranda comically and added, "I admire you, my Lady, for getting my dog brother to stay home."

Atarek grinned equally at Miranda's thoughtful expression and his brother's momentarily stricken face. Rubbing his hands together, he asked for an alcoholic beverage.

Although Dreibrand hated to use his own hand to get his brother started, he crossed the room and opened the cabinet. When the glistening decanter of Jington crystal greeted him, Dreibrand knew he would need some of the amber fluid as well.

My brother is in my house and I am pouring him a drink, Dreibrand marveled while pulling two crystal tumblers off the shelf. The sparkling crystal looked out of place in his patchy rough hewn home, but he enjoyed the contrast. The crystal hidden in the cabinet reminded him of his treasure stashes hidden around the somber rocks of the Tabren Mountains. *Will Atarek even believe that the House of Veta is no longer ruined?* Dreibrand thought. *Do I want to tell him?*

Knowing not to skimp, Dreibrand poured his brother a drink. As Dreibrand filled his glass, he reached for a third tumbler and splashed a small amount into it. He forced the glass toward Miranda.

She wrinkled her nose, but Dreibrand quickly suggested that she might need it.

"Come on, Sister, we are celebrating," Atarek said, swirling his drink impatiently. "Let us get this toast over with, Dreiby. I have been stone cold sober since Holteppa."

Dreibrand raised his glass obligingly. "Then here is to greatest achievement in your life."

Atarek clinked his glass against their glasses. Despite his hurry, Atarek paused to sniff the contents and frowned with uncertainty.

"It is the best money can buy," Dreibrand assured him. He took a sip, as did Miranda.

Discarding his uncharacteristic caution, Atarek started gulping the drink aggressively, welcoming the alcohol into his body like a hungry hawker at a sideshow beckoning a customer. Midway into the third gulp, he paused and then lowered the tumbler. With his eyes growing wider, he gently cleared his throat, and then coughed and sputtered. His face reddened and he shuddered.

Dreibrand and Miranda had to laugh. Easterners were raised on wine and thin brews. The liquor of the west had an unexpected brass knuckle punch.

Deltane laughed at his uncle's reaction that even tempted a smile from Esseldan.

Exhaling loudly, Atarek said. "That is strong." When Deltane laughed again, Atarek added that he was glad to be so entertaining.

"You really should not drink it so fast," Dreibrand said and took another sip.

Atarek patted his chest. "I feel that already. But there is room for more." He boldly tossed back the rest of the drink. Again, he shuddered but the shaking subsided into a satisfied sigh. "It has been so long it feels like the first time. I will have another please."

Dreibrand wound his fingers protectively around the neck of the decanter. "You should shave before you get drunk, At," he suggested.

Atarek rubbed his beard and weighed the difficult decision. "I will have another drink while I shave," he said.

Wearily, Dreibrand poured him another drink, but put the decanter back in the cabinet. When he ushered Atarek toward the back of the house, the boys meant to follow, but Dreibrand

told them to stay with their mother. Deltane looked upset and Esseldan looked indifferent, but they obeyed.

Walking down the hall, they passed the kitchen and Atarek saw Sahleen pouring a steaming kettle into the bathtub. "Ah, that looks very nice. All of that looks very nice," Atarek commented.

"Sahleen, bring hot water to my room," Dreibrand ordered.

"Do not bother, I will just shave in the tub," Atarek said.

"No, let her finish filling the tub. I want to talk to you in private," Dreibrand insisted quietly.

Back in his bedchamber, Dreibrand showed Atarek the faded paintings on the ancient walls and provided a brief description of ancient Nufal. When Sahleen arrived with a basin of hot water and a towel, Dreibrand was silent until she set it down and left. Removing his scissors and razor from their box, Dreibrand gave them to Atarek and then shut the door.

Bravely, Atarek took a swig of his liquor and then started snipping his ragged mustache.

Atarek commented, "I still cannot believe we are together."

"Yeah," Dreibrand said. He took a deep breath and dove into his lecture. "At, we need to get some things straight. First thing, do not call me 'Dreiby' in front of people or 'Little Brother.' And you need to pay attention to your behavior here. I know in Atrophane, you do not care because, well, everyone thinks we are losers, so you feel that you might as well act that way. But, here, we are not censured. I am respected. Damn it, I am in charge, like a king."

Atarek pulled his eyes out of the mirror to see if his brother was joking. Although Dreibrand appeared serious, Atarek chuckled anyway and returned his attention to his beard.

Dreibrand bristled, annoyed with his brother's disinterest. "Atarek, it is very important that my people continue to respect me. These are stressful times. We are threatened."

"So, what do I have to do with people respecting you?" Atarek demanded coldly. Picking up the razor, he inspected its edge.

Dreibrand snorted with disgust. Atarek knew what he was talking about. "You have not exactly distinguished yourself as a leader," Dreibrand said.

"Oh, yeah, you are the army deserter. The pride of the family," Atarek retorted.

The old shame kicked Dreibrand in the guts. "How do you know that?" he whispered.

"Haley Triesto told me," Atarek answered casually.

Dreibrand had to think a moment before remembering that was Sandin's wife. "How did you get to talk to her?" he asked.

"Oh, I have been moving in much higher circles myself," Atarek said smugly. "After I get cleaned up and another drink in me, I will tell the story. I think you will like it. I know I did."

"Who else knows?" Dreibrand worried.

Taking pity on his brother's distress, Atarek comforted him. "No one really. She said it was supposed to be a secret to protect the honor of the great Lord Kwan. But I want to tell you, Dreibrand, when I heard you deserted, I was so proud," Atarek said.

The fact that his brother was proud of his actions reminded Dreibrand of his guilt. "I behaved shabbily," he recalled. "I wish I had not just run off, but the decision has brought me more success than if I had stayed."

"Well, Dreiby, you know I was always against your serving the Empire. Made me sick," Atarek said.

Mention of the old argument resurrected its emotions, and Dreibrand said hotly, "At least I was trying to better our family."

"Yeah, and they rubbed the censure in your face and kept the best bits for themselves," Atarek surmised.

Dreibrand could not deny it. Atarek understood the truths that Dreibrand had insisted be made clear to him.

After such a harsh comment, Atarek tried to cheer his brother. "If you are worried about besmirching the family name with your desertion, I am the only one who seems to care. And maybe old Sandy Promentro. He seemed to have taken your retirement a little personally."

"What? You saw him!" Dreibrand said.

Although annoyed with himself for bringing up the subject, Atarek maintained his calm. He assumed the strong drink had made him mention someone who he specifically wanted to avoid talking about.

"Yeah, of course I saw him. At his fort at the edge of the Wilderness," Atarek said.

"What did he say to you?" Dreibrand said.

"He told me to get lost," Atarek chuckled, wishing that was all it had been. "Actually, he was the one who finally confirmed for me that you were alive and out here somewhere."

"Does he know where I am?" Dreibrand asked eagerly.

Atarek shrugged and wiped hair off the razor. "He did not seem to know exactly where you were, but he did not have to tell me either," he said.

Shaking his head with disgust, Dreibrand grumbled, "He must have sent Fanlyre with you because you were going to find me one way or another. And now I have shown Fanlyre the settlement."

Before Dreibrand could continue to worry, he smacked his head with disgust. Dreibrand decided he had lost the ability to think since the unexpected arrival of his brother. "What am I saying? I do not care about Fanlyre. With those rys in league with Sandin, they can tell him exactly where I am."

"I thought the rys were on your side," Atarek said. His casual inspection of his smooth face contrasted heavily with his brother's worry.

"Not these rys. They are not of Jingtun," Dreibrand answered. Unbuckling his swordbelt, he lay down on his bed and pulled off his boots. He described the emergence of the fierce rys from the Tabren Mountains and the battles he had fought with them.

Atarek had difficulty grasping the reality of the battles that his brother had survived. Atarek asked many questions about the magical powers of Tempet and Alloi, and then, cautiously, he touched the crystal orb on his brother's sword. Blue light swirled lazily within the crystal, and Atarek tried to imagine the forces radiating from the object. Clearly, his brother was privileged to enjoy this magical protection.

Dreibrand noted his brother's natural fascination with the warding crystal. "I can give you a warding crystal. I suppose you should have one," he said.

"A charm like this one?" Atarek asked. He was surprised that his brother had magical items to share.

"Well, not entirely like that one. It has a special strength. But I have some others. You can have one," Dreibrand said. He yawned. The soft bedding lulled him, and he admitted that he was tired after riding all night.

"Sleep then. I will bathe and check on the Fayeths. You should be able to get a couple hours before my party," Atarek said.

Dreibrand shut his eyes, and Atarek assumed his brother had drifted off, but when he moved toward the door, Dreibrand spoke.

"It is nice to see you, At," he said. Gesturing vaguely toward the hall, he added, "You can stay in that room." Then, he fell sound asleep.

"And it is nice to see you, Little Brother," Atarek whispered. He paused to soak up the joy of completing his quest. He had actually accomplished something, and Atarek could not recall ever feeling so good about himself.

He went to the kitchen and took a leisurely bath. He tried to coax Sahleen into attending him, but she feigned ignorance of his language and departed.

33. Regenerating Desire

Atarek is what Dreibrand would have been without his ambition—Miranda, diary entry from 10th day of Late Summer, Year 5 Nufalese calendar.

From the foot of the bed, Madame Fayeth and Lydea watched the rys physician work his spells. Hanshen descended into a deep sleep almost immediately, and faint blue light flickered over his body while Jolen concentrated. No one spoke. The only sounds came from Tytido, who was gathering a few personal possessions in the main room of his house.

Jolen finished the treatment of healing magic and smoothed the blankets over Hanshen with his gentle hands. Madame Fayeth heard Tytido greet someone at the outside door, and she pried her attention away from her son.

Tytido tapped on the open bedroom door and quietly offered to introduce Miranda to the Fayeths. Bearing an armful of fresh linens, Miranda observed the boy tucked into Tytido's bed. Miranda lived with the pain of losing her first daughter to a violent death, but she had never endured the experience of watching one of her children suffer with a terrible disease. Her heart went out to Madame Fayeth instantly.

Honored to be visited by the wife of Lord Dreibrand, Madame Fayeth said formally, "You are kind to check on us, Lady Veta."

Miranda quickly insisted that her first name would be fine. "I want to welcome your family to Vetanium," she said. "I know how hard your journey has been. I crossed the Wilderness once myself."

Madame Fayeth exhaled wearily. "I still cannot believe I actually got this far and found a rys physician willing to help me," she said.

"Jolen would not deny anyone treatment," Miranda said.

When he heard his name, Jolen moved away from the bed and joined the women in their conversation. "Your son will rest well tonight," he said in the western human language, and Miranda happily interpreted the statement.

"Oh, you are so kind," Madame Fayeth said, and Jolen sensed her gratitude without interpretation. Since he had begun treating humans regularly, he had come to cherish the relief he brought them.

"Madame Fayeth," Miranda said.

"Please, call me Rose," Madame Fayeth reciprocated.

Miranda continued, "Rose, I have brought a few things to help you and your children be comfortable." She extended the sheets and towels.

Madame Fayeth thanked her, and without having to be told, Lydea came forward and accepted the linens.

Although Miranda could guess at how the burden of a sick child had taxed Madame Fayeth, she encouraged her to relax. "Please, Rose, I invite you to join me at the head table for Atarek's feast. You should allow yourself to celebrate after your difficult journey."

Madame Fayeth glanced at her son. "I think I should stay here," she said soberly. "But thank you for the invitation, Miranda."

"Lydea come, ah, join us," Tytido suggested hopefully.

Lydea glanced shyly at Tytido with the beginnings of appreciation for his attentiveness.

Detecting the young woman's desire to socialize, Miranda added, "Rose, if you are too tired to attend, I understand, but Lydea can sit with me and you would not have to worry."

After only a brief hesitation, Madame Fayeth decided that Miranda would be an adequate chaperone for her daughter.

"Oh, thank you, Mother," Lydea said gratefully. She had expected an automatic denial of freedom, and she squished the linens inside the big hug that she gave her mother.

Joy warmed Tytido's body. He tried to think of something to say to Lydea, but he ended up speaking to her mother instead. "Madame Fayeth, I go. Sorry, my home cannot give...many..." he struggled to find the right word.

Grasping his sentiment anyway, Madame Fayeth said, "Oh, Lord Tytido, it is fine. All we needed is one good bed for Hanshen. Lydea and I will be fine in your spare room with our bedrolls."

Miranda asked Tytido if he was coming to stay at her house.

"No. I will bunk with Ven. Where is Dreibrand?" he said.

"Sleeping. Give him some more time," Miranda said. When Tytido frowned impatiently, she asked if it was something important, but he said it could wait.

Tytido seemed confused about his next move before walking out the door.

Assuming the hosting duties that Tytido had abruptly abandoned, Miranda said, "Tytido does not have much to make a family comfortable." The sparse bachelor furnishings supported her point. "But I have two serving women, and between them and myself, we should be able to get you some fresh clothes."

Madame Fayeth said, "Actually, Lydea and I do have a clean change of clothes packed in our chests. Not even the Wilderness could make me pack light."

"Oh, good. I will get someone to haul water in here so you can have a bath," Miranda said.

"That would be so wonderful," Lydea said dramatically.

Miranda stepped out the front door and asked two passing men to bring water for the guests. When she came back in, she crossed the main room and went out the back door. Outside, she grabbed the wash tub and dragged it close to the fireplace.

"Tytido lives simple, but he does bathe," Miranda said cheerfully.

Despite the prospect of hygienic comforts, Madame Fayeth looked worried when Miranda straightened.

"Miranda, would you please help me speak with Jolen?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," Miranda said, wishing she had not been so thoughtless.

While Lydea started a fire, Jolen led the other women into the spare room for a private conversation. One chair occupied the room along with a pair of boots that leaned against a chest. A winter coat was tossed on top of the chest and winter clothes bulged from beneath the unlatched lid. Jolen guided Madame Fayeth into the single seat and started talking.

Miranda interpreted his introductory reassurances about how Hanshen had responded well to healing magic.

"But what is wrong with him?" Madame Fayeth said, as if a diagnosis could ease her mind.

Jolen pursed his fine lips thoughtfully before voicing his opinion. "His blood is wrong."

Although Miranda considered the answer odd, she passed it along.

"What does that mean?" Madame Fayeth demanded.

Patiently, Jolen began to explain that human blood, although it looked like a single substance to human eyes, actually consisted of a mixture of several substances. The composition of Hanshen's blood was an unbalanced mixture. Jolen speculated that this was the source of the boy's weakness and susceptibility to illness. "He has a respiratory infection, but my power can help him fight that, especially now that we are in the dry part of the summer," Jolen said, trying to end on an encouraging note.

Madame Fayeth's eyelids fluttered as emotions clamored for release. "Can, can you fix his blood?" she stammered.

After Miranda interpreted, Jolen said that he would try. "But I cannot make any promises. I must study your son and try to understand what process in his body has gone wrong and then guide it toward proper functioning. This is an advanced challenge for me. I am accustomed to fixing broken bones and helping women have babies," he confessed.

Madame Fayeth thanked the rys, but then she started crying. The sniffles were proud and restrained. Jolen excused himself, deciding to give the sad woman some privacy because he had no solid hope to offer.

As Jolen shut the door behind him, he encountered a noisy group of men entering the house with buckets of water. Tytido was among them, lugging a bucket with the urgency of a firefighter. When he had learned of Miranda's request for water, he was agonized by his blunder.

Apologizing to Lydea for his mistake, he emptied his bucket into the kettle and hoisted it over the flames for her.

The water brigade he had assembled rapidly filled the water barrel by the door and half filled the bath tub, but the last man to enter was not carrying a bucket.

"Madame Fayeth!" Atarek called happily. After his bath, he had absconded with the crystal decanter and tumbler, and they glittered nervously in his grip like hostages. "Oh, hello, Lydea."

"Oh, look at you, Atarek," she cried and tossed a careless hug around him. She rubbed his smooth cheek and told him how handsome he was. "I still have to get cleaned up," she pouted.

"Looks like these boys are working on it," Atarek said. "I might have to play bodyguard and shoo them out before you can get in the water though."

Lydea giggled.

Tytido witnessed her warm welcome of Atarek with paralyzed jealousy. When Atarek detached himself from Lydea's embrace, Tytido relaxed a little.

Looking around, Atarek asked, "Where are Han and your mother?"

"Ssshh, Hanshen is sleeping and Mother is in there," Lydea said. She turned to the fireplace and peeked at the water. She muttered that it was taking too long to heat up. Tytido stood by as an observing mute. The distracting concept of Lydea's bath did not allow him to attempt conversation.

Atarek blithely greeted Jolen and knocked on the spare room door.

"Hello, Madame Fayeth," he called. When he heard her muffled reply, he opened the door. "Hey, no crying, Madame. This is a happy day." He rushed up to her and dropped to a knee. He would have looked like a wooing lover except his only offerings were liquor.

Madame Fayeth wiped her nose with a handkerchief. She noticed the flush upon Atarek's face, and after another sniffle, said, "Atarek, do not tell me you have a drinking problem too."

With a shameless grin, he said, "Yeah, you could say that."

She sobbed again and hid her face in the handkerchief.

Atarek looked to Miranda for help. "Did the physician tell her something bad?" he said in a much more serious tone.

"Well, no, not really," Miranda said. Trying to soothe Madame Fayeth, she patted the upset

woman's shoulder.

"See, Madame Fayeth, do not be upset. You have found the help you sought," Atarek said.

Madame Fayeth pulled the handkerchief away from her face and searched it for a dry spot. After clearing her throat, she yelled, "There is something wrong with his blood!" She returned to sobbing.

Miranda alleviated Atarek's confusion by describing Jolen's diagnosis.

Determined to cheer up his traveling companion, Atarek pulled her out of her crying jag with his insistent pleas. "Be reasonable, Madame Fayeth. This is everything you wanted. Hanshen is doing better and you have found a rys who has actually told you what is wrong with him. And I have found my brother! You should be celebrating. I know maybe I take too much pleasure in life, but I cannot stand to see you take none at all," he declared.

"I suppose I should be happy for making it this far," Madame Fayeth admitted.

"Yes! Now have a drink with me to toast our mutual success," Atarek said.

"Oh, Atarek, I do not drink," Madame Fayeth moaned.

"But this is a very special occasion. Please, my dear sister Miranda will have one with us," he said.

Although Miranda was not prone to drinking, she did consider that Madame Fayeth could use something to settle her nerves.

"Rose, perhaps just a sip would do you some good. You are exhausted and have been under so much strain," Miranda coaxed.

Madame Fayeth relented in her temperance. Delighted to have corrupted her, Atarek rushed to get some cups from the kitchen before she changed her mind. The house had emptied except for Lydea, who was pouring hot water into the tub.

"Where is everybody?" Atarek said as he rifled through the cupboards.

"I asked them to leave. I think those men intended to watch me take a bath," Lydea commented.

Atarek chuckled. "In case you have not noticed, there are not very many women around here, so get used to the attention. Hey, do you want a drink?"

Lydea's eyes widened with temptation but she murmured that she was not allowed.

"Then you will just have to sneak it. Come on," he said while pouring her a small amount that he thought a teenage girl could handle.

Atarek splashed shots into the other cups and emptied the decanter into his tumbler while Lydea contemplated her forbidden beverage.

"Go on," he ordered and set the decanter aside, discarded and forgotten.

Rather impressively, Lydea tossed her little drink down, hoping that speed would help her get away with the crime.

"I would say you have done that before," Atarek commented.

She cleared her throat and patted her chest in reaction to the liquor. "Sometimes at school, my friends and I would get a bottle of wine," she admitted. After inhaling deeply through her nose, she added, "But this is much stronger."

"Yes, it is," Atarek said. "Give me a hand with these drinks. Better put yours down though."

Lydea giggled at her attempt to incriminate herself.

When Atarek presented Madame Fayeth with her cup, she rescinded her approval, but Atarek told her that it was poured and she could not refuse now. With the exuberance created by three prior glasses of liquor, Atarek toasted their successes. Miranda sipped her drink mostly to encourage Madame Fayeth.

Obligated to complete the toast, Madame Fayeth poured her drink down just like medicine.

"It is terrible," she declared, beginning to cough.

Atarek laughed. "Just give it a chance. It will make you feel better," he said.

Thinking of her bath that was not getting any fuller or hotter, Lydea said, "Atarek, could you put another kettle on the fire for me?"

"And then get out of here, right?" he laughed and headed into the main room on his errand.

He grabbed the kettle handle, which was still hot, and cursed as he reached for the cloth. He dipped the kettle in the water barrel and hurried the dripping vessel to the fireplace. Drops of water hissed in the fire, and he still managed to burn himself again despite using the cloth.

He muffled his curses as the women came out of the spare room.

"Atarek, you would not be so clumsy if you did not drink so much," Madame Fayeth scolded.

Looking as innocent as a schoolboy who is getting away with a prank, Atarek said, "Now, now, you had some too." He darted past her to retrieve his drink and then sidled up uncomfortably close to Miranda. "I need my dear sister to introduce me around town," he said.

Miranda looked at him sharply, goaded by his familiarity with her. His presence was so strange. He was so like Dreibrand and yet so different.

"I suppose it would be best to supervise you," Miranda said.

"You do have a sense of humor," Atarek noted triumphantly.

Madame Fayeth told Atarek to be nice to her. He acted offended by the order and declared, "Of course I will be nice. I have always wanted a sister." He leered at Miranda who automatically leaned away. Enjoying Miranda's reaction, Atarek continued briskly, "Come on, Miranda, show me around town so I can get this party started."

Miranda gestured toward the door with mock eagerness.

Outside, lanterns marked the doorways of the settlement's modest homes and people gathered around fires in open camps. Miranda explained briefly the layout of the town and introduced Atarek to people who they encountered.

As they casually toured the settlement, Faychan naturally inserted himself onto their path. In rough Atrophaney, he introduced himself as a friend of the Veta family.

"Really?" Atarek said with genuine interest. "And how do you know my brother?"

"Faychan helped us in the war against Onja," Miranda explained tersely.

Atarek did not grasp the events that her statement encompassed, but they sounded important. He studied Faychan, who was older than the other westerners that Atarek had encountered. With graying hair and a soft round face, Faychan looked friendly.

Because Miranda preferred for Faychan to direct his attention elsewhere, she said, "I am sure you will have a chance to get to know Atarek later when you are not so busy."

Amused by her attempt to divert him, Faychan said, "I have assigned men as needed, my Lady. It is my pleasure now to have a drink with Dreibrand's brother."

"What are you saying?" Atarek asked, impatient with their exchange in a foreign language.

Faychan mimicked lifting a glass to his mouth. "Drink, Atarek, with me," he said in thick Atrophaney.

"Aha!" Atarek cried, delighted by the message. He slapped an arm around the shorter man's shoulders. "You are a friend of the family."

The physical contact actually startled Faychan. With his notorious Kezanada reputation, he was unaccustomed to such carefree contact from anyone.

Glad to have found a drinking partner, Atarek said, "Miranda, go get my brother up."

Offended by the order, she reminded, "You wanted me to show you around."

"And now I have made a friend, and I want you to get my brother," Atarek said carelessly and started moving off with Faychan.

Although annoyed by Atarek's dismissal, Miranda disliked more the ease with which Faychan had charmed Atarek away from her.

Ignoring Atarek's request, she occupied herself with the management of the buffet and assignment of servants to the head table.

Dreibrand heard music outside and knew that he was already fashionably late for the party. He nuzzled the bedding affectionately before forcing open his heavy eyes. Envisioning Atarek presiding over the festivities, Dreibrand swung his legs out of bed. The whole house was quiet and dark. The glow from the enchanted crystal on the handle of his sword reflected in the mirror.

Reactions to Atarek's presence blundered around Dreibrand's sleepy mind. His joy from seeing Atarek surprised him, but guilt for abandoning him bit deep as well. Dreibrand did not know how to reconcile his old life with his new one.

He started washing up and changing his clothes. As he buttoned his clean shirt, he heard someone come in the front door of his house. Dreibrand left his bedchamber and saw a man with a bright lantern at the other end of the long hallway.

"Dreibrand?" Tytido said.

"Yeah," Dreibrand replied and squinted in the sudden light. He walked down the hall and joined Tytido in the front room.

Although Tytido had been up the night before as well, he did not look tired. His face was alert and his dark brown eyes had an intense gleam. "I need to talk to you," he said.

Dreibrand yawned and nodded at the same time. When he saw the open cabinet, he sighed at the pilfered shelf. Latching the cabinet door, he forced the annoyance aside and asked how the Fayeth boy was doing.

"Better, but Jolen has not made any conclusions," Tytido said quickly because he wanted to get to the subject that was urgent to him. "Dreibrand, about Lydea." He said her name with dreamy approval. "I want her for my wife."

"Wife!" Dreibrand cried, waking all the way up. "Tytido, you just met her today. You mean you want her in your bed," he corrected, almost sternly.

"No, I mean it, Dreibrand. She is so beautiful, so perfect. Once I have her, I could not ever let her go. And I want to show her respect, do the right thing. I would not want to dishonor her," Tytido said.

"Tytido, you would not dishonor her," Dreibrand assured him. "She is not some western girl forbidden to all. She is a free Atrophane woman. She can have a lover if she wants one."

The concept distressed Tytido as much as it confused him. "What do you mean? That she can have a lover who is not her husband? But, but women have babies. What then?"

"Then she would have what the Atrophane call a lovechild. It happens. There is no reason to condemn a woman for being fertile," Dreibrand explained. He knew his culture varied significantly from Tytido's culture in respect to women.

"I do not believe you," Tytido said. "I have heard you complain about Sahleen many times."

Dreibrand chuckled with embarrassment. "You do make a point, Tytido," he conceded. "But I do not punish her. I do not lock her up every night although I admit it has crossed my mind. Even in Atrophane, people would think Sahleen should marry somebody. It is one thing to have a lovechild, but three is really going too far."

"Why are you telling me this?" Tytido demanded.

"Because I want you to understand that marriage may not be on Lydea's mind. She is young. If you go chasing her, she might decide to have some fun. She will feel secure risking the chance of a lovechild because she can always marry later—maybe even someone else," Dreibrand said.

"No," Tytido gasped. "She will marry me. Dreibrand, I will be kind to her, respect her, protect her, provide for her, I swear it."

Laughing now, Dreibrand made his agitated friend stop. "Tell her, not me." He put a hand on Tytido's shoulder. Dreibrand had every sympathy for his friend and he understood the urgency. Men outnumbered women in Vetanium and Lydea was a prize beyond hoping for. He continued, "Do not worry, Tytido. There is no reason for this girl not to fall madly in love with you. I will help you. I will command her to be your tutor, to help you refine your Atrophaney. I will do so tonight."

Dreibrand's rapid scheming thrilled Tytido. "You came up with that quickly," he noted.

"Hey, I grew up doing this," Dreibrand said with a little smile for some fond memories. "You may not approve of the freedom of Atrophaney women, but it gives the men a lot of freedom too." He winked suggestively and Tytido grinned briefly before recovering from his wolfish lapse.

"I still want to marry her," Tytido insisted.

"Fine," Dreibrand said. "But I can only do so much. You will have to talk to her. Charm her."

"What do I talk to her about?" Tytido said, becoming flustered all over again.

"I am not going to do everything for you," Dreibrand declared. "The sooner we get to the feast, the sooner you can seduce this girl."

Tytido frowned at the choice of words and insisted again that his interest was not frivolous.

After leaving the house, they joined the flow of people heading to the center of the settlement. Those settlers who had tables had set them up with chairs and benches in the town square. Roasts were coming off the large cooking fires and people were bringing bread and side dishes from their private hearths. Insects swirled around the torches and braziers, and the food smells taunted Dreibrand's hunger.

He surveyed the scene quickly and located his Atrophane guests. Commander Fanlyre was seated at a table with Kashil, who had been assigned as his interpreter. The Atrophane soldiers stayed close to their commander and watched the crowd cautiously. Dreibrand saw cups in their hands though, and surmised that their shyness would not last the whole night.

As Dreibrand approached the head table, he was not surprised to see Atarek and Faychan already settled in together and sharing a bottle.

"Brother!" Atarek called. Standing quickly, he bumped the table and the dishes wobbled. "Dreiby, I mean Lord Dreibrand," Atarek said, correcting himself with exaggerated regret. "Come sit. You have kept me waiting too long."

"Yes, I will, At, but you are not my only guest," Dreibrand said and looked at Lydea.

She was sitting next to Atarek and appeared more mesmerized by his drinking than entertained. With Tytido at his heels, Dreibrand moved behind Lydea's chair and said, "Miss Lydea, I am sure you cannot feel safe so close to my brother."

"Hey!" Atarek protested but his volume made Lydea flinch, which added to Dreibrand's point.

Continuing, Dreibrand said, "You can sit with Lord Tytido right here." He pulled out her chair while she got up and he seated her a couple chairs down with the eager Tytido.

"Lord Dreibrand, I did not mean to take your seat," Lydea apologized.

"Oh, please, do not trouble yourself over it," Dreibrand said pleasantly. "I am sure you are too nice of a lady to tolerate Atarek's wildness. Best to leave him to me. Lord Tytido will provide you with more appropriate dinner conversation."

She looked at Tytido curiously and wondered what to expect.

"Miss Lydea, there is something you can do for me," Dreibrand added and she returned her attention to him quickly. "Lord Tytido is a very important man in Nufal and I rely on him quite a bit. He has been studying the customs and language of the east, and while you are staying with us, I want you to continue his instruction in the Atrophane language. You are an educated girl, right?"

"Oh, yes, my Lord," Lydea replied proudly.

"Good, please provide him lessons every day," Dreibrand commanded. He made eye contact with Tytido over her golden-haired head and tried to convey his expectation that Tytido should say something. Tytido stared back with mild panic.

"Lord Tytido, tell our guest about your homeland," Dreibrand suggested wearily.

Relieved to be prompted, Tytido finally uttered words. When Lydea faced him with polite interest, he faltered. Although he was a warrior who had fought for his life against many strong foes, he marveled at the fear the lovely girl put in his heart. He had never been so afraid of failing in his life. Rallying his courage, he started describing the Hirqua Tribe. When Atarek grabbed Dreibrand in a headlock, Tytido knew he was on his own.

Dreibrand was pulled to his seat before escaping Atarek's grip. Atarek slammed a cup down in front of his brother and poured him a drink from the bottle Faychan had provided.

"Time for us to celebrate together, Brother," Atarek declared.

"Yes, Atarek, it is," Dreibrand said and took up his drink. "Welcome to Vetanium, my Brother."

Atarek laughed heartily, still thrilled by the existence of his brother's settlement. They poured down their shots in unison.

When Dreibrand put his cup down, Miranda was standing in front of the table and he felt vaguely guilty. He usually spared her the sight of his boisterous behavior.

"I thought perhaps we should invite the Atrophane Commander to sit at our table," she said, remaining very focused on business.

Dreibrand appreciated her efforts, but he wanted more time to ponder Fanlyre's potential before spending much time with him.

"Not tonight," he said.

"Nor anytime soon," Atarek added. "Send him to the children's table."

"As you wish, Dreibrand," Miranda said with emphasis on her husband's name.

Dreibrand stood to welcome her as she came around the table. Taking her seat next to him, Miranda touched his hand affectionately. Compared to his brother, Dreibrand seemed like an even more wonderful man.

As the food began to be served, Atarek ate with enthusiasm. After weeks of dry rations, the fresh meat and vegetables were delicious and he was more than ready for something solid in his stomach. Subdued by a filling belly, he was content to listen, and he asked Dreibrand to bring him up to date on his life.

Still amazed by his brother's presence, Dreibrand began his story at the point when he reached the Wilderness. The Atrophane Horde was preparing to conquer Droxy, and he had been looking forward to his lifelong dream of exploring the Wilderness. Atarek nodded, remembering how his younger brother had always wanted to discuss the latest rumor from the distant western lands.

When Dreibrand learned that Lord Kwan intended to send him back to Atrophane, Dreibrand had become incensed. With Fanlyre in the settlement, Dreibrand reasoned that he could not hide everything about his past, but he still used the word "resigned" when he explained that he had left the military and set out into the Wilderness on his own.

Placing his arm around Miranda's shoulders, he explained that he had met her in the forest near Droxy because she was hiding from the invaders. Miranda smiled to Dreibrand, enjoying the intimacy of their shared memories.

Dreibrand continued the story, and when he related the events that took place after his arrival in Jington, the cruelty and power of Onja shocked Atarek.

"So you can see why I chose to trust Shan," Dreibrand said. "He was the only rys who would dare to act against her and help us."

As Dreibrand began to talk about his journey into the western kingdoms and the war against Onja, Esseldan and Deltane came over from the children's table. They had intended to pester their parents and their newly arrived uncle for attention, but Dreibrand's tale of adventure captured their interest. Dreibrand lifted Deltane onto his lap, and Esseldan hung from the back of his mother's chair and listened quietly. He tried to imagine the rys Queen who had possessed him for many months.

The dishes were cleared and many settlers started to play music and dance before Dreibrand finished. He pointed out the many western men who had been with him since the war with Onja, including Tytido.

As he identified his loyal warriors from the west, Dreibrand reflected that he had buried himself in foreign surroundings. Although he loved Nufal, he realized that he could never remove from his mind the fact that he was Atrophane. He was a product of his culture, and it seemed that Atarek had come to remind him of that. Dreibrand had a heritage in Atrophane, a family who needed his strength, and he was wrong to forsake them. His ambition to revive the House of Veta within Atrophane had been amputated from his heart years ago, but the old desire began to regenerate. The Vetans deserved to be reinstated among the Atrophaney elite. It was fine that he was happy to live outside the society of his birth, but it was wrong to leave his brother to his undeserved fate.

During the long story, Atarek had forgotten to keep drinking and the distracting swirl of drunkenness had dissipated.

Impressed by his brother's accomplishments, Atarek asked with disbelief, "For fighting that war, King Shan gave you the whole Wilderness?"

Dreibrand simply nodded.

"And you were rewarded with a great treasure?" Atarek said.

Mentally, Dreibrand recoiled from the thought of discussing his earnings with his irresponsible brother, but he overcame his misgivings. "Yes, Atarek. Although no one in Atrophane knows it, except possibly Promentro and Kwan, our family is arguably wealthier than any Clan or House now."

Atarek tried to let the statement sink in, but the concept was like a dream that was impossible to remember upon waking. "How can that be?" he whispered.

"Atarek, when Shan took over Jington, he took control of the most fabulous treasure imaginable. In Jington is two *thousand* years worth of tribute from the entire western world," Dreibrand explained.

Atarek searched Dreibrand's face for a sign that he was joking, and then he checked Miranda's reaction. When he concluded that they seemed completely serious, he demanded, "Then why have you been hiding here while I am forced to watch my fortune shrivel?"

"I had reason to believe that your simple needs were being met," Dreibrand replied with unfiltered contempt.

Atarek opened his mouth to challenge his brother's statement, but no words came out. He knew that he had spent his life on the prow of a sinking ship singing at the top of his lungs.

Deltane who had fallen asleep against his father's chest stirred when Dreibrand tensed with anger. Making an effort to calm himself, Dreibrand said, "Brother, what would you have me do? Head home with my treasure only to have the ruling class seize it? I would not even get past Promentro. He controls the whole damn military now. And just why do you think he is living out here anyway?"

The thrill of finding out his brother had gained a huge fortune was countered by the threat of losing it. "Dreiby, by the Gods, Sandin is coming for us," Atarek realized. He felt the echoing sting of Sandin's lash upon his back.

"We will talk of this later. Tonight we are celebrating," Dreibrand said and gestured with his eyes to Deltane who was snuggling in his lap.

"Yes, of course!" Atarek agreed, surprised that he had lapsed from his habitual merriness.

Miranda stood up and turned the sleepy Esseldan away from the table. "I need to put the children to bed," she said, and Dreibrand slid his son out of his lap and stood him up next to Esseldan.

"And when will you be putting me to bed, Miranda?" Atarek asked suggestively.

Dreibrand clenched his teeth, trying not to reward his brother with an outburst. This was an old game that Atarek liked to play with him. "Show some respect," he growled.

Atarek laughed. "Oh, yes sir, Little Brother. I can see you like this one."

"I more than like her," Dreibrand declared.

Watching her husband being baited was fascinating for Miranda. She was not accustomed to someone simply toying with Dreibrand's feelings for the fun of it.

"Atarek, tell the boys good night," Miranda said.

Leaning out of his chair, he gave the sleepy boys a hug. Next, the boys sought a good night from "Uncle Tydo," and Tytido obliged them with a big hug and scruffed up their hair.

Lydea rose and offered to help Miranda with her children. Appreciating the thoughtful girl, Miranda was about to accept, but Dreibrand intervened.

"You are our guest, Lydea. No need for you to do anything except have fun tonight," Dreibrand said. "Tytido, show her around. Maybe she would like to dance."

Lydea's eyes lit up with enthusiasm for that suggestion, and Tytido gladly offered her an arm to escort her into the center of the festivities.

"Have a good time," Miranda said, although she wondered why Dreibrand had been so quick to squash the girl's offer.

Dreibrand got up and wrapped his arms around Miranda. Pulling her close, he whispered, "Tytido really likes Lydea. We need to help him win her over."

"We do?" Miranda said, uncertain if she approved of the scheming.

"Come on. Tytido is a good man, and he is sick of being alone," Dreibrand urged.

"I told her mother I would watch out for her," Miranda said with concern and peeked around Dreibrand's arm to locate the girl.

"And she has caught the eye of the most eligible bachelor in Vetanium. What is there to worry about?" Dreibrand asked.

Miranda reluctantly condoned Dreibrand's attempt at matchmaking. Tytido was a good man, and Lydea was old enough to deal with men on her own. Miranda wished that she had been so lucky. When she was Lydea's age, she already had a child and knew only the touch of an abusive master.

"Come back to the party," Dreibrand invited and Miranda said that she would. He kissed her and told the boys good night.

When Dreibrand returned to Atarek and Faychan, he found them rediscovering their common bond of drinking.

"You should be careful with that stuff," Dreibrand admonished as Atarek finished another shot. "You do not know what it is going to do to you."

"I like what it's doing so far," Atarek said.

Dreibrand slapped his hands on Atarek's shoulders and declared that they should mingle. Atarek agreed readily and stood up. He used the chair as a crutch before finding his balance. Faychan intended to stay with his new drinking buddy, but Atarek waved him back. "Gimme a moment with my brother, Faychan. I have to tell him something before it slips my mind," he said.

After Atarek pushed him a few steps away from the table, Dreibrand said, "What is it, At?" Atarek took a deep breath through his nose. He was reeling a little after applying another shot of liquor to his system. He had not sobered as much as he thought. "Dreiby, you love your wife, and that's great, but...I have to say this, 'specially now that the family's so wealthy again. That oldest boy—he's not yours."

Atarek regarded him with such serious concern that Dreibrand had to laugh. "At, I know that. Ess was a little baby when I met Miranda."

"Oooohhhh!" Atarek said with extravagant relief. "By the Gods, Dreiby, I thought we had a problem." He grabbed the front of Dreibrand's shirt and yanked him back toward Faychan. "Well, come on, then. I can enjoy myself now."

34. The Peace Proposal

When Ambio Nateve returned to Fort Promentro, his nerves tingled with alarm. Riding toward the fort with his column of soldiers, he could not align his strong foreboding with the normal scene ahead. The fresh timbers of the fort rose with human optimism, and the flags proudly flaunted themselves in the wind, but Ambio's mouth went dry as if the fort were a smoking ruin.

After weeks skirmishing with rebels, Ambio's senses were attuned to danger. Because he saw no threatening signs ahead, he reviewed the mission that he had just completed. Perhaps he should have been more thorough and killed more rebels. Scattering them might not have been enough. He could have persecuted a few more villages that harbored the roaming rebel bands, but the damage and demoralization that he had inflicted upon the Bostas had seemed sufficient at the time. He could find no lingering doubts to explain his sudden unease.

As he drew nearer to the fort, four riders came toward him from the open prairie. Shading his eyes, Ambio discerned the golden eagle banners of the Darhet flying over the small group. He swerved from the path to wait for them while his soldiers continued toward the fort.

Between the flapping flags, Ambio spotted the Darhet. It was strange for the Darhet to be rushing to see him.

The Darhet waved to Ambio eagerly as his group rumbled to a stop. The dust raised by the galloping horses drifted on with the wind. An uncharacteristic grin beamed from the Darhet's face, and Ambio could not recall seeing so many of his lord's teeth.

What has he done with Sandin Promentro? Ambio wondered.

"Lieutenant Nateve. I was told that you would arrive today. Welcome," Sandin said.

Reservedly, Ambio thanked his lord, uncertain about the warm reception.

In a conversational tone, Sandin gestured to the trudging soldiers and said to Ambio, "I know they have been fighting hard but they will have to join the training exercises the day after next."

Ambio nodded tentatively and asked, "What training, my Lord?"

Sandin laughed. "Recey, let Lieutenant Nateve slake his thirst to welcome him."

Ambio accept a leather canteen from the squire, but he kept his eyes on the Darhet while he drank. After imbibing a modest amount, Ambio handed the canteen back to the squire.

"My Lord is kind to me upon my return," Ambio said. "And I am glad to report that I am deserving of such favor. I have scattered the rebels after taking a toll upon their miserable and ragged forces. Those who aid the insurgents have been taught to rethink their sympathies."

"Yes, yes. I will debrief you later," Sandin said impatiently. "Come, Lieutenant Nateve. You must see!"

"See what, my Lord?"

Laughing again with a triumphant ring, Sandin spurred his horse and circled Ambio quickly. "You must see the beginning of a new world, Lieutenant. Our world!"

Sandin loosened the reins that had been contradicting his spurs, and his horse launched into a run. Recey and the flagbearers turned hastily to follow. Bemused by the Darhet's behavior and bizarre words, Ambio hurried to catch up.

Beyond the fort, two groups of soldiers consisting of infantry and cavalry maneuvered against each other in a recognizable war game. The Darhet commanded his squire to blow his horn to stop the exercise. Without slowing the pace of his horse, Recey put the horn to his lips and announced the Darhet's command with several brassy squeals. Drums carried the message through the ranks until the war games began to grind to a halt.

Ambio noted that almost all of the soldiers stationed at the fort were participating in the exercises. He wondered if anybody was still watching the slaves.

Following the Darhet into the gathering of soldiers, Ambio said, "I see my Lord has decided to keep the men in fighting form."

"More than that, Lieutenant. We shall go to war before the year ends," Sandin said, and his eyes focused far away.

Ambio was about to ask what was planned, but his tongue shriveled like a slug in salt when he saw two strange beings emerge from the sorting ranks. Although Ambio was familiar with rys, he had never seen any like these. Their coloring was like a black pearl. The male was completely bald—a trait that Ambio had never seen in a rys, and the female was a living work of art. Only the heavens seemed a fitting home for her extraordinary beauty.

The male and female joined hands and waited for the Darhet to approach with his lieutenant.

"By the Gods," Ambio managed to murmur.

"Most definitely by the Gods," Sandin said. "They are tabre. From Nufal." Very very quietly he warned Ambio not to refer to them as rys.

Stunned, Ambio simply followed his lord toward the tabre. After dismounting, Sandin amazed his lieutenant by bowing deeply to the strange guests. The tabre regarded the men haughtily but patiently. Ambio quickly bowed, and Sandin introduced him to Tempet and Alloi.

"We have formed an alliance to fight with them against their enemy," Sandin explained.

"Who is that?" Ambio asked, forgetting to employ any formality.

"The rys," Tempet hissed, and the venomous sound made Ambio's throat tighten.

"Sandin Promentro has told us that you are acquainted with the rys," Alloi commented in an emotionless voice that contrasted with her brother's overt hate.

Tempet abruptly moved toward Ambio and inspected him with a critical eye, like a breeder judging livestock. "I think that he has not been corrupted by his association with the rys," he decided.

Fear accelerated Ambio's heart rate, but his fighter's nerves held him steady. "Why do you want to make war on Jingten?" he asked bravely.

Tempet snarled with disgust. How could the human even utter such an ignorant question?

Having come to know well the vengeful passions that fueled Tempet, Sandin intervened. "Lord Tempet, he is shocked and confused, as I was. Give me time to explain. He will serve us well in our venture."

Ambio was almost more disturbed by the Darhet's fatherly protection than the anger he had incited in the strange creature.

Reasonably, Alloi said, "Of course, Sandin. We only wanted to meet your lieutenant. We shall cease our training for the day, and you may explain the situation to your officer."

As soon as she finished speaking, Alloi looked hard into Ambio's eyes. He noticed white light flicker in the back of her eyes and realized that tabre possessed magic similar to rys. Then he was unable to think about anything. He had no past, present, or future, until Alloi started talking again and he was released from her spell.

"Yes, Sandin, he is very loyal to you. We will benefit from his service," she commented.

"We will restart training at dawn," Tempet said irritably. He stomped off in the direction of the fort and Alloi followed him.

Nudging Ambio out of his daze, Sandin told him that he would explain everything over dinner.

"Dinner?" Ambio echoed quietly, amazed by the invitation.

"You will not believe what fortune has brought us," Sandin added. A little smile settled on his lips and he retreated into a private world.

The next day, Ambio was commanding battle exercises, and he accepted and believed in his purpose completely. The cause of Tempet and Alloi actually possessed justice, and the concept of conquering Jingtun stimulated all his ambitions. He would no longer be someone who weathered the Atrophaney conquest and struggled against the odds to develop an imperial career. Now, he would have his chance to be part of the greatest conquest ever. It would mean the ascension of humanity as masters of the world, and Ambio would be at the pinnacle to share in the spoils.

But he would have to battle the rys first, and even with the power of the tabre behind him, it was a formidable task. The training that Tempet and Alloi mandated tested his nerves as nothing had before. The blasts of magic that the tabre made him endure assaulted basic instincts. The body reacted before the mind, flinching as if lightning had struck close.

Tempet and Alloi were hardening Ambio and all the soldiers to the use of battle magic. Just short of injuring anyone, Tempet and Alloi constantly rattled the ranks with flashes of magical fire. Sometimes spells would crackle and pulse over the soldiers' bodies in startling displays.

Refining the courage of the humans was only one part of making them a real threat to rys, and Tempet and Alloi wanted to offer their soldiers more protection. The tabre worked every evening to produce warding crystals.

Tempet and Alloi knew that their mass-produced enchantments would only cause Shan a trifling inconvenience, but bolstering the confidence of their forces would be worth the effort. And with the extra troops that the Darhet had summoned from the Empire, Tempet and Alloi expected to overwhelm the rys King with superior numbers. Quantity mattered in rys-tabre warfare.

The soldiers at Fort Promentro slid into the routine of daily training, and their enthusiasm made rest days unnecessary. Every day after the midday break, the soldiers that had served Tempet switched to Alloi's side, and her morning group went over to her brother. When Ambio served the side of Alloi, he experienced a fierce determination to protect her. Serving her was a privilege, and he responded well to her guidance. One afternoon, with the spells of Tempet blazing around his body, Ambio pressed forward and shouted encouragement to his men. Alloi rewarded his effort by casting a shield spell over him. Ambio felt the heat of the opposing spell dissipate. The snapping and stinging magic that sparkled over his skin and armor was replaced by a comforting glow that made him feel like the strongest man in the world.

Alloi appreciated how quickly the lieutenant adapted to her enhancement. Many of the men were as startled by the shield spells as the attack spells, but with Ambio's example, they were learning the difference today. The humans would be twice as effective in battle once they could press their advantage when supplemented by magic.

Empowered by Ambio's bravery, her soldiers finally broke through Tempet's soldiers and seized the flag. Alloi tried to picture the flag that waved triumphantly in a soldier's grip as her victory over Shan. When Tempet won the flag during the exercises, Alloi saw in his mind that he pictured the flag as a spear with Shan's head skewered on its tip. But Alloi was unable to reward herself with violent images of success.

Instead of ordering the soldiers back into position, Tempet and Alloi ended the battle exercises for the day. The Atrophaney diplomats were emerging from the Wilderness, and Tempet and Alloi were eager for news from the homeland of their enemies. They immediately collected the diplomats and returned to the fort.

When Eddleket entered the Darhet's office, he was impressed by his first close view of the tabre. Flanking Sandin, who sat at his desk, Tempet and Alloi stood with their arms crossed. The white hair and dark skin of Alloi blended superbly with the imperial banner covering the wall behind her.

Eddleket found it easy to imagine the tabre as superhuman fighters sent by the Gods to help Atrophane achieve even more greatness.

I see now why King Shan wants peace. He fears to see Atrophane with such powerful allies, Eddleket surmised.

Already accustomed to dealing with the rys monarchy, Eddleket was not flustered by the interview, and he proceeded to smoothly deliver his report. He removed the two parchment scrolls that bore the urgent proposal from Jingtén. He handed the one written in Atrophaney to the Darhet, and Alloi extended her hand to receive the one written in the rys language.

"We should at least read it," Alloi said when Tempet gave her a disapproving look. She knew that Tempet would not deign to touch something that came from the hand of a rys, but she saw no use in such extreme behavior.

Sandin pulled off the golden ring that held the scroll, and the metal chimed on his marble desk. Cracking the seal, he began to peruse the content.

Eddleket offered a verbal summary. "Both documents contain the same information. King Shan desires peace with Tempet and Alloi. He says he has no wish to continue the ancient feud between Jingtén and Nufal. He says that it causes him joy to learn that rys have survived in Nufal."

"Rys!" Tempet exploded. "The ignorant animal." Tempet's disgust snapped like water in hot oil and he fumed. "How I shall enjoy killing that scum-sucking rys and all his worthless servants."

Eddleket recoiled and tucked his hands into his voluminous sleeves.

Alloi had not been distracted by Eddleket's jabbering or her brother's shouting. With the flowing script created by a rys hand in front of her, she was vividly connected to her former life. The differences between the tabre and rys languages were mostly nuance, and viewing the letters made her long for her culture.

Transfixed by the document, Alloi said, "Shan apologizes for Onja. He says it was he who unlocked the Deamedron from their unholy prison and released their souls to the next world. He wishes to heal all the wounds in Nufal, and begs us to consider peace. No rys alive today would continue the feud between Jingtén and Nufal. He invites us to Jingtén to live with our cousins." Alloi stopped and stared at the first signature on the page. Seeing Shan's name written by his own hand summoned an image of him, and with his kind words before her, she could not think a harsh thought.

"Alloi," Tempet said. "I am not interested in rys lies. Put the parchment down."

The stern voice of her brother yanked her out of the refuge that Shan's peace proposal offered. Believing the wonderful words could not possibly be true, Alloi obeyed her brother's request. She set the parchment on the desk, and the scroll promptly curled up and concealed the signatures. Tempet's magic seized the document and it burned quickly.

"Lord Tempet," Sandin said and tossed his half-read scroll toward the wall.

Tempet struck the moving target with his magic, and the scroll burst into flames as it hit the wall. Chuckling, Tempet moved around the desk and stomped out the fire.

"You are starting to understand how we will work together to destroy our enemies," Tempet commented approvingly. "I like you more every day, human."

Sandin rose. "By choosing the side of Atrophane, you will find your venture successful," he said.

Tempet actually smiled. "And the leader of the Atrophane shall have our finest enchantment to protect him. Shan will fight hard before he dies, but I will see that you live to plunder his treasure, Sandin Promentro."

"You are kind, Lord," Sandin said and dipped his head reverently.

Listening to the banter between tabre and Darhet, Eddleket was not certain if he was distressed or overjoyed. He had welcomed the means to intimidate Jingtén, but he had not expected to hear the Darhet's mysterious new allies rave so confidently about killing King Shan. With the assertive tone of a diplomat who finds himself suddenly invisible, Eddleket said, "My Lords, what shall your response be to Jingtén?"

"You can sweep up these ashes and take them to Shan if you are so inclined," Tempet suggested.

"No response will be needed, Eddleket. You can go home," Sandin said, guessing that he was granting the chubby diplomat his true wish. While waving Eddleket toward the door, Sandin said to Tempet. "Come to my chambers and we shall drink wine to celebrate the weakness that Shan has displayed with his pleas for peace."

The tabre set a hand on the man's shoulder. "Celebrate as it suits you. My sister and I have warding crystals to make," Tempet said. He beckoned Alloi, and they left the fort as they often did in the evening, to work their magic in private upon the wild land.

Sandin wondered if he had been too bold to invite the aggressive Tempet to drink. Very vaguely, he was reminded of an overly familiar servant who must be admonished to stay in his place, but the thought was fleeting.

He went upstairs and ate a silent supper with Valay. She had not accepted the presence of the tabre as easily as he had. During their frequent visits to the Darhet, she retreated to the bedchamber and listened through the door while they plotted their war.

Tossing his napkin on his plate, Sandin left the table and went out on the balcony. It was late summer and the sun was setting earlier. The stars were already out and he looked toward the Rysamand where he always looked. Valay followed him.

"My Lord," she said.

"Yes?" he responded without looking at her.

Valay hesitated. Her instincts told her to give up and go back inside. She considered trying to tempt him toward conversation by mentioning her pregnancy. Then, she wondered if she should try to seduce him into her arms—a place he had not visited since the tabre came.

But it was more than her emotional or physical needs that troubled her. Valay was worried about him. Tenderly, she touched his hand and found that it gripped the rail with unnecessary intensity.

"My Lord, do they hurt you?" she whispered.

Sandin faced her abruptly and narrowed his eyes, initially angered that she would project weakness on him. But his offense faded quickly and he allowed himself to focus on the beautiful young woman from whom he had taken so much pleasure.

He reached for her hair and gently toyed with the coppery tresses. "No," he answered. "And I have their promise that they will never hurt you. So, you can stop hiding and being afraid."

Valay melted against his hand with gratitude for his concern. Kissing his wrist, she murmured her desire to be close to him.

But he pulled the hand away and returned it to the rail. His gaze went back out into the night. "Go inside," he said.

Valay wanted to protest, but she had been trained against it. Swallowing her emotions, she obeyed and saved her tears for her pillow.

Despair enhanced Shan's exhaustion when he emerged from his trance. He had monitored the arrival of the diplomats at the distant Atrophane fort, and, as he had feared, Tempet and Alloi had rejected the peace proposal. Shan had observed their training exercises as well and recognized that they were planning to fight rys forces.

Quylan had accompanied Shan when he climbed Curlenfindi for this meditation. Although initially reluctant to allow Quylan to join him on his mountain, Shan was glad to have her with him now. Crumpling into her waiting arms, he imparted his bad news in a weary whisper. He saw no way to avoid a violent end to their problems.

"I know you do not want to kill them, my love," Quylan said and ran her fingers through his white hair.

"But I must. Already my weakness has caused too much suffering, including yours," Shan lamented.

"No, Shan, not weakness," Quylan admonished. "You are an example to us all."

Shan straightened, more disturbed than comforted by her words. "Yes. I know," he said.

"How can I help you?" Quylan said.

Taking her hand, Shan sighed. He admired her willingness even after the severe injury that she had suffered. Quylan had courage, and Jingtun would need her strength.

"I will teach you more about battle magic," he said. "But first, you must help me with an easier task. When we return to Jingtun, I need to rest. Can you contact Captain Tulair for me?" Shan said.

"I believe so," she said.

"Good. Tell Tulair to inform Dreibrand that my peace proposal has failed. There is no immediate danger because Tempet and Alloi are still in the south. We will go to Vetanium and convene a council of war when the time comes," Shan said.

A gust of wind hit the ledge that they sat upon and pulled a cloud close to Curlenfindi. The chilled vapor scudded across the stone face of the mountain and obscured the green valley below. The wind rose into a howl that defied the summer thriving in the lower regions of the world. The cloud deposited droplets of water on Quylan's hair.

"The Rysamand gives us power," Quylan whispered in awe of her sudden epiphany. She had understood that she could manipulate the forces inherent in the fabric of the cosmos, but as Shan had learned centuries before her, she realized her power was rooted in her mountain homeland.

"And the Rysamand will give us the strength to defend it," Shan said. "The rys were stronger in ancient times and the same will be true again."

35. The Counselor

Dreibrand turned away from the blinding flash. The spectators cried out and shielded their eyes. Even unable to see, Dreibrand jumped to the left instead of standing still because Tulair would surely strike his last position.

After the blinding stars receded from his vision, Dreibrand saw the rys captain fending off an advance from Tytido. Armed with their enchanted swords, Dreibrand and Tytido were trying to keep Tulair between them.

Tulair had suggested the sparring match after relaying the reports from Jingtun to Dreibrand and his associates the day before. Confronted by an inevitable invasion, Tulair had wanted to practice fighting warded humans. Dreibrand and Tytido had eagerly accepted the invitation to train with a fast and clever rys.

A ring of settlers surrounded the fighters. Tulair held a staff that was soaked on each end with oily soot. Dreibrand and Tytido had tied white cloths around their torsos, so that Tulair's hits would be clearly scored. The warding crystals on the men's weapons prevented Tulair from focusing his magic on them, but he had begun to adapt to the hindrance. Igniting himself in a burst of magical light forced the men to look away and given Tulair a new advantage.

Dazzled by the simple flash, the men barely avoided Tulair's spinning attack. Tulair flared with blue light again, and he anticipated the movements of the men better. With rys speed and graceful style, Tulair hit Tytido across the chest, which left a clear mark and knocked the man to the ground. Without pausing, Tulair leaped at Dreibrand and hit him in the kidney area.

Dreibrand yelled and smacked Tulair's staff to the ground. The sword blade chopped off the end of the staff, but a black mark had been left on Dreibrand's back and Tulair could not be denied the hit.

Even with a shortened staff, Tulair began probing for another opportunity to strike his opponent. Tulair circled the point of Dreibrand's sword with his staff. They traded a few blows before Tulair deflected the blade and opened up his opponent. Dreibrand dodged the lunging attack.

Tytido entered the fray again, forcing Tulair back on the defensive. The observing settlers cheered

their men. It was a thrill to see a rys hard pressed by humans. Tulair did not mind their prejudice though. He was determined to improve his skills, and he was learning to respect the ability of the warriors. Dreibrand and Tytido had fought in wars and Tulair was acutely aware that he had only been in one battle.

Experimenting with his discovery that the usefulness of his magic was not limited to actually striking his opponents, Tulair shot his bolts of magic at strategic spots in order to make the men look one way or another. When they reflexively turned their eyes, Tulair scored several more hits on both of them.

Aggravated, Tytido hacked the other end of the staff off with a hard sweep of his sword. Backing away from both men, Tulair held up a hand and lowered his staff.

"I think I have learned a great deal. Shall we take a break?" Tulair proposed.

With sweat dripping freely from beneath his helmet, Dreibrand nodded and caught his breath. "Yes, enough, before you blind us all," he said.

Reminded of Shan's admonishment to be careful when practicing magic, Tulair said, "Are your eyes all right?"

"I think so," Tytido said, mimicking blindness and then cracking a grin much to Tulair's relief.

Looking over his shoulder and down his back, Dreibrand frowned at the smudges that indicated his defeat. "I see you have found a way to deal with us," he grumbled.

Seeing that the exercise was concluded, the spectators began to disperse. Tulair shook hands with Tytido and Dreibrand, thanking them for their time. Dreibrand wiped the sweat from his forehead and Gulang emerged from the crowd and thoughtfully brought a canteen of water.

As Gulang delivered the water to Dreibrand, he said to Tulair, "I would like to spar with you and some of the other rys soldiers. It would be an interesting challenge."

"Yes, I encourage anyone to train with us," Tulair said.

After quenching his thirst, Dreibrand passed the canteen to Tytido and added, "Actually, Tulair, I think all of my warriors should train with yours as much as possible."

Tulair approved.

Pleased that the rys soldiers were proving to be eager allies, Dreibrand ordered Gulang to arrange a training schedule for all the men.

"Yes, my Lord," Gulang responded. He accepted the canteen back from Tytido and replaced the plug. Discreetly, he studied Tulair, anticipating his turn in the ring with the Captain of the Jingtun Guard.

Dreibrand nudged Tytido and warned him that his girlfriend was coming over.

Tytido instantly looked around and saw the Fayeths approaching with Jolen and Atarek. Hanshen was doing a little better, although Jolen always hovered attentively, and they had come out to watch the sparring. Tytido fantasized about Lydea complimenting him on his athleticism.

As if the raggedy sparring vest were on fire, Tytido pulled the soot smudged fabric off his body. He wiped his hands and tossed the vest on the ground just as the group arrived. Tytido greeted them with improved Atrophaney, lavishing them with some new words that Lydea had taught him during his lessons. Tytido continually glanced toward her for approval and Lydea met his gaze.

"Oh, my Lords, what a display," Madame Fayeth commented. "Hanshen just loved it."

A bright grin defied the boy's pallid face.

"I taught my brother everything he knows," Atarek declared and gave Hanshen a conspiratorial wink. Atarek relished the restrained annoyance on Dreibrand's face.

Tulair and Gulang politely excused themselves to go discuss a training schedule.

Noting the martial atmosphere, Madame Fayeth inquired, "What is our situation?"

Dreibrand considered his response. The message that Tulair had recently received was not a secret, but his guests did not grasp their danger. Tempet and Alloi were a vague threat that was difficult for the Fayeths to equate with the kind rys who they had encountered so far.

"Madame, you are aware of the rogue rys, Tempet and Alloi, and of their vicious attacks on my people. Now they are in league with Sandin and raising an Atrophaney force to bring against us," Dreibrand said.

"Oh, Sandin Promentro, such a beastly man. You are twice the noble that he is, Lord Dreibrand," Madame Fayeth said, and Dreibrand enjoyed the flattery.

"Bring against us? But we are Atrophanes," Lydea protested.

"That does not mean anything," Hanshen said and leaned on Atarek's hip. He cast his eyes down and remembered watching Sandin brutalize his favorite bodyguard.

Uncomfortably aware of the source of Hanshen's juvenile cynicism, Atarek ruffled the boy's hair and hoped he would keep his secret.

"Miss Lydea," Dreibrand said. "I wish you could have visited us during a better time. You have my pledge to protect your family. Or, if you prefer to go home before hostilities erupt, you may." Addressing her mother, Dreibrand continued, "Actually, I have detained Commander Fanlyre and his men these weeks in case you needed an escort back to imperial territory."

Tytido's heart skipped a beat. *How can he urge them to leave!* With panic in his eyes, he looked at Lydea sharply. *Stay with me*, he pleaded.

"But Hanshen is doing better," Madame Fayeth cried. "I cannot leave. We need Jolen." She heaped gratitude on the rys physician with a loving sweep of her blue eyes that actually matched the color of the rys quite well.

"We will protect you," Tytido declared.

"Yes, and you are welcome to stay," Dreibrand said after sensing Tytido's distress. He had not wanted to put Tytido's fledgling relationship in jeopardy, but the Fayeths had needed to be warned.

"I feel safer here than going back to the domain of the Darhet," Madame Fayeth said.

"And the House of Veta will not forget your loyalty," Atarek added.

Dreibrand noted his brother's suddenly regal tone and paused to appreciate the concept of Atrophaney citizens actually preferring to associate with the Vetas.

"Madame Fayeth," Dreibrand said. "If you are certain about staying here, I will inform Fanlyre that he and his soldiers are free to leave."

"You are just going to let him go," Atarek criticized.

"You have been nagging me to get rid of him every day since he got here," Dreibrand said with exasperation.

"I was just surprised to finally hear you agree," Atarek said.

Breezily ignoring the bickering that often occurred between the brothers, Madame Fayeth said, "I am certain about staying. I came here knowing that we might live here for some time." Her statement settled Tytido's nerves.

"Then I hope that love for Nufal shall grow in your heart as it has in mine," Dreibrand said. "And when the threat of Tempet and Alloi has been eliminated and I settle my business with Sandin, I hope that you will be able to reconnect with your business ventures in the Empire. It is my goal to trade with the east as well as the west."

Madame Fayeth raised her eyebrows with definite interest. She detected a hint that she would have a preferential relationship with the rulers of Nufal and perhaps even Jingtun. Overwhelmed by the prospect of health for her son and making a fortune, she could only murmur her thanks for his kindness.

Dreibrand's suggestion interested Tytido as well. The thought of binding the Fayeths to Nufal economically was a promising strategy toward his goals.

While removing his sparring vest, Dreibrand suggested, "Madame, you may want to write some letters if you have anyone you want to correspond with back east. You could give them to Fanlyre."

She nodded. "Perhaps, I could write a few. To let the family know that Hanshen is doing better." She smiled down to her son.

"Are there going to be more fights, Mother?" the boy asked.

"I think so," she said.

"All of the warriors will be training soon," Tytido said.

"But not until after lunch I hope," Lydea said. "I wanted to invite you, I mean all of you, to have lunch with us."

Elated by her voluntary display of interest, Tytido accepted.

Nudging his brother, Atarek said, "You must be hungry after all your showing off."

"Actually, you go on, At. I will see you later," Dreibrand said and then politely declined the invitation.

Atarek wrinkled his brow questioningly. He could tell when his brother was trying to put him off.

Maybe I have been crowding him a little, he conceded. Maybe he needs to sneak off with his luscious wife. Smiling at the thought, Atarek dismissed his brother nonchalantly and looked forward to diverting himself with a pleasant lunch with the Fayeths.

Thanks for the permission to go, Dreibrand complained to himself and walked away. He glanced back once to confirm that his brother was not following. Contrary to Atarek's guess, Dreibrand had nothing as pleasant as slipping away with Miranda in mind. He needed to talk to someone who could grasp the magnitude of his problems. The needs of the flesh distracted Tytido. Atarek was on his nerves, and Dreibrand did not have the heart to burden Miranda constantly. She had been up all night after hearing the report from Tulair, and since morning, she had been attending to the business of the settlement. Coordinating the building of shelters and making sure crops were harvested properly and on time were pressing needs as summer ended.

Faychan remained.

A small cabin for Faychan was nearing completion and Dreibrand looked for the former Overlord at his new residence. The door had yet to be hung, and a blanket covered the opening.

"Come in, Dreibrand," Faychan called from inside.

Dreibrand pulled the blanket aside and entered. Faychan had already been provided several items of furniture from his followers. Even though he was no longer an Overlord to those who had once called themselves Kezanada, many of the refugees were loyal to him and made an effort to provide for him. A neatly made bed with a bright quilt was in the corner and he had a table and chairs. His helmet sat on a bench beside the sunniest window. He had polished the soot from the scorched metal and was in the process of attaching a new horsetail tassel.

"How did you know it was me?" Dreibrand asked.

"I heard you coming and recognized the sound," Faychan said. "Us westerners have better ears than you easterners."

"Oh, really?" Dreibrand said with a little automatic regional pride.

Considering his statement beyond debate, Faychan said, "How did your sparring go with Tulair?"

"Good. I got quite a work out," Dreibrand said and rotated his shoulders. He pulled off his helmet and set it next to Faychan's helmet.

When they sat down together at the table, Faychan, for once, did not offer a drink. Shan's news of invasion sobered even him.

Dreibrand said, "I expected you to take an interest in the training this morning."

"I suppose I will have a second chance," Faychan said, unconcerned about his absence. "I slept in."

"Drinking with my brother is hard work isn't it?" Dreibrand said.

"No, no. My pleasure," Faychan said. He chuckled as he remembered a particularly good joke that Atarek had managed to tell him the night before.

"I regret, Faychan, that my visit will not be so entertaining," Dreibrand said.

Faychan reformed his demeanor and asked, "Does my friend come to speak with me about his war or to find out if his drunken brother is spilling the family secrets to me?"

"Some of both, I suppose," Dreibrand muttered.

"Well, Atarek has been most informative, but I am sure that you have no need for me to repeat back your family secrets," Faychan said.

"No, I do not," Dreibrand agreed tersely. "I came to hear if you have learned anything of interest from the Atrophane soldiers."

Faychan replied that he had news.

After enjoying Dreibrand's impatient silence, Faychan divulged his information. He reported that rebel activity near the frontier was a recurring problem and offered what details he had come by. Although Dreibrand knew about the rebels from his brother's description of the rebel attack, hearing a military point of view was equally informative.

"A man named Metchlan leads the Bosta rebels. He is getting famous for never being caught, but your man Kashil, who had heard of him, did not seem so impressed. Kashil believes the rebels will never accomplish anything except constantly angering the Atrophane," Faychan said.

Dreibrand considered the information carefully. The name of Metchlan was new to him, but he had not been in the Bosta Territory for years.

"It sounds as if the imperial frontier is quite volatile," Dreibrand said. "It would seem that Sandin has enough problems without attacking us. I must assume that Tempet and Alloi have control of him. Otherwise, Sandin would have to be completely mad to take his army away from such an unstable region."

"Perhaps Tempet and Alloi will help Sandin with his rebel problems," Faychan speculated.

Dreibrand shook his head, unwilling to hope that a Bosta rebellion would distract his enemies. "Tempet and Alloi want the rys. I can't imagine them bothering with the Bostas when Shan's report was clear that their goal is Jingten. They talk of nothing else," he said.

Faychan did not doubt the information gathered by the rys King, but he did not want to dismiss the intriguing reports of occupation and rebellion in the Bosta Territory. He proposed, "You know, we could find a way to aid these rebels. It will pressure our enemies."

It was an appealing notion, and Dreibrand could tell that Faychan had spent some time thinking about it. But Dreibrand doubted he could cultivate allies among Bosta rebels. He had personally conquered the territory for Atrophane only a few years earlier, and he mentioned this difficulty to Faychan.

Adept at playing all sides, Faychan said, "They may be forgiving if their situation is desperate enough."

Dreibrand saw no practical way to exploit the situation and said as much. "The distance alone will make contacting this Metchlan difficult. And slipping agents past Tempet and Alloi would be chancy, maybe even impossible. I do not think courting the Bostas will serve my needs anyway. When Sandin is defeated, I want to fill the power gap with my authority, and the Atrophane will never obey me if I support their enemies," he said.

"Do not be so skeptical," Faychan admonished. "Perhaps the Atrophane do not have to find out. Things can be done covertly. You really should consider sowing these seeds. A buffer state between Nufal and the Empire would be a good thing." The aging Masterspy smiled.

Dreibrand appreciated Faychan's vision and asked him to elaborate.

"Well, I can agree that maybe we cannot act on it now," Faychan conceded. "But the strategy remains valuable. These Bostas display resistance even after several years, and, if we can set the Bostas up with some type of quasi-independence after our victory over Tempet and Alloi, the Atrophane could be bogged down south for years, allowing Nufal to develop."

The smell of freshly cut timbers permeated Faychan's simple home and reminded Dreibrand of Nufal's infancy. His settlements were fragile and could be easily stunted by war, but his dream of a new kingdom would flourish in peace. The possibilities in the distant Bosta Territory could not be discounted, and Dreibrand decided that he would look for opportunities there in the future.

"Maybe I can convince Kashil to act as our ambassador to the Bostas when the time is right. Send his people money, probably jewels. Let them know who is their friend in the west," Dreibrand speculated.

"Yes, yes, Dreibrand, very good," Faychan praised.

"We shall see," Dreibrand said, not getting excited. The prospects of regional engineering were attractive, but Tempet and Alloi had to be eliminated first. Moving on, he asked what more Faychan had heard.

Faychan hesitated. The work song of a harvesting crew hauling grain into the settlement filled the silence. At first, Dreibrand assumed it was Faychan's usual drama but then Dreibrand detected actual reluctance.

Because there was no delicate way to put it, Faychan said bluntly, "Dreibrand, I have heard that Sandin Promentro assaulted your brother. Beat him in front of everybody."

Dreibrand swore, and his anger and sorrow shook each other like fighting dogs. He had known in his heart that Atarek simply could not have stopped at Fort Promentro without any consequences. Sandin would have surely realized who he was, but Dreibrand understood why his brother had not told him.

Acquainted with how anger could make Dreibrand's tongue flap, Faychan said, "Tell me about your problems with Sandin Promentro."

"My personal issues with Sandin Promentro hardly matter when compared to Tempet and Alloi," Dreibrand said guardedly, anchoring himself on their threat even as rage drove his heart into stormy seas.

"I think the issues do matter, especially when he supposedly beat your brother just for being a Veta," Faychan explained. He was determined to have details.

Shutting his eyes, Dreibrand absorbed the hard blow of guilt. His rivalry with Sandin was never meant to harm Atarek. After a deep cleansing breath, Dreibrand opened his eyes and told Faychan that the friction between himself and Sandin was not a complicated matter—only two men with ambitions for the same thing.

"That is quite a bit," Faychan muttered.

"Yes, it is," Dreibrand admitted ominously. As he imagined Sandin trying to seize Nufal, Dreibrand allowed brutal images of combat and battles won by his hand to replay in his mind and give him strength. After dreaming of putting his violence aside, Dreibrand hated Sandin even more for rousing his warrior passions.

"Tell me why Sandin Promentro would hurt your brother?" Faychan urged.

Emotions lurched in Dreibrand's chest. He was still choking on the news.

"Sandin is a brutal man. That is why he hurt my brother," Dreibrand said. "That, and he hates me. Always has."

"And you always hated him right back," Faychan guessed. "Why?"

Allowing himself to take pleasure in the complaining, Dreibrand said, "Because he had everything I wanted. Wealth, power, and he flaunted it in my face. I am sure that no one derived more glee from my censure. He laughed at my efforts to better my position. And when I began to succeed, he

made sure that I would ultimately fail. I imagine my success with the rys and Nufal really galls him.”

“Ah, the censure,” Faychan purred. “Your brother mentioned that. It explains much. I always wondered why you liked being so far from home.”

Dreibrand snarled and clenched his fists, angry with himself for actually mentioning the censure, even if Atarek had already done so. Dreibrand was not sure if he could attribute the slip to his distress for Atarek or the trust that he wanted to place with Faychan. Composing himself somewhat, Dreibrand returned to Sandin’s reasons for assaulting Atarek. Dreibrand surmised that Sandin had wanted to provoke him. “But I will not be goaded into a reckless move,” Dreibrand insisted. “It is Sandin’s turn to make a mistake. If he comes here as Shan’s enemy, Shan will defeat him, and I will be there to seize Sandin’s claims to the Wilderness.”

“And then what?” Faychan said, impressed by the bold statement.

Dreibrand stood up and went to the sunny window, but he did not look out. Instead, he pondered the light glinting on the recently polished helmet. “If I get that far, then I will worry about my next move,” he said evasively.

Faychan clicked his tongue disapprovingly. “No, Dreibrand. You need a clearer purpose than replacing some man who upset you. I disliked the fact that Benladu was elected Overlord, so I removed him and seized his title. However, I did not have much success after that.”

“Then how am I to benefit from your analysis of your defeat?” Dreibrand said. He faced Faychan now to indicate his sincere interest in any ideas.

“What does my Lord truly want?” Faychan asked as if by merely waving his hand he could grant wishes.

“Peace and security for Nufal,” Dreibrand replied with certainty, but the rest of his desires were not so easily put into words. His first simple answer would have been enough before Atarek arrived, but the presence of his brother raised many complicated issues. When Dreibrand had been presumed dead by all of Atrophane, including his family, his actions did not have consequences for them. Dreibrand was far away, living his own life, making his own destiny. But now Atarek had involved himself in the situation, and the ambitions of the House of Veta in the Wilderness were prematurely revealed. A conflict with Atrophane could jeopardize his parents and their ancestral lands. Even embittered by an unloving childhood, Dreibrand would not wish imprisonment or worse upon his parents. And although Dreibrand enjoyed his exile, he would never allow the remaining Veta estate, with its broad green pastures, virgin woodlands, and jagged cliffs overlooking sandy beaches, to be forfeited to the Damar.

“But what of my brother?” Dreibrand wondered aloud. “After all this mess with Tempet and Alloi, how can he ever go home in safety and retain his noble title to his estate?”

“It sounds like you want your brother to go home,” Faychan observed.

“Eventually, yes. It is good to see him,” Dreibrand said. “But...”

“But you worry he will try to take over,” Faychan finished the thought.

Dreibrand shook his head adamantly. “Forget that, Faychan. My brother and I can work out our differences. He would never betray me, nor I him.”

“Touching,” Faychan murmured, unimpressed by bonds of kinship. “But you do want to send him home eventually?”

“He will want to go home,” Dreibrand predicted. “He loves Atrophane, and he would want to claim his inheritance.”

Accounting now for Atarek’s needs as well, Faychan proposed, “Say, we are victorious, and you depose Sandin. Then, you go to Atrophane with your hard won authority and clear your name.”

“Clear my name!” Dreibrand cried. Instantly angered, he narrowed his eyes and declared, “I would demand the respect that we deserve. I will toss their censure at their feet and set in on fire.”

Faychan clapped his hands together. “Ah ha! That is the Dreibrand I love,” he cheered.

Impervious to the praise, Dreibrand scoffed, “My blustering words serve only fantasy. I cannot

protect Veta interests in Atrophane from the other side of Ektren. Short of taking over the entire Empire, I cannot change the censure. Half the ruling class in Atrophane benefited from the fall of my family. By the Gods, we lost seventeen estates!"

"Then take over the Empire. This Sandin rules the west, right?" Faychan said.

Dreibrand threw his hands in the air. "I do not want it. A fresh start in Nufal is far better than governing occupied lands. Making my own kingdom has been at the heart of my dreams. That is why the Wilderness was irresistible to me," he said.

Faychan understood the difference. Dreibrand was the Lord of Nufal and the settlers had chosen to occupy his domain. He was accepted by the people, not forced on them. "Then we must come up with a plan to get the attention of your countrymen. Make them see your power and obey you when you say that the censure is over," Faychan said. "This mad war that Tempet and Alloï are driving Sandin into will have to be an unexpected move to the leaders in your imperial capital. They will feel that they have lost control of their western domain, which is the case, and then after we defeat Sandin, you will have control."

"I will make lifting the censure terms of surrender," Dreibrand said.

"Do you think that will work?" Faychan asked.

"It might," Dreibrand said. "We Atrophanes appreciate written law. Lifting my censure in an official manner should be enough. That is how it was imposed. But I would need control of substantial military forces to pressure the Darmar and the Derataem. Make them understand that they could lose more if they do not give me what I want."

"Seizing control of the military usually works quite nicely," Faychan remarked. "But we must ensure that the military can stomach surrendering to you. The Atrophane soldiers here have been whispering about your desertion."

Dreibrand restrained his humiliation when he heard Faychan so casually refer to his disgrace. A secret was difficult to bury when it was a fairly obvious fact.

"I mean your resignation, my Lord," Faychan said, feigning sensitivity. He patted the table top to coax Dreibrand back into a chair, and continued, "I see that this is a difficult subject. But it can be put to rest. You, Lord Dreibrand, are a great man. I think the soldiers want to think well of you."

"I was a popular officer with my men," Dreibrand recalled.

Faychan did not doubt Dreibrand's claim of charisma. Counting points on his fingers, he said, "The soldiers basically know this: You were listed missing, and now you are alive and doing quite well in Nufal. You apparently abandoned your country, but you serve the rys King, which is impressive to them, and rightly so, and you are courteous to them and greet them as your countrymen," Faychan explained. "I judge that if you keep giving them good things to say about you, the past can be forgotten."

"Good. Because I resigned over differences with Sandin Promentro," Dreibrand said. Suddenly inspired by his own propaganda, Dreibrand eagerly added, "Atrophane society does not require a noble to necessarily obey another noble. I did not desert my people but rather I defied other nobles. By traditional warrior codes, if I can show myself to be the stronger lord, then I am the stronger lord. I must present myself to the military as this traditional type of challenger."

"That sounds workable," Faychan decided and tapped his lips thoughtfully, like an artist contemplating his next stroke.

Dreibrand observed the mercenary and wondered what bubbled in the cauldron of Faychan's mind. His newest counselor had been tremendously helpful, but Dreibrand dared to ask a hazardous question: "What are you hoping to get out of all this, Faychan?"

Appreciation for the inquiry showed on Faychan's face. *This is why warriors fight and die for you, Dreibrand. Because you never forget to take care of every man,* he thought approvingly.

"I am provided for," Faychan said humbly.

Dreibrand looked askance at Faychan, which made Faychan grin and expand his reply. "I have not long lived in the east. Perhaps you ask me what I want before I know what there is?" he said with his usual sly style.

Knowing how haggling pleased Faychan, Dreibrand said plainly, "I expect that you will want more than this cabin."

"It is enough for now," Faychan murmured, and he suddenly looked again as he had on that gloomy day in the Jingtun Valley, wounded and defeated.

"Let me know when it is not enough, my friend," Dreibrand said.

"For now it is my pleasure to serve my new Overlord," Faychan responded.

After noting the ease with which Faychan flowed into the mold of a modest subject, Dreibrand moved on to another subject. "Tell me your opinion of Fanlyre?"

Sandbagging his insight by habit, Faychan said, "I did not think you cared about him. You have ignored his requests for an audience."

Dreibrand vaguely replied that he had his reasons for keeping his distance.

Although curious about those reasons, Faychan reported, "He has not been talkative, and our fraternization with his men makes him nervous, which reveals some intelligence. Other than that, he is young and unsure of himself."

"Do you think he is ambitious?" Dreibrand said.

"He is not flawed by it, like you and me," Faychan joked and Dreibrand had to give up a quick smile before Faychan continued. "What are you hoping to get him to do?"

"Stab Sandin in the back, I suppose," Dreibrand growled.

"Not entirely realistic," Faychan murmured.

"Sandin could make it easy," Dreibrand said knowingly. "But I was mostly thinking of courting Fanlyre's friendship because he is a commissioned officer. When we defeat Sandin, he could encourage his soldiers to follow me." He stopped to consider the details again and was troubled.

Faychan advised firmly, "He will be your enemy for certain if you do not try."

"True enough," Dreibrand said. He pushed himself away from the table and thanked Faychan for the informative conversation. Fired by his sense of purpose, Dreibrand stood up quickly, but then paused on his way to the door. Looking over his shoulder, he said quietly, "Faychan, about what happened to Atarek. Keep it quiet. As a favor to both of us."

"Yes, of course," Faychan said.

He watched the blanket swing back into place over the doorway after Dreibrand left. Dreibrand's receptiveness to the direction that Faychan hoped to steer the coming war encouraged him.

36. Conquest Before Treaty

During lunch, Madame Fayeth observed the growing familiarity between her daughter and Tytido. His language lessons that dragged on for entire afternoons had not avoided her notice, and she doubted that linguistic development alone motivated him.

Madame Fayeth felt her normal urge to sever her daughter from the male attention, but Tytido had been so kind and generous. He gave up his bed every night so Hanshen could be comfortable, and, unlike her situation with her late husband, Madame Fayeth was reluctant to display hostility toward a male while living in his house.

Lydea and Tytido exchanged smiles across the table, and Madame Fayeth chewed her food without tasting it.

"Are you ready to watch more sparring this afternoon, Hanshen?" Atarek asked.

The boy lifted his eyes from the food that he had been pretending to eat. "This morning wore me out. I want to stay here," he said.

Jolen noted the wan response.

Instantly distracted from her daughter, Madame Fayeth brushed a lock of her son's lengthening hair behind his ear and patted his shoulder. He was not old enough to let his hair grow so long, but she did not have the heart to deny him the Atrophaney sign of manhood.

"Are you feeling bad?" she whispered.

Hanshen shrugged. Aware of the strain that he put on his mother, he wanted to discourage her worry. He told her that he was simply tired.

Jolen knew differently. The boy's condition had initially improved after treatments of healing magic, but the effects were slowly fading. The rys physician was uncertain of his next step.

Madame Fayeth tapped Hanshen's plate. "Finish your lunch and then you can take a nap while I write some letters."

"Make sure to tell Uncle Ramos that I am doing fine," Hanshen said sternly, invigorated by his hurt feelings. His father's brother had wanted them to stay in Atrophane. And although Hanshen was of a tender age, he knew it was because of his inheritance and not out of any genuine concern for him. Hanshen loved his mother fiercely for her daring, and he wanted to make sure that her success was rubbed in the faces of their greedy relatives.

"I will be sure to do that," Madame Fayeth assured him.

"You know, I should send a letter home," Atarek said, puzzled that he had not thought of it before. Recalling the one quick note he had sent to his parents before leaving Cros, Atarek assumed that his parents now considered him insane after reading that he was going west to search for Dreibrand.

"Oh, of course," Madame Fayeth agreed. "Your parents would be delighted to learn that both of their children live."

"Yeah," Atarek grunted as he realized why he had not thought of writing home before. "But there is no way Fanlyre is going to send along my letter."

Madame Fayeth quickly came up with a solution. "Atarek, I will include your letter inside a letter that I send to one of my relatives who I trust. Then, she can forward it to your family."

"You are so kind," Atarek said sincerely. "Let us do that, but we still have no guarantee that the letters will not be inspected by the military."

Madame Fayeth frowned and silently cursed Sandin Promentro's name again. "I will endeavor to persuade Fanlyre to smuggle my letters. I will beg him for the privacy I deserve in my family matters. He is a decent man, really. He might oblige me."

"We can hope," Atarek muttered. He pushed back his plate and got up from the table. "Well, I am off to find my brother. He should write our parents as well. Maybe offer them an apology for letting them think he was dead all these years."

He bid his companions good day and advised Hanshen to get some rest. Yawning, Atarek said, "I could use a nap myself, Han."

"Maybe if you did not spend the night carousing, you would not be so tired," Madame Fayeth declared, unwilling to miss a chance to scold him for his drinking.

"My dear Madame, I was hardly carousing," Atarek assured her. "You should join me tonight so you can see how well I behave."

Madame Fayeth cast her eyes down as if he had said something indecent.

"I will leave it as an open invitation then," Atarek said and departed.

Tytido and Lydea had paid little attention to the conversation. They maintained eye contact while eating quietly.

As the others finished eating, Lydea dutifully began to clear the dishes. As she picked up Tytido's plate, he said, "I have time for a lesson this afternoon."

"I thought you had to train with the warriors," Lydea said, trying to appear disinterested and appease her mother.

"I can do as I please," Tytido said.

"As you wish," Lydea said.

While Lydea continued to pick up, Madame Fayeth took her son into the bedroom. Jolen followed, intending to give Hanshen a quick exam. Lydea smiled to Tytido as he went out the door, but concern for her brother distracted her from anticipating her tutoring appointment. Hanshen's illness had become normal to her, but enjoying herself while Hanshen suffered made her feel guilty.

Tytido went outside and sat under a tree that grew near his house. He fidgeted impatiently with the grass, plucking a few blades from the ground and wiping the soil from the roots. Atrophane vocabulary and grammar were not on his mind.

After what felt to him like an entire day, Lydea emerged from his house carrying her small folio of papers. Tytido rose to greet her. Although he was excited to finally have some semi-privacy with her, he noticed her sad expression.

"You worry about your brother," he surmised.

Lydea shrugged. "It is hard after seeing him do better. He was fine this morning, but now he is weakening again. I heard Jolen whispering to my mother about it."

"Jolen helped him before. He can do it again," Tytido encouraged.

Lydea nodded. Her brother had known far more desperate moments than this mild relapse. Opening her folio, she searched for the point where they had concluded the last writing lesson.

Over the weeks, Tytido had overcome much of his shyness around Lydea, and he reached out and took one of her hands. With his other hand, he shut the folio. "We should do something else today," he suggested.

Lydea stared at his hand that covered her hand. She resisted the urge to look back to see if her mother was watching from the doorway. Lydea liked the contact of their skin that made her heart quicken. Tytido moved his thumb over her fingers, enhancing.

"What is something else?" Lydea asked bravely.

"We can go for a ride up the High Road and see the valley," he answered.

A tingle deep down in Lydea's stomach warned her that being alone with him would tempt her flesh in ways she did not know. Although uncertain, she wanted to experience the temptation.

Despite her desires, Lydea had been conditioned by her vigilant mother and automatically said, "I will have to ask my mother."

Tytido said, "I understand, in Atrophane, women are free to do as they please."

"They do not have my mother," Lydea countered. "She will be angry with me."

"She will forgive you," Tytido said. "Come. It will be fun. And, ah, soon, my duties will take me away from you."

Thinking of the war that occupied his future, Lydea could not deny herself the chance to spend a lovely late summer afternoon alone with him.

When she agreed, Tytido gave her hand a happy squeeze before letting go. They hurried to saddle some horses. Tytido moved fast because he was eager to attend to his romantic business, and Lydea was afraid that her mother would notice her departure.

Tytido assisted Lydea onto her horse. She was not dressed for riding, and he enjoyed how her skirt pulled up past her knees when she sat in the saddle. Her delicate leg wear represented a feminine treasure next to the smooth saddle leather. The sight of her silk stockings from some fancy shop in distant Atrophane rewarded him with an unexpected rush of confident excitement.

Instead of taking the High Road around the south rim, as when people normally traveled to

Elendra, Tytido headed up the north loop of the road. This route was little traveled and turf still spread over the ancient stones of the road. In places, erosion had dragged the hills over the road, and they had to ride over the rough ground. Despite the centuries of neglect, the original surface that had been carved from the land remained for the most part, and the ghostly outline of the road wound up the mountainside.

"Is it safe to be out here?" Lydea asked after the settlement receded from view and only empty wilds surrounded her. "I have been told about the fen, the fentha—"

"Fenthakrabi," Tytido said. "Do you not think that you are safe with me?"

"Well," she hesitated, trying to be generous. "I heard that the beast can kill many men at once."

Becoming more serious, Tytido conceded that they were very dangerous. "But it is a forest creature. One has never been seen on the High Road."

"Then, I shall insist that we not go into the forest," Lydea said.

"No, we will not," Tytido agreed. "I would not go into the forest without some warriors. It is a wild place, even to us." Tytido then related his smaller excursion into the forest on his way to Elendra in which he had seen a fenthakrabi fight a mother bear.

"Oh, I think Vetanium is enough of the Wilderness for me," Lydea said.

Her comment bothered Tytido and he quickly tried to alter her opinion. "Nufal is a beautiful place, and once a great rys civilization occupied this valley. Humans lived here as well. Come, just a little farther and you will see."

They had been riding around the mountain to the north of Vetanium, gradually gaining elevation, and Tytido knew they would soon reach a point that overlooked the valley.

Tytido hurried up the road and Lydea urged her horse to follow. She gasped when her horse faltered, and he immediately looked back with concern. The horse was fine, but Lydea had been frightened when it stumbled.

Straightening herself, she patted the horse's neck. A little embarrassed, she said, "I do not ride as well as you. I am really a city girl."

Despite her claims of urban ineptitude, Tytido admired her perseverance. In his eyes, she did not look foreign to the land. Her hazel eyes matched the sun-dried plains that unfolded in the vista behind her.

"You came across the Wilderness, Lydea. I am sure you can handle one short trip up a road," Tytido encouraged.

"You know, Tytido, calling this a road takes some imagination," she commented.

"In Nufal, this counts as quite a good road," he insisted.

They ascended a steep switchback and emerged on a ledge. Lydea exclaimed with delight as she saw the panoramic view. Below her, a dense forest filled the oval valley. Mountains ringed the forest like proud family members gathered around a newborn's crib. Lesser peaks attended the broad snow-capped mountains that dominated the hazy distances to the north, east, and south. But the massive ruins rising from the forest impressed Lydea the most. She had not guessed that the Tabren Mountains concealed the architecture of such an advanced society. The temple jutting from the canopy was higher than the largest building in Cros, and, for the first time, the mysteries of the Wilderness truly excited Lydea. Atrophane was not the greatest realm that had ever been.

Tytido dismounted and held her horse's bridle while she got down.

"It is amazing," she breathed, and Tytido was delighted to see the wonder in her eyes.

Walking her to the edge of the road, he said, "The city you see in the forest has by far the largest ruins, but there are ruined cities all the way around the valley, like Vetanium. This road connects them all." He swept his hand in a circle to indicate the locations of the other cities.

Eagerly, she began to scan the valley and he continued, "We know of five ruined cities, not including the forest city. There is Vetanium and the second settlement of Elendra. To the south, on

the prairie, is an old town, and far back in the mountains is what we call the Secret City." Remembering the chilling scream from the canyon, he added his belief that Tempet and Alloi had come from the Secret City.

Pointing to the north rim, he continued, "And there, almost directly overlooking the forest city, is the fifth ruin."

"I think I see something," Lydea said. "Some broken walls maybe."

"I know it does not look like much at this distance," Tytido apologized, wishing that a grand, shining city lorded over the valley. Stepping close behind Lydea, he put a hand on her shoulder. "That is where my settlement will be. All the surrounding lands will be my estates. I plan to build a new city and call it Lydeaem." He punctuated his statement by kissing her neck and sliding his other hand around her hip and down into the crease above her thigh.

Lydea inhaled sharply and looked over her shoulder, drawn by his browsing lips. Tytido felt her tense in his arms, but it was a good tension created by the sudden injection of affection. As her head turned, he switched from nuzzling her ear to kissing her cheek. Quickly, he arrived at her lips, turned her body, and embraced her fully.

Their kiss deepened, and mutual desires flared, swiftly increasing in intensity. Lydea wrangled with temptation as pleasure enticed her body toward freedom. The power of her feelings startled her and she attempted to retreat. Pulling away from Tytido, she tried to locate her rational mind. Even as she groped for control, the lingering energy of his touches and kisses beckoned her to return.

Tytido resisted his urge to simply pull her back to his hungry lips. He believed that she wanted him, but he accepted that he had to let her reach that conclusion for herself. Her virginal uncertainty was endearing to him as well, and he relished how much his advances had flustered her.

With the breeze cooling her wet lips, Lydea avoided eye contact and said, "Why do you want to name your settlement Lydeaem?"

Tytido said, "That is how to use your language to name the city after you, right?"

"Yes, it is correct, but, but why?" Lydea asked again although she could guess at his reasons.

"Because I want you to come live there with me—as my wife," he answered.

"Wife?" she repeated sharply and took a step back.

Her reaction wounded him and revived hurt feelings from a previous attempt to marry. Before the war with Onja, he had been betrothed to a woman from his tribe. As was typical among the Hirqua, it had been an arranged match, but he had looked forward to his marriage after winning wealth and glory in the war. But when his betrothed had learned of his intention to move to the Wilderness, she had refused to marry him. Her family had agreed with her, and Tytido had been obligated to accept the refund of his brideprice. He had left his homeland as a single and humiliated man.

That rejection had burned deeply into his pride, but time had healed the pain. Eventually, he was glad that the Hirqua woman was not with him.

"I know the Wilderness can be a difficult place for a woman to live," he said, attempting to reason with her fears. "But we can live better than I do now. I will have a big house built for you, and you can have as many servants as you want." He restrained himself from moving closer to her in his excitement. "Lydea, you will be a noblewoman, ruling class. I am wealthy. I offer you life at the top of society."

Lydea blinked hard. The strong breeze tugged strands of her golden hair in conflicting directions.

"Tytido," she murmured. Searching for words, she studied the man whose kind attention made him more attractive with each passing day. Confronted by his passions and desire for commitment all at once, she could not think straight. Only desire and fear stimulated her mind. Tytido stood before her, a handsome strong man. Any woman could potentially find him appealing. He had charmed her as he struggled through his shyness, but she had noticed the intensity that lurked inside him. As he sparred that morning, she had seen him strike with fierce speed. He was a warrior, a killer. Alone on the mountainside, he could make her do anything. Although frightened, Lydea found the thought thrilling.

"I did not expect you to ask me to marry you," she finally said.

"I hoped you would like it," he said, and she detected vulnerability and sadness in his voice. "Lydea, I love you, and I promise to always treat you well." When he saw that his words touched her, he decided that her answer could wait. She was overwhelmed and uncertain, but when Tytido had held her briefly in his arms, he had felt a definite willingness.

Conquest often came before treaty, and he took her in his arms again. She did not resist him. The delights of taking a lover were easy to accept.

A bedroll was always with his saddle, and he pulled out the blanket and spread it on the grass. Their eager kissing and caressing quickly weakened their limbs until they lay down together. Tytido pried away her clothing, savoring every bit of skin revealed by his efforts. When Lydea was afraid, he distracted her with the pleasures that the mind is never prepared for the first time.

In an ecstasy of achievement, Tytido made love to her. He was mindful of her tenderness and tried to remain gentle. There were no words when they were finished. Lydea was obviously contemplating her first sexual experience, and Tytido held her lovingly. As he had predicted, upon having her, he never wanted to let her go.

After many sleepless nights of anticipating this moment, his desire returned quickly, and he joined with her again without ceremony. Her gasps and soft cries invigorated his passion until they reached a heavy-breathing climax. Pushing himself up, Tytido kissed her breasts, admiring the nipples surrounded by her creamy skin. Lydea smiled to him dreamily, grateful for the experience.

A third coupling soon followed, and afterward, they lay side-by-side, looking into each other's eyes. Tytido traced a finger along her cheekbones and jaw. "Lydea," he said. "I am a Lord of Nufal. I will not sneak around to be with you. We shall arrange a place to stay together."

Lydea giggled. When Tytido asked her what was so funny, she said, "My mother is really going to make a scene."

Concern replaced Tytido's blissful expression. "I will talk to her. Tell her that I will marry you," he said.

Lydea rolled over and moved on her hands and knees toward her nearest item of clothing. Her bare buttocks, rosy in the setting sun, briefly mesmerized Tytido.

Beginning to dress, she said, "Tytido, we have no reason to rush about this. I prefer that I spoke to my mother on my own. She will be angry with me for going out with you today. I would spare you her rage."

"I am not afraid of your mother," he insisted.

"You are a brave man," Lydea complimented and her accompanying smile made Tytido melt with affection for her. He longed to hold her again, but the day was ending and it would be dark before they got back to the settlement as it was.

"Then, you will tell her that you want to stay with me?" he asked.

Lydea hated to make a commitment, but her body was ripened by recent pleasures, and she accepted that she would want to feel that way again. Tytido looked better than ever now. The curious desire that his masculinity had inspired before was now replaced by genuine craving.

"I can make my mother understand that she will not keep me from seeing you," Lydea said. The bold words surprised her, and she knew her days of childhood obedience were ending.

Slightly appeased by her promise, Tytido dressed and gathered the horses that were grazing near the road. Lydea was admiring the golden blaze of sunlight on the temple ruin when he led the horses over to her.

"I want to marry you soon," he said, returning to the subject. He still hoped to accomplish every objective while out riding.

With the interior of Nufal spread out in front of her, Lydea recognized how much he was offering her, but it did not make it easy to forsake Atrophane.

"Tytido," she said and looked at him. "I do not know. Just because of what we did today does not

mean..." She trailed off when she saw how her words hurt him. She had not guessed at how swift her regret would be for saying anything that caused him pain. Wanting to undo the damage, she gave him a quick kiss and added, "I will think about it, I promise. People do not just make love once and then get married."

Slipping his arms around her tightly, Tytido kept her close. "How many times before you will marry me then?" he said.

Lydea laughed and pushed him away. "I do not know."

Tytido relented. As they rode back to Vetanium, he realized that she was acting just as Dreibrand had predicted she would act.

She can play her games, but I will not let her refuse me, Tytido thought firmly.

Night came before they returned to the settlement. From the windows of his house, light defied the darkness, watchful and unblinking. As they entered his front yard, the door opened, and the judgmental silhouette of Madame Fayeth greeted their arrival.

"Tytido, maybe you should go," Lydea whispered.

The darkness hid his smile. Lydea did not grasp that her mother did not intimidate him.

As they dismounted, Madame Fayeth marched a couple steps outside. "Where have you been?" she demanded.

"We went riding, Mother," Lydea said. She was trying to be brave, but her voice quavered.

"What makes you think you can do something like that?" Madame Fayeth snarled.

"I wanted to see more of the country, Mother," Lydea explained meekly.

Taking her hand, Tytido said, "Madame Fayeth, your daughter was safe with me." Madame Fayeth clenched her teeth. "Lydea, get in the house," she ordered.

Tytido stopped Lydea's hand from sliding out of his grip. He said, "Madame Fayeth, please do not be angry with Lydea. I invited her to go riding."

"How dare you invite my daughter anywhere?" Madame Fayeth exploded.

Impassive toward her fury, Tytido said nothing. Confronted by his silence, Madame Fayeth's hostile posture shriveled. The light from Tytido's house was spilling across her shoes, and she deserved to be thrown out for her rudeness.

"Lydea! You are home. We were worried." Hanshen called from the doorway, and his small voice diffused the situation slightly.

Pleased to see him up, Lydea acknowledged him happily.

Sensing that her mother was, for once, embarrassed by her yelling, Lydea took a little control. Quietly she said, "Mother, can we talk together reasonably?"

No, Madame Fayeth thought automatically. She could not be reasonable when every maternal fiber of her being told her that she had failed to protect Lydea. Madame Fayeth glowered at Tytido, still wanting to yell at him. Madame Fayeth knew why men tempted young women out for tours of the countryside.

Considering her mother's silence the best she could hope for, Lydea pulled her hand free. "Tytido, I will see you tomorrow," she said.

Although unperturbed by Madame Fayeth's required hostility, Tytido was instantly distressed by Lydea's dismissal. He did not want to spend the night apart from her. He did not ever want to spend another night apart from her. His instinct was to claim total possession of her, but his heart told him not to upset his beautiful young lover.

Reluctantly he said good night to both women. He draped Lydea with a longing look before turning to gather the horses. He wondered what she would talk to her mother about. He hoped that she would excitedly relay the news of his marriage proposal. His cultural compulsion was to discuss the

proposal with Madame Fayeth and negotiate brideprice, but apparently, the Atrophaney women had other conventions.

When he returned to Ven's cottage, his snoring cousin did not compare to the joy of making love to Lydea. Tytido stretched out in his small bed and ached for her to be with him.

37. A Warning for Cevlead

Loyalty to a lord who disregards your interests is foolishness – Galmonlay, hero of Atrophane's classic age.

With so many crucial decisions to make, Dreibrand sought inspiration from those who most needed him to make the right choices. He played with his children.

The boys rewarded his company with good behavior and exuberant play. Dreibrand descended into the fatherly world that only challenged him to entertain two small boys. Even Esseldan forgot his sorrow during the wrestling games and twice burst out laughing. Deltane squealed through his efforts, often begging for release and then giggling excitedly when he applied a fresh grip on his father.

Rayda watched as the males grappled playfully. She shouted warnings and offered encouragement at random, without showing loyalty to anyone in particular. When Dreibrand tired, he let the boys go and rolled onto his back.

Deltane promptly flopped over his father's torso. "I got you! I got you pinned! I win!" he cried with delight.

"The wrestling match was over," Dreibrand said.

"But I did not stop fighting," Deltane insisted proudly.

Although it was only boyish rhetoric meant to declare a victory, Dreibrand pondered the statement. He likened Deltane looming over him to his own plan to intimidate the Empire into removing the censure. He would be as a small boy claiming to pin a grown man. Was it really possible?

Only if the man is your father, Dreibrand thought.

"That is enough, Deltane," Dreibrand said and tickled his son's ribs to make him get up.

Deltane grabbed his father in a tight hug. Despite the fun they had been having, Dreibrand could feel the need for reassurance radiating from the child. With the little arms around his neck, Dreibrand desperately tried to think of a way to succeed. Deltane's future was at stake.

He held his son in his strong arms and sat up. Looking past Deltane's curly head, Dreibrand saw Atarek walking up the path.

Waving to his brother, Atarek said, "You accuse me of not taking things seriously, and here I find you rolling on the ground with children."

"I followed your example and decided to have some fun," Dreibrand said lightly although seeing his brother made his anger at Sandin return like an ulcer.

"I did not say have clean wholesome fun," Atarek corrected him. "But you will be glad to know, Dreiby, that I decided to listen to you and be serious. I would talk with you."

Dreibrand nodded and gently coaxed Deltane into releasing him. After standing and brushing dirt and bits of grass from his clothes, Dreibrand told the children to continue playing outside. Rayda and Esseldan were already complying, but Deltane pouted for his father's attention.

"I need to talk to your uncle," Dreibrand explained. He looked into his son's eyes, wanting him to

understand.

"Our conversation would bore you, boy," Atarek said.

Reluctantly Deltane accepted that his interlude with his father was over and joined his playmates. When Dreibrand and Atarek entered the house, Dreibrand lifted his dozing daughter out of her basket. Sahleen attentively came out of the kitchen with her toddler trailing her.

"Do you need me, Lord Dreibrand?" she asked.

"Could you take the children to your house," he said.

Sahleen gathered up her baby boy and steered her toddler toward the door. "I will come back for Victoria," she said.

Dreibrand and Atarek tickled the baby girl's chin while Dreibrand bounced her gently in his arms.

Talking to the baby, Atarek predicted, "Victoria, you are going to be so pretty when you grow up. You will make your father bald with worry when you get interested in boys."

"She will not," Dreibrand insisted and pulled her a little closer. "She will charm people into obedience with her beauty and wit, and be a source of security in my old age."

After smiling stupidly at her cute little face, Atarek said, "I still am not used to seeing you with children, Dreiby."

"You are not used to thinking about our family having a future," Dreibrand said.

Troubled by the comment, Atarek stopped smiling. With his innocent niece in front of him, accepting the status of their House within the Empire was more difficult.

Sahleen returned and Dreibrand gave his daughter to the wet nurse. As Sahleen went out, she looked back with a curious flash of her dark eyes.

Once the brothers were alone, Atarek stated his business. "Dreibrand, I am going to send a letter home with Madame Fayeth's letters. I want to tell Mother and Father that we are all right. I think you should write them and, well, explain yourself."

Dreibrand huffed like an annoyed teenager. "What do they care about me? I assumed my disappearance relieved them," he said.

Offended, Atarek said, "Do not hide behind your hurt feelings. We never did anything to deserve thinking that you were dead."

"I did not think you would care," Dreibrand said.

"You did not think I would care?" Atarek cried and pointed at himself.

Unable to dodge his guilt, Dreibrand murmured, "I did not think our parents would care."

"Why not?" Atarek said.

Venting a lifetime of anger, Dreibrand yelled, "Oh, come on, Atarek! You know they liked you best. They wished that I did not even exist."

Atarek was aware of the favoritism that Dreibrand accused their parents of practicing. Atarek had consciously tried to make up for it by taking Dreibrand into his heart. Even so, Atarek intended to defend his parents. "Dreibrand, it was not easy for them. Father felt bad because he had little to give you. And Mother, by the Gods, Dreibrand, the Empire censured her children. Your birth just doubled her disgrace."

Dreibrand crossed his arms, refusing to be sympathetic. "I know, Atarek, she mentioned it to me many times."

Atarek accepted that he could not undo the years of bitterness that Dreibrand had endured, but Atarek wanted to coax his brother toward pitying their mother. "She cried when the letter came from the military saying you were gone. She cried and regretted how she had treated you. I saw her," Atarek said.

"Then I prefer to let her think I am dead if that is the only way she can love me," Dreibrand declared.

"You do not know what it was like!" Atarek shouted. "You do not know how the censure devastated Mother and Father. I was only five, but I remember everything the way it was before, before Grandfather fell out of favor with the Darmar. We were so wealthy and so powerful, and it all fell apart. And we had to watch the execution. I had to see them kill my grandfather. I knew him Dreibrand. He adored me and I had to watch him die. You were safe in Mother's womb, protected from the horror of watching your whole society turn against you. You never understood what they did to us. You only criticized us for doing nothing. You never understood that if we had challenged our censure, the Empire would have chopped all our heads off!"

Atarek stopped. He was breathing hard, and the childhood memories of the axe, of Baner Veta's falling head, and of spouting blood banged inside Atarek's head liked caged lunatics.

Atarek had never spoken so vividly of the execution, and Dreibrand imagined how it might have influenced a five-year-old boy.

Allowing himself to consider Atarek's view for once, Dreibrand said, "Maybe you are right, At. Maybe I do not understand. But I could never just accept it and suffer quietly. I had to believe that I could undo the damage. Rebuild our fortune, regain our power."

Atarek heard the sincerity of his brother's beliefs. He had heard Dreibrand speak like this before, usually as they argued.

"I know what you believed," Atarek said. "And deep down I admired your courage, even if I thought it was foolish. How else do you think you convinced me to pay your tuition to that damn military school?"

"You made me beg every semester," Dreibrand recalled. He was not proud of it, but he had always needed to pester Atarek, who had a substantially larger allowance from their father, to pay the academy.

"And then you got your commission and never came back," Atarek said. "You hurt me, Brother. You were all I had and you left me."

Confronted by his callous actions, Dreibrand regretted discarding his brother from his life. Atarek had not deserved such treatment. "Atarek, I am so sorry," he apologized.

Deflated by his brother's regret, Atarek admitted, "I know, Dreiby. Perhaps I gave you a few reasons to spurn me as well."

At that moment, being brothers was more important to Dreibrand than allowing either of them to continue carrying their resentments. Trying to explain actions that seemed so cold, Dreibrand said, "I should have sent you word that I was alive – and sent the money I owe you. That is so obvious to me now. But in my desire for a new life, I shoved my homeland out of my heart, but I should not have excluded you."

When Atarek considered the settlement around him and Dreibrand's new wealth, he could understand how his brother had been so distracted from old family ties. "I guess I understand, Dreiby, and I even forgive you for hurting me. I can see how driven you are by your precious ambitions. But you must write our parents. It is your duty."

Dreibrand contained his comment about the irony of Atarek reminding him about duty. "I will do it because you ask, Atarek," he said. "But the chances of our messages reaching home cannot be good."

Pleased that his brother would personally write home, Atarek quickly explained his plan to implant his correspondence into one of Madame Fayeth's letters.

Unable to share Atarek's confidence in the plan, Dreibrand warned, "That will only be possible if we can persuade Fanlyre to be sympathetic to our needs."

Atarek shook his head, displaying his general dislike of Fanlyre. "No. Do not even discuss it with him. Our best bet is to have Madame Fayeth appeal to him, which she plans to do. He may smuggle her letters if he has any honor," he said.

"I want Fanlyre to be more than a courier," Dreibrand said, seizing the segue to discuss his

ambitious goals. "I am going to warn him not to oppose me in the coming war. Offer to reward him if he is loyal to me."

Atarek laughed with disbelief. *You have such thoughts, Little Brother.* "Dreibrand, what are you talking about? He is not going to do anything for us," Atarek criticized.

"We should at least sound him out," Dreibrand urged.

"We?" Atarek said defensively. During his long travels with Fanlyre, Atarek had far exceeded his conversational needs with the man.

"We should not just dismiss Fanlyre as an enemy," Dreibrand explained.

Atarek said, "He is Sandin's lackey. I do not want you talking to him."

"Is that an order?" Dreibrand said.

"I would like it to be," Atarek grumbled.

With an intuitive leap, Dreibrand understood that his brother did not want him talking to Fanlyre because Fanlyre might mention what Sandin had done. Dreibrand turned away from his brother and steadied his emotions with a deep breath.

He listened to Atarek rummage in the cabinet and then cuss softly when he discovered that Miranda had relocated the liquor supply.

Dreibrand asked, "Atarek, where is the jade stallion ring?"

The silence was not long, but Dreibrand knew it was the exact amount of time that his brother took to contrive a lie.

Atarek answered that he had left it in Atrophane.

"Where?" Dreibrand said, turning to confront his brother.

"In a whore's purse," Atarek snapped irritably and slammed the cabinet shut.

Dreibrand knew that the ring reserved for the Veta heir was the one small item from which Atarek extracted some family pride. Great men in the family had worn it for generations, including their grandfather, and Atarek had valued it greatly.

Deciding not to bother confronting him about the lie, Dreibrand demanded, "Did Sandin Promentro take it from you?"

Atarek's jaw dropped. Eight years had allowed him to forget how smart his brother was. Collecting himself slightly, he said, "Did some magic rys tell you?"

"After I noticed that it was missing, I suspected something had happened to you at the Wilderness fort. Today, I learned that Sandin attacked you," Dreibrand said. He kept his voice even and compassionate.

"Did Fanlyre tell you?" Atarek said with a sinister tone.

Dreibrand explained that the soldiers had repeated the story of the incident.

"It was nothing," Atarek said quickly.

Watching Atarek rub his ring finger, Dreibrand chose not to pursue any details about the attack.

"At, I am sorry that my problems with Promentro caused him to hurt you," Dreibrand said.

Atarek brushed by his brother and plopped into a chair. He had wanted his brother to avoid feeling guilty about the whole thing. "Dreiby, it was nothing," he said, but the vindictive curl of his lips contradicted his words.

With his guilt now confessed, Dreibrand pushed toward the next logical subject. He leaned over Atarek and grabbed his broad shoulders. "We are going to get Sandin. We are going to kick him out of the west, and we will make the imperium revoke our censure," he announced. His voice was

stern, like the swift strike of sharpened steel against an enemy. Dreibrand spoke with the voice that rouses warriors to the fight. The voice that convinces men to kill for honor, for country, or just because it is good to win.

Atarek marveled at the confidence his brother displayed. The intense focus of Dreibrand's blue eyes indicated that he was already seeing his victory, and Atarek suddenly wanted to see it as well. For the first time, Atarek realized how war had changed his brother. The ambitious young man who had left Atrophane eight years ago was now a conqueror who always did everything on his own terms. He was not the Lord of Nufal by happy accident.

"Bold words," Atarek whispered.

Dreibrand had expected his brother's usual pessimism, and the flicker of interest from Atarek was encouraging.

Dreibrand let his brother go and started to pace. He spouted his enthusiasm. "This war forces me to be bold. As much as I wish that it was not happening, I must seize the opportunity. If Sandin is actually going to invade my territory, I must make it a terrible defeat for Atrophane. Then, we can negotiate terms." He stopped and grinned. "Anything you want to ask the Empire for, Brother?"

"I would like them to send out a good bottle of wine from the Truliam Hills," Atarek said with a fond chuckle. "Really, Dreiby, you are not going to get Sandin to negotiate anything."

Dreibrand's grin withered as he considered Sandin. "I do not foresee being merciful with Sandin Promentro," he said.

Although Atarek had his appetite whetted for revenge, he did not take his brother's statement lightly. "Noble killing noble is not going to make us any friends."

"This is not about making friends. It is about power. When I defeat Sandin in the Wilderness, I will be the man with the power in the western Empire," Dreibrand said.

Raising his hands, Atarek shook his head. "Dreibrand, slow down. What are you thinking? The Empire will never accept it."

"They will if Jingtun supports us. You forget that rys are involved as well, and Shan can make mighty demands," Dreibrand said.

"Has the rys King said he would do this for you?" Atarek asked.

Dreibrand responded that he still needed to discuss it with Shan.

"What if he says no?" Atarek said.

Concern that Shan might reject him did not trouble Dreibrand. The trials that stood between them and victory were the greatest obstacle. He looked into the deep well of his courage. He would have to be brave, as brave as when he faced Onja.

"Shan will say yes," he predicted. "Because I will face Tempet and Alloi in battle, and for that he will reward me."

"You sound so certain," Atarek commented.

"Shan is generous," Dreibrand said.

Atarek groaned and complained that it all sounded very risky.

"But if we do not take everything from Sandin, pick clean his bones, we risk more," Dreibrand insisted. "What of our parents? They could be punished if we satisfy ourselves with only the defense of Nufal. Atarek, think about your inheritance. You want your estate to be yours when you go home."

Uncomfortable thoughts twisted Atarek's face as he untangled the variables that his brother described. He had given no thought to going home, but maintaining the ancestral home of the Vetas was his duty.

"All right. Do as you think best, Dreiby," he said.

Atarek's approval elated Dreibrand more than he would have imagined. It helped relieve his guilt for causing Atarek so much grief. "Will you help me, At? Are we in this together?" Dreibrand asked eagerly.

"I suppose there is not anything else to do for fun around here," Atarek said. "You are going to get us killed, Dreiby, but perhaps it will be more entertaining than drinking myself into an early grave."

Dreibrand frowned, "The warrior pictures only success," he said.

"Ah, showing off that military education I paid for," Atarek said. "But really, do you know what you are going to do?"

"Not exactly," Dreibrand admitted. "But let us start with Fanlyre."

Showing a little embarrassment, Atarek said, "If you really want to try convincing him to join us, or whatever, fine, but I am afraid I might have already messed that up. You see, when we first got here, I threatened his life."

"When?" Dreibrand asked. He was surprised that Atarek had done something discreetly.

Atarek explained that it was only a quick threat and his reason for making it. "Actually, I should go kill him right now," he added casually.

"Could you indulge me and wait?" Dreibrand said.

Graciously, Atarek promised to contain his murderous rage. He felt close to his brother again. As close as ever.

Hidden by a new moon night, Dreibrand and his brother followed the stream out of Vetanium. The trail through the trees was rough, but the fresh scent of the nearby water was reassuring.

The slender message that Dreibrand carried in his pocket was a great bulk in his mind. After asking Miranda to arrange a private meeting with Fanlyre, Dreibrand had written his parents a letter. He would entrust it to Madame Fayeth when his errand with Fanlyre was complete. Although Dreibrand never expected his parents to get it, the act of putting ink to paper and communicating with them had troubled him. After Atarek's lecture, Dreibrand nearly felt guilt, but his dislike for his parents remained firm. He could not imagine that thinking he was dead was a crushing burden to them. After their disinterested and apathetic rearing, he considered himself even. The thought of his mother crying over his loss was endearing, but Dreibrand was beyond the need for craving her affection. He had the pleasure now of watching his children happy with their parents and that was enough.

Atarek slapped at a mosquito on his neck and simultaneously batted some foliage away from his face. "Why are we out here?" he whispered.

Annoyed, Dreibrand wondered why his brother bothered to whisper as he blundered through the night. *He is lost without a tavern light to guide him*, Dreibrand thought as he continued quietly along the dark path.

"Because it is such a nice night," Dreibrand whispered back playfully.

They emerged into a clearing. Water bubbled nearby on its way into the dense forest, and the heavy bows of an old maple tree arched overhead, creating a leafy dome between them and the stars. Warding crystals flashed beside the gnarled trunk when Miranda pushed her cloak away from her sword. Beside her, two almond-shaped eyes flared with blue light and fire sprang from the end of a torch. Captain Tulair held the torch that cast its light on Fanlyre.

Dreibrand went to Miranda and set a hand on her shoulder in a silent greeting.

"Why have I been brought here?" Fanlyre demanded. His authoritative tone failed to hide his nervousness.

With a smile, Dreibrand conveyed his approval to Miranda. She had prepped Fanlyre nicely by abruptly separating him from his soldiers with an invitation enforced by Tulair's presence.

"I have neglected you, Commander Fanlyre. I thought we should talk," Dreibrand said.

"Then why march me into the woods? A nobleman would invite me into his home for a civilized chat," Fanlyre said.

"Do forgive this drama, Commander," Dreibrand said. "It is for your benefit. Although I offer my friendship gladly, it may not serve you to have that known."

"I fail to see how I shall benefit from being dragged away into the night," Fanlyre said. Although he tried to be brave, his eyes were wide with fear as he looked from one Veta brother to the other.

"What is your first name?" Dreibrand asked.

"Why do you want to know?" Fanlyre said.

"I have decided that it is unfortunate that the House of Veta has no friends in Clan Fanlyre," Dreibrand said.

"Friends?" Fanlyre scoffed. "I will have nothing to do with you, traitor."

Atarek tensed, wanting to strike the man, but he restrained himself. He was curious to see if his brother could actually change the man's mind about anything.

Dreibrand continued, "And what has made me a traitor? I was making the Empire before you were even a cadet." Stepping closer to Fanlyre, Dreibrand hardened his voice. "You hurl insults at me out of ignorance. You let Sandin Promentro pollute your mind with his jealous lies. He calls me traitor because I would not allow my censured name to keep me from claiming territory. Lord Kwan and Sandin were going to prevent me from earning estate grants, as was my right as a noble and a commissioned officer. Does refusing to be a weakling make me a traitor?"

Fanlyre said nothing. His lack of response, however, seemed to appease Dreibrand, who simply asked for his name again.

"Cevlead," he said.

"Thank you, Cevlead," Dreibrand said.

Fanlyre was not impressed by Dreibrand's attempt to be amicable. "I am not going to tell you anything about the Darhet just because you are being friendly," he stated.

Chuckling, Dreibrand exchanged a look with Tulair. "My knowledge of Sandin's activities is far more current than anything you know," Dreibrand said.

Fanlyre looked at the rys standing next to him. He still had little understanding of rys powers. "Then what do you want from me? Why do you detain me? I can tell that I have become your prisoner. Your warriors took all our horses out to pasture and they guard them day and night," Fanlyre said.

"And I apologize for making you uncomfortable," Dreibrand said. "Actually, my brother wishes to apologize about something as well."

Atarek snorted with disbelief. He resented that Dreibrand was putting him on the spot, but when his brother looked at him expectantly, he rolled his eyes and said, "I am not going to kill you, Fanlyre."

"That is supposed to be an apology?" Fanlyre criticized.

"Look, I know your soldiers have been blabbing about what happened. You could have had the decency to keep them quiet," Atarek snarled.

Their dispute puzzled Miranda and Tulair, but they did not comment.

Looking genuinely unhappy, Fanlyre said, "I told you I did not agree about what happened."

"Of course not," Dreibrand interrupted. "How could you condone the Darhet's actions?"

"The Darhet does not look for me to condone his behavior," Fanlyre insisted.

"The Darhet," Dreibrand sneered. "You so want to please him and advance your career. Don't you, Commander? But I am sure you noticed right away that Sandin Promentro is difficult to please."

Fanlyre hid his recognition of the fact and clung to the hopes he placed in his mission. He had located Dreibrand, the settlement, and could give a thorough report about the strength of the Nufalese settlers and their activities. "You will not poison my mind against my Lord Darhet," he said and lifted his chin defiantly.

"I will leave that job to Sandin," Dreibrand said. "But, Lord Cevlead, as a fellow Atrophane, I would warn you that your Lord Darhet has made a mistake in joining Tempet and Alloi against Jingteng. I encourage you to stay here and avoid being involved in Sandin's demise."

Fanlyre narrowed his eyes. "Do not think you can twist my mind. I have heard of fresh rys graves in Jingteng. Your precious King Shan sent a peace proposal south so fast that he must be afraid to fight. Atrophane will win."

Blue sparks snapped in Tulair's eyes. Hearing a human speak so casually of the lost soldiers angered him. "Do not doubt the power of King Shan," he hissed. "It was because of him that Tempet and Alloi fled south desperate for allies."

Miranda entered the conversation. In the war against Onja, she had persuaded many men to serve the side of Shan, and her sincere loyalty to Shan was difficult to resist.

"Lord Cevlead, do not see weakness in Shan's peace proposal. He acts quickly to stop war because he hates violence. It rips his heart to pieces when people hurt each other. You should go to Jingteng and meet him before you decide to aid his enemies," Miranda advised.

"You should listen to my wife," Dreibrand said. "I have no desire to fight against Atrophane, and it brings me great sorrow to see my own countrymen misled by Tempet and Alloi, who have surely deluded Sandin. He knows better than to enter into a conflict with Jingteng. Lord Cevlead of Clan Fanlyre, I beg you to avoid the fate of Sandin."

As much as Fanlyre wanted to block out the arguments of his captors, he felt the force of their sincerity pry into his mind. Although disturbed by the news that the Darhet was suddenly embroiled with mysterious rys and planning to attack Jingteng, Fanlyre was not about to judge his Lord General. Fanlyre was the one wearing the uniform of Atrophane, whose insignia Dreibrand had shed years ago, and a renegade lord would not sway Fanlyre from serving his beloved Atrophane.

Miranda continued, "Lord Cevlead, you must understand that Tempet and Alloi are dangerous. They killed a servant in my home and several of our people. If you could have seen Tempet, you would not wish to serve him. He is terrible and vicious, a murderer, and we did not deserve his hate. I know your heart is loyal to Atrophane, but we ask you not to confuse your duty to the Empire with service to these beasts that have come to destroy the peace that Nufal has been without for thousands of years."

Her compelling speech loosened Fanlyre from his refuge of certainty, and he said, "I do not understand. There must have been a reason they attacked you."

"The reason is old and rotten," Tulair answered. The rys captain then told Fanlyre what he knew about the history of Jingteng and Nufal, and of the Great War.

Fanlyre struggled to grasp events that had taken place millennia ago and apply them to his situation.

Dreibrand said, "Jingteng was victorious in the past, Lord Cevlead. And Shan will win in the present. You should join us when Shan calls his war council. If you were to give your allegiance to Shan in his time of need, he would reward you with greater wealth than even the Empire can provide. Once the war is over, you could even have your choice of land to rule. Perhaps a whole province might be nice? I plan to remake the western Empire to suit me. To secure Nufal for my heirs and return the House of Veta to distinction in the Empire."

Fanlyre laughed. "You are mad. You cannot convince me to betray Sandin."

"Your words, not mine," Dreibrand said. "I would not put such ideas in your head. For if you return to Sandin, Tempet or Alloi will surely probe your mind with magic and uncover any plots you made with us. I could not ask you to endanger yourself like that. But I gladly invite you to stay."

Fanlyre became silent, unsettled by the possibility that a rys could extract this conversation from his mind and perhaps interpret it as colluding with Dreibrand. *Is he trying to trap me by simply having this discussion?* he thought.

Briefly, Fanlyre wondered if Dreibrand could be right about the Darhet being controlled by the rys who were hostile to Jington. If that were true, then the Darhet would technically no longer serve Atrophane, and Fanlyre would have a reason to withhold his loyalty.

Ashamed of himself, Cevlead Fanlyre sternly banished Dreibrand's invitation from consideration. It was too dangerous, and abandoning his allegiance to the Darhet based solely on the version of the facts presented by Promentro's enemies was absurd.

"You ask too much, Dreibrand Veta," Fanlyre said. "I can see that your censure gives you an excuse to operate outside the Empire, but I am not censured, nor do I have any desire to bring that fate upon my Clan."

"You will not stay then?" Dreibrand said.

"No, I cannot," Fanlyre said.

Miranda urged him to rethink his answer. She told him that, unlike Sandin Promentro, he had a chance to avoid entanglement with Tempet and Alloi. "Do not let yourself be counted as King Shan's enemy. As a noble lord of Atrophane, you can help your Empire build peace with Jington, and with us," she said.

Although genuinely enticed by the chance to meet the rys King, Fanlyre shook his head. His refusal clearly disappointed her, and he saw pity on her face, pity for him, and it made him afraid. She truly believed he should stay.

"Your decision is unfortunate," Dreibrand concluded. *He will believe me when he meets Tempet and Alloi*, he thought.

"What will you do with my men and me?" Fanlyre asked, assuming that his rejection had just condemned them all.

Dreibrand replied, "I gave you my pledge of peace. You are free to go, Lord Cevlead."

Surprised that he had not needed to appeal to Dreibrand for mercy, Fanlyre suddenly disliked the report that he would deliver to the Darhet about the settlement.

Fanlyre said, "I apologize if I have been rude, Dreibrand Veta, and to you as well, Atarek. Even as my Lord plots against you, you have been generous and honorable."

Although the words were appealing, Dreibrand cut him off. "Stop, Lord Cevlead. You have refused my invitation to stay as our friend, so speak no kind words to us. As I said, when you return to the Empire, you can expect Tempet and Alloi to scrutinize your mind because you have been in contact with their enemies."

The warning chilled Fanlyre. *Can rys magic really open my mind?*

Dreibrand continued, "Lord Cevlead, even if you return here as my enemy, I will not condemn you because your loyalty to Atrophane motivates you. This I know, and I forgive you in advance."

As Fanlyre contemplated the eerie absolution, a moth circling the torch cast an erratic shadow across his face before incinerating itself.

Miranda said, "Captain Tulair, could you escort our guest back to the settlement?"

The rys captain nodded and handed the torch to Miranda because he would not need its light. Tulair nudged Fanlyre in the proper direction.

Once Fanlyre was out of earshot, Atarek complained, "Well, you did not accomplish a damn thing, Dreiby."

"I have planted seeds, Brother," Dreibrand said cryptically. "Fanlyre does not yet understand the situation well enough to abandon his duty to his Lord General. I saw that right away. I hope that, when the time comes for the Atrophane to surrender to Shan, Fanlyre will judge me by my actions today and accept me as an honorable lord. When he returns to Sandin, he will see that we spoke the truth to him."

Not far away, a small animal shrieked as presumably a predator overtook it in the night. Atarek flinched and said, "Then, if that was all your plan was, why did we come out here?"

Miranda gestured toward the depths of the forest with the torch and answered, "To put memories of fear in Fanlyre's mind. He had to think he was going to be murdered when Tulair and I snatched him away. These bad memories will help protect him from suspicion if Tempet or Alloï look into his mind."

"Can a rys really do that?" Atarek said.

Dreibrand and Miranda nodded in unison, and she explained how both of them had witnessed Shan mindreading a man whose loyalty needed to be determined.

Dreibrand added, "In my opinion, Fanlyre does not hate us. He is just an officer doing his duty, but his comfortable visit and release from my custody might make him look bad to Sandin and his evil allies. I would not have our kindness condemn him."

Atarek reflected briefly on the complexity of his brother's scheming. He commented, "Well, let us hope that Fanlyre has the wit to appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"He may, and there was no harm—to us—in trying," Dreibrand said.

38. The Council of War

Rys soldiers crowded the restored roadway through the narrow pass. Above their heads, snow clung to the mountains that grudgingly granted a path through the high rocky places. As the soldiers exited their lofty homeland, they looked upon the plains and dark mountains of Nufal and craved to purge the unfamiliar eastern lands of their unexpected enemies.

Shan halted beside the monument that so impressively marked the boundary of his kingdom. His spells had shaped the hand and sphere and locked them together with invisible forces, but even this overt symbol of his might was insufficient to protect his homeland. A great challenge had risen from the bone pile of history and demanded that his powers be proven on the field of battle.

Shan chose to remind his faithful rys that he did not want his reign to foster hatred. He turned to address his soldiers.

At the center of the front row was Taf Ila, who had insisted upon leaving retirement to defend his homeland and specifically his daughter. Quylan had opposed her father's decision, but in this matter, Taf Ila had refused to listen to his Queen. He had put on his uniform and armed himself. Shan had not discouraged him.

"My soldiers," Shan said. "Breathe the pure air of the Rysamand before we leave our homeland. Remember perfectly the beautiful place of your birth. A deep madness drives Tempet and Alloï, and they must be prevented from ever climbing the pristine slopes of our domain. But let us not judge them for their aggression. They are born of bitter times. My brave rys, I now ask you to face great danger in the battlegrounds of the east. This was not of my design. Your Queen and I offered peace, humbly begged for it even, but those poor souls who had the strength to hibernate through the entirety of Onja's cruel reign, now seek to punish us for her crimes. Yet, do not let guilt enter your hearts. You fight to defend Jingten, and that is the sacred duty of all rys."

His final words hung in the thin air, and with the wind howling through the pass, the Rysamand sang with approval for his speech.

As they were instructed, the rys soldiers paused to consider their homeland, and each rys accepted dying for its defense.

Shan looked at Quylan, who sat on her horse at his side. Accoutered for war as she was, she embodied the spirit of their defense. Her delicate courtly garments were gone, replaced by black armor. A gorget covered her graceful neck, and a breastplate and tasse encased her supple torso. Gauntlets and pauldrons protected her shapely arms, and rows of sparkling warding crystals adorned her new shell.

Shan had crafted her armor, laboring for eleven days. Driven by the desire to spare Quylan another injury, he had heated the metal with many spells. Quylan had observed him while he created the enchanted armor and crystals and learned about his spells as he worked. Understanding the enchantments would allow her to enhance their protective powers and stop Tempet's bitaran that pierced time in search of vengeance.

Shan had made a similar suit of armor for himself. Along with warding crystals transferred from his old armor, he had added new crystals that were designed to thwart Tempet's bitaran. Across his chest, the crystals were arranged into a profile of Mount Curlenfindi.

With his new Queen at his side and the warpath ahead, Shan had an eerie sense that he was repeating history. Had Dacian once paused at this spot to look upon Onja in the heights of the Rysamand? Shan shuddered inside his armor.

When Quylan deemed that the silence had been observed long enough, she said, "Let us ride now to our duty."

Shan heard the grim determination in her voice, and for the first time truly respected her as the Queen of Jingten. Her devotion to the defense was total, and Shan realized that he could trust her. Love stirred in his heart, and he criticized himself for letting his paranoia allow the feeling to grow stale.

During their journey to Vetanium, Shan renewed his bonds of affection with Quylan. She savored each moment of pleasure, knowing that he had taken her into his heart more than ever before.

The night before they reached Vetanium, Shan watched the full moon rise over the Tabren Mountains. With his young Queen dozing in his arms, he wished that their lovemaking alone could heal the wounds left by the Great War. Briefly, he imagined holding Alloi as he held Quylan, but it was a pointless thought. The rough embrace that he had once used to subdue Alloi had only enraged her.

Tempet and Alloi are beyond soft feelings. Onja took that from them long ago, Shan lamented.

He dug his fingers into the turf and touched the soil beneath the grass. His sensitive fingers detected the fine grit of eroded stone. Tiny bits of both the Rysamand and Tabren had blown down for ages to join on the plains. It was a shame that the beings born of the two lands could not mix as the elements of the land mixed.

Shan lifted his hand and contemplated the moonlight on his fingers. The celestial connection with his flesh guided his mind into an elevated state. His complete awareness of his physical existence as part of an infinite cosmos enchanted him.

Deltane pressed closer to his brother as the King of Jingten approached their home. The boy was surprised by his fear. He knew Shan to be a kind being, cherished by his parents, but some dark purpose now hardened the normally tranquil face of Shan.

Deltane whispered to his brother, "The rys look mad."

Esseldan shifted his dark eyes onto Deltane. The older boy looked gratified by the mustering. "They are going to hunt Zanah's killer," he explained.

"Will Father go with them?" Deltane asked although it was silly to hope that his father would stay home.

Miranda hushed the boys gently because Shan and Quylan had reached them where they waited in front of their house. Dreibrand advanced to greet the King. He bowed and stated his formal welcome on behalf of the people of Vetanium.

Shan dismounted and extended a hand to his friend. They clasped each other's wrists with firm friendship, and Shan drew strength from the devotion of his beloved human ally.

Letting go slowly, Shan said, "Dreibrand, allow me to reintroduce you to Quylan, who is now the Queen of Jingten."

Dreibrand bowed again. "Congratulations, your Majesty," he said graciously. "I hope that Vetanium can offer you some comfort."

"I am pleased to be your guest, Dreibrand Veta," Quylan said, and Dreibrand appreciated her generous statement.

After Shan assisted Quylan off her horse, Dreibrand ushered them toward Atarek.

Awed by the regal rys, who sparkled with warding crystals, Atarek failed to respond. Even his lowly human perception allowed him to sense that Shan and Quylan were far more special beings than the other rys. Beautiful and confident, they were blazing hot suns compared to other rys, who were mere candles.

The bond that Atarek had just observed between Shan and his brother impressed him as well, and Atarek accepted that Dreibrand was not boasting about Shan's willingness to help him. With such a powerful friend, Dreibrand was right to seek an end to the censure.

"Normally he is quite a loud mouth," Dreibrand said to fill his brother's silence.

"Your Majesties," Atarek blurted upon realizing his blaring dumbness. He bowed deeply with an uncharacteristic eagerness to recognize authority.

Shan chuckled, and the happy chiming sound relaxed Atarek. "Oh, please, Atarek, call me Shan. As Dreibrand's brother, you are my friend."

"There is a first time for everything," Atarek joked because the King's warm personality made it feel safe. Dreibrand had told him that Shan would be easy to love.

The jest appeared to puzzle Shan slightly, and Dreibrand hoped that his brother was not about to do something rude or stupid.

"I mean, you are too kind," Atarek said, remembering his manners.

"That is my hope," Shan murmured.

"And you may call me Quylan," the Queen said. She wanted to show Shan that she did not crave to hear her title, and she sensed his approval for her modesty.

With the introductions complete, Dreibrand invited them inside for refreshment.

"Yes, thank you, Dreibrand," Shan said. "And assemble those who you have chosen to sit with us on the war council. We shall all meet today."

Dreibrand hailed Tytido and told him to collect the others for the meeting.

Miranda transferred her children to the care of Sahleen and Tiah, and then joined Dreibrand and her guests. The front room of their home appeared too plain to receive the royal rys. The small swirling lights within their warding crystals were brighter once out of the direct sunlight, and their dark armor looked as if two small starscapes had been pried from the heavens and placed in the room.

Dreibrand seated his guests at the table, and Miranda went to the kitchen to bring the food and beverages that she had prepared. She would serve the rys King and Queen herself.

"You have made new armor," Dreibrand commented conversationally although the fact that Shan had arrived equipped for immediate battle disturbed him.

"I have created new enchantments for a new enemy," Shan explained.

"Are they marching north now?" Dreibrand asked, unable to be patient.

"Not as of three days ago," Shan said. "But I felt it was time that I came to you. I sense that Tempet and Alloi will not remain patient for their revenge."

Shan's judgment smashed Dreibrand's hopes that the invasion might wait until spring. Gloomily, he sat at his table. Miranda distributed glasses around the table and poured water for her guests. She set a goblet of water in front of Atarek with a suggestive flourish.

Addressing Atarek, Shan said, "You picked an awful time to visit."

Atarek laughed. "An example of my luck, King Shan. But at least I am here to help my brother in his time of need. I am sure that he could not have lasted much longer without me." He flashed Dreibrand a slightly scolding look to remind him that the sting of abandonment had not completely faded.

Anxious for Shan to like his brother, Dreibrand did not contest his brother's ridiculous statement.

Dreibrand held his cup while Miranda poured water for him.

Captain Tulair arrived, and Shan praised him for his excellent duty. Tulair welcomed the reassurance after noticing that Taf Ila had come with the King.

Bowing to Quylan, the captain said, "My Queen, I regret missing your coronation."

"Your missions were more important than my ceremonies," she said.

Shan urged his captain to sit and sensed how honored Tulair felt to join his King at the table.

As the group ate the lunch that Miranda had made, Shan chatted with Atarek and asked him about his trip. After Atarek described his relatively uneventful journey across the Wilderness, Shan commented that he and the Fayeths had been lucky not to cross the path of Tempet and Alloi. He added, "I imagine they noticed you but took no interest."

"I have never been accused of being boring," Atarek remarked while examining the inside of the water goblet, as if he expected a miracle to change the contents to a stronger drink. Looking up, he added, "But the trip was not undertaken for pleasure, so perhaps that explains my temporary lack of appeal."

"Yes, the Fayeths," Shan said. "Has Jolen been able to help the boy?"

A cloud of concern crossed Atarek's face. "Not entirely," he said.

"After our council, I would like to meet the Fayeths," Shan said. As Atarek gushed with approval, Shan scanned the settlement and located the child's struggling life force. Compassion for the boy nourished Shan, who had been burdened lately with thoughts of killing.

As Miranda cleared away the lunch dishes, Tytido entered with Faychan, Gulang, and Kashil. Dreibrand told Shan and Quylan that the men represented the leadership of his warriors. Each man politely greeted the King and Queen before taking a seat. Shan and Faychan locked eyes, each acknowledging the unexpected situation.

Shan tried not to review his resentments toward the fallen Kezanada leader. *I did encourage Dreibrand to take him in*, he thought.

Before Kashil spoke, Dreibrand provided an introduction. After discussing with Kashil the possibility of aiding the Bostas, Dreibrand had decided that it was important to include Kashil in this meeting. "Shan, meet Kashil. He is from the Bosta Territory on the edge of the Wilderness. It is my belief that all of us would be served well if the people of Nufal befriended the Bostas. I have agreed to represent the interests of the Bostas when we achieve our victory over the Atrophane. Kashil will act as my liaison to the Bostas."

"Welcome, Kashil," Shan said. "And what are the interests of the Bostas?"

The Bosta man attempted to answer, but his rough use of the western speech embarrassed him and hindered him.

"The King will understand your native speech," Dreibrand prompted softly.

Relieved to use the language of his birth, Kashil said, "My King, the Bostas suffer from Atrophane rule. There is no freedom, only slavery and property loss. The looting by the Empire must stop."

"A worthy goal," Shan said noncommittally and gestured for Kashil to take the last chair.

Still intimidated by Dreibrand's grandiose plans to usurp control of the frontier, Atarek said, "I think we have a lot to decide before my brother can start carving up the Empire."

Dreibrand quickly checked for Shan's reaction. He would not have stated his intentions so brashly.

"Dreibrand, you have not mentioned such ambitions to me," Shan said.

"They are newly formed since the Atrophane have chosen to attack us, and my brother exaggerates. My ambitions concern the future security of Nufal and the treatment of our family in Atrophane," Dreibrand explained. "But, as my brother said, we have much to do before I can attend to such matters."

"Yes. A difficult struggle awaits us," Shan said ominously and his enchanted eyes gathered the gazes of the humans at the table. "I thank all of you in advance for supporting Jingten against its enemies. I know that the rys are the cause of Tempet and Alloi's rage, and I apologize for this terror that our history has brought to Nufal. You do not deserve their anger after all your efforts to revive this land."

"As always, Shan, you are generous," Dreibrand said. "But no one here forgets that your great power made it possible for us to even live here. As we defend ourselves, we are glad to help our rys neighbors."

"Even so, I remain grateful for your support," Shan said. "And now the time to talk of our war has sadly come. To begin, I request that you elaborate on your plans with the Atrophane, Dreibrand." Shan had little concern beyond stopping Tempet and Alloi, and Shan had not considered what schemes Dreibrand would have.

Dreibrand straightened his shoulders purposefully into the back of his chair and prepared to announce more completely his ambitions that he had been incubating. He felt like a badger about to leap from his hole with the intention of slaying a buffalo.

"As you may or may not know, Sandin Promentro and I are old rivals from when I was an Atrophane officer," Dreibrand explained. "Although I pity him for becoming mixed up with Tempet and Alloi, I cannot tolerate his invasion. In this war, I intend to invoke my right as a noble born Atrophane to personally challenge him in order to settle our dispute over the region."

Miranda briefly clenched her fists as she pictured her husband in a fight to the death. Atarek scowled, but no one interrupted Dreibrand as he went on. "Shan, after you defeat Tempet and Alloi and force the surrender of the Atrophane army, I want to issue my challenge. When Sandin's soldiers see me defeat him in a duel, I predict that I will gain their obedience and thereby seize control of the frontier. Then, to stabilize the region, I will negotiate peace with the Bostas, who I know have been misused at the hands of my countrymen." *And at my hands*, Dreibrand remembered. "And finally, from my position of power, I will persuade Atrophane to make a treaty with Nufal for our benefit. In this matter, I would appreciate the support of Jingten."

Shan stared at Dreibrand critically. It was his habit to be impartial to the affairs of human states. He wanted no part in their conflicts for two main reasons. He hated to watch them fight and his taking a side could mean more death.

After a thoughtful sigh, he said, "When we have our victory, Jingten will have need for a treaty of surrender from the Empire. The Queen and I will, of course, maintain the interests of our allies."

Dreibrand thanked the rys King, knowing how Shan felt about the request.

Shan continued, "We all have much to gain by victory, but we must finish the war first." He began to share his knowledge of enemy activities that he had gathered during extensive meditations.

"They are preparing to march north soon," Shan said. "Tempet and Alloi display such a thirst for killing us that I am surprised that they have not come before now."

Bothered by the timing, Dreibrand said, "Shan, I would not choose to launch an invasion in this land with the summer gone. If they are so eager, as you say, what reason has kept them from coming sooner? They must be waiting for Sandin to get more men. He would have to send for them from deeper in the Empire."

"How many do you think he might have sent for?" Shan asked.

"He would have thousands at his disposal," Dreibrand said. "But he could not empty every garrison in the western Empire unless he has gone completely insane. Still, I would easily expect about six or eight thousand, at least. How many does he have now?"

"Five thousand," Shan answered.

"There were not that many soldiers at the fort when I was there," Atarek offered.

"Perhaps he has already received his reinforcements then," Tytido said.

"He will bring more," Dreibrand predicted knowingly.

"We will know the figure once they start marching," Miranda said because she saw no point in

guessing about it until Shan confirmed the size of the invasion. "And for now, we know our forces will not match theirs. With a thousand rys soldiers and a thousand human warriors, already we are outnumbered by the five thousand that Shan knows will come."

"But half our army is rys," Tulair noted proudly. "And we have been training against warded humans. We will more than match them."

"Captain, draw power from your confidence but do not take refuge in it," Shan admonished.

Tulair humbly acknowledged the advice, treasuring each wise word from his King. *I am to develop my power. Not overestimate it*, Tulair thought.

Shan continued, "For those of you who served me in the war against Onja, the strategy will be familiar. The soldiers, both rys and human, will need to protect the Queen from the assaults of the enemy until our magic can overcome Tempet and Alloi. Quylan will operate from the heart of our group, casting shield spells to protect us from battle magic. I will directly engage Tempet, who is our greatest concern. He is a fearsome slayer, and he will be aided by Alloi's spells. From what I can tell from watching their training, Alloi will be in a similar position as Quylan—protected by ranks of soldiers so that she is free to cast spells unharassed. Our offense will be to breach her defense and remove her power from the battle."

Faychan cleared his throat purposefully. "King Shan, can't we do better than mirroring their strategy?"

Dreibrand looked to Shan expectantly. Dreibrand believed that an army with an innovative style often prevailed quickly whereas two armies with similar styles could stagnate in battle and victory could go either way.

"We are here to discuss any alternatives," Shan said. "But I know that I must engage Tempet in combat. He could slaughter many of you if I do not occupy him."

Except for Atarek, everyone present had witnessed Tempet's lethal power, and they were not inclined to dispute Shan's claim.

Miranda said, "Shan, because we know how dangerous Tempet is, perhaps none of us, not even you, should meet him in battle. Attack him with your magic from a distance. Do not let him get close."

"Yes, Shan," Dreibrand urged. "We did not fight the Sabuto or the Zenglawa with you at the front lines. You made us strong from within."

"Quylan will be in my former place at the heart of our army," Shan reminded.

Tytido suggested that Shan join Quylan. "I know your power will let you strike down Tempet before he even reaches our front lines," he said.

With a fond smile for Tytido's faith, Shan said, "You are kind to place yourselves before me, but I must be firm in my insistence that I will engage Tempet. This will allow you to drive toward Alloi while I occupy him. If she is removed, Tempet will not have her power to aid him. That is what saved him from me before. I have tried to destroy both of them with spells from afar, but together, they are too strong. They must be kept apart, and I must be close."

The sobering facts lulled the conversation. The sounds of children playing outside contrasted with the heavy problems discussed by the adults.

Pushing on with the daunting business, Dreibrand said, "Because Tempet and Alloi are so strong and we need to get close to them, we have to find a way to surprise them. Obviously, we can construe from their acquisition of Sandin's army that they fear to face us without reinforcements."

"Is it possible that our enchanted weapons could cloak a raiding party from the perception of those rys?" Faychan asked. The tactic had been used against Shan in his war with Onja and almost been successful.

Faychan's boldness for bringing up the subject amazed some of the people present. The enchanted weapon in his scabbard had once been raised against Shan, but only once.

"Most of us know of the enchantments to which you refer, Faychan," Shan said. "But assuming that those enchantments will still fool Tempet and Alloi would be perilous. All of us—" he paused and

swept his gaze around the table. "Must remember that Tempet and Alloi are survivors from the Great War. They were powerful enough to hibernate for thousands of years and emerge intact. They are obviously highly adaptive. We should assume that any advantages that we may have will be short-lived."

Dreibrand valued Shan's emphasis on caution. Only a rys really grasped the potential power of another rys. Sometimes Shan could seem infuriatingly slow, but he achieved victory with thoroughness. Once rys were locked in a blazing battle of magical wills, surprises were devastating.

"Shan," Dreibrand said. "We know firsthand how difficult it was to fight Tempet and Alloi even when they were by themselves. We must devise a way to separate them from the protection of their soldiers and attack them directly. Because we are outnumbered, limiting our engagement with a superior force is essential."

Shan respected Dreibrand's ability to plan a campaign and agreed. "Then, the next element of our strategy must be to choose our ground," he said. "Faced by such a drastic threat, I am inclined to take the offensive and march south. Crush them far from their goal."

Light flared in the crystal at the pinnacle of the mountain design on Shan's grim armor, and Dreibrand surmised that Shan was keen to avenge the rys who had died.

"I think that patience is in order," Dreibrand cautioned.

Surprised, Shan said, "I thought you would approve of an aggressive move, Dreibrand. I know you are most comfortable on the offensive."

"That was true in the past," Dreibrand conceded. He paused to seek Miranda's eyes. "But I have a home to defend now, Shan. And so do you. I say we let the Wilderness be our ally. If they would invade us, let them grow tired traveling for many days to reach us while we prepare to meet their challenge. And, I say that we wait for them on the Quinsanomar. Let Tempet and Alloi be reminded of their past defeat. Their past weakness."

Disturbed by the suggestion of gathering on the Quinsanomar, Shan said, "I see no tactical advantage in going to that place."

"I was thinking that the place would attack them in their minds. Agitate them," Dreibrand said. The less the enemy calculated a situation, the more a calm opponent might achieve.

"Or it may enrage them horribly. Give them power," Shan countered.

"Or that," Dreibrand said dismally.

Miranda could still see in her mind the dangerous wraiths that had once haunted the Quinsanomar. "Dreibrand," she said softly. "Do not take war to the place. It has only begun to rest."

Dreibrand considered her request and appeared willing to heed it, but Tytido, who had privately agreed with Dreibrand's point about the Quinsanomar, sought a reasonable alternative. "But Dreibrand is right that we should take a westward position that will defend the pass into the Jingteng Valley and draw the invaders away from here," he offered supportively.

"That would leave this settlement vulnerable," Quylan noted with actual concern.

Dreibrand said, "I have given thought to the safety of the settlement. I will tell the settlers to evacuate to Elendra. I have prepared the second settlement from the beginning as a mountain stronghold. Elendra is far more remote and defensible than here."

"You are wise, Dreibrand," Shan said.

Faychan suggested. "The harvest is nearly in. We should begin shipping supplies now. That way the women and children can travel with less burden."

Gulang was uncomfortable about sending his wife into wild rough mountains. "I have just finished my house here," he protested. "Are we just to abandon this settlement to invaders? And is there shelter for everyone at this second settlement?"

"The quarters will be tight, but we will survive in Elendra," Miranda assured him.

Dreibrand said, "Gulang, I know this is difficult for you so soon after the loss of your other home. But it is better to leave only the buildings of Vetanium vulnerable to Sandin and have our families safe in Elendra. You must agree?"

Gulang frowned, but he accepted that the evacuation was prudent. "I agree, Lord Dreibrand. Forgive my complaint," he said.

"There is nothing to forgive. Miranda and I did not enjoy this decision," Dreibrand said.

Knowing that it was her duty to lead everyone's families to the mountain refuge, Miranda said, "I promise that Tiah will be safe while you fight for our homes."

"Thank you, my Lady," Gulang said sincerely.

As Quylan heard the humans plan for the worst, she more fully appreciated Shan's love for them. They were willing to defend Jingtun even when it meant leaving their homes in jeopardy. To encourage the humans, Quylan said, "You are brave to risk your homes for us. Shan and I shall make sure that no enemy soldiers will have the leisure time to raid your homes."

"The Queen is right," Shan declared. "The invaders will have no men to spare for pillaging this good town. Until the time for battle comes, our warriors will continue to train, and I will monitor our enemies every day. The Queen and I shall give much thought to today's discussion and seek to create spells to support our strategies. But let not our serious preparations keep us from all pleasure. Dreibrand, I believe you have harvest celebrations. Have your people celebrate their bounty as usual. Our remaining days of peace must not be squandered."

"That we will gladly do," Dreibrand said, appreciating Shan's tendency to focus on the good and happy things in life.

With the council adjourning, Miranda invited the King and Queen to stay at her house.

"Yes," Dreibrand added. "I would be glad to throw Atarek out and give you his room."

"Nice," Atarek muttered, even if he was relieved to hear a joke after so much serious talk.

Shan laughed. "You honor us, but Quylan and I shall camp with our soldiers." He rose from his chair, and everyone respectfully stood for his departure.

After offering Quylan his arm, Shan said, "Atarek, please inform the Fayeths that we shall visit them this evening."

"My pleasure, King Shan. They will be honored," Atarek said.

39. The Challenge of Good Deeds

"They are here!" Lydea cried and scrambled from her post at the window.

"The King and the Queen?" Madame Fayeth asked.

Lydea nodded urgently and stopped in front of the door.

Madame Fayeth beckoned to Hanshen who was sitting by the fire. He popped up eagerly as if no sickness taxed his body and took his mother's hand.

Outside, faint steps approached the door, and Madame Fayeth fluttered nervously. Sweat sprouted on her palms and down her back. After Atarek had told her that Shan intended to visit that evening, Madame Fayeth had spent the last few hours pacing or cleaning the house, and she had changed her clothes twice. She still could not quite believe that the famous King of Jingtun had automatically been interested in the health of her son.

A precise knock sounded at the door.

A King is knocking on my door, Madame Fayeth thought, completely astounded by the fact. "Get it, Lydea," she hissed, remaining quite capable of giving orders.

Lydea scooted to the door and opened it wide. She hoped that the breakthrough that Hanshen

needed was at hand. Jolen had said that the King would be her brother's best hope.

"You are Lydea Fayeth," Shan said and smiled.

His unpretentious demeanor surprised Lydea. After watching Shan ride into the settlement with his Queen and soldiers, she had expected the haughty attitude of a great monarch. In his enchanted armor, he had appeared grand and untouchable, but his armor was off now, and his white hair framed an inviting face.

"Do not block the door!" Madame Fayeth said, and Lydea moved.

Shan and Quylan entered. The Queen had removed her grim armor as well. Fine royal clothing of silk, suede, and fur clad the magical monarchs, and several gold chains were braided throughout Quylan's lustrous black hair. Madame Fayeth estimated that the gold of the Queen's hair accessories could feed many families for a year.

Shan handled the introductions, and put the Fayeths at ease within his aura of kindness.

Getting to business, Shan said, "Madame Fayeth, forgive me if I seem abrupt, but I would like to begin my assessment of Hanshen. It is getting late and this may take some time." Looking at Hanshen, Shan added, "I assume you have a bedtime like other human children?"

"I am too old for that stuff," Hanshen said.

"Old?" Shan chuckled. "Young Master Hanshen, do you know how old I am?"

The boy studied Shan, comparing what he had heard about ryls' life spans with the appearance of the ryl King. Except for his white hair, Shan's smooth blue skin and chiseled features had the appearance of a man on the youthful side of his prime. Finally, Hanshen shook his head.

"Five hundred and forty seven," Shan said.

"No you're not," Hanshen disputed.

His mother gasped, but Shan told her not to be upset. "He believes me," Shan said, and Hanshen did not contradict him a second time.

"Are you ready to talk to us about your problem, Hanshen?" Shan asked.

Suddenly shy, Hanshen mumbled his consent. He wanted their help, but he hated discussing his disease.

"Madame, I hope you do not mind, but it would be best if we were alone with your son," Quylan said.

After checking with Hanshen, Madame Fayeth said, "We will wait out here."

The ryls and the boy went into the bedroom, and Quylan shut the door. Shan picked the boy up and set him on the bed. Kneeling before the child, Shan asked him if he was afraid.

"No, not really," Hanshen answered. "Jolen said I could trust you."

"Good. Now, Hanshen, how long have you been ill?" Shan said.

Fidgeting with the bedspread, Hanshen said, "Some children in Atrophane say you are not real. That you are just a story."

"And what is the story told about me?" Shan asked, accepting the child's need for diversion.

"That you are a sorcerer who lives on a mountaintop," Hanshen said.

"Actually, I live in a valley, but I climb mountains sometimes," Shan said.

Hanshen grinned, delighted that he was having a private conversation with a King that some of his schoolmates did not even believe existed. Hoping to delay depressing questions, Hanshen continued, "King Shan, Jolen says your magic is much more powerful than his."

"That is what makes me King," Shan explained.

"How did you get that way? What makes you different than Jolen?" Hanshen asked.

"Jolen and I share many traits," Shan said modestly. "The forces that we harness to make magic are the same. It is just that I was born with a greater aptitude and I developed it. You have heard of humans who are geniuses. They have extraordinary talents or are perhaps incredibly intelligent. Think of a musical genius who composes lovely songs. Now compare him to someone who can barely hum a tune. They both make music. They both love music. But their results are vastly different."

Hanshen grasped where the similarities diverged. Timidly, he said, "King Shan, will you be able to cure me?"

Compassion softened Shan's regal face. "I will try," he whispered sincerely.

Although Hanshen remained perfectly still, excitement surged through his body. He had never drawn so much hope from a hesitant whisper.

"Will this hurt?" he asked.

Shan shook his head. Taking up the boy's hands, Shan massaged his palms and asked Hanshen again how long he had been ill. Hanshen replied this time, and Shan proceeded with the exam.

When Shan and Quylan emerged from their trance over an hour later, Hanshen was sleeping peacefully in the bed. Only a slight spell had been needed to coax the boy into a perfect sleep. The rys looked at each other over the sleeping child. The inner fire of their magic still glowed upon their faces, but their minds were no longer traveling the inner corridors of the human body.

"What can you do?" Quylan asked.

"I think I can devise a spell to cure him. I can see what has gone wrong," Shan said, but Quylan detected frustration behind his statement.

"You are not sure what to do," she surmised.

"I must ponder the problem. I know that, in time, I can help him," Shan said with determination.

Quylan gazed sympathetically upon the human child. "But Shan, do we have time for this? We must perfect our battle magic," she reminded.

"We have time," Shan insisted.

"I think, perhaps, we do not," Quylan argued very gently.

With a patient sigh, Shan came around the bed to be closer to her. "Quylan, I do not fault you for reminding me of my duty, but you must understand that this good deed will make me stronger. Saving a life is so much more difficult than killing." Shan paused and extended a hand over the boy. Hanshen's lifeforce tickled the fingers of the rys King. *I can kill his flesh. I can command his mind. I could seize his soul and keep it as my plaything, but can I make his body live when it is so deeply diseased?* Shan asked himself. The challenge was irresistible and he did not have to feel sullied by the temptation.

Retracting his hand, Shan continued, "Expanding my power is not my only motive. I want to help him. It is the right thing to do."

Touched by his reasoning, Quylan accepted his decision. Shan had been preparing diligently for the bloodshed that he abhorred, and she should not begrudge him this kindness.

When Shan told Madame Fayeth that he would work on a cure, she sobbed with happiness and gratitude.

Hugging her mother, Lydea said, "This is so wonderful. Mother, please do not cry."

Dabbing at her eyes, Madame Fayeth apologized to everyone for her outburst.

"Your happy tears give no offense, Madame," Shan said. "I have seen a mother weep over the loss of her child, and I would not see it again."

"You are so kind, my King," Madame Fayeth said.

Madame Fayeth showed the King and Queen to the door, thanking them with every step. When they were gone, Madame Fayeth and Lydea rushed to Hanshen. Together, they tucked him tighter into bed although he had been left in good order.

Relieved by the promises of the King, Lydea allowed herself some optimism concerning her brother. If he truly could be saved, she need not feel so guilty about her own pleasures. The possibility of a cure, however, increased the chance that they would all return to Atrophane, which complicated her feelings for Tytido. But her confusion did not prevent her from wanting to see him. While her mother stayed to sit with Hanshen, she left the room with an errand on her mind.

That afternoon, Tytido had asked her to bring to him some of his winter clothes that were stored in the room that she occupied with her mother. Lydea knew that he would have arranged for Ven to be gone and was waiting up for the delivery.

The attentive Madame Fayeth intercepted her daughter before she went out the door. Eyeing the hat, gloves, and fur-lined cloak, Madame Fayeth asked her daughter where she was going.

Practicing her newly independent attitude, Lydea replied, "Tytido asked me to bring some of his things to him. The weather has turned cold and he needs them."

"Why does he not get them himself?" Madame Fayeth wondered with astute skepticism.

"Because they were in the room that we stay in. He had no desire to intrude," Lydea explained.

Madame Fayeth frowned. "And how many hours will this task take you?" she asked sarcastically.

"Mother, how many times do you want to have this fight?" Lydea said. "I am not a little girl. You cannot keep me locked up anymore."

She moved toward the door, but her mother grabbed her arm. Lydea whirled on her ready to endure another confrontation, but her mother did not look angry this time, only concerned.

"Lydea, Tytido is not an Atrophane," Madame Fayeth said, expecting her vague words to make her point.

Lydea rolled her eyes. "You take me across Ektren and then you complain that the man I meet is not an Atrophane," she ridiculed.

Madame Fayeth tried another approach. "I know you are growing up, Lydea, but men are not just all fun. There are consequences," she cautioned.

The stubbornness receded from Lydea's face. Despite her mother's strictness, Lydea had been educated in the facts of life. But her fears could not counteract her desire to be with Tytido. He thrilled her and lavished her with love, and he had been busy for several days. Lydea missed him and ached to be alone with him tonight.

"Do not worry, Mother," she said. Lydea patted her mother's hand affectionately and then slipped free.

"When will you be home?" Madame Fayeth asked as her daughter grabbed the door handle.

Trying to force her mother into accepting an honest and adult relationship between them, Lydea said bluntly, "Morning."

Madame Fayeth gasped.

"Mother, stop it. You must know I sneak out and come home just before morning anyway," Lydea said.

Madame Fayeth found her door of denial locked this time. She had suspected the truth, but it had been nice not to hear it. Swallowing her anger, Madame Fayeth said, "Lydea, do you think you have to go to him because of this house?"

Lydea laughed, "No."

"We can find another place to live," Madame Fayeth continued. "Do not let him coerce you."

"Mother, he does not coerce me," Lydea insisted. "I am going."

She yanked open the door and departed. Madame Fayeth resisted the urge to drag her daughter back. After latching the door, Madame Fayeth leaned against it. "I hope you are happy, Lydea," she mumbled. Wearily, she returned to Hanshen's bedside. One child still needed her attention.

As Lydea ran toward the cottage where Tytido stayed, she tossed his cloak over her shoulders. Before she could knock on the door of the shuttered cottage, it was thrown open. Tytido reached out and pulled her into the warmth. A single candle burned on the table and orange coals glowed in the fireplace. In the low light, they saw each other's faces slackened with passion.

Without exchanging a word, they began kissing. Tytido claimed her with an insistent embrace and pinned her against a wall. Pushed to complete abandon by their desire, they made love quickly, only uncovering what was necessary for the joining.

Hot and partially sated, they went next to his small bed. This time they took the time to undress and make slow careful love, savoring each other and lingering over every pleasure.

Resting now in Tytido's arms, Lydea said, "I missed you."

Tytido ran his fingers through her tousled hair, admiring the firelight on her face. "I could tell," he said and kissed her again. Tytido hoped that her hunger that had developed while he had been busy with his duties would encourage her to accept his marriage proposal.

With that important business on his mind, he pulled away from her lips. It was easy to lose himself in lovemaking instead of nagging her for marriage, but Tytido no longer wanted to indulge himself without assurances. He sat up. Lydea stared at him expectantly, waiting for him to initiate their next bout of intercourse, until she noticed the serious look on his face.

"What is it, Tytido?" she asked.

Caressing her cheek, he said, "I want this happiness to last for my whole life. Tomorrow, when the harvest festival begins, let me announce our marriage."

His calm, loving, confident voice lulled Lydea briefly. She wanted to say yes, but she was not sure. He asked for so much. He asked for everything.

"Tytido, you are so earnest," she said, purposefully using a word that she had not taught him. While he searched for the meaning of her statement, she touched his chest suggestively.

Giving up on figuring out the word, Tytido said, "Well?"

"Well, I do not know," she snapped and stopped touching him.

"Do you even think about it?" he suddenly accused.

"No!" she lied cruelly.

Pain thudded through Tytido's body similar to blows he had taken in battle. He leaned away from her, stunned by his rage. He had never imagined being angry with Lydea, and the intensity of the emotion was horrible.

Bolting out of the bed, he started dressing. "You should go," he snarled.

Lydea sat up with a blanket wound around her torso. "I am sorry," she offered, knowing she had been mean.

Tytido pulled on his under tunic with so much vigor that he strained its seams. "No, you're not. You do not care that I want to marry you," he said.

"That is not true," Lydea insisted.

But it was too late for Lydea to undo the damage of her words. Tytido had been pushed into a terrible temper. He vented, "I do not understand you! You could not hope for a better husband. I know what it is to be lonely. I would appreciate you every day for the rest of my life!"

Shamed by his devotion, Lydea looked away from his contorted face. She weathered the rest of his shouting with tears squirting from her eyes.

"What am I to you? I know. I am your little fling before you go back to Atrophane, so later in life,

you can sit at one of your little imperial tea parties and talk about the foreigner's heart you broke on your Wilderness trip."

They were hateful comments and Lydea cringed. She had often considered something akin to his rude scenario. She wanted to be with him, but she did not know if she never wanted to see her homeland again. She could not decide.

Tytido scooped up some of her clothes and shoved them in her lap. "Get dressed. Go. Tempt me with happiness no more!" he cried.

Lydea reacted with her own anger. Springing to her feet, the blanket fell away, and she confronted him in her nakedness. She wanted to rebuke him and flaunt the flesh that she knew he wanted.

"Do not think you would make such a perfect husband!" she shouted. "You live in a three-room house without plumbing and call yourself a noble!"

"Get dressed!" he thundered and turned his back on her.

"Gladly," Lydea replied.

While she replaced her clothes that had been removed with such joyous haste, Tytido put on his boots furiously. After slamming his second foot in, he seized Lydea. "Let me show you the way back to that three-room house. You can have it. You earned it! I will found my settlement and build my palace and find another woman. You are not the only woman in the world."

When he pulled her out of the cottage, she started screaming and fighting him. Her struggling and smacking made Tytido realize how beastly he was behaving. Letting her go, he took a step back. With sudden consternation, he regretted every word and action of the last few moments.

How did I get to this awful place? he wondered.

Lydea flung insults at him. Despite her anger, she delayed storming back to his house because she did not want to return to her mother. Even while yelling, Lydea realized she did not want to be fighting with Tytido, but it was too late to discuss her misgivings about marriage with him honestly and reasonably. She had said hurtful things instead, and now she was sucked into a morass of emotional torture.

Miranda swayed her daughter gently in her arms. Everyone had gone to bed early, gathering energy for the festival the next day, except for Victoria who had woken up crying. Miranda had just soothed her into quietness and was enjoying the peace she had imparted to her daughter. She hugged the warm little body and savored the moment until noise from outside intruded.

"Dreibrand," she said. "I hear shouting."

He woke up quickly, having just dozed off after being awakened by Victoria. "I do not hear anything," he mumbled.

"There it is," Miranda whispered, and Dreibrand heard the shouting this time. He also detected the shrill of an angry female voice.

Sitting up, he snatched up some pants and shoved his feet into his boots. "It is probably Sahleen making trouble again," he complained. "I should teach her a lesson and send her back to the Temu!"

"Dreibrand, do not be so terrible," Miranda admonished. "It is not even coming from her house."

Dreibrand heaved a sigh. "We shall soon see," he said.

When he entered the hall, he noticed candlelight beneath his brother's bedroom door. Assuming Atarek was up, Dreibrand decided to ask him to come with him. Tossing open the door with the inconsideration that only siblings are capable of, he said, "At, come check out this shouting..." He stopped and looked away quickly. Atarek and Sahleen were entwined in the bed.

Atarek laughed, completely devoid of embarrassment. "I will catch up to you, Dreiby."

"Yeah," Dreibrand said and blinked hard, trying to purge the image from his mind. *Atarek, what am I*

going to do with you? he thought and shut the door. Before leaving the house, Dreibrand wrapped a cloak around his bare shoulders.

Once outside, it was not difficult to determine the source of the shouting. Down the lane, the voices stopped in front of Tytido's house. The door opened and lamplight spilled out as Madame Fayeth rushed out to investigate the commotion. Dreibrand saw Lydea run behind her mother.

"Mother, tell him to go away!" she shouted.

Tytido stopped a couple paces away from the women. With his lover retreated to her mother, he was helpless now. Despite commanding Lydea to leave him, he had abandoned the decision, and had been begging her to come back every step of the way toward the house.

I should have guessed, Dreibrand thought and hurried to intercede.

"Lydea, stop hiding. Can we talk about this?" Tytido said.

"What have you done?" Madame Fayeth demanded. Her maternal instincts were back to full force, and Tytido knew he could say nothing to placate her.

Lydea answered with damning words. "Mother, he dragged me outside. Laid rough hands on me. I was so scared! He is insane."

"Lydea, I barely did anything. I am sorry," Tytido cried. Although longing to vindicate himself, all he wanted to do was grab her and drag her back to the cottage.

"What is going on?" Dreibrand said. No one had noticed him walk up in the dark. The instant appearance of a judgmental authority caused everyone to shout his or her case at him. Dreibrand put a hand up and silenced everyone. He recognized a raging lovers' quarrel complicated by the inclusion of a parent. It had to end. Firmly, he instructed, "Madame, take your daughter inside. Tytido come with me."

Madame Fayeth instantly complied, thankful for Dreibrand's intervention, but Tytido was incensed by the order. "Stay out of this! I just want to talk to her," he yelled and got in Dreibrand's face.

Dreibrand put a hand on his friend's heaving chest. Switching to the western common language, Dreibrand hissed, "Do you want to dig yourself a deeper hole, Tytido?"

Tytido spun away. *Am I going to be horrible to everyone I love tonight?* he wondered with intense self-loathing. In a sinking state of despair, Tytido decided he desperately needed Dreibrand's advice.

"Come on," Dreibrand said and nudged his friend away from the house. They returned to the cottage. Noting Ven's absence, Dreibrand assumed that Tytido had arranged a tryst with Lydea that had gone terribly sour.

Tytido saw an item of Lydea's clothing on the floor, and moaned with dismay. He crumpled into a chair at the table, and clasped his face with both hands.

"What happened?" Dreibrand asked.

"I don't know," Tytido answered without looking up.

Dreibrand lit another candle and started rummaging around the unfamiliar household until he located a bottle of liquor. Setting a fat drink in front of Tytido, he told him to start at the beginning.

Tytido lifted his head and contemplated the refuge of calming alcohol under his nose. Thinking back to the beginning, he privately recalled the bliss of holding the woman he loved, but the memory of sexual pleasure was now tainted with the fear that he would never have it again. Tytido wanted to cry, but he reached for the drink instead.

The alcohol burned down his throat, scolding him for wanting a better companion.

"She will not marry me," he confessed miserably.

Dreibrand took a seat and tried to better assess the damage. He asked, "Did you give her the gift you have been making?"

Tytido shook his head. "It is supposed to be her wedding gift," he explained.

Dreibrand brightened. "Try giving her the gift next time when you ask her to marry you," he suggested.

Growling into his cup, Tytido said, "I will not bother. She has made herself clear. I ask her all the time and she always changes the subject." He took another drink. "No woman will marry me. I hope I die in this war."

"Do not talk like that," Dreibrand said sternly. He knew Tytido had reason to take this rejection hard, but he hated to hear him talk of death.

"It would teach her a nice lesson," Tytido insisted. "Then, she could really miss me."

"With an attitude like that, you can stay behind," Dreibrand said.

Tytido looked at him sharply, and Dreibrand was pleased to see some sign of the warrior within Tytido.

"I did not think you would let this girl scramble your mind so much that you would abandon our defense," Dreibrand said.

"Ah, but she does scramble my mind," Tytido said. "She makes me feel so insecure. If only she would marry me, and then I could know that I could come home to her, have her forever. Then, I swear by my ancestors, I never had so much to live for."

Dreibrand wanted to admonish him again for equating Lydea's acceptance to the desire for life, but Dreibrand understood the dream that Tytido had. As an Atrophane officer, Dreibrand had thrown himself into the peril of battle because of pure ambition. The hunger for power and wealth was a great motivator, but it was not equivalent to having someone else depending on your success and wanting you to survive.

"Tytido, you and Lydea have had a fight," he said. "It is NOT the end of the world. Give yourself a few days to cool down, then try to talk to her again."

Bitterly, Tytido said, "Yes, of course. I can only last so long without rejection."

"I doubt you won her over with such negative thinking," Dreibrand said.

Tytido could not argue. He remembered wading through his shyness and achieving a rapport with her. He remembered his first bold touches that had excited her.

But the situation seemed impossible now. At the moment, he could not imagine forgiving himself for what he had said to her, and he certainly could not believe she would forgive him.

"Dreibrand, you warned me. You said Atrophane women were difficult. She gives me so much pleasure but does not care that I want to marry her. I guess she is just a heartless slut," Tytido said.

"If that is what you think of her, why are you so upset?" Dreibrand asked.

Tytido clasped his head again. "I do not mean it!" he cried. His weak attempt at besmirching her perfection only made him hate himself more.

"This will work out," Dreibrand encouraged. "Give it a few days, Tytido. I have seen how you two look at each other. Neither of you will be able to stay angry for long."

"Do you think so?" Tytido asked.

"I know so. But you need to keep a cool head. Do not go to her tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that. Try to make her wait as long as possible. It will give her time to see things your way," Dreibrand advised.

"But the evacuation will be soon. Every day is so precious," Tytido argued painfully.

Dreibrand nodded. "And that will begin to weigh on her mind. If she loves you, she will marry you before you must part," he predicted.

Tytido took another sip of his drink. He felt awful but at least the ugly anger was subsiding. He was not sure if he could follow Dreibrand's advice and wait so long. He wanted to run over to his house that moment and apologize.

Someone knocked on the door, and Tytido looked up with intense hope. Dreibrand answered the door and Atarek barged in.

Slamming the door behind him, Atarek shouted, "By the Gods, Tytido, what have you done? Madame Fayeth wants your head. And poor Lydea is crying like a mad woman."

"What did Lydea say?" Tytido asked, longing for any information.

Atarek narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Nothing to me," he said. "She was crying in her room when I stopped by to see Madame Fayeth, who is about as angry as I have ever seen her, and trust me, I have seen her angry."

"They quarreled, At. That is all," Dreibrand said, trying to calm his riled brother.

Atarek's attention remained ominously focused on Tytido. "Madame Fayeth says you were rough with Lydea," he said bluntly.

Sick with shame, Tytido admitted that he had pushed her outside. "But I never hit her," he insisted.

"You are not to push that girl with so much as a finger!" Atarek snarled and rushed forward, ready to administer punishment.

Dreibrand caught him across the chest and held on. "Do not let the exaggerations of upset women provoke you," he said firmly. "I have trusted Tytido with my family for years."

Serious skepticism lingered on Atarek's face for another second and then vanished. Stepping away from his brother's embrace, Atarek swung his big frame into a small chair and reached for the bottle. "Good. I thought I was coming over here to break your head open, Tytido. But I am glad I do not have to." He tipped the bottle to Tytido and then took a swig.

"Do not think you could," Tytido growled.

Atarek brought the bottle down and leaned forward, but Dreibrand halted the challenge. "At, settle down. And Tytido, your temper does not serve you well."

Tytido muttered something in his own language and shifted in his chair so he did not have to look at anybody.

"Dreiby, what was this fight about anyway?" Atarek asked. Although he had taken Madame Fayeth's limited version of events as gospel, he was now interested in a fuller story.

Dreibrand explained that Tytido was upset because Lydea would not marry him.

Surprised, Atarek said, "I had no idea you wanted to marry her. Her mother just thinks you are having a good time."

"What!" Tytido cried. "No wonder her mother hates me." But the news gave him no relief. It only impressed on him more that Lydea had no interest in a lasting relationship.

"I will let her know," Atarek offered, but Tytido just waved his hands and told him not to bother.

"Dreibrand, thanks for your help. I think you two should go," Tytido said. He decided that it was best to be alone with his misery.

"Sure," Dreibrand said. "I will see you at the training grounds in the morning?"

Tytido nodded.

Getting up to leave with his brother, Atarek said, "Hey, Tytido, sorry I charged in here like that. Madame Fayeth got me a little fired up."

"It's all right. You were doing it for Lydea," Tytido said, wishing that he had been the one rushing to her defense.

As Dreibrand and Atarek walked back to their house, Atarek commented, "Poor man. You should have warned him about Atrophane women."

"I did," Dreibrand said.

"Then, I guess he is a brave man," Atarek said. "I think I shall follow your example, Brother, and get me a nice foreign girl."

Dreibrand moaned, and the disapproval delighted Atarek, who inquired, "Are you mad about the wet nurse?"

Dreibrand stopped outside the door to his house, "I am not mad, At," he replied. "But I would like her relationship with our family to remain that of a servant—no more."

"Oh, she serves me well," Atarek joked relentlessly.

"Atarek..." Dreibrand said.

Atarek laughed at his brother's pleading tone. "Oh, ignore my joking, Dreiby. It is nothing serious. We were just having some fun. She is an obliging girl."

"Yeah, I noticed," Dreibrand muttered. Although he found the indiscretion difficult to tolerate, he set a forgiving hand on his brother's shoulder as they entered the house.

40. Impatient for Battle

Cevlead Fanlyre sped across the Wilderness, pushing his men hard, but after ten long days in the saddle, their weariness could no longer be ignored. When they reached a small lake of inviting waters and lush grazing for the horses, the Atrophane men were tempted to rest until they discovered a ruined town nearby. Its stone buildings had been worn to nubs of smooth bone jutting from the grasslands near the Tabren foothills, and the haunted taint of old Nufal clung to the place.

Unwilling to sleep near the ancient site of mass death, Cevlead and his soldiers rode on through the night until reaching a larger lake that lulled them, particularly Fanlyre, into finally resting.

They camped on the western shore of the long lake that embraced the Tabren foothills. On its eastern shore, tree-covered hills dipped into the gently rippling waters that separated the grassland from the forest. Once the afternoon sun pushed aside the morning chill, Fanlyre and his men bathed. The lake, however, remained cold beneath its sun-sparkling surface, and the men quickly washed away the dirt and sweat of their long journey.

Fanlyre raised his head out of the water and pushed back his long wet hair. He looked at the trees across the lake. Their leaves were beginning to change, and the green, gold, and orange reflected on the blue waters. The possibility that he was the first human to visit this spot for thousands of years held his attention until his shivering distracted him. He turned toward the sun that was warming his back and walked out of the water. The muddy bank squished between his toes, and he liked the deep mark of his footprints in the brown soil.

As Fanlyre dressed, he dwelled on the feel of his heavy silk jacket and noted the texture of the stitching. He had worked hard to earn his uniform and paid handsomely for his commission in the military.

Fanlyre buttoned his jacket slowly while admiring the colossal spread of the Rysamand that ruled the western horizon. The blue peaks crowned in bright snow flaunted the hard power of the world, and Fanlyre regretted not making it to Jingtun.

I shall likely see it yet, he thought, but he would have to fight a war to see Jingtun now, and the mountains did not look like an easy place to conquer.

His sergeant walked up and saluted. "Sir, how long do you intend to camp here?" he asked.

Fanlyre scanned the ribs of the closest horse. The animal showed signs of depletion, and they were still a full week away from Fort Promentro. The horses needed some time to graze.

"Three days," Fanlyre replied.

The answer brightened the sergeant. "With your permission, Sir, I would like to go hunting with some of the men. Fresh meat would be welcome."

"Be careful," Fanlyre cautioned as his gaze drifted up the slopes of the Rysamand. "This land is much bigger than us."

"Yes Sir," the sergeant said, and then, detecting his commander's pensive mood, he decided to try some more meaningful conversation. "Sir, we are rushing back to take our side in the war, right?"

Fanlyre ceased his contemplation of the landscape and looked at the man. "Of course, Sergeant. I am told that our Lord Darhet is mustering for an invasion of this territory, and it is our duty to hasten to his side," he said.

"Oh, truly, Sir," the sergeant agreed. "But I was wondering, just between you and me, Sir, how did you get Dreibrand to let us go? He must have wanted to keep us prisoner or worse."

Fanlyre frowned. He was not used to a common man attempting to be familiar with him. But after months in the Wilderness with the sergeant, Fanlyre accepted that he could shed some of his aloofness.

Although tempted to take credit for their release, Fanlyre told the truth. "Dreibrand Veta had no quarrel with us. His feud is with the Darhet, and he does not condemn us for doing our duty."

The sergeant cracked a grin. "Nice guy," he commented.

Fanlyre saw nothing amusing. "He is a traitor to the Empire," he admonished. "I suggest you not speak kindly of him."

Seeking to recover from his blunder, the sergeant soberly agreed.

Even as Fanlyre belittled the censured renegade, he was reminded of Dreibrand's own warning not to speak well of him. Fanlyre considered again the claim that Tempet and Alloi would assess him. The possibility that a few honorable words between noble men could damn him in the eyes of Atrophane's powerful new allies injected Fanlyre with doubt. For an awful moment, his courage groped for guidance, and Fanlyre considered returning north. Dreibrand's offer of fellowship and a share of the fruits of victory suddenly seemed practical.

What is wrong with me? Fanlyre thought, disgusted by the foolish wandering of his thoughts. Fanlyre reminded himself that he had been fortunate to learn exactly where Dreibrand Veta lived and many details about the settlement. Now Fanlyre had a chance that the Darhet would actually consider his mission a success, except for leaving Atarek behind happy and healthy.

Sandin sat in his office late into the night. The glass chimneys of the lamps had been soiled black as he finished a lengthy report to the Darmar. He wondered how Zemthute II would react to the news that Atrophane was about to conquer Jingtun. The existence of the rys had not even been a myth a few years ago, and the imperium was still quietly reeling from the concept of encountering a more powerful civilization. Now, Sandin had the means to establish Atrophane as the world's supreme civilization. The extra soldiers that he had summoned from the southeast had all arrived. Ten thousand overflowed from the fort and encircled it with a camp that made Sandin look like he was besieging himself.

Tempet and Alloi had recently informed him that the march north would begin within a couple days. Sandin had mentioned to them his concern about the season. He knew in the north that frost already clutched the prairie grass in the mornings, but the tabre assured him that victory would come swiftly. Tempet had said that if snow protected Jingtun by the time Shan was killed, then they would seize Dreibrand's settlement and supplies and winter there. The suggestion had pleased Sandin very much.

Sandin concluded his report to the Darmar by promising the demise of the House of Veta. Sandin avoided actually mentioning that Dreibrand was alive in order to appease his respected patron Lord Kwan, but with Atarek effectively exiled, Sandin urged the Darmar to grant the last remaining Veta estate to Haley Triesto. After writing the name of his wife, Sandin paused. He recalled how she had pleaded with him to stay away from the Wilderness, but her reasons eluded him. He shrugged and signed his name.

While carefully folding the parchment and pressing his seal into a blob of wax, Sandin eyed the one

unopened letter that was on his desk. It had been the first item that he removed from the latest correspondence bundle, but he had set it aside. It was from Carfu, and Sandin guessed at the confusion his friend would no doubt express in the letter. Along with his request for soldiers, Sandin had sent a private letter to Carfu explaining his reasons.

As he reached for the letter, Tempet barged into the office without knocking. Sandin withdrew his hand from the letter and gave his attention to the tabre. Tempet's powerful presence filled the room, and the lamplight sparkled on the bitaran that was always strapped across his back. Tempet had supplemented his attire of skins with military pants and fine Atrophaney cavalry boots. He looked like a dark mercenary, willing to use whatever was at hand to achieve his goals.

"The group you sent into Nufal with the sick child is returning. Alloi and I will debrief your officer immediately. We would judge his loyalty. Bring him to us," Tempet commanded.

Sandin chuckled at Tempet's doubt. "Fanlyre will obey us. I have no doubt."

"We will determine if the rys have polluted him," Tempet snapped.

"I will send Ambio to get him," Sandin said. When he stood up, he paused thoughtfully and added, "Lord Tempet, I would be present during your assessment of him."

"Very well," Tempet granted.

At dawn, Fanlyre arrived at the fort, and the sprawling camp of soldiers impressed upon him the reality of the coming war. While riding through the night to reach the fort, he had been surprised when Ambio intercepted him. The lieutenant had been sent to escort him by Tempet and Alloi, and Fanlyre wondered uncomfortably how long their powerful minds had been watching him. He now dreaded his appointment with the strange beings.

They are called tabre, he reminded himself. Ambio had made clear that Fanlyre understood the distinction before they passed through the gates.

The empty hallway outside the Darhet's office contrasted ominously with the crowded fort. Fear replaced fatigue as Fanlyre approached the open door of the office. He wet his lips and stepped into the doorway. Tempet and Alloi rose from the chairs in front of the desk. Their proximity startled Fanlyre, and his eyes darted between the male and female. They were striking beings, tall with athletic bodies. The female wore a simple white robe with a hood draped over her shoulders. Her short hair was brushed back from her beautiful face. She would have been a ceaseless joy for a man to look upon except for the melancholy that clung to her features like dew on a spider web. The male stared at Fanlyre like an impatient executioner.

Fanlyre had kept his mind focused on his report, but the presence of the tabre drove it from his mind. Dropping to a knee, he waited for instructions.

Sandin stood behind his desk and placed both hands on the smooth marble that hovered in front of him like a cold altar. "Meet Tempet and Alloi. The Gods have sent them to increase the glory of Atrophaney. They would know if you would serve them."

Cautiously, Fanlyre looked up at his lord. The tabre hung on his peripheral vision like two threatening storms. "Is it my Lord's wish that I serve them?" he asked.

"Yes, Commander. They are great allies of the Empire," Sandin said.

Gathering his courage, Fanlyre looked at Alloi and then at Tempet. "Then I wholeheartedly pledge myself to your service," he said.

Sandin relaxed and took his hands off his desk. "You see. He is my officer. Of course he will be loyal to us," he said.

Tempet showed no reaction to the Darhet's confidence.

"Please stand, Commander," Alloi invited. Her reasonable voice and attractive form subdued some of Fanlyre's fear.

Although easily drawn to his feet by Alloi's command, Fanlyre remembered to confirm the order with the Darhet. Sandin nodded once, gratified that Fanlyre still looked to him as his lord, even in the

presence of the tabre.

Determined to function, Fanlyre recalled his report. He hoped he could now begin to please the Darhet, and perhaps Tempet and Alloi. "My Lord, I have learned the whereabouts and status of Dreibrand Veta as you asked," he said.

"Yes, yes, Commander," Sandin said shortly. "I know that you have followed my orders. But I obtained the information about Veta's settlement while you were away."

The blunt announcement that his report was obsolete crushed Fanlyre. He berated himself for not realizing how useless his report would be. Tempet and Alloi had come from the north and even attacked Vetanium. He had been stupid to think that his information mattered.

Desperately, Fanlyre continued, "Surely, my Lord, you must be interested in the many details that I can provide. I have spoken with your enemies. They detained me for several weeks."

Tempet hit him with a question. His voice was sharp and hostile. "How is it that you speak with our enemies and yet you return here with your soldiers unharmed?"

Fanlyre hesitated, believing totally that his life depended on giving the correct answer. Panic thudded in his chest. Worried that hesitation might indicate guilt, he took refuge in the truth.

"Dreibrand met me as the escort of the Fayeths and his brother. Because I posed no threat, he gave me his pledge of peace. Although he knew later that war was certain between us, he kept his word," Fanlyre explained.

Sandin snorted with disgust.

Alloi was more generous with her opinion. "A noble man misguided by the rys," she murmured.

Ignoring her comment, Tempet said, "What did you think of the rys?"

Fanlyre answered, "I had never seen them before. I thought they were powerful. I saw them work magic."

"What kind of magic?" Tempet demanded.

"Magic to heal the sick boy, I think," Fanlyre said.

Tempet ran a hand over his bald head and looked to his sister. "A rys performing healing magic on an eastern child. I find that difficult to picture," he grumbled.

"It does not concern us," Alloi said. She stepped closer to Fanlyre. She was about the same height as he was, and she dragged his consciousness into her eyes.

Sweat broke out over Fanlyre's body. *She is going to read my mind!* He had no doubt. Already magic flickered in her eyes. Fanlyre realized he could not move. *I am a loyal Atrophane!* He knew it was the truth. He hoped it was enough.

When Fanlyre regained his wits, he was sitting in the chair that Alloi had initially occupied. Feeling his intense fatigue now, he blinked a few times to orient himself. When he focused on the letters littering the desk, he woke up completely. The Darhet was seated and reading one of them. Tempet loomed over Sandin's soldier looking at the letter as well. Fanlyre turned stiffly to his left and saw Alloi sitting in the other chair.

Noticing that Fanlyre was aware again, Sandin put down the letter. "Commander Fanlyre, were you going to tell me about these?"

Fanlyre touched the pouch at his belt, feeling for the bundle of letters that he had accepted from Madame Fayeth. The pouch was empty.

Alloi answered for him. "He had not decided yet," she said.

"What that does mean, Commander?" the Darhet demanded.

"Um, my Lord, as you can see, those letters are written by Madame Fayeth to her relatives in Atrophane," Fanlyre explained. "She realized that her letters might be inspected. She asked me to respect her privacy and send them along unmolested. I was going to ask your permission, of

course, but I had hoped that her letters would not interest you."

Sandin's gray eyes scrutinized the young officer. "Such a gentleman, Fanlyre," he finally muttered and tossed the letter aside and cracked the seal on the next one. "You are right. They are not particularly interesting, but I must inspect them. Apparently, her son is doing better. At least the rys have done something worthwhile."

Tempet scowled. "The boy would have benefited more from the magic of Alloi."

Sandin opened the letter and discovered two more small letters concealed in the bundle. "What is this?" he said with interest and quickly scanned the letter. "Listen to this, Commander: 'please forward the extra letters to Lord and Lady Veta.' Did you know about this?"

Fanlyre straightened with alarm. Sandin pitched the letter at him so he could inspect the damning evidence. Madame Fayeth's request of her relative to deliver letters to Atarek and Dreibrand's parents shocked Fanlyre, and he denied his knowledge of her deception.

Because his answer was meaningless, Sandin looked to Alloi for confirmation. After she perused the letter, she said, "He had no knowledge of this."

"Lucky for you, Commander," Sandin declared. "By the Gods, Fanlyre, I hope you do better in battle because you certainly have no talent for security."

The blunder devastated Fanlyre. He had not expected Madame Fayeth to be duplicitous. Her action essentially made her a traitor, but his relief from having Alloi clear him of guilt was lessened by the confirmation that she had inspected his mind.

"What did you do to me?" he asked Alloi.

She understood that the intrusion had upset him and calmly explained its necessity. "I examined your experiences while you were in the north. We had to make sure that you had not been corrupted by rys. They could have entered your mind with magic and sabotaged your loyalty."

Fanlyre wanted to ask how much she knew, but he suppressed the question. He did not want to appear as if he had things to hide. Uncomfortably, he wondered if she knew about his conversation with Dreibrand. Fanlyre took some comfort as he remembered his repeated rejections to Dreibrand's invitations.

Perhaps I have nothing to worry about, he thought, but his uncertainty bothered him. Everything bothered him.

Sandin laughed after he started reading Dreibrand's letter. "Veta is apologizing to his parents," he announced so everyone could share in his amusement. "Gods, Dreibrand, you are such a conceited bastard. Listen to this: 'Forgive my long absence without sending word. I was distracted by the success I achieved in western lands. I was wrong not to share my fortune and power with you, knowing well how these things are denied our family in Atrophane. Atarek has corrected me, and I pledge to restore our House to its former glory.'" Sandin shook his head, unable to conceive of how Dreibrand imagined such ambitions.

Sandin stacked Madame Fayeth's letters and said, "Too bad Madame Fayeth decided to commit treason. Otherwise, I would have forwarded her letters, Commander. Now, I shall arrange for her fortune to be forfeited to me, which should be fitting punishment until I see her again."

Horrified, Fanlyre cried, "My Lord! Please, do not be so harsh with her. Perhaps Dreibrand coerced her to conceal the letters. She had to stay in Vetanium so her son could have treatment from the rys physician."

"All the more reason she should be punished," Tempet said coldly.

Although frightened by the tabre, Fanlyre could not ignore how his heart compelled him to defend Madame Fayeth. With a softer tone, he said, "But she does not know she could have help here. My Lord Darhet, I beg you, as a personal favor, please forgive her."

Sandin sat back comfortably in his chair. "She has chosen her side. Your request is denied."

Fanlyre stared at the Darhet, shocked by his callous decree. But arguing further would be foolish. Fanlyre recognized that he was lucky not to be condemned by his association with the enemy.

"Forget her, Commander Fanlyre," Sandin said. "Your duty is all that concerns you. Report to Lieutenant Nateve. Since you have returned in time to join us, you will be assigned a cohort of infantry as befits your rank."

Falling back on his military discipline, Fanlyre saluted properly and accepted his orders. He was grateful to leave the office with his body and commission intact. Although he was back among his own people, he felt unexpectedly like a foreigner, who was tolerated mostly for convenience.

Ambio watched Valay descend the staircase from the Darhet's private level. Two female slaves attended her and five soldiers guarded the male slaves who carried her baggage.

Ambio greeted Valay with carefully restrained warmth. She looked at him with trusting eyes.

"Everything has been prepared for you," Ambio said. He handed her a pouch and explained that it held the deed to a house in Phefnalang that the Darhet had purchased for her along with letters to Clan Promentro bankers who would arrange a long-term income for her and the child. "And I have personally picked the soldiers for your escort and assigned your bodyguards," Ambio added, trying to reassure her.

But Valay showed no enthusiasm for being shipped back to her home city. Touching her rounded stomach, she said, "Will the Darhet not even bid me farewell?"

Ambio hated seeing pain in her wonderful eyes. The Darhet had given him no kind words to pass along to her, and Ambio could not understand disregarding the feelings of such an exquisite woman. He wanted to comfort her, but he dared do no more than arrange for her safe travel.

"The Darhet has seen to your needs. I am sure your home in Phefnalang is very nice," Ambio said.

"Please, Ambio, let me see him," she whispered and stepped toward the hall that led to her master's office.

Gently, Ambio caught her arm. "He is with the tabre," he whispered back. "You understand."

Valay shook her head. "No! I do not!" she cried.

Ambio hushed her, and she hung her head, embarrassed by the emotional display. "I will never see him again, will I? He will never even come to see his child," she said miserably.

Ambio forced himself to let her go. "You do not know that," he soothed. "After his conquest of the ryls, I am sure the Darhet will return to Phefnalang to celebrate his triumph with you."

Valay smiled to the Cinivese officer who had purchased her to use as a bribe. She appreciated his kind words, but admonished herself for needing them. At the Shexi School, she had been taught that even a beautiful pleasure slave could be forgotten amid the grand plans of a powerful master.

"I hope so," she said.

"Take care of yourself, Valay. I hope everything goes well with your baby," Ambio said.

She thanked him and allowed herself the fleeting regret that Ambio had not purchased her for himself. Deciding that she should be glad to return to civilization, she walked out with dignity. Ambio watched her leave, longing to give her a more affectionate goodbye.

"I have been ordered to report to you, Lieutenant Nateve."

Ambio grudgingly shifted his attention and saw that Fanlyre had emerged from meeting with the tabre. "You look like crap," he declared.

Although peeved by the comment, Fanlyre could not deny that his clothes were dusty and his boots were scuffed. His chestplate of armor still had some shine, but only because the metal could resist the dirt better.

Lightening up on the noble born Atrophane, Ambio said, "Crossing the Wilderness will do that to you. What did you think of the tabre?" he asked.

He gave Ambio a strange look, wondering how the man could even ask the question so casually.

They turned my mind into a brunch buffet, Fanlyre thought. He noticed that it was now midday. Without realizing it, he had been with the tabre for hours. "Um, they are powerful, Lieutenant," Fanlyre said.

The response amused Ambio. "You have not seen anything yet, Commander Fanlyre. Look, get some sleep. After you wake up, report to me, and I will assign you some soldiers."

"Yes Sir," Fanlyre said, grateful for the opportunity to sleep.

He plodded out of the main building and went to the barracks that had housed him during his first brief stay at the fort. He discovered that five other commanders now occupied his former room. They were recently arrived from southern garrisons. Due to the crowding, Fanlyre had to spread his bedroll on the floor, but his exhaustion was total and the floor did mind his sleeping on it.

When he awoke the next morning, the walls startled him after weeks in the Wilderness. As the morning light glared in the single window, his episode with the tabre returned vividly to mind.

They were real, he thought.

When his roommates got up, Fanlyre discovered that he was quite popular. They were young officers like himself and they wanted to know everything about his trip deep into the Wilderness. Fanlyre was gratified that some people wanted to listen to his report, and his sense of isolation began to ease.

"Oh, King Shan has hardly any troops," scoffed an officer. "We will each have a heap of treasure from Jington by spring."

"I wish we were waiting until spring to go. It is cold here already," complained another officer, who had been raised in mild Phemnalang.

Judging his roommates by their attitudes, Fanlyre guessed that they had not lost a few hours in the midst of one of Alloi's spells. They seemed to have no reservations about the alliance with the tabre, and they looked forward to the campaign.

Fanlyre dressed and went to find Ambio. As he made his way across the crowded yard, he wished that his dread, which he did not seem to share with anyone, would stop lingering inside him.

Ambio lounged on the steps of his quarters. He had yet to put on his armor and his shirt was only halfway buttoned. A cup of tea steamed in his hands. He blew across the liquid, watching it ripple, before taking his first sip.

Fanlyre walked up and saluted. Ambio finished his first ceremonial sip and then took a bigger gulp because the demands of his position had commenced for the day.

Without looking up, Ambio said, "Good morning, Commander Fanlyre. Did you sleep well?"

"Very well, Sir. Thank you for asking," Fanlyre said.

Ambio set his porcelain cup on the wooden steps and straightened. When he lifted his chin, Fanlyre immediately noticed the warding crystal tied with a braided leather cord around the neck of the Cinivese officer. The enchanted object surprised Fanlyre who had thought that only Dreibrand and his associates possessed such rys items.

Knowing that the white orb with its pale light had caught the commander's eye, Ambio grinned and touched the charm that nestled in the cradle of his collarbones. "We are ready to fight some rys now," Ambio said.

"We are?" Fanlyre said guardedly.

Ambio stood up and invited Fanlyre inside. "Yes, the tabre have made hundreds of these charms. They will protect us in battle from rys spells and help Alloi protect us with her shield spells," Ambio explained as if it were very ordinary. "The soldiers had to draw lots for their share, but all of the officers get them."

"Really?" Fanlyre said, very interested.

Ambio chuckled. "Yes. Even you."

The disparaging comment annoyed Fanlyre. Only a matter of a couple years and probably luck placed the non-Atrophane above him.

Ambio opened the drawer of his small desk and pulled out the warding crystal. The mysterious orb dangled from the leather cord, and Fanlyre eyed it warily.

"Alloi made it for you last night," Ambio announced, and jiggled the charm to encourage Fanlyre to take it.

As Fanlyre looked at the crystal orb, desire for it began to replace his reluctance to receive it. Beckoned by the pleasing white light inside the crystal, he thought about how he was an officer and deserved his own warding crystal. Fanlyre reached for it and the smooth crystal settled into his palm.

"Put it on," Ambio said.

Fanlyre attached the crystal around his neck with a tight knot. His worries about his situation suddenly eased. He welcomed the comforting feeling after so much worry.

"Lieutenant, when do we march?" Fanlyre said, feeling some optimism.

"We leave tonight," Ambio said and began buttoning his shirt. "It is funny, Fanlyre, you are the last one to get here, but you are the first one to hear the order that everyone has been waiting for." After sliding on his heavy silk jacket, he grabbed his chestplate and began buckling it on. "Help me out here, Commander."

Fanlyre hesitated. His lower military rank did not instantly compel him to perform a servant's duty. But he overcame the offense prompted by his class, and assisted the lieutenant. While fastening the armor, Fanlyre reminded himself that military life did not always coddle the pride of a noble man.

"Why are we leaving at night, Sir?" Fanlyre asked conversationally.

"The tabre have a large ceremony planned tonight. When it is done, we will begin our great conquest," Ambio explained. He continued to gush with enthusiasm for the war, citing his particular devotion to the service of Alloi. The rys deserved her vengeance, and in Ambio's opinion, the worthiness of the cause elevated the campaign above mere greed.

A strong wind started from the north that night, but Sandin insisted that the windows remain unshuttered as his squire helped prepare him for departure. He said that the wind was the Wilderness summoning him.

"You told the flagbearers to be ready?" Sandin said. He buckled the strap of his jeweled helmet himself, and then held his hands out for his gauntlets that Recey waited to put on him.

"Of course, my Lord," Recey confirmed.

Sandin flexed his hands inside the gauntlets, which was always a good feeling. "You realize, Recey, how privileged you are to join me at the threshold of history," he said.

"I am the squire to the Darhet of the West. I realize my privilege every day," Recey said.

Unaccustomed to the squire using so many words at once, Sandin actually looked him in the eye. "I am doing a great thing for humanity. I will usher in a new age not just for Atrophane, but for all people," he said.

"Yes, my Lord," Recey agreed.

For once, his thoughtless compliance annoyed Sandin, who had expected the squire to be more impressed. *Idiot. He does not think past his next tub of laundry,* he thought.

"Bring my horse," Sandin ordered.

After Recey left, Sandin shut his eyes and imagined his forces gathered outside the fort. He had overseen larger hosts during his service with the famous Hordemaster Kwan, but this modest army would bring Sandin an even greater prize than the eastern world. Empowered by Tempet and

Alloi's hatred, Sandin would reach Jingtun and plunder its astounding riches. He would subjugate a race that he loathed, and then his imprisonment in Jingtun would no longer collect a debt on his pride.

Sandin smelled the smoke that was drifting over the fort. His soldiers clasped thousands of torches, and he pictured the mass of blazing lights. He was ready to ride into the heart of the fiery spectators and be anointed by the power of the tabre. Opening his eyes, he strode out the door. His blue cloak billowed in the wind and his boots thudded on the balcony.

When he rode out the gates, the drummers started. The steady boom and tap blended perfectly in Sandin's ears with the cheers from his men. The adulation of thousands of soldiers thrilled Sandin more than the tired ceremony when he had received the Rod of Golan. Men ready to kill for a cause, any cause, truly served the God of War.

The army gathered around a wide circle of braziers that had been set up on the nearest hill. The wind pulled at the fires, but it could not diminish the circle of light that contained the tabre. Tempet and Alloi awaited Sandin, who would soon be a human vessel for their power. An ankle length cloak of skins draped Tempet's back, and he wore a chestplate that he had modified with his magic. Shaping the armor with his mind, he had stamped into the metal a detailed image of Drathatarlane as it had been in the past. Eager to avenge his civilization, he ran his hand over the metal, feeling the outline of the cliffside cityscape.

Alloi disdained the wearing of armor. She strictly observed the warrior code for female tabre. They used only their magic – no weapons, no armor. Such encumbrances would act as a barrier between her mind and the energies of the cosmos. Her white robe and fur cloak were all she needed to wear when she challenged her archenemy. In recent meditations, Alloi had observed the rys King leaving the mountains with his female, whose armor disgusted Alloi.

Metal and charms will not save you, she thought.

"Yes, Sister, I am pleased that you have finally grown impatient for battle," Tempet said in her mind.

"Nufal crawls with rys now. It is time to remove them," Alloi responded.

"Rys! Their ignorance is amazing," Tempet said. *"They do not even know that we are called tabre."*

"We shall teach them before they die," Alloi promised.

Excited by her growing fervor for their mission, Tempet stepped forward to greet Sandin who had just entered the circle of braziers. The firelight shifted erratically over the banners that the flagbearers lifted behind Sandin, and the white chariot of Atrophane shook in the stiff wind. Sandin met the hot gaze of Tempet without fear. With immense respect for the tabre, the Darhet got off his horse and knelt before them.

The army watched in awed silence as the Darhet paid homage to the tabre. The potent message astounded the Atrophane, who collectively believed that they served only themselves. Now the Darhet made serving the tabre an integral part of their loyalty to him. This went beyond alliance, but no man uttered a protest. Sandin Promentro had never failed the Empire, and the soldiers and officers would serve him as they always had.

Genuinely gratified by the acceptance, Tempet was moved to speak to the soldiers who would help him punish the rys. Alloi used her magic to insure that each human heard the words of her brother.

"Bold men, a great task is set before you. The rys shall be removed from the world. Their unjust mastery of your kind will soon cease. It is no mere coincidence that you have returned to Nufal at the time of our rising. In ancient times, this was your home. You do not come as conquerors. You come to claim the homeland of your ancestors. Nufal has despaired without her children. Fight for her as you would your mothers!" Tempet's words reached deep into the emotions of the humans, making them crave the destruction of the rys.

Drawing his bitaran, Tempet held it over his head. He stalked along the perimeter of braziers waving the glittering weapon over the fires. It flashed brighter than the flames. "Nufal! Nufal!" he cried, and the soldiers joined him in his chant. Their voices pounded across the open land. The throb of drums began again, forcing the voices louder with their insistent rhythm.

"NUFAL! NUFAL!"

Alloi approached Sandin, floating like a peaceful dream amid the thundering noise. She commanded

Sandin to rise. He stood face-to-face with her, intoxicated by the battle chant of his soldiers. Tempet circled back to join his sister.

When Alloi spoke, she did not have to shout over the noise. Her exquisite voice came to Sandin's ears as softly as a lover whispering in his bed.

"Sandin Promentro."

"Yes," he responded, completely captivated by her beauty and power.

"I have made a great gift for you. My brother and I recognize that it is your power that provides us with loyal and strong soldiers, so we shall share our power with you. I present the warding crystal that I have made for you. You shall have the greatest protection from rys that we can offer," Alloi explained. From her robe, she removed a heavy golden bracelet. An oval-shaped crystal, smooth and white, was embedded in the bracelet. Her voice became firmer. "For your forgotten homeland, for the souls of your ancestors who were locked in tortuous bondage, Sandin Promentro, accept this warding and be the avenger of Nufal."

Alloi held out the bracelet and the gap in the band widened. White light burned in her eyes and she awaited his response.

"Death to all rys," Sandin declared, sharing in the passion of the tabre. He extended his right arm to receive the charm.

Beaming with approval, Alloi placed the bracelet over his wrist and the gold contracted to a perfect fit. Sandin clenched his fist and pressed the charm to his chest. Even through his armor, he felt its heat spreading through his body. Then, an intense light that should have been blinding but was not encased him. The blackness of the night receded from his perception, and he could not feel the land beneath his boots. An undefined energy soaked into his flesh, perhaps even into his soul, and imbued his cells with enchantment.

When the spell faded, the army had become silent. Sandin looked around. He had difficulty believing that he was in the same place. He felt like he had crossed a great distance, but only the stars had shifted across the sky with the advance of the night. The wind had died down to a benign breeze.

"We are ready. Lead our army, Sandin Promentro." Tempet commanded.

Without further words or ceremony, the Atrophane commenced their journey into the Wilderness. When dawn came, the fort was far behind. The trees that dotted the landscape became sparser, and the prairie consumed them before the day ended. To Sandin's surprise, except for a meal break, they did not stop at sunset. The soldiers were not weary from marching, and the horses behaved as if they were fresh from a stable and full of oats. As they pushed on through the night, Sandin realized that they were energized by some great spell. He wondered how long it would last.

He had his answer in the morning when the army began to slow. Marching feet dragged and horses' heads drooped. Sandin experienced the effect himself, and he wanted to slip from the saddle like a sack.

Tempet and Alloi, who rode beside him, suddenly showed fatigue as well. Their great magic had buoyed men and beasts beyond normal endurance, but now the tabre had to pay the price for their exertion.

The army sleepily made camp. Exhaustion made the difficult chore of fortifying the camp especially arduous. Soldiers had to use their swords to cut into the tough turf before they could dig a trench and build soil into a low wall. Each shovel full of dirt strained the men and they cast down their tools and collapsed as soon as the wall was done. Sandin had seen a camp fortified better but in the emptiness of the wilds he knew no one was going to attack. The sloppy fortification would suffice.

"Lord Tempet," Sandin said, "Shall you use your spells to propel us north at this pace the whole way?"

"No, we shall not use it again until it is time for battle," Tempet said.

Sandin nodded with great approval. He had never dreamed of an army having such a tremendous advantage. Along with superior numbers, his army now would have greater endurance.

"Sleep well," Tempet said and then joined his sister in a tent.

Sandin had no doubt that he would sleep well, but his hunger equaled his need to rest, and he ordered Recey to prepare food. Two soldiers had just finished putting up his tent, and Sandin lowered himself slowly to the ground in front of it. He pulled off his helmet and freed his hair from its ponytail. He interrupted Recey's sleepy fumbling with the kindling and had the squire remove his armor. Recey obeyed without even one "Yes, my Lord" because he was too exhausted to speak.

After Recey finished the fire, Sandin lounged beside it. The day was clouding up and the chill of the dawn was not receding. As Recey boiled water and fried pork, Sandin dwelled on the scent of the food until he remembered that he had brought Carfu's letter. Sandin removed the letter from a pocket and turned it over in his hands.

Eventually, he opened it. Carfu's handwriting triggered a sense of fondness for his distant friend. Sandin read the letter.

My Lord Darhet, I know of your distaste for the rys, and I understand your desire to conquer them for the glory of Atrophane. But an alliance with this Tempet and Alloi is dangerous. I fear that it is their magic that summons our soldiers to the frontier and not your wisdom. Alas, I will obey your orders, but I beg you not to make war with Jington. Despite your own desires, you have said yourself that Atrophane must seek peaceful coexistence with the rys. Sandin, my friend, keep your own counsel. No one knows the might of Jington as you do.

Your friend and servant, Carfu Anglair

Sandin respected his friend's plea for prudence, and only a few months ago, Sandin would never have attempted conflict with the rys. *But everything has changed, Carfu. I do trust Tempet and Alloi, and you would too if you were here,* Sandin thought.

He folded the letter and slid it back into his pocket with the intercepted letters of the Veta brothers. Sandin looked forward to proving Carfu's concerns unnecessary and Dreibrand's plans impossible.

41. *The Last Fine Day*

Dreibrand loves Nufal, but the memory of his homeland persists for him like a woman who broke his heart – Miranda, diary entry from 29th day of Harvest, Year 5 Nufalese calendar.

The pleasant diversion of the harvest festival gave way to daily drilling for the warriors while Shan and Quylan refined their battle spells and explored new methods for enhancing their fighters. But when Shan's meditations revealed that the invasion force had entered the region, the intense pace of training ended. With the evacuation of the settlers only days away, Dreibrand decided that rest would serve the warriors best before facing their violent ordeal.

As the humans awaited the time of action, Shan seized the last precious days of peace to solve the mystery Hanshen's disease. He entered a prolonged trance to pursue a cure.

Miranda sent the last of the supply wagons to Elendra and worked with Faychan to conceal the tracks of her planned retreat. Because a landslide blocked the south rim of the High Road, she wanted it to appear that the settlers had taken that route instead of the north rim. In the terrible event that a war party came to destroy Vetanium and then pursue the settlers into the mountains, she wanted it to take the south rim and then be delayed by the broken road.

Faychan admired her ruse. He worked to lay wagon ruts on the false path and obscure the wear on the north rim trail.

Two nights before the evacuation, Miranda's family ate a quiet dinner, and the children were allowed to stay up late. Dreibrand and Atarek indulged the boys in games, knowing that after tonight there would only remain difficult goodbyes. Even after Esseldan succumbed to exhaustion, Deltane defied his sleepiness. He sat in his father's lap and asked him endless boyish questions until he eventually fell asleep. Dreibrand carried his son to bed and tucked him in. He appreciated how Deltane snuggled under the blankets. Dreibrand wished that a warm bed alone could protect his son from the hostile world.

My enemies will never reach you, he thought savagely.

He sat and listened to the soft breathing of the child. Dreibrand had never lacked courage in battle, but the small bundle of his beloved firstborn beneath the covers infused him with a surplus of strength.

When Dreibrand could finally envision his victory and his family safely reunited in Vetanium, he tiptoed out of the room. He would fight his way toward that image until it became reality.

He found Atarek sitting alone in front of the fireplace. Although Atarek had been exceptionally sober for the evening, he now had a drink in his hands.

"Where is Miranda?" Dreibrand asked.

"She went outside," Atarek answered without looking up from the crackling flames.

Dreibrand grabbed his cloak and went out to find her. She was not far from the house. It was a cold night, and she welcomed him when he put an arm around her shoulders. He asked her what she was doing outside.

Miranda answered that looking at their land helped her to feel strong. She faced the plains, where the wind blustered into the settlement from the north. She easily imagined the campfires of their enemies twinkling somewhere upon the dark prairie.

"You already possess all the strength that you need," Dreibrand encouraged. "You will command the evacuation well."

Miranda did not doubt her ability to perform that duty. She pivoted to face him. "Dreibrand, I should stay with you. I will be wasted in the mountains. I want to fight for our home," she announced.

His chest clenched with an instinctive fear of placing his mate in danger.

Miranda continued, "I am not the only woman who feels this way. Tiah and some of the other Kezanada women are not afraid. We see no sense in hiding in the mountains when our survival depends completely on your victory."

"Your courage is needed elsewhere," Dreibrand declared and placed both hands on her shoulders. Softening his voice, he said, "Miranda, it is not right for us to be together now. You must be with our children. I cannot trust their lives to anyone but YOU." Dreibrand leaned close to her and touched his forehead to her forehead. "If I know they are with you, then I will know that—no matter what happens—my family will be safe. I know that you would never fail them. Even if I do not make it, I know you will make sure our son inherits Nufal, as he should. Nothing would ever stop you. Nothing. I believe it!"

"Dreibrand, do not send me away. I will not go!" she persisted.

"Be logical, my love. In this battle a few more fighters will not make the difference. It is Shan and Quylan who will ultimately achieve our victory. I do not want us to be apart, but it is for the best. We already agreed to this," Dreibrand said.

"No," Miranda moaned and tears moistened her eyes as she contemplated their separation.

Dreibrand hated to see her reduced to tears. "Please, Miranda. I will be all right. But you must think about the other women who need you to be strong for them, and all the men who have families are trusting you take care of things while they go fight."

Miranda shook her head hopelessly. Their breath created a pocket of heat between their faces even though the sharp wind tugged their long hair. Miranda knew she could not refuse the many duties that he had cited for her, but she had to confront him about that which truly concerned her.

The tears on her eyelashes and sparkled in the starlight. She looked into her husband's eyes and said, "Dreibrand, you do not speak of it to me, but I know that you will be gone from me for...much longer than you want me to think."

He touched her chin and smiled with fondness as if storing this moment of closeness between them to comfort him later. "I expect the battles to be quick and decisive," he said.

Unwilling to be lulled by his easy words and soft touch, Miranda pulled away from him. "With your

talk of removing Sandin, supporting the Bostas, ending the censure, I know such things cannot be accomplished from our far land. You will have to travel to Atrophane and may not return to me for years, if ever," she accused as if already certain of the final abandonment.

"What makes you say that?" he challenged.

"I have seen how you act lately," she said. "The way you look at children, at me. You look like you are saying goodbye to everything."

Dreibrand wanted to tell her that she exaggerated. Of course, he had been consciously lingering over the details of his privileged life. Preparing his spirit for the rigors of warfare did not come as easily as when he was a younger man. Although this was the truth, he realized that Miranda had guessed the unpleasant realities that lurked in the future.

With a sigh, he admitted, "Perhaps I will have need to return to imperial territories, but I have no desire to go all the way to Atrophane. And I expect the force of my alliance with Shan to gain us quickly the treaty that I desire. My need to exert influence over the Atrophane military should be brief."

"Brief?" Miranda repeated with disdain for his estimation. "Such things will take months, at best."

Dreibrand rejoined that a few months were a small price for the security of Nufal and the restoration of his family name.

"But, Dreibrand, I will need you," Miranda insisted. Her voice cracked with vulnerability.

"Your loneliness and the separation from our children are my greatest regrets," he said.

"Then forget such hardships, my love. Come home after Tempet and Alloi are defeated. What do we really care what the Empire thinks of us? Shan shall always be there to protect us. Come home," Miranda pleaded.

Even genuinely tempted, Dreibrand hesitated to agree. Refusing her request would be cruel to both of them, but yielding to their selfish desire for comfort would accomplish little.

"Dreibrand, come home," Miranda urged again. She stepped closer but stopped short of touching him as if his rejection already burned her. "What are you thinking about? Why is the choice not easy?"

Bracing himself against her possible anger and for the difficult loneliness that his choice would inflict on both of them, he said firmly, "Miranda, do not ask this of me. This crazy invasion might be my only chance to get the upper hand with the imperial elite. I would not force the issue otherwise, but because I have the chance, I will seek to end the Veta censure. Think of Atarek, and think of our children. Would you have them denied the opportunity to visit the eastern world in safety and with respect?"

To avoid being deprived of her husband, Miranda could have rejected any reason that he gave, but she knew how much the censure rotted the thick beams of his noble spirit. Although Nufal fulfilled him in many ways, Dreibrand had been born an Atrophane noble and he still dreamed of being accepted as such by his people.

Miranda took a deep trembling breath. Her simple needs did not warrant giving up the chance to better their family's future. Because she could not deny his greatest wish, she resolved to do her part to make his plans succeed. *And I will try to hope that my happiness with you has not ended forever*, she thought.

Trying to hide her sadness, she said, "Go with my approval and my wish for you to succeed, but Dreibrand, remember how much I love you."

Receiving her blessing, he embraced her with immense gratitude. Finally, Dreibrand understood why his devotion never quite erased her insecurity. Miranda, more than he, had always recognized his deep longing to cure his estrangement from his homeland, and she feared that a reconciliation with Atrophane might lure him away from the refuge of her loyalty and affection.

"Miranda, I love you above all things, even Nufal, which I entrust to you with complete confidence. You have my promise to return as soon as I can," he pledged and kissed her fiercely.

Miranda returned his kiss with equal passion. With his promise, she would be brave in their time of

parting.

Pulling back from his reassuring lips, she responded, "I and all of Nufal will be here to welcome you home."

By midnight, the fires had all burned out in the rys camp. Like the humans, many of the rys soldiers were sleeping because they would ride to war the day after next. Only a couple windows in the settlement glowed with lamplight, and one of them was Madame Fayeth's window.

For days Shan had wrestled with the challenge of Hanshen's illness. While Quylan waited for him to emerge from trance, she feared that the disease was proving impossible to cure. The failure might be an intolerable blow to Shan's confidence, and she wished that he had not undertaken the taxing attempt to cure the boy with their mortal enemies so close.

The wind rippled through the frost-withered grass and tugged on Quylan's cloak, but the chill did not bother her. She was bred for the bitter cold of the alpine Rysamand.

After days of keeping her impatient vigil, Quylan's nerves finally fluttered with excitement. Energy built inside Shan like charged storm clouds ready to embrace in lightning. She sensed the new spell forming in his mind. Did he have the answer?

The blue light from Shan's unblinking eyes intensified and encased his body in an azure aura. He rose to his feet with fluid ease.

"Quylan," he said. She jumped up, ready to hear his orders. "You must prevent the mother from interfering." Without further elaboration, he stalked toward the settlement. Quylan rushed past him and knocked on the door of the Fayeths' residence.

Madame Fayeth yanked the door open eagerly, but quailed from Shan as soon as she saw him. A great raw power had replaced his magnetic charm. After longing for his return, she now feared him. He looked more like a demon bent on destruction than the kind spirit who promised healing magic.

"Madame, the King must see your son," Quylan said.

Lydea came quickly from the other room, throwing a shawl over her nightgown. She had been staying home at night since her fight with Tytido.

"Are you going to help Hanshen now?" she asked.

Shan did not respond to her and headed for the closed bedroom door. Quylan gestured for Lydea not to follow him. Lydea glanced questioningly at her mother, who finally asked to know what was going to happen.

"We must not interfere," Quylan instructed and moved between Shan and the women.

Shan entered the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Hanshen's lifeforce was a warm shape beneath the ample covers. The sudden jump of Hanshen's heart when he woke up thudded against Shan's multiple senses.

"Who is it?" Hanshen whispered.

He sat up quickly and squinted in the brightness that radiated from Shan's face. At first, Hanshen had been afraid, startled from his sleep, but when he saw Shan standing at the end of his bed, Hanshen experienced the sudden awareness of his fate.

Shan had no desire to intimidate the boy or the family, but the vision of his spell was so fragile, so precious in his mind, that he could not jeopardize any detail of it. Preparing them with hopeful words would only distract him from the cure that his mind had netted with delicate strands of intellect.

"Hanshen, do you want me to try?" he asked simply.

Although Shan's magic pressed tangibly against Hanshen's body, he understood that Shan was not omnipotent. Hanshen even guessed that the attempt to cure him might be dangerous.

Hanshen nodded. When Shan did not move, the boy said, "Yes."

Shan came to the bedside and laid hands upon the child.

The spell started like all the other healing spells that Hanshen had experienced. Warm and soothing, the spell invigorated him. Then, his toes began to tingle, and then to burn. Hanshen would have flinched but discovered that he could not move. His body was completely under the command of the rys King. Now it was pain, moving up his feet and into his ankles. Cell by cell, the discomfort intensified until pain consumed his legs. By the time it reached his hips, Hanshen was screaming. He did not hear the thump on the door as Quylan stopped his mother from entering.

When the pain mounted higher, he passed out, carried into unconsciousness on the fast current of Shan's magic.

When he came out of the faint, the pain was gone. Shan sat on the bed next to him. The rys stroked the boy's hair apologetically and kept his other hand on Hanshen's chest. Tiny blue fires still swirled within Shan's glossy eyes.

"I am sorry that it hurt," Shan said as he continued to block the boy's residual pain.

Hanshen was not angry. The rys had done something. Hanshen definitely felt different. "What did you do, King Shan?" he asked.

"I destroyed the elements in your blood that were sickening you. And I changed your body, all the way into your bones so that it would not produce the sickness in you anymore," Shan explained.

Astounded, Hanshen simply contemplated his body, trying to decide if he felt better.

"I think you will notice your health returning very soon," Shan said.

"Am I cured?" Hanshen finally dared to ask.

Shan paused thoughtfully before he answered, "Yes, but I cannot guarantee that it is permanent. Because I do not know the essential cause of the disease, I cannot predict that it will never happen to you again."

Hanshen digested the cautious answer and then smiled. The rys King had said yes.

"Thank you, King Shan," the boy said.

Shan looked away, seemingly embarrassed by his incredible deed. "Let us tell your mother," he said. The latch of the bedroom door clicked open without anyone touching the handle.

Madame Fayeth entered her son's room apprehensively. The long silence after the screams had stopped had tormented her with the conclusion that her son had died. If the rys Queen had not clamped Madame Fayeth to her chair with a spell, she would have beaten down the door.

Hanshen sat up and greeted his mother with a happy face. He intended to quickly clear Shan of any criticism. "Mother, I am all right!" he cried and looked at her suggestively.

She shrank away from his joy. It was too emotionally dangerous to believe what he implied. As he continued to stare at her with an encouraging grin, Madame Fayeth whispered, "Hanshen, do you mean...?"

"Cured, Mother!" he cried. Hanshen lifted his arms as if his scrawny body had already begun to grow again.

Madame Fayeth rushed to her son and began to examine him. She pulled back his shirt searching for bruises or cuts, some sign of the rys King's workings, but Hanshen was unmarred.

Shan began to explain to her what his spell had done. Lydea slipped to her brother's side as well, looking at him in awe. As his sister, she could see that he was improved. Although he still appeared to be a thin sick boy in a big nightshirt, Lydea saw the difference. His soul had stepped back from the next world.

"Hanshen, how do you feel?" Lydea said.

"Sore," he replied. "But King Shan says I will feel better soon."

Disbelief still ruled Madame Fayeth's face when she addressed Shan. "Thank you so much, King

Shan. You have brought us a miracle," she said.

Shan hushed her gently. "Do not use such a strong word. I already told your son that I do not know that this will be permanent. Someday, maybe, he might relapse. I do not know."

Madame Fayeth accepted the possibility without getting upset. Bad news had been her companion for too long for this to bother her.

Shan added, "But truly, Madame, I expect Hanshen to have a long and normal life."

Madame Fayeth smiled and her heart filled with love for the King of Jington. "My King, I see that your greatness has no need for praise, but this is a miracle," she insisted.

"This was the power of life and death, Madame," Shan said with a cold tone. "Tonight, I had the power of life. Soon, I will have the power of death."

The statement was unexpectedly sharp, and the human family fell silent. Shan walked out the door and left without another word. Soaring on his triumph, he was already turning his mind to his next great challenge.

Quylan handled the goodbyes.

While packing the wagon the next morning for the evacuation, Lydea told a man who stopped to help her about Hanshen's healing. The news then flew around the settlement. With war on their minds, the settlers were excited by Shan's great achievement. It was just another example of the rys King's supreme power, and everyone's spirits soared with confidence.

When the news reached Tytido, his feelings were mixed. He was happy for the Fayeths, especially for Hanshen, who was a great kid brother, but it meant that the Fayeths would have the freedom to return eventually to their home.

As Dreibrand had advised, Tytido had diligently avoided Lydea. At first, he intended to make her miss him, but instead, the separation had only driven him deeper into depression until he dreaded his next conversation with her. Although he prepared every day for battle, he feared to risk another rejection from her. He preferred strategy meetings and hard exercise instead of accepting that she did not want him. Only in his rational moments between lovesickened misery did he even understand why she refused his proposal.

Ultimately, Tytido could not endure her departure without apologizing to her. Knowing the violent horror of battle would soon be his closest companion, he did not want his last memory of Lydea to be their wretched fight.

Lydea froze when she came out of the house to get water from the barrel. Tytido was walking toward her with a bundle draped over his arm. Her first thought was that he looked good, but then she remembered her anger. She pulled the door shut behind her, hoping her mother would not notice his arrival.

Tytido stopped a respectful distance from her. His eyes darted between her face and the ground, reminding Lydea of his initial awkwardness around her.

Finally, he just said hello.

Lydea responded with the same, and their eyes connected. They were searching for a segue to a more serious conversation.

"I am happy about your brother," Tytido said sincerely. "I knew Shan would heal him."

That joyous subject put Lydea at ease. "It really has not sunk in yet," she admitted. "Hanshen has been sick for so long. We risked everything to come here. I cannot believe our wish came true."

Tytido liked seeing her happy. It made her even prettier. He shifted the bundle on his arm. "Lydea, ah, about what happened. I apologize." He spoke the Atrophaney word very carefully, refusing to let his foreign accent diminish it. With the word spoken, his regret poured out.

Lydea listened to his apology patiently, forgiving him in her heart. The time without him since the terrible night had made her contemplate what it would be like to never see him again. She was also

a little ashamed of her careless rejection that had twisted his temper into an ugly outburst.

Although gratified by his apologies, Lydea stopped him. "Tytido, I am sorry too. I was mean and goaded you."

"No," he said quickly, unwilling to let her accept any blame, but then he paused. They had just exchanged apologies, and he searched for a way to make the most of it. He saw Lydea glance at his bundle, and he decided that it was his best course of action. "I have been working on a present for you," he said and extended it to her.

Excitement flashed on her face. "Oh, it is heavy," she said as she accepted it. She pulled up the plain cloth cover and beheld the fur coat beneath. Gasping with pleasure, she ran her hand down the fox fur collar. Lynx fur composed the body of the coat and more fox trimmed the sleeves. The furs of the two predators were a striking mix.

"Tytido!" Lydea cried and hugged the luxurious coat to her chest.

"You will need it this winter," Tytido said. "It is much colder here, I am told, than in Atrophane. It feels soft, but it is strong and warm."

"Where did you get it?" Lydea wondered.

"Some of the furs I trapped myself and I have been trading for the others since I met you," he explained. Her delight with the gift encouraged Tytido. He could tell that she enjoyed being the inspiration for such a fine coat. "I did the fur work myself," he added proudly. "Furs have been a skill of my clan for generations. But I hired Sahleen to make the lining."

Lydea opened the coat and admired the fine silk interior and the embroidery along the pocket edges. "It is amazing," she whispered.

"Put it on," Tytido insisted.

Slowly, Lydea grinned and spun the coat over her back. Tytido stepped around her and held it while she slipped into the sleeves. She exclaimed happily when it was a good fit. Tytido smiled with satisfaction. He had not had difficulty judging the size and shape of her body.

"Oh, I can feel how warm it is already!" she said. Cuddling her cheek into the soft collar, she turned and discovered that she was much closer to Tytido now.

He wet his lips. "It was supposed to be your wedding present," he said. His heart twisted on the gallows of his emotions. He had raised the subject he could not bear to avoid, and Lydea's face fell with uncertainty and sadness.

Unwilling to let her immediately enforce her refusal, Tytido continued urgently, "Lydea, I understand that you did not come to Nufal to live the rest of your life. You came because of Hanshen, and I guess you want to go home. At least, I want to think that is the only reason you will not marry me."

Lydea looked away, seeking mental shelter. Too much was happening today. Her mind did not want to cope with the evacuation or the war, and now, Tytido wanted her to decide the rest of her life.

Maybe I should. It might be the only chance I have. The thought surprised her. It was especially dark considering the good fortune her family had just experienced.

Tytido had the benefit of knowing exactly what he wanted. "If you still want to be with me, I would go live with you wherever you want to live. I can guess how the Wilderness does not compare to the Empire. And I want to see the eastern world. You could show me the sea. I have never seen such a thing."

His willingness to relocate startled Lydea. The offer alleviated her fear that she was merely some female prize, a trophy to adorn his rough life in Nufal. He was willing to place her before his personal ambitions. But Lydea knew how much his dreams meant to him. His plan to found a city and establish himself as ruling class would be a profound achievement, and Lydea was not sure if she could ask him to give that up. She doubted that he would be happy doing so.

"Does that make a difference, Lydea?" he prompted impatiently.

"Tytido, you should build your settlement and be its lord. I know you love Nufal and you belong here," she answered him.

He exhaled as if he might not draw another breath. She used his own desire to begin his settlement to divert him from her. "But I would not know what to call it," he said.

She hated inflicting pain on him. She remembered every sensation from the wonderful day overlooking the valley when Tytido had declared his love.

Lydea stepped away and looked across the settlement. Everywhere people were packing for the evacuation. By tomorrow morning, she would be on the High Road passing the place where she had made love to Tytido for the first time. But this time she would not know if she would ever see him again.

"When I said that I never thought about marrying you, I did not mean it," she confessed.

Tytido froze, afraid to speak. He stared at a lock of her hair, admiring the golden strands blending with the fox fur.

Lydea suggested, "Perhaps it would be better if you named your settlement Lydeaem. We can always visit Atrophane. I could show you the Empire and the sea and you could still be a Nufalese lord."

Tytido gasped her name and wrapped his arms around her. "Yes, that would be best!" he agreed. He started kissing her, deluging her with his passion. It would take many embraces to erase the days of heart broken suffering. Barely removing his lips from hers, he whispered, "This means you will marry me, right?" Despite his craving, he had learned to make her be specific.

"Yes," she said. The decision made her happy. It was a wonderful joy like having her brother healed. Feeling this way was far better than making Tytido sad.

"Then we do not have much time. When I touch you next, you will be my wife," he announced and let her go.

"Now?" Lydea said, but Tytido was already moving toward the door to the house.

Madame Fayeth had been eavesdropping behind the door, and she jumped when Tytido knocked on it. She hurried across the room before saying that he could enter.

He burst in quickly. His dark eyes latched onto Madame Fayeth and sparkled with urgent excitement. "Madame, I am to marry Lydea today. We must negotiate her brideprice. I have much to offer you for the loss to your household. Horses, cattle, land, gold. From these things you may choose freely."

"Tytido, what are you doing?" Lydea asked.

Mindful not to anger her, Tytido realized that easterners were a slave culture and this process might offend her. "Lydea, this is how my people get married. A man must give his wife's family many gifts. It is supposed to honor you," he explained.

"It does," Lydea said, deciding it might even appease her mother.

Madame Fayeth approached her daughter and took her hands. She asked if Lydea was sure about getting married. Lydea insisted that she was certain, and Tytido relished her emphatic tone.

Looking at Tytido critically, Madame Fayeth said, "And there will be no more nonsense like a couple weeks ago?"

"Oh, no. Never," Tytido said.

Although Madame Fayeth did not look convinced, she did not have it in her heart to deny Lydea this marriage. Her daughter had spent days moping and nights crying, so she obviously had strong feelings for the foreign man, and Madame Fayeth suspected that Tytido had as much power and wealth as any merchant class Atrophane man who Lydea could marry. Perhaps more.

Pulling her daughter close with great affection, Madame Fayeth said, "Do you want to always live in Nufal?"

Lydea suddenly looked doubtful, but she maintained her commitment. "Yes, Tytido and I shall build a new settlement. But we will travel to the Empire to visit someday. I promise."

Madame Fayeth was quiet. She did not know what to say, but Hanshen did. He was up, dressed, and looking better already. "Mother, we should all live here. I want to stay close to King Shan and grow up to be one of his people like Lord Dreibrand and Lord Tytido," the boy declared.

The decision stunned Madame Fayeth. She had dragged her children into the Wilderness on a dangerous gamble and now both of them wanted to say. Reverting to parental concerns, she said, "But what about your education? I want you to go to the University of Cros."

Hanshen shrugged. "Then I will. But not for about ten years," he answered. He was not opposed to his mother's plans for his schooling, and he began to imagine himself as a grown man returning to Atrophane after years in Nufal. He would be quite an exotic specimen, who would no doubt interest many girls.

"Oh, it is all so much at once!" Madame Fayeth exclaimed and put her hands on her cheeks.

Tytido suggested, "Madame Fayeth, write down an estimate of some things that you would like, and I will agree to it. We will discuss and add to the exchanges after the war. I must go make arrangements for the marriage."

He apologized to Lydea for the thrown together ceremony and promised that he would make it up to her later. Tytido reached for her hand, but then recalled his declaration he would not touch her again until they were married, and kept his hands to himself.

Recovering a portion of her wits, Madame Fayeth said, "Lord Tytido, among the Atrophane, a marriage entails more than giving gifts to the bride's family. It should be the beginning of a beneficial alliance between families."

"Oh, yes, Madame Fayeth," Tytido answered quickly. "I give my word. Now please excuse me. I have much to do. Plan what details that concern you, and meet me in the town square at midafternoon."

Tytido and Lydea exchanged marriage vows in front of the entire settlement, including the rys King and Queen and the rys soldiers. Following the example set by Dreibrand and Miranda five years before, they did not designate a person to perform the ceremony. After Hanshen presented his sister to her bridegroom, Tytido and Lydea simply expressed publicly their wish to commit the rest of their lives to each other for the purposes of love and companionship. Madame Fayeth cried on Atarek's shoulder.

As Lydea spoke her vows, she imagined how interesting her life would be as a Lady of Nufal. Not even in her most fanciful daydreams about falling in love had she conceived of moving to the Wilderness and pledging herself to a foreign warrior. When Tytido came close to seal their joining with a kiss, she was amazed to be married, especially to a man who she had known for barely two months.

Although it was not the season for marriages, the autumn gave them a splendid day for a wedding gift. The sun filled the clear sky with warmth that glowed on the bright foliage of the deciduous trees and deepened the green of the pines. The air was crisp and a pleasure to breathe. The brisk beautiful afternoon hardly seemed the harbinger of winter, but this would be the last fine day of the year.

The Rys Chronicles continue in *The Borderlands of Power*

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Excerpt from The Borderlands of Power

Dreibrand thought about his family. He was glad that they were not here to see what he was about to do. He hoped that he could win his children a more peaceful existence.

He lingered on the image of Miranda in his mind. Dreibrand was very thankful for the last few years. Miranda was a better companion than he had ever hoped for, and he was gratified to have provided her with a good life. He knew how much it meant to her.

I am ready, he told himself. Aloud, he said, "You were right to hate me, Sandin. I was always meant to take your place."

Dreibrand ran toward the fighting square. The run warmed his muscles and prepared him for combat. He entered the square on a side composed of his warriors. As they parted before his exposed blades, the Nufalese settlers yelled his name. He passed by the green flag of his family and stood on the ground where he would reclaim his place among the Atrophane elite.

Atarek watched his brother emerge into the fighting area. Stripped to the waist and brandishing his shining sword, Dreibrand appeared worthy of the cheering. Atarek surged with family pride. He noted the long scar on Dreibrand's torso and marveled at the tenacity with which his brother pursued his ambitions. Dreibrand proved the nobility of their bloodline and was the champion of the House of Veta.

Atarek shouted encouragement to his brother, which started another bout of cheering among the warriors.

Dreibrand saluted the two sides of the square that supported him and then saluted the Atrophane soldiers who watched silently. He was certain that Sandin seethed with annoyance to see him as the center of attention.

Dreibrand nourished his bravery with the cheering and focused on his brutal task. He deftly spun his sword and thrust the weapon into the turf. Then he threw his dagger into the ground next to the sword.

Tytido, who was unfamiliar with the dueling form, leaned close to Atarek. "What is he doing?" he asked.

"He must leave his weapons at the edge of the square," Atarek explained. "They must begin the duel by fighting with their hands. The object is to beat down your opponent, retrieve your weapons and then kill him. You have to use a weapon to kill but you must initiate combat without them."

"A true physical test then," Tytido said.

Atarek crossed his arms and then uncrossed them. His agitation was eating his nerves like locusts in wheat. "It is just stupid military bullshit," he grumbled.

Dreibrand watched his rival move through the ranks of soldiers with one flagbearer. The Atrophane soldiers began to cheer for their leader, but Dreibrand hoped that it was obligatory.

Sandin presented a very different image of himself when he entered the square. Stripped to the waist, he lacked the lavish garments and armor of his station. Even so, he remained an imposing man. Unsoftened by his privileged life, his trim and muscular physique was a tribute to Atrophane masculinity. And although he had spent most of his career behind the fighting lines, Sandin Promentro possessed the lethal talents expected of a noble officer.

Impatiently, Sandin tossed his weapons into the ground and strode toward the center of the arena. Dreibrand advanced toward his opponent. With each step, the primal intensity of their contest increased. It was the basic battle for territory and authority that men had waged since the savage depths of human existence.

When they met, they raised their fists and circled each other with light steps. Searching for a chance to strike, they stared at each other with complete devotion to the duel. The situation surprised neither of them. Ever since Dreibrand had joined Lord Kwan's Horde, their relationship had taken the course toward conflict.

In true Atrophane style, Sandin struck first. He sprang at Dreibrand, eager to crush the challenger and redeem the integrity of his command. Sandin punched high and low with furious speed. He displayed the skills of a man whose training has been guided by many masters.

Dreibrand blocked and dodged. He guarded his body and reserved his energy while studying Sandin's physical style. Patience rewarded Dreibrand with an opportunity. He slammed a fist into Sandin's torso with precise force. Sandin slowed because of the blow, and Dreibrand pressed close and grabbed his opponent with a wrestling grip.

Sandin twisted and pulled, trying to break free, but Dreibrand held his bare skin as if he possessed claws. Sandin placed one hand on Dreibrand's shoulder and seized his jaw with the other hand. He pushed Dreibrand's head back, and Dreibrand struggled to keep his head from twisting. Muscles rippled in his neck and back, but he could not overcome Sandin's leverage. Dreibrand relinquished a handhold and punched Sandin in the lower ribs.

The hit forced Sandin back, and Dreibrand followed through with several more punches before Sandin started blocking them. When Sandin recovered his stance, Dreibrand dropped back to reassess. He did not want to waste energy and make himself available for counterblows.

Both men were breathing hard already, and the shouts and cheers of the watching armies were distant to their ears. Summoning the fury he felt for Sandin, Dreibrand recalled old offenses and new ones. Sandin seethed with the desire to destroy his enemy. The disastrous engagement with Shan had smeared his reputation, and he hungered for a glorious victory.

Dreibrand launched a bold offensive, leaping toward Sandin and kicking high. The first kick clipped Sandin's shoulder and knocked him off balance. Dreibrand spun to build force behind his second kick and aimed for Sandin's head. Sandin grabbed Dreibrand's incoming foot and slammed him to the ground.

Even with his head jangling on the hard ground, Dreibrand stayed in control. Because Sandin held his foot, Dreibrand was able to yank Sandin forward with his leg. Sandin fell between Dreibrand's legs, and Dreibrand flipped on top of him and started beating his face.

They struggled on the ground, punching and rolling and wrestling out of each other's pins. The vicious spectacle enthralled its watchers. The stakes were high for the men of Nufal, and they cheered for Dreibrand faithfully. The Atrophane soldiers were astounded and even flattered by the sight of two nobles grappling like starved bears for command. It thrilled them to actually see the Darhet fight like a true warrior, and it was equally intriguing to watch Dreibrand pour all his strength into claiming Sandin's position.

Whoever won, they would gladly follow him.

The Rys Chronicles continue in *The Borderlands of Power*

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Appendix A ~ Noble Clans and Houses of Atrophane

Clan Chenomet – Traditionally distinguished for its military leadership, Clan Chenomet maintained its influence and power by delivering victories and successfully defying rivals. Then in the imperial period, the Clan continued to find much glory and wealth. The Atrophane say that the Clan was born to win, but the motto of Clan Chenomet is Loyal to the End.

Clan Promentro – Another traditional big player among the Atrophane elite, Clan Promentro always performed well militarily, but the foundation of its wealth is banking. The motto of Clan Promentro is Share Honor with the Gods.

Clan Anglair – Clan Anglair is considered the builder of Atrophane. The Clan is well-respected by all classes of society, which suits it well because it often has to employ many merchants and organize large-scale labor. Its expertise is in architecture, aqueducts, and city planning. Clan Anglair is very wealthy and has the motto Seek Wisdom with Your Hands.

Clan Fanlyre – Although a Clan that has also prospered in banking, it has typically carried the lower end of the banking market left to it by Clan Promentro. The expansion of the Empire opened up opportunities for the Clan, however, and its wealth has grown. The motto of Clan Fanlyre is Always Survive.

Clan Abundo – A militaristic Clan that enjoyed its best prestige during the Atrophane classical period of internal warring. Although wealthy and respected, the Clan was thoroughly overshadowed by Clan Chenomet during the imperial period. Its motto is All is Won by the Sword.

Clan Mazehta – Supportive of religion, Clan Mazehta is thoroughly entrenched throughout the temple hierarchies. This gives it much sway with the masses and a steady income that produces political muscle. The motto of the Clan is All is from the Heart.

Clan Tabella – A naval Clan, it monopolizes shipbuilding. Traditionally it controlled the trade in seafood, salt, and all shipping by waterway. The imperial period has been very good to Clan Tabella. Its motto is Adapt and Prosper.

Clan Burtet – Although all Clans produce wealth through agriculture from their vast land holdings, Clan Burtet is a giant among the food producers. Its estates produce the majority of bread grains and the Clan rapidly added to its plantations during the imperial period. The motto of the Clan is Respect the Land.

Clan Sartur – Another religiously focused Clan, it rivals Clan Mazehta for influence among the temples. The foundation of Clan Sartur's wealth, however, came from the silk trade for it discovered and developed silkworm culture and silk making in antiquity. Its motto is Sacred is the Defender.

Clan Mehpet – The land holdings of Clan Mehpet are concentrated in the Valtrane Mountains of the Atrophane Peninsula. Its wealth is naturally based on mining. The motto of the Clan is Blood from Stone.

House Veta – A once prominent noble house famed for its livestock breeding and valuable herds, House Veta suffered the wrath of the Darmar after a political assassination scandal and had most of its estates confiscated. Even financially devastated, the noble status of the House remained, of course, because nobility cannot be taken away. Its motto is Freedom Forever.

House Triesto – A noble House made wealthy by its extensive estates with vineyards and olive groves, House Triesto has always enjoyed wealth and respect, neither rising too high to incur jealousy nor lacking in influence. Politically astute, House Triesto has the motto Value Life for It is Fleeting.

House Kafella – A distinguished House noted for its devotion to scholarship, House Kafella has found wealth and fame by founding the schools and universities of Atrophane that pursue all the great subjects such as law and medicine. The motto of House Kafella is A Better Way Exists.

Appendix B ~ Rys Society

By human standards rys are a rare species. Known only to live in the Jington Valley of the Rysamand Mountains, rys possess a nearly universal disposition for conformity. Most rys keep to their places and live unobtrusive existences. Rare exceptions occur among rys youth, who can show a bit of rebellion and even travel outside the mountains. But this is invariably a stage and those few rys who indulge wanderlust will eventually return to settle down in Jington. They are said to be always drawn back to Jington because ultimately no rys can bear long separation from the mountains of his or her birth.

Very little is known of rys history or their origins. There are no recorded rulers of Jington before King Dacian and Queen Onja, and during the over two thousand years in which Onja reigned, any records that may have existed did not survive. So treacherous was life under Onja that rys adapted into a quiet society in which they showed little ambition or curiosity. Their lives revolved around personal relationships and they took joy from the natural splendor of the land. Although rys value their families and friendships, marriage is by no means a permanent arrangement in rys society. Due to their long lives that typically extend up to a thousand years and even centuries past that, lifelong mating proved to be tedious. Rys form formal marriages that last for decades or even centuries, but there is no stigma in dissolving the union. Marriages usually end amicably and offspring may choose with which parent they wish to live.

As a rule, rys are bonded within formal marriage before mating. There are never any exceptions because both the male and the female must be committed to reproducing and consciously choose to do so during intercourse. The powers even of common rys allow them to have deep awareness of their physiology, and without the mutually agreeable desire to cause pregnancy, their bodies will not induce the proper hormonal and physiological elements for fertility and virility. In addition to reproductive unions, Rys certainly engage in recreational coupling, but their whims, and lusts, and pleasure seeking can never accidentally result in pregnancy. But when two rys desire to mate, then the social rule is to marry. Other than the requirement that male and female pairs wishing to bear ryslings marry, the only other social norm regarding sexuality concerns the age of maturity. Rys are recognized as an adult at age one hundred. Physical maturity for both males and females happens at roughly this age as well.

The population of rys is small, only about 5,000 in and around Jington. Reproduction is slow, with females bearing one to three ryslings over the course of their lives.

Unlike human societies, rys do not have any inequality between male and female. Their powers occur in both sexes, and all respect and status are derived from skill and power. Rys society functions as a true meritocracy, and the monarch or monarchs always represent the rys with the greatest magical ability.

Throughout the Age of Onja all foods and material needs were provided to the rys by the tribute that the humans delivered to the rys Queen. After King Shan ceased to demand tribute from the western human kingdoms, rys were forced to meet their needs on the open market. Hardship was entirely avoided, however, because King Shan underwrote the rys economy with his colossal treasury, and the rys

themselves proved willing to explore a more realistic role in the economy. With their wondrous minds and magic powers, rys discovered their many talents for producing goods and services that were highly desirable and valuable to humans.

Rys society stagnated under Queen Onja, but as it emerges into a new age, it is difficult to predict how such a gifted species might develop. Currently the level of interaction between rys and humans is rising. A situation that is both enriching but potentially dangerous – for humans.

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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