

The Borderlands of Power

The Rys Chronicles Book IV

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The Borderlands of Power: The Rys Chronicles Book IV

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To Glen

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Shan thought. But somehow Nufal was impossible to ignore. Although the land had initially felt foreign and hostile to him, he was growing accustomed to the region. Perhaps Nufal was not so alien. *Before the Great War, the rys of Jingten and Nufal must have commingled, been kin. What ended the peace?* Shan wondered. He suspected that Onja had been the cause.

Despite his diligent interest in the lost history of the Great War, Shan's research had yielded few additional details. The scraps of ancient history that he had obtained from the Kezanada through Faychan had not discussed the causes of the conflict. Shan wondered if the ancient human fighters had even known the reason for the war. If they had, then their writing of it had not survived the ages.

With the invaders drawing closer, Shan shifted his mind to the present. He commanded everyone, even Quylan, to take some rest. He would watch over them in case attack spells came. And when they woke, they would hear his final plan for the battle.

Dreibrand held his left arm out so Faychan could wrap it with fabric. All around them, other warriors were being prepared in the Kezanada way for their mission into the night. Although Shan's spell would conceal them, Faychan and the other former Kezanada had insisted that everyone be properly outfitted. Magical support did not translate into neglecting the skills of stealth. All armor or shiny accessories needed to be covered with cloth. The padding would prevent clinking that could give a man away, and the dull cloth would stop firelight from glinting off metallic items.

Faychan suggested binding Dreibrand's dagger into the wrappings on his left forearm. Dreibrand was accustomed to using a dagger from his belt, but Faychan advised him that the wise commando always carried a hidden weapon. After he covered the ivory handle with cloth and checked to make sure that it would hold in place, Faychan showed Dreibrand where to probe for the weapon and pull it out.

"It is in there tight," Dreibrand commented, wiggling the dagger.

"Well, you do not want it to fall out," Faychan said. "If you need it, I am sure you will not worry about tearing a bit of cloth."

"No, I suppose not," Dreibrand conceded. He appreciated that Faychan shared his techniques for operating behind enemy lines.

Securing the last wrapping with expert fingers, Faychan stepped back and regarded his subject. Dreibrand's helmet and neck were wound with black cloth as well, and the warding crystal on his sword had been wrapped. Faychan nodded with satisfaction. "Much better," he said.

Dreibrand slapped his arms against his armored torso and approved of the softened sound. "This was your favorite part of being a Kezanada," he guessed.

"I was good at it," Faychan said. "I should go with you, but Shan will not have me."

Trying to divert Faychan from the rejection, Dreibrand said, "It is better to have you here. If I am captured, I will need you to get me out."

"Oh, I see," Faychan laughed.

"How can you joke around?" Tytido criticized. He had watched Faychan prepare Dreibrand for the mission and grown anxious for the assembling strike force.

"You have never had a sense of humor before a battle," Dreibrand said.

Tytido saw no fault in his seriousness. When the battle started, the commandos would be utterly surrounded by enemies. Even aided by Shan, they had to rely on Tytido's forces to save them. As Shan and his strike force infiltrated the enemy army, Tytido, Faychan, Tulair, and Quylan would be poised to engage. After Shan launched the internal surprise attack, Tytido would attack from the outside and relieve pressure on the commandos.

Ideally, the confusion created by the separate attacks would allow them to eliminate Tempet and Alloi. Then, Shan could compel the Atrophane to surrender because they could not hope to defeat the King of Jingten with mere human power.

Everyone accepted that Shan's daring raid was necessary. Their army was too small to face the invasion force in a conventional daylight battle. They had to strike from within and without under cover of night and magic so that they could hit key players during the mayhem.

Trying to ease Tytido's obvious tension, Dreibrand said, "We shall be reunited in victory."

Knowing that his doubts would not serve them now, Tytido said, "Yes. Fight well my friend."

"I will, and good luck," Dreibrand said.

He checked his sho dart pistol again to make sure that a dart was loaded in the chamber although he knew that it was there.

Fires were forbidden tonight, and Dreibrand quickly scanned the area in the deepening dusk. The rys soldiers were starting to team up with their human partners on the strike force. Atarek was taking a few more practice swings with his new sword, and Dreibrand went to speak with him before their parting.

Atarek lowered his weapon and said, "Looks like this war is about to get started."

"Yeah," Dreibrand agreed soberly. "I have to go soon."

Visibly uncomfortable about Dreibrand's foray into the enemy camp, Atarek said, "I suppose this is the type of thing you have done many times?"

"Well, not exactly like this, but I have been in plenty of tight spots," Dreibrand replied, trying to be positive about the situation. "Now stop worrying about me because you are not going to have it so easy. Remember, stay close to Faychan while I am on this mission."

Atarek rolled his eyes and nodded. "And you can stop worrying about me. Maybe I don't have your fancy military training, but I have been rather dangerous myself on a few occasions. I recall bloodying your nose a couple times," he said.

"I know. I just want you to be careful because..." Dreibrand pictured himself fighting in the middle of the Atrophane encampment and continued, "Atarek, if something should happen to me, promise me you will take care of my family."

Such responsibility was a dizzying concept for Atarek. He sheathed his sword and fiddled with the handle of his new dagger while trying to think of what to say. "Are you sure you would not want to ask a more reliable sort?" he said.

"Atarek," Dreibrand growled impatiently. "This is about the future of the House of Veta."

Looking ashamed of his lack of seriousness, Atarek said, "Yes, of course, Dreibrand. I am honored."

"Thank you," Dreibrand said with a humility that Atarek had never seen in him before.

Atarek kept his hand on the sword at his hip. Although still trying to become used to the larger weapon, its presence alongside his body was reassuring, as was the warding crystal hanging around his neck. "Well, Dreiby, if something happens to me, promise me you will pour a few good glasses of wine on my grave every year," he said with a grin.

Dreibrand indulged his brother's need for humor and asked, "Red or white?"

"Alternate each year. And maybe a couple shots of that nasty liquor too," Atarek said.

"I can do that," Dreibrand promised. "But I insist you live a long life before burdening me with the maintenance of your grave."

"I plan to, Little Brother," Atarek said, mustering some Atrophaney optimism.

Dreibrand embraced his brother. "Take care of yourself, Atarek," he ordered.

Slapping his brother's back, Atarek said, "Say hello to Sandin Promentro for me."

"I will," Dreibrand said. "And take good care of my horse."

"Thanks for thinking of me before the horse," Atarek joked.

Dreibrand let his brother go and saw Shan waiting for him only a few steps away. As the commandos gathered around Shan, the rys King reported that Tempet and Alloi were deep in spellmaking trances, which meant that they would be distracted and unlikely to detect his invisibility spell. Shan hoped to interrupt them before they could start their attack.

"Let us go," Shan said and pulled his black cloak over his sparkling armor and gleaming shield.

The commandos double-checked their sho dart pistols and pulled their head wrappings over their faces.

Blue fire overtook Shan's eyes, and he tuned his mind to the heartbeats and souls of the warriors, which would allow him to keep his camouflage spell on them as they moved. Shan's immense power executed the spell swiftly, and his strike force flickered out of sight. Faychan just barely heard their feet whispering away through the frosted prairie grass.

"Well, Lord Tytido of Nufal," Faychan said graciously. "It is time to do our part."

Reluctantly, Tytido felt a hint of camaraderie with Faychan, but he refused to show it.

"Truly, Faychan," he responded and stalked toward his horse. The army was under his command while Dreibrand and Shan were away, and he would not fail them. And he would most definitely not fail Lydea. Tytido focused on her image and recalled how the peak of ecstasy had enhanced her beauty on their wedding night. No opponent was going to keep him from returning to his beloved bride.

2. The Wretched Thrill

Bravery binds my comrades to me

Loyalty opens the path to glory

Courage breaks our enemy

Discipline brings us victory

—Atrophane soldiers' song

Shan led the commandos in single file. Every one had a partner who was supposed to be ahead of him in line. Gulang moved behind Dreibrand who followed Shan. In this manner, the men and rys would breach the Atrophane perimeter at one point, like a snake into a gopher hole.

Watch fires blazed around the camp, but they lighted the Atrophane more than they drove back the night. The camp was active, no doubt alerted to the movements of Quylan and Tytido.

Dreibrand measured the swath of lights on the black prairie. The Horde that he had served in as an Atrophane officer had been larger than the army before him, but the sight still made him recall the thrill of being part of such a spectacular force. Tonight, he acted as an avenging ghost coming to condemn who he had been in an earlier life.

Through a gap in the watch fires, the commando force slipped over a low wall of soil and crossed a trench into the enemy bivouac. Dreibrand observed the faces of the soldiers on watch duty. It was difficult to believe that they did not see the one hundred warriors passing them.

Inside the camp, soldiers sat around their fires. Most of them had their helmets on, only waiting to buckle the chinstraps. An archer inspected his quiver of arrows, and a cavalryman sat by a fire anxiously spinning his spurs with his fingers.

Dreibrand overheard snips of conversation.

"By Golan, we will be in Jington before winter."

"They only have two thousand soldiers."

"Tempet could kill them all himself."

Dreibrand doubted the soldier quite grasped the veracity of the idle boast. Tempet's combat abilities had so impressed Shan that the rys King had adhered to his decision to fight Tempet personally. The commandos had been assigned Alloi as their sole target. Their job was to prevent her from assisting Tempet, which should allow Shan to kill him.

The enchanted force wound its way deeper into the camp, beckoned by the red command tents at the center. For a while, Shan even fell into step behind a soldier, who had no idea that one hundred enemies filled his tracks. Sometimes the line of infiltrators had to break to let an unwitting soldier pass through.

The chestplate armor and uniform of the ranking lieutenant caught Dreibrand's eye. Once, Dreibrand had worn the same items.

He is returning from an assessment of the perimeter, Dreibrand estimated because the lieutenant appeared to be headed toward the command center to make his report.

According to Atrophane military procedure, the camp had been set up in an orderly grid, and the lieutenant's path intersected with the path along which the commandos quietly proceeded. Shan stopped just before the lieutenant turned onto their route. Dreibrand tapped Gulang with three fingers, which was the signal to halt. Gulang passed the code to the rys soldier behind him, and the command went down the line.

Unexpectedly, the lieutenant stopped and spun around. Agitated, the man's brown eyes roved the torchlight, looking for something that had caught his eye.

Dreibrand marveled at how the man looked right through him. Even more surprising was that the officer was not an Atrophane. Dreibrand was sure of it.

While Dreibrand tried to pinpoint the man's ethnic origin, white light flared beneath the lieutenant's collar. The lieutenant gasped because ghostly images flickered in front of him. Shan clenched his teeth and reinforced the magical camouflage that had been disrupted by the strong warding crystal worn by the officer.

The faint outlines of bodies disappeared before the lieutenant could analyze what he had seen. But the sudden heat from the warding crystal against his neck alerted him to the possibility of magic. The incident had to be reported to Tempet and Alloi and he took half a step toward the command center, but then froze.

Shan snared the officer's mind and soothed his alarm. The warding spell that protected the lieutenant troubled Shan very little now that he knew it was there. The rys's powerful awareness batted aside the protective spell as if it were only an annoying fly. Gripping the human's thoughts, Shan scrambled the memory of seeing intruders and he removed the desire to report the news. Then, in consideration of Dreibrand's goal of taking command of the Atrophane, Shan suggested for good measure, *"Betray Sandin Promentro."*

The lieutenant reached into his collar and touched the warding crystal for reassurance. He knew that the tabre were making a great spell, and he assumed that it had caused the crystal to flare. He noticed a few soldiers staring at him because he had been standing there with a strange look on his face. After a scowl from the lieutenant, the soldiers looked away, and he continued toward the command center.

Trailing the disturbed lieutenant, the commandos encircled the red tents in the heart of the camp. The ten thousand soldiers on all sides weighed heavily on the minds of the concealed warriors.

Although camouflaged, Dreibrand ducked behind a tent as his comrades took their places. The red tent fabric near his face mustered many memories, and the imperial banner hanging between the Darhet's battle flags judged Dreibrand harshly. The symbol of his homeland snapped in the gusting wind as if it wanted to fly loose and smother its insolent son.

Nonsense! Dreibrand told himself. *What did I tell Deltane? Nufal is your home. Nufal.*

He took a deep breath to steady his resolve.

Many torches illuminated the inner circle of tents. Dreibrand scanned the area, searching for Sandin. The largest tent flapped open and Tempet strode out. The soft edges of his fur cloak contrasted with the hard armor on his chest. Intense white fire filled his eyes, leaving his face in deep shadow. Alloi followed him, and magic blazed across her face as well.

With Tempet and Alloi before him, Dreibrand accepted that agonizing over killing Atrophanes was truly a trifling issue. Sandin came out of his tent next, and Dreibrand overcame his misgivings about civil war entirely. He narrowed his eyes. Sandin would pay for his treatment of Atarek.

Unlike the other warriors, Shan had not crouched behind a tent. He observed his enemies from an open position. A black cloak draped his body, covering the relic shield and sword in his hands.

"Go. Go kill her," Shan ordered aloud.

It seemed that at his bidding, the wind pulled up the edges of his cloak and revealed the gleam of his weapons.

Drawing his sword and sho dart pistol, Dreibrand sprang forward. From this moment onward, he could assume that the camouflage spell would fail. Following his lead, all of the commandos launched into action. Dreibrand ran straight toward Alloi. He refused to be deterred by her femininity.

With her mind still stretched from casting the endurance spell, Alloi could barely comprehend her

perception when a charging man formed out of air. She raised her hands to fend off Dreibrand's advance with a spell just when Dreibrand pulled the trigger. She cast her spell the instant the dart pricked the skin of her palm. A burning wall of magic slammed Dreibrand backward.

He hugged his sword close, hoping to tap strength from its powerful warding crystal. The onslaught of his one hundred companions protected him as he struggled to recover from the painful blow.

Although startled by the intense attack, Tempet immediately defended his sister. His hungry battle cry exploded from his throat, and the bitaran sprang obediently into his hands. The swinging bludgeon hissed through the air, and the commandos jumped aside. Three died, two humans and a rys, their guts smearing across each other's corpses. Gore blotted the sparkling diamonds when the bitaran emerged from flesh. Blood splattered Dreibrand's forehead, and his desire to survive drove him to his feet.

Shan intervened before Tempet could slaughter any more attackers. The rys King was able to maintain the camouflage spell around himself until he was within a step of Tempet. Distracted by warriors charging from every direction, Tempet did not sense the approaching lifeforce until the very last instant. His right side was carelessly exposed when Shan became visible and thrust his sword. Tempet evaded sudden death, but the blade cut his right arm. Following his sword stroke, Shan slammed his shield onto Tempet's wound and cast a blistering attack spell.

With Tempet occupied, Alloi received the full assault of the commandos. Atrophane soldiers and officers rallied to her defense. Alloi leaned drunkenly and shook the dart from her hand. Staggering behind the Darhet, she forced discipline upon her mind and barricaded her physiology against the sho drug as much as possible. The rys soldiers scared her the worst. Their presence dragged her mind into the ruin of the past, making the Great War happen again.

Dreibrand focused on her sluggish retreat with the surety of the wolf that has selected its weakened prey from the herd. He attacked, trading blows with Atrophane soldiers. He cut down an infantry man, and then a young officer died on his blade. As Dreibrand retracted his bloody sword, seeking for the next place to strike, he made eye contact with Sandin. Even with his face covered, Dreibrand detected that Sandin recognized him. Their venomous gazes spat their mutual hatred at each other, but Sandin denied Dreibrand the luxury of combat. Seizing Alloi's arm in a strong grip, Sandin shouted for his men to cover his withdrawal.

An explosive attack spell shook the area, making fighters stumble and shield their eyes. Sandin squinted in the flash and glimpsed the dueling blur of Tempet and Shan. Soldiers on both sides avoided their magical conflict that spewed hot destruction like an angry fumarole.

The fray at the command center aroused the rest of the camp, and soldiers already hyped for battle rushed to help.

The commandos continued to spread havoc among the Atrophane. The second attack of their comrades outside the camp would come soon and draw off the Atrophane soldiers. With the aid of sho darts, the commandos expected to have a decent chance of fighting their way out.

Dreibrand pursued Alloi relentlessly. He was determined to prevent her from harassing Shan. And he hoped to kill her and end the fighting even more quickly. He hollered to Gulang and the others for support and fought through a swarm of soldiers toward Sandin.

The commandos yanked torches from the ground and tossed them onto tents as they charged Sandin's position. Hard pressed, Sandin could not give thought to determining how his camp had been infiltrated.

Ambio Nateve arrived at the Darhet's side and assessed Alloi with desperate concern. Her breathing was labored, and she had sunk to her knees.

"Sho dart," she explained. "I need a moment to overcome the poison."

"Stop gawking at her, Lieutenant," Sandin barked. "Lead the counterattack."

Ambio gladly redirected his passions to the attackers, shouting orders. Mad with desire to protect Alloi, Ambio confronted a rys soldier and promptly cut him down. It was his first rys kill, and the triumph instilled him with a lust for more.

Dreibrand and his comrades hit the cluster of men around the Darhet. Their fast blades drove aside Atrophane weapons and sliced flesh. Many Atrophane died, overwhelmed by the intense onslaught of rys and human warriors.

Intent on reaching Alloi, Dreibrand encountered Ambio. Their swords crashed, but Dreibrand expertly outmanned him and knocked Ambio into a small tent. Unwilling to waste time on finishing the man, Dreibrand scrambled closer to his female target.

Sandin drew his sword and barred Dreibrand's advance. The men became momentarily impervious to the fighters killing and dying around them.

Yelling madly, Dreibrand attacked Sandin. The Darhet's blade barely budged when their swords met, but his boot heels were driven deeper into the ground. He flung Dreibrand's sword aside and his speedy riposte put Dreibrand on the defensive.

Sandin laughed, delighted by the grudging respect in his opponent's eyes. "You know you cannot take me," he taunted.

Beyond Sandin, Alloi sank to the ground. She clutched her head as if debilitated by a headache. Her vulnerability beckoned Dreibrand. Momentarily protected from other attacks by his comrades, Dreibrand dueled Sandin fiercely.

While still fighting with an Atrophane soldier, a rys soldier assisted Dreibrand by casting a heat spell at Sandin. It flared brightly around Sandin's head, and although his warding protected him from harm, the brightness disoriented him.

Dreibrand struck hard, and Sandin was saved only by his armor. The point of Dreibrand's sword punched a hole in the armor over Sandin's heart and the blow knocked him down. One more well-aimed thrust of the sword would finish the Darhet, but Dreibrand did not forsake his last chance at Alloi.

Jumping past the tumbling Sandin, Dreibrand landed in front of Alloi and stabbed at her prone body with all his might. Despite the impairment from the sho drug, Alloi twisted aside and avoided Dreibrand's descending swordpoint. The sword stuck into the ground next to her ribs. Dreibrand leaned on his sword, halfway off his feet. The warding crystal on the end of the sword handle illuminated their faces, and Dreibrand stared into her eyes. He felt his mind falling into a trap, and his awareness clawed at the edges of his free will.

"Noooo!" he yelled in defiance of her power.

Alloi summoned the energy to cast an attack spell that blasted Dreibrand back. His sword remained planted in the ground next to her. Stunned, Dreibrand could not react when Sandin loomed over him.

The smug face of the Darhet smiled down to him. "I have looked forward to taking you alive, Dreibrand," he said.

Two soldiers seized Dreibrand. He struggled against them as they put him on his feet. The soldier on the right never got a good grip on his arm, and Dreibrand punched him in the face. With his right hand free, Dreibrand yanked his dagger out of the wrappings on his left arm. Dreibrand stabbed the other soldier in the arm. He cried out and let go.

Dreibrand swiped at Sandin and sliced the man's cheek. Cussing dreadfully, Sandin covered his cheek, shocked by the deep sting.

Dreibrand dove for his sword and rolled back to his feet with the weapon in his hand. He looked for Alloi, but she had regained her feet and scrambled away from him. When she looked over her

shoulder, Dreibrand saw the white light glowing in her eyes, which indicated that her powers were recovering rapidly.

More commandos came down on her and she cast an attack spell that killed three soldiers, two rys and one man. Dreibrand jumped over their smoking bodies to confront her. He hacked at her relentlessly with each running leap. A human could not have dodged every stroke of cutting death, but she possessed a greater speed.

Yet another attack spell thwarted Dreibrand, sending him reeling through a campfire. He kicked over a grill and a teapot, showering the area with coals, but their heat was insignificant compared to the burning spell that squeezed his warding.

Dreibrand stayed on his feet and kept moving. He staggered in a circle, intending to attack her again. A fresh wave of Atrophane soldiers stymied him and the other commandos until new attack spells blazed among the Atrophane and broke their lines. Quylan had begun her assault.

Aware of the second attack, Alloi rushed to the Darhet, and a mass of soldiers surrounded them. Dreibrand yelled angrily as she eluded him again.

Why can I never touch her? he fumed.

Renewing his effort, he attacked soldiers and tried to follow her. Despite his hacking and killing, he made little progress, except for reaching some beleaguered comrades. Atrophanes had surrounded Gulang and the rys who had helped Dreibrand earlier by hitting Sandin with a heat spell. They were relieved to see Dreibrand cut them an escape hole.

"Lord Dreibrand, we must go!" the rys shouted. Like Dreibrand, he had tried until past the last chance to reach Alloi, which had now become a futile cause.

But Dreibrand did not want to give up. In his madness, he might have stayed there to die, unwilling to accept failure, but when Gulang was hit hard and fell against him, Dreibrand accepted the situation. With the rys defending him, Dreibrand grabbed Gulang and kept him on his feet. Blood poured down his face, soaking into his hood.

The mayhem had become intolerable, and all the commandos were retreating. Although stung by his inability to destroy Alloi, Dreibrand decided that he could still save Gulang, which was a worthy goal. The rys grabbed Gulang from the other side, and they fled for their lives.

In the swelling confusion within the camp, they became just three more figures running in the night. When they were recognized as enemies and confronted, they fought again. With heat spells and slashing blades, they gained more ground, and the watch fires on the perimeter drew closer.

Gulang finally stumbled, dragging Dreibrand down. The rys stayed with them and held their pursuers at bay with heat spells. Dreibrand lifted Gulang's head, fearing to find the man dead. Gulang, however, blinked the blood from his eyes and proved he was still alive.

"Move!" Dreibrand ordered.

A warded soldier had gotten through the rys's defense and loomed over Dreibrand with a lifted sword. Dreibrand blocked the weapon with his sword. Then he let go of Gulang and tried to stab the soldier with his dagger, but the soldier jumped out of the way. Still on one knee, Dreibrand placed his dagger between his teeth and grabbed Gulang's pistol from his belt. Fortunately, a dart was in the chamber, and Dreibrand shot the man. In humans, the sho drug acts instantly and cannot be resisted. Paralyzed, the soldier fell over.

Desperate, the rys soldier reached deep within himself and dragged more power out of every fiber of his body than he ever had before. He cast a benign but helpful spell of sleepiness around him, toppling most of the soldiers into a doze.

"Come!" the rys encouraged, dashing ahead of Dreibrand.

Dreibrand put his dagger into its place on his swordbelt and pulled one of Gulang's arms over a shoulder. With a groan, he heaved the man off the ground and ran after his rys comrade. Dreibrand's muscles burned from the extra burden.

Because commanders and sergeants were calling their men to battle, Dreibrand, Gulang, and the rys were able to escape. The darkness beyond the watch fires enveloped them. Forced to rest, Dreibrand stopped and set Gulang down. The rys crashed to his knees beside them, gasping for breath as well.

"Gulang, speak to me," Dreibrand demanded.

"My Lord," he responded feebly.

"Good man. Now on your feet. I cannot carry you around all night," Dreibrand said.

"Leave me," Gulang murmured.

Dreibrand pulled off the hood and found the dent on the helmet. He eased the helmet back and searched the blood-slick hair for the wound.

Gulang groped for his hood and then wiped some blood from his face with it.

"You will live, Gulang," Dreibrand said. "But we have to stop this bleeding." He took the hood from Gulang's hand and pressed it over the split scalp. Dreibrand asked the rys what his name was.

"Dey," the rys responded.

"Can you do anything for my man?" Dreibrand asked.

Dey nodded but gestured that he required a moment before acting. He had exerted himself tremendously by using more magic than he ever had before in his life.

Dreibrand looked around. The clouds had thickened and completely obscured the stars that would help guide him back to his army, but flashes of attack spells marked its position anyway. Quylan and Alloi were trading blows as the Nufalese force assaulted the Atrophaney ranks.

"Where is Shan?" Dreibrand wondered.

"There," Dey answered. He grabbed Dreibrand's shoulder and pointed.

A sphere of light abruptly marked the rys King's position, briefly revealing him and Tempet within a lightning flash of magic. They dueled atop a hill apart from the clashing armies. As Shan had wanted, he had lured Tempet away from his allies, but as of yet, had failed to kill him.

"We have to regroup," Dreibrand said. He could not bear to be a stray from the battle.

Catching a second wind, Dey leaned over Gulang. "I can stop the bleeding," he said and blue sparks snapped from his fingertips as he cauterized the wound.

Gulang bit his lip. A Kezanada must never reveal his position by crying out in pain.

Dreibrand put the helmet back on the warrior and helped him to his feet. Although Gulang was regaining his senses after being knocked out, he was wobbling.

"I will catch up to you, my Lord," he said.

Reluctant to leave him behind, Dreibrand grabbed his arm again and hauled him forward.

Gulang protested, "My Lord, I thank you for saving me, but I will not delay you. I will catch up."

Dreibrand appreciated the warrior's selfless attitude. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Gulang would have nodded, but his swimming head made the motion unwise. "I am coming out of it," he said.

"Be careful," Dreibrand said and touched the man on the shoulder to express his admiration and respect.

Dreibrand and Dey departed at a swift run. They saw glimpses of the battle in bursts of magic that illuminated the combatants. Dreibrand recognized that the Atrophane cavalry was organizing a counterattack.

"Damn!" he cursed and ran faster.

Traveling on the fringe of the Atrophane position, Dreibrand and the rys reunited with several escaping commandos. Dreibrand sent one man back to help Gulang. They approached their army from the rear and shouted the password to indicate that they were not enemies.

Dreibrand rushed gratefully into the ranks of his army. Warriors cheered to see more of the commandos returning. Faychan had been receiving the returning commandos, hearing their reports, and then reassigning them to the battle lines. When he heard Dreibrand shouting for him, he urged his horse back through the mix of warriors and horses until he found him.

"At last! I heard you were lost," Faychan cried, lifting the visor of his helmet. He grinned, glad that his information had been wrong.

"Who said that?" Dreibrand said.

"About half the soldiers who made it back. You were seen taken down by the Atrophane," Faychan explained.

"Well, I got back up," Dreibrand said tersely. He was too concerned about the Atrophane cavalry flanking their position to care about the details of his escape. The events were only a blur in his mind anyway, tainted by his failure to cut down Alloi. The line of blood on Sandin's face flashed into his mind, which granted Dreibrand some satisfaction.

"Where is my brother?" Dreibrand said.

Faychan chuckled grimly. "Killing Atrophane. He was waiting for you here, like you told him to, but when he heard the reports that you were lost, he went berserk."

At, you will get yourself killed, Dreibrand worried. He ordered someone to bring his horse, and then began to question Faychan urgently about the status of Quylan and the battle lines. Faychan said that Quylan and Alloi appeared to be stalemated. Their spells were having little effect on either side. No progress had been made penetrating the Atrophane force.

Dreibrand cursed. "It is hopeless without Shan's power," he decided. "We are about to be overrun by about two thousand cavalry. We must withdraw. I will go to the front, tell Tytido, and then get Tulair and Quylan. You must coordinate the rearguard. We will move to help Shan. He has removed Tempet from his supporters and battles him in a private duel."

"Shan said to stay away," Faychan reminded.

"I know, but Tempet is exposed, which makes him our logical target because we cannot defeat the Atrophane," Dreibrand said. A soldier arrived with Astar, and Dreibrand sprang into the saddle. He took a quick drink from the canteen tied to his saddle and then took up his shield that had been secured with his gear as well.

"Hey, Faychan," he said. "Hiding the dagger saved me."

The old assassin smiled wickedly as they parted ways.

Dreibrand rode into the thick of battle, shouting to encourage the fighters, letting them know that he was alive. He reacted to the heinous noise of war as if not even a day had gone by since last he

had been in a battle. The killing howls and dying screams mixed with the fervent clash of weapons. Dreibrand felt his blood run hot with the wretched thrill of combat. His lethal training buried his fears. He controlled his mount without giving conscience thought to the direction, and when he struck the line of Atrophane, his sword collected the toll for invading Nufal.

He saw Tulair, and moved away from the front line to speak to the rys captain. After shouting more encouragement to his fighters, Dreibrand got the rys's attention. "Captain, we cannot hold this position and we will soon be charged by cavalry. Get your rys soldiers on our right flank and protect our retreat. I want to move to help Shan."

Tulair processed the information quickly and accepted the decision. Dreibrand searched for Tytido next and found his friend already guarding their withdrawal. The Nufalese assault had failed, and the Atrophane were rushing in hard, squeezing the Nufalese from three sides. Fortunately, the Nufalese force was entirely mounted and they could evade the tangle of Atrophane infantry.

"Dreibrand!" Tytido shouted. The last of the surviving warriors had disengaged, and everyone was riding west. Watching their backs, the two men rode next to each other.

"Where is my brother?!" Dreibrand yelled. He hated to think that Atarek was one of the dark immobile masses on the ground.

"I made him go to Quylan to tell her to get moving," Tytido answered.

Dreibrand could not spare time to express his gratitude to Tytido for watching out for his brother. With his sword, he pointed toward the last spot where he had seen Shan. "Go that way. Find Shan. Help him fight Tempet. I will guard Quylan's retreat and catch up," he said.

Without waiting for Tytido's response, he rushed toward Quylan, navigating the cross traffic of retreating riders. In order to protect the warriors from attack spells for as long as possible, the rys Queen would have to move last.

Dreibrand allowed himself to hope that Shan was killing Tempet at that moment. He needed to believe that this rout would not continue.

He reached Quylan and her core of rys bodyguards. She stood inside a blue pillar of light that rose into the night sky. The brilliance of her power cast her bodyguards in silhouette, and Dreibrand could not distinguish if one of them was human.

Atarek, however, saw his brother coming. "By the Gods! Dreiby!" he cried.

Too harassed to enjoy the reunion, Dreibrand asked urgently if communication had been possible with Quylan.

Taf Ila responded, "I have told her that we must move, but I do not think she agrees. She says she is close." The strained rys father did not understand what she meant, and his fear for her was as a wild animal tearing at his guts.

Dreibrand paused. If Quylan would not move, he was torn between protecting her position and aiding Shan.

"Dreibrand, they said you were cut down," Atarek said.

"I was knocked down," Dreibrand corrected. He assessed his brother quickly. Atarek appeared unhurt. "They said you were killing Atrophane."

"That is what must be done, right?" Atarek said dully. "After tonight, I would say we deserve our censure. Look, here come more." He readied his sword and shield. His face hardened with a determination that Dreibrand had never seen there before.

The thunder of a cavalry charge rumbled in the dark. Disregarding the fleeing warriors, the Atrophane charged Quylan's stagnant position that was now virtually unprotected.

What have I done? Dreibrand thought.

"You have done what you had to do. Hold your ground. It is my time."

Dreibrand did not immediately recognize the voice in his head, until the pillar of energy around Quylan expanded rapidly, and he realized that she had spoken in his mind. The bright swirling magic roiled past him, Atarek, her father, and the rys bodyguards.

The Atrophane riders entered the expanding light and emerged from the night as surreal specters in the blue glow. Their weapons were raised and clods of turf flew upward from the pounding hooves.

Confidence in Alloi's shield magic made them storm the rys position so boldly, but Quylan welcomed them. She had been waiting for this opportunity. Alloi was overextended protecting so many troops, and Quylan wedged her power into the crack that had finally developed in her enemy's shield spell.

The attack spell turned the air to fire. The air whistled past Dreibrand and Atarek as it was sucked into the instant conflagration. Riders around Quylan had to steady their mounts and gasp for breath. The Atrophane riders within a sweeping radius had no chance for survival. They burned along with their horses. The only mercy was in the intensity of the spell that consumed them quickly.

With the stench of cooked flesh choking him, Dreibrand looked away. He could not avoid his horror for the soldiers he had just watched die. He had to find a way to make them stop attacking or Shan and Quylan might have to kill them all.

"Sandin knew better than to bring them to this," Dreibrand growled.

Appalled by the awesome destruction, Atarek shared his brother's sympathy for the dead. He covered his mouth and nose and said nothing.

An eerie quiet replaced the din of battle. The surviving invaders were stunned in the aftermath of Quylan's massive spell.

Dreibrand knew they had to seize the moment. He shouted to Quylan and told her that they must rejoin Shan.

Quylan did not acknowledge Dreibrand. Instead, she took a few steps forward until her father jumped from his horse and delayed her. "Quylan, where do you go?" he asked worriedly.

Her burning eyes did not blink. The destruction she had wrought twisted the beauty of her delicate face. She pointed into the heart of the Atrophane.

"No," Taf Ila whispered.

Quylan found his fear menial. He could not grasp the plane of existence she had just achieved.

3. Strategy Forsaken

The enemies of the Queen of Jingtun burned in the furnace of her power. Quylan watched their bright souls streak across the land and then swiftly lose shape before fading into the next world. Although satisfied by the human toll, it was a minor thing when she compared it to the achievement of cracking Alloi's shield spell.

My youth wins over your age, you hibernating horror, Quylan thought and moved forward. Her father spoke, sounded worried, but she dismissed his timid concerns. The immensity of her spiking powers compelled her to act while Alloi was reeling.

She commanded her bodyguards to stay back, and they dared not disobey after her fiery display.

Quylan strode toward the Atrophane. The cold ground steamed in the aftermath of her searing attack spell, and the vapors swirled around her body.

When she reached the torn edge of the army, Quylan admired the panic she had wrought. After witnessing over a thousand cavalymen burned to ashes, some men stared vacantly or jabbered in fear. Others coped better but still did not know what to do. Commanders and sergeants attempted to revive discipline, but their voices cracked when they shouted orders.

The first men who saw Quylan emerge from the smoldering field cried out to their Gods. Those who were in her path, she killed. Pumping magic from the deepening well of her power, she reinforced her shield spell, and the arrows and spears that came her way disintegrated in the shimmering blue heat of her protective aura.

Unable to harm Quylan, the humans backed away from her. The parting soldiers thrilled Quylan, proving her new invincibility with their impotence.

Quylan felt as if she had been born for this moment. That all her ambitions had guided her to be Queen so she could defend the Rysamand. With the protective layers of Atrophane soldiers peeled back, Alloi was exposed and Quylan confronted her directly. Blue light illuminated Quylan, and white light surrounded Alloi. They exchanged attack spells, and their flaring magic reflected on the low clouds with a sick glow.

Quylan thought about the clouds draping the frozen peaks of the Rysamand, and the images increased her power. She battered Alloi with successively more fierce attack spells. The fractures forming in Alloi's shield spell fueled Quylan's desire to win. Soon she would be blasting Alloi's unprotected flesh and the war would be half won. Quylan imagined Shan's gratitude, and then she imagined the gratitude of all the rys. They would revere their new Queen as much as their King.

As Quylan gained strength from the thought of her homeland, Alloi did the same. The blood of many beloved tabre had once muddied the Nufalese plains, and Alloi had pledged her existence to avenging them. Feeling that her shield spell would soon fail, Alloi channeled her mind into another strategy. Her concentration did not falter when Quylan's attack spell finally shattered the shielding magic around her body.

The rys battle magic singed Alloi's fur cloak and burned through her white robe. Mimicking the pattern of a frozen river cracking in the thaw, cuts opened on Alloi's body. The pain burned deeply into her flesh, and cooked blood clung to the edges of her tattered garments.

Alloi's counterstrike saved her before the attack cut her to pieces. The ground between the female fighters heaved and split. A deep trench opened beneath Quylan and sucked her down. The unexpected descent ended Quylan's spell as she landed at the bottom of the hot pit.

Alloi filled the trench with magical fire. Quylan disappeared within the ball of white heat, cowering within her shield spell.

"Sandin Promentro, attack her!" Alloi ordered, and the Darhet signaled to his soldiers to approach the hole.

Shan and Tempet lost themselves in their struggle, and the erupting combat between the armies diminished into an insignificant squabble.

Shan sliced Tempet's right biceps open with his first surprise strike and then pressed the Shield of Dacian onto Tempet's bleeding arm. The shield drained Tempet's power like a spider tapping the juices of its victim.

Desperate to escape the touch of the shield, Tempet jumped back and switched his bitaran into his left hand. Clenching his right arm against his side, he staggered between two tents. Shan pursued his opponent, excited by the injury that he had inflicted.

The warm flow of blood inspired Tempet to greater courage. He had survived the final awful battle of the Great War, and he refused to be weakened by one wound.

I am the strongest warrior, he thought. Despite the maiming, Tempet met Shan with a fierce reprisal. Even one-handed, he could wield his bitaran like the attack of a dozen trained warriors. The bludgeon smashed, and the spear thrust as Tempet and his weapon spun around Shan.

Shan blocked the enchanted skewer and swiped at Tempet. The tabre leaped away from the blade and attacked with the bludgeon end of his weapon. The cold sparkling head of the bitaran smashed into Shan's shield. Tiny lightning bolts crackled every time their enchanted weapons met.

Firing attack spells at each other with increasing abandon, they crossed the Atrophaney encampment. Some soldiers died in their path, blown away by spells. Dimly aware of the indiscriminate killing, Shan drove the fight away from the humans.

Ridding his heart of mercy, Shan labored against Tempet. No revulsion for killing touted its moral arguments as he defended the future of his race.

Tempet exchanged blows with Shan with increasing speed while weathering Shan's blistering spells. As each blow of his weapon landed, Tempet remembered the face of a fallen tabre comrade, but his fury could not overwhelm Shan.

After expending mighty efforts to kill each other, the rys and the tabre stalled at the exact same moment. Shan had never imagined being fought to a standstill. Panting, they stared at each other across the top of a grassy knoll, groping for the strength to resume the struggle.

With his chest heaving inside his armored torso, Tempet managed to speak. "You fight like a female," he said and expected the insult to provoke a reckless response.

Shan found no shame in the criticism. *My magic will prevail over your weapon skill*, he promised.

Shan gathered his magic around his vision of Tempet's destruction as Tempet lifted his bitaran, ready to resume the battle. Shan assembled the last elements of his devastating spell, but his lethal concentration slipped when Quylan's screams rang his head. She did not call for help, but her mind broadcast her need.

Her mental wail of weakness snared the attention of Tempet as well. He knew immediately that his sister had trapped the female rys, and Alloi summoned him to the kill. Tempet hesitated, but the sound of approaching riders urged him to return to his sister. Separated from Alloi and his army, Tempet suddenly worried that a trap had been set for him.

"Tempet, come back to me," Alloi commanded firmly, and her concern made Tempet aware of his wound again.

He lunged at Shan, and the bitaran extended forward like a fishing spear. Shan dove aside to avoid its enchanted point that pierced the ground where he had just stood. Satisfied that he had foiled Shan's simple plan, Tempet abandoned the duel.

Shan rolled to his feet and intended to cast a potent spell at Tempet as he fled. But the swelling ball of light faded from Shan's lifted palm when Nufalese riders overtook Tempet.

The riders attacked Tempet, and Shan admired their bravery. He had cautioned them not to fight Tempet, even ordered them to stay back. But their disobedience did not displease the King of Jingtun when he saw Tempet dodging their spears and arrows.

Tytido galloped toward Tempet with the confidence of someone approaching a practice target. He roared the battle cry of his tribe and hurled his spear. It bounced off Tempet's armor but dented the cityscape pressed into the metal chestplate. The blow knocked over Tempet, but he rallied his strength swiftly to his defense. His powerful spell exploded among the nearest riders. Shan tossed a net of shielding magic over them just in time to save them.

Tempet regained his feet, but the impact of the spear reverberated in his wounded arm. He ran from his swarming enemies and cleared a path with his bitaran. It swiped low and destroyed a horse leg. It struck high and killed a rider.

Shan chased Tempet, who ran into the ranks of Atrophane that had closed around Quylan and Alloi. The warriors followed the rys King even though they headed directly for the Atrophaney force from which they had just retreated. Dreibrand, Atarek, and Quylan's bodyguards rushed to join their comrades in the renewed assault.

Shan did not pause to aid his warriors against the human soldiers. It was too important that he catch Tempet before he could reach Quylan. Shan did not fear to run into the heart of the enemy army. Any soldier who opposed him died before hitting the ground. Still, the soldiers impeded him, and their increasing frenzy to support their tabre master kept them coming.

The urge to slay all the nearby soldiers in a mass killing and thereby clear a path popped into Shan's mind.

I could do more than that, he thought but resisted turning down that broad avenue of his power.

Once again among his obedient soldiers, Tempet welcomed the boost their presence gave to his powers. He had not anticipated his surgical removal from his supporting forces. For the first time since the beginning of the surprise attack, he wondered how Shan and so many soldiers had gotten into their camp.

But his mind quickly dropped analytical matters when he neared the youthful rys Queen in the clutches of his army. His bitaran had tasted the sweet nectar of her blood, and it would do so again.

Atop a mound of displaced ground, Sandin urged his soldiers toward the pit that contained the trapped rys Queen. Between attack spells from Alloi, the human warriors cast their spears and fired their arrows into the trench. Quylan lashed back with her battle magic as she clawed at the sides of her prison. Soldiers died at the rim, and some tumbled down to join her.

I will fill this pit with bodies to get out if I must, she thought crazily. The charred men draping the edge of her prison were meaningless debris to her.

But a chilling shriek shook the smoky air and reminded Quylan of a power she respected. The scars on her body burned and the skin split. Blood flowed beneath her armor.

The soldiers fell back from the pit, and she heard one runner approaching. Knowing and fearing who it was, Quylan gave up her mindless effort to climb out of the pit. She worked her levitation magic and gained a handhold on the rim. Ignoring the rising pain in her shoulder, she started pulling herself out.

Tempet saw her desperate hand reach out of the hole, and her pitiful effort filled him with glee. He ran toward her, and just as she emerged, he kicked her face. Quylan flew back into her trap and landed at the bottom.

An attack spell from Alloi followed her brother's kick. Tempet had to turn away from the boiling air. Rushing up behind Tempet with a trail of bodies behind him, Shan saw his Queen knocked low between their enemies, and he saved Quylan from the deadly blast with his shield spell.

Tempet stepped aside and narrowly avoided the sword driving for his torso. The blade scraped across his armor, and Shan pressed his shield against Tempet's dangling wounded arm. Shan had learned how to use the shield more effectively, and he connected his mind to the enchantment within the relic. With a violent hunger, he consumed the energy that the shield sucked from his opponent.

Tempet cried out and twisted his bitaran toward Shan. He tried to extend the piercing end of the weapon, but the point reached out only slightly and then retracted in weakness.

They grappled physically, each striving to hurt the other while holding their weapons back. Tempet swung Shan over the pit. Shan supported himself with a levitation spell and pushed Tempet back. They continued to struggle at the edge.

Recovering from her fall, Quylan began to cast her spells again. Blood dripped from her lips and sizzled on her heated armor. Quylan and Alloi connected in a blazing flow of magic. Attack spell and shield spell became indistinguishable as the battle seethed between the females.

Sandin, who had fallen back when Tempet arrived, ordered his men back into the fight. Nufalese warriors and rys soldiers stormed into the breach opened by Shan, and they rushed to support their leader. With a great portion of the cavalry gone, the Nufalese riders made progress against the infantry, especially with Alloi occupied.

Tulair and the rys soldiers concentrated on reaching Alloi. Dreibrand, Faychan, and Tytido moved to help Shan because their enchanted blades gave them a greater chance of hurting Tempet.

"Atarek, stay with Gulang. Concentrate on keeping a path open for our escape," Dreibrand ordered. He saw that his brother wanted to dispute him, to stay by his side, but Atarek accepted his crucial role.

"I will keep the back door open for you, Brother," Atarek yelled. "Go kill those bastards."

Amid the grim combat, the brothers exchanged a tender look. Atarek did not envy his brother who hurried to face a colossal foe, and Dreibrand worried terribly for Atarek in the disorder that ruled the night. Dreibrand recognized the deteriorating situation. Strategy had been forsaken. Dreibrand had watched with helpless horror as Quylan abandoned her position and recklessly plunged into the heart of the enemy. Commanders had no chance to think through their moves. Every second presented a new danger, and the warriors were simply reacting.

Magic lit the scene. Soldiers moved in the flickering light like scuttling beetles in a nightmare. In the brighter flashes, the wide screaming mouths of the dying were revealed, but the screams were indistinct in the din. The ground shook from intensifying attack spells. A few drops of cold rain descended with the sharpening wind, but no one noticed.

Tulair led his rys soldiers toward Alloi. Atrophane soldiers died for her defense, cut down by spears, knives, and spells. Tulair was the first to reach Alloi. He threw his long knife at the last soldier in his way, and then jumped off his horse and deftly plucked his blade from the man as he fell. Casting a shield spell, he charged the female tabre.

Alloi had been so involved with Quylan that she had not realized that the rys soldiers had sliced through her human defenders so quickly. Physically dodging the swiping rys knife, Alloi switched her attacks to Tulair. He survived her first blast and bravely sought to cut her flesh again.

Quylan gasped as Alloi's last attack spell ended. The rush of power that had intoxicated Quylan had subsided, and she felt depleted. When she looked up and saw her father looming over the pit, she was immensely grateful. Taf Ila reached down to her and she sprang toward his hand. The wreckage that had replaced her beautiful face dismayed Taf Ila. Her bleeding lips were swelling and turning black.

As Taf Ila pulled her up, Quylan spared no time to even thank him for the rescue. She immediately turned her attention to Shan, who fought on the opposite side of the hole. Blue fire blazed in her eyes and she reached deep within herself for the power to attack Tempet. When her spell struck him, he jerked forward like a puppet in a strong wind, and his bitaran flailed wildly. He fell into Shan's striking sword, and the blade penetrated the armor that Quylan had superheated and softened with her attack spell.

Tempet lurched back, stung by the enchanted sword point. It had cut through two ribs and grazed a lung. The pain raced up his air passages until his head reeled with the agony.

Dreibrand rode up behind Tempet and swiped at the reeling tabre with his sword. Dreibrand managed to slice him on the back of the neck behind the left ear.

Saved from decapitation only by luck, Tempet somersaulted backwards into the pit to escape the fury of his multiple attackers.

Shan snarled with frustration at Tempet's amazing speed. Dreibrand, Faychan, and Tytido spread out around the pit, ready to stop Tempet if he tried to escape. Shan and Quylan combined their power and encased Tempet in a sustained attack spell. He writhed on the broken ground, and raindrops hissed as they struck the dome of destructive energy over him.

Keenly aware of her twin's failing defenses, Alloi rid herself of the rys captain and many of his comrades. She obliterated Tulair's shield spell and blasted his head from his shoulders. Throwing her hands wide, she bombed the area with magic and even killed a few Atrophane.

Free of the rys attackers, Alloi forced back her brother's tormentors. Dreibrand, Tytido, and Faychan survived her attack spell only because of the powerful wardings that covered them and their horses.

Despite his pain, Tempet reacted instantly once his sister's support arrived. He leaped out of the hole and directed his power into the ground. An explosion below Quylan hurled her and her father in different directions. Tempet landed on the blackened craggy ground between them. He staggered toward the lovely rys female, whose existence offended him into the depths of madness, and he thrust his gruesome weapon at her body. Quylan braced her enchanted armor with her magic. The crystals that studded the armor glowed, and blue fire crawled up the shaft of the bitaran that hovered her heart. Her will made her armor as hard as diamonds, but she could not maintain the perfection of the protective enchantment. Against Tempet's fierce strength and magic, Quylan's power finally failed. The bitaran flashed with triumphant white light.

Quylan did not scream, but Shan felt the shaft sinking through the flesh of his mate, and he screamed for her. Without even thinking if he could accomplish the feat, he leaped across the pit, buoyed by levitation magic that streaked behind him like a comet's tail.

Tempet lifted his weapon out of Quylan's body and blocked Shan's blows. The blood of the Queen of Jingteng dripped from the bitaran's sharp crystals that glowed purple through her thick blood. Shan struck at his hated rival again and again, casting attack spells each time his blade hit his enemy.

Alloi struck Shan with an attack spell. Faltering in the heavy storm of her magic, Shan could not duck behind his shield quick enough to avoid Tempet's swinging bitaran. Only partially deflected by the shield, the bludgeon struck Shan a glancing blow across his right eye.

Shan fell back and landed next to Quylan's unmoving body. The sprawled forms of the rys monarchs presented Tempet with a pleasing image of his victory. He had waited inside hard stone for over two thousand years, but at last, Nufal would have her revenge.

"Nufal!" he cried and lifted his enchanted weapon. The spear end sharpened and lengthened, glowing brightly as if just taken from the furnace of an enchanted forge. Tempet promised himself that he would mutilate their bodies and sit for days to watch the parts decompose.

But his tunnel vision and sick anticipation for the rewards of victory did not serve him. The human allies of Shan braved the triumphant power of Tempet to defend their King. As a single enchanted wave, Dreibrand, Tytido, and Faychan overran Tempet. Their swords battered at the cruel dark creature who brought only pain to Nufal.

Denied his final stroke of victory, Tempet felt his power wane. The agony of his wounds overcame his rage, and in his condition, he could not cope with three swiping blades that confused his magical perception. Tytido and Faychan continued to push him away. They were equally surprised to still be alive and to be making progress against the terrible Tempet. An attack spell from Alloi finally separated them from her twin. Their horses reared and the men choked on the hot air from which their wardings barely protected them. Tempet staggered into a group of Atrophane soldiers and sank to his knees.

Dreibrand jumped from his horse and went to Shan. With his left arm, Dreibrand lifted Shan's head. The buckler strapped to his forearm was a platter beneath the King's head. The right side of the rys's face was broken and bleeding purple blood. Swollen raggedy flesh bloated over the right eye, but the left eye opened and blazed with blue light.

Shan moved his lips. "Drei..." but he could not finish the name of his friend.

"Up, my King," Dreibrand said. Driven by his intense fear, Dreibrand hoisted Shan to his feet and reached for Astar's bridle with his right hand that still held his sword.

"Help me!" Taf Ila cried, tugging at his daughter's limp body.

Dreibrand pitied the futility of the rys father's actions. Draping Shan against his saddle, Dreibrand pushed the rys up. Shan gripped the saddle.

Tytido and Faychan along with the few surviving rys soldiers kept Atrophane spearmen and swordmen at bay only a few paces away. Unable to ignore Taf Ila's plight, Dreibrand hollered to the closest rys soldiers to assist him.

Leaving Shan clinging to Astar, Dreibrand forcefully relieved Taf Ila of his daughter and ordered him to get on a horse with one of the rys soldiers. When Taf Ila protested, Dreibrand shoved him toward the rys rider who extended hand so Taf Ila could get on the horse. Beckoning a second rys, Dreibrand lifted Quylan over his horse. The rys soldier pulled her across his lap, and his miserable horror over the state of his Queen showed on his face.

"Withdraw!" Dreibrand shouted. "Withdraw!"

He hardly needed to give the order. His battered force had to flee. Tytido and Faychan defended Dreibrand as he mounted his horse and dragged Shan up with him.

They retreated west. Every man and rys still hoped to make another stand in the defense of Jingtun. Dreibrand had no way of knowing how many of his warriors had died. He was only glad to hear the thunder of comrades riding next to him through the thick stench of burned flesh. The cold rain fell harder, hurting his face as the angry northwest wind cut across his hectic path.

Atarek, are you with us? Riding near me in the dark? Dreibrand thought.

Dreibrand's arm muscles cramped and flamed, but he would not let go of Shan. They rode until even the young Astar began to sag beneath his burden. The rain streaked through the froth on the colt's chest. Dreibrand stopped and ordered a halt. His hoarse voice was weak in the stormy dark. Tytido dismounted and rushed to assist with the lowering of the rys King. The loyal Hirqua warrior gently placed Shan on the comfortless ground where freezing rain puddled.

Dropping to his knees next to the King, Dreibrand held the warding crystal on his sword next to Shan's face. Tytido hissed with a startled intake of air.

"Shan," Dreibrand whispered with tragic fear. "What can I do?"

Only a trace of blue light burned below the sagging lid of the left eye. Shan tasted the rain on his lips, but before he could speak, Taf Ila started shouting.

"Help my treasure! Help my beautiful rysling!" he cried. He jumped from the horse that he had ridden with the other rys soldier and scrambled to the rider who had carried Quylan.

"Is she alive?" Shan asked, afraid to hope.

Dreibrand and Tytido looked at each other. Neither of them had any reason to say yes.

Shan lurched upright so suddenly that Dreibrand had to dodge him.

"Where is she?" Shan demanded, swinging his head drunkenly as if he did not understand why his vision was reduced.

Dreibrand took his hand and they got to their feet together. Shan touched the right side of his face, and then retracted his hand quickly as the pain flared from his touch. Staggering slightly, Shan used his advanced rys senses to locate Quylan.

Taf Ila sobbed over her body. Rys soldiers and humans stood back from his grief.

"Heal her, my King," Taf Ila pleaded.

Shan sank beside her. The gaping hole in her armor over her heart was a hopeless abyss. The bloody facial wounds enhanced what remained of her beauty.

Shan touched her cheek. Her soul was gone. Shan imagined her in the warm bliss of the next world and envied her comfort. Without emotion, he said, "She is dead."

"Heal her!" Taf Ila shrieked.

Shan stood up and turned away. He did not have the luxury of the raving display in which her father now indulged. Taf Ila lunged for Shan, but two soldiers stopped him. Everyone knew that if even one broken piece of life remained in Quylan, then Shan would try to heal her.

Quylan, Shan thought. Her loss spawned a dreadful anger inside him and deep shadow embraced his mind.

Dreibrand asked Shan what they should do. When Shan did not answer, Dreibrand contemplated the horrible possibilities. Much against his nature, he murmured, "Have we lost?"

Shan swung his functioning eye onto his human friend. The sudden blaze of magic from the one eye made Dreibrand lean away slightly.

"No," Shan said.

Although it was the answer that Dreibrand wanted to hear, Shan uttered the syllable with ominous certainty.

4. Shattered Devotion

No soldiers dared to help Tempet after he collapsed. They either feared to touch him or were not moved to pity their tabre champion. The soldiers stood still in the cold rain that doused their bloodlust that had flamed like a droughted forest in a lightning storm. The bodies littering the ground crushed their expectations, and ashy heaps with melted metal remnants were all that marked some of the Atrophane dead.

The endurance spell, however, still throbbed within the bodies of the Atrophane fighters, and the Darhet ordered his forces to regroup. He intended to pursue the survivors, and his officers scrambled to rally the soldiers.

Alloi rushed to help her brother. Her tabre grace failed her as she floundered on the broken muddy land and crumbled at Tempet's side. Her gentle hands took him by the shoulders, and her magic soothed his agony.

Alloi probed the wounds with her warm thoughts, and she discovered that Tempet had been ravaged badly during his duel with the rys King.

"You should rest," she said.

Defiant fire flared from Tempet's eyes and glinted on his dented armor. Even his great pain could not dim his elation from killing the rys Queen.

"We shall continue," Tempet said.

"*Tempet*," Alloi argued mentally.

"Enough of your caution!" he snapped back. "Our army has many hours of strength left. Heal me, Sister. Now."

Without further protest, Alloi poured her heart into the healing spells. She feared for her brother and wanted him to be as strong as possible when he met Shan again.

With his ribs knitting, Tempet deepened his breathing. Pleased by the progress, Alloi switched her power to mending his arm, but her mind recoiled from the sliced muscle. Edges of necrotic flesh peeled back from the open wound. The Shield of Dacian had sucked from the flesh vitality that could not be put back. The wound would not respond to healing magic, and Alloi worried that her brother could lose his arm.

"Make a sling," Tempet commanded stoically and held the useless limb across his torso. He was aware of the irreparable damage, but he still had three limbs left with which to kill Shan.

Ambio Nateve walked up to the tabre. Although he was one of the more battle-hardened officers, he looked shaken.

"The Darhet seeks to know your status, my Lady," he said, addressing Alloi with deference.

"We shall continue," she replied heavily but then sensed that Ambio's thoughts were troubled. She took a moment to reassure him. "You fought bravely, Ambio Nateve. You served us well." She touched his shoulder with a gentle kindness that immediately rekindled his spirits.

Tempet, however, did not regard Ambio so generously. Detecting a suspicious hint of confusion within the man's mind, Tempet glared at him while Alloi tied the sling around his arm.

"Assemble the Darhet and his officers," Tempet ordered tersely.

"Yes, Lord Tempet," Ambio responded. He saluted the tabre and left to do his bidding.

The army began to aid its wounded as the officers gathered for their meeting. When Tempet and Alloi arrived, they heard Sandin encouraging his officers with reports of their success. Sandin was impervious to the rain tapping on his jeweled helmet and streaming down his heavy silk cape. The conquest of the rys was actually happening, and the glory immunized him to physical hardship.

"The Queen of Jingten is dead. The pitiful forces that dared to ambush us in the dark are fleeing. We shall hunt them down," Sandin said.

"And Shan is wounded," Tempet announced and hefted his bitaran. "One more blow from me and he will be removed from this world."

The Atrophane shouted approval although some of them, including Commander Fanlyre, privately noted that Tempet was wounded as well.

"Let us waste no time," Sandin declared. "Our enemies are weary and we still burn for battle. Lord Tempet shall lead us onward."

Sandin expected Tempet to take eagerly to Shan's trail, but other business interested the tabre.

"Hold!" Tempet cried. "I would know how so many fighters appeared in the center of our supposedly guarded camp." His hot eyes shifted toward Ambio. As the Darhet's high lieutenant, Ambio was responsible for coordinating perimeter security.

"Surely, it was Shan's magic that made the surprise attack possible," Alloi said, annoyed by her brother's inexplicable desire for delay after he had insisted on immediate action. The attack had been repelled, and Alloi saw no reason to give it further thought.

"I doubt Shan can make so many soldiers impregnable to my senses," Tempet argued arrogantly. "Or, what of you, Sister? Do you believe that so many men could be hidden from your great mind? Would you overlook the reeking presence of the rys King?"

"Our minds were occupied with the endurance spell," Alloi said.

"Bah!" Tempet scoffed. "We were betrayed." He scanned the assembled officers, sparing only the

Darhet his accusing gaze.

Appalled, Sandin asked if Tempet had any proof of his claim.

Tempet said, "My proof is that magic strong enough to cloak so many warriors could not have escaped my notice. Shan had conventional help. Someone must have arranged for there to be a gap in the perimeter."

The word betrayed rang in Ambio's head. He did not know why it frightened him so much. He possessed no guilt.

"Do you suspect someone?" Alloi demanded.

Promptly, Tempet said, "Lieutenant Nateve arrived at the council just before the attack. And he was returning from his perimeter inspection."

Startled, Ambio looked to Alloi for help, but she suddenly did not exhibit the warmth that he cherished. Next, he turned to Sandin. "My Lord, I protest. I swear there was no sign of Shan's entry."

Tempet's circumstantial suspicions bothered Sandin on a distant level, but he was eager to begin his hunt. The King of Jingten and the Veta brothers remained to be claimed as valued trophies.

"Lord Tempet, I would have you investigate your suspicions quickly. Scan the minds of my men for the truth if you will," Sandin said.

Fear flowed through Ambio's body like a rapid poison. Diverting the tabre, Ambio pointed at Fanlyre. "Commander Fanlyre is more of a suspect than I could ever be. He set up the east perimeter, and he has spent the most time among our enemies. Lived with them. Ate at their table. No doubt drank their wine," Ambio said.

Fanlyre froze. He could feel all eyes upon him, ready to believe him guilty.

"Then peer into Fanlyre's mind," Sandin said. "Do what will appease you, Lord Tempet."

The Darhet's careless words offended Fanlyre. How could the Darhet, an Atrophane noble, so carelessly condone the interrogation of his officers? Although confused by this mystery that opposed all Atrophaney custom, Fanlyre realized he had to attend to his own survival.

"My Lord Darhet, let me not stand accused by a Cinivese. I appeal to you, my Lord, as noble-to-noble, to respect my class. Let he that was accused first be cleared before I must be humiliated," Fanlyre said. He withstood Ambio's horrible glare, which Fanlyre considered far more tolerable than risking another magical inspection of his thoughts.

Sandin actually heeded Fanlyre's plea. The provincial officer should prove himself before an Atrophane noble stood accused.

"If you would observe Commander Fanlyre's privilege of birth, I ask you to start with Lieutenant Nateve," Sandin said.

Tempet did not seem to care who was first. Ambio's immediate attempt to throw off blame only damned him in Tempet's opinion.

"Very well," Alloi said with exasperation.

Ambio stiffened as she grabbed his mind, and all the officers held their breath.

Although Fanlyre had reflected the accusation back at Ambio, he pitied the man gripped in the vise of Alloi's inescapable mind. *I did not expect this witch hunt*, Fanlyre thought. *But do any of us truly know what to expect from these creatures?* Distressed by his questioning mind, Fanlyre tried to think about nothing.

Alloi halted her examination after a short time. The image of Shan in Ambio's mind had startled her, and she was not as thorough as usual. Ambio had seen the rys King just before the surprise attack.

Disappointed, Alloi delivered her finding and added, "He has thought to betray you, Sandin Promentro."

"No!" Ambio shouted. "That is impossible!" He gaped at Alloi with disillusion. He loved serving her, and she condemned him with lies that he could not understand.

Ambio whirled toward the Darhet and opened his mouth to proclaim his innocence, but he never uttered a word. A loud gurgle was his last sound as Sandin slammed a dagger into his throat. Ambio reached up to his gushing neck. His eyes bulged with disbelief for his fate.

Sandin handed his dagger to Recey for cleaning. "May we go now?" he said irritably.

Tempet watched the human crumble to the ground. With Ambio bleeding to death, Tempet decided that he was satisfied. He snickered at the Darhet's swift punishment and gave the order to march.

Fanlyre, stunned by what had happened, walked woodenly toward his horse. The dispersing officers and soldiers oozed across his perception as his mind remained fixed on the abrupt killing. Guilt over his contribution to Ambio's death tore at his conscience even if he had little respect for the provincial who had weaseled his way to high rank. The evidence had been too minimal for Ambio to deserve such an instant execution. Fanlyre asked himself how many of his thoughts could Alloi misinterpret? How fast would the Darhet's dagger strike?

He touched the warding crystal tied around his neck but its reassuring influence was gone. His pleasant devotion to Alloi had been shattered, as if he had just seen his first love kissing another man.

A flagbearer passed Fanlyre, and he looked up at the soggy Atrophane banner, dim in the sputtering torchlight.

Do any of us still serve Atrophane? Or are we simply the tools of these mad beasts? Fanlyre wondered. *I must try to do what is best for the soldiers under my command,* he decided, falling back on the basics of his military training. That duty remained sound, and he could go to battle again with that to guide his heart.

As Dreibrand assessed the survivors, an increasing panic constricted his heart. Where was Atarek? Dead on the dark plains?

Dreibrand squashed the thought. The possibility destroyed his courage like a fierce flood taking a bridge. His warriors looked to him for strength and guidance. Many of them had just lost friends and relatives. He could not give in to his terror.

Composing himself, Dreibrand walked up to Kashil. "Have you seen my brother?" he asked calmly.

Kashil stood by his horse's head, using the animal for some protection from the freezing rain as he tried to bandage his arm. The Bosta man shook his dripping head.

Dreibrand moved on to Gulang, hoping that Gulang's presence meant that Atarek had escaped as well. Chaining his emotions like an unruly prisoner, Dreibrand asked about his brother.

Unable to look directly at Dreibrand, Gulang reported that he and Atarek had been fighting to guard the retreat. He had seen Atarek's horse cut down, and Atarek fall into the midst of attacking infantry.

"My Lord, I saw him fighting, but there were Atrophane everywhere. I could not reach him, and then I could no longer see where he was, and I could not...." Gulang stopped speaking, stricken by shame. After Dreibrand had saved him during the commando raid, Gulang loathed himself for not

being able to return the favor and assist his lord's brother.

"Did you see him killed?" Dreibrand demanded.

Gulang shook his head.

Reverting to the role of a commander who must maintain morale, Dreibrand said, "I know you did your best." He walked away.

Dreibrand wandered back to Astar. He could not give thought to any action except waiting for Shan to give him an order. With the ability to function slipping away, Dreibrand tasted of the rotten food that he had shoved down his brother's throat. Now, he knew how Atarek had felt when he received the letter stating that Dreibrand was missing in action.

Holding the colt's bridle, Dreibrand hid his face next to Astar's long nose. "I am so sorry," he murmured.

As Dreibrand discreetly despaired, Shan emerged from his healing trance. He had closed the wounds on his face, but the swelling still consumed his right eye. During his cursory treatment, he had determined that his right eye might never see again.

Acutely troubled by his grief and dire situation, Shan approached Quylan's body. Taf Ila still sobbed over her corpse. When he looked up, he grimaced at Shan with profound hate.

"You," Taf Ila snarled. "You brought her to this!"

Shan let the rys's outrage pass over him. With tragic calm, Shan said, "I will regret this forever, but, Taf Ila, let not Quylan's death be in vain. She gave herself for one reason and that was to defend Jingtun. Captain Tulair is dead as well. I ask you, Taf Ila, to resume your old rank and lead our soldiers. Our enemy pursues us at this moment and they will overtake us with the first light of dawn."

Taf Ila wrestled with the madness of his grief. Bombarding Shan with insults would not bring his daughter back. And Jingtun needed to be defended. He kissed Quylan's cold hand and returned to his feet.

"Yes, my King," Taf Ila said.

Shan waited for the reinstated captain to salute. Although they could not be bound by their sorrow for Quylan, Shan still expected to be respected as the King. Taf Ila most likely would hate him for the remaining centuries of his life, but Shan would still require obedience from him. With difficulty, Taf Ila resumed the rigors of duty and saluted.

Satisfied, Shan continued, "Captain, when the enemy reaches us, I will stop them. You must fall back. If I am not successful, flee home and destroy the eastern pass. If all the rys put their magic together, you can break the mountains and clog the pass with rubble."

Astounded by the thought, Taf Ila shook his head. "How?" he whispered.

"You and the other soldiers can do it if you try. You will do it to protect our home," Shan said.

Starting to accept the possibility, Taf Ila said, "My King, even that will not stop Tempet and Alloi."

Shan nodded. "But it will stop the human army. Tempet and Alloi, despite their power, are only two rys. You can kill them before they kill all of us."

Taf Ila did not know what to say. If his powerful daughter had not prevailed against them, then how could he and the other common rys expect to do it? Suddenly he needed his King very much.

"I will not fail," Shan assured him.

Shan turned and took a few steps until he realized that he was not walking in a straight path. He

had relied on his conventional sight more than he thought. Learning to compensate for his lost vision would take some practice. Correcting his course, he went to Dreibrand and informed him that the Atrophane were coming.

Dreibrand said heavily, "We shall stand against them, if that is your will, but we are too few to face that army."

"No, you shall fall back. I have already ordered Taf Ila to move away with the rys soldiers. I will stop the army," Shan said.

Dreibrand looked into the shadows that covered the rys King's torn face. He knew that the fair and kind being who he trusted was still inside, but he dreaded the destruction that Shan had to be planning if he was dismissing his warriors.

"What will you do?" Dreibrand asked cautiously.

Shan put a hand on the human's shoulder as if bidding even the concept of friendship farewell. "What I must, Dreibrand. What I must," he said.

Disturbed by the cryptic reply, Dreibrand started to ask for details, but Shan pushed the questions back into Dreibrand's mind. There would be no discussion.

"Dreibrand," Shan said sternly with a tone that would be obeyed. "Fall back with your men. Go as soon as your brother reaches us."

"Atarek?" Dreibrand cried. "You have seen him?"

"Yes, when I observed our enemy," Shan replied. "He is approaching our position on foot. I am sorry, Dreibrand. You must have thought him lost. Forgive me for not mentioning it right away."

"Oh, Shan, forget your apologies. Guide him to me," Dreibrand said jubilantly and sprang onto his horse with new vigor.

Dreibrand's joy pleased Shan, who savored the fleeting happiness amid so much woe.

"Go, Dreibrand, go get him," Shan said. He would have allotted himself one last smile, but his painfully inflamed face prevented it.

Dreibrand galloped into the rainy predawn murk. Alone on the dark plains, he shouted for his brother, heedless of the advancing Atrophane army.

"Atarek! Atarek!" he yelled into the rain.

Dreibrand yanked the bindings from his sword handle to expose the warding crystal. He drew the sword and waved it, hoping that the small light from the warding crystal could attract Atarek.

"By the Gods! Are you the only one left, Little Brother?" Atarek shouted from the darkness.

Astar snorted as Dreibrand hauled back on the reins and jumped to the ground. He slipped on slick clumps of grass, and before he could get up, Atarek loomed over him. Rain dripped from Atarek's long hair hanging below his helmet, and he pulled Dreibrand up. Dreibrand embraced his brother and laughed with relief.

"No, I am not the only one. But as usual, you are late and holding up the show," Dreibrand said.

Cherishing the intensity with which his brother's armored arms gripped him, Atarek said, "Why should I hurry? I have been here for months and you were never so glad to see me before."

Dreibrand could not defend himself. He gave Atarek another hug before letting him go. "Atarek, I was always glad to see you. Gods, you have been right to chastise me. I have been awful to you."

Atarek chuckled robustly as if he had not just fled on foot from a crazy battle. "You thought I was

dead, didn't you?" he surmised.

"At, shut up and get on the horse," Dreibrand said.

"Very well. This is no place to be. Trust me, your old military buddies are not too far away," Atarek said. He clambered gratefully into the saddle.

When Dreibrand mounted, Atarek said generously, "I accept your apology, Dreibrand. My hurt feelings are forgotten, provided you get moving."

"What happened to you?" Dreibrand said.

"I was doing all right until my horse got killed. Then, soldiers were all over me. I tell you, Dreiby, I fought them off like I had been in the army my whole life. But if it was not night, I do not think I could have gotten away. In the dark, the soldiers lost track of me. Knowing I had no chance against so many, I pretended to be dead. Threw myself between some bodies." Atarek stopped. He had not reviewed the horror of that experience until he spoke of it. He was very glad that it had been dark. "When things calmed down, I left," he concluded.

"You were lucky, Brother," Dreibrand said gratefully.

"Yeah. Too bad I was not betting money," Atarek said. Trying to shake off the memories and images that his mind was processing, he complained, "Dreiby, you did not warn me that the weather gets so shitty around here."

"Oh, it will get worse than this," Dreibrand said.

"Then, I am definitely only spending my summers in your wonderful kingdom," Atarek declared.

5. Mad Heights of Magic

Protect Sandin Promentro from those monsters who live as Gods – prayer note from Haley Triesto to the Goddess Simosha burnt at a temple offering.

Shan belonged to his enemies now. With his spirit blistering in the snapping flames of his revenge, he edited his followers from his perception and dipped into the nether regions of his power. Tempet and Alloi would pay for smearing his renaissance with their filth of violence.

In his last moments of moral awareness, Shan hated them most for making him do it. *Onja, I shall make you proud today*, he thought with hopeless acceptance of his degradation.

The Atrophane army closed on him. The lifeforces in the front ranks marched into the quicksand of his mind. His magic sucked in the physical existence of each soldier, exposing and then seizing each soul. Those men who carried wardings were more difficult for Shan to access, but with some extra effort, he soon felt their blood moving through their veins. Their beating hearts blended with the drums.

Tempet and Alloi sensed Shan's magic spreading among the soldiers like water filling a rice paddy. When they recognized the spell consuming their human minions, a tremor of fear finally rattled the confidence of the tabre twins. They remembered a time long ago when the King and Queen of Jington had ordered their soldiers back and stood alone on the plains to meet the Nufalese army.

"Tempet," Alloi communicated to her brother urgently.

"He is soft and incapable. I will kill him now," Tempet assured her and loped ahead of his army. The pain in his arm had become a part of him, but Tempet knew how to cope with pain. He turned it to anger, a substance that could fuel him through any challenge. With long strides, he approached the King. Tempet ceased to be aware of the centuries that he had spent in stone. He was back in

his own time, except with a second chance to win the war.

Tempet stopped in front of the advancing army. He raised his bitaran and taunted Shan. "Are you ready for my justice? Your Queen died easily. Prepare to join her." Tempet laughed, insane with the anticipation of taking down Jingten's remaining monarch.

Shan ignored the words. His powerful perception was beyond the meaningless noises. He was choosing victims in the nearest ranks of men.

Allowing himself to take pleasure in the supremacy of his power, Shan cast his spell. Like ripe corn falling before the swift scythe, Atrophane soldiers lurched in agony and tumbled in death. Shan had wanted a world where they could live in peace and prosperity, and they had demanded an alternative.

Killing the soldiers was only the first step. Shan snared their souls like a bear plucking fish from a stream and tossing them onto the bank. Shan prevented them from taking their natural journey to the next world. He yoked the displaced lifeforces with his ugly spell and bound their incorporeal existence to his fierce will. Shan claimed two thousand dead as his servants and directed their fury at Tempet.

Appalled by Shan's enslavement of souls, Alloi tried to set them free, but the net of his will was impossible for her to immediately untangle. Her mind shook as a fly in a spider web shakes. She resumed her battle magic against his body, hoping to kill him.

Shan fortified his enchanted armor with a shield spell. His magic had never come so effortlessly and the burning pain of Alloi's attack faded into pleasure. Shan continued to control his new army that was beyond defeat. No force could harm the fresh crop of wraiths. Only warding crystals could repel their ripping freezing grip of death that reached out to tear the living. Tempet whirled within the thickening circle of wraiths that were driven to assault him.

The surviving Atrophane soldiers faltered in terror as they saw the ghostly images of their comrades floating above the toppled bodies. Red eyes burned in the sockets of warped colorless faces. Pitiless magic forced their eyes to look upon the living world that they were no longer meant to see. They served Shan in torment, and their suffering fueled Shan's power. He believed that they deserved this punishment for following the commands of his enemies.

Tempet wallowed among the wraiths, swiping at them even though they could not touch him because of his wardings. Shan locked his mind onto Tempet's body. The threat from the rys King made Tempet cease his mindless hacking. He regained his bitter courage and ran at Shan through the throng of wraiths.

Shan's power gushed through his system like lava pushed up from the raging furnace of the world. He had taken the path that led to the ultimate level of rys magic, and he had freed his mind of any reservation before doing so. He welcomed the dark expansion of his magic and forgot all the good places in his heart. The obedient wraiths that swirled around him encouraged him to drink deeply of the magic elixir that he had always forbidden himself to even sip. Shan was the master of living things. And twice their master in death.

Constant attack spells from Alloi exploded around Shan. The ground around his feet turned to smoking craters but he was untouched by her assault.

No warding, no armor, no shield spell could stop Shan now. His accelerated mind met Tempet's advance with a firm spell that would not fail. He transmitted so much power in that instant that all of his senses briefly went blank.

Tempet halted abruptly. He recognized the stiffening of his body as stone suddenly encased him. Locked inside the magically formed rock, no sound of his fury could escape. But Tempet knew this spell well, and he immediately began to work his own magic to undo it.

Shan had expected Tempet to react in such a way, and he used the efforts of the tabre against him. Building upon Tempet's magic that was about to dissolve the stone, Shan multiplied the force

many times. The hard statue form that held Tempet exploded. Chunks landed at random, blood dripping from their hard edges. The handle of the bitaran stuck out of one piece of stone that still encased the bludgeon.

Tempet was gone. Broken into many pieces.

Shan howled with triumph as his senses returned from a plane of pure energy. He saw the world again, but it was drastically altered. Silver souls moaned inside cold white auras. Even the subdued colors of the frosted prairie were lost beneath an undulating blackness that snapped with blue sparks.

The Nufalese and rys soldiers occupied a wide hill that swelled from the grassland like a great hump back. The pelting chill of the night had sapped the warriors of any bodily warmth. Glowering storm clouds rationed the daylight, and freezing rain drizzled. The rys bore the weather better, but their hardiness did not lessen their depression as their soft boots cracked through the thin frozen layer of soil and squished in the mud underneath.

Dreibrand and Atarek joined Tytido, who waited for them on the slope that overlooked Shan's position. They dismounted and prepared to watch Shan oppose the Atrophane. Leaving Shan alone made Dreibrand uncomfortable. The rys King looked small upon the vast landscape.

In the bleary excuse for day, Atarek saw the dark mass on the sodden plains that marked the Atrophane force. The tap and thud of their relentless war drums grumbled across the land. They advanced rapidly, seemingly unaffected by the long night of fighting.

Without speaking, the men watched the army press closer to Shan. Dreibrand spotted Tempet advancing wildly through the ranks, but Shan stood firm, unimpressed by the onslaught of his enemy. Dreibrand expected to witness the eruption of another duel between the mighty rys males, but instead a visible explosion of magic radiated from Shan and chaos blossomed on the battlefield. The sheer scale of the magic, with its abnormal brightness, astounded Dreibrand, who gaped at the horrific tumble of dying soldiers. Overcoming his awe, he remembered his spyglass and yanked it out to take a better look.

"What do you see?" Atarek asked urgently, jerking himself loose from his stunned silence.

"He got him!" Dreibrand exclaimed and lowered the spyglass from his eye.

"Tempet?" Atarek asked anxiously.

"Yes. I saw him fly into pieces," Dreibrand said, impressed by the thoroughness of Tempet's death.

Tytido sighed with relief. "Finally something is going our way," he said.

Although Dreibrand shared the sentiment, watching so many Atrophane soldiers die had been difficult. He knew they were just men doing their duty, as any of his warriors would do.

Dreibrand lifted the spyglass again. With Tempet gone, Dreibrand expected to return to the battle soon and be in position to receive the Atrophane surrender that Shan would demand.

The drizzling rain spotted the lens, and Dreibrand sought something to wipe it with. His studded leather gauntlets and armored jacket offered nothing suitable, and he had to pull an unused bandage out of a saddlebag.

After wiping the precise lens, he observed the battle again. His focus had been on Tempet before, but Dreibrand now scanned the long piles of dead soldiers. Their losses had indeed been heavy, even by Shan's standards, but the actions of the living soldiers disturbed Dreibrand the most. They were recoiling in fear. No, it was terror. They slashed the air with their weapons and scrambled in retreat.

Scanning the scene, Dreibrand saw several soldiers flail about and then fall to the ground in apparent agony. "What is Shan doing?" he wondered aloud.

"Something's wrong," Tytido declared, even without the benefit of a spyglass. "Dreibrand, what is happening?"

Dreibrand had seen such pure terror before. "Oh, Gods!" he cried and tore the spyglass from his eye. A cold sweat broke out over his already damp body, and he shuddered.

"What?" Atarek demanded. He squinted at the distant scene, trying to see what distressed his companions.

"He could not have," Tytido insisted. In past battles, Shan had claimed many lives, but he had never seized a soul.

"He has," Dreibrand whispered. He could watch people die, even Atrophane, if that was what was needed to further his goals and protect his interests. He had in the past watched the innocent die with the guilty, and been able to accept it. But trapping a soul, especially the soul of a soldier, and twisting its power against his comrades was horribly wrong.

Dreibrand asked Atarek if he recalled the story of the Deamedron that he had been told since coming to the Wilderness.

Atarek's face twitched with distaste and he nodded. He looked again at the crumbling lines of Atrophane troops and witnessed the terror that he had only imagined before. The fleeing men began to slow, run in circles, and then form clusters. From experience, Dreibrand knew that those who possessed no enchanted protection were clinging to anyone with a warding crystal.

Becalmed by his grim sense of purpose, Dreibrand said, "I must put a stop to this."

When Atarek demanded how, Dreibrand did not explain. With the supreme ease of a superb leader under pressure, Dreibrand told Atarek and Tytido to gather the other warriors but not to advance until he signaled for them.

"I am going with you," Atarek declared and stepped between Dreibrand and his horse.

"Stay back," Dreibrand hissed, showing his strain now.

"I listened to the story. My warding crystal will protect me from those things," Atarek argued.

"Not from Shan," Dreibrand snapped. "Who knows what madness afflicts him. He might not pause to recognize you, and then he could turn you into a slave spirit."

"And what says he will recognize you?" Atarek countered. Dreibrand tried to move around his brother and grab Astar's reins, but Atarek blocked him again. The brothers tensed as if on the verge of wrestling.

"Shan will recognize me," Dreibrand shouted and shoved Atarek aside. Dreibrand vaulted into the saddle. "Tytido, make him understand. I have to go."

"Dreibrand, but what can you do?" Tytido asked, requiring that his friend reveal his plans.

"I will intervene," Dreibrand said, wishing that he could actually answer the question. Even without knowing what he would do, he was certain that he must help men that were suffering a terrible fate that only got worse with each passing second.

Atarek seized the bridle of the colt and wedged his shoulder beneath the animal's arching neck. Astar balked but Atarek held the colt's head in place with his strength.

"Dreibrand, is this not what we want? You said Shan would give us victory. That his power would make the Empire accept our terms. Why do you go now to stop him?" Atarek demanded.

Dreibrand looked at his brother, who had embraced his ambitious goals. For the first time, they were united by the same purpose, and it was Dreibrand's resolve that seemed to be breaking.

"Shan has gone too far," Dreibrand said. "I must go stop him. I must."

Moved by his brother's pleading panic, Atarek stepped aside. "If you say you must, then you will," Atarek whispered but Dreibrand was already gone. Despite recent hard use, Astar bolted down the hill, conveying his master with the required speed.

Sandin watched his men turn and run. He knew the normally brave and disciplined troops would not obey him if he ordered them to stop. Sandin had seen the original Deamedron and had watched many of his men die painfully on that day, hacked and twisted by the insane shadows of dead soldiers.

He looked at Alloi, seeking her assistance, but she had not moved since the destruction of her twin brother. Unblinking, she seemed frozen in the moment that had claimed Tempet's tenacious life. Perhaps Shan's mighty display had crushed her desire for conquest, but Sandin could not stop now. Unlike that day when the Deamedron had decimated his men, Sandin possessed his enchanted bracelet, and the wraiths could not touch him. He decided to face King Shan himself. If he actually slew the rys leader, then his fame and power would never fade. Never.

Drawing his sword, he commanded Recey to blow a battle charge upon his horn. The squire attempted to comply, but fear made his mouth as dusty as a mausoleum.

Sandin advanced on the seething wall of wraiths that harvested fleeing soldiers. He had to spur his horse to make the steed continue. He was close enough now to see the wispy limbs tearing at living flesh, pulling men to the ground and ripping their lives away. Sandin refused to turn back.

His determination, however, was not enough to reach Shan. As the wraiths overran the soldiers, the living men naturally found the safety zone created by Sandin's warding crystal, and they crowded around his horse. Thwarted by a clinging panicking throng, Sandin ordered them out of his way, but they could not obey when it meant instant death.

Sandin looked around in despair. The officers and soldiers who were lucky enough to have warding crystals were being mobbed by desperate men as well. His whole army had been reduced to mewling clots of men penned on all sides by the threat of painful death.

Above the rising din, Sandin screamed his loathing for the rys. In his rage to reach Shan, he was tempted to start cutting his way through his own mindless men. He waved his blade over their heads and commanded them to move.

Cringing beneath his fury, they begged their lord to help them get away.

"Cowards!" Sandin snarled. "Advance with me."

Although those soldiers who could hear the Darhet tried to obey, they could make no progress against the mass of men pressing against them in their need to stay within the range of Sandin's warding.

Men started calling to Alloi to help them. Even with Tempet gone, they still had faith in her power. They could see her, holding back wraiths with a glowing shield spell. She stared at the madness around her with wide disbelieving eyes. She had left this horror behind in her first life and she could not bear to look upon it again.

I should have died in my own time, she lamented from the depths of regret. Vengeance had seemed a worthy goal twenty-two centuries ago, but it had only driven more soldiers to their deaths and their souls into the clutches of the rys.

Shan felt the warded rider approaching him from behind and turned his blazing eye toward the impudent intruder. Shan's perception wrapped the flesh of the man and began to seep through the exceptionally heavy warding. Focusing on the internal essence of the human, Shan prepared to pluck the delicious fruit of the man's soul.

"Shan! Shan!"

The rys King spun completely around, startled that he had not recognized Dreibrand.

"Shan! Stop!" Dreibrand yelled. He pulled his sweating horse to a stop and beheld the flickering masses of wraiths that tormented clumps of men. Sickened by the awful scene, he jumped to the ground and staggered toward Shan.

Breathing hard, he yelled, "Shan, how could you do THIS?"

"I had every right," Shan said and he pushed his wraiths hard with his mind, forcing them to conduct their wretched tasks at a faster rate. A corresponding increase in screams came from the battlefield.

"No, no," Dreibrand protested and stepped closer until Shan raised his flashing shield.

"I told you to stay away," Shan said. The rys's lips trembled. Whether it was from fatigue, madness, or the immense power conducted by his body, Dreibrand could not tell.

"Shan, enough. Let them go," Dreibrand said urgently. He extended a hand toward the hellish scene as if the feeble gesture could stop the tragedy. Shan abhorred violence and suffering, and Dreibrand believed that the rys would stop if he simply asked.

All that remained of Shan's morality, however, was a bleeding stump where he had amputated the good things in his nature.

"Let them go?" the rys King sneered with contempt. "They would kill us, or have you forgotten?"

Dreibrand shook his head. "My King, you can have your victory without this. It is wrong. You have made them Deamedron. How, Shan? How could you?"

"Shut up!" Shan snapped. The absolute shock for his actions that Dreibrand displayed reminded him of his ideals that had once been so precious. Those kind impulses had made him better than Onja, but not anymore.

Shan seized Dreibrand in a spell that gripped him like an iron maiden. Unable to move, Dreibrand cried out in fear and pain.

Shan harangued his immobile subject, who was forced to watch the continuing torment of human souls and human lives. "They made me do it. They chose to ignore my power. I am the King of the Rysamand. There is none higher. All of them knew better than to tempt my anger by tampering with my domain."

Dreibrand struggled to reply. Even clenched by pain, he argued, "You torture soldiers who only follow orders. The invasion was not their decision."

"They wanted to sack Jingten. Every one of them," Shan said. His eyes were merciless pits of hot fire flaming as bright as the sun but blue as the deepest glacial crevasse.

Squinting in the blaze of Shan's power, Dreibrand pleaded, "Shan, forgive them."

"No!" Shan shot back instantly. Absolution did not compare to the exquisite pleasure that domination delivered. Shan took a deep breath, filling his mind with the addicting power that he

had held at bay for centuries.

Seeing Shan this way broke Dreibrand's heart. The face of his beloved leader and friend had been twisted into a visage of remorseless cruelty. Only Dreibrand's naturally defiant will overcame his desolation and allowed him to make another attempt to retrieve Shan from his insanity. Like a man diving into raging cold waters to save a person sinking to the bottom, Dreibrand grasped at the remnants of his loyalty for Shan.

"You could free the souls and those left living would surrender right now," Dreibrand proposed.

"I want their destruction," Shan said.

"Is this not enough?" Dreibrand said. "Let them go. No one will forget this display. You have defended Jingtun."

"Jingtun is to be more than defended," Shan said as if quoting from some mysterious scripture.

"Then you are no better than Onja," Dreibrand said. His love and loyalty for Shan shattered like an ancient and priceless vase falling on cold hard stone.

The cracking of Dreibrand's love rattled Shan, but the ryls could no longer react with any form of kindness. He could not think to mend the damage as Dreibrand's devotion whirled away on the hot blasting wind of his evil. Angered by the loss, Shan intensified his spell. The pain bit Dreibrand deeply, and he cried out.

"Beg for your life," Shan commanded. He wanted confirmation that Dreibrand was still his loyal subject. Surely, the man would have to obey him when inflicted with such pain.

Mastering his agony, Dreibrand panted, "Ahhh, I beg for them. Release their souls."

"No. Ask me for your life. I will grant it," Shan said.

"Shan!" Dreibrand screamed, remembering his pure loyalty for Shan with awful longing. This monster was intolerable. "Shan, you are hurting me."

"I said I would let you live if you would only ask," Shan said with exasperation. Why did the pitiful human not respond? The pain had to be enough to make him do anything.

Dreibrand continued to scream, but the song of his anguish puzzled Shan further instead of rewarding his madness. The intense pleasure of dominating others faltered when he observed his human friend mauled by spells that attacked nerves with serrated malice. The memory of Dreibrand defending him in times of need stirred, and Shan abruptly ended the torture.

Dreibrand fell to the ground. He twitched as the pain slowly released his body, and he retched a small amount.

Shan stared with confusion at the man on his hands and knees. Shan wished that Dreibrand had not interfered with the punishment of Jingtun's enemies. From the highest to the lowest, Shan intended to punish them all. If the ryls were to live in peace, then the very concept of invading Jingtun had to be eradicated from the world.

"Go wait with your warriors, Dreibrand," Shan commanded, expecting the man to be thoroughly chastised.

"I came to save the souls of these men," Dreibrand persisted. He braced for the next stroke of magic that would bash his nerves. A string of spittle fell from his lower lip as he waited for the pain to resume. When nothing happened, he looked up at Shan.

The ryl was surveying the accelerating demise of the Atrophane war host. The sounds of dying were made more terrible by the absence of clashing weapons.

"Give them a chance to surrender," Dreibrand suggested and lifted a pleading hand toward the ryls

King. In that pose, his armor and weapons became the encumbrances of a supplicant and ceased to be the trappings of a warrior.

"They are surrendering," Shan commented with satirical delight. He thrust against a patch of warded soldiers and killed them. Wraiths began to rise and join the assault on the living.

"Nooooo!" Dreibrand shouted.

He scrambled to his feet. Being a hardened fighter, Dreibrand immediately wanted to draw his sword and strike at the rys who had tortured him. It was the logical thing to do and probably the only way to free the demented souls. Yet, he doubted his ability to hit the immensely powerful rys and cause damage. Getting himself killed in a dubious physical assault on Shan would not serve his purpose.

"I will show you mercy!" Dreibrand declared. He ran toward a group of Atrophane soldiers. Wraiths pecked at the fringes of the group. In their panic, some soldiers pushed the desperate away, fearing that they would be pulled out of the warding. Other men of better caliber clutched their comrades, trying to help them. Those who possessed wardings tried to adjust their positions and protect their men, but the strategy was hopeless. Moving to include one man meant another was exposed to the wraiths.

Three such unfortunates had just begun to shriek as cold death penetrated their flesh when Dreibrand reached them and the wide sphere of his warding pushed the wraiths away. Soldiers rushed into the new zone of safety before even realizing that one of their enemies had come to provide it.

Dreibrand held his sword above his head, and more men flocked to the glowing warding crystal. "I will help you! I will help you!" he yelled. He kept the blade out as much to advertise his warding as to defend his possession of it.

Wounded painfully by their contact with the wraiths, the soldiers who had been immediately saved by Dreibrand staggered to his side with gratitude.

Turning so that the others could see and hear him, Dreibrand announced, "I am Lord Dreibrand of the House of Veta. I am the human sovereign of Nufal and I have come to protect you from Shan. Your leader has led you astray. A campaign against the rys should not have been conceived."

Half of the soldiers were too overcome by fear to even register his words, and those who heard him were not critical of his motives. Like people jumping from burning buildings, they accepted the presence of the enemy leader if it meant life.

Dreibrand's action, however, incensed Shan.

So, you turn against me now. Your claims about not having any loyalty to Atrophane were mere stories for a King's amusement, Shan fumed in his deranged state.

He stalked toward Dreibrand. Wraiths swirled away from Shan's warding like mist parting before the prow of a boat. The spirit slaves gathered in the wake of their grim creator. Ghostly blue flames danced between their translucent bodies.

The courage that thrived at the core of Dreibrand's personality quaked with an unfamiliar uncertainty. He had faced many great enemies, even Onja herself, but Dreibrand feared to oppose Shan.

Even drenched in the knowledge that Shan was unstoppable, Dreibrand stood fast in the defense of the Atrophane soldiers. Acting to protect the members of the very military that he had deserted redeemed him from much of the guilt that he carried for that choice.

I had not imagined that I would meet my end this way, he thought. Each swift step that Shan took toward him accelerated his crisis. Seizing upon the warrior philosophy of his education, Dreibrand sternly repeated the thought. *I will be victorious. I will be victorious.*

Even so, he lowered his sword. He would not initiate combat with Shan. He hoped that the sword itself might remind Shan of their bond.

As Dreibrand beheld the horrible madness that distorted Shan's face, he understood that he needed to reunite Shan with his compassion for humanity. The Shan that Dreibrand revered had only killed his enemies until a surrender could be achieved.

Whirling to face the Atrophane soldiers, Dreibrand shouted, "Surrender to him! You must. For your lives. Lay down your weapons and kneel to him! Now!"

Perhaps because Dreibrand was an Atrophane, they listened to him, and with the mighty rys King bearing down on them, surrender seemed the wisest option. Fighting the rys King was futile, and men began to choose the shame of dropping their weapons.

Dreibrand faced Shan again and followed his own advice. Thrusting the point of his sword into the ground, Dreibrand kneeled behind the weapon.

Shan stopped in front of him. Gruesome specters hung in the background like an underpaid clique.

Although shaking, Dreibrand still managed to speak clearly. He used the Atrophane language so the soldiers would know that he spoke for their benefit. "My Lord, my King. I ask for mercy for these men. See their surrender."

Shan scanned the group and a few more men set down their arms. "You can die with them!" Shan hissed in his native tongue.

Although lacking fluency in the rys language, Dreibrand grimaced as he surmised the malicious meaning.

"Shan!" he cried. "It is I, Dreibrand. Have I not always been obedient to your will? Have I ever wavered in my loyalty? Be merciful. Be the Shan I love!"

Even held hostage by his worst instincts, Shan was beckoned by Dreibrand's lingering desire to love him. The puzzling image of Dreibrand begging on his knees stalled Shan's hemorrhaging hatred. Avoiding the pleading eyes of his abused friend, Shan looked at the warding crystal mounted on the handle of Dreibrand's sword. Their blood had anointed the weapon. The enchantment within the sword had been made stronger by Dreibrand's devotion, and their deep alliance had brought them both much success.

The magic locked inside the sword touched Shan's senses. His friendship with Dreibrand had helped define the power in the crystal, and Shan had just cast away that friendship like a gnawed bone. The act had diminished him, and the mad heights of magic that he had achieved by embracing his rage could not replace what was lost.

Abashed, the rys King shuddered with the moral realization of what he had done. He clasped the wounded side of his face, feeling the pain again. He staggered back as if about to flee the scene of an accidental crime.

When he stopped, he leaned over, sickened by his corrupted state of existence. Only his true enemies were deserving of his madness. Tempet was dead, but Alloi remained, and it was time to stop tormenting her human servants. They were not responsible for destroying his dreams for the future.

Shan did not expect Dreibrand to ever forgive him. The rys doubted that he would ever forgive himself for this day that had led him astray from his dearest beliefs. Although the very sense of condemnation made it easier to sin, Shan decided that he would undo what he had done.

The rys King released his minions. He saw the spirits fade and rise through the portal to the next world. Shan hoped that passing between worlds would cleanse the souls of the memory of what he had done to them. He wondered if Quylan looked down on him, but he did not know. It was strange that he could not know.

The survivors watched the hellish spirits disappear, and those Atrophane who had surrendered with Dreibrand were grateful for their bargain.

Coming down from his evil mania, Shan focused on Alloi. Perhaps he had chosen to punish her servants so severely just to avoid striking at her. During the long battle, he had sent others to harass her, and he had thwarted her attacks, but Shan had yet to truly attempt killing her. He had hardly allowed himself to look upon her because he feared that her beauty would entrance him and make him weak. It had before.

My beautiful lost rys of the Tabren, I must put you down, Shan thought.

With miserable death strewn across the land, Shan decided that he had been mistaken to allow this joining of armies. *I should have been braver,* he lamented.

He pushed hard with his mind, spreading his magic insistently into both armies, but without causing damage. He did not crush living organs or rip souls from men still convulsing in the final moments of death. Shan only made them stop—stop everything. Overwhelmed with drowsiness, men began to stumble into the cold mud. Riders slipped from tired horses. Eventually, even the rys soldiers passed out.

The underlying moan of controlled spirits was gone. The screams and shouts of frightened fighters were silenced, and only the light drizzle pattered on the land. Total death appeared to have claimed the battlefield. Unmoving bodies draped each other, but the living remained among the dead.

6. *The Quinsanomar*

The will to fight drained from Alloi's heart as her army crumbled around her. Each man that dropped represented another portion of her failure. She wished that Tempet and she had stayed locked in stone rather than cause this disaster. The potential of her life had already been wasted in warfare, and she was no more capable of defeating Jingtén than any of the tabre had been in the last age. Even with Onja and Dacian gone to dust, the new King of Jingtén possessed an equivalent power.

A tremendous fear seized Alloi. With Tempet dead, she was utterly alone. The absence of her beloved twin was already a hopeless agony.

All was ruin.

Alloi fled. She wanted to choose the place of her death, and the Quinsanomar beckoned. It was the place where her civilization had perished. It was the place where her parents had died and Alloi rushed to join them. She should have died with them centuries ago.

Shan watched her run westward, and concern for Jingtén fired the glowing coals of his anger again. Assuming an intransigent hatred compelled her to attack Jingtén on her own, he chased her. They would end their conflict alone on the plains. It would be better that way. Shan preferred that his rys not see him kill another of their kind. Shan gave scant thought to the Atrophane or his followers. He expected that Dreibrand would handle the situation to his own satisfaction.

Determined to reach her burial ground, Alloi stayed ahead of Shan. Choosing the spot where her bones would sink into the land was all that remained of victory for her. She choked on the irony that she had spent centuries in hibernation only to return to the place where she had narrowly escaped death.

As she ran toward the cloud-veiled foothills in the west, Alloi did not turn to view her homeland a final time. Unbearable memories of a lost home were all that the Tabren Mountains could offer her.

As nightfall came, the wind picked up, coming from the north with ice pick vindictiveness. In her increasing haze of grief and fatigue, she recalled the old Nufalese adage *snow in the mountains, wind on the plains*.

Sensing Shan's violent will coming closer, Alloi ran faster, but she tripped and flopped hard onto the unyielding land. Dirt covered the blood caked on her clothes. Pushing herself up, she discerned black shapes in the distance. For a delirious moment, she thought they were tabre, waiting for her to join them.

Despite the bliss of the fantasy, it withered quickly. Alloi realized that she had reached her destination. A forest of broken blocks interrupted the plains and defined the Quinsanomar.

Alloi sobbed between gasping breaths and cried out to her parents pitifully. She longed for their comforting love. Although the old battlefield no longer shackled the souls of her parents, she felt closer to them in this sad place.

When she ran among the stones, she remembered the tabre and human fighters who had stood in the spots that the stones occupied. With deeper horror, Alloi remembered how her power had been great enough to deflect the powerful spell that had seized most of the Nufalese army, but her power had not allowed her to protect everyone close to her. Only a few had survived at her side to witness the oncoming nightmare of defeat.

With her executioner approaching, Alloi's instincts stirred one more time and she chose to delay her end. She hid behind a tumbled monolith. Alloi loathed taking shelter under the stone formed by rys magic, but she needed a few moments before facing her hunter.

Her pounding heart confused her. She could not understand how her body could pulse with so much life when sorrow and defeat were her only sustenance. She silenced her gasping lungs when Shan entered the area. His potent lifeforce flowed over her senses, like smoke filling a room, and she heard his breathing between gusts of wind.

Suddenly, Alloi thought of Tempet and knew that he would want her to strike. She had an obligation to avenge her twin, but even that seemed to have little value. They had locked themselves in the hard limbo of the Tabren Mountains for twenty-two centuries in order to avenge their whole race, but no amount of violence would change the fact that only cracked stones marked the existence of the tabre.

Alloi looked deep into her past. She remembered being a tabling with Tempet. They were playing in the forest. She had used her fledgling magic to coax a rabbit into her arms outside Kwellstan. Alloi remembered Tempet's delight as he had petted the soft fur. She wished that Tempet had been granted a different life instead of an existence consumed by hate.

Through her teary eyes, Alloi gazed at the sky. Heavy clouds blackened the heavens and she had no star to guide her.

"There is nothing I can do," she whispered, apologizing to her dead twin and her entire race.

Her advanced perception allowed her to track Shan as he came closer. He made no attempt to cloak his body. The Shield of Dacian on his arm burned against her senses. Alloi knew that the enchantment craved to drink up her power, and its magical hunger was growing. Alloi imagined that he would subdue her with the shield and then make his killing blow. Ready for her fate, she decided to spare him the trouble of flushing her out.

Shan stopped when Alloi emerged from her hiding spot. Her wretched grief slapped his mind. In a flash of anger, he believed that she deserved it. Tempet and she had reduced him to a violent beast, a killer who relished twisting the life from his victims. She should suffer for dragging him into the clutches of his darkest temptations.

Even as Shan recognized how he had succumbed to the allure of his powers, he accepted that the genocide had to be completed. One survivor from ancient Nufal remained, and she had to join the others who were interred in history.

He drew his sword. Blue fire glowed on the edges of the blade. The ancient rys enchantment was tuned to the presence of its enemy. Shan prepared to strike the final blow of the war. She would die for the rys she had killed. She would die for obliterating the place in his heart that could

envision an enlightened world.

Like a devotee of suicide cult, Alloi came forward and grabbed the blade with her hand. The blue fire jumped up her forearm, but she did not cry out as the fine edge cut her hand and the blood sizzled.

Shan tensed and lifted his shield. A defensive spell immediately flared around him, pushing back the night. The blue glow revealed her physical form, and the profound desolation on her beautiful face stalled Shan's execution.

Alloi dropped to her knees and pulled the swordpoint toward her heart.

The submission startled Shan, but offered him a chance to extract an explanation.

"Why?" he hissed.

Alloi did not meet his eyes. She spoke dully, as a broken-spirited prisoner would do. "To hurt you as you hurt us."

"But it was not us," Shan said with exasperation. "You knew that thousands of years had passed."

"That did not excuse ryls crimes," she answered. Although she still believed that her actions had been justified, her emotions were too exhausted to hate. Only grief remained and she was ready for it to end. She pulled the sword into her flesh. Shan saw blood squirt around the point and soak into her tattered and scorched robe. He pulled back on his sword, resenting her attempt to steal his final victory.

"Then fight me if your hate is so permanent," Shan commanded. "Too many have died for you to just give up."

Magical white fire flashed in her eyes with the rage of an entire race, and Shan felt its heat. Still, she did not strike.

Shan goaded her again. The destructive mood that had consumed him earlier wanted to maintain its new preeminence in his mind.

"I killed Tempet. I killed your mighty mate. Come, take your last chance at revenge if it means so much to you," he said.

"He was my brother, my twin brother," Alloi corrected sadly. His death seemed to have reduced her soul by half.

"More reason to fight me," Shan said. "Your hate made you refuse my peace offer. Your hate brought more death. Your hate killed my Queen, Why stop now? Fight!"

"My hate was my duty," she said. "But I cannot fulfill my duty. I feel your power, and I cannot even avenge my brother let alone my whole race. End my misery."

Shan yanked away his weapon. That day he had killed wantonly. He had killed even as Dreibrand begged mercy for his enemies. And now, Alloi asked him to kill because he was a killer. Suddenly, Shan wanted to redeem some scrap of his kind nature. Although the heat of battle had roused him to vile action, he could not summon the desire to strike her down if she would not fight him. Perhaps as the King of the ryls, he owed the sole survivor of Nufal's holocaust something better than the swift death that she begged to receive.

But something more than a vague sense of debt compelled him to hesitate. It was Alloi. She was impossible for him to defeat. He had always recognized her spirit as a profound match for his own. When he looked upon her, he imagined them together as a rose with the petals of his soul overlapping the petals of her soul. He ached to join her in a gentle soft world where pink blushed on pure white. He despised that their only interaction had been the crashing of thorny branches.

He put his sword in its scabbard and pointed at her bleeding chest. Alloi gasped when his magic

touched her body and healed the wound. Then, his magic enveloped her, caressed her with apologetic sympathy, and healed all of her wounds.

"I cannot hurt you," Shan admitted. "I could never hurt you." He staggered away and fell against a tilting monolith. The sick delight induced during his killing rage slipped away and deluged him with guilt. Upon the cold defiled land of the Quinsanomar, he contemplated how the ugliest episodes of rys history had claimed him and given him a role in a performance that no one wanted to watch.

Alloi stared at him for a long time. His mercy confused her. This did not seem to be the same creature who had obliterated her brother. Not even Tempet's eternal hatred for the rys had been enough to protect him from Shan's final fury. Alloi would not have guessed that a rys driven to such violent use of power would ever return to a compassionate state.

"Beautiful Alloi, make peace with me," she remembered him saying. The sound of his earnest voice had lingered in her ears since that night. Shan had always been reluctant to hurt her. Twice he had proposed peace, and Alloi accepted for the first time that he had been sincere.

His mercy shamed her.

Alloi chose not strike at Shan even if he appeared vulnerable with his back to her. She empathized with his disgust for the whole war. Pursuing his destruction now would do nothing to honor her brother or any of the lost tabre. As Shan had insisted, he was not guilty of destroying Nufal.

In hindsight, Alloi wished that she had done more to steer her brother's mind away from their pointless revenge. They could have reclaimed their kingdom and joined the settlers in the revival of Nufalese civilization. That would have served the memory of the tabre far better.

It was only one more thing to regret.

"I have no desire to live," Alloi announced. "I forgive you in advance if you will send me from this world, King Shan."

Her meek absolution called to the shriveled places in Shan's heart. He did not even suspect her of trying to trick him.

"Alloi," he whispered and looked at her. Speaking her name made him feel better. "Already one rys Queen has been lost today."

"Tabre. I am a tabre," she said although surprisingly unperturbed by his mistake. Perhaps that he had equated her to a queen prompted her generosity.

Shan apologized and said the term a couple times. Finally, he commented, "But you are not so different than me. We are the same."

"That fact did not prevent our division long ago," Alloi recalled.

"The Great War," Shan whispered. His curiosity for the secrets of history surged.

"You know very little about it," Alloi surmised.

"I know enough to understand how much you must hate the rys of Jington," Shan said. He extended a hand. "Let us talk, Alloi. Perhaps I can convince you to continue your life."

Alloi recoiled from him. It was an automatic response to a rys hand reaching out to her. The rhetoric of the Great War had demanded complete revulsion for the enemy.

Shan boldly stepped close and took her by the hand. Alloi cried out and an instinctive snap of magic slapped at Shan. He disregarded the sting. The joy of touching her, finally showing her a trace of tenderness instead of rough combat, discounted her minor attack.

"Let one good thing emerge from this wreckage, Alloi," he advised. "Let yourself survive."

"Why do you risk such mercy with me?" Alloi asked. Rys, by definition, eradicated all threats to their supremacy.

"Because I can see that we share a problem. We were born with kind hearts but have led violent lives," Shan explained. "Perhaps, we could find some comfort in our shared sorrows."

She trembled in his grip, and Shan understood how difficult it must be for her to trust him. The first Deamedron had existed for most of Shan's life, and he had intimately experienced the undying hate that the tabre possessed for the rys. Even so, he had pitied them and been relieved by their release.

"It was I who let the souls of the tabre free. It was I who undid the spell that Onja used to enslave the Nufalese," Shan said.

"You lie," Alloi snarled automatically. No rys would have bothered to end the torment of her lost race. Alloi assumed that Onja's death had released the spirits.

"If I can prove my statement, will you spend some time talking with me?" Shan said.

"What proof do you have?" she said skeptically.

"My memories," Shan said. He raised her hand to his temple. "I will trust you if you will trust me."

Her sensitive mind immediately felt his mental defenses dropping. The invitation to communicate so intimately beckoned to her loneliness. Her curiosity tempted her as well. Reading the mind of a rys or tabre was a far more complicated task than perusing or controlling the mind of a human or other lesser animal. Alloi cautiously peeked inside the cracked door of his thoughts.

Shan had the specific memory waiting for her. Alloi only needed to look at it.

When Alloi connected to his memory, she stiffened. After breaking Onja's spell on the Deamedron, Shan had guided the souls toward the next world. The process had nearly killed him because the souls had pressed against him with pure malice. As the images rushed into Alloi's head, she began to recognize some of the souls that had touched Shan so briefly. She cried out and hurled herself to the ground.

Concerned, Shan bent over her. Alloi refused to be soothed by his gentle touch. As a skilled mindreader, she knew that the images she had viewed in his mind were real.

"You did set them free," she said.

"I admit that I had to in order to rid the world of the threat, but I wanted to end their torture as well," Shan explained. "I never dreamed of meeting a living Nufalese with whom I could begin to make amends for our terrible past. I accept that the rys wronged you," Shan said.

"You guided my parents to the next world?" Alloi asked.

"Yes, if they were Deamedron," Shan said.

She did not speak for some time. The wind moaned between the monoliths, and she listened to the sad song upon the land. He had set free the enslaved souls of Nufal instead of trying to seize control of them, and Alloi respected his choice very much.

Finally, she whispered, "The tabre wronged the rys as well."

"Nothing could have deserved what Onja did to you," Shan insisted although painfully interested to know her firsthand version of history. Onja had cleaned the record after her war, and future generations had known very little, except not to enter the Wilderness.

Alloi gripped his hand and felt the rich deep pulse of his existence. The contact reached into the desolate pit of her loneliness, where her vulnerable spirit cowered. She could seek companionship with death or with this rys, whose offer to help carry her burden of grief amazed her.

She also sensed his grief, intense shame in fact, for his actions on the battlefield. Her sensitive mind felt his reluctance toward returning to his subjects. He had fallen from the pedestal of his moral authority. Fallen hard.

His awareness of his wrongdoing appealed to Alloi. She pitied Shan for failing when hard circumstances had tested his good heart.

Shan knew that she was analyzing the heavy thoughts roiling at the surface of his mind but he was not disturbed by it. So close to Alloi, he felt he had found a refuge from the madness that had recently seized him.

Shan said, "Alloi, you offered to forgive me if I would kill you. Instead, I ask for forgiveness for killing your brother. If I had known then how dear he was to you, I would have found a way to be merciful."

Imagining how Tempet might have been in a different life, Alloi said, "You were merciful. He suffered far more than I."

"Walk with me," Shan whispered tenderly and she followed him away from the ancient battlefield.

7. Days of Freedom

Squalls of freezing rain glazed the silent battlefield. For two hours, the cold taxed the bodies of the fighters before Shan's spell began to wear off. The rys soldiers awoke first. Their clothes crackled as they sat up and broke the sheens of ice on their bodies.

Under a slate sky that scowled at a windy land, the rys tried to find their King, but, with the best of them killed, none remained who could cast their minds farther than a dozen hasas from the area. Unable to detect Shan and confused by his absence, the rys soldiers waited uneasily.

Taf Ila noticed little and cared for nothing beyond the devastating sight of his dead daughter draped over the back of a horse. Thin ice shrouded her in a glassy layer that crusted on her armor and black hair. Lurching to his feet, Taf Ila went to Quylan and removed one of her gauntlets. Pressing her lifeless digits against his face, he plunged into his sorrow and shut his eyes.

Amid the scattered remains of the Atrophane force, Sandin awoke. His dismay swiftly slapped aside his grogginess. Alloi was gone, and all of his soldiers were strewn over the ground like toy soldiers knocked down by a spoiled child.

Shivering, Sandin automatically hugged himself although pressing his arms against his armor did nothing to warm them. His body that had burned with the endurance spell was cold and depleted. His horse stood nearby. The majestic war steed hung its head, drained of all vigor for battle.

Sandin spotted Recey collapsed between two flagbearers with one of the Atrophane banners covering half of the faithful squire's body. Shoving his mind out of its haze, Sandin assessed the area more thoroughly and discovered that even the enemy soldiers were down. He could see their prone bodies sprinkled along the hill where they had retreated. At first, he assumed happily that Alloi had killed them until he saw rys walking along the hill.

Where is Alloi? Sandin worried. He saw no trace of his powerful mistress. An intense desolation threatened him when he accepted that she was missing. With Tempet dead, he needed Alloi to conquer the rys. He gained some hope when he determined that Shan appeared to be missing as well. Perhaps Alloi was fighting Shan to the death on some private chosen ground.

At least those wraiths are gone, Sandin thought with utter relief before his mind blocked out the horrible episode. He did not consider his guilt for driving his soldiers against the King of Jingten.

He went to his squire and determined that the man was not dead. After Recey got up, they began to rouse the others.

My army is still larger. I shall clean up this mess while I await Alloi's triumphant return, Sandin

thought.

In another portion of the dismembered Atrophane army, Dreibrand opened his eyes and experienced the same shock as Sandin when he viewed his surroundings. Bodies stretched away in every direction. The Atrophane soldiers who had been sheltered by his warding appeared untouched, and Dreibrand hoped that they were still alive. Farther away, torn heaps of dead men littered the ground. They were the unfortunates who had been rent by the frigid fury of the wraiths.

But no wraiths prowled the area, and thinking back, Dreibrand remembered watching their vile vapors dissipate.

Shan released them, he thought, thankful that the horror had ended.

When Dreibrand sat up, his arm stuck to the ground before snapping free. The crunch of ice as the crusted turf released him warned him that he had to be dangerously cold. Deep shivering suddenly started, and he recognized the onset of exposure. When he stood up, the cold constricted his body. He flapped his arms vigorously, and his sluggish body mustered some blood flow.

He plucked his sword out of the ground and sheathed it. Concerned about his brother, Dreibrand took out his spyglass and looked toward the location of his comrades. Still on the hillside where he had left them, he spotted Atarek and Tytido rising stiffly from the ground. Dreibrand also saw that Astar had wandered back to them.

Dreibrand scanned the rest of the area, turning in a circle and studying the groups of bodies. Shan was no where in sight, and Dreibrand could not find Alloi either. Frightened earlier by Shan's berserk actions, Dreibrand did not entirely regret the King's departure. Although the sentiment felt foreign, Dreibrand's allegiance to Shan now resembled the ashes of a comfortable home burned by an arsonist.

After Dreibrand concluded that Shan and Alloi were gone, his thoughts turned urgently to Sandin. He pointed the lens in the direction of the Darhet's last position. Dreibrand was just in time to see the battle flags of the Darhet rise again.

Dreibrand lingered a moment and viewed Sandin as he moved about rousing his men. The sight of his rival briefly mesmerized Dreibrand as he contemplated how to stop the man who would surely order his army to resume fighting.

Dreibrand put away his spyglass and woke up the nearest soldier, who stared at him with confusion but not alarm. He simply did not recognize the Atrophane warrior who told him that they were safe now.

When Dreibrand moved to the next soldier, the first soldier finally remembered who Dreibrand was. "You are the renegade," he said, shaking with cold and coughing.

"I am the man who stopped the King of Jingten from killing all of you," Dreibrand said. "Now get moving before you freeze."

After Dreibrand roused a few men, he bade them to begin waking more soldiers. They complied, but Dreibrand could tell that they were uncertain about his presence. No one seemed inclined to confront him though.

Hoping to gain more leverage among the dazed Atrophane, Dreibrand inquired about Commander Fanlyre. The first men that he asked did not recognize the name or perhaps they were too upset to think about it. Dreibrand continued through the groggy groups of survivors until he reached infantry who were under Fanlyre's command. On this bad day, Dreibrand finally heard a scrap of good news. Last that the soldiers knew, Fanlyre had still been alive.

Dreibrand rushed among the bodies. His aching legs gathered speed reluctantly, but he urgently needed to locate the one man who might listen to him. Dreibrand rolled over a man in armor and a blue officer's uniform who lay face down next to a horse.

"Cevlead!" Dreibrand cried when he recognized the young earnest face with a short nose and slightly full lips. He shook the man's shoulders.

The commander's eyes fluttered open, and in his first instant of consciousness, he raised a hand to his neck and touched the warding crystal tied there.

"You!" Fanlyre cried. He flopped away but found that he was too hobbled by hypothermia to elude his visitor.

"Here, I will help you up," Dreibrand said and offered a hand.

"What happened?" Fanlyre demanded. He looked around with nervous glittering eyes. The cold air revealed his steaming breath in stuttering puffs.

"The wraiths are gone," Dreibrand assured him. "We must talk. There is little time."

Confused, Fanlyre stared at Dreibrand. He had seen the censured lord run between the soldiers and the rys King. Many soldiers had kneeled around Dreibrand, and then...the memories were fuzzy.

"Is the battle over?" Fanlyre said.

"It will be if you make the right decision," Dreibrand replied and grabbed Fanlyre.

After being hauled to his feet, Fanlyre flung off Dreibrand's hand and stumbled a couple steps backward. "Get away from me!" he yelled. Being seen so close to the enemy would surely damn him in the eyes of the Darhet. Proving his loyalty after returning from Vetanium had been dicey enough.

"Lord Cevlead, I propose a truce," Dreibrand said calmly.

Hugging himself because of the cold, Fanlyre looked around at the rising soldiers and wondered if he was the only one who saw Dreibrand.

Sweeping his arm toward the indifferent soldiers, Dreibrand explained, "I saved many of their lives with my powerful warding, and I saved all of you when I begged Shan to show you mercy."

"Damn lies," Fanlyre hissed. "You—you and Shan plotted this atrocity."

"No!" Dreibrand denied the accusation strongly. He was appalled that Fanlyre could even consider that a connection between him and what Shan had done was possible. With sincere passion, Dreibrand insisted, "I would never condone what Shan did today. Against his command, I came to defend the very soldiers who invaded my land. You know me to be an Atrophane noble, Cevlead. I would never build my power upon the souls of men."

Dreibrand wished that he could convey his revulsion for what had occurred. A man's fighting spirit was a sacred strength in Atrophaney military culture. It was enough for a man to give his life, not his afterlife.

Fanlyre shuddered on top of his shivering. He pieced together his memories, but his mind hated the wretched events that it now contained. The lifeless moans of spirits as they crushed the lives of screaming soldiers now cursed his memories. He would never be the same man that he had been. Even with the precious warding crystal around his neck, Fanlyre had been so afraid. He was tempted to believe that Dreibrand would not have agreed to the horrors that he had witnessed. They did not match the character of the man who had released him from Vetanium.

Dreibrand hoped that Fanlyre's silence was the beginnings of cooperation.

"This cold will kill you and your men," Dreibrand said. "We need to attend to our physical needs before the night comes. We need a truce so we can spend our time building fires to warm us."

The suggestion of a fire afflicted Fanlyre with primal longing for warmth, but he glanced around at

the wet freezing land and doubted his ability to coax a flame from any fuel that he might find.

Dreibrand guessed Fanlyre's mind and said, "My rys allies can start fires in any weather. I will ask them to help you."

Exposure to the elements had made the Atrophane vulnerable, and Dreibrand counted on survival instincts to break through the sturdy barricade of their loyalty. Dreibrand recognized the shattered look of men reeling from an assault of wraiths driven to kill by rys magic. The Atrophane were demoralized and Dreibrand wanted to pick up their courage that had fallen from the nest.

"Where is Shan?" Fanlyre demanded suddenly and with obvious fear.

Dreibrand hesitated before deciding that he would have to display some honesty if he were to cultivate trust with Fanlyre. "I do not know," Dreibrand admitted. "Where is Alloi?"

Fanlyre had no idea. Distracted by his freezing hands, he clumsily removed his gauntlets and blew on his fingers. While easing his hands painfully back into his gauntlets, Fanlyre recalled the strong drink that he had tried while in Vetanium. He wished he could have a sip now.

It crossed Fanlyre's mind to take Dreibrand prisoner and rally some success around his career, but Fanlyre gained no motivation from his ambition. With the killing of Ambio fresh in his mind, Fanlyre wanted to avoid the attention of the Darhet altogether. Fanlyre still had not sorted out the events that had led to the death of the Cinivese lieutenant.

Dreibrand glanced worriedly in the direction of Sandin and gauged the progress of Sandin's troops. "Cevlead, help me make a truce before it is too late," he pressed.

"You will not make me a traitor," Fanlyre insisted.

Dreibrand argued, "But Sandin Promentro deserves the loyalty of no man here. He has led this army to disaster. You know what you must do."

"And what must I do?" Fanlyre snapped.

"Stay alive, keep you men alive, seek victory for Atrophane, which in this case would mean escaping total annihilation," Dreibrand said.

Fanlyre chuckled derisively but then started to cough. He cleared his throat and said cynically, "I suppose you are going to kill us all?"

His sarcasm provoked Dreibrand, who said impatiently, "Look, Cevlead, I do not know where Shan and Alloi are, but wherever they are, Shan is winning. And when the rys King returns and sees that this army has not turned back for its own territory, I doubt that I can save you again. Shan has been taken over by some awful madness that I have never seen in him before. The Atrophane must cease to antagonize the rys King, or your doom will be certain."

Because Fanlyre had witnessed the horrid seizure of souls and their murderous rampage, he could not deny that the invasion had driven the rys King beyond all restraint.

Dreibrand said, "Cevlead, you saw for yourself what Shan can do to his enemies. No warding can protect you from his fury. Your weapons, your training, and your courage cannot stop him. Nor could your vicious rys allies. My devotion and pleas for mercy were barely sufficient to draw Shan back from a complete massacre. I do not know that he will listen to me a second time if you continue toward Jington. And Sandin clearly means to continue. Do you think that King Shan will stay away if his rys are attacked again? Can you risk yourself and your soldiers on the chance that King Shan might stay away?"

Fanlyre did not answer the questions but he looked in the direction of the Darhet. Slowly, the soldiers were being reassembled, and Fanlyre contemplated his duty to report to his lord. Then, he surveyed the faces of the soldiers under his command. They flapped their arms and huddled together, trying to combat the wet that chilled their bodies to the core.

Dreibrand watched Fanlyre assess the condition of his men. Softly, Dreibrand said, "Help me make a truce, Cevlead. Then I can rid you of the man who flung you into an ill-begotten campaign that wasted many lives."

The suggestion startled Fanlyre. He hated that he had even listened to such treasonous words, but he could not stop thinking about what Dreibrand proposed.

"I cannot fight him for you," Fanlyre said. He scared himself with his weak response. He felt like an infant abandoned on the doorstep of an unreliable caretaker.

"I ask only that you support the truce," Dreibrand said. "I am the only man who is going to fight Sandin. This dispute is between Sandin and me now. He will answer for invading my land, and he will answer to all of you for misusing the imperial military."

"He is my Lord General," Fanlyre protested rigidly, as if arguing with himself. "Have the memories of duty and honor grown so dim in your mind?"

"You chastise me well, Lord Cevlead, but I am an Atrophane noble, and a noble demands a practical cause before choosing to be the servant of another noble," Dreibrand said with conviction.

Fanlyre could not decide if he should ridicule the cockiness of Dreibrand or admire it.

Unwilling to let Fanlyre make the wrong decision, Dreibrand heaped more arguments upon the commander's rattled mind. "My offer of friendship still stands," Dreibrand said. "Once Sandin is gone, I can make peace with the Empire. I would do it gladly, and I can make an honorable peace for Atrophane. I am very wealthy. I would pay ransom for the security of my territory and negotiate a reasonable treaty for coexistence with the Empire. You could help engineer this, Lord Cevlead. You could be the bringer of profit, peace, and progress to the imperial frontier." Dreibrand had moved closer as he made his offers with increasing excitement.

"Stop!" Fanlyre cried. "I want none of these things. I can do nothing."

Dreibrand grabbed his arm. Fanlyre reached for his sword, but Dreibrand batted his hand away from the handle and pulled him close. "What do you want? Tell me," Dreibrand commanded. The time for Cevlead Fanlyre to become his ally or stay his enemy had come.

When Cevlead did not respond, Dreibrand added, "Tell me you serve Sandin Promentro with a loyal heart. Tell me you would defend your Lord General."

Cevlead found it difficult to buttress his thoughts with loyalty to the Darhet. Obligatory obedience to the Empire had gradually become an abstract option since Cevlead had begun his travels in Nufal.

Dreibrand leaned closer to Cevlead, who looked back at him thoughtfully. The cloth that had bound Dreibrand's helmet and neck had come loose and the steel of his armor shone through the wet sagging fabric. The intensity of Dreibrand's blue eyes begged Cevlead to be bold.

Cevlead whispered, "I hate him. I hate Sandin." The confiding of his terrible secret set him free. The magic of the tabre and his duty to the Darhet fell away from his mind. Cevlead Fanlyre would decide his own destiny.

Dreibrand smiled because he had counted on Sandin's lack of appeal. "We exchanged pledges of peace before and kept our bond. Would it be so hard to do so again?" Dreibrand said. He let go of Cevlead's arm and took a polite step back.

"They will call me a traitor. Everyone will see that I sided with you," Cevlead said, but he was seeking advice more than arguing.

"The soldiers will see who was the officer who made the correct decision," Dreibrand coaxed. "Sandin no longer deserves to be the leader. Sandin knew better than to take soldiers against Jington. Even with his rys allies, he could not have realistically expected to breach the Rysamand."

Sandin knew firsthand how powerful Shan was. Your Darhet has failed in his duty to use his soldiers with wisdom. He wantonly tossed Atrophane soldiers into a mill of death, where their souls risked a far worse fate. He did so either because he has lost his mind or because his rational mind has been corrupted by magic. You cannot dispute this."

Truly, Cevlead understood the ease with which Alloi had entered his mind. He had no reason to think that the same had not been done to the Darhet. Perhaps far more had been done, and Sandin could not be redeemed from the desire to crush the rys.

As a cadet and then a newly commissioned officer, Cevlead had not imagined that his loyalties could become confused. But the philosophy of his military education had been the wise use of soldiers for the benefit of the Empire. If the Empire prospered, so did its ruling class and its people. Provoking King Shan did not appear to bring any benefit to the Empire. *Dreibrand is right. We are nobles. We do not have to blindly follow a lord who is in error*, Cevlead thought. Remembering Ambio's abrupt execution, Cevlead envisioned the Darhet's whims turning against him even if he did remain loyal.

"The Darhet has gone mad," Cevlead said. "I see now how the tabre distorted his mind. I will help you end this."

Profoundly relieved, Dreibrand thanked him. He had persuaded Cevlead with little time to spare. Dreibrand and Cevlead shook hands and renewed their bond of peace.

"What will you do?" Cevlead said.

"I must go speak with my men, and then I will signal for parley," Dreibrand answered.

Skepticism soured Fanlyre's expression. "The Darhet hates you, and he has more soldiers. He may simply attack."

"Then stand with me when I signal for parley, Cevlead. Your sanction of the discussion should forestall an attack," Dreibrand said. Cevlead looked appalled by the suggestion, but Dreibrand tried to encourage him. "I will signal for surrender. That will get Sandin's attention. He will not miss a chance to accept my surrender," Dreibrand predicted.

Cevlead warned, "Sandin wants to execute you."

"How formal," Dreibrand remarked but he moved on quickly to important details. He asked Cevlead to stall reporting to Sandin and to tell his soldiers to stand down because a truce was being arranged.

"But, Dreibrand, even if Sandin agrees to speak with you, what will you say?" Cevlead said.

Eager delight erased many hardships from Dreibrand's haggard face. "I will condemn Sandin for his mistakes and I will challenge him for his title of Lord General," Dreibrand answered.

The risks that Dreibrand embraced amazed Cevlead, but he wanted Dreibrand to succeed. Even with Tempet and Alloi gone, Cevlead could not believe that Sandin would relent from his assault. He would hunt the rys or, at the very least, ransack Vetanium, and as Dreibrand said, eventually Shan would come back to punish them when they did not leave the territory.

"May the Gods grant us a long friendship, Dreibrand Veta," Cevlead said trying to invoke a positive outcome.

"I wish for the same," Dreibrand said and really meant it. Although manipulating the loyalties of Cevlead Fanlyre had always been his hope, Dreibrand wanted their relationship to be genuine. "I must go talk with my people. I will ask the rys to help you with fires as soon as a truce can be arranged. Meet me at the base of that hill when I come forward to signal my parley."

Without waiting for Cevlead to respond, Dreibrand departed. The Atrophane soldiers observed his passing but did not hinder him. The men who had directly witnessed Dreibrand pleading with the

rys King on their behalf had spread the story quickly, and the opinions of the soldiers favored him. Fanlyre's order to assume a truce was not disputed.

Running up the hill warmed Dreibrand but could not dry the wet clothes beneath his armored jacket. Atarek rushed out to meet him, and when Dreibrand stopped, the wind cut through his flesh with an icy bone saw.

Only recently off the ground, Atarek was trembling severely.

"Stomp your feet. Move your arms," Dreibrand directed. After living in the north for several years, he had learned to cope with the climate.

Atarek followed the suggestion. After complaining about his sore hands and feet, he asked what had happened.

"It seems that Shan must have put everybody to sleep," Dreibrand said.

"That is what Tytido said," Atarek said. "But why? Just to make us freeze to death."

Dreibrand shook his head. He did not want to think about what passed for reason in Shan's mind today. "It appears that Shan and the female have chosen to take their dispute elsewhere, which perhaps is the best for us," Dreibrand said.

"Perhaps it is," Atarek agreed.

Looking to Tytido, who was jogging in place, Dreibrand quickly inquired about the status of their warriors.

"Faychan is making sure that everyone is off the ground. Telling them to get ready to ride," Tytido said and then clamped shut his chattering teeth.

"Good, but that may not be necessary. I have gained a truce with Fanlyre," Dreibrand explained.

"Fanlyre," Atarek repeated with contempt. "You place too much store with that fool."

"He would see himself freed from Promentro's leadership. That is enough for us," Dreibrand said. He pointed out the group of Atrophane that was supposed to stand down. Other groups of soldiers were drifting away from the remnants of Fanlyre's cohort and returning to the Darhet's side. The small size of Fanlyre's command dismayed Atarek when he compared it to the bulk of the Atrophane that remained with Sandin.

Tytido shared Atarek's worry that Dreibrand overestimated his chance for success. Tytido said, "Dreibrand, I know what you would like to do, but...we should go while we have the chance. We do not even know where Shan is."

"Good riddance," Dreibrand snarled. "I have had my fill of his help."

Too traumatized by the awful deployment of souls to comment about it, Tytido quietly continued to give his advice. "We need to fall back to the Tabren foothills. Great damage has been done to this invasion force, but we are not sufficient to finish it off. We must avoid more casualties and force them to seek us out where the terrain will make us equal. We have our stashes of food to sustain us, and if we hurry, we can destroy the supplies that the Atrophane have left poorly guarded at their camp."

Dreibrand nodded to each suggestion that Tytido made. "And Lord Tytido, that is exactly what you shall do if things do not go well for me," he said.

Tytido's dark eyes silently questioned the actions that Dreibrand appeared determined to take.

Faychan returned from his inspection and immediately noticed the nervous tension among Tytido, Atarek, and Dreibrand.

"What is our plan?" Faychan asked.

Dreibrand greeted the aging mercenary and replied, "I will go forward and challenge Sandin Promentro." He spoke with enthusiasm as if the presence of his rival lifted a great burden of impatience from his mind.

"I see," Faychan murmured. He reflected on how discussion had now turned to action. A tingle of excitement for Dreibrand's daring plan warmed Faychan slightly.

"Hey, Dreiby," Atarek said. "I know I said this sounded like a good idea, but I do not think so now." He glanced meaningfully at Promentro's force.

Dreibrand said, "I want to do this, At. And it is important to our House. We need a victory, a big victory, and this is our chance. Walk out with me and carry our banner."

Atarek recognized his brother's old thirst for success, but this time it did not rouse his confidence in grandiose schemes. "But you said you needed Shan with you when you did this," Atarek reminded.

Although Dreibrand shared Atarek's doubt, he could not measure himself by his relationship with Shan anymore.

"I do not need Shan to hide behind. I will show all those men my worthiness on my own," Dreibrand said solemnly.

Tytido interjected, "No one suggests that you have ever hidden behind Shan."

"It would not have to be suggested," Dreibrand snapped. "We are not going to wait for Shan or look for him. Is it just me who noticed what he did?" He swept his gaze around his inner circle, forcing them to accept that the rys King had become unhinged during the battle. It was an unpleasant fact for all of them. Their alliance with Shan had always been crucial.

Dreibrand salvaged some optimism and said, "But we can see if our current rys companions are still in this with us." He instructed Tytido and Faychan to organize their warriors into a line across the hilltop. Then, he asked Atarek to accompany him as he went to talk to the rys.

Most of the rys soldiers simply stood beside their horses, seemingly waiting for orders. Dreibrand asked the first rys soldier that he reached if anyone knew where Shan had gone.

The rys shook his head. "What shall we do, Lord Dreibrand?" the soldier asked. He looked toward Taf Ila, who showed no signs of functioning.

Dreibrand asked the brooding rys soldier to be patient and continued with his brother toward Taf Ila. Dreibrand had no special relationship with Jingteng's former and current Captain of the Guard, and Dreibrand disliked having to intrude on the elder rys's grief. Shan's disappearance also added to Dreibrand's unease. He no longer carried himself with the certainty that he was the King's favorite.

"Captain," he said.

Without looking up, Taf Ila ordered the rude humans to go away.

"The war is not over. You are needed," Dreibrand said.

"The war is over for me," Taf Ila said. He lifted his head a little and Dreibrand glimpsed the image of the female corpse reflected by the vacant blackness of his eyes.

"Captain, you have my sympathy, truly, but the other rys soldiers need you," Dreibrand said. "The King is gone, and everyone, including our enemies are recovering from the spell. We must act. I have gained a truce from a portion of the Atrophane army." Dreibrand pointed to Fanlyre's group, and he was encouraged to see Taf Ila's eyes follow his finger. "And, Captain Taf Ila, we need all the rys to help us with their magic. Can you warm the bodies of men? The exposure is hurting us. Hurting me. Can you make us warm?"

The quiet pleading of the man's voice touched Taf Ila. He understood that the humans had to be cold. Taf Ila could understand cold. The dead hand of his daughter impressed on his mind the fire that had died inside of her.

Painfully, Taf Ila nodded. "You are right, Lord Dreibrand. I would not have Quylan's death be part of a defeat. She has died for our victory."

He pulled Quylan's body from the horse's back and arranged her on the ground. Dead and spattered with ice, she embodied the sacrifice of war.

Taf Ila straightened and said, "I will order my soldiers to help your men get warm. I know that is what my daughter would have done."

"Start with my brother," Dreibrand said, and he gave Atarek a reassuring glance.

Taf Ila searched within his soul for the power inherent in all rys. The death of his precious and young daughter had seemed to stomp the flame of his magic into cold ash, but he found one spark. Raising his right hand, he placed his palm over Atarek's heart. Taf Ila had difficulty being gentle with so much rage and agony inside. Restraining his turbulent emotions, he pushed a subtle heat spell through Atarek's body, granting him a reprieve from exposure.

Atarek dropped his head back slightly and sighed. The relief from the spell was better than entering a cozy cabin with a roaring fire.

With his shivering banished, Atarek grinned gratefully to his brother. "You should get some of that, Dreiby."

"At the Captain's convenience," Dreibrand said.

Taf Ila obliged him, and the enchanted warmth radiated through Dreibrand's bloodstream from his heart. Dreibrand felt strong again although he doubted that his vitality would last very long.

"Captain, I thank you," Dreibrand said.

The rys captain did not acknowledge him. Before resuming his duties as a leader, Taf Ila looked once more at his daughter. He could scarcely accept that the discarded heap was his beautiful Quylan, the Queen of Jington.

Dreibrand and Atarek climbed over the hill and viewed the Atrophane forces. Cevlead and his men had not moved, but beyond the wide spray of dead bodies, Sandin's forces were reassembled and appeared ready to march at any moment.

I must signal my surrender now, Dreibrand thought, and although it was only a drastic ruse meant to get Sandin to participate in a parley, Dreibrand acknowledged that he truly would be surrendering a part of himself. His days of freedom from the Empire were over.

8. Parley

Sandin has been with me the longest and I hold him in much esteem. He is a great noble, whose service to the Empire adds to its greatness. Perhaps I am wrong to test him with the favor that I show Dreibrand, but I enjoy the charisma of the young censured lord, and seeing Sandin feel threatened is very interesting – Lord General Kwan Chenomet, journal entry, year 778 Atrophane calendar.

With unexpected detachment, Dreibrand examined the moving formations of Atrophane soldiers. He spotted the officers on their horses and knew which blocks of infantry went with each rider. The cavalry units had been substantially thinned, and, altogether, the invasion host had been cut in half. What remained of the abused army Dreibrand intended to claim.

Casually, he asked Tytido to bring him a spear and to borrow a bow and three arrows from an

archer. As Tytido fulfilled the assignment, Dreibrand went to his horse. He patted Astar on the neck and took out the last of the unused bandages from a saddlebag. Looking at the white cloth on his grimy gauntlet, Dreibrand remembered watching Miranda tear the old linens into bandages for him to take with him.

Thinking of his wife, he instantly clung to his devotion to his family. Startled that his thoughts had strayed from them during the stress of battle, Dreibrand turned quickly to the east. The freezing rain on the plains had been snow in the mountains. White dusted the dark mountainsides.

He expected that his family and the other refugees would have reached the shelter of Elendra by now. Sitting around fires, they would be thinking of their cold warriors on the open land. Fortunately for the Nufalese men, the blessing of rys magic could pass on the warmth of distant hearths. The rys were working their way through Dreibrand's men and warming them with controlled heat spells. Those warriors who had already been treated were mounting their horses with renewed vigor. They waited for the command to attack or withdraw.

Perhaps they shall do neither, Dreibrand hoped. With the safety of his family and people to motivate him, he was not afraid of what he had to do.

Atarek noted the bandages in his brother's hands and said, "I guess you are planning on getting hurt."

"I shall try not to, At," Dreibrand said.

Tytido returned with the requested items. Dreibrand draped the bandage strips over his arm and reached for the spear. He handed it to Atarek with a ceremonial flourish.

"Will you walk out with me, Brother?" Dreibrand invited again.

For Dreibrand's sake, Atarek hid his nervousness with a grin. "Yes, I will. Someone has to look out for your crazy ass," he said.

"Most definitely," Dreibrand agreed.

Atarek moved around Astar and retrieved the House of Veta flag from the saddlebag hanging from the colt's other flank. While unpacking the banner, Atarek said, "I guess it's a good thing we brought a spare." The other banner was lost with his gear and dead horse on the battlefield.

"Standard military practice," Dreibrand said.

"I see," Atarek muttered and started fumbling his way through mounting the banner on the spear. The fabric rolled open and the black stallion galloping on the field of green waved hesitantly. Atarek recalled the reckless ambitions of his grandfather that had eventually ruined their House. *Perhaps only bold action can restore our family*, he thought and wanted very much to believe that he could contribute to that goal. Although pride stirred inside Atarek, he still measured his desire to confront Sandin Promentro against his lingering doubts. Atarek envied Dreibrand's certainty.

Dreibrand took one arrow from Tytido and began tying a strip of white cloth around the shaft. He explained, "In the past, before Atrophane was a united and civilized place, the Houses and the Clans often warred. Yet, we were of the same culture and we shared many customs and traditions. Shooting three white-flagged arrows is a signal for parley. To be precise, a parley to discuss terms for surrender."

"But you cannot," Atarek protested, but Tytido stayed calm and waited for Dreibrand to tell them his angle.

"It is just to get Sandin's attention. Once I have his ear, I will issue my formal challenge," Dreibrand said and started on the second arrow. He explained further that Cevlead's presence would sanction their call for discussion and the soldiers would expect Sandin to observe the traditions. Sandin's officers would advise him to avoid any more fighting because of their heavy losses, and if the Atrophane thought that Dreibrand would simply give up, then they would want to let him.

Dreibrand knowingly added that the Atrophane were accustomed to having opponents surrender to them.

"I think you make too many assumptions," Atarek judged.

Dreibrand smiled, mostly with approval for his brother's sudden adoption of critical thinking. "That is why we must hurry. If my signal is ignored, then we can still retreat."

"I am ready," Atarek said and gestured with his flag.

Dreibrand held out his hand and Tytido gave him the third arrow.

When the arrows were finished, the brothers mounted their horses quickly, and Tytido handed the bow to Dreibrand.

"You know what to do if things go badly," Dreibrand said to Tytido in the western language.

"Yes, I have been getting lots of practice," Tytido said.

"Was that a joke?" Dreibrand asked.

"I hope so," Tytido said. After an anxious look at the approaching Atrophane, Tytido wished them luck and told them to get moving.

Dreibrand and Atarek started down the hill. They looked at each other, and both men privately marveled at the moment that they were sharing.

Breaking eye contact, Dreibrand said, "Atarek, I issue the challenge."

Having expected the little last minute reminder, Atarek controlled his annoyance. He invited Dreibrand to argue the point and said, "I have more reason to challenge that bastard than you do."

Dreibrand appreciated his brother's animosity toward Sandin, and although he respected Atarek's fighting ability, he would not allow his elder brother to make the challenge. Dreibrand and Sandin were both graduates of the Darmar's military academy, and the school required expertise in the martial arts. Even if Sandin was past the prime years of manhood, Dreibrand knew that Sandin remained a formidable fighter.

Sparing his brother's pride as much as possible, Dreibrand said, "This is my role, Atarek, and you know it."

Reluctantly, Atarek considered that the stakes were much higher than he could wager. Although he believed that he could twist Sandin's head off, he was not foolish enough to think that he could win command of the Atrophane soldiers. Dreibrand was the warrior, the victor of campaigns, and the self-proclaimed Lord of Nufal. The soldiers would look to him for guidance, not a rowdy civilian, who barely even took himself seriously.

"Be careful, Dreiby," Atarek whispered.

"This is the easy part," Dreibrand said, and the storm clouds thinned briefly in the west. Bright light twinkled on the frosty plains. After such a day of ugliness, Nufal still mustered a moment of awesome beauty.

The brothers reached the base of the hill. Just ahead of them, Cevlead waited with his soldiers. Dreibrand assumed that by now the commander's lack of movement perplexed Sandin.

Cevlead moved out slowly on his horse to meet Dreibrand and Atarek. The commander did not speak immediately when he joined them. He stared at Dreibrand as if reassessing his decision a final time.

The sight of Commander Fanlyre joining Dreibrand was entirely unexpected by the Atrophane.

Sandin's force hesitated until the drums finally stopped. The Atrophane soldiers reacted with the mild confusion of an audience that does not understand the performance.

"Treachery!" Sandin fumed. He swung his wrathful gaze onto Rearden, the officer who Sandin had just rewarded with the field commission of lieutenant after killing Ambio. Sandin demanded to know why his soldiers were stopping.

"My Lord, we do not know what Fanlyre's men are doing," Rearden replied. "He has not reported."

"I gave no order to halt," Sandin said.

"But, my Lord, I think that we have paused naturally—"

Sandin immediately cut him off. "Naturally! Soldiers do what they are told, not what they feel like doing."

Rearden tried not to be intimidated by his lord's raving. "Look, my Lord!" he said, grateful for a reason to divert Sandin's attention.

Dreibrand lifted a bow and sent an arrow into the air. Its white flag flapped in the wind, and the extra weight brought the arrow down quickly. A second arrow followed and punched into the turf near the first one. Sandin narrowed his eyes suspiciously when the third white flag flew through the air.

"My Lord, he signals for parley," Rearden said excitedly.

Infuriated by Rearden's eagerness for conversation instead of battle, Sandin saw red for a moment. He struggled to unclog the emotional blockage of his reason. With Alloi gone, thinking had become difficult as if his mind had been weakened by injury.

"He is asking for your terms, I believe," Rearden said. The traditional forms of Atrophaney negotiation were obscure to him. They had not been needed in his lifetime.

"I can see that, Lieutenant," Sandin said. "Now, resume our attack."

Rearden wavered. He hated to dispute the Darhet, especially today, but Rearden believed that his opinions had tactical value. A lieutenant was supposed to be capable of advising his lord and expected to do so. "My Lord, perhaps we should speak with him. Maybe Commander Fanlyre does not act because he has already heard the offer of surrender. And the parley would give us an opportunity to send a cohort back to our camp and better secure our supplies. They no doubt meant to lure us away from our camp with their surprise attack last night."

"Fanlyre is a born traitor!" Sandin yelled. He shut his eyes briefly. Betrayed by Fanlyre, Sandin felt a terrible violation. His head throbbed with fatigue, and he fell back on his new lieutenant's recommendation. Sandin told him to send men to retrieve their supplies. Rearden gladly assigned a commander to take his soldiers back to provide support and protection to the wagons and teamsters left behind after the army chased Shan into the night.

As the new lieutenant carried out his order, Sandin considered that Dreibrand's ridiculous display presented him with an opportunity. Accepting the invitation to parley would give Alloi time to return, and thinking of her power renewed Sandin. He was pleased by his wise choice to wait for her before sending his soldiers into battle. The faintly pulsing veins of light in the oval crystal on his wrist told him to be patient. Sandin had no doubt that Alloi was alive.

"She is still with us," Sandin murmured.

When Rearden returned to his lord's side, he noticed the Darhet staring at the charm. He understood that it was a far stronger enchantment than the small crystal secured to his neck.

Sandin yanked his eyes away from the bracelet and briskly gathered Rearden and a dozen cavalymen to his side. The Darhet's group moved forward through the ranks of soldiers toward the open field where the white flags fluttered on the trampled ground. The concept of dictating terms to

Dreibrand entertained Sandin. He told Rearden that Dreibrand should prefer surrender to the total destruction that awaited his small force.

Rearden acknowledged his lord's opinion approvingly but was inwardly doubtful about the imminent destruction of their enemy. Abused by the cold, he lacked the inner fire to give battle, and the soldiers shaking on their feet appeared to be sapped of strength by terror and exposure. The endurance spell that had powered him and the others through the night had faded and left behind an abnormal weariness that dulled the mind. Rearden could not recall the last time he had taken a bite of food.

When Cevlead saw the soldiers coming forward with Sandin, he urgently warned Dreibrand about being captured.

"I welcome the spectators that Sandin brings to listen to me," Dreibrand said.

Cevlead needed a greater source of confidence than Dreibrand's faith in good luck. He pivoted in his saddle and signaled to his sergeant. Twenty foot soldiers ran forth with the sergeant to join Cevlead.

"Thank you, Lord Cevlead," Dreibrand said. He was certain he heard Sandin cuss in the distance.

"I will want more than your thanks," Fanlyre said.

Cevlead's hint for payment drew Dreibrand's attention away from his rival. Eyeing the young noble man, Dreibrand said, "You shall be rewarded."

Although the promise had value, it did not ease Cevlead's awful fear. With Sandin and his soldiers coming closer, Cevlead felt like a prisoner in a cell watching the crowd gather for his execution, but he braced himself manfully for the consequences of his actions.

When Sandin saw the pack of traitorous infantry scurry forth to presumably protect Dreibrand's right to parley, he nearly ordered a charge. They all deserved execution, but even whipped by his numerous rages, Sandin accepted that ordering his soldiers to fight the Atrophane soldiers mixed up with Dreibrand would be problematic. Dreibrand's banner of his Atrophane House advertised his kinship all too clearly, and by tradition, an Atrophane noble should acknowledge the parley signal from his enemy noble. Sandin decided that it was smarter to play the game that the Veta brothers had started. They could have their civilized chat and then everybody, Fanlyre included, would be punished for their terrible impudence.

Sandin spurred his tired horse into a run and led his riders in a slowly tightening circle around Dreibrand's group. As Sandin closed on their position, he watched Dreibrand and Atarek turn their heads to track him. Sandin regarded them with complete contempt and then flipped a disrespectful look at their banner as if it was a piece of an old woman's laundry.

Dreibrand and Atarek were unimpressed by his sneering display, and their calm reassured the Atrophane who stood with them. Sandin stopped and his riders fanned out from his sides. As was appropriate during a parley, he did not surround his opponents although he had wanted them to sweat about the possibility.

Now that he was close to Dreibrand, Sandin actually took pleasure in the meeting. Dreibrand and his brother looked weak with their little crowd of pathetic traitors. Sandin moved forward a little farther on his horse and turned it aside so that he could address Dreibrand more directly. Dreibrand moved out as well and mirrored Sandin's stance.

As the two men faced off, Rearden studied Dreibrand with interest. He had heard about the exploits of Lord Kwan's infamous former lieutenant, and the man in front of him fit the stories. A fabulous armored jacket covered his broad shoulders and his rys-made sword glowed gently with enchantment. The rumor that Dreibrand Veta could dip into the treasures of Jingtun at will had also reached Rearden's ears. Although impressed by Dreibrand, Rearden still believed the censured renegade owed penance to his people, which the Darhet would surely extract from him.

Sandin shouted, "After all these years, Dreibrand Veta finally shows himself. Has your shame finally worn off, deserter?"

Dreibrand hid his distress over Sandin's bold use of the truth. Apparently the maintenance of Lord Kwan's honor was no longer a priority. *None of that will matter when Sandin dies at my hands*, Dreibrand thought and he glared at Sandin with a cold gaze that promised death. Sandin would soon have to answer for the humiliation of Atarek and the invasion of Nufal. "I have wanted this chance to speak with you, Sandin Promentro," he said ominously.

Sandin snorted. "Listen close, you insolent bastard. My terms are that one in ten of your men must die. The others I will let live. You and your brother must surrender yourselves to me and answer for your crimes to the Empire."

"You are the criminal!" Atarek shouted and thrust his banner-laden spear into the ground. "This territory is claimed by the House of Veta. You have invaded without provocation."

"You are the allies of imperial enemies and squatters on land that you have no more right to than a brothel slave," Sandin snarled.

"That is the last insult you will ever make to us," Atarek declared, and Dreibrand decided he had to intervene.

Specifically addressing the soldiers with Sandin, he said, "I am Dreibrand of the House of Veta. I am the Lord of Vetanium and a guardian of Nufal."

Atarek introduced himself as well, and a soothing dignity embraced his spirit when he stated that he was Lord Atarek Veta, heir of his House.

Seeking to annoy Sandin, Dreibrand spoke to the officer who had come with him. "Who are you, Commander?"

"Lieutenant," Rearden corrected without much enthusiasm and added his name.

"Ah, the fortunes of war," Dreibrand commented fondly. "I became a lieutenant after a great battle. Of course, that battle had been a victory for Atrophane, unlike today."

"The day is not over," Rearden said, employing his imperial confidence. "Your signal for surrender is all that has delayed my Lord Darhet from destroying your remaining force."

"Quit wasting time, Dreibrand," Sandin commanded. "Either accept my terms, or go take your place with your fighters. I would grant you that courtesy before I attack."

"Courtesy?" Dreibrand mocked. "What do you know of courtesy, Sandin? My brother found your manners lacking."

"You are both censured pigs," Sandin said. "Stop clinging to your noble birth because it means nothing anymore. Drinking pure water still makes piss."

"You are proof of that," Atarek said, and all the Atrophane soldiers tensed expectantly. The sharpening exchange of insults would surely require action soon.

Although Dreibrand admired how Atarek taunted their enemy, he feared that Atarek would overstep himself. Dreibrand seized back the dialogue. "Sandin, in essence, you are before me to hear my terms," he announced.

"What arrogance!" Sandin exclaimed, truly surprised until he remembered who he was talking to. His mind churned with annoying memories about Dreibrand. The young man who had so impressed Lord Kwan with his flattery and front line stunts. The censured noble who would not adhere to the punishment that his House deserved.

Dreibrand said, "I propose a truce. The true combatants are gone. The King of Jingtun has destroyed your ryls champion and disappeared with your spellmaking female. It is foolishness for us

to fight. I have no desire to fight Atrophane men born of the same land as I. All of us are exposed to the cold and we need to attend to our physical needs. It is time for a truce so that the Lord Darhet and I can adopt a posture of negotiation between nobles."

Sickened by the speech, Sandin discarded his plan to waste time until Alloi came back. He jerked his horse around and snarled that the parley was over.

"You shall listen to him!" Cevlead yelled before anyone else moved. His assertiveness roused his soldiers.

Sandin heard the voice of his delinquent commander and thought about the sword at his hip. He wanted to draw the blade, chase Cevlead down, and give him a squealing death.

Rearden expressed his disgust while the Darhet simmered. "Your actions are sickening, Fanlyre. You dishonor your Clan," Rearden said.

Unmoved by the criticism, Cevlead said. "How do you like filling Ambio's boots?"

"I fill my own boots!" Rearden snapped defensively.

Cevlead continued, "Think of your peril, Rearden. Even a Cinivese officer deserved a better hearing. My confidence in the Darhet's leadership is gone. His mental state is in doubt."

Dreibrand did not know what they were talking about, but he gathered that Sandin had done something that disturbed both of them.

"I hardly think that a rookie commander should question the mental state of his lord," Rearden scolded.

Dreibrand pounced. "But I would question it!" He rode his horse slowly in front of Sandin's soldiers. "I am a son of one of Atrophane's original Houses. I am here to challenge the leadership of Sandin Promentro."

Sandin whirled around and his sword came out. "You will pay for your crimes, Veta!" he said.

"And you will pay for yours," Dreibrand said. The cold hatred in Sandin's eyes glittered like the costly jewels on his helmet and the fine edge of his blade. His passion to kill excited Dreibrand. *He wants to fight me. He wants it!* he thought.

"How dare you?" Sandin seethed. He switched his attention to Fanlyre, blasting the man with his contempt. Sandin told the men with Fanlyre that anyone who interfered would be executed as a traitor.

Dreibrand counted on avoiding a conflict that involved the soldiers. "Sandin Promentro!" he yelled. "The soldiers want the truce I offer. They have suffered enough from your leadership today."

"Your surrender is all the truce that you will get," Sandin said.

Dreibrand rejected the chance to become Sandin's prisoner. Drawing his sword, he addressed Sandin's mounted warriors, whose eyes bounced between him and their lord.

Dreibrand said, "As a noble, it is my place to correct your lord's faulty leadership. Stand back, and let me hear Promentro answer my challenge. You must grant me that."

The strictures of class and military discipline had taught the soldiers obedience, but the same things had taught them that they had no place in the quarrels of nobles. The heavy losses and horrors of the day left the soldiers inclined to hear Sandin's answer to the challenge. Fanlyre's rescinded loyalty also indicated that another noble questioned the Darhet's actions as well.

"Capture him!" Sandin shouted.

The soldiers hesitated, uncertain of the situation.

Dreibrand saw on the faces of the men ordered to capture him that his bravery impressed them, and that Sandin's recent failings were foremost in their minds.

"They want to hear your answer, Sandin. If you can invade my land, you can defend your honor," Dreibrand said. "I insist you have forsaken your authority by serving Tempet and Alloi and taking many men to a terrible death, and you have nothing to say?"

"I do not have to answer to you," Sandin hissed.

"Then you have to answer to your army. How many men did you lose today? And for what? Tempet is dead, and Alloi is somewhere meeting the same fate. Without them, you are just an army in hostile territory and bad weather. You have forgotten your duty to use your soldiers wisely. You risked the very souls of Atrophane men with your madness. It was I who pleaded with the rys King to let you go, and it is I who will take command of this army before you drive all of these men to their deaths." The criticisms poured forth from Dreibrand. When they had served together under Lord Kwan, he had longed to drag Sandin into disgrace.

"Silence!" Sandin roared.

He charged Dreibrand, but no soldiers reacted to his lead, and he aborted the attack. Dreibrand held his horse steady and did not flinch. Atarek jittered for action and his horse jumped forward.

Crippled by the unexpected course that the parley had taken, Rearden was unsure that it was his place to act.

Threatened by the ominous inaction of his soldiers, Sandin faced the possibility that his men actually wanted him to prove his worth. Slapped by the ridicule of another noble, they wanted to see how he was superior. For the first time ever, the Atrophaney class structure worked against Sandin. The rank-in-file commoners whose obedience created his power now seemed willing to watch another noble try to seize authority over them.

"You are ruined man, Dreibrand. It is not your place to judge my leadership," Sandin said, hoping to regain the confidence of his stalled soldiers.

"I know what standard you are to be held to, Sandin. I would never squander the lives of my soldiers as you have done. You have failed in your duty to the Empire," Dreibrand said. "I would replace you before more men die."

Insecurity was a foreign sensation for Sandin, and he tried to mask it with disdain for the challenge. "And just how would you replace me?" he sneered.

Dreibrand's skin tightened into gooseflesh. He had imagined this moment many times, and he felt greedy anticipation as he spoke the words.

"In personal combat," he said. "The bitterness between us should not involve the lives of soldiers. Let us settle this as nobles. In a duel."

Sandin considered the challenge. He just as easily could have left and ordered his army to attack, but a personal combat with Dreibrand had immense appeal, and it would give Dreibrand no opportunity to escape. Sandin had always wanted to be the punishing hand that smote Dreibrand, and slaying the shameless exile would rekindle the loyalty of the soldiers into a bright flame.

"What form?" Sandin asked coolly.

"Galmonlay tradition," Dreibrand replied without hesitation.

"Then I declare a truce," Sandin said. "We shall meet at noon tomorrow."

Citing the classic method of dueling for the military elite surprised the soldiers. Its ugliness had not been witnessed for generations.

9. *The Savage Depths*

The exhausted troops on both sides welcomed the truce. They clustered into small camps in the prairie hollows and sat in tight circles to block the wind and weather the night. They would wait until morning before attending to the bodies that littered the land. No one looked forward to digging holes in the half-frozen ground, but the truce obligated them to spare the fallen the undignified treatment of the carrion eaters.

The wind was persistent and cold. Clouds blocked the inspiring stars, but the elements granted one mercy, which was that the rain did not resume. Even so, starting fires proved a futile task for the Atrophane after they retrieved their supplies from their torn camp of the night before. The scant fuel that could be gleaned from the plains was soaking wet or even coated with ice. When a rys soldier came to Cevlead and started his fire, the blessed flames alone validated the commander's decision to support Dreibrand.

After some fires sprang up among Cevlead's troops, he ordered his sergeant to take some coals to the other Atrophane and help them. Cevlead, however, declined to approach his associates. He worried that his actions had estranged him from the other officers. Although proud of personally making the challenge to the Darhet's leadership possible, his guilt over the betrayal was inescapable.

As he spread his bare fingers directly over his delicate fire, he told himself that he would not even have this minimal heat if he had not aided Dreibrand. Soldiers huddled tightly around the little fire with Cevlead. Their bodies protected the precious flames from the wind and greedily absorbed the energy of the fire.

"Sir, do you think Lord Dreibrand will...win?" a soldier asked.

Cevlead snapped his eyes onto the soldier who had sounded more worried about Dreibrand failing than losing his current Lord General.

"Yes, of course," Cevlead answered quickly because he had to hide any trace of doubt from the men in his command. "Lord Dreibrand will show you he deserves to be Lord General."

The soldier digested the answer and seemed disturbed by his hope.

On the other side of the hill from Cevlead's fire, Dreibrand contemplated the faith that so many people had in him as he toured his haggard camp. He missed the faces of many Nufalese settlers and hoped that his duel would spare the lives of the rest of them.

Weary as he was, Dreibrand took the time to check on each wounded man. Because of healing assistance from his rys allies, many of the wounded were going to survive. A few suffered from grim injuries though, and Dreibrand recognized that they would die. Those who were conscious Dreibrand praised for their bravery and asked if he could fulfill any requests for them. Already surrounded by their closest friends, the dying had divvied their possessions and had little else to ask for. Dreibrand assured each dying man that his efforts to defend Nufal had made the difference.

Their sacrifices motivated Dreibrand as much as his dreams. Tomorrow, he alone would assume the burden of defending Nufal.

The rys had paid a high price to defend their homeland as well. When Dreibrand visited the rys section of camp, he found that the rys, with their advanced senses, had already gone into the night and collected their dead. They arranged the bodies in a long row next to their lovely Queen, whose reign had been so much shorter than Jingtjen's last Queen.

Taf Ila, who was functioning for the sake of the other soldiers, paused in his contemplation of his daughter's corpse when Dreibrand spoke to him.

Quietly, Dreibrand asked, "Does anyone have any idea where Shan went?"

Taf Ila shook his head. "If dear Quylan were still with us, she could find him. But our King is beyond any of our senses. And that wretched female has not been detected either."

Dreibrand frowned. Although he actually dreaded seeing Shan again, Dreibrand had expected the rys King to return. He had counted on the fearsome presence of Shan to keep the still larger Atrophane army under control, especially if Sandin broke his commitment to the duel.

Taf Ila said, "Lord Dreibrand, tomorrow, I will be returning to Jingtun with...my daughter and the other dead."

Alarmed by the announcement, Dreibrand instantly asked Taf Ila to stay. Even without Shan, the rys soldiers enhanced his small force greatly.

Taf Ila held up an impatient hand. "I am done here. With the location of my King unknown and one of the enemy rys still unaccounted for, I must return to Jingtun and see that our home is defended. But, in consideration of your need, I will allow rys to volunteer to stay with you."

"Please," Dreibrand said, supposing that he should be grateful that Taf Ila granted him that. "I wholeheartedly request volunteers."

Taf Ila turned back toward Quylan, effectively ending the brief discussion, and Dreibrand respectfully withdrew. On his way out of the rys camp, Dreibrand stopped and personally asked several rys to consider volunteering. Many of the rys soldiers who had been in Vetanium since summer had become accustomed to human company and had even made some friends. They said they would decide by morning.

Atarek and Tytido had coaxed some tea into brewing by the time Dreibrand joined them at their tiny campfire. He gratefully accepted a cup. The heat spell that had revived him earlier was wearing off, and the cold gnawed at his weary body again. Atarek pulled out a flask and offered to spike the tea. Dreibrand opted to drink a shot straight from the flask. The alcohol was especially strong in his fatigued body. Its relieving influence melted through his system rapidly.

"Here, Dreiby, have some food," Atarek said and offered some rations.

Dreibrand ate in silence, methodically replenishing his body that had been driven to extremes during the long battle. He did not look up from the pan until Tytido packed his pipe. Despite his expert technique, Tytido cursed in his native language as he struggled to light the bowl in the stiff wind. He grabbed the closest shield and propped it up in order to create a small wind break. After managing a few puffs, he offered the pipe to Dreibrand.

As Dreibrand indulged in a smoke, Tytido said, "I am skeptical about this truce."

Dreibrand tried to put him at ease. "The Atrophane are just as exhausted as we are. They will wait to see what happens between Sandin and me," he said and passed the pipe to Atarek. Despite his propensity for vices, Atarek was soon coughing.

Tytido said, "I must admit that I did not truly believe the Atrophane would be so receptive to your challenge of their leader. You are their enemy."

Dreibrand clarified, "I am an Atrophane noble. So, those soldiers see me as a countryman who has a disagreement with their lord."

"But for their loyalty to Sandin to be so weak..." Tytido said.

"I know they seem fickle to you," Dreibrand said, feeling the need to defend his people. "But Sandin has not cultivated their loyalty. He has demanded it, but never earned it. When I was an officer, I began to gain power because I was popular. I did not assume that I was a leader. I showed that I was a leader."

Tytido nodded, accepting that Dreibrand's explanation was not so strange. Years ago, Tytido had decided that Dreibrand deserved his loyalty more than other men deserved it.

Atarek cleared his throat and gave the pipe back to Tytido. He retrieved his dependable flask but stopped it halfway to his mouth. Studying the western characters etched into the metal flask, he asked, "Dreibrand, are you really sure this whole thing is a good idea?"

"Do you doubt that I can take Promentro?" Dreibrand said defensively.

Atarek rolled his eyes, searching for the right words. He did not want to offend his brother, but he wanted to express his worry. "Dreiby, it is a combat. Anything could happen. You know, bad luck. I just do not know if I can let you go through with this."

"I did not ask for your permission," Dreibrand said.

"Well maybe you should have," Atarek snapped.

Sensing that the brothers needed some privacy, Tytido excused himself and went to wait for scouts to report back to camp.

Dreibrand was grateful for his friend's tact. Alone now with his brother, he said, "Is this about you being the older brother? Do you think this should be your fight?"

Atarek muttered bitterly, "Yeah. I guess something like that."

Dreibrand sat forward. "Atarek, this fight between Sandin and I could have easily happened years ago when I was still in the military. But I promise you, At, tomorrow he will pay for what he did to you. The insult to our House has been foremost in my mind even if I speak mostly of challenging him so I can seize his power."

Atarek gestured dismissively. He did not like the subject. "Why stick around here when our enemies outnumber us? It is too risky. They only accepted the truce because they were cold and tired. I say we should go find King Shan. You said he was our greatest advantage."

Dreibrand cast his gaze into the hot mysteries of the campfire. He searched the small flames for his lost love for Shan. The affection was there, but it cried like a forlorn child lost in a crowded market. Gathering his resolve, Dreibrand intended to go on without the support from Shan that he had become so accustomed to having.

"I do not want to see Shan. You may not realize what happened when I begged him to stop the horror this afternoon, but he hurt me." Dreibrand took a deep breath as he remembered the pain. "I do not know what stopped Shan. If it was me, or him, or the Gods we are supposed to believe in. But, I do not know him anymore."

Atarek detected his brother's desolation. The strength that Dreibrand derived from his friendship with Shan had been obvious, and Atarek did not want his brother to act rashly because of his sudden vulnerability. Atarek knew that his brother was prone to snap decisions in times of stress. Perhaps that made him a good leader and perhaps it did not.

"I still think you should reconsider your options," Atarek persisted.

For a moment, Dreibrand sagged beneath the pressure of his brother's concerns. Although he was fully aware of the increased risks due to Shan's departure, it did not diminish the prize.

"I must follow through on my challenge," Dreibrand said. "You must agree that this is our big chance. With Tempet gone, and probably Alloi as well, we can secure Nufal for years by subduing this army."

Atarek recognized when his brother's mind was made up. They had argued too many times in the past for him to waste more time on the activity.

Dreibrand understood that essentially Atarek was only concerned for his safety. Feeling very close to his brother, Dreibrand tried to reassure him. He explained that he had fought far more battles than Sandin and that he was the younger man.

Atarek believed that his brother was capable of winning, but he still dreaded the scheduled combat. If time never reached that point, he would be grateful. His wish even seemed possible. Tomorrow seemed a vague concept. Since the onset on the fierce battle the night before, each minute had taken on an excruciating clarity. Every moment of life became a precious gift. The trauma of battle had only started to soak into Atarek's frazzled nerves. His exhaustion did not compare to his worst hangover.

He suggested that Dreibrand get some rest.

Many campaigns had bestowed upon Dreibrand the ability to sleep between fights. Battle scenes haunted all of his days, but he could give his body what it needed. Curling up to his saddle and battle gear, he passed out.

Atarek kissed his flask a couple times and listened to the howling wind. Eventually, he succumbed to his physical need to rest and lay down next to his brother. Reminded of their childhood, Atarek focused on the memory of a mild night spent camping on the beach with Dreibrand. The warm summer air soothed him in his mind as the wretched north wind galloped around his ankles.

The brothers slept, but the insecure environment kept their senses tuned to the world. Atarek and Dreibrand awoke in the same instant when light steps prowled close.

"Dreibrand," a man whispered with a western accent.

Dreibrand sat up with his dagger in his hand.

"We should talk," the voice suggested in the common western speech.

"Who is there?" Atarek hissed, threatened by the foreign words.

Dreibrand recognized the voice and answered for the man. "Faychan."

"At your service," Faychan said. He slipped close and squatted next to the men.

"Is something happening?" Dreibrand inquired.

"If you want it to happen," Faychan said, keeping to the western language.

"What are you saying?" Atarek growled.

"Come on, Faychan, you know my brother cannot understand you," Dreibrand said.

"You can tell him what I say if you want to," Faychan countered with the unyielding tone of a Kezanada.

Dreibrand listened and Faychan continued, "Your issues with Sandin could be resolved tonight. I and a three or four well-chosen...companions could go visit Sandin before the sun rises."

"You would go?" Dreibrand said. He displayed just enough curiosity to keep Faychan talking. It was best to hear more of what was on the former Overlord's mind.

"I would go," Faychan said.

Dreibrand considered the offer. Faychan was an elusive creature, a stalking panther with claws inside padded paws primed to lash and rend. Dreibrand had once witnessed Faychan erupt from the quiet forest and melt into the obscuring cover of the trees. That had been before they negotiated friendship. Dreibrand calculated that Faychan just might be able to reach Sandin.

Atarek pestered Dreibrand to interpret, but Dreibrand made him be patient. Still speaking the western language, Dreibrand said, "What is your price?"

"My Lord wounds me," Faychan said.

Amused by Faychan's pouting, Dreibrand insisted, "You would only put yourself at such risk for a great price."

"I offer to visit your enemy in his dreams because that is what is needed," Faychan said. "I do it to defend Nufal."

"And for no other reward?" Dreibrand pressed.

Growing a bit impatient, Faychan said, "It is in my self-interest. I think that Sandin will attack us. He still has more men, and Shan is not with us anymore."

Dreibrand asked for the latest scout reports. Faychan admitted that the Atrophane camps were quiet but added, "When they see the rys start leaving tomorrow, their lust for our blood could return."

"I believe that some rys will stay," Dreibrand said. "And Sandin will face me tomorrow. He will not miss the chance to personally attack me."

Faychan made a skeptical noise, but, because he knew very little about Sandin, he could not argue against Dreibrand's judgment of the man.

Staying practical, Faychan said, "But why risk injury tomorrow when I can remove him? The Atrophane are far from home, exposed, terrorized by Shan to the limits of sanity. They are vulnerable. Quietly remove their failed leader and take the reins."

Despite the concerns of all those close to him, Dreibrand remained convinced that his plan was the best plan. "I thank you for the offer, Faychan, but an assassination, or even an attempt, would enrage the Atrophane. I might even lose Cevlead." Dreibrand paused before granting Faychan a private detail. "Such a thing has caused troubles for my family in the past. I must take on Promentro in a public and honorable way within the traditions of our noble class. The soldiers will respect that. They will see that I am the superior Atrophane noble worthy of commanding them. Our success depends on that more than ever because Shan is gone."

So, an assassination disgraced your name, Faychan surmised. Although his offer had been refused, the morsel of information about Dreibrand's family had given Faychan a tantalizing reward. "Then let me disturb your rest no more, Dreibrand. I only wanted to discuss your options, my friend," Faychan said and slipped away.

When Dreibrand plopped back to the ground, Atarek leaned over him and demanded to know what had been said. Dreibrand related the conversation.

"And you refused?" Atarek said. He started to get up with the intention of following Faychan.

Alarmed, Dreibrand hissed, "At, do not be tempted. That would hardly be the right course for ending our censure."

Atarek slumped with disappointment. The thought of Sandin stabbed in the night had tremendous appeal because it was an ignominious end for a military man, but Dreibrand made a good point. Assassination had been the crime of their grandfather and the punishment had been political and economic ruin.

Dreibrand said, "Faychan wants us to be indebted to him. I only got even with him this year. Trust me. I would like to keep it that way."

And you shall have your way, Atarek thought. He said no more and let his brother fall back asleep.

When morning came, Dreibrand imagined the boldness of the famous Galmonlay, who had challenged his leader, but the inspiration of old stories waned as the combat drew near. Cold

ambition was Dreibrand's only comfort now, and he would show his strength when the soldiers lined up to watch two men vie for command of them.

Dreibrand draped his armored jacket, helmet, chainmail, and gauntlets over his saddle. A duelist could wear no armor. His brother helped him prepare for the contest. Atarek meticulously wrapped Dreibrand's hands with strips of cloth, winding the fabric over the knuckles. He took his time. The bindings should enhance the fists without constricting the flesh.

Atarek often paused from his wrapping and looked into Dreibrand's eyes. The resolute calm that Dreibrand radiated comforted Atarek somewhat. He understood that Dreibrand executed a specific plan, the goals of which went beyond mere primal revenge on Sandin. Atarek tried to have faith that his brother could bring them through this dangerous situation.

"Would you like to come with me when I take this army back to the Empire?" Dreibrand invited casually.

Atarek shrugged. "I better go with you. I really do not think I could trust myself alone with your wife," he said.

Dreibrand resisted his jealousy and discovered that he could smile. They grinned at each other and briefly forgot the serious task ahead. The clouds broke and a warm shaft of morning sun brightened Dreibrand's camp.

"Ah, I could use some sunshine," Atarek said and lifted his face into light.

"Are you done?" Dreibrand asked, ignoring the weather. Atarek returned his attention to the hand wrapping and secured the loose ends. Dreibrand knocked his fists together, testing the feel of the bindings. He commented to Atarek that he had done a good job.

Atarek muttered thanks without enthusiasm.

"Don't worry, Brother," Dreibrand said and reached for Atarek's hands. "I can do this."

Atarek nodded and squeezed his brother's hands encouragingly. They stood up together when Tytido returned from a meeting with Cevlead.

After a conspicuous look at Dreibrand's fists, Tytido said, "Cevlead told me that Sandin will meet you on the middle ground in front of Cevlead's camp."

Dreibrand nodded. He had expected that to be the location. Glancing around at his camp, he said, "You should prepare our men to withdraw."

Tytido appreciated that Dreibrand considered the consequences of failure. According to Dreibrand's culture, contemplating defeat was a defeat in itself. This contrasted to the western philosophy of facing death in order to overcome the fear of it. Instead of courage through confidence, the westerner found courage through acceptance of all possibilities. Tytido and Dreibrand had often enjoyed discussing this difference in their upbringing. Gradually, Tytido had come to see the merit of Dreibrand's philosophy, and Dreibrand had learned to temper his confidence when necessary.

"All of us plan to stand with you," Tytido said. He had not neglected to prepare the warriors to withdraw. If Dreibrand lost the duel, their lives would certainly be forfeit unless they could escape. Despite the risk, the Nufalese warriors had decided that caution served their leader the least on this day. "They know that you will win," Tytido added.

Their devotion touched Dreibrand deeply. He was proud to fight for their future, and the responsibility strengthened him. "I am pleased," he said. Pointing toward the middle ground where the duel would take place, Dreibrand instructed Tytido how to place the warriors. The spectators would form a fighting square with fifty people on each side. Dreibrand would be allowed to have his men make two sides of the square, and Sandin's soldiers would form the other two sides of the fighting square.

"When noon approaches, line up," Dreibrand said. "Sandin and I will enter after the square has been formed."

With the morning to wait, Dreibrand ate breakfast with his brother and Tytido. Then, he went to talk to the rys. He was relieved to learn that two hundred rys soldiers, including Dey, had decided to stay with him. They planned to satisfy their curiosity about foreign lands by joining him on his trip. Since the Empire of the eastern world had taken an aggressive stance, many rys soldiers had decided that it would be logical to go learn about the place and its people.

Dreibrand thanked the rys for their support, and then asked Taf Ila if he had any indication that Shan or Alloi might be returning. The elder rys captain shook his head. No one had detected them.

The sun climbed the sky, and Dreibrand inspected his weapons. The enchantment on his sword made sharpening unnecessary. He still marveled at the perfection of the blade. After numerous battles, it remained free of even a tiny nick. Its unmarred surface was so unlike the spirit of a man after war. His dagger, which was the product of only human crafting, needed attention. Patiently, he sharpened the small blade that had saved his life many times. The dagger had recently sipped of Sandin's blood, and Dreibrand imagined it drinking deeply.

Next, Dreibrand emptied his pockets and placed his possessions in his saddlebag. Before putting the spyglass away, he used it to locate Sandin. The Darhet's flags marked his position. Sandin appeared to be keeping his word. His hands had been bound for fighting as well. As Dreibrand watched Sandin removing his accouterments in front of his red tent, he pondered how the challenge had suddenly made them similar men.

Dreibrand turned the spyglass over in his hands and remembered his visits to the rys glassmaker's house before putting it away.

Very little time remained until the duel. As the men readied themselves to observe the contest, a noticeable hush collected over the camps. Dreibrand imagined how their shouting would erupt once he started trading blows with Sandin. He hoped that they would all cheer for him. The continued absence of Alloi had to be wearing on the Atrophane officers and soldiers. Without her, they had no practical means of attacking Jingtun, and already winter was closing the eastern pass. Their future only promised a languishing existence in a freezing frontier.

When Dreibrand's warriors moved toward the dueling field, Atarek came to wish his brother good luck. Atarek hugged Dreibrand and slapped him on the back. "Let me know if you want any help cutting the life out of that bastard," he offered. "I will be in the front row waiting for your signal."

"I will keep that in mind," Dreibrand said graciously.

After a heavy sigh, Atarek said, "Well, I suppose it is time you started this damn nonsense."

Dreibrand nodded and gestured for Atarek to move on with the others.

With obvious reluctance, Atarek joined Tytido, who saluted Dreibrand before turning away. Kyel had volunteered to carry Dreibrand's banner to the dueling ground. Although Kyel had suffered a gashed leg in the battle, he limped forward with the flag because he wanted to show how much he supported his leader.

Atrophane soldiers had already begun to form their two sides of the arena, and Dreibrand watched his warriors fill in the other sides of the square. He actually enjoyed watching the enemies moving into orderly position, restrained by tradition.

I am doing the right thing. I would not see these men kill each other anymore, Dreibrand thought.

He looked over to the rys camp. They were wrapping the bodies of their dead for transport to Jingtun. With the snowy Rysamand rising in the west, he knew that only rys could attempt the pass this time of year. Snow would already be clogging the narrow road. Although their horses would be at risk, the rys soldiers expected to survive entering their homeland. Even a sudden highland blizzard could not kill a rys.

Dreibrand wondered if Shan had gone back to Jington but then tried to ignore the empty place in his heart that pined for his rys friend. He could not let it weaken him right now.

Dreibrand unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. Then, he pulled off his undertunic. The cold air made him shiver, but exposing his flesh to the Wilderness cleansed him spiritually. After pausing to enjoy the elemental caress of the breeze flowing through his hair, he tied it into a ponytail.

Next, he unbuckled his swordbelt and grabbed his sword and dagger. Shaking the weapons loose, he let the belt fall.

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 Atrophaney 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 Atrophaney 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 Atrophaney 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.

Atarek envied his brother. He ached to rush into the arena and assist in the beating. Tytido empathized with Atarek's difficulty. He wanted to help his friend as well.

The fighters were on their feet again, boxing vigorously. The crowd collectively exclaimed as Dreibrand achieved a solid blow across Sandin's jaw. Sandin swayed and his fists drooped. Dreibrand tackled him to the ground. He pummeled Sandin until he stopped moving. Dreibrand could barely resist the urge to crush his throat and squeeze every breath out of Sandin. But

resisting that crude impulse was part of the Galmonlay challenge. The opponent required a military death at the point of a weapon.

Dreibrand noticed Sandin's enchanted bracelet. Seeing Sandin adorned with a token of rys power made him furious with jealousy and he throttled Sandin briefly. "Your army is mine, Sandin," he hissed triumphantly. Springing to his feet, Dreibrand sprinted toward his weapons.

The warriors by his weapons beckoned Dreibrand as if he were finishing a race. They shouted with approval and called for the blood of the Darhet. Dreibrand skidded to a stop and plucked his sword from the ground. Turning around, he bent down, retrieved his dagger, and came up running.

Sandin gasped after Dreibrand let him go. He needed air, but his incapacitation had been overplayed. He jumped up and started running toward his weapons.

The Atrophane soldiers resumed cheering for their lord. Sandin armed himself but waited for Dreibrand to come to him. Despite his eagerness, Dreibrand slowed. He had not expected Sandin to rise so quickly, and he regretted not breaking the rules and strangling Sandin completely.

Unwilling to wind himself for Sandin's convenience, Dreibrand stopped altogether. He decided to goad his opponent with humiliation. "Come on, Sandin!" he shouted. "Do not make me chase you!"

Sandin seethed when mocked in front of his soldiers. He would make Dreibrand pay for that one. Sandin looked across the dueling ground and spotted Atarek in the front row.

With his typical arrogance, Sandin sauntered toward his opponent, circling to the left, which placed him between Dreibrand and the Nufalese warriors. He gestured invitingly with his weapons as if they were merely engaging in some friendly sparring.

Dreibrand decided that he had allowed Sandin to make his contemptuous display long enough. It only gave Sandin an opportunity to rest. Dreibrand approached his opponent. Sandin's bloody lips and puffy eye begged Dreibrand to do more damage. With a war cry, Dreibrand lifted his sword and charged. Armed with perilous steel, the fighters meshed into a single machine of swirling blades. One bad move or slow block would mean death now.

Their weapons clanged with rapid hammering reminiscent of a weaponsmith's shop. Although Sandin gave ground, Dreibrand did not draw blood. Sandin seemed to be backing up purposefully, and Dreibrand wondered if Sandin played the defensive in order to tire him. Dreibrand thought it was a peculiar strategy because he had no doubt that his endurance exceeded Sandin's stamina.

Dreibrand drew deeply upon his fighting skills, commanding his mind and body to remember every battle, every move, every victory. He lunged at Sandin boldly and stopped the Darhet's blade with only his dagger. While Sandin's sword was stymied, Dreibrand lashed at the man's torso. Sandin jumped back and twisted away from the attack, but the swordpoint tore open his left pectoral. Sandin cried out, and Dreibrand hacked again with his sword. Left with no option, Sandin threw himself backward to avoid the stroke that could have cut him in half.

Dreibrand pounced, hoping to skewer Sandin, but Sandin followed through on his fall, somersaulted backward, and came up on his feet. Inspired by the blood flowing down Sandin's chest, Dreibrand pressed in hard with another attack. They parried each other's blows, and Sandin continued to give ground.

Atarek watched the fighters nearing him. Discreetly he pulled a knife as Sandin's back edged closer.

Tytido whispered, "Dreibrand has wounded him. He will win."

Atarek nodded but he did not put his knife away.

Dreibrand felt that he was weakening his opponent, but in his sudden surge of confident bloodlust, he moved too recklessly. After blocking a sword stroke, Sandin was able to backhand Dreibrand on the side of the head. The blow scattered Dreibrand's vision and he stepped back in a completely

defensive posture. Sandin then threw his dagger. It landed in Dreibrand's right pectoral and stuck.

Dreibrand yelled indignantly. Sandin laughed at his rival's pain and dismay. Dreibrand took another step back and faltered as he coped with the shock that stamped through his body.

Frantic to distract Sandin from his wounded brother, Atarek broke from the line.

"Your wife is a whore, Promentro. She moaned in my arms and begged for more," Atarek yelled.

The heckling snared Sandin, who whirled to face Atarek. Sandin had merely meant to kill Dreibrand in front of Atarek as a bonus bit of cruelty, but perhaps he would have to reverse the order of the Veta brothers' deaths.

Tytido panicked and lunged after Atarek. When Tytido tried to shove Atarek back to the line, Sandin swiped at Tytido, who jumped aside and awkwardly deflected the flat of the sword with his gauntlet-protected hand. Sandin thrust at him again and caught Tytido in the armpit where no armor protected the flesh. At the same moment, Atarek attacked Sandin, who ducked to avoid Atarek's knife, squatted, and thrust his sword upward beneath the bottom edge of Atarek's armor. Sandin removed the blade as fast as he put it in. The penetration of steel into flesh had been expertly brief. Although Sandin enjoyed the abrupt confusion on Atarek's face, he spun away from the teetering elder Veta because Dreibrand required the same treatment.

The image of Tytido and Atarek engaging Sandin had entered Dreibrand's brain, but he had not processed what was happening. He remained completely focused on killing Sandin, and he knew the moment had come. With his left hand, Dreibrand threw his dagger, which caught Sandin in the stomach when he turned around. Now that he had a free hand, Dreibrand pulled the dagger from his chest and advanced on his quarry.

Pain altered Sandin's features. He struggled to react despite the erupting pain in his vitals, but his body failed to produce a defense. Dreibrand did not hesitate nor offer quarter. He leaped toward Sandin and kicked him across the chest, which knocked him down. Dreibrand then shoved his sword into the heart of his enemy, lifted the blade, and hacked Sandin with two triumphant strokes.

Dreibrand shouted a victory cry. He gave voice to his ascendancy and vented the terrible emotions that had carried him to power on the strong current of his human will.

10. Tribute to the War God

Dreibrand's exultation ended as his heaving lungs gasped for air. Sweat streamed down his shoulders and back, and his body steamed in the cold. He leaned over and let his sword slide from his hand. Blood rained onto his pant leg from his wound, but the sight of Atarek and Tytido sprawled nearby distracted him.

Dreibrand stumbled to his brother. With trembling legs, he collapsed next to Atarek. "What are you doing?" Dreibrand asked.

"I made a mistake, Brother," Atarek said, and when he clutched the brown grass, his bloodied hips and thighs penetrated Dreibrand's perception.

Wide-eyed with denial, Dreibrand shook his head. He had to be hallucinating. How could Atarek have gotten hurt? When Tytido moaned nearby, the events clicked in Dreibrand's head. He had seen Sandin strike at them.

"Are you all right?" he asked stupidly.

Atarek lifted his head and blood spilled over his lips. Dreibrand cried out weakly and touched Atarek's mouth as if he intended to put the blood back in the body. Atarek let his head fall back to the cold ground. Dreibrand put his hand over Atarek's wound, and the hot wetness of the blood terrified him. The blood continued to flow. The wintry air pulled delicate steam from the leaking torso.

Dreibrand's warriors had rushed forward with delight for his victory, but dismay stalled their advance.

Dreibrand shouted to them desperately. "Get a rys who can heal! Get a rys healer!"

Men reacted to his wretched plea for help. Warriors turned and ran toward the rys camp.

"Dreiby," Atarek said. His voice already sounded far away.

Dreibrand bent close to him and promised that help was on the way. He babbled to his brother about surviving bad wounds. He would be all right.

With a sterner tone, Atarek whispered "Dreiby, stop lying to me."

"Atarek!" Dreibrand moaned and seized his hand. "What were you doing?"

"You were hurt. Wanted to help..." Atarek started to gag and he twisted with pain. "Stupid," he added when he could speak again.

Dreibrand began to tear at the bindings on his hands. He wanted them so he could bandage his brother, but the tight bindings stymied his panicked fingers. He snarled with frustration.

Atarek feebly reached up and stopped his brother's fumbling. The pleading pain in his eyes compelled Dreibrand to stop and listen. "Dreibrand, you were always the heir of our House. So much better than me," Atarek said.

"No!" Dreibrand cried passionately.

"Too late to discard that ego now, Brother," Atarek said, even mustering a smile. "You are the Veta heir."

"Shut up, Atarek," Dreibrand ordered. "I will get you help." He looked around for the rys. The time since requesting help was immense in Dreibrand's mind, but only seconds had passed.

Atarek continued, "Glad I came to see you. Missed you."

The dire reality of Atarek's wound demanded that Dreibrand calm himself. He would not waste his brother's last moments with hysterics. "Atarek, I am sorry," he said. "I was so resentful and jealous of how Mother and Father loved you. I should have been better. You gave me everything you could, and I was awful."

"I forgive you. I always did," Atarek said generously. "And thank you for the last few months. You made it possible for me to live free of censure. Not since I was a little boy...I had forgotten...how it felt."

Throes wracked his body again. Dreibrand held him, wishing that he could at least stop the pain.

When Atarek stopped moving, he drew a breath. Only Dreibrand heard his last words. "Tell Madame Fayeth that I love her."

Dreibrand's shriek of grief was the antithesis of his victory cry. He threw himself back from his brother's body, propelled by an explosion of helpless rage. He wanted to escape the horror of his brother's immobile form but he could not stop looking at him. Dreibrand watched a man stoop next to Atarek and check for his pulse. He looked up at Dreibrand without any hope to offer.

"Atarek," Dreibrand shouted, but Atarek's blue eyes looked no longer upon the world.

The vacant shell of his brother consumed Dreibrand's world. This was the price for defying the Empire. This was the punishment that Dreibrand had never understood. Atarek had watched the blood of their grandfather spill on the altar of Atrophaney justice, and Atarek had shunned all ambition.

I have lost my brother! Dreibrand thought, and he loathed every trace of his desire for power. Coveting Sandin's position had led him to this tragedy. Dreibrand had never truly estimated the prices of his plots.

He yelled incoherently and tore at the dead grass with unbearable fury. Tytido called to him. Two warriors had helped Tytido sit up, and despite his wound, he wanted to help of his unfortunate friend. Beyond consolation, Dreibrand did not even register Tytido's concern.

Dreibrand seized his sword and lurched to his feet. Screaming, he hacked at Sandin's carcass, venting the ugly animal insanity that could not be placated. But wanton mutilation of his defeated rival provided no comfort and Dreibrand ceased the cutting, sickened by the action. Looking up, he saw the Atrophane soldiers swarming toward him. The approaching mass of soldiers reminded Dreibrand of the purpose of the duel. Although he now regarded his ambition as his brother's bane, he could not fail to attain his goal. Everything still depended on achieving success in the next few moments even if Dreibrand ceased to care.

Gods! I must command them, he thought. His responsibility to his loyal followers lashed his mind until he could function.

He stalked toward the Atrophane soldiers fearlessly. They were his and he would claim them.

Lieutenant Rearden reached Dreibrand first. He looked at Sandin's body, appalled by the sight. Rearden had no need to confirm the death of the Darhet.

"Your men interfered!" Rearden shouted at Dreibrand. "The duel was violated."

Crazed by adrenaline, Dreibrand grabbed Rearden by the chinstrap of his helmet. He aimed the officer's face at Sandin's body and growled in his ear, "Choose which lord you will serve."

Rearden felt the damp blade of Dreibrand's sword pressed against the back of his neck. Only the bedraggled locks of his long brown hair separated the blade from his skin. The lieutenant decided to recognize Dreibrand's victory.

Dreibrand released Rearden. "I am your Lord General!" he shouted to everybody. "I claim Promentro's authority."

Dreibrand returned to Sandin's body. He kicked the dead man's sword disrespectfully and stooped to claim the golden wristband that hung from the bloody arm. The bracelet slipped off Sandin's wrist easily because the enchanted metal had retracted from the dead flesh.

Living light still shone from the smooth white crystal, and it tickled Dreibrand's mind. He looked away from the crystal quickly. Even during the brief connection, he had experienced release from his unbearable grief, which warned him that deception was one of the bracelet's greatest charms. He clipped the bracelet over the waistband of his pants and stood up.

Boldly, Dreibrand walked into the midst of the gathered Atrophane. They stepped aside from his path. His bare bloody chest seemed impervious to any threat. The seizure of power went undisputed.

Dreibrand kicked over Sandin's flag that had been planted by the dueling ground and demanded to be shown Promentro's possessions. Cevlead pushed his way through the shocked crowd and intercepted Dreibrand.

"I will show you," the commander said. He rushed ahead of Dreibrand but glanced back often. Cevlead led Dreibrand toward the other flags that hung limply beside the late Darhet's tent.

The remnants of the Atrophane army watched in awe as Dreibrand entered the heart of their group. Dreibrand Veta had shown himself to be the stronger lord and serving the Lord of Nufal appeared to be the best option in his harsh haunted land. Although men of a violent trade, the soldiers had never expected to witness such a brutal transition of power.

When the red tent of the Darhet was close, Dreibrand rushed past Cevlead. A man in the uniform of a squire knelt in front of the tent with his back to Dreibrand.

"Squire, show me your master's personal items!" Dreibrand shouted.

The squire did not move. Dreibrand shoved his shoulder to get a response, but the young man fell over. Upon seeing his lord die, Recey had rushed back to the camp and sliced open his forearms.

Cevlead cursed when he saw the drained squire, who had only a few moments of life left. Even Dreibrand, who was already profoundly traumatized, grimaced at the sight. He could not imagine a servant committing suicide over losing Sandin.

Disgusted, he stepped around the dying squire and tore open the tent. Ducking inside the trembling fabric, Dreibrand disliked the heavy presence of Sandin within the small shelter.

The squire had neatly laid out Sandin's clothing on the bedding when his master went to the duel. Dreibrand rummaged among the clothes carelessly, tossing them aside after inspection. An inside pocket of a quilted silk jacket produced a bundle of three letters. The first one was written by Carfu. Dreibrand remembered the lieutenant, who had been Sandin's crony. Dreibrand did not bother to read it. He stuffed it haphazardly into a pocket. Crushed by a fresh layer of pain, he paused when he saw the second letter. He recognized Atarek's handwriting above the crackled seal.

Their parents had never been contacted. The letters had been intercepted by Sandin as Dreibrand had predicted.

Swallowing back the tumor of sorrow in his throat, Dreibrand peeked at the last letter. His handwriting addressed the violated note. Dreibrand dreaded the revised letter he would have to send to his parents now.

Dreibrand finished searching the clothes without finding what he sought.

The swordbelt, he thought suddenly and spun out of the tent. He tried to avoid looking directly at the expired squire.

"Get him out of here," Dreibrand snapped at Cevlead and pointed at the corpse.

The commander called over a couple soldiers to haul the squire away.

Before his devoted departure, Recey had hung his lord's armor properly. He traveled with a folding wooden rack that he used to keep the chestplate off the ground. The jeweled helmet capped the top of the rack. Dreibrand smacked the armored treasure to the ground. The heavy swordbelt of the Darhet draped the shoulders of the armor and Dreibrand snatched it wantonly. Swift and thorough as a badger gleaning a log of termites, he scoured the small pockets that lined the heavy belt.

Dreibrand cried out. Locating the precious item brought him no relief. He squeezed the jade stallion ring tight in his hand and said his brother's name. Dreibrand could not bring himself to put it on.

He decided to return the ring to Atarek. It belonged to his brother. With irrational urgency, Dreibrand raced back to Atarek's body as if he carried an elixir that would resurrect him.

The Nufalese warriors cleared away as Dreibrand returned to his brother. They radiated a great sympathy for him.

Several rys soldiers had joined the group to offer their healing magic, and Dey was treating Tytido. Atarek, however, remained untouched, sprawled on the plains in his death pose. Disrespect had not caused the inaction, but rather, everyone automatically judged that moving the body would be unwise at this time.

Dreibrand was impervious to those around him. Falling to his knees next to Atarek, he shuddered from the pain. The utter loss pounded his victory like a condemned prisoner being stoned to death. Every drop of Atarek's blood spilled upon Nufal tainted Dreibrand's dreams for his new kingdom.

He spoke to his brother, telling him that he had brought the jade stallion ring. Dreibrand unclenched his hand. The ring had left an indentation in the bloodstained cloth bindings. Dreibrand pulled the glove off Atarek's left hand. His shattered reason had latched onto the concept of returning the ring to his brother, but actually touching the dead flesh dragged Dreibrand away from any purpose. Shaking with self-loathing despair, Dreibrand hunched over Atarek, still clinging to the hand.

Dreibrand derived no comfort from the thought of burying his brother with the ring. Atarek would not have wanted it looped around his rotting finger. The ring was meant to be worn by a living Veta. Baner had sent it from his cell the day before the execution, even knowing that his family was ruined.

Dreibrand heard someone say his name. He snarled nastily for the person to go away.

"My Lord, you are hurt. Let us see you," Faychan said. He took another cautious step closer.

Gulang was behind him, carrying Dreibrand's clothes and armored jacket.

Dreibrand closed his hand tightly over the ring, as if thieves had come to snatch it. He did not grasp what Faychan had said. The blood flowing from his chest was irrelevant.

Genuine concern for Dreibrand motivated Faychan to help him as well as the need to keep the new Lord General functioning during this unexpected stress.

"Dreibrand," Faychan said. "You are not alone. Let us..."

"NO!" Dreibrand yelled. He would accept no comfort. He deserved eternal punishment for getting his brother killed.

Faychan focused on the vulnerability beneath the hostility. He edged closer. "I will help you tend Atarek. What shall I do?"

His calm inquiry for direction did not elicit another rage from Dreibrand. Hanging his head, Dreibrand mumbled something under his breath. Faychan dared to touch his shoulder. Dreibrand tensed but did not strike. A quick signal from Faychan drew Gulang closer. The loyal warrior placed the shirt over Dreibrand's back. Dreibrand needed to be covered even if he was heedless of the cold.

"You are stabbed, Dreibrand," Faychan said. He used a very calm voice. While aiding many injured and even hysterical comrades over the years, Faychan had developed a soothing tone that penetrated disturbed mental states.

Dreibrand went blank. He sank utterly into his grief, staring at Atarek with unblinking eyes as dead as his brother's eyes. In such a state, he submitted to Faychan's exam like a child having his face washed by his mother. Dey, who had been nominated the rys soldier with the best healing skills during the aftermath of the battle, came to treat Dreibrand. The rys cauterized the chest wound with a heat spell. The sudden intense pain jolted Dreibrand back into the larger world. He groaned and tried to touch his chest, but the rys kept his hand away.

Using the western speech, Dey told Dreibrand that his lung had been punctured and that he should lie down. The rys then warned him that a surgery was necessary to release fluid from the chest cavity.

Dreibrand processed the information. The heaviness in his chest confirmed the rys's report, but Dreibrand could not rest, not yet.

"Get me some tah," he ordered.

The rys frowned, and Faychan said, "It might be too strong in your condition. Your exhaustion, the blood loss. The stress from the drug would be bad."

"I need it," Dreibrand stated.

Despite the risk, Faychan accepted that Dreibrand had to keep moving in this critical time. "I will administer the dose," Faychan said firmly.

Dreibrand voiced no objection. The ryls started bandaging his chest while Faychan went to get the vial of tah from Dreibrand's saddlebag. When he returned, he lifted the tiny bottle to Dreibrand's lips.

"Just drink what I give you. Do not try to get more," Faychan directed.

Faychan tipped the vial quickly, dashing a small amount of liquid into Dreibrand's mouth. If Tytido had seen the lifelong Kezanada giving Dreibrand the volatile drug, he would have been alarmed.

Dreibrand swallowed the minor sip, and immediately took a deep breath as the drug prodded his beaten body. The pain in his lung flashed briefly before being numbed. Fatigue cleared from his mind, and the awful grief took a small step back from his heart.

Braced against the pain by the tah, Dreibrand pulled on his under tunic. Then Faychan held up his shirt and Dreibrand groped for the sleeves. With the tah charging through his veins, he still did not feel the cold, but he intended to make himself presentable to his newly acquired army.

"Give me the vial," he instructed grimly.

"I will hold it for you," Faychan said.

"Damn you, it is mine," Dreibrand said.

"I will return it later," Faychan said. "You know that I am right."

Agreement flickered through Dreibrand's mind as he recalled the caution with which tah had to be used. An injured man could kill himself by continually seeking relief from the ryls potion.

Still clenching the ring, Dreibrand fumbled with his shirt buttons. He had to concentrate to complete the precise task. After closing his shirt, he thought to thank the ryls for the healing. Dey nodded graciously and helped his patient to stand.

Gulang held Dreibrand's armored jacket for him and Dreibrand inserted his body back into its protective case. As the heavy plates settled over his shoulders, Dreibrand coughed. Even aided by tah, pain erupted through his chest. Another warrior had retrieved Dreibrand's gauntlets, helmet, and swordbelt. Dreibrand shoved the ring into a pocket of his pants and accepted his gear.

While buckling on his belt, Dreibrand noticed the bracelet that he had tucked in his waistband. He took it out but only looked at the crystal's flickering white light through the corner of his eye. He resisted the urge to slide the bracelet onto his wrist and instead placed it conspicuously onto his swordbelt near the buckle.

Dreibrand slipped his sword neatly into its scabbard and told Faychan to gather their warriors. He needed to address the Atrophane army and he wanted his Nufalese men to be positioned behind him.

Next, Dreibrand advanced on the Darhet's body and retrieved his ivory handled dagger from the stomach of his vanquished rival. He pondered the corpse. Blood splattered Sandin's face, and his blank eyes no longer beamed with arrogance. Sandin was just another mangled man, spat out of the insatiable maw of war. Tribute to the war God Golan.

Dreibrand wiped the freezing blood from his dagger onto the dead prairie grass. When it was reasonably clean, he returned it to his belt. Stiffly, Dreibrand stood back up and saw Rearden standing there. The face of the young lieutenant expressed his revulsion.

Dreibrand would test his loyalty now with unwelcome orders. He waited for the lieutenant to salute. Rearden actually obliged his new lord by dropping to one knee. Accepting the ascension of the censured noble, however, came to the officer with difficulty, and even as he kneeled, he considered ordering the army to attack the Nufalese followers of Dreibrand. It seemed the proper

course of action, but Rearden had sensed that the soldiers lacked animosity toward Dreibrand. The story of how Dreibrand had saved them from the vicious magic of King Shan was spreading quickly.

"You may rise, Lieutenant," Dreibrand said. "Relay my orders that mass graves should be dug. The ground has only begun to freeze, which means that we can still accomplish a proper covering for our fallen." As Dreibrand spoke, he thought about burying his brother. It was an ugly abstraction in his mind. He had never imagined that his beloved Wilderness would inter Atarek.

Pointing to Sandin, Dreibrand added that the former Darhet should be buried with the others.

"A noble in a mass grave?" Rearden asked with shock.

"He can share the fate he inflicted on his men with his foolish campaign," Dreibrand snarled. He took a step closer. "And if you question me one more time, Rearden, I will put you in the ground with him."

A venomous flash in Rearden's eyes revealed his opinion of the threat, and Dreibrand had to wonder what methods would be best for bringing this hostile officer under control.

"Assemble the soldiers. I will address the army," Dreibrand added.

Rearden hesitated. Although filled with dislike for the killer of his rightful lord, he lacked the means of defying Dreibrand. Rearden could not assume that Alloi would return to rally the Atrophane back to their original purpose. He saw her great gift of power to the Darhet on Dreibrand's belt. It was now only a trinket among Dreibrand's trophies.

"Yes, Lord," Rearden said tersely. He flicked a salute at Dreibrand and stomped away.

The Atrophane army responded to the call of its commanders to form ranks. The soldiers had been standing around in disorderly clumps discussing the bewildering events. They marveled at the intensity of the duel, and its bizarre conclusion. They speculated about the consequences of Sandin's death within the Empire and Dreibrand's intentions. No one could say what had happened to Alloi, but few remained hopeful of her return. She clearly had been unable to stop the terrible counteroffensive of the rys King. It seemed likely that she had been carried off to some wretched death, and only Dreibrand Veta remained to offer them any protection from the undefeatable King Shan.

Dreibrand mounted his black colt so that he could address his soldiers from a higher level. Only seven hundred of his Nufalese warriors remained, but they stood behind their lord with great pride in his victory.

Dreibrand coughed, hating the damage in his chest that would impair his speaking voice. He wanted another sip of tah but knew that Faychan would rightly insist that it was too soon.

Dreibrand had rehearsed his speech in his head over many days. He hoped that it would be worthy of being repeated so that all would hear his message.

"Brave Atrophane soldiers," he began, striving against the sting in his lung. "I shall explain my reasons for challenging Sandin Promentro, but I suspect that in your hearts that the reasons are plain enough. He promised you the riches of Jingtun, but instead you received heavy losses in a cold hard land. I knew Sandin. I served with him under the great Lord Kwan, and despite my differences with Sandin, I knew him to be an intelligent man, and a man who well understood the peril of entering a conflict with rys. All of you have seen the power with which the King of Jingtun defends the Rysamand. Tempet and Alloi deluded you into thinking that the rys could be defeated. I challenged Sandin in order to end his senseless campaign. He had clearly lost his powers of reason and had become a menace to you. On the field of honor, I meted out the punishment that Sandin deserved for his misuse of command. My noble station granted me the right to correct him.

"I regret the lives that we have taken from each other in recent battle. I proclaim peace between you and the warriors of Nufal. They came forth to give battle because you invaded. Understand that I, a noble Atrophane, have founded settlements in this land. Atrophane has no need to conquer

this place. Any person who wishes to live here or do business here is welcome to do so, but it shall be done in a peaceful manner.

"Now that I have claimed the Lord Generalship of this army, I will return you to imperial territory. Then as the leader of Nufal, I shall ask the Empire to negotiate a treaty that will allow both lands to coexist in peace and prosperity.

Dreibrand paused in order to let the pain caused by his diaphragm shoving on his lungs subside. When he continued, he made his most crucial point. "The Empire is obligated to provide you with your base pay. I see no reason that you should not get it. However, I will make a list of those men present here, and, when we return to the Bosta Territory, I will provide you with a bonus payment. Consider it a gratuity from me for accepting the truce that was so needed yesterday."

The soldiers whispered the news back through the ranks. The promise of a bonus brightened them after their fruitless and tragic journey.

Rearden stepped forth from the ranks. "And how does Dreibrand of the *ruined* House of Veta expect to pay such an army?" he challenged in order to test the rumor of Dreibrand's wealth. Perhaps Dreibrand could be exposed as a fraud and the sympathies of the soldiers would fall away from their usurper.

Pointing to the snowy peaks of the Rysamand, Dreibrand said, "Fighting in western wars, I won a vast treasure. The coffers of my House now rival all the Clans and Houses of Atrophane, and I shall be generous with you, soldiers of Atrophane. The treasures that Sandin promised you, I already possess. You are far better off serving me."

Dreibrand swept his gaze over the ranks. The men looked back at him thoughtfully. He rode toward Rearden and stopped in front of the antagonistic officer.

"Any more questions, Lieutenant?" Dreibrand asked.

"No," Rearden said.

Dreibrand studied the hate revealed in the lieutenant's blue eyes. It would be easy to hate Rearden and dispose of him, but Dreibrand no longer wanted to hate anybody except himself.

"You have your orders," Dreibrand said and withdrew into the midst of his warriors.

Slowly, he dismounted. Each breath stabbed his right lung as if the knife were plunging in over and over. Dey was waiting to speak to him.

"You are a great human lord, but you need more help," the rys said. He recognized that human will and tah would not sustain Dreibrand indefinitely.

"Must this be done?" Dreibrand said, glancing around cautiously.

"What does your body tell you?" Dey said.

"My mind says that I must wait," Dreibrand said. Although he believed that the procedure to drain the fluid had to be done, he feared the incapacitation. It would have to be done in secret. The Atrophane soldiers had to believe in his strength.

Tytido, he thought with an abrupt slap of guilt. He had not checked on his friend. He asked Dey if he knew where *Tytido* was. Dey had helped *Tytido* earlier and led Dreibrand to his friend. As they walked together, Dey took special care to move slowly. He used his essential rys grace to casually mask Dreibrand's ragged gait.

Tytido rested among the wounded. They were lined up closely in order to benefit from each other's body heat. Dey hung back while Dreibrand worked his way through the injured toward *Tytido*. The warrior on the left of *Tytido* was able to scoot over a bit and make room for Dreibrand.

A light spell of sleepiness had comforted *Tytido* earlier, but his eyes fluttered open when Dreibrand

squatted beside him. Miserable with guilt, Tytido shrank from his friend. "I am sorry. I tried to stop him and protect him," he said.

"What happened?" Dreibrand asked.

Tytido recounted how Atarek had pulled his knife when Sandin came close. "I told him that you would win," Tytido insisted. "But when you were hurt, I think he simply reacted."

"Do not blame yourself, Tytido," Dreibrand said in a choked voice. "How badly are you hurt?"

"It is a deep flesh wound. Cut my muscles under my arm," Tytido replied.

"I am thankful that you were not hurt worse," Dreibrand said.

Considering how Dreibrand already suffered from terrible loss, Tytido appreciated that Dreibrand was still able to show concern for him. "Dreibrand, I am so sorry about Atarek. I could tell that you loved him," Tytido said.

Dreibrand's face sank into his hands. Tytido expected to hear him sob.

Keeping his eyes hidden, Dreibrand said, "Tytido, this is the hardest thing."

The futility of comforting words stymied Tytido. He sensed that Dreibrand would be changed after this day.

"Dreibrand, it is not your fault," Tytido said, trying to guide Dreibrand toward some hope.

"Yes, it is!" Dreibrand hissed. He pulled his hands down. His eyes were dry but wild light lurked inside them, as the fire of his guilt began to spread.

Physical duress overtook Dreibrand's mental misery. He coughed painfully and then panted for breath. He could not ignore his condition much longer.

"Tytido," he said painfully. "Will you be able to move at all tonight? I need you."

"For you, I can," Tytido said, motivated by Dreibrand's strained breathing and pale face.

In a low voice, Dreibrand explained that he would occupy Sandin's tent. Using the official shelter would be meaningful to the Atrophane. The tent would also provide the cover he needed for the treatment that his wound required. He described what Dey intended to do.

"I want this to be secret. No one else must know that I will be so vulnerable tonight," Dreibrand said. He shuddered through another cough, trying to stop the spasm that lanced him with pain. When he was able to speak again, he said, "Tytido, find some men that you trust and send them to get the treasure that I need to take south."

"Yes, I will," Tytido said, already knowing who he would ask to retrieve the gems that Dreibrand had stashed outside of Vetanium.

"Come to me when the sun goes down," Dreibrand instructed. "I will be in the Atrophane camp. I must spend much time with them from now on. Help our people to understand."

"They do, Dreibrand," Tytido said. "They know that you gather our enemy to your greatness for our benefit."

"I do not want any one else to die," Dreibrand said as if he were reciting a difficult lesson.

Peace did not come soon enough for Atarek, Dreibrand thought. The grief tore at him, making his wound meaningless.

The need to attend to his brother's body gave Dreibrand the strength to rise. He plodded to the place where he had camped the night before. Atarek's saddle and bedroll were still there.

Dreibrand remembered the touch of Atarek's hands as he had bound his fists for the fight.

Slowly, Dreibrand gathered the bedroll and Atarek's few possessions. After he stood, he paused to watch the rys soldiers departing with the bodies of their fallen. The line of white horses moved toward the Rysamand, ready to brave the highland snows and leave behind the madness of the lower world.

Dreibrand turned toward the east and observed an Atrophaney work crew outlining an area to begin their digging. The Tabren Mountains oversaw the work and Dreibrand dared to hope that it would be the last mass grave dug in Nufal.

After retrieving his bedroll as well, Dreibrand headed toward his brother with the shrouding materials. He felt a fear worse than charging a steadfast line of infantry. The reality of Atarek's passing would have to be confronted.

Men and rys were mindful to stay back from Dreibrand as he prepared Atarek for burial. No one wanted to see the tears that streaked their leader's face. Dreibrand wrapped his bedroll around Atarek. He hoped that the warmth from his body that had seeped into the blanket on many nights would reach Atarek's spirit.

Dreibrand would not be needing the simple old blanket. He would be claiming the trappings of the late Darhet. Dreibrand had taken Sandin's life, army, and tonight he would take to his bedding even if the prospect repelled him. In a few weeks, he would take Sandin's fort. Beyond that, Dreibrand was not sure. He had plans but his grieving mind could not fathom them now.

Before closing the blanket around Atarek, Dreibrand put Atarek's sword and knife over his chest and placed his brother's cold hands on the weapons. Dreibrand arranged Atarek's hair nicely and cleaned the dirt from his face. After a thoughtful pause, Dreibrand tucked Atarek's flask into the hand with the knife. He then used Atarek's blanket to wrap him in a final layer.

"At, you should not have joked so much about dying," Dreibrand scolded. After a shaky sigh, he continued, "I take up now that which burdened your heart. I have learned the lesson impressed on you at a tender age. I should have listened when you admonished me. We could be in Atrophane now, going to some party I suppose. Wasting our lives in amusement. Letting the Empire have its power."

Dreibrand's vision blurred. He wiped the tears from his eyes and dabbed the moisture onto Atarek's face.

The task was becoming too difficult. Dreibrand had to break away. An abundance of distraction surrounded him. The delicate state of the peace and the wound in his chest demanded his attention. Even with Atarek gone, his people still depended on him.

"Tomorrow," he whispered and slowly backed away.

Striking contradiction emerges upon closer inspection of the status of women in Atrophane society. Being a slave-holding culture, the Atrophane simultaneously respect – admire even – the freedom of women while also binding some women in slavery. Men can be slaves as well, but the existence of free women who can own female slaves illustrates how inequality permeates the culture. However, inequality is not based on gender. It is based on social status and perhaps misfortune. A woman is not enslaved because she is inferior. A woman, or a man for that matter, is enslaved because she has no means of enforcing her right to freedom. In more female-oppressive cultures, it can be argued that all women are slaves because they have no recognized right to freedom.

Throughout the rest of the eastern world in the societies of Pandovelar, Phefnalang, and the Ramrai River provinces, patriarchy forces women into a lesser role. Property and marriage rights are much more strictly defined, or as is usually the case, prohibited. Although legally, the status of women in these other eastern societies is assigned a low position, it does not equal the total subjugation of women found in the western world. An eastern woman can aspire to a fair level of independence outside of her male relatives if she is able to succeed in business or otherwise survive in the absence of male relatives. The legal codes brought by the expansion of the

Atrophane Empire, however, have been expanding the rights of women and initiating opportunity.

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, sons, 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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